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	Mr Gerry Kelly

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 26 January 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I would be grateful for the attention of Members for a few minutes. Last Tuesday evening, I drew the attention of the House to the fact that numerous points of order had been raised during that day's sitting. I indicated that I would return to those points of order that were legitimate in due course. Before I come to those matters, I will address the general issue of points of order that are raised in the House.

I shall repeat what I said last week: too often, issues are raised as points of order that would be better dealt with outside the Chamber. It is regrettable that time is spent having to deal with such issues in the Chamber; however, I am even more concerned about the tendency toward points of order being used to challenge the authority of the Chair. I cannot put it more plainly than to state that that simply will not be tolerated.

For the avoidance of doubt, Members should note that I will not take any points of order on any of the matters on which I am ruling today. If Members wish to consult me about any matter that is not clear, they should do so outside the Chamber.

I will move on to matters that were raised last week. On reading the Official Report, it appeared to me that there was some confusion in Members' minds about the difference between questions following a ministerial statement, and debates. I remind the House that although questions are provided for in Standing Orders, they are not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions will not be allowed.

There are some Members of this House who seem to want to turn ministerial statements into take-note debates. In fact, last week, several Members indicated that the statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Nigel Dodds, was important to the House. Every ministerial statement is important to the House, yet those Members felt the need to make long

introductions to their questions. Let me make it absolutely clear that that will not be allowed.

Members may want to make very short introductions to their questions, but they should then come to their questions. The convention in this House has always been that after a ministerial statement is delivered, the Chairperson of the appropriate Committee is called, and of course the Chairperson, because he is called as Chairperson, is allowed some latitude in introducing his question. However, it stops at that. From then on, it should be questions on that ministerial statement, and questions only. Members here who are Members of another place will tell you that that would not be allowed anywhere else.

There seems to be some confusion on this issue. There should not be. I direct Members to Standing Order 18, which sets out clearly the role of a ministerial statement to the House. This issue has been raised several times in points of order, over a long period. From here on in, I will not be taking any points of order on an issue concerning a ministerial statement, and neither will my deputies. Ministerial statements give Members the opportunity to ask questions about those statements; that is what they do. They are also opportunities for the House to hold Ministers and the Executive to account. I cannot be any clearer on the issue.

I now turn to related matters, concerning the role of the Chair during Question Time and questions on ministerial statements. The Chair has always resisted making judgements on the extent to which Ministers have answered Members' questions. Whether the Minister has given a satisfactory answer is for the Member asking the question, and other Members, to judge. If a Member is not satisfied with an answer, he or she may pursue it by way of a supplementary question, through a question for written answer, by going through the Committee, or by tabling a motion for debate.

Once again, some Members continually get up on that particular point of order, and want me as Speaker, or my Deputy Speakers, to sit in judgement on whether a Minister has answered a question to the Members' satisfaction. Members will know that that would be a total and absolute minefield for me as Speaker or for my deputies. That is something that we are not going to do. There are a number of avenues open to Members in how they might address an issue if they feel that they are not getting a genuine answer from a Minister. Once again, I make it absolutely clear that neither I nor my deputies will take any points of order on that issue again.

Last Tuesday, 18 points of order were made in the House, almost all in one debate. That must be a record for this House. Some of the Members who raised issues concerning Question Time or questions on ministerial statements sit on the Procedures Committee. My

understanding is that the Procedures Committee has been looking at a number of issues in and around questions. That is where the arguments should be made, not in this House. There is a unique opportunity within the Procedures Committee for members of that Committee to bring forward points about Question Time or ministerial statements on which they feel they can agree. They should not be raised as points of order in this House when Members sit on a Committee that is currently examining those issues.

Once again, let us be absolutely clear where we stand in this House on issues concerning whatever it may be. Most of the points of order that are raised are spurious, and Members know that they are spurious and do not relate to the business of the House that is being discussed at that time. A point of order should be absolutely clear; it should relate to the issue that is being discussed in the House at that time. Unfortunately, Members will raise a point of order and talk about almost anything. All of that needs to finish, because my job as Speaker is to protect the integrity of the House and protect the business that goes through this House. That is my role.

I will now move on to a further issue, which I touched on briefly last Tuesday: the First Minister's reference to the Clerk at Table. I remind Members again that Assembly staff should not be referred to at any time. Adverse references to staff cannot be tolerated. The House should be clear that the Chair is entirely responsible for the conduct of the business. The Deputy Speakers and I are grateful for the advice and assistance that we receive from the Clerks, but we have no doubt where the responsibility lies. I have said to some Members with whom I was discussing these issues this morning that you would almost need the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon to try to resolve some of these issues.

Finally, I remind the House that I will take no points of order on any of the issues to which I refer today.

I will now turn to the serious matter of expressions that were used in the Chamber last week. The First Minister indicated that, in his opinion, Mr Declan O'Loan accused him of deceit. I have reflected on the comments that were made by Mr O'Loan, and consider that although he alleged deceit, he did not allege it against any particular Member, or name any particular Member. That being the case, I am content that his comments were not unparliamentary.

Later in that debate, the First Minister made certain references to Mr Elliott, and used the expression:

"attempt to mislead and con people" — [Official Report, Bound Volume 36, No 7, col 2].

Although I have ruled before on allegations of misleading, I have not done so on allegations of attempting to mislead. Therefore, I will not rule its use

as unparliamentary on this occasion. However, on the basis of the guiding principles that apply to parliamentary language here and in another House, Members should, in future, avoid any language that questions the honesty or integrity of another Member. If a Member has a genuine concern about such matters, advice should be sought from the Business Office on whether any procedural approaches are available to that Member.

I will now turn to Mr Durkan's accusation that the First Minister was misleading the House. To accuse another Member of misleading the House is, clearly, unparliamentary, and as I indicated last Tuesday, I will call the Member to withdraw the remark.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was asked by the Deputy Speaker to address the offending term, so I did. I am being asked by the Speaker to withdraw the offending term, so I will. If, in my challenge to the First Minister, I used a handful of words that were procedurally incorrect, I withdraw the handful of words that are procedurally incorrect. However, my challenge to the First Minister remains a challenge that he invited after he made statements that misrepresented a ministerial colleague. I believe that the accuracy and the veracity of those statements can clearly be questioned —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to a close very quickly.

Mr Durkan: Can be questioned when set against available facts, including previous statements in this House by the Minister for Social Development. So, as I withdraw my words, which were procedurally incorrect, I ask the First Minister to withdraw his words, which were factually incorrect.

Mr Speaker: Order. Those are two completely different issues, and I will not allow any Member to rise on a point of order or to widen this debate. The House is grateful to the Member for withdrawing the remark. There are different avenues that the Member can pursue in how he might deal with this issue, but certainly not this morning, and not this afternoon, through this House, and I say that to all sides of the House. There are different avenues that Members and Ministers can go down for examining issues if they have a genuine concern about allegations that are made against Members or Ministers in this House.

The First Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Let me make it absolutely clear: I said at the very start that I will not take any points of order on what I have ruled on this morning, or on what Members may say in relation to that. That would open up the entire debate, and I do not think that that would be helpful to the House. I am extremely happy to talk to Members outside the Chamber if they are dissatisfied with what has been said in the Chamber.

The First Minister: On a new point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for a Member to indicate that the facts were misleading when that Member is not in possession of the facts, and, by his own admission, was relying on a leak from a dishonourable and –

Mr Speaker: Order. I would ask the Member to take his seat. Once again, I made it absolutely clear that I will take no points of order on the rulings that I have made this morning. I very much hear what the First Minister has said, and I am, as I said, happy enough to talk to any Member outside the Chamber about what avenues are available to Members with regard to what has been said or done.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, which is not about this matter in particular. However, when a Member is told that he or she must withdraw a remark, must the Member not withdraw it unconditionally? He or she cannot say –

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me make it absolutely clear: Members in this House will know that when the word “misleading” is directed generally at a Member and that Member is named, I have allowed some latitude. I have allowed Members some latitude to make a short introduction and then to say what they want to say. That has been the convention in the Assembly. This afternoon, I have done the same. Yes, I could have made a strong ruling and insisted that the Member withdraw his remarks and say nothing else. However, the convention in the House has been to allow the Member to make a brief introduction and then to let he or she decide what action to take. I am on record as ruling in that way.

12.15 pm

I shall finish by saying that, sometimes, I approach these matters with a heavy heart. It gives me no pleasure to make the rulings that I have made this afternoon. However, I always say that the guiding principles of adherence to Standing Orders and good business of the House are very much policed by Members. Do not be mistaken in thinking that because some latitude is given, there is some weakness. Let me make it absolutely clear: if any Member oversteps the line in the House — and Members are aware when they do so — I will deal with that, irrespective of who the Member is.

As Speaker, I have given Members from all sides of the House quite a bit of latitude during Question Time, debates on ministerial statements, and so on. However, some Members continue to abuse that latitude. I wish to be absolutely clear that when Members cross the line, they must face up to that, and such matters will be dealt with. We will now move on.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 21 January 2009.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 26 January 2009.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 26 January 2009.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Assistance Bill

Further Consideration Stage

The deputy First Minister (Mr McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill be agreed.

Mr Speaker: Members have been provided with a copy of the Marshalled List, which details the order of amendments for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in my provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There are three groups of amendments. The Assembly will debate the amendments in each group in turn.

The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3, which deal with imposing additional responsibilities, by notifications, approvals and reports, upon Departments to Committees and to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The second debate will be on amendment Nos 4 to 11, which deal with the power to provide financial assistance where unsatisfactory funding arrangements exist.

The third debate will be on amendment Nos 12 and 13, which deal with schemes for financial assistance.

I remind Members who intend to speak that during the debates on the three groups of amendments, they must address all the amendments in the particular group on which they wish to comment. When the initial debate on each group is completed, any subsequent 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.

I also remind Members that this is the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill. Under Standing Order 37(2), this Stage is restricted to debating any further amendments tabled to the Bill.

If that is clear, we shall proceed.

We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. In the debate on amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 and 3.

These amendments deal with imposing additional responsibilities, by notifications, approvals and reports, on Departments to Committees and to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 18, at end insert

“(3A) The relevant department shall notify, as soon as is practicable, the appropriate statutory committee of any designation under this section.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In page 1, line 20, at end insert

“(4A) Regulations made under this section, if made by a department other than the Department of Finance and Personnel, require the approval of that department.” — [Mr O’Loan.]

No 3: In page 2, line 4, at end insert

“(8) The relevant department shall, within 1 year of the commencement of the scheme, provide a report on the operation of the scheme to the appropriate statutory committee.” — [Mrs D Kelly.]

It was well articulated last week, particularly by the SDLP, and also by the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party, that we have no desire to hold up the process and that we fully recognise the need for legislative cover to provide assistance in an emergency situation. In your opening remarks, Mr Speaker, you pointed out quite rightly that these amendments seek to ensure that the relevant Committee, which may fall under the legislation of any of the schemes to be introduced, shall have full sight of the scheme when it is introduced, at the point of designation. Amendment No 1 seeks to ensure that the matter is brought before the relevant Committee as soon as the scheme is initiated.

Amendment No 2 looks to the financial situation in which a Department might find itself. If there are no Executive funds or contingency funds, the approval of the Minister of Finance and Personnel should be sought, and the Executive should give consideration to where a Department’s money might come from. There is concern that this legislation will give the First Minister and the deputy First Minister the authority to instruct a Department on how it should use its money, without regard having been given to the Programme for Government or any other money having been secured. It is incumbent on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to indicate at an early stage — during the monitoring rounds, for example — what contingency fund he hopes to introduce to provide the money.

When the Executive and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are considering the introduction of a scheme, consideration must be given to where the money will come from so that the relevant Minister has an opportunity to indicate what impact that loss of finance will have if there is no additional or new money. It is also important that the legislation should oblige a Department to provide a report to the relevant Committee within one year of the scheme’s commencement, because Committees need to have oversight.

Mr Speaker, you have spoken many times about the primacy of the Assembly and the scrutiny Committees, and other Members have said that Committees have a clear role and remit and that they welcome their scrutiny.

These amendments seek to improve the legislation and should not cause the First Minister or the deputy First Minister any concern. The amendments seek to put the relevant Committees in good stead in respect of the scheme’s introduction, outworking, evaluation and impact. That may also inform future debates concerning the Programme for Government and any decision on whether those should be mainstreamed at the next Budget round. It is our party’s wish that Members, particularly those from Sinn Féin and the DUP, will give consideration to our concerns and support these genuine attempts to improve the legislation.

Mr Moutray: I rise to speak on the first group of amendments that appear on the Marshalled List for the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill. At the outset, I wish to state that my colleagues and I oppose amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3. Last week, the Assembly held a marathon debate concerning the Financial Assistance Bill and its context. Having read the long list of purposeless amendments that have been tabled this week, I believe that this could be another marathon debate.

I have no problem with a marathon debate. However, the same point is being made time and time again, and some Members are using the debate as a political football. Are the Members who have tabled the amendments not listening to the First Minister?

The amendments that are listed in group 1 undoubtedly attempt to use the Bill as a political point-scoring exercise and attempt to sabotage its ability to assist those who are most in need. Although those Members are trying to score points, they are hindering and deterring the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Executive in assisting those who are most in need.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: No.

Amendment No 1 requires a Department that has been designated under clause 1 by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to inform its Assembly Committee of any designation. Is that procedure not already in operation? The Members are surely aware of the ongoing liaison between Departments and Committees. That is standard protocol. Therefore, the amendment is unnecessary because it calls for the introduction of a process that already exists.

Likewise, amendment No 2 requires the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to approve any regulations made under clause 1. That amendment is totally unnecessary, because the Minister of Finance and Personnel will make his views known when the Executive — I repeat, the Executive — are asked to agree a proposed scheme. Once again, duplication is being introduced.

I oppose the content of amendment No 3, which lacks purpose and rationale. The amendment, in effect, says that — and I am sure that Members will, at some stage, try to attack my interpretation — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the Member. Mobile phones must be switched off, if possible. None of us is innocent; we all make that mistake with mobile phones. However, mobile phones must be switched off, if possible.

Mr McElduff: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, will you clarify whether that instruction is optional or mandatory?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are all to blame, and Members must switch off mobile phones or, at least, put them on silent mode.

Mr Moutray: I reject amendment No 3 on the basis that there should be a statutory duty to report on a scheme. Furthermore, that report should be made to the Assembly, rather than directly to the relevant Committee. In any event, Members should be aware that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister can, as part of its scrutiny role, seek information or an update on the operation or roll-out of any scheme at any time. Members are again choosing to play politics with the Bill rather than supporting its content and the benefits that it will bring to those who are most in need. I oppose the amendments.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I oppose amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3. The policy objectives and the purpose of the Financial Assistance Bill have been addressed; it will deal with emergency situations that arise extraordinarily. Amendment No 1 —

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No.

Amendment No 1 is superfluous. As Mr Moutray said, there was a marathon debate last week on the amendments, which are largely irrelevant. Points have been reiterated, and the debate has almost become political theatre. Some parties seem to be tabling amendments and filibustering rather than addressing the reason for the legislation. In my experience, those who are fuel poor, vulnerable, on benefits or elderly are constantly asking when they will receive the money.

The Minister previously said:

“Show me the money, and I will do the business”.

People are now asking when they will receive the money — the sooner the better, I say, because people are suffering daily as a result of all this discussion, which is really of no benefit to those people at whom the legislation is aimed.

12.30 pm

The purpose of amendment No 2 is to seek to require the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Department to approve for other Departments money that may or may not be available. However, the Executive operate on the principle of collective responsibility, so anything that happens will be the Executive’s responsibility. No single Minister should be in a position in which he or she can hold back legislation that is most necessary.

The statutory duty sought under amendment No 3 is already in place — the appropriate Committee must consider any proposed scheme, and all proposed schemes will eventually come before the Executive. My colleagues will deal with the other amendments. I reject the amendments, which are largely superfluous and of no benefit to those people most in need. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: At the outset, I totally reject Mr Moutray’s opening remarks about other parties not wanting to help those most in need. The Ulster Unionist Party has made it clear throughout the debates on the Bill that we are very much committed — as I accept that everyone in the House is committed — to helping those most in need.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that not one of the debates that has taken place on the subject has delayed fuel payments by one day? Protocol requires that the Bill go through all the legislative Stages. Mr Moutray has exposed only his own lack of understanding of the legislative process.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for her intervention, and what she says is absolutely true. During last week’s Consideration Stage debate, the First Minister pointed out that it was very unparliamentary for Members to leave the Chamber during the course of the debate. Debate is not delaying the Bill; rather, it is an important part of the democratic process.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should return to addressing the proposed amendments to clause 1.

The First Minister: For clarification, in case anyone thinks that I want everyone to stay in the Chamber all day for the entire debate, there is a general courtesy that a Member who speaks should remain in the Chamber until the Member who speaks next has completed his or her speech.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for that intervention, and I will return to discussing the Bill immediately. I am not sure whether the First Minister’s colleague Mr Moutray stayed in the Chamber until the next Member to speak had finished.

The SDLP, along with the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party, has attempted to table amendments that will improve the Bill’s democratic accountability.

The amendments would bring the legislation more into line with the power-sharing character of the unique Government institutions that we have in Northern Ireland. The amendments that were proposed last week were an attempt to ensure that decisions made in any emergency situation be made by the entire Executive, with the consent of the relevant Departments.

The amendments that the SDLP tabled for today are aimed at ensuring that the Assembly appropriately scrutinises designations of financial assistance. Despite the ill-tempered reception that the amendments received last week, the SDLP has proposed others that will improve the Bill. Amendment No 1 seeks to ensure that the relevant Statutory Committee be notified by the related Department of any designation of financial assistance under clause 1. Designations under clause 1 are subject to negative resolution, and that will result in limited, or no, opportunity for Members to scrutinise proposals. Amendment No 1 would ensure that the relevant Department would be able to examine, and have input into, proposals if appropriate.

I see no reason for rejecting that amendment, over and above the fact that, to date, the DUP and Sinn Féin have yet to accept any amendment to a Bill that received accelerated passage. Not only would amendment No 1 enable Committees to scrutinise proposals on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, but they would be able to add their diverse, and often expert, experience, which, in many instances, would help to improve pieces of legislation that all Committees in this place consider.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member share my wry sense of amusement that not only will people not accept amendments but — save for the First Minister — they will not even take interventions, so unsure are they of their positions? The point was made to Members opposite that they do not even understand the legislative process; they will not even let us debate the matter, never mind listening to what we have to say.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to my honourable friend for that intervention — he is absolutely right. As the debate progresses, it will be interesting to see whether Members of the two main parties in Government — bar the First Minister and the deputy First Minister — take interventions.

All Ministers are aware of the positive input that Committees can make to proposals. It will be a lost opportunity if amendment No 1 is not accepted. I hope that the deputy First Minister will be more receptive than the co-holder of his office to the recommendations that will be made by Members today.

The deputy First Minister will probably make reference to over-legislating and over-complicating the Bill. However, amendment No 1 is an important and worthwhile addition, which the deputy First Minister

would accept if he were more in tune with the implications of accelerated passage.

Amendment No 2 seeks to ensure that the Bill does not impinge on the ability of Departments to manage their budgets and to meet their settled targets and public service agreements. The recent strategic stocktake highlighted the tight fiscal position in which all Departments find themselves. The amendment will provide Ministers with the peace of mind that they will be able to continue to manage their own budgets.

Amendment No 3 is another sensible proposal that will ensure that the success or failure of any scheme can be examined by the Assembly. For policy to be implemented successfully, it must be monitored and evaluated throughout its life and afterwards. The amendment provides an opportunity for Departments to learn from their mistakes and to share successes with other Departments, Committees and non-governmental organisations.

To not accept the amendments will make little sense. They are reasonable and constructive, and they will benefit this piece of legislation. I thank the SDLP Members who tabled the amendments, and I look forward to the deputy First Minister's response.

Dr Farry: I support amendment Nos 1 and 3, and I seek some clarification on amendment No 2. Today's debate is important. It is certainly well within the procedures of the House to have it as it is part and parcel of the legislative process. The debate needs to be more constructive, brief and to the point than was the case last week, when we had extensive discussions about these matters.

My party appreciates that Members can discuss amendments at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage and that we do not have the guillotine system that exists in the House of Commons. In the context of Northern Ireland's divided society and the multi-party system, it is important that free and open exchange takes place, but with that comes a responsibility on Members about how they approach debates.

Mr B McCrea: May I check that the Member is encouraging debate and that he welcomes interventions? We recommend that the two parties to which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister belong should take interventions and listen to what we have to say.

Mr Speaker: Order, order. On at least two occasions during the debate, Members have almost forced others to take interventions. It is up to the Member who has the Floor whether he or she decides to take an intervention. That could be rather risky, but Members decide whether they want to take interventions. This issue has been raised on several occasions; nobody can force the Member who has the Floor to take an intervention if he or she does not want to.

Dr Farry: Thank you for your points, Mr Speaker. I am more than happy to take interventions, as was just demonstrated when I took one from Mr Basil McCrea.

Nevertheless, Mr Speaker's point touches on the fact that, more than 18 months into this mandate, we await the commencement of free and open debates. If Members continue to merely read out their speeches, rather than other Members having to listen to them, those making the speeches may as well just hand them to the Office of the Official Report for printing.

The First Minister: Surely the Member will acknowledge that conducting a debate in the Chamber does not depend simply on the occurrence of interventions. A debate consists of a Member speaking, followed by subsequent Members dealing with the comments that he or she has made.

Dr Farry: I fully concur with the First Minister's remarks, and his Back-Bench colleagues, and those belonging to Sinn Féin, would do well to listen to them. I recognise that the First Minister engages in debate, and such conduct should be encouraged in respect of all Members.

Returning to the substance of the amendments, it is important that we do not rehearse the arguments made last week, when there was a full debate on clause 1 and, although not to the same extent, on clause 2.

The Alliance Party takes a slightly different approach to clause 1 than it does to clause 2. We envisage that clause 1 would deal with short-term and exceptional circumstances, in which case more checks and balances would ensure that relevant Departments and Ministers act in accordance with them.

Furthermore, Mr Brady said that the Bill is designed to deal with emergency situations; however, we should focus on it dealing with exceptional circumstances. Winter-fuel payments are not emergency provisions — winter happens every year. However, circumstances might be exceptional, particularly, for example, in the present economic situation, and it is important that we make that distinction.

My colleague Naomi Long will discuss clause 2, and she will demonstrate that a different approach might be appropriate when dealing with longer-term systemic situations that pertain to delivering policies throughout Departments. I can envisage circumstances — for example, if a Department or a Minister is not operating in line with a policy direction that has been centrally agreed by the Executive — in which it might be possible, indeed, necessary, to make progress without the consent of the relevant Department or Minister.

Nevertheless, we should move more cautiously with clause 1 in order to ensure that all parties sign up to it, and that is why I am sympathetic to the thrust of amendment No 2, although more explanation is required

about whether the final “department” contained in it refers to the Department of Finance and Personnel or to the first Department mentioned. If it refers to the first Department mentioned, the amendment's drafting might be tautological, but if it refers to the second, the amendment would be acceptable to the Alliance Party. I shall await clarification at the end of the debate from those who tabled that amendment.

An argument may be made that the actions stipulated in amendment Nos 1 and 3 would happen in any event; however, there is no reason why they should not be added to the Bill to provide additional reassurance and to ensure proper reporting and accountability in Committees and in the Assembly. Therefore, the Alliance Party has no difficulty in accepting them both. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I look forward to a free exchange of ideas among Members during the rest of the debate.

The deputy First Minister: Having read the Official Report of last week's seven-hour Consideration Stage, I should not be entirely surprised that an even greater number of amendments have been tabled for the Bill's Further Consideration Stage. I intend to oppose the three amendments in group 1.

Amendment No 1 would require a Department to inform its Committee that it had been designated by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under clause 1 for the purpose of creating a scheme. Amendment No 1 is unnecessary because such notification would occur in any event as part of ongoing liaison between a Department and its Committee.

During the Bill's Second Stage and Consideration Stage, it was emphasised that any regulations made under clause 1 or clause 2 would be subject to normal Committee consideration, including any proposal by a Department to make regulations using the powers provided for in the Bill. It is normal practice for a Department that is proposing to make regulations to write to its departmental Committee Clerk to advise the Committee of a proposed statutory rule.

That practice will be no different in the case of regulations being made under clause 1 to deal with exceptional circumstances. The letter to the Committee will provide sufficient information for it to carry out an informed policy scrutiny. That notification procedure is set out in the handbook on subordinate legislation.

12.45 pm

In addition to that formal communication, I would expect that departmental Assembly liaison officers would contact their departmental Committee Clerk to alert them immediately once they become aware that their Department had been designated under this legislation. In view of that, I reject amendment No 1, because it is unnecessary. Committees will be aware

from an early stage that a Department has been designated to make regulations under this legislation.

Amendment No 2 would require the Department of Finance and Personnel to approve any regulations made under clause 1 of the Bill. When viewed in isolation, amendment No 2 does not seem unreasonable. However, it has to be viewed in the wider context of decision-making under clause 1. As we have said in previous debates on the Bill, any proposal for a determination, designation or scheme will have to come to the Executive for consideration and agreement. The views of all Ministers — including the Minister of Finance and Personnel — will have to be considered in reaching decisions. I reject amendment No 2, because the Minister of Finance and Personnel will have made his views known when the Executive were asked to agree to a proposed scheme.

Amendment No 3 would require the relevant Department to report on the scheme, to its Committee, within a year of the scheme's commencement. The Members who tabled this amendment and amendment No 1 seem to believe that the Committees will be kept in the dark or ignored by their Departments; that will not be the case. However, if there is to be a statutory duty to report on a scheme, such a report would be to the Assembly and not to the relevant Committee.

In any event, a Committee could seek information on the operation of the scheme at any time, as part of its scrutiny role. Therefore, it is unnecessary to place a statutory duty on relevant Departments to produce a report on the operation of a scheme to a Committee. I ask Members to reject amendment Nos 1, 2 and 3.

Mr O'Loan: I am glad to have the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the first group of amendments and to summarise the debate. As several Members said, a substantial debate on the Bill was held in the Chamber last week, and that debate was seen by many of us as being necessary.

I have used the words “loathsome” and “obnoxious” in relation to the legislation, but, today, I describe it as “dangerous”. That description should be taken at least as seriously, because, as legislators in a democratic Assembly, we should guard vigilantly the rights of that Assembly and its elements — particularly, in the context of this debate, its Committees. That is true in any legislature, and it is particularly true in a society that remains unstable and which has parliamentary institutions that are still subject to the test. Anyone who challenges that contention should remember that the Executive did not meet for 154 days, as has been referred to often.

Therefore, any measure that proposes significant changes to how the Assembly runs itself should be subject to close scrutiny. No one should misrepresent that as an attempt to hold up payments to those who

are in need. It is for that reason that I am disappointed in the reaction of OFMDFM and its representative parties to the amendments. If OFMDFM was of a mind to assuage the concerns of others, it would have been willing to listen to these modest amendments.

Members will know well that we sought more substantial changes. We wished to delete clause 2 and await a more considered introduction of its provisions before the relevant Committee.

OFMDFM resisted that utterly and successfully. The changes that we sought to make to clause 1 of the Bill were also rejected. We are now submitting very modest changes to clause 1, the first of which is that we want a report of the designation to be made to the relevant Committee. Secondly, we want DFP to approve the regulations. Thirdly, a report on a scheme should be made to the relevant departmental Committee within a year. The unwillingness of the parties in OFMDFM to assent to those modest changes brings no comfort to those who table the amendments, or to their parties, that they will be given a fair crack of the whip in the relationships and decision-making in the Executive.

In proposing the amendments, Dolores Kelly outlined the reasons for tabling them with absolute clarity. She emphasised that there is no desire to hold up the financial measures that will represent the first use of the Bill. Naomi Long pointed out correctly that the amendments have not held up the proceedings of the Assembly or the payments even by one day. Other factors, to which I referred earlier, have held up those payments considerably.

The First Minister: Would the Member like to give way on that issue?

Mr O'Loan: I could give way to the First Minister.

The First Minister: I am grateful to the Member. He is right, and, in fact, that point was raised on 18 occasions during debates on the earlier Stages of the Bill. The erroneous argument was made that the Bill required accelerated passage because the Executive had not met for 154 days. In support of that argument, the leader of Mr O'Loan's party relayed to the House leaked information that had been provided to him by some dishonourable person whom he has not named. *[Interruption.]*

I am sure that everyone agrees that someone who leaks a confidential Government document is, unquestionably, dishonourable. I am sure that the Member will accept that the document dated 2 October 2008 may not have signalled the end of the issue and that his Minister came to her Executive colleagues and said that her officials were pursuing with the Departmental Solicitor's Office and officials from other Departments whether another Department had the power to make the payments. There is a fistful of correspondence that demonstrates that right up to

December 2008, the matter had not been closed. Therefore, the challenge has been answered, and I hope that there will not only be a withdrawal but an apology from the leader of the SDLP.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is important to return to the debate and to the business on the Floor of the House.

Mr O'Loan: I have no difficulty in getting back to the debate, and I am sure that everything that the First Minister said will be studied closely. Undoubtedly, the leader of the SDLP, in due course and in the proper place, will respond.

I noted that the deputy First Minister was sent out to speak on the Bill today, but the First Minister evidently felt it necessary to come to his rescue when the nature of the Bill and its progress was challenged.

I turn now to the responses to the amendment.

The deputy First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Certainly; I am pleased to give way to the deputy First Minister.

The deputy First Minister: The Member knows that the deputy First Minister does not need to be rescued by anyone.

He mentioned the Executive not meeting for 154 days, although when they finally met, they did so after reaching an important agreement on the transfer of policing and justice powers. Given that he raised that issue, he should recall the period from the summer of 1998 to the winter of 1999 when the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister were held by David Trimble and Séamus Mallon. Under their stewardship, the Executive failed to meet for a period of 500 days.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must remind Members that good practice dictates that interventions must relate to the issues being debated on the Floor, which are the amendments.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member take an intervention from this side of the House?

Mr O'Loan: I will take the intervention.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member share with me the relief that the deputy First Minister does not need to be rescued, because he and the First Minister are in the same boat? Will he also join me in saying that whenever we discussed leaks and various other things, issues of public interest were involved? I recall that in another place —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind Members once again that good practice in interventions is that they must relate to the business being discussed in the House.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you. I will be glad to pursue my own remarks.

I believe that the deputy First Minister misrepresents the historical record. If, at some point, he wishes to outline the gains that his party made during those 154 days, and his precise timetable for the devolution of policing and justice, I will be happy —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must return to the debate.

Mr O'Loan: I accept what you say, Mr Speaker.

I was disappointed by Stephen Moutray's responses to the individual amendments. He said that reporting the designation to the Committee was already standard protocol. If it is in place already, why is there resistance to writing this simple amendment into the Bill?

Amendment No 2 is important. In relation to the point that Stephen Farry raised, the exact wording has been properly verified by those who are competent to do so, as far as parliamentary drafting is concerned; therefore, the Member can be confident that the words, "of that department", clearly refer to the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is a necessary provision. As John McCallister said, it will give Ministers peace of mind that they will retain control over their own budgets. Again, if the two parties want to give the assurance that they are working in partnership with others in the Executive, they can support this amendment.

Without amendment No 2, we could find ourselves in the situation where the Public Accounts Committee, the Government auditor, or other oversight bodies would, later on, find themselves looking at the scheme and the regulations and saying that there were financial deficits or irregularities. DFP would be put in the position of saying that it had nothing to do with creating the scheme; it simply allocated a certain sum of money, but was not involved in how that money would be spent. That is not good Government. Amendment No 2 is valid.

Stephen Moutray — surprisingly for a democrat speaking in a democratic Chamber — was not happy that the Committee that was set up to scrutinise that activity should report on the scheme within a year. He said that it would be better if the matter were to come to the Assembly as a whole. Where is the provision in the Bill that a report be made to the Assembly as a whole? It is not there.

We have made our points cogently in relation to the amendments, and the Bill would be better if those amendments were included.

The deputy First Minister referred to existing protocols around informing Committees. He used the words, "I would expect". He believes that everything is covered by ordinary procedure. Once again, the SDLP wants much more confidence on the issue and the clarity that would be expressed by writing those straightforward amendments into the Bill.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. The deputy First Minister referred to the fact that Committees receive information and advice on subordinate legislation. However, many Committees have complained about the terms in which they receive that information, and its timing. Rather than to expect things simply to happen, it is the business of legislation to be very clear about what is required to happen.

1.00 pm

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Member for that useful intervention. I rest my case, and I support the three amendments.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 34; Noes 55.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Burnside, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr O'Loan.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brolly and Mr Moutray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 34; Noes 56.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Burnside, Mr Cobain,

Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr O'Loan.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brolly and Mr Moutray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 3 be made, put and negatived.

Clause 2 (Unsatisfactory funding arrangements: power to provide financial assistance)

Mr Speaker: Order. We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 4, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 5 to 11. I advise Members that amendment Nos 5 and 6 are mutually exclusive. Therefore, if amendment No 5 is made, I will not call amendment No 6. The second debate deals with the power to provide financial assistance where unsatisfactory funding agreements exist.

Mr Elliott: I beg to move amendment No 4: In page 2, line 7, after “acting jointly,” insert

“and with the agreement of the Executive Committee.”.

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 5: In page 2, line 7, at end insert “() that exceptional circumstances exist.”. — [Mr O'Loan.]

No 6: In page 2 line 8, leave out “a” and insert “an unforeseen”. — [Mr Elliott.]

No 7: In page 2, line 13, leave out line 13 and insert “be ineffective or inadequate, and”. — [Mrs D Kelly.]

No 8: In page 2, line 16, leave out “6 months” and insert “3 months”. — *[Mr Elliott.]*

No 9: In page 2, line 25, at end insert

“(3A) The relevant department shall notify, as soon as is practicable, the appropriate statutory committee of any designation under this section.” — *[Mrs D Kelly.]*

No 10: In page 2, line 27, at end insert

“(4A) Regulations made under this section, if made by a department other than the Department of Finance and Personnel, require the approval of that department.” — *[Mr O’Loan.]*

No 11: In page 2, line 35, at end insert

“(8) The relevant department shall, within 1 year of the commencement of the scheme, provide a report on the operation of the scheme to the appropriate statutory committee.” — *[Mrs D Kelly.]*

During last week’s Consideration Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill, I noted with interest that the First Minister informed the House that clause 2 of the Bill did not represent a power grab. He said that:

“one cannot grab power that one already has. That power is already resident in OFMDFM.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p359, col 1].*

The First Minister’s view is that clause 2 is a tidying-up exercise that makes explicit what is already implicit. He even suggested that, when undertaking that tidying-up exercise, clause 2 is the:

“more open, transparent and democratic way”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p360, col 1].*

I thank the First Minister, because his reasoning provides the rationale for the Ulster Unionist Party’s amendment — amendment No 4 — which proposes that consent be required of the Executive Committee for the exercise of the powers conferred on OFMDFM by clause 2.

Today, the deputy First Minister may tell the House that amendment No 4 is unnecessary. He may even take a leaf out of the First Minister’s book and accuse those of us who support it of not having two brain cells to rub together, but that is not the point. Amendment No 4 is merely intended as a tidying-up exercise, and in tabling it, we are trying to be helpful and constructive to the Bill. A power grab is not being carried out by the Executive Committee; one cannot grab power that one already has. That power is already resident in the Executive Committee, and, as the First Minister said last week:

“any determination that is made under that clause goes to the Executive for agreement; any designation goes to the Executive for agreement; and any scheme that is reached goes to the Executive for agreement.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p358, col 1].*

Given that that is the case, amendment No 4 is an open, transparent and democratic way of making explicit what the First Minister has already said. After all, who would wish to argue against making processes in the Chamber more open, transparent and democratic? To reject amendment No 4 suggests that the Member for

Foyle Ms Anderson was correct in her boast that clause 2 represents a “significant sea change”, and is not merely a tidying-up exercise; it will be saying that clause 2 is not merely making explicit what is implicit but is a significant sea change in the workings of the Executive.

The overriding message that has been picked up by the media and the public is that the Bill is exclusively designed to provide financial assistance to address emergency situations. Neither I nor my party wishes to go against that, and neither do the majority of Members. However, the manner in which the Bill has been presented has led people to believe that that is the Bill’s only purpose.

Clause 2 is not designed to address emergency situations. Regardless of all the previous protestations of the First Minister, clause 2 is designed to significantly change the role of his Department, as the Member for Foyle Martina Anderson has stated.

The Bill is called the Financial Assistance Bill, but at Consideration Stage, it appeared that the First Minister could not decipher whether clause 2 was designed to provide specific instances of financial assistance, or whether it should be used as a tool to promote his Department’s co-ordinating role on the cross-cutting themes of poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. The First Minister made much of the fact that his Department already has a cross-cutting role to co-ordinate those and other issues. Is the Bill concerned merely with enhancing policy co-ordination, or does it represent a significant sea change in the role of OFMDFM?

These devolved institutions should seek to ensure that all parties, which represent different sections of society in Northern Ireland, work together for the common good of all in light of our collective past. The role of First Minister and deputy First Minister, as representatives of the largest parties, is to co-ordinate and provide innovation on the cross-cutting themes that affect more than one Department, be they child poverty, sustainability, and the other issues that regularly come before the House. Indeed, the first objective in the public service agreement outlined on the OFMDFM website is to assist Government in making and implementing well-informed decisions and improving public services. The word used is “assist”, not “dictate”.

I disagree with the First Minister’s interpretation of clause 2. To suggest that it is a continuation of the powers of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is not correct. Clause 2 moves the role of the First Minister and deputy First Minister beyond providing co-ordination to overriding the power of Departments for any reason they deem necessary.

1.30 pm

Have the decisions that Sinn Féin and the DUP have made to date been conducive to a shared and normalised future for Northern Ireland? The Bill will give the DUP and Sinn Féin more power to produce and implement policy on an us-and-them basis. We are slowly moving away from co-operation to an enforced carve-up on all these issues.

The Ulster Unionist Party has tabled further amendments to clause 2 that will move the Bill closer to the original intention, namely, to provide financial assistance to people who are suffering from unforeseen events and actions. Amendment No 6 will ensure that clause 2 is not used as a normal policy tool by OFMDFM to override Departments and the Programme for Government. It will ensure that only poverty, social exclusion or deprivation not foreseen or factored into the Programme for Government and Departments' own schemes and policies can be addressed. Failure to accept the amendment will justify Sinn Féin's interpretation of the Bill as a sea change in the way we do business in this House.

I draw the deputy First Minister's attention to the fact that, whereas clause 2 stipulates that the First and deputy First Minister may exercise their powers when a situation exists which "requires" financial assistance to be provided, clause 1 states that they should act on an exceptional circumstance only if and when they deem it to be "desirable". The word "requires" implies compulsion; "desirable" implies a lower threshold of need. I want clarification of those terms. The Assembly should be informed why different words have been selected for each clause, and exactly what the ramifications are.

Clause 2(1)(b) states that financial assistance can be provided when the First Minister and deputy First Minister deem that existing arrangements and policies are "for any other reason unsatisfactory". That should sound alarm bells. What is meant by "any other reason"?

If the Bill is genuinely about financial assistance to people in exceptional circumstances or unforeseen situations of poverty, social exclusion or deprivation — rather than to effect a sea change in the way that the Executive create and implement policy — we must act quickly in each circumstance. However, during the Consideration Stage, the First Minister stated that:

"The time limits of three to six months will provide a discipline for the relevant Department to act promptly to put a scheme in place and to avoid any suggestion that the determination might be used inappropriately at a much later date when the original circumstances no longer apply." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p342, col 2, p343, Col 1*].

Poverty, social exclusion and deprivation are likely to be with us for the foreseeable future and many years to come. How, then, can a situation that is unforeseen or out of the ordinary be given a timescale for reaction?

The Ulster Unionist Party's amendments will clarify the intention of the Bill and give it definitive boundaries and purpose.

By reducing the time to react under clause 2, amendment No 8 reflects the urgency that should be shown in reacting to a critical situation. If clause 2 is not to be used exclusively for emergency situations, we should all ask where the money will come from.

Last week, in his ministerial statement, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said that:

"the main source of funding to address emerging pressures is expected to come from the resources that were allocated in the Budget process". — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p301, col 1*].

However, we have been told that the shortfall between what Departments need to meet their Programme for Government targets and what is actually available is over £1 billion. At this stage, there will be a difficult balancing act between reduced requirements and emerging pressures. The clause has the potential to add a duplicating spending pressure to our already stretched Budget. I ask the deputy First Minister whether, if he uses the powers of clause 2 to give significant financial assistance, reductions will have to be made in other areas.

If clause 2 is to stand, it is crucial that it be used only for unforeseen circumstances of poverty, deprivation or social exclusion that require immediate action. Otherwise, the Bill, rather than better co-ordinating Government in Northern Ireland, will further divide parties and Ministers in the Executive.

Mr Shannon: I oppose the proposed amendments to clause 2. My colleague will speak to amendment Nos 4, 5, 6 and 7, and I will speak to amendment Nos 8, 9, 10 and 11. We want to dismiss the supposed need for those amendments as quickly as possible so that the Assembly, rather than holding things back, can get down to the business of helping the people of this Province. That is what I am about, and I hope that I can persuade other Members to be of the same opinion.

In this time of recession, people need good legislators who see their needs, and they need good legislation that will meet those needs. The Bill will show the public that we have both. I am anxious to get the Bill in place so that when the need arises, it can do the job that it is designed to do, which is to help people.

Amendment No 8 proposes to reduce the time limit from six months to three months from when a determination is made under clause 2 to the making of any consequent regulations. Given the time that is required for consultation, for example, that would mean that the relevant Department could run the risk of not meeting its proposed deadline. We all know that it can take some time for consultations to be completed and for the Assembly to approve regulations in draft form. Meanwhile, the people in the street would be worse off. I believe that amendment No 8, if agreed to,

would reduce the effectiveness of the legislation and would be a backward step.

Amendment No 9 is as unnecessary as amendment No 1, which relates to clause 1. Amendment No 9 would require that a Department that has been designated by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister inform its Assembly Committee of that designation. The amendment is unnecessary because notification will take place in any event as part of the ongoing liaison between a Department and its Assembly Committee. For example, when the junior Ministers have been requested to attend the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, they have done so. Very clearly, all the Committees liaise, particularly —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank Mr Shannon for giving way. I am sure that he will acknowledge the fact that much of the work of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has had to be changed because of the failure of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to send papers on time. Will he also acknowledge that that office overuses the phrases “a paper to follow” and “something to be decided shortly”?

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her intervention. Obviously, we are still bedding in and there are still things to do. *[Laughter.]*

We are not entirely happy with everything; however, we are all keen to see things move forward, and I am very keen to see that happen. I oppose amendment Nos 8 and 9 because I believe that they are unnecessary.

Amendment No 10 —

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. Several Sinn Féin and DUP Members made the point that their opposing the amendments will speed up the process. Will the Member state clearly how many extra days would be added to the process if the amendments were agreed to?

Mr Shannon: I was going to say that I am glad to accept the Member’s interventions, but that is not entirely true. In the Assembly, the DUP and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have tried to ensure that all Committees have representation. During the previous Assembly mandate, when roles were reversed, contact from the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP left a lot to be desired.

Amendment No 10 proposes that the Department of Finance and Personnel is required to approve any regulations that are made under clause 2. That amendment is unnecessary, because the Minister of Finance and Personnel will make his views well known to the Executive when they ask him to approve a proposed scheme.

Like amendment No 3, amendment No 11 proposes that:

“The relevant department shall, within 1 year of the commencement of the scheme, provide a report on the operation of the scheme to the appropriate statutory committee.”

If there were to be a statutory duty to report on a scheme, it should be to the Assembly as a whole and not directly to the Assembly Committee concerned. In any event, the Committee could seek information on the operation of any scheme at any time as part of its scrutiny role, especially if that scheme were to run for longer than the period that the amendment envisages. It has been made abundantly clear today that OFMDFM is not attempting to pull the wool over people’s eyes. We are ensuring that the Bill really meets people’s needs and circumstances.

The amendments that have been proposed do not give adequate protection. Indeed, they do the opposite — they merely add red tape and, in some cases, take away from the purpose of the Bill, which is to help people at times when they most need it.

I reject the proposed amendments and ask that all Members in the Chamber do the same to ensure that the Bill has the power to do what it is designed to do — that is, to step into the breach and make a real difference to the lives of those in need.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I object to all 13 amendments, and particularly wish to comment on amendment Nos 4 to 11. Amendment No 4 is entirely unnecessary. The joint First Ministers have already told the House that they will be bringing proposals for an amendment to the ministerial code. That will ensure that determinations of the scheme under the Bill must be agreed by the Executive, therefore ensuring the rights of all Ministers.

Amendment Nos 5 and 6 would impose additional requirements that would, effectively, defeat the current intention of the Bill, which is to identify the capability gap where a scheme is required.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: Absolutely not. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Anderson: It is abundantly clear to me that those gaps exist already. The OFMDFM Committee heard a wealth of evidence that exposed clearly the fact that the current programmes and policies are not delivering. There are programmes and policies that replicate the failed outcomes of the past. That is precisely the reason why the Committee, in its report on the inquiry into child poverty, concluded that OFMDFM, as lead office, should:

“have a role in challenging departmental Delivery Agreements to ensure the relevance and robustness of departmental targets and actions”.

I will repeat that. OFMDFM should:

“have a role in challenging departmental Delivery Agreements to ensure the relevance and robustness of departmental targets and actions”.

In fact, the Committee went even further and recommended that OFMDFM, along with DFP, should consider the introduction of a system of financial incentives and penalties to ensure that cross-departmental priorities, such as child poverty, are delivered on.

I find it strange that parties that endorsed those recommendations in the Committee now seem to feel that OFMDFM should have no role in identifying and implementing cross-departmental priorities. It is also strange that those parties argue that OFMDFM should not challenge any Department’s ability to tackle poverty yet, in the report on the inquiry into child poverty, they recommended that OFMDFM should take on that role.

Similarly, amendment No 7 would restrict the ability of the Bill to make a genuine and swift intervention by providing financial assistance to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation when funding arrangements are unsatisfactory.

I must admit that I find amendment No 8 curious, but I am sure that some of the opposing parties will explain it. On the one hand, we have parties in the Chamber complaining about the alleged plot to undermine the influence and authority of individual Ministers, yet the original six-month time frame would allow sufficient time for consultation and engagement with the relevant Minister and to get the approval of the Executive and the Assembly. I oppose that amendment.

Amendment No 9 is entirely unnecessary. It is part of any Committee’s normal role and remit to scrutinise the work of relevant Departments. Any Committee can ask for the kind of notification that is referred to in the amendment at any time. The Committees should be doing that anyway, and I would have grave concerns if the SDLP feels that it needs additional legislation to carry out the role that it should have been performing for the past 18 months.

Amendment No 10 is also unnecessary, because the Bill ensures that all potential schemes must be agreed at the Executive, thereby allowing all Ministers to make their views known.

My objection to amendment No 11 is similar to my objection to amendment No 9 in that any statutory Committee can request such a report at any stage. Not only that, it is the responsibility of the Committees to get an update on the progress of any relevant report, programme, project or policy. That is what MLAs — particularly as Committee members — are paid to do; therefore, they should be getting on with their job.

In rejecting those amendments, I find it regrettable that the SDLP, the Alliance party and the UUP seem intent on trying to take over the Bill — which is, clearly, designed to tackling poverty, social exclusion and deprivation, providing much-needed assistance —

1.45pm

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you ascertain, Mr Speaker, whether it is in order for a Member to make statements about the position of another party when that party has not contributed to this portion of the debate, and when the Member is not willing to accept an intervention to clarify that point?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: I am sure that the Member will be quite able to defend his party and himself at this or future debates. I have to say again, to all sides of the House, that Members should not persist in interventions. It is up to the Member who has the Floor whether he or she wants to take that intervention. Members should not persist. *[Interruption.]* Order, Members should not persist.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Maybe they understand that now.

Those parties seem intent on trying to take over the Bill — which is, clearly, designed to tackle poverty, social exclusion and deprivation, providing much-needed assistance to our people — in order to pursue their own narrow political agendas of opposing Sinn Féin on the one hand and the DUP on the other.

Yesterday’s men and women are still recovering from the shock that the people relegated them to third and fourth place. Today’s men and women have moved on to build a better society, and we are doing so without you. The vast majority of the people are standing with us because they want a new and better society for all.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to speak to the amendments.

Ms Anderson: Just as the people could see, at the last election, who will be delivering for them, I am confident that the people of the North will see this wreckers’ charter for what it is.

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member speaks directly to the amendments.

Ms Anderson: For that reason, I will oppose emotions *[Laughter.]* — this motion — and I oppose amendments —

The Speaker: Order.

Ms Anderson: I oppose amendment No 4 to amendment No 11. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs D Kelly: Follow that.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: Of course.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. This is an important debate. Does the Member agree that it is the convention in other Parliaments around the world — and I appreciate that we are an immature democracy, but trying to learn — that there is a proper give and take in debate with regard to interventions?

Mrs D Kelly: Of course, I completely endorse what Dr Farry has said. As a matter of curiosity, however, and it may be helpful for Dr Farry to know, that although Ms Anderson does not take interventions here, she prints on the Sinn Féin website something that one is alleged to have said. That is how they reply, as I have found to be the case.

With regard to the amendments, clause 2 of the Bill is entirely unnecessary, and it is a false pretence to include it in a financial assistance Bill. It is, and remains, a power grab by Sinn Féin and the DUP. In her contribution, Ms Anderson said that they have moved on, and the voluntary coalition that exists between Sinn Féin and the DUP is how this society will be governed. She suggested, rather erroneously, that our party's Minister had failed in her ability to deliver. I believe that the record shows that Ms Ritchie, as the sole SDLP Minister of the Executive, has delivered despite the fact that Sinn Féin and the DUP took £30 million off the social development budget.

Mr Molloy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Should not the Member also speak to the Bill?

Mr Speaker: I have warned all sides of the House, and I am prepared to give Members some latitude when they are speaking to the amendments, but, really, some Members are almost stretching it to a point. I remind Members: please, as far as possible, try to speak to the business that is on the Floor at this moment, and that business is amendments to the Financial Assistance Bill.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but I was merely responding to some of the accusations that Ms Anderson made. It was Ms Anderson who let the cat out of the bag when she said that the Bill was going to be a “significant sea change”.

Clause 2 does have the potential to bring about a significant sea change. None of the parties are opposed to the Bill in its entirety, they do not want to see any delay, nor indeed, are they causing any such delay.

Unfortunately, Mr Shannon has left, but in answer to his question, the legislative process has not been delayed by one day. It is a matter of public record that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed to the accelerated passage of the Bill. It is entirely untrue and unfair to give the impression that a delay has been caused by any of the

other parties in their attempts to make a bad piece of legislation better.

Ms Anderson suggested that clause 2 is aimed at addressing capability gaps. Surely, if there are capability gaps in the Programme for Government, or indeed, in the Budget, an annual Budget review would identify those gaps within each Department. Legislation enabling a power grab by the First Minister and deputy First Minister is, therefore, not required.

Proposed amendment Nos 4 to 11, which we support, attempt to try to ensure that the Executive remains at the heart of Government. Proposed amendment No 4 stipulates that power should not simply be confined to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, but that the agreement of the Executive Committee is required. In an interview, Mr Molloy said that Sinn Féin and the DUP would have the majority vote in the Executive, and, as Ms Anderson pointed out, that is obviously the case as we move towards a new future which is Sinn Féin and DUP controlled.

It is entirely erroneous to suggest, as Mr Shannon did, that clause 2 is designed to help the people of the Province in their time of need. It is not about that at all; we all know that it is about directing money to areas where there is poverty, social exclusion and deprivation. Mr Kelly informed the House that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would bring forward legislation by November 2008; surely their failure to do that constitutes a capability gap in the building of a better and more inclusive society.

I note that in the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Sinn Féin and the DUP now accept the findings of the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, something which they have bad-mouthed on a regular and routine basis over the past couple of years because it was created under direct rule. If clause 2 is to deal, in some way, with social exclusion, deprivation and poverty, one wonders why Sinn Féin and the DUP were not doing what they were supposed to do, and why, 18 months into a new Administration, none of those strategies have been produced. For example, many Members will accept that the victims and survivors of the conflict are often disadvantaged — through the loss of the main wage earner and so on — and yet there is further procrastination in bringing forward the strategy for victims and survivors. Although that strategy is now being put out to consultation, albeit on a limited basis, no precise dates have been given.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must once again remind the Member to try, as far as possible, to keep her remarks to the amendments that are being discussed.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I want to finish my last remarks by saying that a capability gap

exists within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Ms Anderson, and others, asked why amendment No 8 seeks to remove “6 months” from clause 2 and insert “3 months”. The purpose of the legislation is to respond quickly to emergency situations. One would have to ask whether it is really an emergency if six months is the length of time that it takes to act. Therefore, it is an attempt to improve the Bill, and to put it on the footing that the DUP and Sinn Féin have suggested that it already is. To a certain extent, we accept their rationale, but we want to improve upon it.

Proposed amendment No 10 concerns determining where the budget will come from, and relates to clause 1 in which an attempt is made to identify the money prior to any scheme being initiated. Proposed amendment No 11 is aimed at ensuring that all Members of the Assembly and the Committees have the opportunity to scrutinise the outworkings of any scheme under this initiative. Other parties will do well to remember that majorities can be created in all shapes and forms.

During his contribution to the debate on the Bill’s Consideration Stage, the First Minister suggested that it could determine who has responsibility for preschool-aged children, which could, clearly, fall upon the Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane. That may well be an area in which the scheme might be used and action taken.

The SDLP takes its responsibilities of scrutiny and public accountability seriously. It does not sell itself out nor do deals behind closed doors for its own party-political advantage. It works for the greater good of the community.

Mrs Long: I rise to give the Alliance Party’s position on the second group of amendments. I will preface my party’s response to those amendments by reiterating its stance on two particular matters.

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

The First Minister refers continually to his frustration that my party does not listen to him. Mr Moutray also expressed his concern. It may be news to Members on the DUP Benches that, unlike them, the rest of the House can still exercise its right to hear what the First Minister says and not agree with him. However frustrating or novel that concept might be for them, to hear is not to obey. It is worth putting on record that the Assembly has free thought and speech: long may that continue.

The other issue is the differences between parties’ positions on clauses 1 and 2. The Alliance Party’s position on clause 2 is quite different to those of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. Had Ms Anderson conceded the politeness and courtesy of giving way, her misapprehension that the Alliance Party supports

all of the amendments in the second group could have been corrected. Clearly, however, Ms Anderson does not believe that she needs correction on any matter.

Clause 2 deals with a cross-cutting theme for which OFMDFM already has direct departmental responsibility. The policy drivers for tackling poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation already exist in OFMDFM. That is its specific duty. Therefore, my party does not consider clause 2 to be a power grab, but rather an attempt to deal with the failure of all Departments to co-ordinate on the delivery of a cohesive agenda.

During the past few weeks, I have acknowledged repeatedly, both in the Committee and in debates in the Chamber, that there are major difficulties in delivery with regard to those issues because functional responsibility often rests with other Departments or multiple Departments, which leads to tensions between them on issues, such as those to which Mrs Kelly referred — childcare for school-aged children, for example. That gives rise to significant problems.

Martina Anderson rightly referred to the fact that the matter was discussed by the Committee and that it recommended that it should be highlighted. However, she failed to understand or convey the subtlety of that discussion. It is quite right that the Committee recognised the potential need for financial levers for the delivery of considered cross-cutting themes. However, it did not agree that clause 2 was the right mechanism by which to do that.

In fact, junior Minister Donaldson and junior Minister Kelly tried repeatedly to convince the Committee that no additional levers are required and that the status quo is sufficient. The Committee was not convinced. Subsequently, it stated in its report that those levers might be necessary. I recognise the need for OFMDFM controls of those cross-cutting themes. My query is whether they might also be needed for many other cross-cutting themes — community relations, equality and sustainability, for example.

My party’s consistent position is that clause 2 is not unsound in principle. It welcomes the fact that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have attempted to tackle that capacity gap. However, it wants to ensure that the entire range of cross-cutting themes is considered fully for inclusion in such a clause and that the entire range of potential levers that can be exerted by OFMDFM and other Departments is considered. That is why my party called for that particular clause to be taken back and be subject to a full Committee Stage.

That is a subtle difference in the positions of the different parties.

2.00 pm

I will now speak about the amendments in group 2. Amendment No 4 is largely a repetition of last week’s

debate, and the point has already been made. We have no principled objection to amendment No 4, and we have already put on record our position that the Executive should act jointly. However, in the context of what has already been debated at Consideration Stage, we are not sure that amendment No 4 adds anything of substance. At Consideration Stage, my main concern was that those Ministers whose parties do not form a majority in the Executive would have precious little protection. The insertion of “Executive” into the Bill does not give those Ministers any additional protection; that is unfortunate, but it is fact.

We are not in favour of amendment No 5. We have recognised that OFMDFM already has a responsibility for cross-cutting themes, so we do not accept that exceptional circumstances must be proven for OFMDFM to be able to act on issues of social exclusion, deprivation and patterns of need. Indeed, that would be a reduction in the powers held by OFMDFM.

Mr O’Loan: I seek clarification from the Member. There ought to be a proper process in which an annual Budget is driven by a Programme for Government, and that Programme for Government should be revised and produced annually as a new document. The Programme for Government is the responsibility of OFMDFM in consultation with all other departmental Ministers. Given all that, what circumstance exists that could not be called exceptional, other than the annual Programme for Government? Does the Member not have concerns that a rejection of amendment No 5 would be an opportunity for parties in OFMDFM to act on matters that are not exceptional and that ought to be properly dealt with in the Programme for Government?

Mrs Long: The difficulty with the Member’s proposition is his statement of where these things ought to be rightly dealt with. Social exclusion, deprivation, poverty, and so on ought to be rightly dealt with by OFMDFM; that is the current situation. The issue with the Programme for Government is that, when Ministers sign off on the Budget and the Programme for Government and are not supported by their parties, or when Ministers sign off on an overall Programme for Government but do not give sufficient budgetary priority to its cross-cutting themes, there can be problems that are not tackled.

One example of that is poverty and social exclusion. It is already a priority for the Executive, but that has not led to the Health Minister and the Education Minister coming together and making a decision on who will provide school-age childcare. If OFMDFM intervention is required to make that happen, frankly, so be it. That is exactly the kind of circumstance that is not unforeseen but that needs to be tackled. It is also a valid circumstance where OFMDFM — in order to meet its departmental responsibilities — needs to have some way of making other parties in Government

work together to achieve objectives, if they have chosen not to do that.

I do not believe that there is a need for exceptional circumstance to be proved, therefore, because that would represent a reduction in OFMDFM’s current responsibilities. Furthermore, in the preface to my detailed consideration of the amendments, I acknowledged that there are flaws in the current arrangements with regard to cross-cutting issues, so I do not support amendment No 5.

The insertion of “unforeseen” in amendment No 6 is a change of the circumstances. We must accept that OFMDFM has a responsibility for tackling the issues that are referred to in clause 2. Those issues do not have to be unforeseen or exceptional for OFMDFM to act on them. Indeed, to the contrary, OFMDFM should be tackling those issues as a matter of routine. It would have been better if we had been able to write into the Bill that OFMDFM would act in direct co-operation with the individual Ministers whose Departments are affected.

The Alliance Party moved that amendment last week, but it was not supported. Acceptance of that amendment would have led to better collaboration and an enhanced Bill. Amendment No 6 does not go any way towards achieving that end and simply removes some responsibility from OFMDFM.

Amendment No 7 aims to delete the phrase “for any other reason unsatisfactory” from clause 2(1)(b). I understand and sympathise with the motivation for the amendment, but the Alliance Party and I are unsure about supporting it for two reasons. There may be reasons, other than those that are stated in the Bill, why mechanisms are unsatisfactory. The Bill states that those reasons should be ineffective or inadequate. I highlighted that matter in my response to Mr O’Loan’s intervention. For example, an individual Department with responsibility for delivering on a particular issue might not give that issue as high a priority as OFMDFM considers necessary. There might be circumstances where such issues are not prioritised. For example, issues such as school-age childcare and acute care might compete for attention in the health budget, and huge tensions could arise about which matter is more important. OFMDFM might have a particular view on that situation, and, therefore, it is important to recognise that unspecified circumstances might arise.

My second reason for having reservations about the amendment is that it is, essentially, negated by clause 4(5), which states:

“Financial assistance may be provided under this Act even though other powers to provide financial assistance exist.”

Therefore, clause 4(5) completely undercuts any attempt to ensure that the provision applies in exceptional circumstances only. Unless clause 4(5) is deleted, the amendment will not have any effect on the

provisions of the Bill. However, the Alliance Party is sympathetic to the motivation of the Members who tabled the amendment.

The Alliance Party opposes amendment No 8. Last week, we highlighted the material difference between the urgency of the measures outlined in clause 1 and clause 2. Clause 1 deals with exceptional circumstances in which an immediate response is required, whereas clause 2 deals with a different, less immediate set of circumstances. The First Minister and deputy First Minister conveyed that message previously. Therefore, regulations could, reasonably, be made and a scheme could be brought to the House within three months.

If the circumstances are exceptional and urgent intervention is necessary, three months seems to be a reasonable time period. However, the wording of clause 2 does not require it to be an emergency, and, therefore, six months seems to be a reasonable period. Six months could permit more complete consideration of measures and could, perhaps, lead to more robust and considered mechanisms than would be created in emergency circumstances.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she accept that the issues provided for in clause 2 could be recurring, and that the Assembly might have to deal with them on several occasions during its lifetime?

Mrs Long: Yes. However, that does not affect my argument. If six months are available in which to address the issue, regulations will, potentially, be more robust and considered than those that have been established within three months, as would be the case in an emergency. However, no one wants to treat every incident as an emergency, because that would lead to poorly considered action.

Mrs D Kelly: Could it not be argued that clause 2 should be omitted from the Bill? That would allow a six-month consultation period under accelerated passage.

Is it also the case that many schemes cannot be introduced because of the failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to agree the financial situation — for example, the delivery and implementation of the Peace III fund?

Mrs Long: To some degree, the Member is reading my mind, because during last week's debate, I made a point about clause 2 being omitted, but the time for that argument has passed. I stated then that it would be appropriate for fuller consideration to be given to the issue. Clause 2 is more substantive and complex than clause 1, and accelerated passage is an action taken in haste that will be repented at leisure — but we are where we are. However, it is a very flawed argument to then say that because of that precedent, everything should be done in haste. I would rather that six months

were available to consider the regulations that are established under clause 2, as I am on record as saying that I would rather have had a proper Committee Stage to consider clause 2 in its entirety.

I have no principled objection to amendment No 9, which states that the relevant Department will notify the appropriate Committee of any designation; however, given that that will happen in any case, I am not sure what the amendment adds to the Bill. It does not particularly concern me, because the motivation behind the amendment is quite reasonable. Implicit in the amendment is the assumption that only one Department will be involved in the delivery of cross-cutting themes. That is quite flawed: two, three, four or even more Departments could be involved in the delivery of cross-cutting themes. One Department or a number of Departments could be involved, which is not made fully clear in the amendment.

As with amendment No 2, the Alliance Party understands the principle of amendment No 10, and some clarification has been provided on the wording. However, I want to put on record that the wording of the amendment is ambiguous. It mentions two Departments, stating:

“Regulations made under this section, if made by a department other than the Department of Finance and Personnel, require the approval of that department.”

The amendment is ambiguous about the Department to which it refers — the Department making the regulations or the Department of Finance and Personnel. I accept Mrs Kelly's and Mr O'Loan's reassurances that the Assembly Bill Office is content that that refers to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

One particular issue that relates to amendment No 10 does not apply to amendment No 2. Amendment No 2 deals with largely unforeseen and exceptional circumstances in which it is likely that additional moneys that have not been budgeted for would have to be taken into a central fund and used for emergency circumstances, whether through a monitoring round or another mechanism. It is implicit in clause 2 that the issue concerns how money is organised within existing budgets. Therefore, I am not sure that the argument for consulting DFP with regard to clause 2 is as strong as the argument for consulting DFP with regard to clause 1. However, I have no strong objection to the amendment, other than having an issue with the ambiguity of the wording.

The Alliance Party is content with amendment No 11 and has no difficulty with it in principle. However — not surprisingly — the party believes that amendment No 13 handles the issue of reporting back to the House more effectively, because more than one Department could be involved, and reporting directly to the Assembly in that circumstance is a much better way to ensure that all Members are apprised of the full extent

of activity under the Bill. There would be nothing to preclude a Committee from calling for a report from the relevant Department about the detailed contribution that that Department is making under any scheme, but an annual report to the Assembly — which could subsequently trigger those reports — would be a more coherent way to handle that reporting rather than each Department producing separate reports. I suspect that it would also be a more comprehensive report for Members, who may have concerns that what is presented to their Committee does not give them the full flavour of what is being done under the powers of the Bill.

I hope that it is now clear where the Alliance Party stands on the amendments and the reasoning behind that position. The party will not support amendment Nos 5 to 8, and it queries how the remainder of the amendments will make a difference to the operation of the Bill.

2.15 pm

Mr I McCrea: I oppose amendment Nos 4, 5, 6 and 7. It is regrettable that we are, once again, considering amendments that fail to offer any positive contributions to the Bill.

Amendment No 4 would require the Executive Committee to agree to any determination under clause 2 by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. However, that amendment is not required as such agreement is already required under the current ministerial code. To make things more specific to the Bill, a draft amendment to the ministerial code has been proposed. Executive approval has been gained, but that amendment will be subject to the approval of the Assembly once the Financial Assistance Bill has been enacted. Therefore, amendment No 4 is unnecessary and should not be supported.

I welcome the fact that the Alliance Party has listened to the First Minister and now considers his views as the rest of us do. Amendment No 5 would result in an additional requirement that would restrict clause 2 to exceptional circumstances. As a result, the clause would become a more restrictive version of clause 1. It would also prevent the Bill from being of any benefit in tackling poverty situations that are not considered to arise from exceptional circumstances.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way, which is something of a breakthrough for Members — with the exception of Jim Shannon — on some Benches. Will the Member outline when he thinks that poverty, social exclusion and deprivation will not be features of our society and why the clause would not apply to exceptional circumstances? Surely the Executive and the Assembly have a role to tackle those issues on an ongoing, routine and daily basis?

Mr I McCrea: The Member knows that the role of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is to scrutinise any functions of that office. I will know exceptional circumstances when they occur. *[Laughter.]*

If the Member does not know exceptional circumstances, I am sure that her constituents will be the first to tell her.

Amendment No 6 would result in an additional requirement, which would add a further restriction to clause 2 by limiting the exercise of powers to situations that are considered to be unforeseen. The purpose of clause 2 is to allow action to be taken to tackle poverty when current funding arrangements are unsatisfactory. However, that may still be necessary in situations that are not considered to be unforeseen.

Amendment No 7 has the potential to restrict the ability to take action to tackle poverty under clause 2 by removing “for any other reason unsatisfactory” from the list of grounds for intervening — even when the arrangements that are in place to provide financial assistance are unsatisfactory. It is important to retain the widest possible powers to intervene when existing arrangements for tackling poverty are unsatisfactory; they simply cannot be cut.

The amendments in group 2 demonstrate that some people in this House are intent on playing politics with poverty. That is why there is no substance in any of those amendments, and I call on the House to reject them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time will commence at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the deputy First Minister.

2.30 pm

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they must rise in their place; otherwise, they will not be called. Even those Members whose names are on the list that I have at the Table must rise in their place.

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Review of the British-Irish Council

1. **Mr Attwood** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report on the review of the British-Irish Council. (AQO 1860/09)

The deputy First Minister: In July 2007, at a summit meeting in Belfast, Ministers tasked the secretariat of the British-Irish Council (BIC), in consultation with member Administrations, to undertake a strategic review of the Council. The review's aim was to ensure that the Council operate in the most efficient and effective manner in delivering its work programmes, working methods and support arrangements, including those for a standing secretariat. Ministers considered interim reports from the summit meetings in Dublin and Edinburgh that were held in February 2008 and September 2008 respectively.

Those reports were informed by papers prepared by the secretariat and the participating Administrations, and focused on three main strands: support arrangements, work programmes, and working methods. The strategic review of the BIC is likely to feature on the agenda for the forthcoming summit in Cardiff. A statement to update Members on the outcome of discussions will be made to the Assembly after that meeting.

Mr Attwood: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer, and I look forward to reading the report.

I refer the deputy First Minister to the Hansard report of 21 October 2008, when the First Minister said:

“east-west relationships must catch up with the existing North/South structures ... the east-west relationships are catching up.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p162, col 1*].

Is the deputy First Minister not concerned that implicit in that statement is the danger that, as east-west relationships catch up, North/South relationships slow down? Given the ongoing review of the BIC, is he not

concerned that at the same time as all that work on east-west arrangements is ongoing, those responsible for the review of the further expansion of North/South implementation and co-operation have not spent even one day considering how to expand North/South arrangements? Does that not give rise to deep concern about what is really happening?

The deputy First Minister: I am concerned only with the proper outworking of the institutions that were established under the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement. Officials from the BIC are working flat out to ensure that the examination and review of all those institutions is conducted in a manner that will result in their working effectively for all the people whom we represent. Many Governments are involved in the British-Irish Council.

Similarly, I want the good work that the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) does to continue. The First Minister and I, accompanied by eight additional Ministers, attended the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in Derry last Friday. We were keen to meet the Taoiseach and 12 of his Ministers who came from Dublin to attend. The responsibility for conducting the reviews of the BIC and the North/South Ministerial Council has been given to officials.

It is important that we who are in Government ensure that the outcome of those reviews is that the institutions work effectively in the interests of all the people whom we represent. It is not a matter of there being a competition between east-west and North/South; rather, it is about ensuring that officials and Ministers in those two important institutions carry out their responsibilities for the benefit of everyone.

Mr Molloy: Will the deputy First Minister outline the timetable for the review of the meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council, as provided for in the St Andrews Agreement?

The deputy First Minister: The provision in the St Andrews Agreement is for a review group to report its recommendations to the North/South Ministerial Council. The group's remit was to examine objectively the efficiency and value for money of existing implementation bodies, and the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation in the NSMC from which mutual benefit would be derived. It was also tasked with having an input into the work on the identification of a suitable substitute for the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

The review group consists of senior officials and an advisory panel of four expert advisers; two appointed by the Executive and two appointed by the Irish Government.

At its plenary meeting last week, the NSMC welcomed progress by the review group and noted that the expert advisers have completed their report on the

efficiency and value for money of the existing implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland. The NSMC has requested that the review group, in consultation with the relevant sponsor Departments and Ministers, consider the recommendations made by the expert advisers and submit a report to the next NSMC plenary meeting. The NSMC requested the review group to complete work on its remaining terms of reference and to submit proposals to an NSMC plenary meeting before the end of this year.

Mr McCausland: The British-Irish Council is important in that it brings together the constituent parts of the British Isles and is, therefore, something that we support. One of the failures of the Belfast Agreement was that it did not give sufficient emphasis to the British-Irish Council. With reference to the deputy First Minister's statement that a report will be forthcoming at the next meeting in Cardiff, will he tell us the date of that meeting and how soon afterwards we might be able to see the recommendations being implemented?

The deputy First Minister: I do not have the exact date, but I believe that it will take place in February.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Meetings with the Energy Sector and Regulator

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what have been the practical outcomes of the meetings which took place in September 2008 between the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the energy sector and regulator.

(AQO 1862/09)

The deputy First Minister: The First Minister and I had informative meetings with representatives of the energy sector and the Utilities Regulator as part of a series of cost-of-living meetings held with stakeholder groups, including the banks, the construction industry, the social and voluntary sectors, business groups and trade unions during the autumn and the early part of the winter last year to gather information on the impact of the economic downturn on local, social and economic interests.

The meetings with the energy sector also helped us to gain a better understanding of the local energy market and the regulation process, and informed us of what actions we, as First Minister and deputy First Minister, could take to help local householders and businesses to deal with increasing energy costs. The meetings also gave a clear signal of the importance that we attach to ensuring that local energy prices are fairly and transparently set in accordance with the current legislative and regulatory framework.

Energy costs are a significant element of local households' budgets, and are a particular challenge for the most disadvantaged households. In recognition of that, the Executive announced in December their intention to provide £150 to support the most vulnerable households. We have also moved to put in place the Financial Assistance Bill, which will enable us to act quickly.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has primary responsibility for energy policy. Our meetings reinforced and supported the review of last year's price rises called for by the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. We welcomed the correction of prices announced by the Utility Regulator on 15 December, and we plan further meetings with some of the energy companies to explore further how they can contribute to easing the burden of energy costs on local consumers and businesses.

Mr Cree: I thank the deputy First Minister for his comprehensive reply. What plans does OFMDFM have to reduce Northern Ireland's dependence on one energy source for electricity generation, bearing in mind the emerging gas cartel?

The deputy First Minister: We are all challenged by the difficulties that have arisen recently. Those challenges and difficulties affect not only us in this part of the world, but most Governments in western Europe. We face real challenges. Many Departments, including the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, are facing up to the problem of how they can put processes in place that will lessen our dependency on some delivery mechanisms. Recent events, such as the economic downturn and fluctuating prices in gas and fuel, represent real challenges for us as we move forward.

Everybody in Government — the Departments, the Executive as a whole, and, I believe, in the Assembly — is continually focusing attention on how we can ensure that we put in place sustainable mechanisms to enable us to become less dependent on a fuel supply that all sorts of factors can affect. Such situations can include different wars in different parts of the world to whatever whim a particular Government have to increase prices. For example, we witnessed the recent difficulty between Russia and the Ukraine and how that can affect not only their relationship but everyone in western Europe.

Mr Hamilton: An essential element of our energy future is the security of our supply, and I know that the British-Irish Council has added a work stream on energy. Can the deputy First Minister tell the House what efforts have been made through the British-Irish Council to achieve a goal of better grid connectivity, which has been outlined in our investment strategy?

The deputy First Minister: At the British-Irish Council meetings, very serious discussions were held on the economic downturn and on the fact that we are absolutely dependent on fuel for energy. To deal with the problems associated with recent rises in energy prices, the Executive have given £15 million to help the most vulnerable people, who are most affected by fuel poverty, and that means that more than 100,000 households on pension credit and income support will receive £150.

Some £21 million is already committed to the warm homes scheme. DETI will work with the regulator's office to explore whether scope is available for regulatory action to be taken for those living in fuel poverty, taking account of the interests of all energy customers, including businesses. The Housing Executive is investigating the potential for its acting as a broker to procure discounted energy for its tenants.

From our perspective, we are moving forward. As many Members will know, DETI published an energy-strategy document in 2004, titled the 'Strategic Energy Framework'. After a review of that framework last year, and in light of the change in world focus towards tackling the threat of climate change as well as addressing concerns around security of supply and economic development, DETI secured the agreement of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment that a new energy framework should be developed.

As a first step in the process, DETI undertook a scoping consultation, which was aimed at engaging the key energy stakeholders and garnering their views on our energy future over the next 10 years. The consultation officially closed on 8 January 2009. Feedback from the scoping paper and a number of energy-related workshops, engagement with other key Departments and the recent independent review of the energy price-setting process will inform, develop and shape a revised strategic energy framework for 2009. The draft framework will be brought before the Committee and the Executive for approval, before it is issued for full public consultation, probably in the spring.

The challenges that the economic downturn and energy issues pose exercised all the Governments represented at the British-Irish Council meeting. Given the way in which the economic fortunes of all those Governments have changed over the past number of months — indeed, over the past 12 months — it is incumbent on all of us to work in a spirit of co-operation in order to ensure that we can meet the challenges of energy delivery and security.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr Speaker, I apologise for arriving late to Question Time, and I also apologise to the deputy First Minister.

My question is connected to the rise in fuel prices. What can the Executive do to monitor or review the current regulatory energy framework? Are there any proposals to review the regulatory system?

The deputy First Minister: The relevant legislation is the Energy Order 2003 and the Electricity Order 1992, which govern the behaviour of the energy companies that operate under licences provided by that legislation.

2.45 pm

The licence will specify, among other things, the allowed profit levels of price-regulated companies and the extent of costs that can be passed back to consumers in prices. The energy regulator's role is to check that companies are operating and setting prices in accordance with the terms of their licences.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is undertaking consultation on a long-term strategic energy framework that will consider how to reduce energy costs, build competitive and sustainable energy markets, and increase use of renewable energy. That new framework will also consider changes to the regulatory energy framework recommended in the recent energy price review.

Safeguarding Children

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's position on safeguarding children.
(AQO 1863/09)

The deputy First Minister: Child protection and safeguarding children is a key priority for us all. Last year, we re-established the Bichard co-ordination group, which is overseeing the implementation of the Bichard recommendations here, particularly the establishment of the safeguarding vulnerable groups scheme.

OFMDFM has co-ordinated a cross-departmental safeguarding policy statement that binds and integrates existing measures on safeguarding children with new actions and policies. The junior Ministers will discuss that issue with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister this week, and it is due to be considered by the Executive next month. In addition, the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people has identified safeguarding as a key priority. A cross-departmental subgroup led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has developed work that is focused, in the short term, on the Byron Review into Internet Safety. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety sits on the British Council for Child Internet Safety, and officials from several Departments will be involved in the council's working groups.

The junior Ministers met NIO Minister Paul Goggins late last year to discuss how to improve the management of sex offenders who prey on the young and vulnerable on both sides of the border. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is making progress on cross-border child protection measures, which is also a live issue for the North/South Ministerial Council. Indeed, it was discussed at its meeting last Friday.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. I am pleased that the issue of child protection was on the agenda at the latest North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Given the recent case reported in the media about predators — for whom there can be no hiding place — will the Minister confirm that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety attended the North/South Ministerial Council meeting and addressed it on this topic, and outline any issues that he proposes to bring forward?

The deputy First Minister: Child protection was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Unfortunately, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was not able to attend.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. However, can he say whether any of the Executive's child-safety programmes have been, or are likely to be, delayed by the now-admitted £1 million black hole in the Budget?

The deputy First Minister: I take issue with the Member's last comment. Quite clearly, important targets are in place. Ministers, in particular junior Ministers in the Executive, are working hard to ensure that children are protected in the way that they deserve to be protected. From our perspective, it is very important to move forward in a way that will see all children protected. The ministerial subcommittee on children and young people was established in January 2008, and is chaired by the junior Ministers. The subcommittee has identified six key priorities, and established cross-departmental subgroups to develop those issues.

A holistic approach is being taken to child poverty that involves a comprehensive early-years strategy that focuses on the development and well-being of each child, including affordable access to high-quality early years provision for families in urban and rural areas of disadvantage and poverty, and provision for vulnerable young people, including those in care settings, those engaged in antisocial behaviour, and those in contact with the criminal justice system.

Other key areas include the promotion of good mental health and early intervention in addressing mental-health issues as they arise; providing care for children with autism, learning, physical and sensory disabilities,

including respite and community provision; safeguarding, including support for parents, families and carers; provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools, including transition to adulthood and the provision of appropriate health and social care intervention; and the provision of school buses, road-safety and transport issues.

The subgroups identified a small number of key priorities on which to focus, and they will report back at the next meeting of the ministerial subcommittee. It has also been recognised that childcare is an immediate priority, and an additional subgroup, which is linked to the subgroup on child poverty, is focusing specifically on that cross-cutting theme. Therefore, much work is being done, and we are determined to ensure that we meet the needs of our young people.

Mrs D Kelly: Has the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister carried out any analysis of the impact that ending Executive funds for children and young people would have? How does he intend to co-ordinate with the NIO on reserved and excepted matters on safeguarding children?

The deputy First Minister: The Executive have made it clear that we believe that all Departments have a responsibility for providing on the issues that the Member outlined. We have placed responsibility on all Departments to ensure that there is delivery on those important issues. I think that that is the sensible way to proceed. However, we all recognise that particular challenges affect young people and that we are duty-bound at all stages of our processes to review continually how we meet the needs of our young people.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Global Economic Downturn

6. **Dr Farry** To ask the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it has given to revising the Programme for Government in light of the global economic downturn.

(AQO 1865/09)

The deputy First Minister: The Executive are committed to the ongoing review of the Programme for Government so that we may take account of changing circumstances and to ensure that we are focused clearly on addressing key challenges. Indeed, the measures that we announced on 15 December 2008 to address the economic downturn are very much part of the ongoing review of our priorities and targets.

From the outset of the Programme for Government, we made the economy our top priority. That was underpinned by our commitment to target resources and efforts towards those with the greatest objective need. Although the economic context has changed

remarkably over the past year, that prioritisation and focus has become ever more relevant and valid — it will be much more challenging for the Executive to deliver on what were always ambitious targets. However, during these difficult times, it is more important than ever that we provide clear leadership and that we work together to deliver on the commitments in our Programme for Government.

The welfare of local people is our primary concern. The Executive are committed to doing all that they can to tackle disadvantage and inequality and to support and protect local people and businesses from the worst effects of the current economic downturn. We have made the credit crunch a standing item of Executive business, and we introduced the Financial Assistance Bill, which will enable us to react quickly to emerging problems.

Addressing the economic downturn is the top priority of all the institutions. It was discussed at the plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council last Friday, and the First Minister and I will raise it at the upcoming meeting of the British-Irish Council. In addition, the First Minister and I have written to Gordon Brown seeking an urgent meeting to press the case that local depositors in the Presbyterian Mutual Society be protected from the consequences of the society's current financial difficulties. We also plan to meet the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, Peter Mandelson, in the coming weeks to ensure that local businesses receive every possible assistance to weather the economic storm.

Today's news of redundancies at the Ulster Bank and NACCO Materials Handling Group in Craigavon further underlines the local impact of the global conditions. Our thoughts are with all the workers — and their families — who are affected by those announcements. Rest assured that the Executive will do everything in their power to help those who face unemployment and to help our economy to withstand the difficult current economic conditions.

Dr Farry: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Has he studied the responses of Governments elsewhere on these islands and further afield? For example, the new deal announced by the Obama Administration covers issues such as social housing and investment in energy efficiency and renewables. Does he share the assessment of many that the scale of the response in Northern Ireland pales into insignificance when compared with that of other Governments? Does he also share the concern that we are being left behind because of the Executive's inability to respond sufficiently?

The deputy First Minister: I do not accept that we are being left behind. We all recognise that there is a very challenging situation worldwide. Indeed, many

other Governments are struggling in much worse circumstances than ours. A new American President has just come into office, and many people throughout the Western World will be very interested to see whether the initiatives that he takes to address the dire economic situation in the United States will have a stabilising effect on the economy there, and also, by extension, on economies in the Western World. Therefore, there are many difficulties and challenges. Like other Administrations, the Executive are continually facing those challenges and taking important decisions to try to weather the very difficult economic storm.

We cannot lose our nerve. A key word that is constantly used is "confidence"; if we simply lie down, we will fail the people whom we represent. We must recognise that we are going to face challenging economic circumstances over the next 12 to 18 months, or possibly even longer. It is interesting to note the absolute failure of many people to predict more than a year ago that the situation would be as disastrous as it appears to be. Equally, even in the midst of the difficulties, it appears that there are very few experts out there who can point to how long the difficult situation will last, but I know that it will not last forever — it will pass. In the meantime, we must weather the economic storm.

The Executive have taken important decisions to assist people who are facing problems, but we cannot rest on our laurels. We constantly have to review the situation to see what more we can do, but every Member knows that we are doing that in the context of a very tight fiscal situation, constrained by the Barnett formula. Like other Administrations, we are tied to the allocations that we receive.

When we put together our Programme for Government and our Budget, we did so in the context of trying to ensure that we manage as best we can across a range of Departments. However, within all that, individual challenges present themselves. For example, we, and many others, appear to be facing rising levels of unemployment, and we must see how we can meet those challenges. It will mean constantly reviewing our Programme for Government. However, as we said at the time, it was not written in tablets of stone. We must recognise that we have to meet the needs of people, and we can best do that by working together collectively as an Executive to ensure that we deliver.

Mr Moutray: In light of current economic conditions, will the deputy First Minister confirm that the Executive were correct to make the economy their number one priority?

The deputy First Minister: We were correct to make the economy our number one driver, because we all know and understand fully that if we are to have an impact on people's standards of living, we must ensure

that we have an economy that is vibrant and that delivers for the people whom we represent.

Even now, in the midst of worldwide economic gloom, it is still important that we, as an Executive, recognise the importance of building the economy in a way that will deliver for the people whom we represent. People are enduring great hardship as a result of rising energy costs, food prices and unemployment levels, so there is a real challenge for us. However, we can put in place programmes and processes that will impact on the difficulties in a way that will be beneficial to the people whom we represent.

Mr Speaker: We will now have a quick supplementary question from David Burnside.

3.00 pm

Mr Burnside: I will be quicker with my question than the deputy First Minister was with his long-winded statement. The deputy First Minister made only one specific point in his three long-winded answers to the question and the supplementary questions. He referred to the Presbyterian Mutual Society. In their representations to the British Prime Minister, will he and the First Minister, if need be —

Mr Speaker: Order. I gave the Member an opportunity to ask only a short supplementary.

Mr Burnside: Will he ask the Prime Minister to nationalise the Presbyterian Mutual Society so that the interests of its customers can be looked after?

Mr Speaker: Just before the deputy First Minister answers, when I said that I would allow a short supplementary question, I meant a short supplementary question. That is why I gave the Member the opportunity in the first place. The Member may not catch my eye for a supplementary question in future.

The deputy First Minister: It is obvious that many people who invested in the Presbyterian Mutual Society are facing a difficult situation. The Executive are sympathetic to their plight at this time, and we believe that Gordon Brown and the British Government must recognise their responsibility to ensure that those people do not incur losses to what, for many, are their life savings.

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

John Lewis Planning Proposal

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the John Lewis planning proposal,

considering the comparison between it and the IKEA site at Holywood Exchange in Belfast. (AQO 1881/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Given that there is no application from John Lewis for a planning proposal at present, I will have to try to read the Member's mind. Since he is here more often than the previous Member who spoke, that will be easy to do.

I assume that the Member is referring to the application that was made by Sprucefield Centre Ltd. That application is undergoing the statutory consultation. A request for further environmental information was lodged with the applicant on 2 December 2008. That information has not yet been provided, but I hope that it will be made available soon.

The stage 1 retail report that followed the BMAP inquiry must also be taken into consideration, and the Planning Appeals Commission indicated to me that it hopes to be in a position to provide that report some time in early 2009. I interpret that as meaning some time this month, so time is running out. The Planning Service will report to me shortly thereafter.

The application is not, of course, directly comparable with that which was made for IKEA, given the differences in the scale and nature of the retailing that is proposed and the locations of each site with reference to the statutory development plans.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer, given that the question was slightly wrong.

Given the fact that planning permission for IKEA was approved within about eight months, what assurance can the Minister give us that the application in the name of Sprucefield Centre Ltd will proceed with all speed? Is he minded to recommend a public inquiry?

The Minister of the Environment: I want to see that application proceed with all speed. The Member and others will know that I have said to the Planning Service that we ought to try to put applications — especially those that are for important economic developments — through the system within the six-month period on which we have made promises.

On the matter of a public inquiry, given that it is my responsibility and role to consider all the evidence that the Planning Service will present to me in its report, the Member knows that I would not prejudge the issue, and I will wait until that report comes. However, I assure the Member that I have asked the Planning Service to bring the report to me as soon as possible after it has the information from the Planning Appeals Commission and from the applicant on the environmental statement. I will make a quick decision on that application because I understand how important it is.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that answer, does the Minister recognise that he may have a conflict of interest, given that the final decision rests with him,

but that unlike his predecessors, he has chosen to remain a member of Belfast City Council's town planning committee? Given that we all want John Lewis to come here quickly, would it not be safer for him to recognise that and take steps to regularise his position?

The Minister of the Environment: During a debate last week, the Member admitted that I am capable of exercising independence in making decisions. Given that he gave my independence a glowing reference, I am sure that he will rest easy in the knowledge that I will consider all the facts that are presented to me and that I will assess them objectively.

Mr Poots: Every day, we hear about job losses and the dire circumstances that the economy is in. Given that that company wants to invest tens of millions of pounds in Northern Ireland and create around 1,500 jobs, will the Minister assure the House that the planning decision will be expedited?

The Minister of the Environment: I hope that I have already given that assurance. However, I express one caveat. The speed with which I can make that decision does not rest totally in my hands or in the hands of the Planning Service. The Department is waiting for a response from the Planning Appeals Commission, which, as the Member knows, is independent of my Department. I have asked my officials for a report as soon as they receive that information, so that I can make a decision. I am aware of the importance of outside investment to Northern Ireland and the role that that can play in creating jobs at a time when the recession is causing difficulties.

Inherited Council Indebtedness

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment what actions will be taken to deal with levels of inherited council indebtedness after 2011.

(AQO 1882/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Matters relating to local government finance are being addressed by policy development panel C, which reports regularly to the strategic leadership board. It is recognised that council indebtedness is one of the more significant issues and that it will require careful examination. When options have been further developed by the panel, recommendations will be presented to the strategic leadership board for consideration.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline the actions that his Department would take if a dispute in relation to borrowing were to emerge among councils in the new district council areas?

The Minister of the Environment: The Department has already tried to anticipate that, and it has already issued guidelines to councils to try to ensure that they

do not take on any unnecessary new borrowing before the new councils are set up. The finance Bill, which will, I hope, come before the Assembly in the spring of 2009 will lay down further restrictions. For example, any new borrowing by councils will have to be agreed by the transition committees of the councils that are to amalgamate. Disputes will arise. However, if the arrangements for the new councils are to work, it is important that transition committees work together and see themselves not as separate councils for the future, but as new corporate entities.

Disputes that cannot be resolved can be referred to me for resolution. I say that with great reluctance, because I hope that I will not have to do that. If that were to happen too frequently, the new councils would face a bleak future.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he spoken to his Executive colleagues to ensure that enough resources are available to implement the functions that are to be transferred to the councils? Would he support the Minister for Regional Development if he were to seek additional funding to bring the rural roads network up to standard?

The Minister of the Environment: I expend enough effort trying to get money for my own Department's functions without having to lobby for others. I am sure that the Minister for Regional Development is perfectly capable of lobbying for his own funds; I will lobby for my own Department.

As for resources for setting up the new councils, I know that councils, councillors and council officials will need to do extra work in the transition period. Therefore, £150,000 will be made available each year to each council to set up transition committees, staff them and make the necessary arrangements. Additional funding bids will be made to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the extra moneys that will be needed for the amalgamation of councils and for setting up new ones. Whether they will be successful will depend on whether we make a strong enough business case for extra money for the rationalisation.

Mr McNarry: I return to the question of indebtedness. Does the Minister accept that there has been a failure to regulate local government debt effectively? By how much has local government debt increased since 2007?

The Minister of the Environment: The debt incurred by local government amounts to £376.6 million. Since 2007, there has been no huge increase. I do not have the figure to hand; I am not a walking encyclopaedia. I will write to the Member with that information. However, I understand that the increase is marginal. This year, £30 million of local government debt will be repaid.

We must closely monitor the issue of local government debt. It would be unfair for councils that have been prudent to find their ratepayers burdened with debt from councils that have been on a spending binge. Through the guidelines that have been produced and the additional powers in the Finance Bill, we can stop councils from spending in a profligate way.

Planning Application Backlog

4. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in reducing the backlog of planning applications. (AQO 1883/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Very good progress has been made in reducing the number of live planning applications. Although the number of applications received this year has decreased by 27% compared to the same time last year, almost 18,000 applications have been processed to decision or withdrawal over the same period. As a result, the number of live applications at various stages of processing has been reduced to approximately 14,500.

Not only is the number of applications live in the system decreasing; the processing times, which relate to targets set in the Programme for Government, continue to show a month-by-month improvement. public service agreement targets for processing 70% of intermediate applications were met in November.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for his response. He and other Members know that we are currently going through a difficult economic period. Some businesses, albeit a small number, want nevertheless to expand. Can the Minister assure us that, if businesses approach his planning officials, some form of fast-tracking can be offered so that they can create more employment?

The Minister of the Environment: There have been massive improvements in the time that it takes for planning applications to be dealt with. All Members of the Assembly who sit on councils know that, by the end of February, a streamlining process should be in place in all council areas.

3.15 pm

In the pilot area in Londonderry, the results have been quite startling. The processing times for minor applications have been reduced from 89 working days to 28 working days. We are now focusing on improving times for intermediate applications. Of course, we have already seen some of the benefits of fast-tracking applications. Although there is an onus on the Planning Service to deal with applications quickly, there is also an onus on applicants not to submit rubbish planning applications that require much work from planning officials to bring them up to the required standard.

As a result of pre-application discussions, proper applications are submitted with all of the relevant information. We are meeting our target of dealing with major applications in six months. That has been the case for those applications that I already mentioned — the Enniskillen project, the Titanic signature project, the IKEA project — and a number of other applications. Meeting that target has been a big improvement, and it means that builders can get on the ground and start to employ people much more quickly.

Mr Gallagher: It takes up to two years for wind-farm applications to go through the planning process. Given the renewable obligations for that important source of energy and the massive amounts of money that companies pay for their applications, will the Minister tell the House whether those applicants will see the time spent considering their applications reduced?

The Minister of the Environment: I am amazed at that question. The one thing that Members ought to do before asking a question is to carry out a bit of research to ensure that they do not leave themselves open to an easy put-down. If the Member had done his research, he would have found that the Planning Service has been so effective that it has already approved a sufficient number of wind-farm applications to meet the target that the Assembly and the Executive have set for renewable-energy production for 2012. Indeed, once those other applications have been processed — even if it takes two years — they should enable us to meet the target that has been set for 2020.

Perhaps the Member should have examined the facts, before he spoke about how inadequate the Planning Service has been in dealing with those applications. If he had done so, he would have known that we are ahead of the game. We are dealing with those applications seriously and processing them quickly. Whether applicants then build those wind farms is another matter. At least, the Planning Service and planning officers are doing the job with which they have been tasked.

Mr Brady: A Cheann Comhairle, I hope that my question does not amaze the Minister too much. Does the Minister see any merit in asking divisional planning managers to institute annual meetings and seminars with local planning agents, architects and advisers? That would ensure better communication and more efficient use of Planning Service resources.

The Minister of the Environment: To a certain extent, divisional planning officers already do much of that work. For example, the Planning Service is currently touring Northern Ireland explaining to agents and architects the background to planning policy statement (PPS) 21 and how applications will be dealt with, so that they are clear about which applications are likely to be successful and which are not. I

mentioned earlier the issue of streamlining. Before streamlining is introduced in any area, divisional planning managers will explain the process to architects and agents.

When the process was introduced in Londonderry, some of the agents and architects were so surprised that they got responses back within four weeks that they thought that the wrong planning applications had been returned. Therefore, there has been an attempt to try to explain that process.

With regard to applications, especially the major applications — as mentioned by the Member for Upper Bann — agents and architects are encouraged to come in and talk about their application before they submit it so that they are aware of the information that is required. Therefore, a lot of consultation happens already. On the matter of individual planning applications, I am encouraging planning officers to talk to agents and applicants rather than allowing things to drift and applications to rest for a long time.

Mr Beggs: The Planning Service recently received £2 million in additional funds during the monitoring rounds, as a result of the reduced fees that it has received. Will the Minister state the number of applications that had been expected but not received, and how that lesser number of applications has contributed to the reduction in the backlog? Given the increased cost burden of the Planning Service, largely as a result of the lack of work that is going through because of the reduction in the number of applications, does the Minister have any proposals to reduce costs in his Department?

The Minister of the Environment: The number of applications received by the Planning Service has fallen quite dramatically. In the last briefing that I received, I was given figures for November 2008 that showed that applications were down by approximately 40%, which is a sizeable reduction in the Planning Service's income.

The staffing of the Planning Service depends upon its income from fees, thereby resulting in some relation between its staffing level and its workload, which I believe is the right way of doing things. However, that very quick reduction in the number of applications means that it is difficult to respond by reducing the number of officers employed. Furthermore, we hoped that the reduction in the number of applications would allow us to reduce the number of live applications in the system and to clear that backlog.

A number of things can be done to try to find ways of funding the services. Although my Department received £2 million from the Department of Finance and Personnel, it did not simply go to the Finance Minister with a begging bowl — it found approximately £3 million in its own budget to help with the shortfall.

Other things can be done also, and I have spoken to officials about measures that might be taken. I do not want to outline those at present because, until we have looked at what savings they might produce — it would be wrong of me to do so. However, I assure the Member that I am aware of the drop in income from fees, which amounts to approximately £6.5 million, the impact that that is likely to have on the resources available to the Planning Service, and the need — emphasised by the many questions about it that have been asked today — to make sure that we keep the staffing complement in the Planning Service to deal with applications as they come in.

Planning Policy

5. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions he has had with Planning Service in relation to the interpretation of planning policy. (AQO 1884/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have regular meetings with officials to discuss planning policy, as part of my role in making the final decision on article 31 planning applications, and in relation to issues that are raised by elected representatives and members of the public regarding specific cases or general policy queries.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister state where he stands if there are court proceedings against his Department with regard to planning applications in Waringstown in my constituency of Upper Bann? To be fair to the Minister, he did not hold the position of Minister of the Environment at the time when that decision was made.

The Minister of the Environment: If a court case is taken against the Department on any planning application, the Department must first go to the court to explain why that decision was taken. Very often, the courts are not interested in whether the right planning decision was made; they are interested more in whether the proper process was followed. If the proper process has not been followed, any applicant or objector should have the right to appeal to the court to ensure that a planning application is dealt with in a proper way.

I do not have a specific role in that, except that I am the Minister of the Department from which officials will go along to justify the actions that were taken.

Mr Shannon: The Minister will be very aware that there is increasing concern that the planning system, and indeed planning policy as expressed through planning policy statements, is not flexible enough to ensure that all potential economic development can be approved. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that developers and planning officials can create a better understanding and relationship in order to process applications?

The Minister of the Environment: I believe that the planning system and other parts of Government have an important role to play in economic development in Northern Ireland. Although we, in the Assembly, are continually looking at how the public purse can deal with some of the economic issues and problems that beset society, there are massive amounts of private investment tied up in planning applications in my Department. I accept that there have been criticisms of the ability of the planning system to deal with the economic implications of some planning applications, and whether it gives proper weight to economic considerations. Members are aware that I have commented on that.

I have asked officials to look at how we can give greater weight to economic considerations when it comes to dealing with planning applications; whether through a quick revision or addenda to PPS 1, which outlines the principles of planning policy, or through a ministerial statement in which we give guidance to planning officers so that they can confidently give greater weight to economic considerations. I am exploring that with my officials. Given the current situation, the planning system ought to play its role in ensuring that economic development is permitted in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us if there has been any further work on the preparation and interpretation of draft PPS 21 by the independent working group?

The Minister of the Environment: The members of the independent working group have been appointed. From memory, it has to report with recommendations by the end of May 2009. During the intervening period, the group will take evidence from a wide range of people, and if the Member has got any views that he wishes to express to the group, I welcome that.

I am aware that many people expressed fears that draft PPS 21 was too restrictive: indeed, members of Mr Bradley's party claimed that that was the case. We have now had three council meetings in which recommendations on the backlog have been taken forward. Of the applications that have been taken forward to councils, 37% of the previously refused applications have now been approved. I think that that indicates that the balance is right; the fact that a substantial number of applications, which were rejected under PPS 14, are now covered by draft PPS 21. That is good news for the rural economy, because building those houses will generate work for many small builders in rural areas.

Planning Policy Statement 15

6. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on Planning Policy Statement 15.
(AQO 1885/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Planning Policy Statement 15, which concerns planning and flood risk, was introduced in June 2006 and continues to provide effective and robust policy guidance on planning applications where the risk of flooding may be a consideration.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his brief answer; however, I am sure that he would argue that it contained all of the detail.

Members of the Planning Service who look at individual applications have raised a point with me on a number of occasions about the level at which they get useful information from Water Service, the Rivers Agency and others, that would help them make determinations about flooding.

Does the Minister have a view on the level of co-operation that is ongoing between those different services, and as to how that could be improved?

3.30 pm

The Minister of the Environment: Just before Christmas, I announced the launching of the Northern Ireland flood map, which gives a strategic picture of where the flooding risks are. That was welcomed by the Planning Service, and should be a valuable tool when it comes to considering planning applications. Historical data is available from NI Water which, again, should be of use to the Planning Service. That is supplemented by the information that public representatives and local people can provide.

Roads Service and NI Water should be capable of providing the additional information required around particular instances of flooding, which are sometimes caused by inadequate drainage or other problems. Whether that information is provided on every occasion, I cannot say. My concern is that those organisations are consulted by the Department — which they are. As to whether that information is provided quickly, I think that that is for other Departments to answer.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Frameworks Process

1. **Mr T Gallagher** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he is going to deliver the construction projects affected by his announcement of the abandonment of the frameworks process.
(AQO 1900/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): In my statement to the Assembly on 15

December 2008, I announced that no construction project would be stopped due to the legal challenges about the use of framework agreements by the Central Procurement Directorate and the Department of Education. I announced that those projects, worth a total value of £115 million, which were scheduled to be delivered by framework agreements, would go to the marketplace on a project-by-project basis before the end of the financial year. Those projects include the South Eastern Regional College in Bangor, at £10 million, and 10 schools, ranging in value from just under £2 million to over £11 million, as is the case at Magherafelt High School.

The recently established construction industry forum procurement task group will focus on ensuring that all those projects move forward into the marketplace. In order that the construction industry can plan for the deal flow, Departments have, through the procurement task group, provided the construction industry group with a comprehensive list of all projects that are to be advertised before the end of the financial year, or are already at various stages of the procurement process.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will all the projects scheduled to go forward in this financial year do so? If not, what will be the position around the finance that has already been allocated for those projects that might be delayed as a result of the problem around the frameworks process?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question. The projects that were to be delivered using frameworks are all at various stages of the procurement process, and no projects have been stopped due to the legal challenges. Departments have indicated that over 60 projects, with an aggregate value of around £400 million, are either to be advertised before the end of the financial year, or are already at various stages of the procurement process.

We have ensured that no projects will be stopped as a result of the framework challenges. Within the overall expenditure of £1.5 billion for the current year, it is not expected that a significant amount will be delayed or postponed. However, if some projects, for whatever other reasons, are subject to a delay, those will be carried forward into next year, and will be a matter for the Departments to manage.

I do not envisage that as a major problem in the context of expenditure of £1.5 billion. The measures that my Department announced in December 2008 will ensure that procurement of projects will not be held up significantly.

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Minister consider an urgent review of procurement policy in order to support and encourage local construction companies to compete for public contracts?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am pleased to inform the House that during the past 12 months, all of the Central Procurement Directorate's (CPD) construction-works contracts have been awarded to local construction firms. I have instructed CPD to provide a report on the position of all central procurement exercises. That is encouraging.

While I have the opportunity to do so, I must also congratulate local construction firms from Northern Ireland for having recently won contract work in Scotland, which is a tremendous boost to the local economy and workforce. That is testimony to the quality of the work of Northern Ireland's construction firms.

Government clients are required to advertise publicly all construction procurement opportunities that are estimated to exceed £30,000 for construction work and £5,000 for construction-related services. Centres of procurement expertise recognise the importance of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to the economy and encourage consortia where appropriate. Those details should reassure the Member and the House.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for expanding on how the issue is being dealt with locally. Given the fact that SMEs make up the largest sector of industry in Northern Ireland, will the Minister explain the arrangements that are in place to ensure that SMEs have the opportunity to bid for projects that are scheduled to go to the market before the end of the current financial year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member has highlighted an issue that has been raised many times, and which I have taken firmly on board. As I have already indicated, all construction work that has been allocated by the Central Procurement Directorate during the past 12 months has gone to local construction firms.

I have already mentioned the requirement to advertise publicly all construction procurement opportunities. I must add that a Construction Industry Forum sustainability task group has developed proposals for promoting equality and sustainable development through sustainable procurement in construction. Those proposals, which, since December 2008, are included in all new public-sector construction contracts, require main contractors to publish opportunities in their supply chain on their websites or, where appropriate, in the local press.

In addition, the Construction Industry Forum procurement task group will consider how to further maximise the opportunities for small- and medium-sized enterprises to bid for and benefit from public-sector construction contracts.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Budget Stocktake

3. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the outcome of his Budget stocktake exercise. (AQO 1902/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In March 2008, the Executive agreed to conduct a strategic stocktake of the expenditure plans of Northern Ireland Departments for the financial years 2009-10 and 2010-2011. The objective of that exercise was not to propose recommendations in respect of a reallocation of resources, but to set the context for subsequent in-year monitoring processes in light of emerging pressures and the expected level of available resources.

Following Executive discussion on 15 January 2009, I made a statement to the Assembly on 20 January on the outcome of the strategic stocktake exercise. In summary, the level of resources that are available to the Executive during the next two years is expected to be lower than when the Budget was agreed in January 2008. That reflects deterioration in the public-expenditure position of most industrialised economies. It means that emerging pressures can be accommodated only from a reduction in existing budgets, an increase in efficiency-savings targets for Departments, or the reduced requirements that are normally declared as part of the in-year monitoring process.

Although Departments have identified a broad range of issues in their response to the strategic stocktake, the two main issues that face the Executive in 2009-10 are the lost income from the deferral of the introduction of domestic water charges, and the cost of the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claim.

Those pressures are also expected to have implications into 2010-11, when the Executive will be faced with the prospect of a reduction in the block grant from the Treasury as a result of the announcement in the pre-Budget report to increase the level of efficiency savings.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he assure me and the House that all the Assembly's Statutory Committees will be involved in the process?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not quite sure what the Member means by "involved in the process". If he is referring to the in-year monitoring exercises, those will follow the normal course of events and procedures. The Assembly Committees will be briefed on departmental responsibilities, and they will no doubt discuss those matters and interrogate officials and Ministers.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. What progress have Departments made to ensure that the

level of accumulated underspend will be kept to a minimum by the end of the year? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is an important question and one to which we rightly return regularly when discussing these matters. It is important that we are not left with significant levels of underspend in Departments at the end of the financial year. All such money is returned to the Treasury, and, since easy access to end-year flexibility no longer exists, it is lost to the Executive. At a time of economic difficulties and pressures, particularly in the construction industry, it is important that that money is rolled out as planned.

Departments tell me that they intend to spend the capital investment allocations that they have been given, and I look forward to hearing about good progress in that regard. In 2007-08, reduced requirements and underspend were £400 million in current and £334 million in capital. That is more than £700 million last year alone, which puts some of last week's press headlines into context.

Mr O'Loan: Given the huge changes in needs and available finance since last year, is the Minister not under a duty to the public and the Assembly to give more than a survey of the financial landscape? What answers is he providing to meet the needs of the present time?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is aware of the situation from previous discussions, and he will no doubt have been briefed by his Minister, who agreed to this process in the Executive. Indeed, when this matter was mentioned at the Committee at which he was present on 2 April 2008, he raised no objections whatsoever, and he acquiesced.

This is a sensible overview of where things are likely to move over the next two years. It is clear that the real pressures concern the possibility of the pre-Budget report efficiencies from Whitehall, a pressure that will come to bear in 2010-11. In London, the Opposition and the Government are vying over who can make the greatest cuts to public expenditure rates of increase. Therefore, it will be difficult for Northern Ireland, other Whitehall departments and other devolved Administrations. In that context, I had a useful discussion last week with the Finance Ministers of Scotland and Wales in which we agreed a joint approach to the Treasury in relation to these important matters that impact on our Budgets.

Growing the economy was made the priority in the Programme for Government and the Budget, and that has been entirely vindicated and validated by events. Indeed, we have allocated over £1.5 billion in capital investment, which is 40% more than in 2006-07 and more than double the £670 million that was allocated in 2003-04. The building of schools, hospitals, houses

and other major capital projects is proceeding, and £1.8 billion will be spent next year. That shows what the Executive are doing to help the economy.

3.45 pm

2011 Census

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on preparations for the 2011 Census. (AQO 1903/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The next census is planned for 27 March 2011. There has already been formal consultation on the topic content, and users are being kept informed of current thinking through, for example, the Northern Ireland Statistic and Research Agency's website and information days. The Office for National Statistics conducted a census test in 2007, and a rehearsal is planned for autumn 2009. Proposals for the 2011 census are expected to be published soon. Moreover, a census Order and census regulations will be laid in 2010 and will provide the opportunity for full legislative scrutiny.

Mr Spratt: Does the Minister agree that the census is a valuable and important exercise? Furthermore, does he agree that it is vital that preparations are conducted effectively and efficiently and in line with the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The point is entirely valid. The preparations should progress as quickly as possible. As I have said in the House previously, given the new digital information age in which we live, there may come a day when some — or, perhaps, much — of the information can be obtained in other ways. However, that information can currently be obtained only through a census, which is mandated by a European regulation that imposes a duty on member states to provide census-type data in 2011.

As the Member said, that information is valuable and provides comprehensive and robust population statistics for Northern Ireland that are consistent for small areas and small population groups. The information is used extensively across the public, private and voluntary sectors and has many important applications. For example, it informs allocation of resources and policy development and monitoring; acts as a benchmark for demographic statistics; and provides the basis for population and housing projections.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened carefully to the Minister's general comments about the census. What new information will the 2011 census demand? Why is it necessary for the Government to have knowledge of that information?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department will introduce its proposals on the census.

I assure the Member that the census is designed to meet specific policy needs. As the Member is aware, the census is conducted every 10 years, and the 2011 census will be closely based on previous models. Any adding or taking out of questions will be proposed soon, and will be subject to full discussion and full legislative scrutiny. Only questions that are required to acquire sensible and useful information should be asked. The questions will be in line with those that are asked elsewhere in the UK.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has accepted that the 2011 census will inform the programme of spending and policy direction of the Executive and the Assembly for a subsequent 10-year period, will he consider the inclusion of a question that will ascertain the community's views on constitutional matters? It is important that people have the opportunity to record their preference, whether it be for a united Ireland or for the continuation of the union with Britain.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The simple answer is no, I will not include such a question. It is not the purpose of a census to ask such a question, and, in any case, we know the answer. The people of Northern Ireland, overwhelmingly, want to remain part of the United Kingdom. Most people welcome the fact that our devolved Assembly is governing part of the United Kingdom.

Civil Service Sick Leave

5. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the current levels of Civil Service sick leave and what action he is taking to reduce those levels. (AQO 1904/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: During 2007-08, an average of 12.9 days per staff year were lost as a result of sickness absence; that was down from 13.7 days in the previous year, and from a high of 15.5 days in 2003-04. Recent figures indicate that that downward trend has continued, and if it continues to do so, it is estimated that the out-turn figure for 2008-09 could be about 11.5 days. Although still short of the overall target for the year of 10.2 days, those are encouraging signs. It is also encouraging to note that the proportion of staff with no recorded sickness absence has increased from 40.7% in 2006-07 to 43.1% in 2007-08, suggesting a growing culture of attendance.

There have been significant developments over the past 12 months, with the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Managing Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service' and the subsequent report of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). The Northern Ireland Civil Service Task Force also produced a report on long-term sickness absence.

Taken together, those reports present a formidable agenda of work, and my officials are developing a framework for implementation.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for his helpful and informative answer. Can he explain to the Assembly any reasons for the variation in the rates of absenteeism between Departments, and can he identify where the real offenders are?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member for his question. There is no doubt that there are differences in the rates of absenteeism between and even within Departments. That can be affected by the composition of the workforce — for example, gender, age, and grade, the size of the organisation, as well as the structure and nature of the work. The statistics show that female staff and staff in the more junior grades have higher levels of sickness absence.

The Member asked about particular Departments; the most notable case is the Department for Social Development (DSD), including the child-enforcement and maintenance division and the Social Security Agency, where more than 58% of staff are female, compared with almost 30% in Department for Regional Development (DRD), for instance. The grade profile of those Departments is also different: 82% of staff in DSD are employed in the more junior grades, compared to 38% in DRD. I use that only as an illustration, but it should be said that we should not simply accept as inevitable or legitimate that some staff have higher levels of sickness than others simply because they fall into certain groups. We need to understand the reasons behind it and take action to deal with it.

Mr P Ramsey: Given that high levels of stress are the primary cause of absence from the workplace, can the Minister tell us what action plans he and his Department are taking forward to increase morale and motivation in the workplace, with a view to reducing stress in it?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is of course fundamentally a matter for each Department to ensure that schemes and action plans are in place to tackle sickness absence, but the approach of the Civil Service to tackling sickness absence is based on four themes: promoting the health and well-being of staff; supporting staff when they are sick; facilitating staff returning from sickness absence; and dealing robustly with inappropriate levels of absence, including through efficiency procedures. That approach was recently scrutinised by the Audit Office and the PAC, and I will be actively considering the various recommendations. However, policies must be kept under review, and certain Departments have a much better track record than others. High sickness absence is therefore not

inevitable; it can be tackled, and it is essential that we continue to do what we can to deal with the problem.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given the comments that the Minister made about under-representation, has any progress been made to recruit more Protestant males at the lower grades of the Civil Service and more women and Catholics at the higher grades to combat under-representation?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That question is not directly related to the issue of sickness absences. In fact, it is not related at all, I think. *[Laughter.]* Nevertheless, my Department is well aware of the need to ensure that fair systems are in place that will lead to the recruitment of a balanced workforce in proportion to the make up of the community. It is an issue that we continue to monitor and work at.

All of those issues are difficult to turn around quickly because we are dealing with large numbers of employees. Therefore, we have to continue to monitor, to report and continually to keep under review the policies that are in place to deal with those issues; and if they are not working, to seek to address why they are not working.

District Rate Increases

6. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on what assistance is being given to district councils to deal with the anticipated significant increases in the district rate in some areas due to factors beyond their control. (AQO 1905/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am pleased to say that I have already announced a package of assistance for councils, as the Member well knows from his very positive reaction to it last week. That package is worth up to £8 million in the next financial year. It comprises three key elements, including allowing councils that are in a general repayment situation to offset the amount through staging the British Telecom and Ministry of Defence reductions over five years. That will result in a benefit of £3.3 million next year.

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

I will also change the way in which councils' net revenues are calculated, providing a benefit of up to £4 million next year. Finally, there will be a one-off reduction in the cost of collection to ensure that some of the additional costs that are associated with the development of new IT systems are not passed on to councils. That will provide a one-off benefit of £600,000 to councils. I believe that that is a proportionate and affordable response that will allow assistance to be provided quickly in order to cushion the impact of a

combination of factors that affect councils at this difficult time.

Dr Farry: The question has, obviously, been somewhat overtaken by events, but I thank the Minister for his answer. Before asking a supplementary question, I declare an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. Does the Minister recognise that the introduction of the £500,000 cap is still a live financial issue for councils such as my own? Given that councils were asked to fund the lost revenue through finalisation figures that were presented to them only in June 2008, they have to fund the cap twice in the same financial year, and that pressure needs to be ironed out.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hear what the Member has said, and he has raised that issue on a number of occasions because, I know, it particularly affects his own council, as he indicated. However, it should be remembered, as I, too, have indicated, that the £500,000 cap was introduced under direct rule — not under devolution. We reduced that cap from £500,000 to £400,000 to ensure that no ratepayers in Northern Ireland were paying above the average highest council tax band-payer in the rest of the United Kingdom.

From April, a reduction in transitional relief of about £1.5 million will be provided to councils over two years. That relief will have a beneficial impact in helping councils such as the Member's own. The £500,000 cap was introduced under direct rule two years ago. Given the steps that we have taken, and the transitional relief that we have brought in as a result of our measures, it is not appropriate to go back any further.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. Rates collection is one of the issues that is beyond the control of councils. For a time, the Rates Collection Agency — and Land and Property Services that took over from it — failed to monitor vacant property properly in order to determine who should be paying rates. Will the Minister assure the House that the penny products of councils that studiously monitored vacant property and reported that information to the Department will be updated accordingly, so that a fair rates burden will be shared by all? Furthermore, what changes is the Minister making to the system to ensure that a similar fiasco is not repeated?

4.00pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am grateful to the Member for raising that subject, which has been discussed in the Assembly and in the Committee. The Member will be aware that I have prioritised the collection of rates and the monitoring of vacant properties, and he will understand from previous discussions some of the reasons for delays, which relate to the legacy that we inherited and to the

introduction of a large number of reforms at one time. The matter is being addressed, and I have allocated extra funds to Land and Property Services (LPS) to ensure that more attention is paid to collecting arrears. Furthermore, a considerable amount of good-partnership work on inspecting vacant properties is under way between councils and LPS, and I want that work to continue.

My Department will do everything in its power to ensure that any benefits arising from those measures appear as quickly as possible on bills, which will be issued without undue delay so that councils — and, given that the rates are regional, LPS — have the maximum income.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Elderly/Disabled Access: Parliament Buildings

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Assembly Commission to outline what arrangements are in place to help the elderly and disabled get from the security screening facility to the front of the building. (AQO 1920/09)

Mr Neeson: The secretariat goes to great lengths to identify elderly and disabled visitors to the Assembly at an early stage, and to ensure that appropriate arrangements are then put in place to guarantee a successful visit to Parliament Buildings. Those arrangements primarily entail business areas in the secretariat discreetly liaising with potential visitors, or their representatives, at an early stage of the visit-planning process. During that process, the precise requirements of groups or individuals are established, and appropriate arrangements are made accordingly.

We do not expect any elderly or disabled visitor to pass through the search unit and then have to walk, or push a wheelchair, up the hill. It is secretariat protocol that elderly or disabled people are permitted to bypass the search facility and access the Building directly through the east or west doors. The security staff on duty at the search facility will inform visitors of that procedure and advise those with mobility or other special needs that they can proceed by car or bus to the upper car parks. Occasionally, elderly people prefer to get out of their transport at the search unit and walk up the hill in order to access Parliament Buildings. We are, of course, happy to accommodate either need.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the member of the Assembly Commission for his answer. Unfortunately, on at least one occasion, an elderly lady has had to stop three times to recover her breath when attempting to walk up

from the screening unit. Can the Member give an assurance that that will not happen again and that the Commission will take the necessary steps — whether that is by informing security personnel or by whatever other means — to ensure that elderly or disabled people are not forced to walk up to the Building?

Mr Neeson: I am disappointed to hear that a visitor had such an unfortunate experience. Staff are kept well informed about the procedures. However, it is important that the visitor unit is made well aware, at an early stage, of the needs of any elderly person or those with a disability, and I can assure the Member that every effort will be made to ensure that that situation does not arise again.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Commission considered installing a large lift for the use of elderly or disabled people, particularly one that would allow such people access to the Public Gallery, the basement and the first floor?

Mr Neeson: In fact, the lifts in Parliament Buildings were upgraded in 2005. Furthermore, last summer, a disabled person's hoist was installed to provide access to the Public Gallery.

Mr Shannon: I am sure that Members are aware that taxis sometimes leave people at the security screening facility, and then have to reverse to get back out, against the flow of traffic. Has consideration been given to the safety of that? Will the Commission consider the construction of a taxi turning circle at the screening point?

Mr Neeson: The Commission reviews that issue regularly. As we develop our outreach programme, it is important that we make Parliament Buildings as accessible as possible. We will consider the issues that the Member has raised.

Public Access to Assembly Business

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission what it has done to increase the coverage and availability of Assembly business to the public through all forms of media. (AQO 1921/09)

Mr Moutray: The Assembly Commission, through its engagement strategy, is making strenuous efforts to ensure that the business of the Assembly is available to the public. The Assembly makes use of a range of media, including the Assembly's broadcasting service, Internet site and printed publications. In addition, the Assembly works closely with the broadcast and print media to ensure that the business of the Assembly is communicated widely and effectively.

Since the beginning of the 2008-09 session, there have been 33 press releases relating to Committee and Assembly Commission business, and seven public notices have been placed in regional and local

newspapers to inform the public of Committee meetings that were to be held outside Parliament Buildings. For all Committee meetings that are held outside Parliament Buildings, media services works with the local media — newspapers and radio — to publicise the work of the meeting, to encourage attendance and to inform the local community.

From 1 January 2007 to 31 December 2007, there were over 7 million hits on the Northern Ireland Assembly website. That figure increased to over 9 million in 2008 — a substantial increase of 2.5 million hits. Furthermore, 17 Committee reports were uploaded to the website to provide public access to Assembly business. In addition, Media Services receives an average of 60 public enquiry calls each week and answers approximately 50 web mail enquiries per week, thus providing information for people across Northern Ireland.

The Assembly Commission has also taken action to improve access to the Hansard report. Now, the Office of the Official Report places on the website the first edition of each sitting day's plenary proceedings on a phased basis, and a draft edition of the Official Report is published no later than three hours after the House rises. That enables the public to access the work of the Assembly within hours of business taking place. The revised Official Report is on the website by 10.00 am the following day.

The Education Service — one of the units in the Assembly's engagement directorate — is also involved closely in promoting the work of the Assembly to the public. It has its own website, which is tailored to the requirements of the Northern Ireland curriculum, and publishes leaflets and other resources that can be accessed by the public and which are tailored for use by schools, youth groups, further education institutions and universities.

From 1 September 2008 to 20 January 2009, 162 groups availed themselves of education programmes. That represents over 5,000 participants, and 77% of those came from the primary and secondary sectors.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his comprehensive answer. Has the Commission considered placing Assembly coverage on video-sharing websites, such as YouTube? The Assembly Commission should ensure that the public is provided with as many avenues as possible to access coverage of the Assembly. A number of businesses, NGOs and individuals use those websites already. It is accessible not only to thousands of people locally, but to millions worldwide, and the Assembly should be doing more to ensure that coverage of Assembly business is put on the Internet in that way.

Mr Moutray: The priorities for the Commission are to make available video content from the Assembly

website, and to improve coverage of Assembly proceedings through the existing terrestrial and satellite channels. In the medium to longer term, the Assembly will engage with Ofcom to consider how the coverage can be improved yet further.

Mr B McCrea: Given the success of ‘Stormont Live’, despite its rather restricted timing, has the Commission considered making available a dedicated Assembly satellite channel? *[Laughter.]*

That would allow people to see every scintilla of proceedings in all their unadulterated glory? It strikes me that the House has all the makings of a good soap opera; people know all the characters. I am making the serious point that people are interested in what we have to say, and they like to see us at work. Some people watch the streaming video of debates on the Internet, but that service is intermittent and not totally satisfactory. Will the Commission consider making available a dedicated Assembly satellite channel that could possibly be shared with other legislatures and the councils?

Mr Deputy Speaker: At last; a cure for insomnia.

Mr Moutray: I am sure that the Commission will take on board the Member’s comments and get back to him.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Visitor Access and Orientation

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Assembly Commission how it plans to manage (i) accommodation for visitors to Parliament Buildings to ensure easy access to catering facilities; and (ii) signage and information to enhance visitor orientation. (AQO 1923/09)

Mr Neeson: Since September 2008, the Assembly’s gift shop, which is beside the reception area, has provided a hot beverage service for all visitors to the Building, and facilities branch has introduced light snacks, such as tray bakes, to accompany the hot beverages. Immediately on entering the Building, signage informs visitors about that catering facility. The engagement strategy includes several proposals to improve visitor orientation: the provision of a public café; the renewal of all visitor material; the enhancement of visitor orientation and information through the provision of improved signage and increased staff intervention externally and internally; and that all visitor-facing staff attend or receive a daily briefing.

In August 2008, facilities branch also devised information cards to be used by security staff at reception when welcoming visitors to the Building. The laminated cards highlighted various key facilities on entering Parliament Buildings and are available in 11 languages. Furthermore, plans are in place to erect

external signs along the front perimeter fence at the east and west entrances, and along the access road to the east side of the Building. Those signs will provide visitors with a range of information, including opening times, security contact details and directional arrows to assist access.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take this opportunity to praise Eurest, the company that provides catering in the Building, for doing a great job. When I asked the question, I was unaware, as would many Members have been, that the hot beverage service was available in the shop beside the front door of the Building. The casual visitor to the Building has a restricted experience.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is enough advertising for Eurest; ask your question, Mr McElduff.

Mr McElduff: I seek assurance from the Commission that the issue will appear consistently on the agenda. It can be difficult to attract causal visitors from west of the Bann, but when they come, they want as much free movement as possible throughout the Building and access to the excellent catering arrangements that the rest of us enjoy.

Mr Neeson: I assure Mr McElduff that the signage at the entrance to the Building directs people to the new facility. It is worth bearing in mind that the Commission is reviewing the provision of facilities for visitors to the Building. I stress that one of the Commission’s main aims is not only to increase the outreach process but to improve it. I assure him that we continually keep all such issues under review.

4.15 pm

Mr K Robinson: I am heartened to hear that the website is receiving about 9 million hits and that our tray bakes are about to take off as well — hopefully to the same height.

Has the Commission considered the better management, or extension, of our car-parking facilities — which are under considerable strain, perhaps due to the success of our visitor programme — so that Assembly staff can enjoy a reasonable working environment by having guaranteed parking spaces?

Mr Neeson: Mr Robinson has raised an important issue. He will be aware that the number of car-parking spaces was increased last summer. The Assembly Commission is aware of the need to develop good access to the Building. However, car parking for staff at Parliament Buildings is the same as that for staff in the rest of the estate, and it is a case of first come, first served.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Committee Rooms: Upgrade

6. **Mr Ross** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to upgrade Committee rooms in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 1925/09)

Mr Neeson: As outlined in question for written answer 2970/09, following queries by Members over the past two years, the Assembly Commission tasked building management branch, the Information Systems Office, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group and the central Committee office with trying to identify the facilities required by Members in Committee rooms. A project has been initiated by the central Committee office of the Clerking and Reporting Directorate to implement the recommendations agreed by the Chairpersons' Liaison Group.

An accommodation audit of Parliament Buildings is due to take place shortly, which will look at the current use of all rooms and consider options to ensure that the space is being put to best use. The audit will examine the size of Committee rooms, their usage and their facilities.

As part of the Assembly's engagement strategy, the Commission intends to develop an additional Committee room in Parliament Buildings, which will have videoconferencing facilities and more seats for members of the public. Further to that, there are plans to implement improved audio and video broadcasting facilities in all Committee rooms, together with live streaming and recorded broadcasting of all Committees in public session, which will allow more members of the public to attend meetings virtually.

Mr Ross: I am encouraged by the Member's response, particularly with regard to having cameras to stream live Committee events. All Committee members will appreciate witnesses having the facility to make PowerPoint presentations. Can the Member give as an indicative time frame in which Committee rooms will be modernised?

Mr Neeson: As I said in my initial reply, the Commission is carrying out an audit of all the rooms in the Building, from the first to the fourth floors. Last week, the group that has been established to carry out the audit had its first meeting. It is hoped that the audit will be finalised by the end of March.

The issue of PowerPoint presentations is continually being looked at. The Assembly Commission wants to further develop and enhance IT services in the Building, and that work is in progress.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Assistance Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Debate resumed:

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am speaking on amendment Nos 4 to 11, and I ask the Assembly to oppose all of them.

Amendment No 4 would require the Executive's agreement to any determination by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under clause 2. That issue has been dealt with exhaustively.

Before Question Time, Dolores Kelly once again tried to suggest that the Bill is OFMDFM's attempt at a power grab. I want to assure Members that that is not the case. When in operation, the Bill will, in fact, enhance the Executive's ability to act collectively. It will give the Executive the flexibility to allocate and distribute funds across all Departments in order to respond to any crisis or hardship situation. We do not restate in legislation that which is already a legislative requirement, as we explained in the debate on the Bill at Consideration Stage. Let me say again that the draft amendment to the ministerial code, which the Executive have agreed, will make their approval explicit, thus reinforcing the existing requirement to seek Executive approval for determinations, designations and schemes under the legislation.

Tom Elliott asked from where the funding for any financial assistance payable under the scheme would come. As I have just said, that will be a matter for the Executive, where the First Minister and I designate a Department to provide financial assistance. The funding required will have to be identified through existing processes for determining public expenditure. An example of that was when the Executive agreed the allocation of £15 million for fuel poverty as part of the December monitoring round.

The Bill is about managing public expenditure at an Executive level and ensuring, with Executive agreement, that resources are directed in response to exceptional circumstances and to deal with unmet social need. The Executive are already at the heart of the operation of the Bill, so I urge Members to oppose amendment No 4.

Amendment No 5 would restrict the operation of clause 2 to exceptional circumstances, and thereby significantly restrict the Executive's scope for intervention to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Sadly, the circumstances whereby almost one quarter of our children live in poverty are not exceptional, and it is those circumstances that we so urgently need to

address. This legislation is one such way in which to do that. For that reason, we would not accept such a restriction in the clause's scope.

Amendment No 6, if it were made, would require that circumstances giving rise to a determination under clause 2 aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion would need to be unforeseen. I am sure that Members can foresee that the impact of the present economic downturn could seriously and adversely affect those areas, groups and individuals who are living in poverty or are at risk of poverty — such as lone parents or people with a disability, or areas that are already suffering from deprivation, which is made worse by rising unemployment. I am sure that Members would not want to ignore those individuals or areas, because we can foresee the difficulties and disadvantage that they experience. The amendment is, therefore, unacceptable.

Amendment No 7 seeks to restrict the Executive's ability to take action to tackle poverty under clause 2. However, before making a determination, it is important that the First Minister and I determine jointly, in consultation with our Committee, and, ultimately, with the approval of the Assembly, that existing provisions to tackle poverty and social exclusion are insufficient to effect the improvement in people's lives that we are aiming to achieve.

There may be situations wherein the limited scope of a programme means that arrangements may be adequate, and even effective, given limited objectives. That does not mean that the arrangements are satisfactory and represent everything that could, and should, be done to address a specific problem. Therefore, we should not impose a restriction or limit the scope for taking effective action, which that amendment would certainly do. For that reason, we will reject it.

Amendment No 8 would reduce from six months to three months the time limit between a determination under clause 2 and the making of the consequent regulations. Members will acknowledge that the clause 1 schemes are, by definition, of greater urgency than those under clause 2, given that they enable us to respond to emergency situations as they arise. For that reason, we proposed amendments that differentiated the time limits within which schemes had to be made after the making of the respective determination, with a lengthier period of six months for clause 2 schemes. To reduce a time limit in a manner that would effectively reduce the scope for scrutiny would be a retrograde step, particularly as the Assembly's approval must be obtained before regulations can be made. For that reason, we totally reject amendment No 8.

Similar to amendment No 1, amendment No 9 requires a Department to inform its Committee that it

has been designated under clause 2. As with amendment No 1, that is not necessary, because the Committee would be notified, in any event, as part of the ongoing liaison between a Department and its Committee.

Amendment No 10 proposes to make explicit on the face of the Bill that the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel is required for any regulations that are made under clause 2. As with amendment No 2, it is unnecessary to make it explicit that agreement is required from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, given the need to obtain Executive approval for a proposed scheme, at which time the relevant Minister may make known his or her views. Furthermore, the Bill does not in any way diminish the authority of the Department of Finance and Personnel in respect of its Minister's role in the approval of public expenditure in general.

Amendment No 11, in the same way as amendment 3, places a duty on the "relevant department" to:

"provide a report on the operation of the scheme to the appropriate statutory committee."

I find it hard to believe that a Department would wish to provide a report to its Committee without a statutory duty being placed on it. We intend to report to the OFMDFM Committee, to the Assembly and, furthermore, to the public on the outcomes of schemes for which we are responsible.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for giving way. He said that he did not foresee a situation in which a Department would not wish to report to its Committee. Why, in that case, is there a resistance to including that requirement in the Bill as a statutory duty, if, in all foreseeable circumstances, Departments will be content to report to their Committees?

The deputy First Minister: Our view is that there is no need to include that requirement. We certainly intend to report to our Committee, to the Assembly and, furthermore, to the public on the outcomes of schemes for which we are responsible. We fully expect that other Departments will do the same and that they will provide details such as who benefited and the overall cost of schemes to the public purse.

It is also open to a Committee to request such information on any scheme at any time as part of its ongoing scrutiny role, particularly if a longer time frame is envisaged for the implementation of a scheme.

Therefore, amendment No 11 is unnecessary and unacceptable. I urge the Assembly to reject all the amendments.

Mr McCallister: Amendment No 4, which the Ulster Unionist Party tabled, was intended to manoeuvre clause 2 away from being used as a general tool with the potential of being used by OFMDFM in normal situations to override Ministers, Departments and

Programme for Government targets in furtherance of OFMDFM's political agenda. Amendment No 4 changes that tool into one that enables financial assistance to be given in unforeseen circumstances of poverty, social exclusion and deprivation.

If the issue is merely one of procedure, in the case of amendment No 4, the deputy First Minister should have no problem in making explicit the involvement of the Assembly and the Executive Committee in any decision that is made under clause 2, lest Members believe that it is — as his colleagues appear to believe — a sea change in the way that OFMDFM works.

Amendment No 5 mirrors amendment No 6, which was also tabled by the UUP. It seeks to ensure that clause 2 is not used in normal circumstances. The use of “exceptional circumstances” in amendment No 5 mirrors the wording in clause 1 and brings clause 2 more into line with the long title of the Bill.

Amendment No 6 ensures that the use of clause 2 does not override existing targets and policies that are laid out in the Programme for Government and the Budget. Departments have policies and targets to address on poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. Failure to support amendment No 6 will reinforce fears that OFMDFM is seeking a power grab and more influence.

Amendment No 7 removes the *carte blanche* approach of clause 2. If the original words are retained, clause 2 will allow the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make up schemes and regulations as they go along. During the debate on accelerated passage, in response to a question from the Member for East Belfast Mrs Naomi Long on whether the Bill would end departmental autonomy, the deputy First Minister said:

“I fully understand the Member's point, and I agree with her. When it comes to implementing the decision that will flow from the proposed legislation, it comes down to our motivation as the leaders of the two largest parties in the Executive and the Assembly.”
— [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p214, col 1*].

His statement illustrates strongly the motivation of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

With regard to amendment No 8, if the Bill is intended to address emergency situations, a Department should act quickly — three months being preferable to six months. If the Bill represents a sea change in the way in which OFMDFM acts, Sinn Féin and the DUP will reject amendment No 8.

4.30 pm

Amendment No 9 is similar to amendment No 1 and seeks to ensure powers of scrutiny for Statutory Committees on any proposal under clause 2. That is very important, because clause 2 represents a sea change in the way in which the Executive work.

Amendment No 10 is similar to the SDLP's amendment No 2 to clause 1, and it will give Ministers peace of mind that they can control their own budgets and implement their own policies.

Amendment No 11 is similar to amendment No 3, which was tabled by the SDLP. It will ensure that the policy and financial assistance can be democratically assessed by the Assembly and the public, and it will provide a window into crucial decisions made by OFMDFM.

In opening the debate on the second group of amendments, my colleague Mr Elliott said that the amendments will open up our democratic process to accountability and transparency. That is needed, because the Bill could dramatically change the role of Departments and the origin of money for financial assistance. Other Members mentioned the cross-cutting measures in which Departments must engage.

Mr Elliott mentioned a shared and normalised future, and said that he did not want a carve-up. That sentiment was rejected by Ms Anderson, who wants Sinn Féin and the DUP to be in the driving seat, which will render everyone else irrelevant. As Mr Elliott said, definitive boundaries and purpose for the measures in the Bill are required.

Mr Shannon held back his support for the amendments. Despite what DUP Members keep saying, not one day has been lost through the debates on the Bill. The Bill has not been held back, and the Members who say otherwise should encourage such democratic accountability instead of shying away from it.

I mentioned the point that Ms Anderson raised in her rejection of the amendments. I would not say that any Member is not committed to addressing poverty, social exclusion and deprivation. Our concerns about the Bill are more to do with the control that it gives OFMDFM. All parties agree that we must do much more to address poverty, social exclusion and deprivation.

Dolores Kelly said that clause 2 is unnecessary and spoke about the Budget process, which is another important point. In an intervention, Mr O'Loan asked why we have not had a Budget process. It is strange that there is always an annual Budget in every other part of the United Kingdom and even the Republic of Ireland, which the deputy First Minister mentioned earlier. Indeed, in exceptional economic circumstances, which it could be argued that we are in at present, those countries might have a Budget more frequently than that. In contrast, we have set a three-year Budget.

In Mrs Long's contribution, she pointed out that, although the First Minister thought that nobody was listening, there is a difference between listening to, and simply not agreeing with, him. Although I disagree with some of Mrs Long's interpretations of our amendments, there is a purpose to getting cross-departmental solutions.

Departments must be responsible for improving the implementation of various policy initiatives.

Mrs Long: Does the Member agree that almost all Members who have spoken have said that there is a need to get cross-cutting measures in place so that they function well? Had the Bill been brought through a proper Committee Stage, with open and frank discussion and debate, we would not be having the continuing reservations and concerns that people are expressing, and the distrust that people are expressing in the intent of the Bill, because it would have been clear and open to everyone to have their say, and people would have been much more confident about the intent of clause 2.

Mr McCallister: I thank the honourable Member for her intervention. I agree wholeheartedly, because the problem that the Bill has encountered relates to the difference between emergency measures and taking a step back and deciding on the best mechanisms for dealing with the other issues. Although we all accept that poverty, social exclusion and deprivation must be addressed as quickly as possible, those issues do not come under the category of emergency measures.

The deputy First Minister has been in office since May 2007, but now, all of a sudden, accelerated passage is needed to get the Bill through. Even in the deputy First Minister's contribution, I believe he said that a quarter of children are living in poverty, which is a shame. It is an absolute outrage that, in this day and age —

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I will give way in a moment.

It is an absolute outrage, in this day and age, that that is the case. I agree with the deputy First Minister that it is a shame, and the Executive should be working on those issues instead of taking 154 days off. They should be bringing proposals and ideas to the Assembly to address the types of issues on which Members have been focusing and raising through private Members' motions for almost two years.

Mr Spratt: Does the Member agree that the UUP Committee members from his party agreed to the Bill's accelerated passage through the House, and, in fact, that the only person who voted against it was the SDLP Committee member?

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask Mr Spratt to withdraw his comments. I did not vote against it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order, Mrs Kelly.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way. That is not an accurate reflection of what happened, because in addition to the members who voted in favour of accelerated passage, a number expressed

reservations about clause 2 forming part of the Bill and made note that, if possible, they would exclude clause 2 at Consideration Stage. Furthermore, I abstained from voting on the proposal to support the accelerated passage of the Bill, because clause 2 was still part of the Bill when it came before the Committee. Therefore, there was, I believe, never an issue from any Committee member about the need for the issues in clause 1 to be dealt with quickly, but clause 2 required additional consideration. Therefore, if we are going to reflect what happened in Committee, we have to reflect it in full.

Mr McCallister: I thank both Members for their interventions. However, at no time has anyone in the Ulster Unionist Party tried to say anything other than the version that Mrs Long gave of what went on in the Committee. Indeed, my deputy leader, Mr Kennedy, who is the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, made that perfectly clear in last week's debate. As Chairperson, he reflected accurately events that took place in the Committee. Therefore, at no time did we shy away from that fact, and we always made the distinction between the major issues, which are getting financial assistance out rapidly and also cross-governmental issues, which should be being dealt with, so that a more effective way can be found to deal with them.

I hope that Members will consider the amendments proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party and support them.

Question put, That amendment No 4 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 23; Noes 54.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Elliott and Mr McCallister.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Ms S Ramsey,

Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr Moutray.

The following Members voted in both Lobbies and are therefore not counted in the result:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that amendments Nos 5 and 6 are mutually exclusive. Therefore if amendment No 5 is made, I will not call amendment No 6.

Question, That amendment No 5 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 6 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 7 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 8 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 9 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 10 be made, put and negated.

Question, That amendment No 11 be made, put and negated.

Clause 3 (Schemes for financial assistance)

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the third group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 12, it will be convenient to debate amendment No 13. The third debate will deal with schemes for financial assistance.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move amendment No 12: In page 3, line 13, leave out from “disputes” to “to” and insert

“data protection issues, disputes as to overpayment recovery.”

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 13: In clause 4, page 3, line 37, at end insert

“(6) The First Minister and deputy First Minister shall lay a report, by means of a statement, annually to the Assembly on the operation of any schemes made under this Act.” — *[Mrs Long.]*

Mr O'Loan: Hope springs eternal in the human frame — I think that that is the correct quote. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: Even though previous amendments have not been accepted, I hope that Members will examine these amendments dispassionately. I hope that

Members will see their usefulness and recognise that they would add to and improve the Bill.

5.00 pm

Amendment No 12, which relates to clause 3, would add significant and useful protections to the Bill on issues that may not have been considered previously. If that amendment is made, it will enable discussion on how schemes passed under regulations will deal with the complex legal issue of data protection. Not all Members may have realised that information that a particular Department has collected for a specific purpose can be legally used only for that purpose — that issue must be considered when a scheme is designed. Amendment No 12 does not say how that matter would be considered or what the outcome of that consideration should be, but it would ensure that it were thought about.

Likewise, there is the important issue of disputes over overpayment recovery. For example, in cases concerning tax credits and Child Support Agency awards, overpayments have been made — money has been issued in good faith, and subsequent attempts have been made to claw back that money. It is desirable that that issue be considered when the scheme is introduced. My party believes that the Bill will be better if amendment No 13 is made.

Members from the Alliance Party proposed amendment No 13, which also has the SDLP's support. I would like to think that even Members who have rejected previous amendments will support that amendment, because they have said that they would support a report to the Assembly, and that is what this amendment would secure. Amendment No 13 states:

“The First Minister and deputy First Minister shall lay a report, by means of a statement, annually to the Assembly on the operation of any schemes made under this Act.”

Some Members have previously indicated that such a report should be made to the Assembly; therefore, I look forward to their support for that amendment.

Mr Spratt: I intend to be brief. I oppose amendment Nos 12 and 13. *[Interruption.]* Surprise, surprise.

The SDLP has not fully thought out amendment No 12. If made, that amendment would allow data-protection issues to be dealt with in schemes under clause 1 or 2. The reason why I say that that amendment is ill thought out is that it would bring matters under data-protection legislation — Members may not know that. Data protection is a reserved matter, so, were it made, the amendment would delay the Bill — an issue about which we talked earlier. Effectively, the consent of the Secretary of State would have to be sought, and the Bill would have to be laid before Parliament at Westminster for a 20-day period. I assume that Members would not —

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: I am happy to give way.

Mr O’Loan: If there are data-protection issues in a legal sense, which is exactly what I am saying, they cannot simply be avoided by not having words in the Bill that relate to those issues. If those issues are there to be considered, they are there to be considered. If we should be referring the legislation to the Secretary of State, we should be referring it to the Secretary of State — I do not know whether that is the case. All the more, that underlines the points that have been argued here very strongly — that the Bill should have been properly scrutinised in Committee and that this is the wrong way in which to attempt to go about enacting this particular piece of legislation.

Mr Spratt: I hear what the Member is saying, but that would have the effect of delaying the Bill. Members have made it very clear that they do not want to delay the Bill in any way. I think it was Mrs Long who stated today that the process must be gone through, and I agree with that. I assume that neither she nor Mr McCallister will support these amendments, given that that would delay the Bill.

Amendment No 13 would result in the First Minister and deputy First Minister having to lay an annual report before the Assembly on the operation of any schemes implemented under the Bill. Yet again, there is an issue in trying to bring about something which is inappropriate. It would be inappropriate for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to account for schemes made by other Departments. This is a common-sense matter, and I hope that the House will agree with me that that would be the case with this particular amendment.

The desire from these Benches is to help people, and to help people as quickly as possible. That can be achieved through the Financial Assistance Bill, which has at its core the motivation to get help to those in need. The public can judge the motivation of others in the Chamber, and what their sole desire is; whether it is to delay getting the assistance out or to delay the Bill, which I believe is much needed at this point in time. Many people are looking to the Bill going through this House as quickly as possible. We oppose amendment Nos 12 and 13.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose amendment Nos 12 and 13. I was not here for the debate last week — I could not be here — but I have read the Hansard report, and I very much welcome the Bill. I welcome the provisions contained therein to deal with exceptional circumstances, poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. I think John McCallister said earlier that everyone believes those matters to be important, and they should be dealt with. I wish to record my welcome for the Bill.

Today’s debate has been interesting, certainly, but when I was preparing for it, I read the Hansard report of last week’s debate. A Member said earlier that Members on this side of the House did not fully understand — I do not think that the Member even used the word “fully” — the legislative process. I think that that Member was addressing a party colleague. I want to comment on the research that that I did on last week’s debate. I sat for some considerable time — *[Interruption.]*

No. It is important —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You may speak on this group of amendments and no others. There will be no referring back to last week; last week is done and dusted. Please speak on these amendments, Mrs McGill.

Mrs McGill: I will obviously abide by your ruling, but I am referring to a comment that was made by a Member in the House today in relation to the understanding of the debate on this side of the House. I wanted to use the example of my research — for some considerable time last night — to point out that it is quite difficult to understand when one reads some of the contributions. I do not want to press the point, but I want to say that I did learn —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Nor will I allow you to press the point, Mrs McGill.

The time to make a comment about what a Member has said is after they have said it, and during the relevant section of the debate. Please continue, but keep your comments to the amendments in group 3.

Mrs McGill: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will try to remember that, and I will refer to the Hansard report if I forget it.

It is my understanding — as Mr Spratt mentioned earlier — that data protection is a reserved matter.

Mrs Long: Does the Member accept that although we cannot affect reserved matters, we still have to abide by decisions made in the context of those matters? If, for example, data protection law applies to the UK and is a reserved matter, it still applies to us in the work that we do. We cannot change it; however, it still applies.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for her intervention. That is the point that I was about to make. I see no need to include proposed amendment No 12, and Mrs Long has made that point for me. Clause 3(i), which immediately follows on from where proposed amendment No 12 would be inserted, provides for:

“any other matter which appears to the relevant department to be necessary or appropriate for the efficient and effective administration of the scheme.”

I believe that that would cover data protection issues.

As for amendment No 13, it has already been mentioned that other Departments have responsibility

in such matters. Perhaps, therefore, it would not be appropriate for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring a report before the Assembly. It is important that we hear what is happening; however, there are a number of opportunities to do that, including through Assembly questions and via Committees.

In conclusion, I was going to say something about the previous debate, but I will abide by your ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. I oppose amendment Nos 13 and 14.

Mr McCallister: It is good to hear Mrs McGill stand up for the rights of Westminster. I am sure that the deputy First Minister will have a word with her about that after the debate.

Clause 3 outlines the further provisions that can, and should, under certain circumstances, be included to ensure efficient and effective management of the financial assistance schemes. Amendment No 12, as tabled by the SDLP, raises pertinent issues surrounding data protection, and the implications that the Bill will have in respect of the potential sharing of information among Departments, and the use of personal data to provide financial assistance beyond benefits. There are statutory procedures that must be followed when using an individual's personal information, and that may affect the ability of Departments to implement schemes for financial assistance. I am interested to hear the deputy First Minister's response on that important issue.

I note that Mr Spratt thought that we could not support the proposed amendments, in case doing so delayed the passage of the Bill.

Throughout the debate, my party has said that it does not want to delay the payment of financial assistance to those who need it most; it wants to ensure proper democratic accountability. If any Member wants to make an intervention on that point, I am happy to give way.

5.15 pm

Amendment 13, which amends clause 4, is sensible because it will increase accountability to the Assembly; it would, however, have been better to be passed in conjunction with the SDLP's amendments Nos 1, 3, 9, and 11. Alone, it cannot guarantee that Statutory Committees will be involved at any stage of the process, although it would increase the overall democratic input of the legislative Assembly. That is to be welcomed.

In the previous debate the deputy First Minister said that he assumed that Statutory Committees would be involved. However, there must be a guarantee. I support the amendment.

Mrs Long: Certain Members persist in peddling the lie that the Alliance Party wishes to frustrate or delay: that is simply not the case. My party wants to make the Bill as robust as possible and to enshrine in it, with amendment No 13, a proper mechanism for reporting

and engaging with the Assembly — the need for which has been expressed by Members from all parties.

My party is minded to support both amendment No 12 and amendment No 13. However, I will listen carefully to the deputy First Minister's assessment of amendment No 12. My reading of it is that it does not impose any additional obligation; nor does it change any legislation with regard to a reserved matter. It simply highlights two key concerns, the first of which is that possible data-protection issues must be considered when schemes are drawn up. For example, there could be conflicts between Departments on data sharing or between a Department and a third-party organisation that has been called upon to deliver a scheme.

I am not sure about the point that Jimmy Spratt made; perhaps the deputy First Minister can clarify it. If data-protection and data-sharing issues arise, they will do so notwithstanding any legislation that is passed by the House. They are reserved matters. There is already primary legislation at Westminster to deal with those issues. As Members have been told repeatedly by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, Westminster legislation takes precedence: Northern Ireland's legislation simply amends the local situation.

In that regard, the Assembly will not add obligations simply by referring to those issues in the Bill; it will merely highlight a conflict. I am interested to hear the deputy First Minister's assessment of that point.

The other key concern that is highlighted in that section is overpayment recovery. I understand Departments' obligation to recover finances that are awarded in error. That has been a source of much debate, particularly when the error is not the result of misinformation being provided by members of the public who apply to the scheme, but of ineffectual administration of the scheme by Departments.

That can cause people significant further hardship. Clause 2 targets those people because they already experience hardship and deprivation. Therefore, it is not unreasonable, in the event of overpayment or error, to ask Departments to consider how they will recover that money in a timely and fair fashion that will not add unduly to the hardship of the people whom they have assisted. There is nothing in the substance of amendment No 12 that causes me concern.

As regards amendment No 13, all parties have said in different ways that they want to maximise engagement with the House on matters that relate to the Bill and that they want the Assembly to be kept informed about schemes. The deputy First Minister and Mrs McGill said that they could not see the need for amendment No 11, which requires Departments to report through their Statutory Committees. They believe that that is unnecessary. Amendment No 11 is simply a mechanism by which Departments can keep

their Committees regularly appraised. Given that, according to certain Members, Departments intend to do so anyway, it is not particularly onerous to make that an obligation. Amendment No 11 creates a reason for a Committee to pursue the matter if its Department has failed.

Given that when we open our Committee papers we often have to follow up on issues and delays, it would be reassuring to have a statutory obligation that ensured that we receive an annual report. Amendment No 13 recognises that some of the schemes are cross-cutting; we are talking about dealing with things that may affect more than one Department. It is a scheme's totality and operations that are of interest to Members of the House. Therefore, it would be better if the First Minister and deputy First Minister would, as joint chairs of the Executive, report annually on behalf of the Executive as a whole.

That would be in much the same way that the First Minister and deputy First Minister update us on issues in the Programme for Government, not all of which are delivered by OFMDFM, which is their Department. Indeed, they also update us on cross-cutting themes such as community relations, equality and sustainability, young people and children and older people. Although delivery on those issues may be spread across a number of Departments, OFMDFM has a special responsibility for them and, therefore, the First Minister and deputy First Minister report to the Assembly. So, it should not cause any particular concern if they do so in this case.

It is feasible that more than one scheme could be in operation at any time. Therefore, it would make sense for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to give us an overview of how many schemes are in operation, how far those have progressed, how they are being delivered, and so on. I cannot see a problem with having legislation that provides for that to happen on a regular basis. Indeed, given that amendment No 11 has fallen, it would be a prompt for Committees to return to the issue if they wanted a more detailed assessment from a Department about its role in any scheme and how effective it has been within its remit.

There seems to be a circular breakdown of logic operating. On one hand, people are saying that it would not be appropriate for Departments to carry out the role individually because more than one Department may be involved and they would probably be doing it any way. On the other hand, people are saying that the First Minister and deputy First Minister cannot do it because they cannot speak on behalf of all the Departments, even though they do that frequently on cross-cutting issues.

I do not think that there is an issue with amendment No 13, and I am interested in whether the deputy First

Minister will be able to clarify the problem about specifying the issues of overpayment and data protection when he responds to the debate. I do not understand how we could have encroached on reserve matters when we are not applying to change any such issue.

Mr Attwood: It is odd what comes out when you least expect it. The exchange between Mr O'Loan and Mr Spratt, which took place early in the debate on this group of amendments, gave the game away. Mr Spratt said, presumably on behalf of the DUP, that the latest amendments tabled by the SDLP and others would be rejected: I presume that the deputy First Minister will confirm that in due course. It is curious, because I cannot recall any piece of legislation being passed in this Chamber without even one amendment having been accepted from, let us say, the minority parties.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You may get used to it.

Mr Attwood: That comment gives the game away again. From a sedentary position, the Sinn Féin Whip said: "get used to it." On this group of amendments, the message being sent out by Mr Spratt and Ms Ní Chuilín to the Chamber and to the people of Northern Ireland is: get used to it. Get used to the fact that when legislation is tabled on the Floor of the Assembly, and reasoned amendments are tabled by the minority parties, not one of those amendments will be accepted; get used to it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that you were working yourself into a point there, but —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Will the Member refer all her remarks through the Chair and not directly to another Member?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was making the point that if a Minister who is responsible for introducing legislative frameworks to deliver services to people in most need is incompetent, the House will take whatever action is required to provide a remedy; so, get used to it.

Mr Attwood: If that is the Sinn Féin Whip's best response to my point, that party should be worried. My point was clear and explicit. In the dying hours of the debate, Mr Spratt said that the DUP will not accept any amendments from the minority parties, even the reasonable amendments that were tabled by Mr O'Loan. Through that response, Sinn Féin was explicitly telling the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party, the PUP, the Alliance Party and the people of the North of Ireland to get used to power being in the hands of the DUP and Sinn Féin, to get used to their views not being heard or acknowledged, and to get used to the fact that sensible amendments that will improve the legislation will be rejected.

That scenario is bad enough. However, Peter Robinson said that the legislation is the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the House.

Furthermore, it has been granted accelerated passage. Given those points and in the event of such sea-change legislation, I would expect some acknowledgment — however small — that the legislation can be improved through one of the many amendments that the other parties tabled. However, that did not happen. Not one has been accepted, and we are told to get used to it.

My second point betrays the DUP and Sinn Féin most. Amendment No 12, which was tabled by the SDLP, refers to overpayment issues, which Mr O’Loan, Mr McCallister and Mrs Long outlined. We know that clause 3 is particularly relevant for the constituencies that are in greatest need. From our experience in our constituency offices, we also know that overpayment issues and overpayment recovery sometimes arise with benefit uptake and payments to those in need. Therefore, Members should be acutely aware that further issues over the recovery of payments could arise as a result of clause 2, which introduces mechanisms to deal with poverty, need and social deprivation. It seems natural and organic that a Bill that addresses issues of poverty and deprivation should contain a mechanism that legislates against further impediment and burden being placed on those in need. However, even that amendment was not accepted.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for giving way. I was not going to say that the amendments are not reasonable, but I hope that he agrees that the provisions of the amendments are accounted for elsewhere in the Bill. We are not saying that our way on overpayments must be followed and that the Bill does not address that point; I believe that the Bill will address those issues. Of course people are concerned about that matter.

Mr Attwood: I have a great deal of regard for the Member for West Tyrone. I sit on a Committee with her, and I know that she fights vigorously for her constituency, and I know about the issues that she tackles. However, I am mindful that she was not in the Chamber last week, and I assure her that the Bill does not contain such provisions.

Given that I am saying that to her, and reassuring her about that, could I suggest to her that if that is the case, will she now, on behalf of Sinn Féin, acknowledge that that provision is not in the Bill, that it should be inserted into the Bill, and that one way, at this very last minute, to change the Bill so that it will protect people who already have a heavy burden, would be to amend the Bill? Does the Member agree with me that given that that provision is not in the Bill, it would be better now if she and Sinn Féin changed tack and supported the amendment?

5.30 pm

I hope that the deputy First Minister has more to say, and I invite him to say more in that regard, given

that a member of his party seems now to accept that what is not in the Bill is not in the Bill, and what should be in the Bill should be put in through the SDLP amendment.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for giving way. It is my view that the Bill takes account of that, as I said in my earlier contribution.

Mr Attwood: I hear what the Member says, but on this occasion, the Member is wrong. Therefore, I say to the Member, and to the deputy First Minister, let us get it right. Let us accept that amendment, so that, given that there is a common commitment in the House to help those who live in deprivation and who are in poverty, there is still yet another protection for them in the event that this legislation should result in them being in a situation of overpayment.

The third point that I want to make is that the Bill demonstrates the dogmatism of Sinn Féin and the DUP. That is reflected in amendment No 13, which, at a very minimum, suggests that it would be sensible for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to deliver a report, by means of a statement, not once a week, once a month, or once a quarter, but once a year — four times in the lifetime of this Assembly, in the event that the legislation is relied upon in the future life of this Assembly. Once a year. The Northern Ireland Policing Board must table a report once a year, as must the Police Ombudsman, the Electoral Commission, the Probation Board, the Justice Agency, the PSNI, every council in the North, and the Assembly Commission — yet it is not good enough for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to table a report once a year in respect of this legislation.

What makes the First Minister and deputy First Minister so precious? Why is it that a minimum standard that informs the life of every single public body in the North is a standard that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister think does not apply to them? Why are the standards for everyone else, but not for two people in Northern Ireland who are meant to be the political leadership of this part of the world? What makes them so exceptional and special that they do not have the obligations that every other person in a leadership role in a public body has? I ask the deputy First Minister to explain that.

Why, in regard to an exceptional piece of legislation, in which there is heightened public interest, and certainly heightened political concern, is it not thought appropriate and worthwhile for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to report once a year to the House? If, when the legislation about the Police Ombudsman or the PSNI was being tabled, I had suggested that they had to report once only every four years, can you imagine the hysteria that I would have faced from the DUP, Sinn Féin and others for saying

that there are public officials in Northern Ireland who do not have the accountability requirements of others.

I would have been, rightly, knocked back, but the SDLP, rightly, did not make such a preposterous proposal. However, by rejecting amendment No 13, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are saying that they are different. Therein lies the essential truth behind this Bill. By rejecting that amendment, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are acting in a dogmatic, centralised and powerful way. They think that they do not have to live up to the standards of anyone else who has that level of responsibility and who must report once a year, every year.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister refuse to include provisions to protect those who are vulnerable in a situation of overpayment, and the Sinn Féin Whip told us to “get used to it”. In the last minutes of this debate — when there are fewer Members in the Chamber — it is odd how some of the self-evident truths of this Bill become clear.

Let me tell the First Minister and deputy First Minister that we do not live by the standards of “get used to it”. People in Northern Ireland will have heard loud and clear — from the mouths of the authors and the supporters of this Bill — that they should get used to the nature and character of DUP and Sinn Féin power in this part of the world. The people have been told that if they do not like it, they can lump it.

The deputy First Minister: Amendment Nos 12 and 13 cover data protection, dealing with disputes regarding overpayment recovery and reporting arrangements. The latter has also been discussed in the context of reporting to Statutory Committees, which was proposed in amendment Nos 3 and 11.

Although I agree that issues of data protection may arise in the course of implementing schemes, the Bill is certainly not the vehicle for resolving such issues. As has already been pointed out, data protection is a reserved matter. It cannot be dealt with in the Bill without the consent of the Secretary of State and the Bill being laid before Parliament for 20 days. We cannot be sure that the Secretary of State would give his agreement. Even if that agreement was forthcoming, it would inevitably delay the Bill’s passage and — ultimately — the fuel-credit payments that we wish to make urgently through this legislation. I assure those who raised the matter that any data protection issues that may arise will not be ignored and will be settled within the existing legal framework.

Amendment No 12 also proposes that clause 3 should specify that schemes will cover disputes regarding the recovery of overpayments, and that was also mentioned. That is unnecessary as the list of issues in clause 3 for which a scheme can provide is neither exhaustive nor mandatory. The legislation

could, therefore, deal with disputes about overpayment recovery as it is currently drafted.

Amendment No 13 proposes that the First Minister and deputy First Minister should report annually to the Assembly on the operation of any schemes that are made under the legislation. I agree with the Alliance Party Members: accountability is essential throughout the process of implementing and developing the schemes. We have no difficulty with the intended outcome of the amendment. However, accountability for the operation of any scheme rests with the designated Department — not with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Furthermore, I expect that the Minister responsible would wish to evaluate the impact of schemes in line with good-practice guidance. We intend to report to our Committee on the outcome of any schemes that OFMDFM implements. I fully expect other Ministers to do likewise, without the need for the legislation to place that duty on them.

Mr Ford: I appreciate the Minister giving way. We certainly accept the point that he made about individual Ministers reporting to their individual Committees. However, the purpose of the amendment is to seek a wider report on the overall operation, which can only be done by the First Minister and deputy First Minister jointly reporting to the Assembly as a single body. He has not answered that point.

The deputy First Minister: The point that I am making is that it is expected that individual Departments, like my Department, would report to their Committees and to the Assembly. Indeed, if that were not to happen, the Executive would ensure that such reporting mechanisms were included in regulations governing particular schemes, and that is why we reject the amendments.

I reassure Alex Attwood that dealing with overpayments is possible under the Bill as currently drafted. Concerns expressed on that matter have been dealt with.

Mrs D Kelly: It is most regrettable that, once again, attempts by parties on this side of the House to give an honest appraisal of the legislation and, where possible, to improve it have been totally ignored by the DUP and Sinn Féin.

The deputy First Minister said that he sympathises with the Alliance Party’s attempt, using amendment No 13, to improve accountability; however, many of the proposed amendments sought to improve the accountability of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the ability of Committees to scrutinise their Departments, and the House’s ability to scrutinise legislation. Nevertheless, he and the First Minister remain bullish in their attitude towards rejecting those amendments. One wonders whether the deputy First Minister’s sympathy for Alliance Party amendments is

a continued attempt to woo that party into breaching d'Hondt in the devolution of policing and justice powers. Perhaps the deputy First Minister will respond to that point on another day?

I was somewhat surprised by Mr Spratt's comment about the SDLP's audacity to play politics in an institution such as this — an institution to which we were elected as politicians. In the past few days, a lot of smoke and mirrors have been employed in the debates about this legislation, and there have been suggestions that the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the PUP and the Ulster Unionist Party have been seeking to delay it. Clearly, that has not been the case.

My party has great difficulty with clause 2, and in order to protect the most vulnerable people in our society, we attempted to improve clause 3 by dealing with data protection matters. In spite of that, no one will listen to us. However, there is continuing confusion on the Benches opposite between reserved matters and the regulations and improvements that we can make under our own volition.

During her contribution, Mrs McGill said that she carried out a lot of research last night — her Sunday evening must have been very boring. Even having undertaken that level of research —

Mrs McGill: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, surely.

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for giving way. I am looking at you, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am wondering whether I am allowed to respond. I was talking about a debate that was held last week, and the Member is referring to that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will not be able to influence the debate last week, so if Mrs Kelly is happy to allow an intervention, the Member is permitted to intervene.

Mrs McGill: I was not present during the debate last week, so I read the Official Report in order to inform myself about the Bill, and I was informed of it by some of the contributions.

Mrs D Kelly: I am not sure whether Mrs McGill expects me to reply to that comment. Nevertheless, I was attempting to point out to her that if she had read and understood the contributions and concerns of those who tabled the amendments, she would appreciate that nowhere does the legislation oblige the First Minister or the deputy First Minister to make a statement.

If Mrs McGill is arguing that it would be up to other Departments and other Ministers to issue such statements, she has failed to recognise that the DUP and Sinn Féin have used the cross-cutting nature of OFMDFM's responsibilities, particularly in tackling poverty, social exclusion, deprivation and children and

young people as their arguments in favour of the Financial Assistance Bill. Due to the cross-cutting nature of their remit, it is clear and right that an amendment such as amendment No 13 be tabled today. Therefore, the First Minister and deputy First Minister should be expected to make an annual statement.

5.45 pm

In his response, the deputy First Minister said that he was sure that such a statement would be made but that he did not believe that there should be an obligation on either him or the First Minister to make one. However, as Members said today and in previous debates, OFMDFM does not have Members' trust, because, as some Members said today, papers to the Committee often do not follow on time and decisions are held up. Several decisions and strategies were held up long before the 154-day logjam; decisions have been lying somewhere in the bends of OFMDFM since last spring.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister — and the DUP and Sinn Féin — should not be frightened of such an obligation. Surely making such a statement is in the interests of good accountability and good scrutiny.

Alex Attwood and Declan O'Loan explained the reason that it was necessary to table amendment No 12, which was tabled by the SDLP and which proposes to insert into clause 3 the words:

“data protection issues, disputes as to overpayment recovery”.

Hardly a day goes by that my constituency office — like, I am sure, those of other Members — is not contacted by people who are worried about overpayments. Given the experience that we have with child tax credits and overpayments in particular, and the financial hardship, pressure, strain and worry that they place on individuals, I do not understand why amendment No 12 would not be accepted.

I think that it was Mr Spratt who suggested that Ministers should table only competent legislation that does not require amendments. The Member should be aware that the First Minister and deputy First Minister tabled amendments to the Financial Assistance Bill, so they have admitted that the legislation required amending. Furthermore, following the accelerated passage of the Commission for Victims and Survivors Bill, the First Minister and deputy First Minister tabled amendments. Therefore, it is an established precedent that Ministers who introduce legislation may table amendments.

The bullish attitude that was displayed by Sinn Féin and the DUP in not listening to the concerns of others was regrettable. No one showed it more clearly than Carál Ní Chuilín. She told the House and the public to “get used to” DUP and Sinn Féin rule without any recognition of the contribution that other parties might

make by suggesting how legislation might be improved. If something does not fit in with Sinn Féin or the DUP's view of the world, it is not accepted, and that is tough on the rest of us. Such an attitude is coming from a party that cried for years that its electoral mandate should be honoured and upheld. However, it is not taking on board the views of other parties now, particularly those of the SDLP, which has a proven track record on the delivery of social justice and welfare issues on behalf of the people.

Question put, That amendment No 12 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 53.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr O'Loan.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr P Maskey and Mr Moutray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 4 (Financial assistance)

Question put, That amendment No 13 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 23; Noes 53.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Cobain, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Mrs D Kelly, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Mr Brolly, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Ms Gildernew, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Brolly and Mr Moutray.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Welfare of Animals Act

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Statutory Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Elliott replace Mr Ken Robinson as a member of the Committee for Education. — [Mr Cobain.]

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

Mr Elliott: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of recent events, to review the welfare of animals legislation as a matter of urgency to ensure that animal-welfare standards are at least equivalent to those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

I rise to address the very serious issue of animal welfare. The Ulster Unionist Party decided to propose the motion for several reasons, the first being that the current legislation lacks the provision for an offence of keeping an animal in conditions that are likely to cause it suffering. At present, action can only be taken if cruelty is apparent and demonstrable.

Several cases involving animal-welfare issues have been highlighted in the press in recent weeks and months.

We have encountered serious cases at Little Acre Open Farm, at Katesbridge and elsewhere. In the community there is great concern that current legislation does not meet the requirements of the Department, the agricultural sector or those who keep animals. We want the legislation tightened up — the current Northern Ireland legislation was enacted in 1972 and needs updating. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's consultation process on the matter ended in December 2006 — more than two years ago.

Since then, there has been ample time to implement new laws, or at least to begin the legislative process, but neither has happened. I understand that the Minister wants new animal-welfare legislation introduced on an all-Ireland basis, or for legislation in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to correspond. I have no problem with the Republic of Ireland's bringing its legislation up to our standards. That is no reason, however, for delaying an update to Northern Ireland's legislation. We want our legislation brought into line with the rest of the United Kingdom, and particularly with that in England and Wales, which was improved and updated in 2006.

The SDLP has tabled an amendment to the effect that we should have legislation similar to that in the

Republic of Ireland. However, the Republic's legislation dates back to 1911, which predates partition. At least we have had updates since then. Therefore, there is no point in our trying to equate our legislation to that of the Republic. We must move forward our process. If the Republic wants to catch up, that is up to the people of the Republic, and we will have no objection to their doing so. We must not be hampered by a delay in legislative proposals in the Republic. Its consultation process has just finished, so it may be four years before it brings its legislation up to a standard comparable to ours. We cannot wait on the Republic.

On the occasions when farms are visited and animal-welfare issues not recognised, some blame the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) officials. However, it may be the Department that is falling down in that instance. It may be the case that, when they are out testing cattle, that is all that DARD officials are allowed to do. It is hard to understand how departmental officials visited a farm on nine occasions and saw nothing amiss on many of them, despite the evidence of serious animal-welfare problems on the premises. If animals are lying dead or dying, I fail to see how officials can miss it, even if they are there for another purpose. When there, they should be able to address all issues. We must ensure that, when they are out on farms, departmental officials have the authority to ensure the welfare of animals on the premises.

New legislation should produce certain outcomes. We want to ensure that departmental officials and agencies such as the USPCA can remove from premises animals whose welfare is neglected.

We also need to ensure that the legislation allows officials from the Department or from other organisations to take action against conditions likely to cause suffering to animals. Voluntary organisations that deal with animal-welfare issues in the Province do a very good job under very difficult circumstances, and under the poor legislation that already exists.

When someone is found to have caused animal suffering, it is important that the legislation prevents not only that person, but also those premises, from retaining or keeping animals under their control in the future, or certainly for a certain length of time. Otherwise, one can never be sure that a similar situation will not happen again on those premises, perhaps by a family member or by the person who was caught the first time.

Therefore, it is important that we move this process forward. Although I have no difficulty with the Republic of Ireland legislation coming into line with ours, what I really want to see is progress on our own legislation. Can the Minister tell me where is the review of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern

Ireland) 1972 that started many years ago? We need to see progress on that, and we need to see it now.

Mr P J Bradley: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“and the Republic of Ireland.”

My South Down constituency colleague John McCallister and I are, perhaps, more aware of instances of animal cruelty than any other Member in the Chamber, because over the past few years in South Down, Stephen Philpott, of the USPCA, has been regularly featured on television, regrettably having to speak from a South Down venue. Therefore, we are very familiar with the problems.

I absolutely agree with the content of the motion. The SDLP's amendment allows for the fact that everything is far from perfect across the water or in the Republic. I concede that the new regulations that were introduced to replace 100-year-old regulations in the United Kingdom are a step in the right direction, and we would benefit if those regulations were replicated here.

I recently listened to a talk given by Professor Patrick Wall, of University College Dublin, to the North of Ireland Veterinary Association at its annual meeting in Magherafelt. In an informative address on animal welfare and health, he spoke about the issues surrounding the November dioxins scare. He praised the legislation in the Republic that allowed for effective traceability and immediate compensation for loss. I know that we are not debating the dioxins case this evening, but it should not be allowed to go unnoticed that there are differences between animal-related regulations that apply North and South.

Currently, the hands of the USPCA are tied. Its officials, as Mr Elliott said, are acting under outdated regulations that deal with only suffering animals. The old saying that prevention is better than cure is very applicable in this debate. It could be claimed that the key word in the motion — and, indeed, in the amendment — is “urgency”. It is the view of the SDLP that the Minister should act immediately to introduce legislation that incorporates the best of the regulations that apply in the United Kingdom and the best that apply in the Republic of Ireland. Calling for the best of both worlds, which we have attempted to do in our amendment, is worthy of support.

We need legislation now that prevents anyone from owning or operating any form of activity that presents conditions likely to cause suffering to animals, whether on farms, in kennels, in stables or in circuses — indeed, everywhere that animals are contained, be it in the open or housed.

I thank Mr Elliott, Mr McCallister and Mr Savage for tabling this motion; it is regrettable that there is a need to do so. However, while cruelty to animals is

still the practice of a few, we must do what we can to address it. Finally, it might be worth the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development debating the issue again, and to learn from USPCA professionals about the regulations that apply across these islands with a view to creating regulations that will be admired by all.

The amendment offers the opportunity to construct all-embracing regulations that will, hopefully in the not too distant future, eliminate the scourge of animal cruelty.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): In March 2006, I called on Angela Smith, as the Northern Ireland Minister with responsibility for this matter, urgently to introduce legislation to protect animals from unnecessary suffering. I said nearly three years ago that we needed a short timetable for the introduction of legislation and that we needed actively to engage on this matter.

6.30 pm

We were told at that stage that the Department was undertaking consultation into the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972; an Act that is so obsolete that, as the USPCA said, it would allow for the packing of 500 small mammals or birds into the back of a car in strong sun. An offence would not be committed until those animals began to die. Never mind the distress and obvious pain that would be endured, the animals would have to die before action could be taken — all because of loopholes in an Act that is more than 35 years old.

When responsibility was passed to the Northern Ireland Assembly and I was appointed Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, one of the first things that the Committee did was to call on the Minister and her Department to review the legislation to prevent dogs being bred for fighting and to prevent the despicable suffering that those animals and others must endure to line the pockets of their owners illegally.

The Department was called to appear before the Committee on several occasions. We were told that the matter was under review, and we are still being told that nearly two years on. On each visit to the Committee, the Department was asked what it was going to do to protect the animals of Northern Ireland. We were told that the matter was being considered on an all-Ireland basis and that the Department was waiting for a response from its counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the Republic of Ireland. The Department waited while more animals suffered, while unscrupulous criminals got richer and greedier, and while everyone else begged for action to be taken.

We are still waiting. We are no further on than we were two years ago when the Committee called for action. We are no further on than we were three years ago when I called on Angela Smith for action. We are no further on while elsewhere in the United Kingdom action has been taken and legislation was introduced nearly four years ago.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has been consistent in calling for cruelty to animals in Northern Ireland to stop and for punishments to fit the crime, which would act as a real deterrent. The Committee is considering a separate piece of legislation — the diseases of animals Bill — and has recommended that the Department introduce mandatory prison sentences for those who deliberately infect animals; a recommendation that we believe to be very significant. It will be significant because we are providing the Department with the means by which to tackle a real and significant problem with real and significant tools.

I assure Members that the deliberate breeding of dogs for fighting or in sickening conditions is no less significant. I assure the House that when the legislation comes before the Committee, we will be no less stringent in calling for appropriate sentences for those heinous crimes, and that the tools that we provide to the Department or other authorities will be no less significant.

Animals are suffering in Northern Ireland today as we speak, and they are being afforded no protection. Offences are being committed against animals in Northern Ireland today; offences that lead to unspeakable torment, pain and anguish to animals. We cannot accept that.

I repeat the call that I made in 2006, but not as it was made then, as an elected representative to a direct rule Minister; this time, I make the call as an elected representative of the Northern Ireland Assembly and as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. We need a short timetable for the introduction of legislation, and we need to engage actively in that matter now. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is more than willing to receive any such legislation that comes before it.

Regarding the amendment, Mr P J Bradley says that we need legislation and we need it now — if we wait for the Irish Republic, unfortunately, we will delay the legislation. We need legislation in Northern Ireland now. Let us look after our own position. I support the motion.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am in favour of the motion and of the SDLP's proposed amendment. I am aware that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has been in touch with a wide range of stakeholders,

seeking their views on all of the issues concerned and on how those should be brought forward. The Department has been in touch with officials in Britain and in the South of Ireland. In 2006, the Scottish Parliament updated its animal-welfare legislation, and, in 2007, England and Wales updated theirs. Unfortunately, they did not liaise properly, and I would not like to see such creeping partitionism enter into our debate. On the island of Ireland, it is necessary that we liaise with the South and with officials in Britain.

The legislation has to deal with issues such as dogfighting, puppy farms and circus animals.

Mr T Clarke: How can the Member square that circle? A 'Spotlight' programme showed that dogs were being imported through the Republic of Ireland. Clearly, there is a large loophole in the Republic of Ireland, whereby dangerous dogs can be brought into Northern Ireland through the back door.

Mr Doherty: I agree with the Member; that is why we have to liaise and consult, in order to close all the loopholes on the island so that that does not continue. I thank the Member for his intervention and for allowing me to highlight that point. As I said, dogfighting must be dealt with.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and want to express my party's frustration at the delay in bringing forward such legislation. We agree completely with Mr Elliott and Dr McCrea; this should have been done a long time ago. We do not accept the Minister's view that it is important to move in tandem with the Republic of Ireland. There is no need to do that; we are quite entitled to lead the way. Good legislation that we can copy has been in place in Scotland and England since 2006. If that legislation does not meet all the demands of the organisations concerned, it certainly meets most of them.

The Minister's desire to wait for the South to move is illogical and extremely frustrating for Members who want to see a legal requirement placed on those people who keep animals to do all that is reasonable to ensure their welfare. We want an end to the situation where keeping an animal in conditions likely to cause suffering is not against the law. Stephen Philpott from the USPCA said that:

"there is no legal redress for a dog forced to survive in a yard littered with its own filth, an animal never groomed, walked or socialised. Only when the sores appear and the vet is ignored, can we involve the PSNI".

At that stage, it is often too late to save the animal; I am sure that Mr Philpott has seen many such cases.

We want an end to some of the practices that have been mentioned, such as circus animals, dogfighting and hare coursing. I regard hare coursing to be a stain on our national pride and something that should have been outlawed years ago, north and south of the

border. It is worth asking: if we are going to move with the Southern authorities, will they take the same attitude toward hare coursing? Will they stand up to the greyhound lobby in the South as is necessary? Major issues surround the treatment of greyhounds while they are racing, and their treatment after they have finished racing is fairly terminal.

The Minister must take heed of the public's frustration. Regularly, the media reports, in horrific detail, on examples of the neglect of animals on a grand scale and on individual acts of cruelty toward all types of defenceless animals. Not all of those acts will ever come to light; however, legal right of access based on public concern could help, and that should have been in place before now.

I doubt whether the Minister or the Department has a problem with the five freedoms, as declared by the Animal Welfare Federation Northern Ireland and others. Nevertheless, I will just repeat them. They are freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition; freedom from discomfort, pain and injury; freedom from disease; freedom from fear and stress; and freedom to express normal behaviour. No one objects to those freedoms, so why the delay?

I have here photographs that show what can happen to a dog when it is neglected. It is suffering from trauma to the tip and every joint of its tail; indeed, some of its tail has rotted away. It is underweight and emaciated. It has dermatitis and dermatosis. It has a lesion on the bridge of its nose that would make you sick, and it has hookworm and sarcoptic mange.

I mention that particular case because that dog has been held by the state in custody since September 2007 under dangerous-dogs legislation. It used to be a well-behaved household pet. I do not know whether it was dangerous: that is what the argument is about. However, it has never bitten anyone and there is no record of aggression. It has been changed from being a healthy animal to an emaciated wreck while in the care of the state. It has been kept in solitary confinement and has suffered in a way in which the legislation that we now demand would never have allowed.

There are examples galore and there will be more while we wait for the Government to take action. It is particularly annoying to see the Government of another jurisdiction acting on a matter on which we should be taking the lead. I hope that the Minister is not allowing her politics to overrule her compassion on this matter. I urge her urgently to bring forward legislation that is based on the British model.

Mr Newton: I thank Mr Elliott, Mr McCallister and Mr Savage for securing the debate. I will approach it from a slightly different angle to that of other Members — from the perspective of abuses of wild animals, particularly those that are used in travelling circuses.

There was a time in this country when barbaric sports such as bear-baiting drew large crowds, when wild bears were tormented to make them react in a violent way for entertainment. Thankfully, society has moved beyond that point. My party colleague the Rev William McCrea referred to organised dogfighting, which was, at one time, common, open and thought to be acceptable. I welcome the fact that all right-thinking people now reject that as a sport. Cockfighting was a centuries old blood sport in which two birds that were bred specifically for fighting fought to the death. Society also rejected that bloody so-called sport, and moved on.

Each of those activities was recognised as a cruel and nasty form of animal treatment, and society demanded an end to that type of animal exploitation. However, there is a form of so-called entertainment that is still active — although it is in decline, which I welcome — which many people find unacceptable and for which people have been taken to court as they pose as animal lovers. I refer, of course, to the animal menagerie, or, indeed, the travelling circus.

For too long, those outdated forms of perverted amusement have travelled the length and breadth of the UK, the Republic of Ireland, and across Europe, touring once-magnificent wild animals in beast wagons for hours on end. A circus is a commercial business activity that trains wild animals to carry out tricks that are not natural to them and which require many hours of degrading, routine practice until the animals, in the eyes of the whip-carrying trainer, get it right.

It is probable that any travelling circus that comes to Northern Ireland will meet all its legislative obligations on animal welfare, but only because the legislation is so out of date. During recent years, however, there have been revelations about how circus animals are ill-treated in order to force them to perform for the paying public. In fact, some of those once-proud and mighty animals do not take easily to riding on each other's backs and jumping through hoops and, therefore, must rehearse until they meet the trainer's demands.

A touring circus spends many hours moving from location to location, and the animals are caged while they travel in the beast wagons. They are confined for hours with little time for exercise. It is impossible for a travelling menagerie to give animals the amenities that they need. Animals such as lions, rhinos, hippos and elephants are shipped in beast wagons across the seas on long gruelling journeys and moved from Italy, France, or Germany to the UK or Ireland.

6.45 pm

I encourage parents to consider the welfare of animals before they visit any travelling circus. There are many successful circuses that do not use wild animals; those that do are an antiquated relic of an earlier period. I

welcome Belfast City Council's unanimous decision to ban animal circuses from performing on council property. Some councils in GB and the Republic of Ireland have also taken that decision.

It is time for the Assembly to give this matter serious consideration and for the Minister to address it in the manner that other Members have suggested. The legislation is out of date; it is more than 30 years old, and it is minimalist in its content.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion that has been tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party. Wearing my other hat, I declare an interest as a member of Ards Borough Council, which is also aware of the problem. I was horrified to see the media reports on the breeding of puppies. I will focus on the Province's puppy farms, where dogs are regularly treated disgustingly before being sold on.

The term "puppy farm" conjures images of little puppies bounding around in the sunshine in fields and playing away to their hearts' content. That is the 'Jackanory' way of looking at it, but the reality is very different. I read a description of a puppy farm that disturbed me greatly. It stated:

"A puppy farm is hard to define, since it could be any size, any location and any number of dogs involved — it does not have to be on an actual farm!"

The puppies do not bound aimlessly around, they are confined and mistreated.

"A puppy farm can also have a license issued by the local council and sell puppies that are registered with the Kennel Club and come with 'pedigree' certificates... The best way to describe a puppy farm is to say that it is a place where puppies are bred, purely as a way to make money, with little or no regard for the health and welfare of the dogs involved... since responsible breeding is actually an expensive business."

I realise that some puppy farms are legal and conform to the requirements of UK legislation, but that is by choice rather than by law. Those puppy farmers voluntarily allow councils' environmental health officers to visit, but there are a great many other puppy farmers who look upon it as a business. They will cut as many costs as possible so that they can make the maximum profit, and they do not care about the suffering or if a few puppies die in the process.

Cost cutting includes: breeding from bitches too often and from too young an age; cramming dogs into unsuitable kennelling and feeding only enough for them to survive and breed; not giving proper veterinary care or vaccinations; and putting pups up for sale when they are too young to leave their mothers.

Tha laa' surroondin dug fermes anither leevstock metters haes bin lauched at as fu' o' loopholes an no tuch enough fer tae tak oan tha proablum. In scriven woark fae tha USPCA wi' regerds tae leevstock

wull-bein, it's cleer whut they think. Tha 1972 wullfare o' animals is past it's sell bi' date.

The law surrounding puppy farms and other animal-welfare issues has been criticised as full of loopholes and not tough enough to properly tackle the problem. The USPCA is clear in its view that the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 is past its sell-by date. The most glaring omission is the absence of an offence of keeping an animal in conditions that are likely to cause suffering. That is the sort of change to legislation that we want to be made. Our welfare officers are limited to doling out advice that often falls on deaf ears, rather than affording proper protection to animals that are being kept in shocking conditions.

In the UK, a new law deems it an offence to keep animals in conditions that do not meet basic welfare standards. Trevor Lunn referred to the five freedoms, which are all basic things that we take for granted. However, animals in the Province do not have that protection.

I have been told that the new legislation across the water has led to a dramatic increase in prosecutions by the RSPCA. However, in the Province, the USPCA has no power to prosecute and, therefore, offers no real threat to those who mistreat animals. If new law was introduced, the USPCA could investigate matters and recommend court action. The USPCA wants the new law for Northern Ireland, which was first proposed under direct rule, to match up with new legislation on the mainland. As other Members have said, that must be done urgently in order to stop the suffering of many animals in the Province who are being abused and neglected.

It is important that the Republic of Ireland is changing its legislation. Earlier, my colleague Trevor Clarke mentioned the cross-border trade; it is worrying that animals can cross the border but ignore the legislation in the Republic. The USPCA said that the fact that keeping an animal in conditions likely to cause suffering is not against the law in Northern Ireland is crazy. Under current legislation, the onus is on the USPCA to prove that the animals have already suffered before it can intervene and close down the premises. It must play a waiting game until the animal shows evidence of suffering or dies.

Despite an update to the law in England and Wales in April 2007, similar changes have yet to be introduced in the Province, which operates under an antiquated law that came into force in 1972. We must act urgently and make changes in order to end inhumane treatment. There is an old saying that a dog is a man's best friend; we must do a much better job of taking care of him and her, and it must begin now.

Mr Savage: I support the motion that stands in my name and that of my two party colleagues. I echo their

calls for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to review the animal-welfare legislation urgently in order to ensure that animal-welfare standards are, at least, equivalent to those in the rest of the UK.

As we speak, an animal-welfare issue is ongoing. Last week's edition of the 'Lurgan Mail' contained a report of a horse that was tied up and left in unsatisfactory conditions, tethered to a lamp post on a path at the rear of Legahory Court and Burnside in Craigavon. The horse is in a poor state and has no access to food, water or adequate shelter. It is abundantly clear that that is an animal-welfare issue. However, under the current legislation, it is not an offence to keep an animal in conditions that are likely to cause suffering. That is a major issue.

As the law stands, action can only be taken if cruelty is apparent and demonstrable. Furthermore, there is ambiguity as to whether it is legal to seize an animal. In the newspaper report, a USPCA representative explained:

"Our hands are tied. It is a source of frustration and embarrassment for our officers. The law shortchanges the animal it's meant to protect."

The police and the USPCA are prevented from intervening until an animal is suffering — such as being on its knees, unable to get up, and so on. In this day and age, that is totally intolerable. I have highlighted the case in the House in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of the legislation. I want the Minister to respond to that, and I ask her to do all in her power to ensure that the animal is passed to the USPCA for proper care and safe keeping.

We cannot wait for the Republic of Ireland to get its act together; its animal-welfare regulations are a century out of date. Furthermore, what guarantee is there that the Republic of Ireland will get its house in order on the issue any time soon?

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's consultation ended over two years ago, but has yet to be published or acted upon. We cannot procrastinate any longer. We must act now — not tomorrow, next week or next month — and enact legislation that will support the industry.

When people abuse the situation and the welfare of animals, it must be the time to bring in legislation, and to do so immediately. I ask the Minister to use her good offices to introduce legislation to protect the animals of this country.

Mr G Robinson: I am pleased to be able to support the motion, as it will address a long-standing gap in legislation in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. I am especially pleased as I believe that it will have a positive impact on the disgusting practices of puppy farming, fighting dogs and cruelty to pets.

I am sure that all Members heard of the awful case in Coleraine, where a pet retriever was so viciously treated that it died. The individual who carried out the mistreatment was sentenced to only six months' imprisonment. That conviction was a welcome result for all who were shocked by the brutality of the case. However, it was a clear-cut case, where prosecution was easily justified. In other cases those who enforce the law have their hands tied by weak legislation. Updated legislation, at least equal to the rest of the UK, is now essential.

We must all remember that despicable practices such as puppy farming can still be legally carried out here. Not only does that cause suffering to the animals involved in the breeding production line, but much heartache is caused when a sickly new pet dies shortly after arriving at a new home. I also believe that puppy farming is strongly linked to the dogfighting scene. If we can in some way stop the puppy farms, we may also have a big impact on the breeding of the dogs that are forced to fight to pleasure their own owners and a paying crowd of blood-seekers.

As we are all aware, the global economy has suffered a downturn. There is evidence to show that, at such a time, pets can be discarded because of the expense of keeping them, especially if they are old or sick. New legislation would enable stronger enforcement to be carried out. If someone decides to dump a dog, and that person can be traced, there will be effective legislation with which to deal with the individual in the appropriate legal manner.

I see a change in legislation as the only way in which we can protect innocent creatures from exploitation. By strengthening the legislation to at least equal that of the rest of the UK, we would be protecting the proportion of animals that are abused for profit, or due to economic reasons. I support the motion.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposers of the motion and the amendment for raising the issue of animal-welfare legislation. I agree that there is a need to protect animals from unnecessary suffering and cruelty. It is something that I feel strongly about and is a matter that I have been working on addressing since coming into office.

It is my intention to introduce legislation on the issue as quickly as possible, but there is also a need to ensure that the legislation is robust and adequate, and does not leave loopholes, either here in Ireland or between here and Britain. We need to get the legislation right, and I am very grateful to have the opportunity to debate the subject and to hear the views of Members. The debate also gives me an opportunity to outline to

Members the actions that I have taken to date on animal welfare, and my plans for the future.

I am, of course, already aware of many of the issues raised by the Members who have spoken. Although the primary responsibility for the welfare of an animal rests with its owner or keeper, I agree that there is a need to provide protection to animals through robust and enforceable legislation. As has been pointed out by a number of Members, animal welfare in the North is governed by the Welfare of Animals Act 1972. Until very recently, animal-welfare legislation in England and Wales was spread over some 23 Acts of Parliament, going back to the Protection of Animals Act 1911, which was itself a consolidation of nineteenth-century legislation. As a result of significant judicial criticism of the language of that legislation, a new Animal Welfare Act came into force in England and Wales in 2007, and in Scotland in 2006.

Unlike in Britain, animal-welfare legislation had, to some degree, already been simplified and consolidated by the Welfare of Animals Act 1972. That Act makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering or cruelty to an animal, and the owner of an animal can be judged to have permitted cruelty if he has failed to exercise reasonable care and supervision in order to prevent an animal suffering.

7.00 pm

In addition to general welfare legislation, the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000 set out minimum standards for all farmed animals and provided a framework for species-specific standards. That legislation requires owners and keepers of farm animals to take all reasonable steps to ensure the welfare of their animals, and to ensure that they are not caused any unnecessary pain, suffering or distress. Therefore, anyone who is responsible for a farmed animal must ensure that the animal's needs are met.

Some people have suggested that the legislation that relates to the welfare of non-farmed animals — such as companion animals or pets — is not as robust as that for farm animals. To a certain extent, I agree with that view. It is one of the reasons that I have been considering what new legislation is needed.

My Department consulted on proposals for new animal-welfare legislation in late 2006. As that exercise was carried out under direct rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider the issues that were raised and the points that were received at that time. I agree with Members — particularly with Mr Shannon — about the very important role that the USPCA plays in relation to education and highlighting animal-welfare issues. However, the USPCA does not have enforcement powers — those lie with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the PSNI.

Following an initial review of the comments — which clearly showed support for new legislation — my officials and I met a range of key stakeholders, including the NI Companion Animal Welfare Committee. That body is made up of a number of groups, including the Blue Cross, the Dogs Trust, Cats Protection, the Animal Welfare Federation and the USPCA. That group has the support of several MLAs, and I welcome, and am grateful for, their interest in this issue.

Discussions have also been held with the Animal Welfare Federation, the Captive Animals' Protection Society and the Kennel Club, as well as a number of other interests. All those meetings were exceptionally useful and informative. I found discussions with welfare groups in Britain particularly insightful as they have first-hand experience of how the Animal Welfare Act 2006 worked on the ground, and of some of the flaws that are contained in the legislation. In addition, my officials continue to meet with the PSNI to discuss aspects of the enforcement of animal-welfare legislation.

The comments that were made to me in those discussions — and in correspondence cases from members of the public — mirror many of the issues that were raised by Members today. For example, we heard calls for legislation to include a specific offence of failing to provide a duty of care for animals. I have also been asked to consider the level of penalties for cruelty offences, and there have been calls for further regulation of activities such as travelling circuses, greyhound racing and puppy farming. Those issues are central to my ongoing consideration of what new animal-welfare legislation may be needed.

With regard to the need to ensure that all animals are subject to a duty of care, Trevor Lunn highlighted the five freedoms. Those are a fundamental principle that already underpin EU legislation on the protection of farm animals. The principle is set out in the Department's codes of recommendation for the welfare of livestock. The codes aim to encourage all those who care for farm animals to follow the highest level of animal husbandry. It is clear that owners of all animals should be required to take all reasonable steps to prevent unnecessary suffering from happening.

I also agree that the level of penalties that is currently available to the courts is not a sufficient deterrent to provide adequate protection for animals. Involvement in the so-called sport of dogfighting is one area that comes to mind in which higher penalties are being considered. That is an absolute necessity, in my view.

A further issue is that of puppy farming, which was mentioned by Mr Shannon and a number of other Members who have spoken. The regulation of commercial dog breeding in the North is far less onerous than the legislation that covers the breeding

and selling of dogs in Britain, where such activities have been illegal since 1999. That legislation was not fully replicated in the North at that time as there was no evidence of puppy farmers operating here. Consequently, puppy farming remains legal here — provided that dogs are kept in premises that are registered with the local council and meet the minimal requirements that are set out in the Dogs Order 1983.

I have been concerned about that issue for some time. I want to deal with that in new legislation that will mirror that of Britain and end the intensive farming of puppies here. Puppy farming is an all-Ireland problem, so I also plan to raise that matter with Ministers in Dublin.

I was very interested in the comments that Robin Newton made in relation to circuses. In answers to a number of Assembly questions over recent months, I have stated that my Department's role in circuses is very limited.

The Welfare of Animals Act 1972 allows for the protection of all animals, but there are no specific provisions for the welfare of animals in circuses. Nevertheless, many people are concerned about that matter, so I am actively considering whether there is a need for further regulation. That would require primary legislation, which would take time, but the Assembly should nevertheless consider it.

Members spoke about other matters, particularly the incidents at Katesbridge and the open farm near Loughbrickland. In recent months, in response to Assembly questions, I have advised Members that I have commissioned an independent review of the actions taken in Katesbridge, and as part of my consideration of that review, I will reflect on any issues raised concerning Little Acre Open Farm.

Of course, when we see images of squalor and filth on farms, or of rotting carcasses, we are right to be concerned that animals might be suffering. However, in itself, that is not sufficient evidence that an offence has been committed. Veterinary surgeons must be objective in assessing evidence and coming to a judgement about what is likely to constitute a case of welfare abuse. When DARD staff inspect farms, they can only report on what they find on the day, so they might not witness animal-welfare problems. Members must appreciate that animals can get sick and die quickly, and that that is not proof that abuse has occurred or that an offence has been committed. Having said that, I will take on board any lessons that can be learned from these cases, with regard both to enforcement and to the safeguards required in the legislation.

In addition, in recent months, my officials have been liaising with the PSNI and USPCA, and consideration is being given to how enforcement

agencies can work together to ensure the best possible protection for animals.

On Friday, my officials became aware of a welfare case involving a horse in Craigavon, and they immediately referred it to the local PSNI, because, with regard to non-farm animals, the police are responsible for enforcing the 1972 Act. I understand that local officers are aware of ongoing difficulties in the area, and they were expected to follow up on recent complaints earlier this afternoon. I have asked to be kept informed of developments.

As I said, it is an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to any animal, and an owner can be judged to have permitted cruelty if he fails to exercise reasonable care to prevent unnecessary suffering. It is also an offence to abandon an animal, and the PSNI has the power to seize an injured or sick horse, or, in the worst cases, to have it destroyed in order to prevent further suffering.

There are no specific requirements in legislation to license farms that are open to the public. However, all owners and keepers of farm animals are required to comply fully with the 1972 Act and with the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2000. Inspections to ensure compliance are carried out by the Veterinary Service, which also investigates welfare complaints made by members of the public and carries out targeted farm inspections where welfare issues have been identified.

I am considering setting up an early-warning and intervention system for farm-animal welfare cases, and I hope to discuss that with farmers' representatives, the USPCA and the PSNI. Such a system would be one way in which DARD could work closely with those agencies to identify and address real, and potential, cases in which the welfare of farm animals might be compromised. The objective would be to provide a framework within which problems could be identified before they become serious.

Under the 2000 regulations, inspectors can serve an improvement notice to a keeper stipulating the steps necessary to improve the welfare of his or her animals. That is an effective tool for ensuring that an animal's needs are met. Failure to comply with a notice can lead to a prosecution, and I am considering extending powers to serve improvement notices to keepers of companion animals.

In the past, I have stated that it is important that animal-welfare legislation be broadly compatible throughout the island of Ireland. Indeed, that is a key component of the draft all-island animal health and welfare strategy. It is important to note that, based on experiences in Britain, where some difficulties have arisen due to differences between English and Scottish legislation, several welfare representatives, particularly

British organisations, have expressed support for an all-island approach. As I said, puppy farming, the control of dangerous dogs and dogfighting are matters that must be tackled on an all-island basis.

I welcome the publication of outline proposals for new animal disease and welfare legislation by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in Dublin.

Work on our legislation is ongoing, and my review of animal-welfare legislation is nearing completion. I will examine all the evidence presented to me, and I will consider the scope for new legislation in the North in line with available resources.

I hope that my statement has dealt with Members' concerns sufficiently, but I will read the Hansard report to check whether there are any issues that I have not covered. I have attempted to describe the actions that I have taken on animal welfare, and I have informed the House of discussions that I have held with key animal-welfare stakeholders from here and Britain.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Not at the moment.

I welcome Member's comments this afternoon, and I will reflect upon those. However, Members must remember that we are working on the legislation in the North; we are certainly looking at the legislation in other areas, but we are considering our own legislation.

I have also been reviewing animal-welfare legislation across the board. Therefore I support the motion and the amendment. It is incumbent upon the Department to review the legislation as quickly as possible. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call P J Bradley to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. He has five minutes.

Mr P J Bradley: I will not take five minutes, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am disappointed that some Members found fault with the amendment; said that I said things that I did not; and spoke of actions that I did not seek or promote. If they read the Hansard report, they will find that they accused me of saying things that I did not say and of seeking actions that I did not seek.

Of the Members who spoke in the debate, I pay tribute to Jim Shannon for his sincere and genuine contribution. He was keen to address animal cruelty; he did not politicise it in any way, and, for that, I thank him.

My amendment makes common sense, and there is no reason for Members to vote against it. I am not asking that we replicate the rules or regulations in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. Rather, I am asking that we introduce legislation immediately that contains the best of all worlds. Let us take the best

from the legislation in England, which, as we heard, is inadequate; from Scotland, which has its faults; likewise, from Wales; and from the Republic of Ireland, although it is behind the times. We should take the best bits from the legislation in those countries and introduce it as our own. That will mean that our legislation will be as good as there is on these islands. I do not understand how anyone who is serious about the issue can vote against that. I urge the House to support the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call John McCallister to give the winding-up speech on the motion. He has ten minutes.

Mr McCallister: It has been interesting to listen to the debate. There is general agreement that something must be done on the issue quickly. Since the end of direct rule and during the early stages of the devolved Administration, we have continued to debate this important issue, but no progress has been made.

My colleague Mr Elliott moved the motion and highlighted that there is a lack of effective legislation. He said that it was necessary to tighten up the legislation. No progress has been made on animal-welfare legislation in Northern Ireland since 1972. DARD consulted on the matter more than two years ago, but since then, there have been no developments.

The House has no difficulty with an all-Ireland approach. However, the problem with P J Bradley's amendment is that if the Republic of Ireland were a shining beacon of hope on animal welfare, we might well look to them to provide leadership on the issue, or we might consider what parts of their legislation would be beneficial to us. However, the bottom line is that their legislation dates from 1911 — long before the creation of the Republic of Ireland. That means that they have never legislated on animal welfare, and that does not instil any confidence that they are taking the issue seriously.

All Members who contributed to the debate have said that we need to act on the issue quickly rather than wait, and that is why my colleagues and I object to the inclusion of the Republic of Ireland in the motion.

I accept P J Bradley's comments about the problems experienced in South Down. That is why it is imperative that animal-welfare legislation is reviewed, and we need not wait years for the Republic of Ireland to catch up.

7.15 pm

Dr William McCrea, the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, was also strongly in support of shortening the timetable for legislation, and he also pointed out that any loopholes in the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 1972 must be closed. The Committee has been trying to push the Minister to act. Despite having been

briefed by witnesses and officials, the Committee has not seen any action on various issues, including breeding dogs for fighting and the introduction of tougher sentences. Dr McCrea was critical of the notion that the Assembly should even consider waiting for the Republic of Ireland to legislate.

Mr Doherty mentioned legislation that was introduced in the Scottish Parliament in 2006 and in England and Wales in 2007. He also talked about liaising with the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the UK, but why should we delay the legislation? Mr Doherty and the Minister are MPs in Westminster and had they taken the seats to which they were elected, they could have pressed for the legislation there.

Mr Lunn recounted some personal stories, and he also passed on to me some harrowing photographs of the abuse of dogs. He shares other Members' frustration at the delay in taking action, and he sees no need or reason for the Assembly to wait for the Republic of Ireland to act. The Assembly has the legislative authority for Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Dowd: I apologise for not being present for the entire debate. I am concerned that simple xenophobia is among the reasons that some Members may be considering voting against the amendment. Is the Member aware that the Republic of Ireland has prepared legislation to the extent that it will be presented to the Minister next month? Surely the Assembly would be wise to study that legislation to ensure that harmonious action is taken on the welfare of animals on this island.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for his intervention. If he thinks that the Republic will be ready to present legislation next month — and I have no reason to doubt him — why is the Minister not following suit and presenting legislation to the Assembly next month? I have not reached the stage of talking about the Minister's contribution, but she gave no timetable for legislation. She said that she listened to Members' concerns, and we have no reason to doubt that she is serious about, and committed to, addressing the issue. However, the logic that follows from Mr O'Dowd's point is that the Assembly is also almost ready to legislate, but the Minister did not mention any timetable for that. If the Minister wishes to tell the House when the legislation will be ready, I am happy to give way to her.

To return to Mr Lunn's contribution, one of his key phrases used in reference to the Minister was not to:

“allow politics to overrule her compassion on the matter.”

Mr Newton took a different approach and spoke about cruelty to circus animals. He said that some councils have not permitted circuses in their areas. It would be useful to raise that issue at European level; I am happy to write to my colleague Jim Nicholson MEP about that.

Mr Shannon spoke about how outdated some puppy farming is and how he wants it to evolve — and we all know that a dog is a man's best friend.

My colleague Mr Savage highlighted the lack of legislation and said that the Assembly must act much more quickly to progress that. He also mentioned a particular issue in his constituency.

The Minister outlined the concerns and gave Members some of the background to the legislation, such as the Protection of Animals Act 1911 that was updated in England and Wales in 2007, and other reasonable measures that have been taken. Again, I return to the point that the Minister spoke about wanting to take her time to produce robust and effective legislation, which is fine because that is what we all want.

The purpose of the motion is to try to ensure that DARD and the Minister move on the issue. We want to see that happen. The Minister has been in post for nearly 20 months; consultation started in late 2006, and it is now early 2009. Therefore, it is not unreasonable for the Assembly to ask her about the legislation. If her colleague Mr O'Dowd is correct and the Republic is further ahead than us, she should want to catch up.

In response to Mr Newton, the Minister said that DARD has a limited role in circuses. However, having observed DARD for several years, I am not sure how true that is.

The general mood of the House is that it would like to see the legislation moving forward at a much faster pace.

The Ulster Unionist Party has genuine concerns about Mr P J Bradley's amendment to include the Republic of Ireland. We have the legislative competence to do it here; let us get on with it. The real evil is not partition, it is animal cruelty.

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

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of recent events, to review the welfare of animals legislation as a matter of urgency to ensure that animal-welfare standards are at least equivalent to those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Adjourned at 7.22 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 27 January 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to inform the House that a fault in the Lobby voting-system software on Tuesday 20 January led to the Aye Tellers' votes being recorded twice during the vote in the debate on the 'First Report on the Arrangements for the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters'. The fault did not affect the outcome of the vote, and the Official Report and the Minute of Proceedings now both reflect the correct result. I assure Members that the problem has been identified and procedures have been put in place to ensure that that will not happen again. The fault did not affect any of the other votes.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Building Regulations (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Financial Assistance Bill

Final Stage

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I beg to move That the Financial Assistance Bill [NIA 4/08] do now pass.

I am delighted that the Financial Assistance Bill has reached its Final Stage today. When I announced in the House on 15 December last year that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) intended to introduce a Bill to take new permissive powers to respond to any circumstances that the Executive agreed warranted rapid and effective action, I said that we hoped to have the legislation in place before the end of January.

We are now in the last week of January and, should Members pass the Bill today, we will have achieved that target.

During the debate at the Bill's Second Stage, I said that it was the most important piece of legislation to be brought before the Assembly since the return of devolved Government. Certain Members took me to task for making that statement and claimed that the deputy First Minister and I had plans for how the Bill would be used. However, I make no apologies for repeating that statement — the Bill is important, first and foremost because of what it aims to do, but also because it is a creation of the new Administration, which means that its provisions are unique to this jurisdiction. The Bill has already attracted positive interest from other jurisdictions.

Our experience since the restoration of devolved Government has shown that the Executive must be in a position to react quickly to unforeseen events or to target resources that address inadequacies in current arrangements for tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Bill provides us with the legislative basis to do that, and it will ensure that the Executive have the necessary

flexibility to address unforeseen circumstances and gaps in the arrangements for tackling poverty.

As politicians, we cannot always foretell what will happen tomorrow, next week, next month or next year. Therefore, it is vital that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as the heads of the Executive, take the necessary statutory powers to enable the Executive to respond to future circumstances or situations as required.

Before I go any further, I want to thank those Members who made constructive contributions to the debates on the Bill, particularly those who spoke in support of the Bill and the Executive amendments that were agreed at the Bill's Consideration Stage. I also thank the few Members who, despite opposing elements of the Bill, genuinely sought to probe, challenge and amend the Bill's provisions. That is part and parcel of the legislative process and is one of the main purposes of a legislative Assembly, it is right that we have a local Assembly that considers local issues to arrive at local solutions that are designed to improve local conditions for local people. I also place on record my appreciation, and that of the deputy First Minister, to the OFMDFM Committee for the clear interest that it demonstrated in the Bill and for supporting the accelerated passage.

However, there are other Members who deserve no gratitude for the role that they played. The Executive will not be waylaid by Members who put party politics above the interests of those in our community with the greatest need. Neither will we let the purpose of the Bill be distorted by those who, in the pursuit of petty point scoring, care nothing for facts and accuracy. There have been lofty pleas about the worth of democratic debate and the need to take into account the views of small parties. That might have had some value if those who hid behind the verbiage had accompanied their rhetoric with a willingness to cease making claims that they, and everyone in the House, knew were bereft of a sliver of accuracy.

Although the Financial Assistance Bill is very short, it has generated considerable heat in the Chamber. Over the course of the four Assembly debates on the Bill — accelerated passage, Second Stage, Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage — we have spent 14 hours discussing two clauses in the Bill. Despite the use of the accelerated passage procedure, it is fair to say that we have discussed and examined those two clauses thoroughly, if not exhaustively.

In addition, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister met on three separate occasions in recent weeks to consider the Bill. First, it met to consider our request for using the accelerated passage procedure; secondly, it met to seek further information from us on the Executive's proposed amendments to the ministerial code; and thirdly, it met

to consider the Executive's proposed amendments to the Bill. I trust that Members will accept that we have tried to keep the OFMDFM Committee fully briefed ahead of each of the Assembly debates.

Much of the discussion on the Bill has, I am afraid to say, centred on idle and inaccurate speculation by Members at the other end of the Chamber about the intentions of those bringing forward the legislation, as opposed to the real intentions of the Bill. Those Members were prepared to undermine their credibility by describing the Bill as a "Trojan Horse", a "politburo Bill", a "personal power grab" Bill, and even a "thoroughly un-British Bill". They referred to the Bill as "loathsome", "obnoxious", "dangerous", "undemocratic" and even "unparliamentary". For good measure, they also — somewhat bizarrely — sought to liken the sponsors of the Bill to a sixteenth-century monarch and a twentieth-century dictator. The proverbial man from Mars looking in at our proceedings might well ask what great evil is being foisted upon the community. He may also wonder about the wicked reason for the Bill's enactment and about the devilish intention that the Executive are seeking to inflict on the people of Northern Ireland. There might be no small amount of incredulity on the part of that proverbial man from Mars when he discovers that the purpose of the Bill is to give financial assistance to people who are in dire need as a result of an emergency or crisis. The confusion might rise even further when he discovers that the Bill has a secondary purpose, which is to tackle poverty and hardship.

During the Bill's accelerated passage through the Assembly, in response to concerns that were raised in Committee and in the earlier stages of our discussions, we proposed a number of amendments to improve the effectiveness of the Bill. At Consideration Stage, we amended clauses 1 and 2 to require that any regulations that are made under those clauses be made within three and six months respectively of a determination made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We also amended clause 2 in order to increase the degree of Assembly control on regulations that are made under that clause. Assembly approval is required, rather than the scheme being subject to a negative resolution. We also amended clause 3 to enable the relevant Department to put a time limit on the duration of a scheme in the regulations that establish it.

I trust that Members will recognise and appreciate that we have attempted to listen to genuine views that have substance and that were offered in order to improve the Bill. Where appropriate, we tabled amendments that were designed to build in additional safeguards to the way in which the legislation will operate.

Without wishing to go over old ground, much mischief was made by some Members on four key issues: first,

was the involvement of the Executive in the decision-making process arising from the Bill; secondly, was whether the Bill's introduction had been delayed; thirdly, was the claim that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were attempting a power grab; and the fourth related to a number of amendments that I put together that went to the heart of whether to duplicate existing legal provisions and whether to insert standard Assembly practice and procedures on the face of the Bill.

I will take those issues in turn. First, with regard to the involvement of the Executive in the decision-making process, the argument ran that because we did not have the word "Executive" on the face of the Bill, it somehow meant that the Executive were not to have a role in the process.

10.45 am

At a very early stage, it was made clear that we had one statute book, that the role of the Executive was already secured by statute and that there was not, in the view of legislative counsel, any need — nor was it desirable — to duplicate legislative enactments. I dealt with that point conclusively on several occasions during the Bill's Second Stage and Consideration Stage.

We all recognise now, though not all are prepared to admit, that the less frequent repetition of that point indicates that everyone is now aware of the nature of the process, which is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would make designations and determinations, which would be brought to the Executive for their agreement. In the case of clause 1 matters, a scheme would be brought forward that would also have to be approved by the Executive. Those matters would be subject to being annulled by negative resolution by the Assembly, if it so desired.

In the case of clause 2 matters, the determination and designation would be brought to the Executive for approval. The scheme would be brought to the Executive for approval and brought to the Assembly for approval under affirmative resolution. No other Minister or Department would have their ordinary day-to-day decisions taken in that manner. That is the most democratic aspect of our Assembly's life.

On top of that, we have the normal accountability measures through which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, or any Minister who is taking forward a scheme, can be questioned during Question Time. Debates can be secured by any party that wishes to do so, and any Member can raise an issue by way of an Adjournment debate. This legislation is subject to the normal panoply of accountability measures. Departments will inform their respective Statutory Committees, as is the normal practice, and those Committees can discuss those matters and bring Ministers to account if they so wish.

Members will know that the Executive have agreed to table amendments to the ministerial code that will require any proposal by the First Minister or the deputy First Minister to make a determination, designation or scheme under the Financial Assistance Bill to be brought to the Executive for consideration and approval. Once the Bill becomes law, we will bring the proposed amendment to the ministerial code to the Assembly for formal approval by cross-community support. I trust that Members will support that amendment to the code in due course.

I will now deal with the second issue, which was whether the introduction of the Bill was delayed. On 13 occasions during the debate on accelerated passage, on three further occasions during the Bill's Second Stage, and at least once or twice thereafter, comments were made to the effect that the legislation was being brought forward by accelerated passage because the Executive had not met for 154 days. The House knows my views on that delay, and the measures that I sought to take in order to have the Executive meet. Contrary to the suggestion that was made yesterday — that I was, somehow, having to defend the deputy First Minister — I can assure Members that that was not my purpose. My purpose is to defend the truth, and the truth of the matter is that no delay was caused by the Executive's not meeting.

The facts are simple. First, the public announcement of an intention to bring forward measures that would allow payments to be made was first made by the Minister for Social Development. The proposed amounts of money were suggested publicly, and there was no hint of any legislative requirement until 2 October 2008, which, as the leader of the SDLP pointed out, was some four months after the first public announcement that the scheme was being pursued.

Several meetings on the matter had taken place between Ministers, and the Executive were informed by the Minister for Social Development — even after the paper of 2 October 2008 — that, although the Department for Social Development (DSD) did not have the legislative authority to take the necessary steps, legislative counsel, the Departmental Solicitor's Office and DSD officials were trying to find out whether any other Department had such powers. For example, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has responsibilities for energy, and it was possible that cover could be found under article 60 or article 61 of the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003. The letter from DSD to legislative counsel in early December 2008 brought that process to an end.

The Executive had already been reactivated and had had two meetings by that time. A raft of communications from Departments supports those facts, as do official notes of meetings and agreed minutes of an Executive meeting. Let us put to rest the suggestion that, somehow,

a delay had been caused that necessitated accelerated passage.

Every Member of the House should recognise the need to make a provision to allow the payments to be made. Those payments could never have been made last year. They would have required funds to be put in place, which became available through the December monitoring round process — a process that the Executive accelerated. Normally, the results of the December monitoring round are not announced until this time of the year, but the December monitoring round was brought forward so that the funds would be available in order to give us the flexibility to make the payments. Even then, there will be administrative requirements to be met, and after the passage of the Bill, the Social Development Minister will require time to put those in place.

The third issue that Members referred to was a “power grab”. The answer to that is simple: we do not need any new legislation if we want to grab more power for OFMDFM. The enabling legislation for that lies in section 17 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and in a later Order, which allows us to vary the functions of Departments. We needed no further legislation if we wanted to grab power. The powers that are being sought under clause 2 relate to issues that are already the responsibility of OFMDFM. Those two facts put to death the suggestion of a power grab, the prospect of which was raised publicly for purely party-political purposes.

The fourth issue concerns an area with which I have more sympathy, and it generated proposals for several amendments. Members sought to specify, in the Bill, normal processes that would, in practice, have occurred anyway. I understand that Members — the male Members in the Assembly, at least — like to have a belt and braces approach. However, it is unnecessary to burden legislation with references to things that happen anyway. That is the case both with respect to duplication, such as putting the requirement for Executive decisions on the face of the Bill, and to some of the procedures suggested in the amendments at Further Consideration Stage. Neither the deputy First Minister nor I have any desire to dodge Committees or to go behind their backs with regard to issues that may emerge from the Bill.

This legislation is being put in place in order to have a better system of government: a Government that are better able to react to unforeseen circumstances. That indicates a desire by the Executive to be able to face any challenge. It is not an indication —

Mr Ford: I appreciate the First Minister giving away. I feared that he was about to move away from the point that I wish to raise.

I take entirely the point that he made about Ministers reporting on schemes to their departmental Committees. However, if I may put to the First Minister a point that

I put to the deputy First Minister yesterday about amendment No 13, which was defeated — the idea that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should provide a general report annually to the Assembly on the overall operation of such schemes. Perhaps the First Minister can give me a better answer than the deputy First Minister did yesterday as to why that amendment was rejected.

The First Minister: I will give the Member three answers. My first is that it may well be that for any purpose after its first purpose there will be no further need for the Bill. Do we put in legislation a requirement for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to give annual reports if the Bill is not used during the course of a year? Do we include in the Bill a requirement to come before the Assembly when the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister already performs a particular role by scrutinising what the First Minister and the deputy First Minister do? Should we do that when existing procedures allow any party to table a motion that would have to be answered by the deputy First Minister or myself on these matters?

If Members wish to have a review of those issues from time to time, they do not have to wait for a year. If Members consider a matter to be serious, they can table a motion, and existing procedures ensure that such a motion would not be blocked from being debated in the Assembly. The deputy First Minister and I would be happy to answer that debate. The Member has my assurance on that matter, as long as he does not do it at an inappropriate time, and I am sure that the Business Committee can ensure that that does not happen.

Therefore, we have no intention of dodging scrutiny of the operation of the Bill. I can think of no Bill that will have its implementation more scrutinised. It will be scrutinised by the Executive and by the Assembly when the schemes are being set up, and by any Committee whose Department is responsible for taking a scheme forward. The normal mechanisms exist at any time for Members to seek clarification or further information through questions, Adjournment debates or, indeed, by a party tabling a full debate.

As I said, I do not believe that there is a need, on the face of a Bill, to duplicate legislation that is already in place, nor to insert processes and procedures that are already catered for by the normal practices of the Assembly.

As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am delighted that the Bill has reached its Final Stage today. However, getting the Bill to this point and, subject to the will of the House, onto the statue book, is not the end of the matter. In many ways, we are at only the beginning of the beginning for this piece of enabling legislation. It might seem strange for me to take the opportunity at the Final Stage of a Bill to say

that I hope that, after its initial use, the Bill never has to be used. If it never has to be used, we will not have had to face an emergency or crisis. If it has never had to be used, that will mean that all the procedures in Departments have operated satisfactorily.

The truth is — and all of us know it — that it will probably not be too long before some crisis will come upon us, and it will probably not be too long before we need to ensure that we have a more joined-up approach to tackling poverty and hardship. In the real world, we have to face those eventualities. However, the difference now is that the Executive will have the ability to respond swiftly and decisively.

I, therefore, commend the Bill to the House.

11.00 am

Mr Shannon: I welcome the Bill and commend it to Members. There has been much debate on the matter, and somewhere in the region of 30 amendments have been tabled. Clearly, everyone has had the opportunity to express their views.

Decisions have been taken, and although I welcome a healthy debate — that is what the Chamber is about — I believe that some of the amendments were unhelpful. Nonetheless, Members have the right to bring them forward. I remind Members of the votes that have taken place, which were very clear, and the will of the Assembly is clear also. Votes of 2:1 and 3:1 on some of the amendments have stated clearly the opinion of the Assembly and Members.

The focus of the Financial Assistance Bill is to help those in need due to emergency situations. I believe that the legislation will be endorsed soon. We will soon have an opportunity to help those in dire need and to respond to those who need help. As the First Minister said, the legislation may never be needed, but should an emergency arise, we will be in a position to respond. I urge Members to support the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Executive and the legislation that is before the Assembly.

We will be more accountable to the people who elected us and to the electorate in general. The Bill is genuine, and we should move forward with it. I believe that it is good legislation; that it can meet the needs of the people of this Province; and that it is important to have it in place. The public can, and will, see the difference in an Assembly that is accountable to them and whose Members are working together to deliver legislation that is important to each and every person.

I urge Members to support the legislation and, in the case of some, to bury the hatchet and move forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don Bhille.

I support the Final Stage of the Financial Assistance Bill. It is an important mechanism, which further empowers the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide necessary leadership. The Bill is about leadership. Effectively, we have 11 Government Departments that are being led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Let them lead — and challenge them to lead.

I am pleased that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister actively supported the request for accelerated passage. During Further Consideration Stage yesterday, my colleague Martina Anderson detailed our party's objections to all 13 amendments, particularly amendment No 4 to amendment No 11. I concur with the Member for Foyle when she stated that the intention of the Bill is to identify the capacity gaps where this kind of strategic leadership or intervention is required. Why would one disable the powers of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and their ability to get on with things and make a real difference to the quality of people's lives, especially as they are able to do so?

I call on those who oppose the Bill to turn over a new page and to move forward and engage in constructive opposition. In far too many debates, it appears to me that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party have been engaged in negative opposition for negative opposition's sake. It seems to be negativity for negativity's sake, and it seems to me that they would rather score a political point over Sinn Féin and the DUP than contribute constructively here. Every day, one hears: "Sinn Féin and the DUP" — they would almost blame us for the bad weather.

The bottom line is that there is a requirement for everybody to engage in working together constructively and to abandon the pursuit of negativity for negativity's sake. I do not have much more to say, apart from restating my call for the SDLP, the UUP and the Alliance Party to stop engaging in negativity for negativity's sake. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: My speech will consist of a few interesting words if I am restricted to saying only nice things about the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mrs D Kelly: What about us?

Mr B McCrea: You are quite right, Mrs Kelly.

We have been admonished, vilified, and even blamed for the weather; we have been exhorted to do better, and to try, somehow, to put the past behind us. The simple fact is that when one disagrees with something — even as a minority of one — the truth is still the truth.

The First Minister said that the Bill has been, and will be, scrutinised; however, I assure Members that the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. How often

will the Bill be invoked? Will it be used appropriately? Will it produce better government? Will it produce action in areas where there is currently no action? Will it tackle the issues of poverty and social deprivation? The proponents of the Bill claim that it will do all those things. We look forward to such action, now that Sinn Féin and the DUP have got their Bill.

The First Minister seems to have two different points of view. On the one hand, he mentioned that Members seemed to criticise the Bill less frequently and that, therefore, perhaps they understood it better. On the other hand, I clearly remember him admonishing Members for repeating the same argument over and over again.

We have not been convinced that all is right with the Bill, despite the fact that — as Mr Shannon said — some of the proposed amendments were defeated 2:1 and 3:1. We proposed amendments precisely because we were unconvinced. When Members state that they will bring something to the Executive — where the two parties that support the Bill have a clear majority — or before the House — where, patently, those two parties have the votes to put anything through — that belies the claim that everything is all right with the Bill.

Mr McLaughlin: Yesterday's voting pattern was informative. The three parties that brought forward a raft of proposed amendments had difficulty in mustering the votes. If this is such an important issue, why could they muster only around 50% of their votes?

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure what the Member's point is. Given that we all know the political reality —

Mr McLaughlin: Only 23 Members voted.

Mr B McCrea: I have given the Member a chance to intervene.

Given that we all know the political reality — no combination of votes from the UUP, the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the PUP, or anybody else, can defeat the unholy alliance between the DUP and Sinn Féin — we wanted to find a way forward.

There has been some suggestion that we should bury the hatchet and move forward. I put it to the First Minister and deputy First Minister that that will depend upon the style of government that they want to engage in. Members proposed what they considered to be proper, well-considered amendments. Whether the other parties disagreed with them is a matter of opinion, although some claim it is a fact — that is fair enough. However, if amendments are brought forward in the proper manner and all points of view are debated, I fail to see the problem.

The First Minister said that he has no doubt that, in the not too distant future, we will come across another unforeseen crisis that we will have to deal with. I know of no bigger crisis facing the whole world than the

current economic crisis, and addressing it will require some form of unity.

Yet, what do we get? We get constant bickering and admonishment from people who cannot do better. That does not build unity. The two-party voluntary coalition is determined to have its own way, or no way. Fair enough; it has the votes at present, so it can do that. However, if it wants consensus, it is going the wrong way about it.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always supported the creation of a statutory mechanism to enable the Executive to provide financial support in exceptional circumstances. It is of paramount importance that any Government can pinpoint objective need and deliver relief effectively and efficiently to people who face extreme situations. In that regard, my party supported the accelerated passage of the Financial Assistance Bill, because we recognised that it will be used in the immediate future to give relief to pensioners who are suffering from fuel poverty. That action is to be welcomed. We look forward to the scheme's introduction by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister at the earliest opportunity.

The Ulster Unionist Party also supported clause 1 of the Bill for the same reasons. However, the clause was seriously flawed because it placed too much power in the hands of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. If they are serious about collective responsibility, they must promote it. Clause 1 amounts to a power grab. The First Minister asked how OFMDFM can grab a power that it has already. In that case, if OFMDFM already has that power, why was there a need for this protracted wrangle? Furthermore, why did Martina Anderson suggest that there was a sea change about the way forward?

Mr Ford: Where is she?

Mr B McCrea: That is a good question.

My party made genuine attempts to amend the Bill in order to make it more in tune with the power-sharing arrangements that are in place, which should include every party. We sought to ensure that decisions would be taken by the Executive and that individual Departments would not be overruled by OFMDFM, because they must have control of their own budgets. Those are perfectly valid reasons to question whether the Bill achieves what the Assembly wants.

We opposed clause 2 because it deviates wildly from the Bill's original objectives. It gives the First Minister and deputy First Minister cross-cutting powers to dictate policy on poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. Of course, people can say that that was in the Belfast Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement, or whatever. However, the point is that the Assembly has collective responsibility to work together on those issues. The problems of social deprivation

and poverty will be with us for the foreseeable future. Departments that have policies to tackle such issues must carry them out under the Programme for Government.

OFMDFM has set a dangerous precedent by pushing legislation through the Assembly by accelerated passage and by refusing even to countenance amendments that have been tabled by other parties. One of the most disturbing features of the debate on the Bill — and Members will know that I am not a culprit — was that when Members wanted to express their points of view through interventions when time was not limited, they were frequently met with, “Talk to the hand”, and their points of view were not heard.

That is not about consensus Government, a shared future or a way forward. That says, “We are bigger than you, so shut up and sit down”. Given the challenges that face the country and the entire world, that is not the way forward. Members who come out with trite words, who say that the Assembly should do better and that parties must bury the hatchet, are those who have votes and leadership and must, therefore, set the style. They have an onerous responsibility because of the challenges that face each and every person in Northern Ireland. It is not our responsibility; it is theirs, because they have taken power. They had better deliver.

I will not labour the point that, previously, the Assembly was warned on other serious issues, such as the proper definition of a victim, and we ran into huge problems on that issue. The point is that if the accumulative mandate of parties in the Assembly is not taken on board —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not a discussion about victims. I ask the Member to stay close to the Bill.

11.15 am

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Deputy Speaker. I made the point that I was only addressing the modalities of why it is important that we take account of the views of all people in the community in these debates.

We have our future to look forward to, and many people have high hopes for the Assembly and that Members will work together. From what I have seen and heard, I have grave doubts about whether this generation of politicians has much to offer the people of Northern Ireland. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating and, one year from now, I will be interested to see whether the Bill has made any real difference to the people of Northern Ireland.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Attwood: At the outset, I thank the Assembly Bill Office for the help that it has given to the SDLP in relation to the legislation; I am sure that that sentiment is shared by many other parties. The use of the accelerated-passage procedure led to the 14 hours of debate, which the First Minister referred to, and many

amendments being tabled. That placed pressures on all parties, but it also placed pressure on Assembly staff, not least the Bill Office, and it measured up to the task.

Although there has been a lot of hot air and heavy words spoken, the Chamber, in its own way, has measured up over the course of this legislation. This legislation has been one of the more defining experiences of the Assembly. It demonstrated that the balance of power in OFMDFM is very firmly in Peter Robinson’s hands. It also reconfigured the balance of power between the Floor of the Assembly and OFMDFM.

Due to the content of the debate, the issues engaged, and the conviction of people from all parties — and I do not demean people in the way that the First Minister demeaned people on these Benches I recognise that there are people in his party who are genuine and who believe what they are saying — the balance of power was shifted back to the Floor of the Chamber. The Chamber began to punch its weight and lay down markers in respect of the authority of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and the rest of the institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement. It began to define a culture of how politics should work in the North of Ireland, which is not manifest in many aspects of this piece of legislation.

The SDLP amendments were intended to probe, improve and proof the legislation and, without exception, all were rejected. Similarly, the amendments tabled by other parties, which, in my view, were also probing, improving and proofing the legislation were also, without exception, rejected.

It is not for me to offer advice to the First Minister, but the experience of the SDLP and many others is that he and his colleagues are at their best when they are being forensic and technical. Anyone engaging with the DUP in this type of situation needs to be fit for purpose and as forensic, technical and political as they are. What surprised me about the nature of the debate was that over the past number of weeks, and again this morning, the First Minister felt that he could not live merely with the protections of being political, technical and forensic, he also had to be insulting, hostile and aggressive to other Members of the House.

Let us look at some of the language that was used this morning. Peter Robinson said that there are people in the Chamber who

“care nothing about facts and accuracy”.

This morning, the First Minister defended the legislation and said that other Members should:

“cease making claims ... bereft of a sliver of accuracy.”

Furthermore, he accused Members of “idle and inaccurate speculation” about his intentions that undermined their own credibility.

That is some of the milder language that the First Minister has used this morning and during the passage of the legislation. It surprises me that someone who has such a grip on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — to the point that he is wiping other people's eyes — feels the need to deploy such language, tone and content to Members. It suggests that the First Minister has felt the pressure, because he knows that during the course of the debate, he and the deputy First Minister have dropped the ball in several regards and have said things that have let slip the chilling truths behind this legislation.

Four points need to be reiterated and emphasised. What does it say about the parties in the Chamber and the nature of democratic debate and discussion that all other parties' amendments to the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Chamber — a fact that the First Minister felt it necessary to repeat, without apology, this morning — can be dismissed completely?

The First Minister's language towards the Alliance Party was more protective than that used about the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP. However, even the Alliance Party, which tabled reasonable and appropriate amendments, cannot say that it has left its fingerprints on the Bill that Mr Robinson described as the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Assembly. I do not understand how he can draw that conclusion when no recognition has been given to other parties' reasonable amendments. It provides a chilling insight into how other people in the Chamber view the nature of democratic debate.

What does it say about the political culture of the Assembly when no amendments are accepted and Sinn Féin finds it necessary — as it did last night — to boast? The Sinn Féin Whip told the House to "get used to it." What does it say to the people of Northern Ireland about the culture of the Assembly, when one party says that other parties should "get used to" not prevailing, not having their views acknowledged and not having their amendments to the "most important piece of legislation" to come before the Assembly accepted?

My colleague Basil McCrea characterised it well when he said that they told us that they are bigger than us and that we should shut up and sit down. That is a chilling insight into the mindset of at least one party and offers a chilling commentary to the people of Northern Ireland.

The First Minister: Before the Member gets too chilled, will he take something else into account? First, I made it clear at Consideration Stage that I accepted the spirit of most of the 30 or so amendments, with the exception of one or two. Furthermore, I accepted the spirit of the amendments that were tabled at Further Consideration Stage. The question was not whether the

points behind the amendments were valid. The problem is not the content of amendments but the party political trivia that is being pushed elsewhere. The amendments were unnecessary because their intentions are already covered by the statute book or by existing practices and procedures. We do not need to legislate for normal procedural matters.

Mr Attwood: I thank the First Minister for his intervention. I note that he was silent about the very point that I was making about there appearing to be those in the Chamber whose message to other parties — and to the community in the North — is that we should get used to their power and to their way of doing things.

Replying specifically to the two points that the First Minister made, you say that now —

The First Minister: I said it during Consideration Stage.

Mr Attwood: I know that you did, and you say it now, but in your closing speech, when you had every opportunity to say more in order to try to bridge the divide that exists in the Chamber over the Bill, you chose to go in a different direction. I repeated earlier some of the language that the First Minister used in his opening remarks; indeed, I repeated some of his milder language. Not once did I hear in his words either any spirit of healing or reconciliation or any spirit that reflected anything other than a continued aggression and hostility to those in this part of the House who tabled those amendments. I must say to you, First Minister, that those words this morning come a bit late. When you had the opportunity for half an hour —

The First Minister: You were not listening.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to please refer all his remarks through the Deputy Speaker, and I ask the First Minister to refrain from having this little conversation and to include everybody in the debate.

Mr Attwood: I apologise for not directing my comments through the Deputy Speaker.

In any case, the First Minister may not have been in the Chamber last night during the concluding part of the debate on the third group of amendments. I took up the point that Mrs Naomi Long of the Alliance Party made when I said that I found it curious that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were rejecting an amendment that would require them to report to the Assembly once a year on any actions that may arise out of the legislation. I made the point — and I make it again — that in my view that demonstrates that the First Minister and deputy First Minister view themselves as somehow more precious than every other senior official in public bodies in this part of the world, across the island, in Britain, and elsewhere, who, as a matter of routine and course, appear before a Minister or a

Parliament at least once a year, in one way or another, to give an account of what they have or have not done.

I say to the First Minister and deputy First Minister —

The First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second.

I say to them that in the spirit that the First Minister referred to earlier, it seems to me that it would have been useful for two reasons if the First Minister and deputy First Minister had agreed to amendment No 13. The first reason is that a practice that is accepted in many other places would have been established.

I suspect that the First Minister is about to say that there are many other ways in which the First Minister and deputy First Minister can be held to account, but when it comes to, for example —

The First Minister: You are answering a question that I did not ask.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I referred already to this conversation that is going on between the First Minister and you, Mr Attwood. I ask you to please take part in the debate, to refer all your remarks through the Chair, and to include everyone in the House.

Mr Attwood: The point is that, curiously, in his reply to yesterday's debate on the third group of amendments, despite the fact that the debate went on for around an hour, the deputy First Minister took no opportunity to address any of the points that were raised, except for one. That seems to me to be the minimum response that the First Minister and deputy First Minister could have given in order to narrow the gap that exists between their thinking and that of various parties — that gap is clearly a chasm.

I will now give way to the First Minister.

The First Minister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He seems to be making bricks without straw.

Can the Member tell us what is the process, from which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is exempt, that brings other Ministers to the Assembly for annual reviews?

11.30 am

Mr Attwood: This is a very specialist piece of legislation. It provides you with enormous powers and it requires that you undertake very substantial responsibilities in the event of certain circumstances arising.

The First Minister: That was not the question.

Mr Attwood: Pardon?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should refer to the First Minister in the third person, rather than as “you”, as he has been doing. He should also make all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: Consider an organisation such as the PSNI. Arising from the Patten Report, it has a whole range of accountability mechanisms for how it conducts its affairs in the North. I do not have to elaborate on what those are, because they are well known. Those accountability mechanisms include a process of occasional formal reporting. That is done at least annually, when the Chief Constable of the PSNI circulates to every house in the North what is, essentially, his annual report on how the PSNI conducts its affairs.

If an organisation such as the PSNI — not to mention many other public bodies in the North — has that level of accountability, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should have the same. In order to create certainty and to avoid doubt, in order to build a bridge with other Members, and in order to demonstrate — on that matter at least — that the First Minister is not guilty as charged by some of the parties in the House, that would have been a minimum step for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take. In doing so, they could have demonstrated their better intentions rather than realise the worst fears that have been outlined in the Chamber. However, even that amendment, like all the others, was rejected.

The debates on the legislation demonstrate that a tension lingers around politics in the North. The First Minister said that the Bill was not a grab for power, but he also said that ministerial colleagues from the DUP and Sinn Féin were under the “control” of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That tension, that slip of the tongue, that revealing comment — however it is described — remains a central concern about the Bill. Even reasonable amendments from various other parties were all rejected, in order to demonstrate where control continues to reside.

As we know, Sinn Féin said that the legislation represents a sea change. However, that should be symbolically — if not materially — demonstrated by creating protections and guarantees around the legislation that gave rise to that claim. Many of the amendments over the past week from the parties to my left outlined those desired protections and guarantees.

Finally, it is only appropriate that I have the opportunity to reply to comments that the First Minister made on another matter during this Final Stage debate; namely, that the Minister for Social Development allegedly advised the Executive that her fuel-payment proposals were covered by legislation. That issue forms part of the backdrop to the Bill and part of the politics that informs it. It is clear that clause 2 contains an attempt to take the ground of the Minister for Social Development.

The Social Development Minister has demonstrated that she is the champion of good causes for people in

hard places, including those suffering from fuel poverty, social housing problems and the loss of construction jobs. She is the champion of good cause for people in bad places, and I believe that the intention behind the legislation is, in part, to put her in her place, given that she is the one who has been asserting her independence in the Executive while remaining part of the collective responsibility.

The Minister has demonstrated that in asserting that independence, she has not conceded what is the right approach for her on issues and as a Minister. That is part of the backdrop to the legislation.

For some time, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have been going to some lengths to try to portray the Minister for Social Development in a way that would not be to her choosing and, in my view, would not be confirmed by some of the evidence. Earlier, the First Minister outlined, at some length, how he saw the role of the Minister for Social Development when it came to the issue of legislative cover for a special fuel payments provision. It is the story of a letter, a statement and draft legislation, as evidence to be measured against what the First Minister outlined this morning and heretofore in the Chamber.

I want to put some evidence on the record. First is a letter from Margaret Ritchie to the Executive. In that letter, on 2 October 2008, when the Executive were not meeting, the Minister for Social Development circulated to her Executive colleagues her proposed fuel-poverty package. Bearing in mind that it is now the end of January, the Minister was highlighting the need for legislation for fuel payments as early as the beginning of October. That letter, which was sent to all Ministers, stated:

“The Department for Social Development does not have legislative authority to make such payments, and therefore, Executive approval will be sought to take forward the necessary legislation in the Assembly through use of the accelerated passage procedure.”

Yet, on Tuesday 20 January 2009, the First Minister informed the House:

“The Minister from her party told Executive colleagues that she already had appropriate power and that legislation was not required. Therefore, the legislative draftsmen were not alerted because the Minister argued that there was no need for additional legislation because she had the power to make fuel-poverty payments.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p335, col 1]*.

The second piece of evidence is a statement by Margaret Ritchie to this Chamber on 6 October 2008, the Monday after she sent her letter to her Executive colleagues. As part of her answer to a question for oral answer from Naomi Long — and again stating the need for Executive clearance for the package and that that might include the need for legislation — the Minister for Social Development said:

“I need clearance for the package, because although the benefits of the proposals may not reach people until January 2009, the work —” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p315, col 2]*.

That proves how far-seeing she was. She continued:

“including possible legislation — needs to start immediately. Obviously, the package includes direct help for those most vulnerable to fuel poverty, but it also includes a series of other actions aimed at bringing more resources to bear on the problem. However, the issue merits a full response from the Executive as a whole” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 33, p315, col 2]*.

My third piece of evidence is that during the course of all that, as the First Minister knows, the Minister for Social Development was attempting to prepare and draft legislation in order to provide her with the legislative cover that she said — in those two statements to the House and in her letter to the First Minister and his Executive Colleagues — would enable her to go about her business.

There are three pieces — *[Interruption.]*

The First Minister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have given the Member some latitude on this issue, because the First Minister referred to it in his presentation. However, now is the time for the Member to return to the contents of the Bill, as printed on the Order Paper.

Mr Attwood: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is the evidence, as I see it —

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: That evidence confirms the situation that was developing in the period up to Christmas, and beyond. In my view, the consequences of the exchange — and I will finish my point here, Mr Deputy Speaker — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You should be talking about the contents of the Bill, Mr Attwood. There will be no further reference to what has gone before.

Mr Attwood: The point has been made accurately and conclusively.

Mrs Foster: It has been made partially.

Mr Attwood: I could invoke other evidence on the Floor of the House to confirm the point.

As I said earlier, there has been a clash of democratic culture in the North around this issue. Nobody is denying that there should be special legislation for fuel payments or that we need to look at legislation and, if necessary, draft it appropriately to respond to particular situations. However, the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill demonstrates that there is a clash of culture. There is a clash of culture between those who are prepared to have reasoned debate and to incorporate amendments into legislation, and those who are not; and between those who want to control us and tell us to get used to them being in charge, and those who want

to live up to the standards of democracy, accountability, oversight, co-operation and partnership that were so long denied to many of the community in the North of Ireland, and who want to move forward on a proper basis.

Mr Ford: I will take up Mr Attwood's latter comments, and — you will be pleased to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker — not his earlier comments.

It seems that we are discussing the willingness of parties in this place to implement normal democratic procedures of debate. I want to place on record the Alliance Party's position on the Bill as it has progressed through its Stages and as it stands, because representations on my party's position on the Bill from certain parts of Executive party Back Benches — DUP and Sinn Féin Members — could be best described in parliamentary language as terminological inexactitudes.

I also noted with some interest that there seems to be an almost mathematically perfect correlation between the proportion of a speech that a Member reads and his or her unwillingness to accept interventions or willingness to misrepresent other parties. I acknowledge, in his presence, that Jim Shannon takes interventions. He does not answer them or address the point that is made, but he is willing to engage in open debate, unlike Members who stand with their heads down and their speeches pre-typed; who make allegations about other parties before those parties have even contributed; and who are unwilling to take interventions in which they will be corrected. That behaviour will have to be looked at by the Committee on Procedures, or as Stephen Farry said a couple of days ago, we might as well resort to a position where researchers email the speeches to the Office of the Official Report. That would save a lot of time and effort in the House.

The position of the Alliance Party is simple: we accepted accelerated passage because there was urgency in respect of the matters provided for in clause 1 of the Bill. It is not a state secret that the Alliance Party is not an enthusiast of accelerated passage. We have supported it for parity Bills for social security and for Budget Bills, but, otherwise, we have taken the view that the need for accelerated passage must be scrutinised carefully.

When one considers the Bills that have progressed through the House with accelerated passage, one will see the evidence as to why a Committee Stage is required on a range of matters. It is hoped that those Ministers who continue to promise that they will not use accelerated passage will deliver on those promises.

My party supported clause 1, because there is the need for urgent business to be dealt with in exceptional circumstances by the procedures that are provided for in that clause.

The Alliance Party also sought to make amendments that we considered would improve the working of clause 1, but they were rejected.

11.45 am

We opposed clause 2 standing part of the Bill, not because we oppose the principle or because we believe it represents a power grab — as other Members pointed out, OFMDFM already has those powers — but because we consider the powers to be potentially so wide-ranging that proper scrutiny is required.

However many hours the two Stages in the House last, they do not amount to the same level of scrutiny that would be carried out during a proper Committee Stage. That Stage involves a proper examination of the issues with witnesses, the taking of written evidence, the opportunity to question, and the opportunity for negotiation between Departments and the Committee. That is why something as exciting as the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 was, eventually, a good Act; it was discussed at inordinate length at umpteen meetings to ensure that the work was done properly.

However, on some Bills that are more important to the overall operation of Northern Ireland, we are not getting any discussion. Legislation is simply rammed through with a limited debate and without a meeting of minds, nor any attempt from the other end of the Chamber to achieve one. That is why I cannot accept this morning's statement from the First Minister that the two Stages debated in the House represented proper scrutiny; they simply did not.

Although the Alliance Party supports the First Minister's general contention that there is a need for joined-up government — indeed, some of us have been accused of banging on about it to the exclusion of almost everything else — there is no doubt that the imposition of the will of the First Minister and deputy First Minister through clause 2 is not joined-up government in the sense that it would be understood elsewhere.

I took some notice of the comments at the beginning of the First Minister's statement. He thanked Members who had contributed to the debate, particularly those who had supported his position. As he also thanked those whose contributions had been "constructive", he seemed to be looking at this corner of the Chamber. I am not sure whether he was seeking to embarrass me. Yesterday, Mrs Kelly suggested that the Alliance Party was being softened up for some other reason by kind words from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That was a tad naive. Anyone who thinks that the Alliance Party's price for playing a constructive role is having people be nice to it has much to learn.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: I am sorry, but I will not give way to Mr McCrea on this occasion, because he will probably make the same pointless intervention that he made during Dr Farry's contribution last week.

Dr Farry: Go on; give him a chance.

Mr Ford: Oh, all right then.

Mr B McCrea: My point is not the one that the Member thought that I was going to make; I am sure that that issue will come up another time. I simply want the Member to appreciate how rarely the First Minister utters soft words. Perhaps the Member is being unduly dismissive. It is not very many people who get kind words. Perhaps the Member should appreciate them a bit more.

Mrs Foster: That is not true.

Mr Ford: I will have to wait to see what the future brings; I am sure that I can accept the assurances of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that Mr McCrea's statement is incorrect. However, I am not sure whether that applies to private Executive or DUP party meetings.

I may be inclined to accept the compliment contained in the nice things that the First Minister said this morning and the nice things that the deputy First Minister has said about the constructive nature of engagement. I recognise and welcome that, as recently as last week, the First Minister used the term "official opposition" in reference to the Alliance Party. However, if the First Minister and deputy First Minister were to go beyond saying that amendments are sensible by accepting a few of them, or by engaging in discussion with those who make constructive suggestions, that would be a much greater compliment. *[Interruption.]*

Indeed, as I hear a Member behind me say, and as Mr Attwood said earlier, the acceptance of even one amendment would show a willingness to accept that the Chamber is a place for debates and ideas, and that the possession of insight and perfect wisdom is not entirely reserved to those who sit at your end of the Chamber, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Sometimes, the small, or even obscure, points that can be heard from all parts of the Chamber may contribute to the greater overall good. If the First Minister and deputy First Minister wish to impress me, my party and, possibly, Members who sit on either side of me, they should take on board the simple notion that an occasional engagement, rather than regarding OFMDFM as the all-seeing, all-wise Department that can solve everything, might possibly help.

One lesson that Members have learnt during the various debates on the Bill relates to interventions. We have, in part, improved the standard of debate and embraced the concept of taking interventions.

I noted the willingness of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to take interventions, sadly, they were not prepared to take any notice of those interventions. However, at least there is a little movement forward, and we should accept that.

Even today, regarding the merits of amendment No 13, which was proposed yesterday, the First Minister said that the first reason against it was that it might mean that they would have to produce a report when they had not done anything. Given that amendment No 13 simply called for a report:

"on the operation of any schemes made under this Act.",

it is clear that if no schemes were made under the Act, there would be no report. The Alliance Party was not imposing anything at all. Nevertheless, that was the first argument made against the point that we were making.

It seems that while some people —

The First Minister: I gave three reasons; were the other two all right?

Mr Ford: Give me time; I was merely pointing out that the first argument that the First Minister can think of showed that he did not have yesterday's amendments in front of him and that he was not really with it.

The suggestion that an issue such as a formal report being tabled before the Assembly could be met by an offer to an opposition party to table a debate during private Member's time, as opposed to a regular standing proposal for something, does not meet our concerns. Therefore, although a little listening has been done, there has been no willingness to look at the matter.

Although DUP and Sinn Féin Members on the Front Benches — and, indeed, their more intelligent Back-Benchers — have learned that open debate is a good thing, there is an unwillingness to listen; there is merely an opportunity to take an intervention and to ignore it, and set the steamroller on its way.

Those issues apply to both those parties, which regard themselves as taking the lead. They will continue to win the votes because they have the numbers to do so. They may lose the arguments some of the time but they will continue to win the votes all of the time, and to use Ms Ní Chuilín's eloquent phrase — we will "get used to it".

If Ministers wish to see improvements to legislation, and if they wish to see things done properly, it would be nice if they would consider whether matters such as clause 2 really need to be included under accelerated passage and whether there would be opportunities to improve legislation by listening to those of us — indeed, all of us at this end of the Chamber — who have sought to be constructive.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This stage of the debate is very important.

Although there has been a lot of banter about the reasons for the Bill, it is important that we recognise the need for the legislation and for accelerated passage. The documentation required has been responded to by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in a way that tries to move forward the passage of the Bill.

Several Members mentioned the compassion that they wanted to see, but we also need to look at the real reasons for the amendments — were they realistic and necessary, or were Members simply trying to put their fingerprints on the Bill? If the amendments were realistic and required, I am certain that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the legal advisers, would have recommended that they be accepted. However, the fact that the amendments were not required meant that they could not be accepted, and the logical reason for refusing the amendments was ignored by those who proposed them.

Mr Basil McCrea said that the Assembly has a collective responsibility, and that all parties must be involved. That works both ways. If there is a reason why amendments should be accepted, it must also be understood that they will not necessarily be accepted every time they are proposed.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he understand that it is difficult for people to agree that his argument is substantiated when it is frequently the case that proposed amendments are praised, but none is ever accepted?

Mr Molloy: I can understand that —

Mr B McCrea: I was going to let the Member finish his point before I intervened, but Mr Ford jumped in ahead of me. I listened most intently to what the Member said. However, the First Minister said that he understood the intentions or sense behind all the amendments — perhaps bar one — and that he had some considerable sympathy with them. Surely it would have been better to have found some consensus or form of words that the House could unite behind. If that had been done, and some cognisance had been taken of the good points that had been made, I can assure the Member that the time that it took for the Bill to pass through the Assembly would have been considerably reduced.

We want to work together, but we have to know that some cognisance has been taken of the significant points that we made. As Mr Ford said, there is no point in being given a pat on the back and being told that a point is good, but, by the way, it is going to be ignored. We must have some form of genuine interaction if we are to make progress.

Mr Molloy: To respond to Mr Ford's point, amendments may be accepted at times, and people may give way and discuss the issues, but that does not necessarily mean that an amendment is right.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member very much for giving way. The Member said that some of us perhaps did not listen properly to the logic that was being used to reject some of the amendments. Among yesterday's amendments was one to make provision for a report to be made to the relevant Committee after a scheme was in operation for a year. The argument that the deputy First Minister used against that amendment was that he would have more sympathy with the idea of a report being delivered to the Assembly as a whole, rather than to the Committee. Yet, when a later amendment made provision for a report to be provided to the Assembly, the deputy First Minister rejected it, as did those on his Benches. Where is the logic in that?

Mr Molloy: First, I thank Members for the interventions. It is useful to hear them; everybody has different ideas. When agreement to accelerated passage was being sought in the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, two parties did not agree to it — they did not object to it, but they did not go along with it and state that it was required. The Bill's passage began against a backdrop of paranoid thinking from the opposition that the Bill represented a seizure of power, but let me ask this question: a seizure of power for what purpose? Where is the power?

The Assembly must meet again to discuss all the issues, and the Executive must agree on them. Mrs Kelly took great exception to my comment that a majority would decide. However, all the Committees and the Executive are made up of a proportion of members from different parties, and they will all vote, and if there is a majority, well, that is the way it is. Unless, we are saying that within every Committee —

Mr O'Loan: Bring back Stormont.

Mr Molloy: A majority now, Mr O'Loan, is different to the situation in Government here some time ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member knows well, and perhaps better than anyone else in the Chamber, that he must refer all his remarks through the Speaker. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Molloy: I stand corrected, a LeasCheann Comhairle, my apologies to you. As Mr O'Loan knows, majority rule within Stormont was an entirely different situation to the situation now whereby the two largest parties have a majority. Over the past few days, we heard lectures on various situations, and it was Mr Durkan who proposed some time ago that we return to majority rule.

Mr Durkan: I made no such proposal. Rather, I rightly accused Sinn Féin and the DUP of operating the new majority rule, with decisions that are made in Stormont Castle being railroaded through the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is time to get back to discussing the Financial Assistance Bill, so I ask the Member to address his remarks accordingly.

12.00 noon

Mr Molloy: The point has been made.

The concerns that were expressed by those who proposed the amendments centred on an alleged seizure of power. The amendments reflected that and, instead of improving the Bill, were about preventing an alleged seizure of power. The situation might have been different if the amendments, rather than being protectionist, had tried to make the Bill better. The amendments have come across as trying to protect a particular Minister. We should all have confidence that the Executive will accept arguments made by any Minister, regardless of party, because they want to do the right thing.

Mrs D Kelly: I totally reject the Member's assertion that the amendments were proposed to deal with a seizure of power — they were about improving accountability and scrutiny. To support the Bill, this side of the House must have confidence that the needs of those who live in poverty, deprivation and exclusion will be met. However, in the last Budget allocation, the Sinn Féin Agriculture Minister took £20 million for slurry tanks from the Social Development Minister's budget for housing. Given that action and the fact that there are so many people who are homeless and living in dire conditions across the North, the Member must understand why we have no confidence that the provisions in the Bill will be used for the right ends.

Mr Molloy: I do not accept that argument. The Bill has a new format and will provide assistance for an extra 36,000 pensioners. That shows that the Executive were concerned about the less well off, wanted to improve their position and wanted to expand the allocation of payments. Therefore, one benefit of the delay is that we have a better Bill.

With regard to the reallocation of money in the Executive, one Minister was not able to spend all her money, which was put back into the pot and used by another Minister who had an urgent demand. If Mrs Kelly is saying that the farmers who had to fulfil targets that they were set by all political parties were not entitled to that money, she is making a different argument from those made by her party colleagues on the Agriculture Committee. There are issues that must be dealt with, and it is important that we deliver for those who are in most need.

The paranoia of those opposed to the Bill has centred on the protection of the interests of Ministers. It is important, and assurances have been given —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member accept that all the amendments related to all Ministers, not just one?

Mr Molloy: The other Ministers did not feel concerned, did not feel intimidated and did not feel that they were losing power — they were confident that they could exert power in the Executive. I do not believe that the Minister for Social Development felt concerned, intimidated or that she was losing power — it was a political argument to get at the Executive. I accept that the former —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Molloy: I will give way when I finish my point. At the weekend, the former deputy leader of the SDLP, who is also a former deputy First Minister, advised parties to engage in more effective debating in the Chamber. The SDLP should take some guidance from its former deputy leader on that issue, get into the cut and thrust of debate, and be confident that it can make arguments in the Executive and have them accepted.

Mr Ford: I do not want to get involved in an intra-nationalist squabble. However, the Member said that all the amendments were designed to protect one Minister. How was amendment No 13, which I proposed yesterday, designed to protect one Minister, as opposed to ensuring accountability?

Mr Molloy: I said that some Members and some parties have particular issues and that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have responded to the amendments and did not see the need for them. That argument was made and was responded to.

The debate has been useful in that sense. However, it does not mean that because Members think that their amendments are important and would be very effective, the proposers of the legislation will think the same. That is the argument that Members have to win or lose. However, it was not, as it has been interpreted, simply a matter of a block voting against it. We all wanted to move forward in a clear way to get the legislation in place in order to deliver on it as quickly as possible.

There have been some delays, but we need to have the legislation in place so that we can deliver on it. We will not have to go through the entire procedure again, as the legislation will be in place, and if there are any future crises, the Executive will be able to respond quickly to the needs of the people at that particular time. Go raibh maith agat.

The First Minister: I thank Members for their contributions during today's debate and in previous debates. I also thank the Committee in particular for supporting the accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly.

I will now take the opportunity to touch on some points that were made during the Bill's passage through the Assembly. I will start with the comments made by the now absent Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea, who said that, at the end of the day, the truth

was still the truth, and the proof of the pudding would be in the eating. Of course, he is absolutely right. Indeed, that is what the deputy First Minister and I are relying on. When the truth is seen, and the spurious and bogus intentions that he and others have attempted to place upon — and to hang around the neck of — the deputy First Minister and me have been proven to be inaccurate, will there be an admission on the part of the Member for Lagan Valley and others that their fears have been assuaged and that the Bill has not been used for the purposes and intent that they indicated?

I will now come to the issue that flows from that, which is amendment No 13 in the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill. The Assembly is master of its own House, and it can bring not just the First Minister and deputy First Minister, but any Minister, before it and seek an explanation for whatever the subject matter may be, including the issue of the working of this piece of legislation.

For the very reason outlined by the Member for Lagan Valley, the deputy First Minister and I will be very glad, if the Assembly so wishes, to have OFMDFM representation in the House to give account for any issues that flow from the implementation of the legislation. However, I say to the Member for South Antrim, who is the leader of the Alliance Party, that he should not forget that at each stage of implementation, the Assembly has the opportunity to deal with any scheme under clause 1 or clause 2. If a new scheme under clause 2 is being brought before the House, it will be completely in order — subject, of course, to your will and to that of the Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers — for a Member to consider that particular scheme in the wider context of the overall schemes that have been brought under this legislation. There, again, is a further opportunity for Members to consider the provisions of the Bill and how they operate.

The other argument being advanced by the still absent Member for Lagan Valley was a gripe about the fact that he cannot win votes in the Assembly, just as, no doubt, he gripes about being unable to win votes in Lagan Valley. The problem appears to be that he does not seem to like democracy. The Member for Strangford Mr Shannon pointed out that the votes were 2:1 and, on occasions, 3:1, but the Member for Lagan Valley wants a system whereby, even if the vast majority of Members believe that there is no need for a change in the legislation, the minority should have its way even if it is deemed by the majority to be unnecessary.

That is just not the way that things work. The leader of the Alliance Party and some SDLP Members complained that, overall, they tabled 30 amendments that were not accepted. Should the deputy First Minister and I accept amendments to the legislation that we believe do not merit inclusion? The argument seems to be that certain amendments should be accepted because

the parties that tabled them considered them to have merit, irrespective of the advice that we received, which was that we should not accept them, and that we take those decisions ourselves.

Mr Ford: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: Let me finish the point; I will give way to the Member.

I have already said that, overwhelmingly, we had much sympathy with the spirit of those amendments. However, the fact is that in some cases, they would have resulted in a duplication of what is already in legislation, and, therefore, were totally unnecessary; in other cases, they would have reflected the general and normal standard practice of the Assembly and its Committees and the way in which we operate, and again, therefore, were not necessary. The only amendment to which I would have objected on principle was the amendment to drop clause 2 in its entirety, and I explained why we did not wish to do that, because it is important that, as soon as we can, we put on the statute book legislation that will provide the mechanisms to allow us to take a joined-up approach to tackling poverty and hardship.

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the First Minister for giving way eventually.

Were he advancing the case that he is currently advancing on the Consideration Stage of the first Bill to come from OFMDFM, it would be entirely understandable. However, he seems to have missed the point that I made to Mr Molloy, which was that when one is told, Bill after Bill, that amendments are constructive and the spirit is understood, but every single one is nonetheless rejected on every single Bill that is introduced, one can possibly understand why paranoia is, perhaps, fed.

The First Minister: It should not be, because the facts are not as the Member states them. The facts are that we tabled four amendments to this piece of legislation in response to concerns that were expressed to us. We listened to all those concerns, considered those that had merit, framed amendments on the basis of what we heard, and tabled them. It is not the case that the parties that are in opposition — or those that are in the Executive but want to portray themselves as an opposition — tabled amendments that were then ignored. In our opinion, there were four specific amendments that had value and merit, and we, therefore, changed the Bill in order to incorporate them.

Although we agreed in many cases with the general tenor of some of the proposed amendments to the Bill, we did not take them into account because they were unnecessary. Many of the effects of those amendments would have happened anyway, and they would not have changed the outcome or purpose of the legislation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the First Minister for giving way.

Some of the amendments that the First Minister has mentioned were tabled as a result of representations that were made to the junior Ministers at meetings of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. That is a clear indication that OFMDFM responds to Members' concerns.

The First Minister: My honourable friend is right. We were responding not only to members of Committees, but to Ministers from some of the parties who spoke during the course of this debate and who made submissions to OFMDFM on the legislation.

I shall deal with another point that was made by the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea, who is still not present in the Chamber. He asked why, if OFMDFM already had powers in the areas of concern, it was introducing this legislation — why was it necessary, if OFMDFM already had the relevant powers?

12.15 pm

Again, he seems to have missed the purpose of the legislation. The legislation is not intended to bring new powers to OFMDFM — and I assume that the Member is referring to clause 2 in particular. Rather, it is intended to put in place a mechanism so that OFMDFM can properly implement the powers that it has already in relation to poverty and hardship. Therefore, it is not a power grab or an attempt to claim new powers for OFMDFM. Rather, it is to provide a way to implement better the responsibilities that OFMDFM has in place already.

The Member for Lagan Valley, Basil McCrea — who has still not come into the Chamber — made another factual inaccuracy. He seemed to think that by putting forward this kind of measure, we were setting off on some new course or direction contrary to the Programme for Government. The purpose of the Bill is to assist us to deliver the Programme for Government, not to provide a course of action contrary to it. I made that point at an earlier stage in the Bill's progress. Therefore, it is consistent with the Programme for Government that we want to deliver the commitments that are in the Programme for Government.

Indeed, I pointed out, specifically, that we had the responsibility, with regard to cross-cutting issues, to deliver on a number of the targets that were set down in the Programme for Government. However, because it was cross-cutting, and other Ministers would have to drive them forward, we did not have the mechanism to get Ministers to do what was required in a joined-up way under the Programme for Government. The Bill provides us with a mechanism to ensure that we can deliver the targets that the Assembly endorsed in the Programme for Government. So, although he did not intend to do so, the Member strongly made one of the points in favour of passing the legislation.

I turn to points raised by the Member for West Belfast Mr Attwood. I leave aside his view that there was a shift in the balance between OFMDFM and the Assembly. The provisions of the Bill reflect the strong preferences of the deputy First Minister and myself. There were no differences between us with regard to bringing forward the Bill. The Bill, in its first use, is to help those most in need. It might be worth pointing out to the Member for West Belfast that had the purpose and intention of the communication of 2 October 2008 been carried through by the Executive, tens of thousands of senior citizens would not have benefited from fuel-poverty payments. He said that the Minister for Social Development was the only person in the Executive who is the champion of good causes for people in bad places. Rather, the Executive were the champions of more people in bad places than was the intention of the paper put forward by the Social Development Minister.

The other issue raised by Mr Attwood was that I had somehow been insulting to those who opposed some of the provisions of the Bill. During the course of thanking Members, I defined categories: those who supported the Bill and its amendments; those who were genuinely constructive in opposition to it; and I gave no thanks to those who deliberately went out of their way to distort the terms and intentions of the Bill. There is a saying: if the hat fits, wear it. The Member clearly recognised the category into which he fell, and felt that the finger was pointing at him. By his own admission, therefore, he recognises that he belongs in the latter category. Ultimately, people will judge his contribution on the outcome of the legislation.

The Member also spoke of the 30 amendments, and seemed aghast that Members could bring forward amendments and them not be accepted. I touched on that issue in relation to comments made by the leader of the Alliance Party.

It is not usual for the Opposition in the House of Commons, and, I suspect, in other legislative Chambers, to propose amendments. Mr Attwood said that the purpose of the SDLP proposing its amendments was to probe the Government. On many occasions, opposition parties do not propose amendments with the intention of getting them accepted — because they know that their amendments do not have the merit to be accepted — rather, they do it to create a debate on the issue and to allow a Minister to give undertakings.

If one examines the various debates that have taken place at each Stage of this Bill, one will see that the deputy First Minister and I have given a series of assurances and have laid out very clearly how we intend this legislation to operate. I hope that Members will examine all the responses that we have provided. If they do so, they will see that we have responded in a positive way to the points that were raised during the course of the discussions.

The deputy First Minister: I thank the First Minister for giving way. During the course of an undoubtedly important series of debates on this issue, words such as “power grab” were used. Yesterday, Declan O’Loan, although he had toned down his comments, described this Bill as a dangerous Bill. Today, the Member for West Belfast Alex Attwood used the word “chilling” several times in his contributions. The First Minister and I have been accused of not supporting any of the amendments that the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party or the Alliance Party proposed.

Like me, does the First Minister find it strange that when it came to voting on those amendments — which were of such grave importance to those parties — the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and the SDLP, as well as, I presume, the PUP, could not muster the support of up to half their members? I find that quite incredible.

The First Minister: The deputy First Minister made two points, the first being that this is a pot-and-kettle issue. The Member for West Belfast Alex Attwood objected to some of the terms that I used during earlier debates on the Bill, while he completely ignored the types of comments that the Member for North Antrim Declan O’Loan made. Mr O’Loan, who must have searched the dictionary for insulting terms that he could use during the debate, came up with “obnoxious”, “loathsome”, “dangerous”, and some others, and yet, Mr Attwood made no reference to those during his strictures.

I agree entirely with the deputy First Minister’s second point. I think that every Member in this Chamber recognises that Mr Attwood has not quite got himself out of party conference mode and into the real world again.

We, in the Assembly, must recognise that there are occasions when we must take off our party-political hats and act in the interests of the wider community. The public, quite frankly, are not following some of the nonsense — the hair-splitting and the intricacies of the unnecessary amendments — that has taken place in this Chamber. All that the public want is for a mechanism to be put in place that can give some help to those who face real hardship as a result of the economic downturn.

In that context, some Members should have shown a greater degree of charity in trying to encourage this piece of legislation. As I indicated earlier, anyone who listens to this debate will find it hard to understand why the Member for North Antrim used the kinds of terms that he has done, and how some of the arguments that particularly the SDLP and Ulster Unionists have put forward could possibly be about a piece of legislation that is designed to overcome poverty and hardship and to make payments to those who are faced with emergencies or crises.

Although Members feel that they have a role to play in probing and opposing legislation, they also have a responsibility not to go over the top.

I will be very careful in this matter because I know that the Deputy Speaker does not want any protracted debate about the issue of delay. Members of the SDLP have spoken again about the paper of 2 October 2008: if life had ended on 2 October, they would have a fine argument to present. Life, however, did not end on 2 October. Further papers were generated after that time. The Minister for Social Development indicated — after 2 October — that she was looking at other ways of finding the powers that would not require new legislation.

The argument was made twice — and I have not referred to this at all as yet — once by Mrs Kelly, and once by the deputy leader of the Alliance Party, that the Minister for Social Development had produced legislation. The Minister for Social Development has at no time produced legislation in order to take this Bill forward. I have the letter with me. The first letter, which —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. First Minister, you were quite right to say that I do not want you to go down that route. I gave you latitude in your original contribution to the debate, and I gave Mr Attwood leeway in responding to that; however, I do not think that we need go any further. Please stick to the matter of the Financial Assistance Bill.

The First Minister: I accept your ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, there are Members present who have criticised other Members for not listening to them, and for not replying to points that they had made. I simply wanted to reply to a point that I had listened to and could have provided information on, which might have put the Member in a better position to deal with the issue.

Mrs Foster: Will the First Minister agree that when one is presenting written evidence to support a case, one should give all that written evidence and, indeed, all the oral evidence?

The First Minister: Yes, of course one should. However, the Member who first raised the point did so on the basis of a selective leak from an irresponsible person and was clearly not given all the evidence to bring forward. I accept the Deputy Speaker’s ruling, and will not —

Mr I McCrea: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I will, providing it is not about that particular issue. *[Laughter.]*

Mr I McCrea: Unfortunately, I cannot promise that I will not stray —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I can promise you that you will not speak on that particular issue. If it is not

about that particular issue, you can intervene; if it is, we will go back to the First Minister.

The First Minister: As Members are aware, the catalyst for this Bill comes from the need to have a legislative basis for making a one-off payment of £150 to help those households suffering from fuel poverty. That plan was announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel as part of the Executive's response to the economic downturn.

I accept entirely the point made by the deputy leader of the Alliance Party that this is the first use of the Bill. It is an enabling Bill and does not, in itself, make that provision, but it was felt to be right — and I think that the Alliance Party agreed with the decision that the Executive took — that rather than coming forward each time with a piece of legislation to deal with a particular Department's emergency, there should be one piece of legislation that can be used in all cases. I think that that was the right decision to take, but, again, I hope that it will not be used too often.

The Bill provides us with the basis on which to do that, and it is, therefore, important that the Bill is passed by the House and receives Royal Assent as soon as possible.

12.30 pm

Subject to the Bill's becoming law, and to Executive agreement, the deputy First Minister and I will immediately make a determination on designation so as to enable a scheme to be developed for making the fuel payments. Officials are considering the available options, and their advice will help to guide Ministers in agreeing the most effective means of getting payments to those households that need it most. The deputy First Minister and I are agreed on the fact that we want those payments to be made as quickly as possible, as they address an immediate need. The Executive will be fully involved in that process. The relevant Committee will undertake its normal scrutiny of the resulting regulations that outline the fuel-payment scheme. The Assembly will have ultimate control of the continued operation of the eventual scheme.

We look forward to working with Members on the first outworking of the powers in this enabling piece of legislation. I urge the Assembly to support the measure.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Financial Assistance Bill [NIA 4/08] do now pass.

The sitting was suspended at 12.31 pm.

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

2.00 pm

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That the draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

This statutory rule has been made under powers that are contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the Order must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly. It amends existing provisions in the Energy Order 2003 that relate to the operation of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO), which is the main support mechanism to encourage the development of renewables in Northern Ireland.

The debate could not be timelier as we look east to the recent problems with the flow of gas from Russia and consider the unpredictability of oil price fluctuations during the past year. It is vital that we, in Northern Ireland, do all that we can to increase the levels of our indigenous renewable energy. That is important to secure the energy supply; to cushion the volatility and impact of longer-term energy prices; and to tackle the challenges of climate change.

Before I outline the amendment's key focus, I will explain briefly the background of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation. NIRO is the main support mechanism for our renewables policy. I am pleased to note that it has successfully stimulated large-scale renewables investment in Northern Ireland.

Indeed, the amount of electricity that is being generated from renewable sources is double what it was when NIRO was introduced in 2005. Almost 7% of electricity now comes from indigenous renewable sources, primarily onshore wind, which continues to be the most commercially viable renewable technology. I am confident that the current renewable electricity target of 12% by 2012 will be met.

NIRO provides the financial incentive that is needed by eligible generators and renewables developers through a system of certificates known as NIROCs (Northern Ireland renewables obligation certificates), which are awarded for each megawatt hour of output that is consumed in Northern Ireland. Those certificates are, in turn, needed by electricity suppliers to demonstrate

that the proportion of their sales that is specified in NIRO legislation for any particular year can be accounted for by renewables generation.

Otherwise, suppliers must pay a buyout fee in order to meet their obligation under NIRO. The buyout alternative means, therefore, that renewables obligation certificates have a tradable value, which is typically in the region of £40 to £50 and which provides the additional revenue stream that is needed by generators of green electricity.

NIRO operates in tandem with similar obligations in Great Britain. There is a single UK-wide market for renewables obligation certificates, regardless of the obligation under which they are issued.

The primary purpose of the statutory rule is to amend existing primary legislation to allow for the principle of banding in NIRO — that is, to allow different renewable energy technologies to receive differing degrees of support in order to take into account their relative costs. That means that less well developed and more expensive technologies will receive higher levels of support through getting more than one renewable obligation certificate for each unit of output, while others will receive lower levels of support by getting only a fraction of a renewable obligation certificate for each unit of output.

Those banding proposals received broad support in the public consultation exercise that was undertaken by the Department during summer 2008. By increasing support for some technologies, the revised NIRO will help to advance the development of other sources of renewable electricity, such as offshore wind, wave, tidal, and some forms of bioenergy, while continuing to provide a useful incentive for Northern Ireland's valuable onshore wind resource.

The Order does not set out the level of banding that each technology or energy source will receive. Recently, that detail has been the subject of further public consultation. Based on the outcome of that consultation, I will bring forward shortly the second stage of legislative changes that are needed to introduce the detailed banding proposals. That will be the new Northern Ireland renewables obligation Order, which the Department plans to implement by 1 April 2009.

For the sake of clarity, I reiterate that today's draft Order provides simply for the principle of banding to be introduced, not the detail. However, it does provide for associated and consequential changes that are needed to introduce the principle of banding. Specifically, the draft Order provides for the principle of grandfathering to be introduced, which will allow existing projects, or those near to coming on stream, to keep the levels of support on which they relied in making investment decisions. That is especially critical for technologies that will receive a lower level of support under the new

banded arrangements and had made their investments on the basis of receiving one ROC for each unit of output.

The draft Order also provides for the continued operation of the NIRO in tandem with the Great Britain obligation. That is particularly valuable for us, as it not only provides the market size needed to make the NIRO viable, but because it allows us, though being able to operate on a relatively low obligation level, to reduce the impact on consumer costs.

The draft Order introduces a provision for the NIRO administration costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Utility Regulator and the GB regulator, Ofgem, which administers NIRO on behalf of the regulator, to be met from the buyout fund. All those changes reflect the recent amendments that the Energy Act 2008 made to the equivalent primary legislation in Great Britain.

Before finishing, I will comment on the need to make late minor drafting amendments to the draft Order as originally laid in November. Those require laying a revised draft Order at short notice, which, although unusual, is necessary in this case because of the time frames to which we are working with the Department of Energy and Climate Change in London in order to have the banded obligations in place by April.

The drafting amendments did not involve any change to the policy intent of the draft Order. They were needed because Department of Energy and Climate Change lawyers were of the view that the interaction between our draft Order and the equivalent GB legislation would preclude the GB legislation from issuing ROCs in respect of generation in Northern Ireland territorial waters. That is a feature of the current obligations, and one that we propose to continue.

We may wish to secure that power for Northern Ireland in due course, and I will consider that in the context of the outcome of the strategic environmental assessment of our offshore renewable energy. In the short term, however, the main imperative is to ensure that all eligible projects that are located in Northern Ireland territorial waters can benefit from the increased level of ROCs for offshore generation. The late amendment to the draft Order secures that position.

I know that many Members will agree with me that increasing Northern Ireland's renewable electricity generation is critical, not just to meet targets but to reduce our overly high dependence on imported fossil fuels, to help to make our energy supply more secure, and to help to shield us from the price volatility of world energy markets. I hope that Members will support the amendment to the primary legislation to allow variations in the levels of support that different renewable technologies will get. I look forward to putting the detailed banding proposals before the Assembly in March.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: Is the Chairperson or the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee not called first?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Paul Butler.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement on the draft Order. There were particular concerns about the expense of investing in the marine power section of the banding system. What are the incentives for people to invest in wave and tidal projects in order to meet that part of the NIRO?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Wells.

Mr Wells: We are all somewhat taken aback by the fact that Mr Mark Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is not present, and I understand that he had a statement prepared. Perhaps I should give way to the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, because I believe that they take priority in such circumstances.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. About half an hour ago, I was asked to deputise for Mr Durkan. The Office of the Speaker should have been informed that I, as Deputy Chairperson, am standing in for Mark because he is unable to attend.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We were not told. Your name is not on the list, and I must call Members whose names are on the list. I can now call Jennifer McCann.

Mr McNarry: That is two Shinnars in a row.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I called Mr Wells, but was then asked to withdraw that decision on the basis that the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee should be called first. She has a statement to make on the Committee's behalf. That is what I am doing, and that is why I am doing it.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has considered proposals to amend and replace the primary provisions of the Energy Order (NI) 2003 in relation to the NI renewables obligation. The Committee was made aware that local legislation is dependent on primary legislation being enacted in GB. Therefore, we must make those changes together in order to avoid distorting the market.

The NIRO works in tandem with the renewables obligation in England and Wales and the renewables obligation in Scotland. There is effectively a single market for renewable obligation certificates. That has led to concern within the Committee that the Scottish Executive propose to award more ROCs for tidal-stream and wave generation than the Department does

here. That could mean that wave and tidal device operators here would receive only two ROCs per megawatt hour for the electricity that they generate, while their Scottish counterparts, under current proposals, would receive three and five ROCs per megawatt hour for tidal-stream and wave generation respectively. That discrepancy has the potential to lead to underinvestment in marine renewables here compared with Scotland. The Committee will explore that matter further when it considers the SL1 for the proposed 2009 NIRO.

The Committee is also concerned that the renewable obligation certificates here and the renewable electricity feed-in tariffs regime in the South are not compatible. It is somewhat tenuous to claim that a single electricity market exists when the two schemes to provide incentives for generating renewable electricity result in operators on one side of the border being unable to avail themselves of incentives to provide electricity to suppliers on the other side of the border. The Committee will watch that issue closely.

After consideration of the proposals at SL1 stage on 3 July 2008, the Committee subsequently considered the Energy (Amendment) Order (NI) 2009 on 20 November and 16 December 2008. Despite the issues that I have raised, the Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the Order.

Mr Wells: Members might wonder why I was so taken aback when I was called previously; I was relying on our Chairman, Mr Mark Durkan, to speak, and I had set aside 40 minutes for his contribution. Our Chairman is extremely diligent, and I am certain that had he been in the Chamber, he would have read up and given an excellent presentation on the important Order.

I support the Minister's Order, which will benefit Northern Ireland. As I have told the Committee previously, I often think that people in Northern Ireland are like the man who buys a new Range Rover in order to take bottles to the recycling plant. We are prepared to take the easy options on renewables and the protection of the environment. However, we balk at the difficult decisions. Sadly, there was a good example in the UK recently in relation to the third runway at Heathrow Airport. Our own Government have set a challenging target of an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050. Having put the rubber stamp on that decision, the Government then balked at the first major policy decision that affected them and decided to go ahead with the third runway. It is clear that we will have to take some difficult actions in the next few years if we are to meet that target.

Remember, the target of 80% reduction by 2050 is based on the consumption rates of energy in 1990. Therefore, in order to reach that target by 2050, we must, in effect, reduce our current energy use by 90%.

That will only be possible if there is a massive increase in the use of renewables, not only in Northern Ireland, but throughout western Europe. Therefore, any amendment to the legislation that will facilitate that must be very welcome. The whole House should support the motion.

I do not see the issue as being entirely negative. Renewables offer a massive opportunity for the economy of Northern Ireland, because we have plenty of sea, plenty of tide and plenty of wind. We are, therefore, in a privileged position in comparison with other countries, as we have the basic forces of nature, which can be harnessed to create renewable energy. We have wind farms, and the tidal turbine at the Narrows on Strangford Lough. Although my colleague Mr Hamilton maintains that that is in Strangford, I maintain that it is actually in South Down. I am absolutely certain of that. A pioneering effort in renewables is being made at Strangford Lough, and the tests of the turbine have proven to be exceptionally successful in generating a large amount of totally renewable power.

There are many other sources of renewables that we in the Province can utilise, but there must also be an opportunity for our beleaguered industry to manufacture many of the items that are required to harness that energy supply — turbines in particular. I believe that we are pushing an open door.

I am also delighted that, yesterday, the President of the United States, Mr Obama, very clearly nailed his colours to the renewables mast as well. Almost every Government Minister in every part of the world has signed up to the need for an increase in renewables. I have no doubt that President Obama is following our own Minister's lead in that respect.

I have no problems whatsoever in wishing the Order a fair wind, and I urge the entire House to vote for it.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome the Minister's statement and Mr Wells's comments. The use of finite resources was mentioned in President Obama's inaugural speech last Tuesday as well, so it is an issue that is important far beyond here.

The Minister made the point, which was supported by Mr Wells, that it is not just a matter of meeting our targets in relation to renewable energy. We can do more than that; we should be aiming to exceed those targets. I referred to the issue in a question to the Minister of the Environment at Question Time yesterday, and — as children sometimes say about a reaction from parents or teachers — I got the head ate off me. I received a lecture about how it was enough simply to meet our targets here in Northern Ireland. I am glad to hear another voice in the DUP speaking more passionately about the issue.

I would like some clarification from the Minister in relation to the ROCs and the single energy market. I

take the point that she made about the UK implications. However, when the producers of renewable energy have surplus electricity, the certificates are not tradable on the island of Ireland. Therefore, some of that surplus electricity cannot be put into a single energy market for the island. That is a problem here in the North of Ireland and, equally, in the South of Ireland, because the system does not work the other way around either. I raise the issue in case it has implications for amendments. We should keep those options open, and work towards creating a situation in which producers of renewable energy anywhere on the island can feed their surpluses into the supply, North or South of the border, regardless of where they are located.

That will improve the system and provide greater security for the generation of electricity across the island.

Mr Neeson: The draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 has been considered by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and we are in support of it. Like other speakers, I remind the Minister and the Department of the very powerful speech that was made by President Obama last week. It is important that a man of his stature provides a lead on such an important issue as the development of renewables.

The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee clearly needs to address the issue because all of us now realise the difficulties that have been created by the global recession and the instability of energy prices throughout the world. I urge the Minister to speak to her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to encourage the greater development of renewable sources throughout the island of Ireland. The single electricity market provides an opportunity to create such co-operation. The island of Ireland has a huge amount of natural resources to develop renewable energy through wind and tidal power. The Ards Peninsula experiment is leading the way in the development of tidal power.

During lunchtime, we received a very powerful statement from Douglas McIlldoon, the former regulator. From what he told us, it is clear that consumers in Northern Ireland are paying too much for their electricity. Hopefully, we will address that issue in future. In conclusion, as a member of the Committee, I fully support the draft Order.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I thank the Members who took part in the debate for their thoughtful contributions. I am pleased that the legislation is supported, and I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the ETI Committee for outlining the concerns and, ultimately, the support of the Committee for this legislation.

I will deal with a couple of issues that were raised during the debate. The Committee will know that Faber Maunsell was appointed by the Department to

undertake a strategic environmental assessment of offshore wind and marine renewables in Northern Ireland waters. Mr Butler made that point at the start of the debate.

On completion of that strategic environmental assessment in spring 2010, we will work with the Crown Estate — the owners of the seabed — to develop the programme, which will involve a competitive application process for commercial renewable energy projects in 2010. Several national and international companies have already expressed an interest in generating electricity in Northern Ireland waters, which we very much welcome.

Mention was also made of the Scottish proposals for a higher level of support for wave and tidal technologies. I stress to Members that those are only proposals at the moment — they have not been endorsed by Europe. I will evaluate whether that is the most appropriate means of encouraging such investment for Northern Ireland. In discussions with my officials and in responses to statutory consultations on the band of NIRO, developers have indicated that ROC rates are not the only factor in their investment decisions for offshore renewable projects.

Other areas, such as access to the grid and the ability of projects to have their electricity taken when they are ready in the next few years, are considered critical as well. Therefore, although I understand the points that have been made, more work must be done on those matters.

The single electricity market is another subject that often comes up, and it was mentioned by Mr Gallagher, Mr Neeson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. There has been much discussion because the Republic of Ireland's system is different to the one in the UK — the Republic uses a feed-in tariff, whereas, the UK deals in ROCs. That is a fundamental difficulty. If we intend to change the system that we use, we must ensure that we do not penalise people who have based investment decisions in Northern Ireland on the renewable obligation certificate system.

Moreover, we must be mindful that chopping and changing systems might point Northern Ireland out as a risky place in which to invest. We must project stability and say that this is our system, and we are sticking to it. That does not mean that we are not examining the Republic's feed-in tariff and attempting to work with our colleagues there on the matter. We are doing so, and we will continue to do so.

My colleague Jim Wells indicated his support for the motion, and he said that there is plenty of wind in Northern Ireland. He is right, although most of it is in the west —

Mr Weir: It is mostly in the Chamber.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is also right. Nevertheless, we must look beyond onshore-wind power generation, and consider other technologies, such as marine, wave and offshore wind. In addition, Mr Wells spoke about the third runway at Heathrow; however, that subject is completely ultra vires with regard to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, so I will make no comment about it.

Mr Wells maintained that the SeaGen project on Strangford Lough is actually in his constituency of South Down, but I think that the clue is in the name of the lough. The success of SeaGen should not be underestimated; it is a hugely successful pilot project, and it lends itself to Northern Ireland leading the way in marine technology. Although the Scottish Executive have made a lot of noise about leading the way in marine technology, Northern Ireland is the first place to have the type of technology that is being piloted in Strangford Lough. We should be — and I am — particularly proud of that fact, and I was able to point that out last week in Brussels, where I attended an energy conference.

We should also take advantage of the green economy. Much has been said about Mr Obama, the President of the United States — where this Chamber leads, he follows. The potential exists for this Administration to bring many green jobs to Northern Ireland, and the SeaGen project clearly demonstrates that point. Therefore, I welcome the scope for investment in that area, which the Matrix report identified as a key sector, and my Department will be working closely with colleagues in Invest NI to identify those possibilities in the green sector.

I say to Mr Gallagher the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone that climate change is not the only driver in the Bill; there are three drivers: climate change; the need for a competitive energy market; and the need for a secure energy market. We must consider all three elements.

Although amending the support system to encourage the development of new and innovative technologies is not the only thing that we must do to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from increased levels of renewable electricity, it is a vital measure, and the banding proposal will ensure that our renewables policy remains robust and effective. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Energy (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 be approved.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Strategic Stocktake

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes in which to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Executive's budget position for 2009/10 and 2010/11, in the context of the strategic stocktake as conveyed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the statement on 20 January 2009.

I will begin by making remarks on behalf of the Committee, and if time permits, I will make some personal remarks. I will make that divergence clear, if it is not already so.

2.30 pm

The debate follows on from last week's statement from the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the strategic stocktake of the Executive's Budget for 2009-2010 and 2010-11. I welcome the opportunity to debate the way ahead, especially in the context of the current financial and economic climate and the challenge that that presents for the Executive and the Assembly with regard to their delivery of the priorities in the Programme for Government (PFG) and to achieving maximum impact from our limited resources.

There has been some debate among Members in the Chamber and in the Committee on the process that should be followed in advancing budgetary matters in the upcoming period. In March 2008, the Executive decided that a strategic stocktake would be undertaken in place of a comprehensive Budget process for 2008-09. On several occasions, the Committee considered the implications of the Executive's decision in that regard. On 24 November 2008, the Committee Chairperson and I met with the Minister to discuss the Committee's concerns. Subsequently, we agreed that the Minister would make a statement to the Assembly on the Budget position in the context of the strategic stocktake — which he did last week — and that that would be followed by today's take-note debate, which will provide Members with the opportunity to deliberate more fully on the issues. At its meeting on 26 November 2008, the Committee expressed its satisfaction at that approach and decided not to pursue other measures.

Last year, the Committee published a co-ordinated report on the future Budget process. In response to that report, the Committee will be briefed soon by departmental officials on proposed arrangements for

the future Budget process. Therefore, the process is ongoing, and it is an issue in which the Committee will take a continued interest.

The Committee agreed its submission on the strategic stocktake to the Minister on 3 December 2008. That included submissions that were received from a majority of the Assembly's Statutory Committees. The terms of reference for the stocktake included a review of departmental progress against plans; the identification of reduced requirements and emerging pressures for the next two years; and proposals for addressing the pressures through adjustments to existing plans and priorities.

The Committee raised concerns in its submission that Departments had not met the stocktake's terms of reference. Members saw no evidence of proposals for addressing new pressures through adjustments to existing plans. That issue was highlighted in several of the submissions that were received from Statutory Committees. Although that may have been as a result of Departments being under increased financial pressure, it makes the job of central finance group and, consequently, the Executive more difficult, and I urge Statutory Committees to scrutinise that area in the coming months. The Committee was more concerned about the apparent absence of a critical review of progress against plans to date. The Committee was particularly concerned by DFP's assertion that more work is required to provide the necessary assurances that services are being delivered as planned and that the majority of public service agreements require improvements in governance and risk management.

The Committee believes that more management analyses of expenditure need to be undertaken in Departments and, centrally, by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and it notes the view of DFP officials that there is an information gap to be filled to enable such analyses to be performed. In the current climate of pressure on our resources, it is even more important that those are directed at the Executive's main priorities and influenced by progress in achieving PFG targets. The Department of Finance and Personnel is continuing to examine the arrangements to achieve PFG targets, and it agreed with the Committee that that should be completed as soon as possible.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel considers that a performance management and monitoring framework for Programme for Government targets will be an extremely important tool to improve analysis and should be implemented as soon as possible. The Committee believes that failure to deliver is the main reason for Departments returning reduced requirements in quarterly monitoring rounds and for year-end underspend. Once established, regular reports against that framework should be shared with Statutory Committees to allow their scrutiny role to be enhanced.

On 26 November 2008, the Committee was briefed by DFP officials on the issues emerging from departmental stocktake positions. At that time, the Committee expressed concern at the approximate £1 million difference between bids submitted and reduced requirements declared to date for 2009-2011.

The Committee accepted DFP's assertion at that time, but questions remain about the scale of some of the bids; whether they reflect pressures and whether those making the bids are aware that difficult negotiations between DFP and other Departments are ongoing. However, the numbers have not improved since November 2008, and the tables attached to the Minister's statement last week detailed a similar difference. Therefore, I again urge Statutory Committees to increase their scrutiny of the proposed pressures and to seek to prioritise them in conjunction with their respective Departments. In the current climate of an economic downturn, it is crucial that Departments do not merely submit wish lists but focus on the identified pressures.

DFP officials informed the Committee that they would have expected more capital reduced requirements to be declared, given the lower cost of taking forward capital projects as a result of the fall in property prices and more competitive market conditions for public procurement from the construction sector. The Committee believes that DFP must do more to identify such capital projects as soon as possible.

Strategically, the Committee's view is that the economic downturn and the emerging pressures on the Northern Ireland block grant over the period of the stocktake mean that it is vital that maximum impact and value for money be achieved from the available resources. The focus should be on the implementation of last year's Pannell Kerr Foster (PKF) report, which aims to improve financial management in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

DFP is working on programmes of mandatory financial training for senior civil servants and on a standard model of financial information to be made available to Department boards. More must be done to move from an incremental to an output-based approach to budgeting and expenditure, as recommended in the PKF report. To that end, the Committee received a commitment from DFP officials that they would begin a series of rolling baseline reviews, with the aim of subjecting all departmental expenditure to that zero-based analysis over three to five years. That analysis will have a key role to play in future budgetary processes, and its output must be shared with the relevant Statutory Committees.

Furthermore, the Committee was informed that the Northern Ireland Civil Service accounting systems are

not fit for purpose; DFP, therefore, expects an improvement in its financial management when financial and accounting services are provided through Account NI. That process will be fully implemented by April 2009.

DFP informed the Committee of the challenges that it faces in meeting its own efficiency targets for 2009-2010 and 2010-11, and it is aware that achieving efficiencies is posing problems for other Departments, too. Statutory Committees' scrutiny of efficiencies is not helped by their outstanding concerns at the level of detail contained in the efficiency-delivery plans of some Departments — even though they should have been published in full early last year.

Nevertheless, DFP recently conducted a review of efficiency-delivery plans and provided an analysis of its key findings to the Minister. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has requested a copy of that analysis, and I urge Statutory Committees to continue to scrutinise plans and to seek assurance from their respective Departments that savings are being achieved through carefully planned measures to improve efficiency rather than through crude cuts in front line services.

The current challenge to meet efficiency targets may be exacerbated by the Chancellor's announcement, as part of his pre-Budget report, that efficiency savings for Whitehall Departments will increase by £5 billion for 2010-11. In November 2008, the Chancellor indicated that those additional efficiencies will apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At an evidence session last week, DFP officials informed the Committee that that will result in more than £100 million of additional efficiency savings for Northern Ireland in 2010-11 — on top of the current target of more than £700 million.

The Minister has already said that he intends to challenge that proposal before the Chancellor's Budget speech in the spring, and he can be assured of the support of the Committee, and of the wider Assembly, in those negotiations.

The main pressures on DFP's budget over the two years that the stocktake covers were identified as relating to NICS reform programmes that it is progressing on behalf of all Departments. In the Committee's report on the Executive's draft Budget, published in late 2007, the Committee raised concerns about the funding of those programmes. We were told that the intention was to allocate the required money from the 2008-09 monitoring rounds. However, bids submitted in June and September 2008 were not met, and the Minister subsequently announced that the collection of rates arrears by Land and Property Services (LPS) would be used to meet the residual cost of Civil Service reform.

Given the Committee's continuing concerns about the performance of LPS — concerns that Members

around the House share — it will continue to scrutinise that area to ensure that the cost of essential reforms are met. Of all the NICS reform programmes, NI Direct probably has the most impact on public expectation. The Committee has been briefed on that programme's progress, and it was informed that the identified pressure of just under £9 million for 2009-2011 will be sufficient to address the total cost of the programme of some £17.9 million, as planned in the final business case, and thus ensure delivery of the Programme for Government targets for that programme.

The Committee also notes that DFP did not identify any reduced requirements as part of its stocktake submission and sees that as a positive reflection that DFP will use its resources effectively to achieve targets in that period and, therefore, minimise resources handed back due to slippage.

The Committee believes that the need to maximise impact on value for money from finite resources requires DFP to take the lead on identifying pre-emptive measures to safeguard against significant year-end underspend. The pattern of Departments declaring reduced requirements late in the financial year has resulted in unacceptable underspend and ever-accumulating stocks of end-year flexibility, to which it will become increasingly difficult to gain access. Given the current economic climate, it would be intolerable if history were to repeat itself and we were in the same position at the end of March this year.

The Committee will wish to see continuous improvement in the performance of the public sector in managing programmes, finances and other resources and in achieving business targets. Individual Statutory Committees, and the wider Assembly, have an important role to play in driving that improvement forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in the time left to me, I will make some personal remarks on the strategic stocktake. Like many Members, I view the strategic stocktake as a valuable exercise in theory, given the economic climate. It was an opportunity — as it says on the tin — to take stock in a strategic way and to assess the state of public finances in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, that has not necessarily been the case in practice in two particular areas. First, as I said earlier, the terms of reference have, at times, been ignored by Departments. There was little evidence that Departments were seeking to identify pressures and consider how they could be met from adjustments from their own plans. Secondly, Departments submitted what were, in effect, wish lists. The process may have been concluded before Christmas, but there was no excuse for some Departments submitting what were, in effect, Dear Santa letters and demanding infinite amounts of money that simply did not exist.

The figures show £52 million of reduced requirements against more than £1 billion of bids. The monitoring round in December had £70 million available and some £300 million of bids. I have heard criticism of a supposed black hole in the public finances of Northern Ireland. The more I hear of that criticism, the more I am inclined to believe that there is a black hole. However, it is not in public finances; it is in the heads of Members who raise that issue. It does them no service whatsoever to start scare stories about schools' budgets being hit and money for education and other front line services being affected. If those Members scrutinised what is going on, they would see that that is not the case. The insinuation that there is a black hole would suggest that it is somehow hidden. The Minister can confirm that he has in no way hidden any of the pressures on bids that have come on our public finances.

There is a duty on those who say that there is a black hole to look at the validity of some of the bids to see whether they are priorities, whether they are absolutely needed, whether they are urgent, and whether they are required at all in some cases.

Asking Ministers to submit bids for what they would like to see implemented over the next couple of years is akin to my going home this evening and asking Mrs Hamilton what she would like me to buy. I am sure that she would say that she would like two new cars, five foreign holidays a year and a brand new wardrobe. *[Interruption.]* She might have to take a bit of a cut in what she would like. There are massive demands on every domestic budget, but that does not mean that that expenditure is necessarily valid, correct or right.

The behaviour of some Departments in respect of this stocktake undermines the argument that some have made for a revised and new Budget process as well. It is clear from the stocktake that these are difficult economic times and that there is no new money available. A revised Budget process would require taking money from other Departments.

I have heard many demands for money, but I have not heard any constructive suggestions from Members as to where that money should come from. Those are important thoughts for Members to ponder; however, I am not optimistic that they will be taken on board. I commend the motion to the House.

2.45 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in today's debate. The strategic stocktake offers us the opportunity to have some input to the budgetary process, and it allows us to highlight some of the priorities that have been affected by the serious economic decline.

I am a member of the Committee for Social Development, which has supported increased

expenditure for a social housing programme to deal with the ever-increasing numbers of people waiting for a home. In fact, Sinn Féin has argued that to invest in social housing is to invest in the future of those who are most in need in our society. Having a home raises our quality of life and impacts on our educational attainment and health. We in the Chamber have a duty to ensure that citizens who find themselves without a home can feel part of this new dispensation, and that can be done only by providing a home for them to live in.

Over many monitoring rounds, the Executive have shown their commitment to the provision of a social-housing newbuild programme. The Programme for Government set out the commitment to provide more than 5,000 new homes over the next three years. Any slip in that schedule would have a devastating effect on those waiting to be housed. The Minister for Social Development must realise that everyone in the Chamber is a supporter of providing an effective social housing programme. In fact, we have congratulated Ministers on providing additional moneys for housing in most of the monitoring rounds that have taken place since the Assembly was restored.

However, rather than arguing a case with her ministerial colleagues, the Social Development Minister has chosen to attack them, even though she supported the package of proposals —

Mr O’Loan: I thank the Member for giving way. I welcome his support for the provision of the money that is necessary for social housing. Can the Member be explicit: is he encouraging the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make good next year the deficit in the housing budget this year? Furthermore, is he asking the Finance Minister to ensure that the money that was allocated for social housing for the next two years will, in fact, be handed over?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister argued that the December monitoring round was a smash-and-grab raid on her budget, when, in fact, not a penny was lost from her social housing budget. When we consider the previous three monitoring rounds, we can see that the Minister has underspent her budget. In June, she surrendered £50 million from social security, which the Executive allowed to be transferred to a social housing development programme. In September, she bid for £68.4 million, and she was given £15.5 million, plus £15 million from sales. In December, she surrendered over £31 million from social security, which went into the pot to tackle the serious economic crisis that we face.

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No.

Could that money not have been used to bring forward newbuild programmes planned for social security offices? That would have provided a much-

needed injection of resources into the construction industry and would have dealt with the serious morale problems among social security staff.

We could be forgiven for thinking that housing is the only brief in the Minister’s Department, but she is also responsible for dealing with need and social deprivation. At a time when many community and voluntary groups working on neighbourhood renewal across the North are under severe financial pressure, the Minister gave back £1.6 million from that budget in December. Why was that money not reallocated to halt the job losses in that sector or the closure of projects?

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Brady: No.

The strategic business review is another example of proposed changes and potential job losses, and I ask the Minister to consider that again, and then do the decent thing and scrap it. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McNarry: I wish to inform the House that the motion has been tabled without legal advice being given to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. In November, a proposal to seek legal advice was voted on, but because two parties can outvote four parties — and did so by five votes to four — the proposal to seek legal advice on the strategic stocktake was summarily rejected by the DUP/Sinn Féin coalition that operates here. That begs a question: did DFP take legal advice on the introduction of a strategic stocktake in the first place? Perhaps we are on shaky ground, because last week in the House, the First Minister told us of the rock-solid commitment to the Programme for Government and its link to a three-year Budget.

However, according to the Finance Minister’s remarks on the same day, it seems that all is not so rosy. His concerns are not alleviated by unified corporate ministerial action. On the contrary, the Finance Minister is petrified to find himself entirely at the mercy of arrogant and ruthless Ministers.

Talking of which, before I set the First Minister aside, how is it that despite having fewer staff than it did five years ago and the smallest of budgets, his Department has increased its monthly payroll by more than £330,000 in five years, to a staggering £1,395,448? Why is it that, as of last week, OFMDFM was the only Department yet to return a report on its efficiency savings? How many times have Members been berated in the Chamber by OFMDFM about efficiency savings?

Last week, the media headlines agreed with my assertions about the existence of a billion-pound black hole — it even got its own cartoon in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’. The media cannot all be wrong. Yet, the Minister denies that such a hole exists. How deep, and what colour, is the pit? Is it a vivid red to match the

forecast figures that he cannot see? What will he do when it dawns on him that the strategy behind his strategic stocktake was flawed in the first place? The Minister talks of pressures like an inventive diversion, because he is dependent on underspending to reduce those pressures. On the one hand, he pleads that there is a difficulty in predicting and measuring pressures, yet on the other, he boldly states that recent history shows that whatever the pressures are, they are manageable. In other words, the Minister hopes that underspending will save his bacon.

We know that the hole was created long before the downturn kicked in — it was always going to manifest itself. However, its impact will be worse in the current circumstances, and only DFP, Sinn Féin and the DUP argue otherwise. We are left with a Minister who is stuck with an inherited economic landscape and glued rigidly to yesterday's plan. He seeks salvation through in-year monitoring, but shakes at the very thought of Ministers spending every penny of their budget allocations and having nothing left on the books. That is a very risky high-wire strategy, which, if unearthed and proven — and it may be soon — is nothing short of negligence and incompetence.

What are we taking note of today? Is there some type of poker game in progress, in which Ministers hold or fold? If so, the Minister is sticking with an outdated and ineffective Programme for Government and the corresponding Budget that he was dealt. We will be back in the Chamber soon for a proper debate, on which there will be a vote to test the two-party coalition and, not least, the nerve of the Assembly. It is crystal clear that we must rewrite a new creative action that fits today's circumstances. It is time to take note of those requirements and to remove the old remedies.

Mr O'Loan: To summarise the outcome of the strategic stocktake, the Minister has sat long and produced a mouse. Incredibly, the Minister's statement did not offer a single new initiative or change of direction, yet it is called "strategic" — that is an affront to the English language. At most, this statement was a survey of the financial and economic landscape. It is a bleak landscape, and there is no chart of it. The Minister is certainly no Shackleton.

We all know that we are in a very serious economic situation, and there have been major changes since the three-year Budget was created in autumn 2007. Every day, we hear reports of job losses. Also, there is a credit crunch, and businesses cannot get the money to invest. There is a lack of confidence and uncertainty. The business world is looking to the Executive for leadership, but it is not getting it in the Minister's statement.

Members might have seen an article by John Simpson in yesterday's 'Belfast Telegraph'. I do not think that many people regard him as polemical or as

an anti-establishment commentator, but he agrees very much that the Minister needs to do more. His article is headlined: "Time to reshape budget to tackle the downturn". In it, he states that the Executive need to move on with plans to revitalise the local economy. I could not agree more.

John Simpson is very specific. He advocates shifting a further £50 million to £100 million within the Budget. His first focus is on enhanced skilling and retraining.

Mr Hamilton: I can anticipate where the Member's speech is going. If he is advocating moving £50 million to £100 million, will he tell us which Ministers will be told that their budgets are going to be slashed by that amount?

Mr O'Loan: There is no question that in calling for a revised Budget, all of that would have to be looked at. I am saying that the Executive, through the Minister of Finance and Personnel, must reconsider their priorities. I am perfectly open about that when I make that statement.

Moving £50 million to £100 million into enhanced skilling and retraining would be a meaningful response to give when many people around us are losing jobs. However, the Minister has not responded in such a way.

John Simpson has also called for the capital programme to be confirmed and enhanced. From where will the money come when capital realisation has dried up? People are aware that there is a problem with the £260 million acute hospital in Enniskillen and that HSBC has pulled out of the PFI scheme, but the Minister has told us nothing of such problems or of the remedies for them. In fact, he has said nothing at all on such matters.

The Minister's officials agree that something needs to be done about the Budget. At the Finance Committee last week, a senior official said:

"Some spending programmes initiated a year or more ago were valid spending programmes in the context that applied at that time. In the different economic and political context that now exists, some of those programmes might have run their course."

There is no better argument than that for a revised Budget. That is what the Minister should be presenting, but he has not done so. The Minister has failed.

Officials have told us that the major pressures on the Budget are water charges and equal pay. In relation to water charges, the Minister has lost £200 million from his Budget for the next two years. The total pressures on the Budget are £1 billion over two years, and what is the Minister's answer to that? Incredibly, his officials told us clearly that his answer is to ignore half of that, as it is just bluff from the Departments, which are simply fluffing up demands into material that is not real. Nevertheless, that leaves a substantial amount. However, half of £1 billion is £500 million, over two

years, so what is the answer to that? The Minister's officials told us that there are always reduced requirements year on year — they say that what they call the “churn” will deal with it.

That is all that the Minister has to say in response to the biggest economic crisis in our lifetimes. The Minister's response is this: something will turn up.

Mr McGlone: I wish to address some comments that were directed previously at our party colleague and Minister, Margaret Ritchie, from Members to the right geographically, in the Chamber, and politically, in terms of the Thatcherite right. They supported a Budget that will ultimately lead to cuts in childcare and that made no provision for an anti-poverty strategy, which we have heard much about today.

In other words, the Budget that they brought about and supported is leading to the underprovision of resources and is counteracting the measures that deal with poverty.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: I will pick up where Mr O'Loan left off. The point is well made, if I may speak on behalf of the SDLP — I was amazed that Sinn Féin signed up to the Budget last year.

The stocktake has exposed serious problems in Northern Ireland's public finances. Although it is relatively easy to point the finger at the economic downturn, in the sense that it is a convenient scapegoat, the reality is much different, because the problems are in some way self-inflicted. At the outset, many questions were asked about the Budget and whether it was capable of meeting all its stated objectives. Since then, further wounds have been caused by Executive decisions.

The existing budgetary framework in Northern Ireland is already very tight. Members would expect me to say that the cost of division causes difficulties in that major opportunity costs are incurred because resources are tied up in providing duplicate facilities. However, I will not labour that point; it has been well made many times in the past. On top of that, we had to deal with the UK Treasury's difficult and tight comprehensive spending review. When that is coupled with the existing structural problems in public expenditure, the situation gets even more difficult.

The Executive's decisions have drawn the Budget even tighter, leaving little room for manoeuvre and large expectations with regard to efficiency savings and asset sales. Efficiency savings are a popular topic of discussion across the country. To me, efficiency savings are about changes in policies and practices — we should do things differently and more effectively. Far too often, efficiency savings are becoming simple cuts

in public services, with the result that we are just doing less, and the reaction across the board to that is extreme.

I note that the DUP has tabled a motion about the Health Service in which it calls for proper efficiency savings rather than cuts. You reap what you sow, and the DUP has a barefaced cheek to table that motion. The situation in the Health Service is a direct outworking of the Budget that the DUP designed and supported, and it should not be surprised by what is happening in the Health Service.

Populism has been placed ahead of prudence, and that can be seen in the number of big announcements and headline figures that the Executive have produced. There is a revenue funding gap of £450 million over the next two years, more than half of which is due to the decision to defer water charges. Furthermore, there is a capital funding gap of £610 million. I appreciate that the Minister said that those gaps can be closed via underspends in previous years, but even if we take the midpoints of those underspends over the past two years, that still raises only £740 million, leaving a gap of £360 million. We must acknowledge that we are in a *sui generis* situation and that past assumptions about underspends may not come to pass. Beyond that, Departments are required to surrender money in a timely manner if the gap is to be plugged and if they are to avoid losing funds at the end of the year. Other demands to spend money will emerge over time; this stocktake has not foreseen all the challenges that will arise.

The Minister and his party colleagues made a point about lecturing MLAs for making proposals for funding without identifying where the money will come from. That is a perfectly fair point to make, but I would turn that back on to the DUP and point out that in making its decisions, it has done exactly that which it preached against. The decision to defer water charges for two years cost well over £200 million, but the resources to facilitate it were not in place. That decision may be right and it may be popular, but it has been made without regard to the available resources. The same thing applies to the health budget, which has first call on the monitoring rounds.

The real damage to the Budget may not be the effect on our ability to plug gaps — I am sure that those can be patched over in some shape or form — but to the opportunity costs of investing in our economy at a time when Governments around the world are seeing the need, not just to mitigate the effects of the downturn, but to invest for recovery. Northern Ireland is standing still because our Budget is not capable of producing the necessary investments that must be made in order to rebalance our economy.

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member aware of the financial mismanagement by the Minister of Education, the result of which is that the schools capital programme

will be £90 million out of line with the resources needed for the 100 major schools projects that are in the pipeline? Failure to secure additional resources will mean that some projects must be slowed down or stopped, at a time when children need the best possible learning environments and when the building industry could do with the work that those projects would mean.

Dr Farry: I concur with the Member. I know of huge frustrations across the board with respect to capital spending on education projects, which should be going ahead, but are not for various reasons. That points both to the challenge of current capital spending, and to that of bringing forward proper investments. We have had a useful debate on the green economy and renewables, but we are not doing enough on those matters. The action does not match the rhetoric.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): I wish to comment, on the Committee's behalf, on certain aspects of the strategic stocktake. The Committee considered the Department for Social Development's strategic stocktake submission at its meetings on 16 and 23 October 2008. Additionally, the Minister for Social Development briefed the Committee on the funding issues relating to the social housing development programme, and other Housing Executive programmes, on 15 January 2009.

The public service agreement targets for housing include the provision of 10,000 additional social and affordable homes by 2013, and the improvement of energy efficiency and other standards in existing social housing. To achieve those goals, the Department set itself annual targets for new house starts and improvements to existing social housing. In the current financial year, the new house starts and the new home improvement targets are likely to be missed.

Those outcomes, should they arise, would be most unwelcome. Such a setback at such an early stage of the new housing programme is regrettable, and it will be important that the Department makes up the housing stock over the next 12 months. The possible failure to achieve social housing improvements is also most undesirable. However, the Committee understands that some £10 million has been identified to ease the problem.

The problem is funding. Social housing programmes were to be funded by land and property sales but, as everyone knows, land and property throughout Northern Ireland have been seriously and significantly devalued. As a consequence, the Department's housing programmes face a shortfall of around £140 million.

We all recognise that there will always be more pressures than easements. Why, when funds are so limited and when there is such a significant economic downturn, should precious resources be redirected to housing programmes? The Committee for Social Development suggests that housing represents a

special case. Additional social and affordable housing will not only serve a social purpose, but will provide additional economic benefits. New and improved social and affordable housing will mean building activity, jobs, and spending in the construction industry and in the local economy generally. Investing in housing is therefore a value-added spending option.

The Social Development Committee agrees unanimously that to deliver on the public service agreement targets for housing, the Department will require additional financial support. There are other social pressures on the Department, which include the mortgage-rescue and mortgage-interest-support schemes. Both provide an important safety net for homeowners who find themselves unable to pay their mortgages. The extent of the financial support that may be required for those schemes over the next two years is, unlike the sums required for the housing programmes, hard to predict. It is important that future monitoring rounds include some flexibility to support those schemes over the next two years.

Notwithstanding what I have said, the Committee supports the view, expressed by the DFP Minister, that the Department should consider all funding options and meet resource requirements, where possible, from internal sources.

All the Committee Chairpersons who speak today will welcome the DFP Minister's exhortation that Committees should challenge Departments' spending plans and priorities. On behalf of the Social Development Committee, I assure the House that we will continue to make suggestions, and scrutinise and challenge DSD spending plans and priorities during these difficult times.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak to this motion as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. I thank the Chairperson and the Committee for Finance and Personnel for bringing this vital issue to the House and giving Members the opportunity to debate and discuss it. It is important that the Committee created this opportunity for issues to be discussed in the House.

The strategic stocktake must be seen against the backdrop of the growing economic downturn in which we, like so many other parts of the world, find ourselves. This situation cannot be said to be of our own making. This downturn is not the same as those of the boom-and-bust cycles of previous decades. This downturn is a result of an adjustment to the global banking and credit system, and creative solutions are required in order to bolster the local economy and to protect the most vulnerable in society. We must also continue to invest in skills, training and innovation so

that we are well placed to make progress on jobs and the economy when the downturn ends.

Those issues must not be forgotten in our consideration of the strategic stocktake. The Committee for Employment and Learning has been at the forefront of highlighting the effect of the economic downturn here. The impact of the redundancies about which we seem to hear on a daily basis will be felt by the Department for Employment and Learning, which provides a range of demand-led skills and training-focused initiatives. Those programmes will see increased uptake as the economic downturn continues to bite, and the Committee signals its approval of the uplifts in the Department for Employment and Learning's budget over the remainder of this financial cycle. That is not to say, however, that the Committee will not be scrutinising the fallout of the Department's reduced requirements.

The Committee has consistently promoted the message that, in this time of hardship, it is vital that investment in up-skilling and re-skilling workers continues and expands, and that those who are made redundant are not left idle and without hope. The Committee for Employment and Learning will also follow the progress of the considerable capital investment set out by the Department over the remainder of the financial cycle. We urge other Committees to ensure that capital projects are not allowed to slip, because they will bring much-needed jobs to our beleaguered construction, and allied, industries.

We should be assessing the up-and-coming industries now, and putting in place training that is appropriate to those industries. That will allow us to be quick off the mark when the upturn finally comes. We will be first in the queue with a skilled workforce, and to capitalise on any opportunities that come our way. The economic downturn makes the sensible use of our budgets all the more important. On behalf of the Committee, I again thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and the Committee itself, for giving Members the opportunity to say a few words. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Every Minister has a very difficult period ahead as a result of the economic downturn, and all Departments will be under pressure.

I want to concentrate on the public housing sector. I understand that the Minister for Social Development has a problem in that the income that the Department expected from the sale of property will be reduced because of the current economic climate. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has made great efforts to assist her by providing an additional £20 million as part of the in-year monitoring process. That should address the core function of any Government in

ensuring that people have decent housing and affordable rent. On a more positive note, however, the economic downturn presents an opportunity for the Minister to get more for every pound that she spends on social housing. I urge the Minister to ensure that that is a reality.

Some Members have decided to twist the facts to try to make out that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has deprived the Department for Social Development of funding. Every Member and every Minister knows that the Department submitted bids for funding way in excess of what was going to be the reality. Those seven bids were, I believe, for almost twice the moneys available. Therefore, I hope that members of the Minister's party will come clean and admit that the Department for Social Development and social housing are very much a priority for the Executive.

There is no doubt that there are still tough choices to make, but they must be made based on fact, not on speculation and political agendas. There is no doubt that the economy will take time to recover, and that it will, effectively, budget plans for some time. Therefore, all Departments must make their core targets those that were set out in the Programme for Government. However, it is a relief that we have a steady hand on the financial wheel at the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that those targets are met without lumbering future generations with debts, which some Members think that we should take on and expect our children and grandchildren to pay for. I support the motion.

3.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee has considered the Department of the Environment's submission for the strategic stocktake, and I am stating Committee members' concerns that the Department anticipates relinquishing more than £185 million in this budgeting period. That is a significant expenditure.

The Department made a bid for £200 million for the budgetary period 2008-2011 to provide funding for councils to cover up to 50% of the overall capital costs of compliance with the EU landfill directive targets. The Committee has been advised by the Department that the three waste management groups established to address the waste management needs of the North's 26 councils have not been in place long enough to be able to use the resources that have been made available by the strategic waste infrastructure fund. The Department now wants — on its terms — to re-phase the money into the next budgetary period.

Mr Dodds referred to that unspent money in his strategic stocktake statement last week. He stopped short of giving a commitment that sufficient funding

would be found for waste management in the next budgeting round. That is particularly worrying when considered alongside the fact that there is likely to be a net reduction in the block grant — relative to the position when the budget was agreed last January — over the period 2009-2011.

The importance of waste management must not be underestimated. We are obliged to meet statutory targets to reduce the impact of our waste. By 2020, 50% of our household waste must be recycled, and the amount of biological municipal waste going to landfill must be reduced to 35% of that produced in 1995. Those targets will not only be challenging to us over the next decade, there are obligatory intermediate milestones to be met in 2010 and 2013, which will be used to indicate that we are moving in the right direction to meet the goals set for 2020.

The three waste partnership groups have told the Committee that there is a long and complex road ahead to establish the structures and policies necessary for the North to meet those waste management commitments. It is essential that reassurance is given that the necessary funding will be available in the next budgetary period in order to facilitate that. Without it, we will create difficulties for our local councils, which are responsible for waste management; for our citizens, who are trying to deal with their own waste, and for the long-term financial position of the North should penalties emanate from Europe for failure to comply with the EU waste directives.

My Committee has also scrutinised the emerging pressures identified in the strategic stocktake by the Department of the Environment. The inescapable requirements of just over £11 million for a range of issues were deemed to be necessary and were supported by members. The Committee believes that the reallocation of the Department's underspend is very unfortunate, and should have been avoided.

The Committee urges the Minister of Finance and Personnel to recognise the importance of reinstating the necessary funding in the next budgeting period. It supports the Department in the recognition of the emerging pressures of £11 million and accepts those as valid and necessary.

I will now speak in my capacity as a constituency MLA. The Executive, as a responsible Government, must start to prove themselves by supporting increased investment in our construction industry. We are experiencing growing homelessness and Housing Executive maintenance needs. There is a growing need also for increased investment in newbuilds. We need to ensure that people, many of whom are living in inadequate housing at the moment, have proper and decent homes, and that there are proper maintenance

budgets. We need to get people, many of whom are now unemployed for the first time, back into work.

Mr A Maginness: I have listened very carefully to what the Member has said about housing in particular. Does he agree that, over the next two years, there will be a shortfall in the region of £200 million in the housing budget? Does he also agree that it is therefore necessary that the Budget be revisited and that there should be a major reprioritisation of the Budget objectives?

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I agree with my colleague: it is a no-brainer. Everybody — from those in the various construction organisations, to tradesmen, suppliers or builders' merchants — is saying the same thing to us.

A less difficult way to kick-start any economy is to invest in construction and maintenance. People are crying out for housing and for work. Let us make the investment and get back to basics by doing what any other Government would do, which is to respond immediately, albeit in a relatively small measure in world economic terms. If that starts the process of bringing people — be it those now doing part-time work, claiming jobseeker's allowance, or forced to take sick leave — back into meaningful full-time work, as they understand it and see as traditional, it is not only the right thing to do economically, it is the right thing to do morally.

Mr Paisley Jnr: We are all familiar with the story of the farmer who, when stopped by a group of tourists and asked for directions, said, "Well, if I were you, I would not start from here." The Minister of Finance and Personnel probably feels like that farmer; if he wanted to try to put Northern Ireland on a particular economic footing, he would not choose to start with the hand that he was dealt. Rather, he would choose to start with a clean slate and from a better economic basis.

Let us be clear; absolutely no one predicted the economic downturn — no one in the House and no one in the Executive, least of all the Minister for Social Development. That is what amazes me about the points that have been made by the party opposite; those Members claim that we could find a way out of the crisis in Northern Ireland if only we had a different Budget settlement. The fact is that the Minister for Social Development helped to negotiate the Budget; she endorsed it at Executive level, in private conversations around the table; and she walked into the Lobby in support of it.

That is why we have an economic plan for the next three years that will allow us to take on board a strategy that will help Northern Ireland get from where it is to where it wants to be. Everyone accepts that the Finance

Minister's room for manoeuvre is limited; however, I commend the excellent job that is being done.

Some of the contributions to economic debates in the House have been very good. Unfortunately, however, there are some Members who persist in scoring cheap points or in defending their Minister as the only person who can sort out all the problems in Northern Ireland — that is rather juvenile. I am a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and, week in, week out, instead of hearing a strategic argument to resolve Northern Ireland's problems, I hear a single argument — a mantra — from the SDLP: build social housing. In other words, give Margaret Ritchie more money, because she mismanaged the money that she had. That is the bottom line, and that is all that we hear from the SDLP.

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No.

Mr Pengelly came to the Committee for Finance and Personnel last week, and I will quote his words from the Hansard report, instead of the paraphrased remarks that some Members have given us. He said:

“the Budget ... was agreed by the Executive and approved by the Assembly in January ... The downturn in the market, when it happened, took us all by surprise. With the benefit of hindsight, most people can offer a full and detailed articulation of the whys and wherefores of a situation.”

I think that we see that to be true today. Everyone on the other side of the House has, with hindsight, the answer to resolving the situation. The problem is that they did not predict it, or support the policies, at the time.

Now, at a time of crisis, they panic. The only way out, they claim, is to renegotiate the entire Budget. How stupid would that be for the Health Service, and for every other Government service? The only thing that the SDLP wants to do is build social houses. With a trowel in one hand and a brick in the other, Minister Margaret will solve the problems of the world. I almost believe that all it would take to fix the damage to the ozone layer would be for Margaret Ritchie to write to Al Gore and suggest building social housing. She is Minister Habitat for Humanity; the Minister of building houses to solve problems. We need more than the SDLP's sub-kindergarten approach to those matters.

I hope that that approach will start to be taken, rather than the nonsense that has been talked about.

Last week, I heard commentators run away with themselves and say that there is a billion-pound black hole in the economy. That characterisation of our Budget is nothing short of a black lie, because there is no such black hole. A strategy is in place to address the problems in the economy, and it must not be forgotten that the total amount of capital expenditure and investment this year will be around £1.5 billion. That is the largest

amount in a single year in the history of Northern Ireland. Some of us are trying to see that the economic problems are addressed, and addressed properly.

If a black hole exists in any economy, it is south of the border, where the Celtic tiger has become the Celtic pussycat. In the weeks ahead, I hope that more people come from the South to spend their money in our economy and on driving our country forward.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. The main purpose of the strategic stocktake was to assess the overall financial position in advance of the 2009-2010 in-year monitoring process. It considered several issues, including departmental progress against action plans, the identification of reduced requirements, and emerging pressures for the next two years. Over the past few weeks, some of those issues have been discussed in the Assembly. The need for financial and project management in Departments, which would help them to meet their targets, has been discussed.

The Assembly has also discussed the need for Departments to identify the reduced requirements early, in order to ensure that the end-of-year accumulation can be redirected and spent on other priorities. The economic downturn and the mounting pressures on end-year flexibility are elements of concern, and, as was said earlier, a big pot of money is not available. Therefore, the money that is available must be used as carefully as possible, and we must identify where to prioritise the money — collectively.

No Member can fail to have been affected by the current economic downturn, the sharp rise in unemployment and the number of businesses that has had to close or go into receivership. Although it must be recognised that that big pot of money is not available, people still have expectations of the Assembly to deliver the changes that are necessary to try to offset some of the difficulties that they are experiencing.

Sinn Féin believes that the block grant from the British Government is inadequate, and, in the context of that financial shortfall and in the absence of a developed all-island economy, we will continue to carry the burden of trying to match limited resources with the increasing needs of people until we have control over our own fiscal powers.

The recent injection of public money to steady the banks has not cascaded to businesses or the consumer. Some banks are now under public ownership, and many others are being supported by millions of pounds of public money. I know that some Members have met representatives from the banks to try challenge that, and that must continue. Money is still not readily available, particularly for businesses.

The Executive have already set out their commitment to seek to maximise social and employment opportunities for everyone, particularly through their public-procurement process. That is an essential part of the investment strategy, because it is now more important than ever that that opportunity be grasped. Existing jobs must be secured, and new jobs must be created for the people who have lost theirs. Public procurement in works, services and goods, equality of opportunity and value for money can all be incorporated into contracts to meet conditions, including good wages and employment of apprentices. That will contribute to local economic welfare and growth.

Small and medium-sized enterprises account for almost 99% of businesses in the North, yet almost three quarters of them, including those from the social-economy sector, do not even apply for public-procurement contracts, because they feel that the tendering stage of the process is stacked against them and weighted firmly in favour of larger companies. An opportunity exists to develop on that. The advancement of capital-build projects for which Departments have already budgeted must also be a priority.

During this debate, and during debates over the past week, it has become clear that some parties are adopting narrow party political agendas, as well as a silo mentality in which Ministers seek to protect their party's interests.

In doing so, they abdicate their collective responsibilities as part of the Executive — an approach that has already been evidenced in the House by the behaviour of Ministers whose parties have publicly adopted oppositional roles. Other Ministers, however, set a good example by demonstrating that, if the political will, leadership and skills exist, it is possible to achieve results outside their party constraints.

3.30 pm

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member aware that the Minister of Education has, to date, failed to budget for teacher redundancies, to the extent of £20 million? That means that the education and library boards, as the compensating authorities for teachers in controlled and maintained schools, do not have the resources to facilitate redundancies. If those resources are not secured, schools will be plunged into crisis, and teachers will face the spectre of unplanned, compulsory redundancy, with all the consequent disruption to schools. Is that the type of good management to which the Member refers?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That was quite a long intervention. The Member can have an extra minute. However, I encourage Members to keep their interventions short.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his intervention in the form of a prepared speech. However, Ministers must not be allowed to abdicate their responsibilities by insisting that they simply do

not have enough money. We face many tough choices, and unless we develop greater fiscal freedom and strengthen the local economy, many difficulties lie ahead. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr A Maginness: Much criticism has been levelled in the debate at my party over its stance on the strategic stocktake, which is little more than a descriptive exercise. It certainly has no serious prescriptive element. On that basis alone, it is right and proper to criticise that particular exercise by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Furthermore, none of us in the Chamber could have predicted the radical change in economic and financial circumstances that has taken place since the Assembly approved the original three-year Budget.

We regard our position as being very reasonable. First, I reiterate that we, quite rightly, opposed the Budget for reasons that we outlined at the time. Secondly, it contained various flaws, but one of the main criticisms of the Budget was that it was based on the realisation of capital assets. We do not resile from that position. However, even were we to do so — we will not — it remains necessary to revisit the Budget.

I cannot think of any other legislature on these islands or in Europe that does not have an annual Budget process. It is most unusual and abnormal not to have such a process. I say to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and to colleagues in other parties, that, sooner or later, we will revisit the Budget, because of the dire economic and financial circumstances in which we find ourselves.

On 23 January, Mr John Armstrong of the Construction Employers Federation warned that we are facing a serious crisis. He stated that the depth of that crisis could be measured by the fact that, in all probability, there will be 30,000 people unemployed in the construction industry by the summer.

Mr McGlone: Mr Paisley Jnr, in an attack on my colleague Margaret Ritchie for daring to care about people who are homeless, for daring to care about those 30,000 people potentially out of work — *[Interruption.]* — Mr Paisley Jnr finds the matter enjoyable and laughable, which is disgraceful. He should apologise to homeless people and to people who face potential unemployment. His behaviour in the Chamber is an utter disgrace.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I must reiterate what I said to Mr Bradley. The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the timely intervention by my good friend Mr McGlone.

Mr Armstrong maintains that 30,000 construction workers will be unemployed by summer 2009. He has said on behalf of his organisation that the Government must take immediate action, which he characterises as “urgent and unprecedented intervention”, which is required to safeguard the industry.

If people do not accept my party’s critical view of the housing sector and, indeed, of the wider construction sector, I urge them to listen to the views of Mr Armstrong and the Construction Employers Federation, which is clear and which happens to correspond closely with the view that the SDLP has expressed in the Chamber during the past several months.

My party has taken soundings from people throughout the North of Ireland. We have listened to builders, tradesmen, suppliers, engineers and professional people who are involved in the construction industry. They are crying out for Government intervention — whether it be in Derry, Fermanagh, Armagh, mid Ulster, or anywhere in Northern Ireland. They want to see significant investment in social housing. That is the demand from people who know what is required to revive the economy and for society to climb out of the depths of recession.

In conclusion, the old Budget must be revisited. The Assembly cannot rely on Micawber’s approach and hope that something will turn up. The fact is that action is required and that the Budget process must be revisited in a radical way. If people do not believe me and my party colleagues, they must listen to the Construction Employers Federation.

Mr B McCrea: The Assembly has been asked to examine budgets and identify pressures in order to determine whether there is a problem. When I examine the stocktake, I see that there is severe pressure on the Department of Education in particular. I accept that the material is published and that people are aware of it. Nevertheless, all Departments have pressures. In respect of the Department of Education, there is pressure of £50 million during the coming year, and £45 million next year. There are also difficulties with phasing capital expenditure.

As the Minister of Finance and Personnel pointed out in his statement, the key point is that resources are tight and if the Assembly cannot persuade the Prime Minister or the Chancellor to honour the CSR, there will be serious problems. There are serious problems already. Services are at risk if money cannot be found. I understand that every other Department has similar pressures. I understand that instead of getting £80 million from land sales in 2008, DSD received only £10 million, and will receive only £10 million in 2009. I understand that there is pressure throughout Departments. However, many of the figures in the Department of Education’s budget are inescapable.

They relate to reviews of job evaluations, pensions, and so on. That money must be found — if it is not, it will mean cuts in services.

I am particularly concerned about provisions for pensions and early voluntary redundancy. Previously, around £60 million was paid in respect of those provisions. That figure is now around £20 million. If teachers cannot be incentivised to take voluntary redundancy, efficiency savings of 3% will not be made.

Worse than that, the latest census figures tell us that pupil numbers have not fallen as we had thought. Indeed, those figures are higher than we thought, meaning that we will not be able to get rid of the teachers who want to go — we will certainly not be able to pay them. In considering the challenges that face us, the education and skills authority budget proposals factor in a wage inflation of 25% over a three-year period, albeit in only a small part of the education budget. That 25% figure reflects the reality, but it is only 2% in our budget in the CSR.

There are other issues that I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be able to address. One of those concerns the much-touted problems that are associated with the framework arrangements, the cost of which I understand to be some £4 million. Does the Department of Education have the authority to spend that amount? Will it be left with the Department of Education, or will it be taken on by the entire Executive? Significant problems will arise if that does not happen.

I want a co-ordinated response to the economic crisis facing us all; that is the real issue that needs to be tackled. It is right and proper that we look at our figures, and I have done that. However, I think that the long-term future of our society depends on our education system. I join other Members in saying that we must find a way of increasing funding for schools in the primary sector. All Members have agreed on that point.

Yet, as Mr Hamilton rightly pointed out in his introductory remarks, if more is to be spent in a particular area, a decision has to be made about which Department that money should be taken from. It is the Executive’s corporate and collective responsibility to sit down and work out —

Mr Storey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea: I am quite happy to take an intervention from Mr Storey if he wishes to make one.

Mr Storey: When it comes to the Ulster Unionist Party, my mathematics is sometimes a wee bit confused. Is the Member talking about a four-party mandatory coalition or the two-party coalition that was referred to earlier? How does the Ulster Unionist Party pick and choose when there is collective responsibility?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be given an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr B McCrea: I am glad that Mr Storey highlighted that point. I call it as I see it: there is no four-party coalition; there is a two-party coalition in which the two parties carve up whatever it is that they want to do. I can speak only for our party, but we are prepared to be responsible and to work collectively with the Member's party in order to tackle the problems facing all the people of Northern Ireland. We need to find a way out of this mess, and party-political bickering is not the way to proceed. *[Interruption.]*

That response merely exemplifies my point; those Members are not listening carefully to what I have to say. The Chairperson of the Committee for Education should know about the pressures that exist, and he will assess them and be as concerned as I am about whether we will be able to balance the budget. I do not think that we will be able to do that. I am not pointing the finger of blame at anyone, because we find ourselves in a dire situation.

I bring these matters to the attention of the Minister of Finance and Personnel with due respect and humility, and I ask whether we can find some way of working through the problems collectively. As I have said in the past, we will work with him, but we need to take corporate and collective responsibility. That is not an unreasonable position to take.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): In order to ensure that the Deputy Speaker does not reprimand me for things that I may say later, I will make the point that I will make only the first part of my speech in my capacity as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

I will inform the House of the position that the Department of Education registered in the stocktake exercise. A total of £60 million of resource pressures were identified for 2009-2010, and some £50 million of resource pressures were identified for 2010-11. The Department also registered a capital bid of £90 million for the schools capital programme for 2010-11.

In late November 2008, the Committee received a briefing from senior departmental officials that detailed those pressures, and we questioned officials again at last week's Committee meeting.

The details of the bids have been posted on the Committee's website should Members wish to consider and examine the make-up of those significant budget pressures.

3.45 pm

As Basil McCrea said, key resource pressures arise from the cost of job evaluations, pay reviews, teacher pensions and redundancy costs, and rises in energy and utility costs, which are all classified as inescapable

pressures. A bid to address a shortfall in the extended schools programme is also included. The Committee is concerned that such pressures need to be met but recognises the need to explore fully the scope to reprioritise spending within the £2 billion education budget.

I will outline an example of an initiative that is under way, for which the Committee pressed the Department during the second half of 2008. It should bring £27 million into mainstream funding to support primary schools from April 2009. Funding support for the new curriculum under the Making a Good Start scheme and foundation-stage funding together with funding for primary-teaching principals' release time should be fully delegated to primary schools under the common funding formula allocations rather than being earmarked budgets. That will allow primary-school principals and boards of governors to use their funds more flexibly in line with their needs and priorities and will reduce the Department's administration costs.

The Department and the Minister must proactively explore such initiatives and innovations on the use of finite education resources. The Committee for Education will continue to scrutinise the education budget through its processes and through the system that the Committee has established and will press for ways to use education funds more effectively and efficiently.

The Committee was alarmed to find a £90 million shortfall — or long fall, depending on how one interprets it — in the capital budget for 2010-11, which, apparently, goes back to the Budget settlement of 2007. The Committee was told that some projects, particularly PPP projects, will have to be slowed down or halted. We will question officials on the implications of that matter at next week's Committee meeting.

I will now speak as a Member of the House rather than as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on whether it is not regrettable that the three Departments that did not identify, reprioritise or assist in releasing additional resources during the exercise that we have undertaken in recent weeks and months were the Department of Education, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development? It is worth noting that the Ministers of those three Departments are members of the same party.

Mr D Bradley: The Minister of Education claims to be the champion of the socially disadvantaged. Does the Member agree that her handling of the budget for the extended schools programme will result in a £6.4 million shortfall in that budget this year, and that that will lead to a significant loss of momentum in that programme and occasion a stop-go approach that will not serve the socially disadvantaged very well?

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

Mr Storey: The Member has identified another problem with how the Department and the Minister address those particular needs. Everyone talks about priorities and the importance of placing children — in an education context — at the centre of all that we do. However, the Department's priorities do not always reflect that notion. The Committee has accepted — and, as a Member, I accept it, too — that there are inescapable pressures. However, if we are unable to prioritise a £2 billion budget in order to deliver for extended schools and all the needs of our education system, then that surely questions the Minister's ability, on that issue and on many others, to do the job that she was elected to do?

Mr Weir: As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I welcome today's debate. Although a lot of what has been heard today has been heard before, some novel remarks have been made. I was particularly taken by Stephen Farry's acknowledgement that the decision on the deferral of water rates may even have been the right decision. At the very least that is progress on behalf of the Alliance Party.

I welcome the debate because I think that a strategic stocktake is the way forward. Unlike the amateur astronomers in the Assembly and the media, who seem to be finding black holes around every corner, I think that, although the finances are very tight, they have been soundly handled by the Finance Minister. There are undoubtedly issues in the Departments over how that has been handled, as has been indicated on a number of occasions, and those are under ongoing examination by the various departmental Committees. However, given the tight financial circumstances, it is right that we should have a sharp, focused debate. That is why a strategic stocktake is the right way forward.

There have been proposals from Mr McNarry, Mr Maginness and others, who have spoken of the legal advice and the inappropriate nature of the process. I have a twofold reply. First, in regard to the issue of legal advice, for all that that has been brought up, there has not been any attempt at a legal challenge to the process, and that is because the process is utterly robust in that respect, and any legal challenges would be without foundation. Secondly, on the fundamental issue as to whether there should be a stocktake or a Budget process, there is an element of navel-gazing with some in the Assembly, which focuses —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will in a moment.

That navel-gazing focuses on process above delivery and examination of the best way forward.

Mr B McCrea: Although I am broadly supportive of what the Member says, there are certain technical problems with the process. In relation to education, we rely upon in-year monitoring to fund extended schools, but the education and library boards need to make decisions now. There must be some way of providing reassurance that we can protect vulnerable programmes; there must be a way of dealing with that.

Mr Weir: We should always be looking at how we protect vulnerable programmes. The point I am making is that, from a process point of view, there are better ways in which the money available to the Department of Education could have been spent. The point is that if we are hung up on the process, and the issue of whether there is a Budget or a strategic stocktake, we miss the real point.

In relation to the remarks made by Mr McNarry, I was slightly perplexed — not for the first time — by the Ulster Unionists. When the Minister made a statement last week, it seemed that some were welcoming the direction to be taken, and yet Mr McNarry now says that we are on the wrong track. The somewhat schizophrenic attitude of the Ulster Unionists is perhaps not surprising, given the fact that Mr McNarry's attitude seems to be "spend, spend, spend", whereas the attitude of his Conservative overlords is "cut, cut, cut". We have to see where the balance lies.

Mr O'Loan reflected the general obsession of the SDLP with social housing as a means to solve all ills in our society, but when pressed, could offer no solution as to where the money should come for that.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, briefly.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Regardless of the SDLP's view of social housing, will the Member comment on the Construction Employers Federation's grave concern about investment in social housing and other infrastructure?

Mr Weir: The Executive have committed to hundreds of millions of pounds worth of construction, which goes beyond social housing. That includes record amounts on hospitals, schools and roads. There is therefore a strong commitment, and I am sure that the Minister will deal with that in more detail. The Member's party has this narrow obsession with social housing. There would be more sympathy for the Minister for Social Development were it not for the fact that, in the most recent monitoring round, her Department was allocated an additional £20 million, yet on a number of occasions she has been unable to spend her budget in the first place.

Mr O'Loan said that the Finance Minister was no Shackleton. I am a great admirer of Ernest Shackleton — not least because of the fact that he stood as a

unionist candidate in Scotland in the early 1900s. Despite his many qualities, however, he failed in his objective to reach the South Pole on his first expedition; his ship sank on his second expedition; and he died before his third expedition began its work. We should not emulate that example.

I consider our Minister to be much more like Roald Amundsen — professionally dealing with a range of challenging circumstances, and overcoming those odds and delivering. The strategic stocktake is an important and worthwhile exercise for the Executive. There has been change, and there is a commitment to capital investment. I commend the work that has been done, and I welcome today's debate.

Ms Lo: A key priority for the Department for Social Development is building social housing to solve the serious problem of housing shortage. There is no doubt that we have a huge housing need — nearly 40,000 people are on the housing waiting list. The Housing Executive faces a dire shortfall in its building programme in this financial year. The target of building 1,500 new homes is unlikely to be met; the Housing Executive proposes to build only 400 new homes at the start of the next financial year — April 2009.

Approximately one third of the Housing Executive's spend is dependent on revenue from house and land sales — a system that is bound to be affected by economic fluctuations, of which we have very clearly seen evidence. The 2007 budget allocation was based on significant receipts from house and land sales for the Housing Executive programmes and for newbuilds. The forecast level of receipts was based on the trend of previous years during the economic and housing boom. They were, therefore, agreed before the recent downturn in property values and the credit crunch.

It is now projected that house and land sales that are required to fund Housing Executive programmes will drop by £60 million in 2009-2010 and £50 million in 2010-11. In addition, as a result of the economic downturn, there will be a shortfall of £55 million in 2009-2010 and £35 million in 2010-11 from land sales, housing association borrowing and contributions from developers that are earmarked for the newbuild programme.

Mr P Maskey: Does the Member agree that the £31 million that the Minister for Social Development gave back during the December monitoring round would have went some way towards addressing the problem that has just been outlined?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Lo: It would have helped, but a lot more is needed in order to meet the targets that were set in the Programme for Government.

The Executive endorsed the Department for Social Development's housing agenda. They saw it as a priority for all our communities. Housing is a big issue for all communities in Northern Ireland. The downturn in the economic situation here should not penalise those communities by not giving the Housing Executive the required allocation to build the necessary housing units.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Member accept that there are innovative ways in which to assist the construction industry and other firms by allowing contracts that are already agreed to commence immediately, and by allowing payments to be deferred until the next financial year in order to safeguard employment and the stability of firms that are currently looking for work?

4.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that we are running out of time, I remind Members that interventions must be short.

Ms Lo: Absolutely; the construction industry is crying out for such measures, which would ensure that people do not lose their jobs left, right and centre. Therefore, I urge DFP to review its Budget allocation to the Department for Social Development, taking account of the severe slump in land- and house-sale receipts, so that the Department can meet its objective of providing decent homes for all citizens.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate on the strategic stocktake of the Executive's plans for the financial years 2009-2010 and 2010-11, following my statement to the Assembly last week.

Although I would hope that my ministerial colleagues and I already have a strong understanding of the issues and of the concerns of Northern Ireland people, and I believe that we have demonstrated that understanding, this debate is important because it provides the Executive with an opportunity to hear the Assembly's opinion about the public-expenditure position for the next two years. However, it is equally important that that is a two-way process and that Members now have a better understanding of the constraints facing Ministers. Moreover, I hope that they will take that into account when carrying out the vital role of scrutinising the public-expenditure plans of Departments.

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

In that context, I wish to record my gratitude to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its contribution to the strategic stocktake process, and, in particular, to the Chairperson of the Committee for tabling the take-note motion.

In addition, I am grateful for most Members' comments about the strategic stocktake, and I shall attempt to respond to as many as possible of the points that they raised. In doing so, I shall focus on several matters that were raised after my statement, and which some Members raised again today. Those matters relate to the desire — as Members put it — for a more fundamental review of the Executive's spending priorities, as well as the misunderstanding, and in some cases, the deliberate misunderstanding, that has arisen about the scale of the issues raised by Departments in their strategic-stocktake returns. However, I am glad that the fact is finally getting through to some Members that a strategic stocktake is precisely that — a stocktake of strategic issues, and not an in-year monitoring process. Therefore, I am grateful that, slowly but surely, some Members are beginning to catch on to what is happening.

I am, I suppose, caught between the argument, on the one hand, that the Executive are spending too much and, on the other, that too little has been allocated to Departments. Sometimes, one is tempted to say that perhaps one has got it just about right.

I shall begin with the review of spending allocations. No one could disagree — and Ian Paisley Jnr, in particular, emphasised the point — that circumstances have changed significantly since the Budget was agreed and that several Departments have been particularly affected by the downturn in the local property market.

With regard to the points raised concerning the Department for Social Development, we all recognise the importance of social housing to the people of Northern Ireland, as David Hilditch highlighted in his remarks a Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. That recognition is reflected in the investment strategy for Northern Ireland allocations for the next three years: £612 million is allocated for roads; £647 million is allocated to developing water infrastructure; £565 million will go to primary healthcare and hospital modernisation; and £855 million will go to schools and colleges.

I am sure that every Member will agree that those are substantial sums. For housing, however, the allocation is £925 million, and that is, I believe, testimony to the massive investment and priority that the Executive put on social housing in Northern Ireland, and anyone who says otherwise is simply not in command of the facts. However, that would come as no surprise to most of us who regularly follow these debates.

The proposal from the local commentator John Simpson for the Executive to increase their response to the economic downturn by up to £100 million was mentioned, and I have carefully considered that. Obviously, that is an important matter, and I have the

utmost respect for commentators. However, I feel that different conclusions would have been reached had people been fully aware of all the factors that lie behind the approach agreed by the Executive in the strategic stocktake.

Reference has been made to the £50 million to £100 million reallocation. I said it last week, and I repeat it today: if we are to have a fundamental review of the departmental allocations, and if Members want more money for a particular service or Department, they will have to state from which existing service the money should be taken. To be fair to Basil McCrea, he acknowledged as much in advance of making a plea for the Department of Education. I also heard a plea from Mr McGlone in relation to the Department of the Environment. Pleas were also made for the Department for Employment and Learning, and even more were made for the Department for Social Development.

We did not hear anything for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Basil McCrea talked about the collective nature of the Assembly. Almost half of the total expenditure has been allocated to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. If we are going to reallocate resources, a primary source of those reallocated moneys would have to come out of the big-spending Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education.

When Members are making challenges, they say that these are matters for the Executive to resolve or that somebody else should come up with a solution. They never say that what they are actually advocating are cuts to, primarily, health and education services. Let them be honest and admit from where the money will come.

Later, I will talk about the work that is being done in those vital areas, but Members must remember that capital spending in those Departments is helping the construction industry. To cut money from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education would be to attack the construction industry as well as cutting health and education services.

Members need to be realistic in this debate and use some common sense. They must not adopt the immature position that, somehow, there is extra money out there. The money has to come from somewhere. The entire Budget has been allocated over a three-year period and with the Programme for Government, has been agreed unanimously in the Executive. There are no extra resources coming from Westminster; in fact, if anything, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party are vying with each other to see who can make the greatest cuts. I heard what Mr McNarry said in the

debate, but, unfortunately, he is absent from the Chamber and will not hear my response to his contribution. He did not mention that his new party masters in the Conservative Party would, if they were in power, implement massive cuts in public expenditure in Northern Ireland and across Whitehall from April this year. Even greater cuts are planned by the Labour Party for 2010-11.

Let us have some realism in the debate. To blame everyone else and to refuse to take responsibility — as Mr McNarry does with regard to his Conservative colleagues and masters' approach to public expenditure — is the height of irresponsibility. There is no doubt, however, that that issue will come back to haunt him and others.

With regard to increasing the scale of the investment programme, I remind Members that the downturn in capital receipts has impacted on the whole Executive. However, we have to deliver on our ambitious plans. I mentioned the importance of the investment programme. We hear talk about intervening to help the construction industry — currently, there are seven major projects under construction in the Health Service. Back in December, we announced that £400 million worth of projects would come to the market before the end of the financial year, and that £115 million would be taken out of the frameworks to be allowed to be procured project by project — so ensuring that none of them would be stopped. We also ensured that the work of the Planning Service was being done more quickly as a result of performance and efficiency delivery unit working with the Department of the Environment.

There are plans for investment of £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion for this year, and that will rise to £1.7 billion next year and £2 billion the following year. That is £265 million in the Health Service towards the building of important health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, Downe Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and in Portadown. From which of those areas in the Health Service — and the associated construction work — do the Members who propose that money be taken from one area and reallocated think that that money should be taken.

Let them tell us which of those health or road projects should be cut. Members talk about social housing being the only means of stimulating construction, but I had a meeting with the quarry producers the other day, and they identified road maintenance and development as the way forward.

A point was raised about referring to the opinions of expert commentators. The CBI's submission in October 2008 mentioned social housing, but also raised a host of other ways to stimulate the construction industry. All those issues are important, but they are all

competing demands. Members who made critical statements during the debate failed to suggest any solutions, other than wish lists based on the economics of fantasy rather than reality.

Members should look at what has been achieved: £127 million has been invested in the Belfast sewers project; £89 million in waste-water treatment projects; £83 million in four major projects in the Department for Employment and Learning, and £200 million in 14 projects being constructed by the education and library boards. Which of those projects should be halted? If the issue is to be addressed seriously, those questions must be answered.

Reference was made to a so-called black hole in the economy. Not long ago, the Assembly was being told about a £500 million black hole in this year's Budget. That has now disappeared and is no longer mentioned, because it was subsequently seen to be completely wrong.

Mr McNarry is not present to hear my response to his simply incredible allegations. The basic thrust of his argument was that it is fundamentally wrong to rely on in-year monitoring and overcommitments. He argued that taking such an approach is dangerous; other Members, although they were not explicit, hinted at that, too. However, on 15 December 2008, his colleague Mr Beggs, during the debate on the monitoring statement, said about me:

“that in extending belatedly the amount of overcommitment, he is reversing the decision of his predecessor and that he will be implementing one of the ideas that was suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party in its submission on the draft Budget”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p115, col 2*].

Mr McNarry is now criticising what his party colleague, on 15 December, praised as being part of the UUP's submission on the Budget.

Another idea that has disappeared down the black hole of Mr McNarry's imagination is the proposal that he made before Christmas for an equity release scheme. Members will recall that he produced, with a great fanfare, his idea that the Treasury would somehow give the Assembly an interest-free loan on the basis of valuing all its assets, and when prices subsequently rose, the Assembly could sell all its assets and pocket the difference. That proposal does not feature at all now; it was just another of Mr McNarry's typical crackpot schemes that he thinks up on the back of an envelope; none of them address the issues.

It is our sensible, logical and rational approach that is delivering the way forward. It seems that Mr McNarry has never heard of pressures; he needs to take a crash course in economics. The logic of his proposal to meet in-year pressures and reduced requirements, and the alternative to in-year monitoring, is to tell Departments that DFP will slice off 2%, 3% or 10% from their capital budgets and transfer the money into a central

fund. To ensure that every single demand for money would be met, DFP would then sit on that money until the Departments needed it. The inevitable outcome would be that, at the end of the year, DFP would have tens or hundreds of millions of pounds that were unspent, and it would have to give that money back to the Treasury.

The reason why we adopt the approach that we do, which has been tried and tested over the years, is because it means that Departments can continue to spend money, but, if in-year pressures emerge at the centre, any money that does not need to, or cannot, be spent, can be reallocated. If Members are saying that they want a fundamental review of the Budget, they must agree to put all the money on the table. As the amounts spent on education and health are by far the largest, that would, effectively, mean removing money from those two areas and reallocating it.

4.15 pm

We heard today that, when that starts to happen, not only will the Department for Social Development be in there but so will Mr Basil McCrea and others on behalf of the Department of Education. The Department for Employment and Learning and, no doubt, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will also have something to say. Mr McCrea said that a collective decision is needed. I would very much like to hear what the Minister of Health would have to say about any suggestion that his budget be cut. I would be interested to hear either the Minister for Social Development or the Minister of Education suggest that something in their budgets could be cut. However, I do not hear that suggestion from any Minister. All I hear is that budgets cannot be cut. Therefore, let us have a degree of realism.

As far as the investment strategy is concerned, the Executive have announced capital projects and investments throughout Northern Ireland — for schools, healthcare, hospitals, housing and the environment. We are spending 40% more than was spent in 2007-08. We are spending £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion this year. Under direct rule in 2003-04, that figure was £670 million. The Executive have been asked about what they are doing for the construction industry. We are already pumping in far more capital investment, which will help the construction industry, than was ever done under direct rule, and we are planning to do even more next year, when the value of capital expenditure will rise 6% or 7%. There will be even greater rises in the following year. Members must recognise all of that.

If I have time, I will deal with several other issues. Jennifer McCann raised the issues of fiscal powers in Northern Ireland and our receiving the block grant from the UK Treasury. It must be recognised that

Northern Ireland benefits significantly from being under the UK public-expenditure system. That is ever more illustrated when one looks at what is happening in the Irish Republic. I did not hear much reference in the debate to the glowing example of the Celtic tiger economy down South. If we were in the same position as the Irish Republic, we would have to make massive cuts to existing spending programmes. However, not one Member from the SDLP, or from Sinn Féin for that matter, cited the wonderful example of what the Irish Republic is doing with its economy. Significantly, not a single reference has been made to the Irish Republic or its handling of the economy, and that speaks volumes for our being under the UK public-expenditure system.

We heard the issue of annual Budgets raised again and again. When those Members talk to their ministerial colleagues, they will tell them that they want certainty on funding and more effective management of public services — at least that is what they tell us. That is reflected in the general UK approach to a three-year spending review. Northern Ireland is not unique in that respect.

One or two Members picked up on the more important emerging pressures, such as efficiencies that the Chancellor suggested in the pre-Budget report. It is important to note that in my recent discussions with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, we picked up on that issue, and there is much common ground on how we address that issue and other issues. I was struck by the large degree of commonality in our approach.

However, I, and, I hope, all Executive colleagues, recognise that we must continue to bear down strongly on the difficulties in the economy, and we must continue to help local businesses, local households, people and families at this difficult time. That is why we included support for families and businesses over the next three years, and that is why we decided to freeze domestic regional rates over the Budget period, marking a clear break from direct rule, when rates bills increased, on average, by around 10%. That is why we have taken measures to bring rate relief to senior citizens and vulnerable households, such as the lone pensioner allowance, the right to defer rate payments and the reduction in maximum capital values.

It is why we recently announced a package of £8 million over the next year to help local councils make up a deficit caused by a shortfall in rates revenue. It is why we have also taken measures to defer water charges for a further year. It is why I negotiated a £900 million financial package with the Prime Minister to meet the pressures of water charges, among other issues. It is why, just last December, we allocated extra money — £20 million — for social housing, and £10 million for health and social care services, as well as for a range of other issues as well. It is why we

addressed issues to help the construction industry, the Department of Agriculture, the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Education. It is why we took the decision to bring in a small-business rates-relief scheme and to freeze business rates in real terms. It is why the Executive decided not to proceed with the direct rule policy of introducing industrial rating at the level on which the direct rule Administration had decided.

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

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

Therefore, we will continue to work hard to deliver for businesses, households and hard-working families in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions and the Minister for setting out the context of, and the rationale behind, the strategic stocktake. The debate has generally been constructive and useful. Some 18 Members contributed, and they raised a number of issues. Members will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to give a blow-by-blow rehearsal of each contribution. However, like the Minister, I shall reflect on some of the key themes that emerged in the debate.

We heard different views from Members on the merits of the approach taken to the stocktake, and, in particular, on whether a new formal Budget process should be embarked on. On the one hand, the argument has been made that the changed economic climate warrants a reopening of the existing departmental allocations through the period up to 2011, with a formal process to realign and reprioritise resources to meet current pressures. The counter-argument is that given that there is no prospect at all of significant additional resources, the present focus should be on the delivery of the Executive's priorities, and on ensuring maximum impact from the finite resources that are available, with reallocations taking place through the in-year monitoring process. That view was underlined by the fact that no member of the Executive came forward to surrender elements of his or her budget. The Minister reiterated that point very powerfully. There was no identification of where resources could be taken from one budget to strengthen or develop another. That all means that we must deal with the resources that are available, through a collective approach by the Assembly and the Executive. That point was developed in discussions that my Committee had with senior officers of the Department of Finance and Personnel last week.

Opening the debate, the Deputy Chairperson explained that the Committee gave careful consideration

to the implications of the Executive's decision that the strategic stocktake would be undertaken in the context of the three-year budgetary process. That included a consideration as to whether the Committee should explore the legal position in that respect. The Committee eventually decided against that.

Today's debate and last week's ministerial statement represent part of the outcome from the Committee's deliberations on the matter and the representations that we made to the Minister, to which I believe he has responded. Those discussions were scheduled for the purpose of providing Assembly input into the overall strategic stocktake process. A further outcome was the co-ordinated submission to the stocktake, which the Committee compiled on behalf of the Statutory Committees.

At this point, it would, I believe, be useful to refer briefly, as did the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, to the terms of reference from the stocktake. They include a review of departmental progress against agreed plans; the identification of reduced requirements and emerging pressures for the next two years; and proposals for addressing pressures through adjustments to existing plans and priorities.

It is important to put on record that the Committee and departmental officials were very concerned that it would appear that some Departments, in their responses, had ignored or not fully addressed those terms of reference. The level of professionalism and competency is an ongoing concern for my Committee with regard to underspend, financial projections and project management, and that is an urgent requirement for departmental budgets. Whatever about economic downturns, there were already pressures for Departments. However, if we do not use the most efficient and effective delivery mechanisms, and measure progress throughout the year, we end up with the nonsense of end-of-year underspend and the surrender of money to the Treasury and to the end-of-year stocks — and, of course, we now face significant difficulties in accessing those stocks.

Several Members mentioned the plight of the local construction sector. In his response, the Minister set out in detail the action being taken. The Committee considered the measures that have already been agreed at Executive level as well as other possibilities. As Members know, the Executive have already taken steps to speed up the payment of invoices, thereby helping with cash flow for small and medium-sized enterprises. Public-procurement policy and practice can be re-examined to maximise the opportunity for local businesses. I raised that matter with the Minister at Question Time yesterday, and the Committee is engaged on an inquiry on that issue, which will hear the views of small and medium-sized enterprises and social enterprises.

The issue of greater flexibility has also been discussed with the Committee with regard to the interpretation or application of procedures in order to cut out unnecessary bureaucracy. As the Minister said, my Committee raised that issue with him with regard to the recent proposal from the Quarry Products Association. That proposal concerned bringing forward roads-maintenance schemes immediately in order to maintain and sustain work crews and workforces, and an agreement by association members to defer submitting invoices for work carried out until the incoming financial year. Although I am mindful of the importance of the accounting rules, the Department should look for flexibility — if necessary, by the Minister raising the issue through urgent direct negotiations with the Treasury — so that the Executive can respond positively to such proposals in the context of the exceptionally difficult economic circumstances.

I also hope that DFP opens up negotiations with the Treasury to enable the Executive further to increase capital spending to boost the building industry. The Committee has been told how Treasury rules prevent the Executive from bringing forward capital spend from one year to the next, despite a three-year CSR settlement being in place. However, it was mentioned in the debate that the Scottish Government have brought forward £230 million of capital projects into 2009-2010, which demonstrates flexibility being explored to the optimum. There is also a question as to whether additional borrowing powers can be accessed in these circumstances, on which a collective judgement would be helpful.

In short, these are exceptional economic circumstances, which require exceptional responses, and I hope that the Minister proactively pursues all available options further to support our local construction industry.

Some Members addressed the issue of competing budgetary demands and the funding gaps caused by what can be best described as the aspirational bids that were made by some Departments and Ministers.

4.30 pm

The Minister dealt quite powerfully with the question of what can be done, as opposed to marking out in an aspirational way what the Departments would like to do. There is the issue of capacity and of finite resource. It has been pointed out that, for many years, Departments have had a track record of putting forward unrealistic bids without identifying how they will be met from within existing departmental allocations. Indeed, they may not have any real expectation of them being met in the final analysis. DFP officials, in their evidence to the Committee, agreed with that.

Members have made cases for priority in individual departmental portfolios. That is inevitable, even in the tenor of this afternoon's discussion. It is obvious that competing or partisan positions would inevitably be presented. However, we heard arguments for additional resourcing for social housing, enhanced skilling and retraining, healthcare, schools capital projects, the construction sector and waste management.

Leaving aside the partisan element, those are priorities for the Assembly and the Executive, and the real issue is how the competing demands can be prioritised and funded. We should all recognise that the present funding arrangements under the Barnett formula — coupled with very limited powers available to raise revenue, except from rates — means that there is a limited pot of money to go around, and constraints exist on the Executive's ability to generate additional or new finances.

The allocations received under the Barnett formula do not take account of our local needs. All parties have made that point from time to time, and, in fairness, Ministers have also made it. Therefore, we have to divide the cake as equitably as possible, and we have to take account of existing pressures. Hence, there is a need to prioritise our spend, to continually raise the performance of the public sector, and to maximise the impact on the value for money to be achieved from the available resources.

The Minister pointed out that overall the level of resources available over the next two years is expected to reduce, rather than increase, as a consequence. However, Departments and Ministers are making bids for significant and unrealistic sums of additional spend, which raises the question of whether people have grasped the value of having carefully thought out and costed Budget proposals in the first instance, and, secondly, in terms of the strategic stocktake, taken account of changing circumstances, economically and otherwise.

The role of Committees and the wider Assembly in actively scrutinising in-year departmental expenditure, including efficiency delivery plans and investment delivery plans, continues to take on more significance every day in the current climate.

We should be mindful that Departments have considerable scope to reallocate resources within their existing baselines to meet new and emerging pressures. Again, Committees have an emerging role — which was there all along, but it is now coming sharply into focus — to ensure that Departments are actively pursuing it. Committees are proactively examining the Departments' activity in that regard and setting out the priorities for the Departments, which, in effect, represent a mature and considered response to existing circumstances.

The fact that many pressures declared by Departments for 2009 must be dealt with in subsequent monitoring rounds provides the opportunity for the Executive to consider the importance of the monitoring round system. Some Members were critical, but I did not hear proposals about how that could be improved. There are four such monitoring rounds in any 12-month period. It is possible that there might be a more focused approach if there were fewer rounds, because some of the earlier rounds are, in fact, just a numbers game.

There is no realistic possibility of either definitive patterns of underspend emerging that would be of assistance, or of any Department giving up resources in the earlier part of a financial year. It might be more productive if we were to reduce our expectations and ensure that we have a much more transparent and accountable approach to the issue of the monitoring round process. In the current circumstances that might take on even more significance, given that the global economic downturn will continue to affect us for the next few years.

The severity of the economic downturn surprised many economists and commentators, including, with all due respect, John Simpson. That means that the Executive are now faced with the challenge of achieving targets in an environment that is markedly different from that which existed when the Programme for Government and the investment strategy were agreed.

I take some reassurance from what the Minister said today and what senior departmental officials are telling us about the strategic investment programme. Completing that programme will be a difficult, but not impossible, task. Those Members who take the approach that a huge black hole is opening up are, perhaps, not fully exploring the substantial power over expenditure that is available to the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Given the restricted Budget, let us work together, support each other and allow all Departments to produce a spending programme that will sustain our local economy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Executive's budget position for 2009/10 and 2010/11, in the context of the strategic stocktake as conveyed by the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the statement on 20 January 2009.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Shared Future

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

Dr Farry: I beg to move

That this Assembly states its concern at the failure of the Office of the First and deputy First Minister to meet its own deadlines for the publication of a draft strategy for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration, incorporating the Racial Equality Strategy; expresses its concern at the marginalisation of the existing Shared Future Framework and Action Plan and the resultant absence of a clear policy on community relations; and demands that the Department urgently brings forward detailed proposals for addressing the continued problems and consequences arising from division and segregation.

I shall begin by declaring an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council (CRC). My colleagues and I are happy to accept the SDLP amendment.

The motion encapsulates the frustration that is growing in many quarters of the House — though not as many as I would like, given the attendance of some parties in particular — and in wider society, about the absence of a credible policy for community relations, good relations or a shared future, call it what one will, in Northern Ireland. That absence is growing and is becoming embarrassing. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has given us a litany of promises about when we can expect a draft strategy to be published for consultation, never mind a finalised policy document. Those promises keep falling, and the gap is widening.

We can all speculate as to why that may be, and we can come up with different theories, such as the differences between the parties that occupy the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or, indeed, major issues of substance. It is to be hoped that the reasons for the delay can be properly elaborated on by Members as the debate continues.

In some respects, CSI (cohesion, sharing and integration) may be an appropriate acronym for the draft strategy, because the way things are going, we might need a crime scene investigator to find it.

A Member: Was that a joke?

Dr Farry: If the Member wants to laugh, he can.

The question of whether we should have a policy for community relations in Northern Ireland is something that we must face up to.

This is not a luxury that we can choose to have; it is not an optional extra. It should be central to any consideration of the future in Northern Ireland. The Executive talk of prioritising the economy, and there are many questions as to whether their actions match their rhetoric. We will judge them on that commitment. However, one cannot grow the economy in Northern Ireland without considering a shared future. Similarly, it is difficult to build and consolidate a shared future unless you have a growing and prosperous society. Those two aspects of policy go hand in hand; that is the incentive for the Executive to get on and produce something.

This delay is not new to devolved government; it is a paradox of Northern Ireland community relations policy that most progress has occurred under direct rule. That is something of which the Assembly should be ashamed. Ultimately, we have responsibility for the nature of our society and should not rely upon a Government accountable to people outside Northern Ireland to produce solid policy consequences. We must face up to that reality. A Shared Future stalled under the first mandate of the Assembly; only when suspension occurred in 2002 did action and documents follow. With the restoration of devolution, a Shared Future and the action plan were sidelined by the incoming Executive, which promised to produce their own policy, which they have called cohesion, sharing and integration.

I have no difficulty whatsoever with a local devolved Administration, particularly when different parties come in, taking on lead responsibility and producing their own alternative strategy in which they have a greater sense of ownership. That is their prerogative, and we respect it. However, we cannot respect a failure to produce. A Shared Future was a good strategy, though it may not have been perfect. If the Executive want to try to improve upon it, we will welcome anything along those lines that they produce — but, yet again, there is a vacuum.

The rationale for having a policy on community relations or good relations is perfectly clear. Continued divisions in our society, the problems of sectarianism and other forms of prejudice, and the ingrained patterns of segregation all carry major costs that we have to bear. They affect us all. None of us can isolate ourselves from those problems. There are major financial implications, but I will not go back over that territory. There are also major economic considerations.

Divisions cause problems for labour market mobility, deter inward investment and affect where investment goes in Northern Ireland once we manage to attract it. We need to face up to those problems. Segregation has major human and social implications; one has only to look at the area of education, where there is not only a cost, but an opportunity cost which

arises when children of different backgrounds are denied the opportunity to mix with one another.

It is no coincidence that the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland that suffer most acutely from poverty are those that are most segregated. When we talk of dealing with poverty in the Assembly, let us look at segregation and the impact that it has.

Of course, we cannot forget the environment. Divisions impact upon the nature of our local environment. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has proven that divisions lead to a heavier carbon footprint in Northern Ireland. If we are to tackle climate change, we must address the divisions and build a shared future.

From that analysis, it is clear that community relations cuts across all aspects of government and cannot be placed in a small silo. Things may be getting better; there are indications from across the board that people from different backgrounds are more willing to mix, share and integrate from one another. We are also becoming a much more diverse society, and that is something that we should warmly welcome. The diversity that is coming to Northern Ireland enriches us all, and we stand to benefit from it. A well-known academic Richard Florida points out that cities and regions that are able to attract a diverse population are better able to nurture creativity and, therefore, greater prosperity. That should put in context the remarks made by one member of the Executive over the weekend.

4.45 pm

At the same time, we must realise that many people in Northern Ireland are missing out on the opportunities that are available to others. There is a real danger of a two-speed Northern Ireland emerging — one in which an underclass is marginalised and lives in a ghettoised environment and, consequently, misses out on opportunities. That situation is perhaps most acute in our two main cities, Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. However, it is also a problem in rural communities. A very good report that was produced by Katy Radford, among others, illustrates that situation extremely well.

Looking to the future, obviously we want the draft strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration to be published as quickly as possible so that consultation can get under way, because it will take some time for the policy to be put in place.

However, we are also concerned about what will be included in the strategy. It is important that we do not slip backwards from 'A Shared Future'. That document was good in the sense that it recognised that "separate but equal" was not a viable way forward and that benign apartheid is a fallacy. It also recognised the importance of cross-cutting actions among

Departments and that community relations cannot be held in the silo of OFMDFM only. There are fears, however, that the draft strategy might create a situation in which we slip back to those ways and in which community relations goes back into the silo of OFMDFM, because no real burden is placed on the other Departments.

On one hand, more money will be made available in departmental budgets for community relations; however, OFMDFM will have control over that. Therefore, other Departments, such as the Department of Education, will not be under pressure to introduce their own policy initiatives.

The SDLP's amendment focuses on the issue of housing. I pay tribute to the work of DSD. At present, it is perhaps the only Department that is moving matters forward and trying to build a shared future, particularly at the housing level by taking forward shared-future housing initiatives and examining the number of the urban regeneration programmes.

However, a major problem exists with the way in which the Housing Executive approaches mixed housing. That must be exposed and challenged. The Housing Executive's policy is to allow people to choose whether they live in a mixed area or a single-identity area. On the face of it, that may seem perfectly benign to some people.

However, the implications of that policy are not benign, because single-identity areas will have to be maintained, thereby denying people the ability to live where they wish. I do not believe that that is a tolerable way forward. Certainly, if that policy were based on race, as opposed to religion, it would be condemned internationally. Although I welcome the amendment, the matter of mixed housing is one that the Minister for Social Development and her Department must address.

Mrs D Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and further calls for these detailed proposals to be fully budgeted and to recognise the potential of social and affordable housing initiatives aimed at tackling sectarianism, promoting reconciliation and advancing the creation of a shared and integrated society.”

I acknowledge the presence of junior Minister Kelly in the Chamber this afternoon. It is much appreciated that at least one member of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is present for this debate. Given junior Minister Donaldson's concurrence with the comments that Minister Wilson made at the weekend, he, too, ought to be here to hear the content of this debate.

During an earlier debate, the Minister of Finance and Personnel said robustly that no ideas were being suggested as to where cuts could be made. If he were to examine the 'Cost of Division' report — which was

published but subsequently binned by members of Sinn Féin at the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — he would find that Northern Ireland, at its upper limit, spends an additional £1.5 billion per annum on a per capita basis on its public services. That includes direct costs and costs arising from duplication.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon all Ministers in the Executive to examine the issues of sectarianism and how we might tackle the biggest challenge that continues to face our society — racism — which has become an unfortunate trend in Northern Ireland now that it is more diverse in nature. That cannot be left unsaid.

It is most regrettable that, since April 2008, Members, including Mr Molloy, Mr Dallat, Dr Farry and me, as well as the Committee, have been told that OFMDFM's programme for cohesion, sharing and integration will be with us shortly.

We were told that the strategy was at an advanced stage of development and would be brought before the Committee, which junior Minister Kelly said would happen before the Hallowe'en recess. We are now at the end of January 2009, and we still have not seen any detailed programme.

One of the points that I want the junior Minister to respond to is that what is now referred to as a programme was initially referred to as a strategy. I would like reassurance that a programme is not a lesser commitment than a strategy. I acknowledge that there is a clear pledge by OFMDFM to achieve reconciliation and integration, no matter how it is presented. Although action to tackle sectarianism remains the biggest challenge, action to tackle racism is most welcome.

The motion tabled by the Alliance Party appears to accept that a racial equality strategy should form part of a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. There are two good policy initiatives there, and there is a danger that, in trying to put everything in the one pot, things will get lost and confused. Although we accept that a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy should tackle sectarianism and racism, we do not want to see the DUP and Sinn Féin duck the challenge or their responsibilities for tackling sectarianism, promoting reconciliation and building a better and shared society.

The sharing of power in Stormont cannot be the end of the journey towards a reconciled society. If anything, the recent DUP/Sinn Féin attempt at a carve up of power highlights that there is still some way to travel. In its amendment, the SDLP remains committed to a shared future and the promotion of reconciliation and good relations in our society. The amendment is evidence of that, as was our motion of 6 October 2008, which called for the immediate publication of the CSI strategy. The motion was accepted unanimously at that time.

There has been, and continues to be, a lack of progress, despite lip-service by the DUP and Sinn Féin in October. As well as committing to delivering detailed proposals in support of the creation of a shared future, any such proposals must be clearly budgeted and money ring-fenced. I acknowledge that additional funding was set aside at the outset of the comprehensive spending review towards the shared future strategy. It is noteworthy that in the monitoring rounds over the past year, money has been returned unspent and reallocated to other Departments because there has not been a robust action plan and the new programme has yet to be introduced.

In 'A Shared Future and Racial Equality: Good Relations Indicators Baseline Report', published in 2006, one of the priority outcomes for OFMDFM is:

"Northern Ireland is a place where people of all backgrounds work, live, learn and play together."

One wonders how hollow some of those words ring today. However, the baseline report also stated:

"More than half of the population (55%) believe that better relations will come about through more mixing."

Those people said that shared housing in particular was one of the ways in which that could be done. The regeneration of the Girdwood and Crumlin Road prison sites offers huge potential to enable that to happen. Many of our people desire and want to be a part of that as we move to a new, better and shared future.

Such a commitment will require a budget, and I believe that there are opportunities to ring-fence such spend. Clarity and commitment need to be built in. Without them, there is a risk that any proposals to promote cohesion, sharing and integration would not be fully and effectively implemented.

Members will be aware that the SDLP fully supports measures to encourage mixed housing; that is clear from Minister Ritchie's prioritisation of housing as an important route to a shared future in Northern Ireland. In Banbridge in my constituency such a pilot scheme was launched several months ago and has been tremendous success. Fortunately, unlike the days when I grew up, there is now a greater acceptance of mixing across the two main communities in the North. That is to be encouraged. People who want to live together should be enabled to do so.

Over the next three years, DSD plans to develop at least 30 shared-future housing neighbourhoods within existing Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates. However, the recent smash-and-grab from DSD's budget is clear evidence of how little importance other parties give to investing in a shared future. Although Members might spout platitudes about a shared future, the facts speak for themselves; money was taken out of DSD. Before Members say that the Minister could not spend the money, let me explain: the Minister sought

that money, but was required to get Executive approval to reallocate it, even within her own Department. She had ideas for doing that which would have led to better outcomes for those most marginalised in society and would have gone some way toward the creation of a better and shared future.

Across civic society there is some doubt as to how inclusive and participative a democracy this Assembly seeks to be. I note that the DUP has tabled a motion calling for the removal of the Civic Forum. The Civic Forum was always viewed as a vehicle to take forward the debate on a shared future. It is a body that can work without the silos of Government Departments and can add real value and fresh perspectives to the challenges facing Northern Ireland as a post-conflict society dealing with issues such as sectarianism, inward migration and interfaces.

Earlier today, at a meeting of the all-party Assembly group on ethnic minority communities, some members expressed concern about the Civic Forum. They had put a lot of work into developing proposals and hoped that their voices would be heard. Representatives from ethnic minorities were very concerned about the comments, which, over the weekend, emanated from representatives of OFMDFM and the Executive. Perhaps junior Minister Kelly will have an opportunity to refer to those comments. If not, I look forward to junior Minister Donaldson's comments later today. There must be leadership and outright condemnation of such remarks.

We all know, only too well, the causes of the conflict in our society over the past 40 years. If we do not stand up for the Poles and Lithuanians, for equal opportunities for all and for a fair and diverse society, today's Pole could be tomorrow's Catholic.

Mr Shannon: There is an old proverb, which illustrates that, at times, we are so caught up in the individual threads that we cannot see the piece that is being embroidered. The Alliance Party wishes to see a better Northern Ireland, and I am with it on that. That is my goal, and the goal of a lot of the parties in the Chamber. I understand the Alliance Party's reason for pushing the issue. However, as a member of the OFMDFM Committee, I am in a position to see the individual threads and how they contribute to the end product that we desire. We are aiming for cohesion, sharing and integration — CSI. Probably all Members are aware that I am a 'CSI: Crime Scene Investigation' fanatic; I watch it every night when I get home. I am not really into forensic science, and I cannot explain how they always get the end result within an hour. Nevertheless, they always do.

We are committed to cohesion, sharing and integration. Although, as yet, there may not be a final product, the DUP is committed to producing a strategy

that provides the right results — a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland. That commitment and that work ethic are already in action through the OFMDFM Committee; projects are in motion, and the Committee is responding to them.

Richt noo OFMDFM haes a' guid freenly unit, whuch brings tha tither woark fae aw iver tha Proavince sic as woarkin wi' groups fae aw sieds, as weel as yung yins an' ethnic minority groups.

This soart o' woark is oan gaun an is weel abel tae staun oan it's ain, an isnae dependin oan a' puttin tha tither o' a paper dokumint. An as we spauk it is poorin it's woark intae fowks lievs

At present, OFMDFM has a good relations unit that co-ordinates work across the Province by working with community groups, youth teams and ethnic minority groups.

That work is ongoing and steadfast, and it is not reliant on the production of a paper document; it is poring into people's lives as we speak.

5.00 pm

OFMDFM also works closely with the Community Relations Council and funds the work that it does in the community. CRC works with local councils on projects that enhance and encourage communities to live peaceably with each other and to work within a framework that breaks down community divides while allowing each community to retain its independence and cultural identity.

OFMDFM has constantly promoted the ideal of a shared future, and it is certain that we are seeing the fruits of the efforts that have been made by hundreds of people. For example, North Belfast has benefited from the youth work that has been carried out there and the work that has been done to reduce interface violence in that area. My colleague Nelson McCausland will probably wish to speak about that later in the debate.

Ethnic minority groups have received funding of almost £1 million in order to promote integration. In my constituency of Strangford, community groups have received funding to put on international days, during which residents of all the ethnic minority groups in the Ards borough can build bonds with their neighbours. Those schemes have been successful in my own area and throughout the Province.

Personally, and as a DUP Member, I welcome much of the 'A Shared Future' document; it has a role to play in moving Northern Ireland forward. However, its ideas are already being integrated into community life, and although the documentation has not been completed, the work has not stopped.

That is not to say that things are perfect; they are not. One need only look at the attacks on Orange Halls

to see that things are not as they should be. Those attacks are damnable, and it is imperative that they are stopped immediately in order for us to move on. It appears to me that projects that work with affected people and young people are the best way of ensuring a better future for everyone. That is the reason why OFMDFM —

Mrs D Kelly: Given that we are talking about true integration and full equality, will the Member then call upon his colleague Minister Wilson to withdraw his remarks that people who have roots here and live here should have preference for jobs over others?

Mr Shannon: He will have to answer for himself, but I have no issues with that. I am happy to promote jobs for everyone, and I make that my business wherever I am.

There are better ways of ensuring a better future for everyone, and it is for that reason that OFMDFM has been working and will continue with its work and provide funding.

The SDLP amendment refers to housing. Tomorrow morning, the Minister for Social Development and I will speak about a new housing scheme that involves 40 units in Newtownards. That shows that we are working within the process.

The DUP wants a resolution to the problems with getting the document finalised, but, in the interim, no one is sitting back on their heels; we are on the ground and doing the business. We are at the beginning of a long road towards a shared future, and we will see the journey through to the end.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the amendment. In common with the proposer of the motion, I want to see the publication of a cohesion, sharing and integration document. However, that must be a programme that delivers, and any attempt to eradicate the twin evils of racism and sectarianism must be based on true equality and inclusion. It is only when that foundation has been laid that the kind of shared and better future that everyone wants — in which everyone is regarded and treated equally — can begin to be built.

I am sure that the proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment will share my hope that the CSI framework will act as a road map towards that society. I welcome the commitment that the deputy First Minister made to provide the necessary financial resources to roll out the programme, and I am sure that the First Minister would also make that commitment. I also acknowledge the ongoing work and the ongoing funding arrangements that are in place to promote equality and good relations while we await the publication of the document.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was informed that funding to support the integration of minority ethnic groups rose from around £600,000 in 2007 to £1 million in 2008. It was also told that the budget for the good relations programme rose from £21 million in the previous Administration to £28 million, an increase of 33%. As was mentioned earlier, £500,000 was committed to youth interface projects. Nevertheless, I understand people's frustration at the delay in publishing the document. However, millions of pounds of public money have been poured into failed strategies in the past, and many of those strategies have changed nothing.

A Shared Future, which is a legacy policy, ignored the reality that the past structures of the unionist regime and British state actively promoted sectarianism through a wide range of direct policies and deliberate outcomes.

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No, you will have time to make your point later.

Divisions in our society, such as sectarianism and racism, manifest themselves in several different ways — as individual or group actions and attitudes or through processes. However, sectarianism and racism also occur, and thrive, within structural inequalities. A Shared Future did not acknowledge that fact, let alone do anything to address it.

We have also witnessed the creation of a quasi good-relations industry in which all kinds of groups and quangos have sprung up to take advantage of the public money that was being thrown into the shared-future agenda. However, that did little to change the reality on the ground. Therefore, although I share concerns over the delay, Sinn Féin cannot support any motion that defends the failed and flawed legacy of the old, shared-future agenda. Lessons must be learned from the mistakes that have been made or we are doomed to repeat them.

The new good-relations approach must be different. It must change outcomes, and if that means taking time to get it right, then, despite the frustration, that approach is correct. There are already many good examples of genuine cohesion and integration at community grass-roots level; one need only look at the joint-community initiatives that are taking place between the Falls and the Shankill, and elsewhere.

The CSI approach must build on those examples, and on the existing legal framework and practices, which are designed to deliver equality for all. There can be no hierarchy of equality. Any good-relations document must be based on due regard for the promotion of equality of opportunity and on addressing relations between all section 75 vulnerable groups.

Social need is also closely interrelated to cohesion, sharing and integration. Both the St Andrews Agreement and the Programme for Government set the context for tackling poverty through the criterion of objective need. Therefore, in rejecting the amendment, I hope that the determining factor for the allocation of houses is need rather than creed. That should, of course, be the case across all programmes and policies. At present, meeting the needs of people is being undermined by the pursuit of a flawed shared-future agenda that prioritises the social engineering of mixed communities over the objective need of those who are homeless — shame on it.

I hope that it is not the case that the proposer and supporters of the motion talk about how much they want a shared and better future while wishing to maintain the same structures, patterns and outcomes of deprivation that make people's lives a misery. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Elliott: Unlike Mr Shannon, I have no proverbs to quote. However, I will point out that the Ulster Unionist Party has a commitment built into its constitution to seek a shared society based on pluralism and a respect for diversity; values that we in the Ulster Unionist party bring to the debate.

It was interesting to hear Ms Anderson talk about the old shared-future agenda. I wonder what that was. Was it the bombing, shooting and murdering of people in this Province? I am not sure whether that was what she was referring to. Certainly, shared-future values are not blind to some of the harsh realities that we have lived through in the past 30 years of violence that has, inevitably, left a painful legacy of division, which must be approached with sensitivity and care.

No Government can make people tolerant or respectful of each other. However, it is the Government's solemn obligation to uphold and promote respect, tolerance and pluralism. That does not mean that we can be forced together. People in this society cannot be forced together. There is a responsibility to build relationships, which have not been good over the past 30 years.

Dr Farry: I understand the Member's point about not forcing people to live together, and I do not support any degree of social engineering. Does he agree that there is a demand from a large section of the population for mixing in education, leisure, workplaces and housing and that the state does not provide the facilities that will allow people who want to integrate to do so?

Mr Elliott: I accept that in many respects. The Member is quite right, and I thank him for his intervention. The difficulty is that people cannot be forced together in circumstances in which they do not want to be together, whether it be living, being educated or socialising together. However, the Assembly, as

society's political leaders, has a responsibility to attempt to build those relationships.

Since the return of devolution, however, the two main parties — rather than genuinely trying to share power — have held each other at bay in what has, basically, been a mutual stand-off of mutual loathing. Rather than making decisions that are based on co-operation and a genuine belief in a normalised and shared future for the people of Northern Ireland, they have carved up power and retained a them-and-us mentality.

Mr Ford: Get used to it.

Mr Elliott: That is a fact that we heard yesterday: get used to it. Certainly, we in this party will not get used to it just like that, and I am sure that that view is shared by others.

Recently, we witnessed Northern Ireland's Education Minister praising a convicted terrorist when she was speaking to children. We have witnessed the deputy First Minister describe the democratic political beliefs of over half the people of Northern Ireland as evil. The real evil in this society is the people who murdered, bombed and shot this Province almost to a standstill for over 30 years.

In the past, people have criticised organisations such as the Orange Order. The Orange Order has been to the fore in promoting civil and religious liberties for all in this society. Mr Shannon spoke of Orange Halls being attacked, just as GAA halls have been attacked. I condemn all such attacks on not only individual organisations, but on this entire society.

This society must be built on mutual respect. Although I do not agree with all the GAA's ethos, rules and regulations, I have a respect for those who do and who want to promote that organisation and play its sports. What I ask for is mutual respect from those same people for the organisations in which I believe and of which I am part. I want them to respect that and to show me the same understanding that I show them. That requires co-operation, listening to each other and being confident in one's own organisation and argument.

This week, the Assembly witnessed the two main parties accept none of the amendments to the Financial Assistance Bill that other political parties tabled in genuine faith. The Ulster Unionist Party believes in a Northern Ireland that is based on tolerance and respect. Those values are core to the British identity. The United Kingdom is a genuinely pluralist place that thrives on its diversity. That is evident in everyday life, and is becoming more evident in this Province of Northern Ireland.

We must strive to develop respect in such a way that different cultures and traditions can be celebrated in a

shared Northern Ireland. We must strive to learn more about our differences and to recognise that from those differences emerges genuine interdependence. Everyone in this society must learn to have genuine respect for one another.

Mr McCausland: I very much believe in a shared and better future, as is stated in the Programme for Government. Much is being done to move in that direction. The Department of Finance and Personnel has set aside £30 million over the next three years, which is a significant increase on previous funding, to make progress in that direction and to promote cohesion.

A good-relations group is chaired by the junior Ministers and involves people from the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Community Relations Council, and others. Work is being targeted specifically towards North Belfast, which, again, is chaired by the junior Ministers. Recently, additional funding was directed towards other measures, such as bonfire initiatives and re-imaging communities, in order to help to improve community relations.

Therefore, much work has been done on a shared future, and the DUP is ready to make further progress on the issue.

5.15 pm

However, I must respond to Martina Anderson's point. She seems to believe that British and unionist rule is behind all the sectarianism and division in our society. Let me say clearly that that is a thoroughly sectarian analysis in itself. An honest assessment is that there is a problem with sectarianism in our society but that it is not restricted to any one community. Sectarianism is an issue across the board and, indeed, across the border in the Republic of Ireland. I suggest that it ill-behaves someone with Ms Anderson's record to lecture anyone on matters of sectarianism. I believe in a shared and better future, but I often wonder whether some of those who proclaim that message genuinely believe in it.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that Ms Anderson was perhaps talking about the old shared future agenda in which the west bank of Londonderry was disseminated and almost all the Protestant community left the area?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. We have seen ethnic cleansing in areas around the border and in North Belfast; however, I will speak about one of those areas in a moment.

I noted Dolores Kelly's comment about Crumlin Road jail and Girdwood, and I agree that the project there must have a shared site and be a shared initiative if it is to succeed. However, the SDLP and Sinn Féin regard that site as one that would accommodate single-identity and specifically nationalist housing.

Indeed, Alban Maginness, who I am glad is here today, once described it as a “windfall site” for nationalist housing. He also described Torrens as a “windfall site”, even though Protestant families were forced out of the area by a sustained sectarian campaign of intimidation.

On the issue of shared housing in North Belfast, the Housing Executive helped the local community of Carrick Hill to erect an arch over the entrance to the estate. Over that arch are a United Irishmen badge and a welcome sign in Irish. I wonder how many people from the unionist community will seek housing in that area. That must also be a shared site if it is to succeed, but it does not seem that that is on some people’s agendas at the moment.

Turning to the issue of education and particularly teacher training, there are teacher-training colleges at St Mary’s and Stranmillis. There is justification for having only one teacher-training college, yet there is a mixed college at Stranmillis and a Roman Catholic college at St Mary’s. If we are really interested in saving money, I wonder how much could be saved by amalgamating those colleges. Dolores Kelly and Stephen Farry spoke about opportunities and the need to save money. I wonder whether Dolores Kelly, in particular, will step up to the line on that issue.

Following on from Tom Elliott’s point about the Minister of Education, there is even a primary or nursery school — I am not sure which — in West Belfast that takes its name from Bobby Sands’s pen name so that he could be held up as an icon to the children in that school; indeed, someone associated with the school said that he was a “role model”. If that is the view that some people have of a shared future, I am greatly concerned.

Much can be done, even without waiting for strategy to be implemented. I ask people to examine the figures that the Equality Commission published recently about its own employment pattern. About one third of the Equality Commission’s staff come from the Protestant community and almost two thirds come from the Roman Catholic community. Indeed, the Equality Commission’s employment pattern has worsened year after year for the past five years. The Equality Commission is happy to lecture everyone else, including Sammy Wilson, on those matters, but it is time that such organisations put their own houses in order.

I intended to raise a whole range of other issues, but given that my time in which to speak is drawing to a close, I will finish with one passing comment. I commend the Irish Football Association’s work in tackling sectarianism. Once again, I encourage and urge the GAA to move forward into a shared future by abandoning the nationalist elements in its constitution and the republican trappings that are in the names of

some clubs, grounds and trophies. That would open the GAA’s doors to unionists as well as nationalists, which would be a step towards a better and shared future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Jennifer McCann, I ask Members to make their contributions address the motion as much as possible.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Divisions in society take on many forms in respect of the individual, the group and structural inequalities.

For me, one of the biggest flaws of ‘A Shared Future’ is that it still fails to recognise the state’s role in creating those structural inequalities. Tom Elliott and Nelson McCausland deliberately did not mention the violence of the state, which was directly or indirectly responsible for murdering hundreds of Irish citizens. It is a bit rich listening to them lecturing Members on this side of the House.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member accept that the DUP’s position on violence has been consistent and is rather different from that of the two Members from the same party who spoke and who both have a record of violence?

Ms J McCann: No; I do not accept that point.

The documents focus on the role of individuals and groups and are weakened by their failure to challenge institutional discrimination and by their lack of emphasis on the need for a national reconciliation unit to drive good relations on the island. It is not only about shared space or understanding; it is about tackling inequalities and discrimination, no matter what quarter they come from. We must challenge existing patterns of disadvantage and need in areas across the North, and we must challenge in particular the underinvestment in certain disadvantaged areas that has resulted in people living in need and in greater disadvantage.

‘A Shared Future’ must tackle all forms of inequality, including discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation and disability. Diversity in society should be seen as something that enriches, rather than divides, communities. As some Members said, the community and voluntary sector plays a key role. In West Belfast, local community organisations work with people in interface areas. Those representatives can teach local people how to tackle sectarianism, racism and other inequalities.

The North of Ireland must be viewed as a changing society. An increasing number of families from all backgrounds and ethnic minorities live and work here. It is incumbent on leaders here, especially political leaders, to show those groups that they are welcome,

given that they contribute positively to life here and work in hospitals and so on. That must be recognised.

The Programme for Government calls for the North of Ireland to become a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous and stable society that is founded on the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust with the protection and vindication of human rights for all. Everyone in society needs to enjoy equality of opportunity and be valued and respected. Equality is the key to building a shared future, and no one in the Chamber — or outside it — should be afraid of equality for all. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate. A shared future is one the key indicators of true progress to a peaceful and stable future.

In the foreword of the document 'A Shared Future', the then Secretary of State, Paul Murphy MP, said that a move towards "relationships rooted in mutual recognition" is an important part of creating a shared future. I cannot disagree with that view. The document also outlines the:

"desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion".

Furthermore, it says:

"it will be incumbent on every individual and organisation in Northern Ireland to play their part to promote a shared Northern Ireland."

I can see the benefits that meeting those aspirations will bring to the people of Northern Ireland and to the Budget.

Part 1 of 'A Shared Future: First Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009' states that all individuals should be treated equally. I believe that many people in our communities are doing just that: treating each other equally. However, a major stumbling block exists to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different political opinion.

You may well ask why I see a stumbling block, and I am happy to supply an answer. As an example, on Limavady Borough Council, where I have served the entire community for 24 years, the six unionist councillors are treated as second-class citizens — with complete disrespect, and what borders on contempt. As long as that behaviour continues, the Utopia that the Members opposite say they want as a shared future is nothing but a pipe dream.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: No, I will not.

On 24 June 2008, junior Minister Kelly stated that he is:

"committed to the principle of equality for all citizens."

Perhaps that junior Minister and his party leadership should tell some of their party's local councillors that that is party policy, because they do the exact opposite. They cause division, they cause distrust, and they do not seem to care.

It also must be said that some of their SDLP colleagues continually support them, and cannot escape their share of blame for the distrust caused. On 30 May 2008, junior Minister Donaldson said:

"Social cohesion is based on changing mindsets."

Those are the most practical and sensible words that I have heard for a long time in relation to this issue. When Sinn Féin and the SDLP show respect for their unionist opponents in all elected bodies, we will be setting an example for the change of mindset that is required, and not before.

Mr B McCrea: It is easy for people to offer words; sometimes words can be used to benefit and sometimes to disadvantage. I heard Jennifer McCann talk about the need to see some leadership and to work together. She spoke about everywhere else except this place. I will take no lectures about a shared future — either from that side of the House or from the opposite side — when every time we try to put forward constructive proposals, we are cut down. There is an opportunity to avoid going back to the past.

Last night, I spoke to a group of young people of mixed backgrounds, aged 16 or 17, along with a panel of other folk. They got extremely exercised about the topical issue of the Eames/Bradley report. What I saw was that those young people, who know nothing of the past 30 to 40 years of bombing, shooting and maiming, have not learnt the lesson. They all want to go back and rake up coals, to poke their fingers into places to see what is there. If we continually rub salt into wounds, we are not going to move forward. There are people deliberately, in my opinion, misrepresenting the comments of others. They seek to take party-political advantage of things, and to say that they are right and everybody else is wrong. How can there be a shared future without some form of respect for another point of view?

Does a shared future have any credibility? Look at the sectarian carve up that happens in nearly every part of our society. Is there some agreement on a common identity; some sort of unified vision; some sort of commonality that would bind us all together? Talk about who has been to places — I have been to a GAA match; I have been to the SDLP conference; I have been to the Gay Pride parade. I have been to those events, because tolerance is not something that is preached, it is something that is shown. I see precious little of it.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, I will give way, but it is not something that comes easily, because any time I try to make an intervention it is not accepted. I will accept the intervention.

Ms J McCann: The Member sits on Lisburn City Council; would he say that there is tolerance in that council for the Sinn Féin members? Unionists have deliberately excluded them from committees for years. Discrimination has gone on for years on that council.

Mr B McCrea: One can take any particular set of circumstances and find fault almost anywhere. The challenge for us here is to find a way of showing some leadership. I am not sure that I see it. There is talk of some sort of mythical people, and of people from working-class communities getting together, and everything is fine.

I do not see that — because I see the problems here in the Assembly. People are looking to the Assembly to keep up with the moves that they have made. I have a real fear that if we do not start putting emphasis on building a shared future, or a common future, or whatever one wants to call it, we will, at some stage, return to the trials and tribulations of the past.

5.30 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I think that the Member will get an extra minute — I am sure that everybody will be pleased to hear that. *[Laughter.]*

I thank the Member for giving way. Martina Anderson said that the strategy A Shared Future was set up under direct rule. It now transpires that Sinn Féin is adopting the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, which it binned, because the party could not come up with anything better in its absence. It was not the SDLP, the UUP or the Alliance Party that promised such a strategy — it was the two parties in OFMDFM that promised the strategy and failed to deliver it. Does the Member agree that Sinn Féin should look for the beam in its own eye?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for her intervention. It is good that I have an extra minute, because she took one minute and 30 seconds to tell me. It demonstrates that a certain amount of humour can go a long way. We sometimes point out the ridiculous position that others adopt, as she has just done.

I have had my fair share of people putting me right on a thing or two today — mainly when I have not been in the Chamber. I find that really disappointing, because I will take on anybody. I accept that there are people of good intent on all sides who want to produce a strategy on which we can work.

I will probably get it in the neck for saying this, but I sometimes wonder what OFMDFM is for. It is so

bereft of ideas that it tries to grab powers from other Departments. If building a shared future is the central issue, let us get on with it. Let us have genuine engagement and mutual respect for all the good points that were made on all sides of the House. It is a fundamental challenge, and this Assembly must show leadership. As my colleague Tom Elliott said, it is fundamental to the approach of the Ulster Unionist Party. We will continue to defend civil liberties.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The wording and intent of the motion need to be examined. I want to look at particular aspects of the motion and — like my colleagues who spoke previously — the framework for a shared future. I will also talk about community relations, division and sectarianism.

‘A Shared Future’ was a direct rule and NIO strategy document that this Assembly inherited, and it consistently failed to address the reasons why people have been — and continue to be — excluded. The emphasis of the analysis has always been on the need for people’s attitudes and values to change — that everything could be different if the two problem communities could be brought together. That has been the message that community relations, and shared future, enthusiasts have peddled, and it needs to change.

The emphasis of a new strategy must be that it has the principle of equality at its very core. We need to incorporate the structural and historical inequalities that have led to deprivation and marginalisation in all of our communities. As an elected representative for North Belfast — and like many others who live in the area — I work each day to try to make a difference for the people who live there.

The problems of sectarianism, homophobia and racism must be tackled head on. The task of building and developing good relations needs to take place on our streets, and that will continue to be one of the biggest challenges that I will face as an elected representative. I have no difficulty with that — in fact, it is a privilege to face that challenge. However, it is imperative that we get the CSI strategy right.

I do not believe that anybody will ignore, ridicule or duck the challenges of national reconciliation, building good relations and having a shared and better future for all Irish citizens. In the past, there was too much of a negative agenda concerning equality matters and objective needs.

Interface violence and sectarianism cannot, and should never, be tolerated. We must tackle sectarianism head on and investigate its root causes, not just its symptoms, which is what the existing shared framework does; that is why we must ensure that we get any new CSI right.

I have no doubt that the proposer of the motion wants the same as I do, and most Members agree with the intent expressed by Basil McCrea. However, I disagree with some Members' analysis, and that is what political debate is about — it is my prerogative to disagree with people. I do not disagree with those Members' intent or with their principled positions; I disagree with their analysis.

Mr Ford: If I recall correctly, when this matter was debated in a slightly different form in October 2008, the Member and her colleagues did not disagree with statements of principles or intent. Can she tell us what has changed in the past three months?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Can I assume, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that I will be allowed an extra minute?

The Deputy Chairperson: Yes.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I totally disagree with the existing shared-future framework, and I have made that clear. Nevertheless, I agree that we must have a shared, and a better, future. However, in all seriousness, debates such as this must take place on the streets where people live, and as elected representatives, we must be aware of what it is like for families to live in fear or to have three generations living under one roof.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I was interested to hear her refer to the rights of every Irish citizen and say that debates must happen on our streets. Does the Member accept that there are those who do not consider themselves to be Irish citizens? Furthermore, the history books tell us that when partition occurred in Ireland, 12% of the population in what is now the Irish Republic were Protestants; today, that figure is 2%. At the time of partition, nationalists made up 20% of the population of Northern Ireland; whereas, they now make up more than 40%. Can the Member explain why the Protestant community was excluded in the Irish Republic?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his intervention; however, I will not go into the annals of Irish history to explain what happened. I accept that the Member considers himself to be British, but as an Irish republican, I consider myself to be Irish.

The SDLP has revealed its hand; rather than deliver on objective need, it proposes that shared-future housing be built on the Girdwood site in North Belfast, so I thank its Members for clarifying that point. In order to implement equality measures, we must consider targeted outcomes on the basis of objective need, because only then will we have a shared, and a better, future for all. We must get used to democracy and to the cut and thrust of debate; however, I will not get used to accepting historical and structural inequalities for ever more. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: The Ulster Unionist Party believes in a Northern Ireland, and, indeed, a United Kingdom, based on respect and tolerance for all. It believes in a shared future for everyone, and if that is to happen, politicians must take great care with their language, which can affect those who are less articulate or less able to reason. If we behave intolerantly, there is a danger that others may follow our lead.

Let us remember that, for many years, when the economy was successful, Northern Ireland employers struggled to fill vacancies, and without skills and labourers from other parts of the European Union, companies such as Moy Park might have moved its employment elsewhere. Indeed, in my constituency, Schrader Electronics found it difficult to fill some skilled engineering posts.

Without the skilled engineers who came from other parts of the United Kingdom and the European Community, companies in Northern Ireland might have been unable to fill their customers' demands and, subsequently, they would have lost market share.

Members need to be careful in what they do and say and recognise the skills that have come here. We need a shared future for everyone. Eva Grossman, a self-employed entrepreneur in my constituency — and someone for whom I have a great deal of respect — is quoted in the Morning View item in yesterday's 'News Letter'. She said:

"Any form of discrimination is not good especially now during the time of difficulties and hardship for everybody".

She went on to ask:

"Would the hardship experienced by a person born in Northern Ireland be any different from those from outside?"

She is saying that everyone is affected in times of economic hardship. We are suffering an economic downturn, and jobs are being lost.

Another factor that has contributed to the situation is the decline in the value of the pound against the euro. Many people who have come here to take up jobs have found that they are working for much less money than they had been previously, and they have less to send home or to save and take home.

Members and Ministers should be careful and tolerant in their language. Everyone hopes that our economy will improve and that we will return to full employment. Perhaps, some time in the future, we will be dependent once more on those who are willing to travel and fill our job vacancies.

One must remember that Northern Ireland companies are successful in winning work elsewhere. Farrans and Grahams have won a £100 million contract in Scotland. How would we feel if their employees — many of whom come from Northern Ireland — faced prejudice as they move to other parts of the United Kingdom to

work? We should ensure that we are tolerant in all that we do.

When local politicians use language that is similar to that used by the BNP, they start to set themselves, and Northern Ireland, apart from national British public opinion. Such language can appeal to the worst fears and prejudices of some.

We need a shared future if we are to maximise any economic opportunities that arise. If we are to obtain the best value from our Budget, we need to look at shared services and how we can position key public infrastructure in locations that everyone can use safely so that savings to our Budget can be made. We cannot afford large duplication in our services.

Martina Anderson ranted against unionists; however, she overlooked her own personal history and the pain that she has caused to individuals. Furthermore, she failed to recognise that actions by herself, her party and their colleagues in arms who used violence against their neighbours, helped to create barriers in Northern Ireland. They prevented a shared future, and they are trying swiftly to distance themselves from those events.

Jennifer McCann also failed to acknowledge those actions. Provisional Sinn Féin was responsible for a vast amount of violence and deaths in Northern Ireland; it was responsible for the majority of violent events. It is, therefore, important that a shared future is recognised and that people do not have double standards.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order. On several occasions, the Speaker has ruled on the term "Provisional Sinn Féin". I also take great exception to the Member's comment that Sinn Féin was involved in the killing or murder of anyone or violence against anyone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand that there is no party called Provisional Sinn Féin.

Mr Beggs: I think that I referred to their colleagues in the Provisional IRA, to which few doubt they are closely linked. It is important that they recognise their failings of the past and move forward together.

Mr A Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will it always require someone from this party to raise the issue as a point of order without the Speaker or Deputy Speaker dealing with it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Member questioning my ability to chair the meeting?

Mr A Maskey: I certainly am not.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I was about to speak, but your colleague intervened before me.

Mr Beggs: It is important that people recognise —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. *[Laughter.]* I call the junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly.

5.45 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr G Kelly): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. A series of criticisms have been made about the delay in bringing forward a policy on cohesion, sharing and integration. That is a fair criticism. OFMDFM is trying to bring forward a strategy that will right the wrongs of the past and that will help to heal the many divisions in our society, which many Members referred to. There is no easy way or quick-fix solutions to those problems. OFMDFM wants to get it right, and it is committed to bringing forward that strategy.

The previous Shared Future framework was a direct rule strategy, and it was from a different time. The Assembly and the Executive are now working, and we have enhanced equality measures designed to protect all members of our community. We also have a growing and welcome number of ethnic minority communities. Therefore, we need to bring forward a new strategy now.

As a representative of North Belfast — a constituency bisected by interfaces and which has suffered from thousands of sectarian attacks — I accept the legitimate criticism about the delay. I, along with others, have worked to reduce the tension and end violence. I see the work being done continually by many people who work on the ground at night and during the weekends. I, and OFMDFM, support all that work.

I want to provide a direct challenge to the proposers of the motion. I am concerned about the accusation implicit in the motion, which claims that the vision of a shared and better future for everyone no longer matters to Ministers in OFMDFM and the parties that they represent. I want to emphasise in the strongest possible terms that that is completely untrue. It is not unreasonable to criticise and question. However, the issue is too important to play party politics with.

It is almost two years since I took up office. During that time I, and others, have been proud to have played a part in taking practical steps to nurture the positive progress being made on the ground to build strong cross-community relationships. Dealing with the debate on the basis that does not recognise the reality of the situation is disrespecting the substantial progress that is being achieved.

As I said already, our priority is to be active in practical ways, so that we can be judged on our record, and not by what others say. I remind Members what the Programme for Government for 2008-2011 states about our vision for achieving a shared and better future for all:

"equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be watchwords for all of our policies and programmes across Government."

The promotion of good relations cannot be divorced or separated from equality. Equality is the foundation and prerequisite for building good relations. To that end, the Executive have made equality central —

Mr Ford: Will the junior Minister confirm that the statement about equality is the considered opinion of OFMDFM, rather than his personal opinion?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): As the Member will know, these speeches are generally passed through the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I am speaking as a junior Minister for the Executive.

The motion asked Members to express their concerns about the marginalisation of good relations. Let us examine our track record and analyse the validity of that marginalisation claim. Let us examine whether we have been true to that vision.

Through the 2007 spending review, we successfully increased OFMDFM's budget for good relations and good race relations from £21 million to £28 million over the CSR period, which has been referred to by several Members. That is a 33% increase on the funding made available by the previous Administration. Are we marginalising a shared and better future? I do not think so.

Funding to support the integration of minority ethnic groups into communities increased from approximately £600,000 in 2007 to £1 million in 2008, and will continue at £1 million for 2009. That is a 66% increase. Are we marginalising the importance of new communities? Hardly.

Funding for targeting resources at on-the-ground projects for young people to prevent them being drawn into interface disturbances over the summer months increased to £500,000 in 2008. Are we marginalising at-risk or high-risk young people? Absolutely not.

We successfully piloted schools projects in association with Rangers and Celtic, who acted together to address sectarianism, specifically in sport. Therefore, the criticism that we have put sectarianism to the side is also wrong. We have commissioned a short, sharp research project to identify effective longer-term intervention and support ideas for at-risk young children.

Mrs D Kelly: Perhaps the junior Minister could share those statistics with his party colleagues, who seem to be at a loss to understand that the Shared Future framework and action plan, although flawed, is delivering on some of its priorities?

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): I am giving the statistics to everyone. Anna Lo did not get a chance to speak, but she knows that when the issue of subsuming the Shared Future policy arose at the commemoration of the Chinese new year last night, we said that we are building on it. We are making a massive improvement

on that, and the work is being carried out by Ministers and Departments.

We have also worked proactively with all relevant agencies, local councils and the PSNI to address key problem areas. We have provided over €50 million to match-fund Peace III funding for measures that OFMDFM is accountable for — that is not a marginal contribution to financial resources. Although some may claim that they have heard that before, others must not have taken it in. I say again, especially to Dolores Kelly, that it bears repeating.

Rest assured that we have a joined-up approach to ensure that people in communities with needs see that they are not on the margins of our work. Some projects were mentioned earlier, so I will explain what goes on, regardless of whether it is for people in Dungannon, Craigavon, Derry or North Belfast. Our job is to resource and empower people who work for the benefit of their communities and their neighbouring communities. When I talk about our record, I am not trying to claim credit for what those dedicated people do. However, talking about our role is the way to counter the message that we are marginalising such work, which is the criticism that is implied by the motion.

As a Minister, I am also financially accountable — I must prove that the large amounts of money to which I refer actually make a difference to how we all live. I have evidence to show Members that we pass the financial accountability test. My evidence, which is based on independently sourced research and NISRA official statistics, shows continued improvements in the range of good-relations indicators. There was a 12% drop in the number of racist crimes between 2006-07 and 2007-08, and a similar percentage shift in the number of crimes with a sectarian motive. In 2007, three out of every five young people — 60% — said that relations between Protestants and Catholics were getting better, which is a significant improvement on the 43% who said that in 2005. Approximately two thirds of adults — 66% — in 2007 agreed that community relations were better than they had been five years ago, compared with 52% in 2005.

The vast majority of people continue to believe that better relations will come about through more mixing between the two communities, which several Members mentioned. Support for mixed-religion neighbourhoods remains high, but, as was pointed out, that situation cannot be forced. People have to agree to it.

The number of parades at which disorder occurred decreased from 34 in 2005 to 10 in 2007, which is a 70.5% reduction. The proportion of enrolments for minority-ethnic pupils has increased from 1.8% to 2%. Few people now think that flag-flying happens more than it did five years ago. Those are indications of positive outcomes and are selected from independent

data and research. We all recognise that challenging work remains, which is why there will be an incremental increase in the budget over the current year.

What is the basis for the ongoing investment? Reports have highlighted several challenges that still have to be overcome. For example, in 2007, there was a clear increase in self-reported prejudice towards people from ethnic minorities — 35%, compared with 24% in 2006.

The number of applications to industrial tribunals on the grounds of racial discrimination has increased from 79 complaints in 2005-06 to 108 in 2006-07. Support for inward EU migration — people who think that it is a good thing — has fallen from 76% in 2005 to 68% in 2007.

Advancing social transformation and the inclusion of all our people is essential if we are to deliver the peaceful, fair and healthy society that we all want. Real progress has been made in recent years, and our society continues to be transformed. However, significant challenges remain to be addressed if everyone is to be given the opportunity to contribute to, and to benefit from, a shared and better future.

We have always emphasised the importance that we attach to the equality agenda, and I reassure Members and communities that we are ensuring that all our legislation meets the standards set by European directives. At this stage, we continue to achieve that by amending regulations to existing legislation. By promoting good relations in that practical way, we seek to challenge and support our communities to become places where any person, regardless of who they are, can live, work, rest and socialise in respect, acceptance, safety and freedom from violence — words that were used by many Members today.

At central Government level, strong political leadership is essential for the success of the strategy. We envisage that the establishment of the new ministerial-led good-relations panel will oversee the work across Government, in local government and with key stakeholders to tackle the issues that I mentioned.

A strategic action plan and locally delivered action plans will be developed and implemented, which will skilfully take account of all good-relations and good race-relations issues through complementary bottom-up, top-down approaches.

The amendment asks us to recognise the potential that social and affordable housing initiatives offer to the goal of creating a shared and integrated society. The provision of social housing must, in the first instance, be based on objective need. Homeless people and those who are living in cramped or unsatisfactory houses need homes, and we need to provide them. We also need to build not only estates, but communities that are safe, secure and open to all. Equality means

that housing should meet objective need, regardless of race, religion or membership of any minority group. People have the right to live wherever they choose.

I want to give credit to the innovative work of the Housing Executive with local people who want to see their segregated communities become places that are safe and welcoming, where anyone can live. Therefore, I give credit to communities in Springfarm in Antrim, Carren Crescent in Enniskillen, Ballynafeigh in Belfast, Clanmil in Lisburn and in the village of Sion Mills. One or two other projects were also mentioned earlier. Those communities are turning that large percentage of people who would prefer to live in mixed neighbourhoods into reality.

By way of confirming that we recognise the importance of those initiatives, only last Thursday, OFMDFM facilitated discussions between community relations officers in all 26 district councils and the staff in the Housing Executive's International Fund for Ireland-sponsored project, to co-ordinate that very issue, along with the effects of the re-imaging communities, community bridges and Peace III programmes.

Those are ambitious and comprehensive objectives; they are essential for us all to accept. I also firmly believe that they are achievable, and that we are reflecting the aspirations of all our people.

Many Members spoke, and I dealt with many of the issues earlier, but there are some pressing matters. Stephen Farry praised direct rule, which does not surprise me, because, under direct rule, the Alliance Party was involved in all the quangos, and it still seems to be involved in them.

Dolores Kelly mentioned the strategy, and I said earlier that it will be brought forward around Hallowe'en. We will give a commitment to try to bring forward the strategy as soon as possible and work towards that. That is another commitment that I have given.

Martina Anderson made a point about equality and good relations, and the fact that equality —

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

The junior Minister (Mr G Kelly): A commitment was made to make resources available for equality and good relations, and, as we have already said, OFMDFM will fulfil that commitment.

6.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling Mr Alban Maginness to make his winding-up speech, I must inform Members that we tried very hard to call Anna Lo because of her special contribution to the debate. I regret that that was not possible.

Mr A Maginness: The debate was comprehensive, and many issues have been unearthed. One of the main reasons for the motion and the amendment was to determine the nature of the Administration's thoughts on the shared-future concept. Having listened to junior Minister Kelly, I am no wiser about what the Administration thinks. Its approach appears to be confused and, at best, cryptic; they do not give any clear and coherent leadership on the matter.

Furthermore, there appears to be a serious difference between the three Sinn Féin Members who spoke during the debate and junior Minister Kelly on the issues that he raised and the comments that he made. Those Sinn Féin Members talked about equality; it seems to me that they are prepared to accept equality, but, at the same time, separation. The whole aim of any good-relations policy is to integrate the community and bring people together where, traditionally and historically, we have been divided. If one is to wait for absolute equality in our community, one will be waiting for ever. One can never bridge differences to the point at which equality is perfectly established. That seemed to me to be Sinn Féin's basic thesis.

It seems to me that a fundamental problem exists between Sinn Féin and other parties in the House, and the DUP in particular, which at least pays lip service to the idea of a shared future. The other parties — the Ulster Unionists, my party and the Alliance Party — all agree on a shared future, and that we must mend and bind together the divisions of the past.

It is all very well to say that inequality is the reason for our divisions. It is about more than inequality. We had a civil war here for 30 years in which many people were killed. Those who were responsible for that, in part, were those who purported to be the provisional republican movement, and it bears a major share of the responsibility for that division. However, it does not own up to, accept or tackle that responsibility. It is now time that they did.

Many Members have expressed a wish to move forward on a shared basis. To criticise ideas such as integrated housing and integrated education, as some people have done, is quite wrong. If the community voluntarily were to come together by way of shared housing or shared education, it would be a good thing. However, one of our fundamental requirements is goodwill in the House and in the Administration. I do not see any evidence of that in this Administration between the two major parties. I see evidence of a power carve-up, but that is co-existence — it is cold war instead of active war. That is no way to run an Administration or to encourage people in the community.

The Good Friday Agreement was a conflict-resolution process, not a conflict-substitution process. However, some people see it as a conflict-substitution process,

and believe that the war should continue by some other means.

We must end that mentality. The two political traditions, which we cherish and should respect, must show some goodwill towards each other; without that we will not make progress. However, Members must give good example to the community and show leadership, as Mr Beggs said, and voting for the motion is one way of showing that leadership. At least among some parties there is unity of approach.

Mr Ford: In proposing the motion, Stephen Farry outlined the motivation for it: the failure of OFMDFM to live up to the rhetoric that it inserted into the Programme for Government; and the failure to deliver on anything more than a slight updating of the shared future policy, which, if I remember correctly, was not quite published during the first period of devolution and delivered under direct rule. Mr Kelly is correct: so far, direct rule has been better for community relations in Northern Ireland than devolution. Dr Farry also emphasised the importance of a shared future as the key to dealing with some of our other problems, especially those of growing the economy by dealing with matters such as labour mobility, attracting inward investment and coping with the situation revealed by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Northern Ireland report on our carbon footprint.

We, at this end of the House, have no problem in seeing OFMDFM develop a strategy: the problem is that it has not yet produced a strategy and is not developing one.

Dolores Kelly, in proposing the amendment, emphasised points that the Alliance Party holds in common with the SDLP. She spoke of the cost of segregation and referred to the motion that she and her colleagues tabled in October, which called for the publication of the strategy. We seek to update that call today, and we have done so appropriately. We accept the amendment. There are other issues besides those relating to DSD; but the DSD issues are a part of the matter.

I was interested, as ever, to hear Jim Shannon's contribution. He said that, as a member of the OFMDFM Committee, he could see the threads of a policy being woven together. Mr Shannon may see that happening, but the rest of us — including my colleague on that Committee — see precious little evidence of it. I welcome Jim Shannon's endorsement of the concept of a peaceful and prosperous Northern Ireland, but, unfortunately, he did not use the word "shared". However, that is forward movement by the DUP, and we welcome it in the spirit in which we seek to promote good relations in this place.

The next contribution was by Martina Anderson who told us, yet again, that equality came first; as far

as I could make out, it also came last in her analysis. That is utter nonsense. Must we wait for ever or until there is full equality in society before we can address the problems of good relations? That is a counsel of utter despair. It is complete nonsense, and it carries no weight in this Chamber unless, possibly, with members of Sinn Féin. To suggest that nothing could happen on good relations until the DUP agree with Sinn Féin on the wicked sectarianism of unionism in the past and the failure of the sectarian British state shows that she plans to implement a long agenda before countenancing any forward movement in good relations. Her points were supported by Jennifer McCann and Carál Ní Chuilín.

When Jennifer McCann listed for our benefit all the categories listed in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, she did not say that section 75 refers to “promoting good relations” as well as to equality. Every Sinn Féin member who spoke showed the same blinkered vision when it came to that. Carál Ní Chuilín also spoke of a shared future as a failed policy. She fails to accept that all that is being implemented by OFMDFM is the outworkings of the existing shared future policy because that Department does not have a strategy of its own.

Tom Elliott, backed by his Ulster Unionist colleagues Basil McCrea and Roy Beggs, also supported the motion and felt a need to defend unionist culture. In view of all that was said in the Chamber that was hardly surprising. One might have hoped that they would have gone a little further. However, their references to tolerance and diversity in the UK are to be welcomed. In particular, Roy Beggs’s references to the economic contribution to some of our new citizens must be endorsed.

When Nelson McCausland said that the DUP believes in a shared and better future, he included the word that Mr Shannon missed, so I congratulate him for that. He also said that the DUP wants to move forward. It was interesting to note that he then chose to immediately disagree with the points made by Ms Anderson, the principal speaker for the DUP’s principal partner in this Government. I wonder whether that is an indication of where the problem lies in the failure to do anything about the CSI strategy. Today, it appears that DUP Members are prepared to reach in the direction of those at this end of the Chamber to a certain extent. However, Sinn Féin, Members are giving absolutely nothing.

If I had been cynical enough to have blamed David Trimble for the failure to move forward in the past, I would now apologise to the Ulster Unionist Party and I would also acknowledge that it is not the Ulster Unionists and the DUP that appear to be creating the biggest block at this point.

It is unfortunate when someone such as George Robinson merely states his problems with being treated as being in the minority in Limavady Borough Council, which allows others to cite their problems with how they have being treated as being in the minority in Lisburn City Council. If Members cannot get away from the notion of simply being concerned about how they and their immediate colleagues are being treated, this strategy will not move forward. The problems are legitimate and true, but we need to reach beyond such simple points.

The response from Gerry Kelly, speaking as Minister, was interesting. He acknowledged that criticism of the delay was fair — at least that is something. After all that we have been through during these past few days in debating the Financial Assistance Bill, it is good that the junior Minister has provided that level of acknowledgment.

I do not believe that there was an implication that OFMDFM does not care about what we are saying. However, there is a clear implication that it does not care enough to put together a proper strategy. We have seen and heard junior Minister Kelly’s party colleagues dismiss the strategy as out-dated and inappropriate, but we have yet to see them develop anything with which to replace it.

Spending money on the old position does not seem to tie in with Mr Kelly’s financial accountability as a junior Minister. He highlighted that he should be ensuring that there is a proper, up-to-date and fit-for-purpose strategy that he and his colleagues can implement and can be fully accountable for. However, there were two things missing from his contribution: first, the recognition that issues around a shared future and good relations are not a small part of OFMDFM; they are a key cross-cutting theme for what is supposed to be a power-sharing inclusion Government; secondly, the promise of something specific. At the end of his statement he promised something soon. However, I was taught some time ago that the word “soon” is not a date. It really is time that we had something much more specific.

In that respect, I believe that Alban Maginness’s comments about the lack of leadership from OFMDFM are accurate. He suggested that Sinn Féin was proposing that a form of separate but equal — and I can think of a rather rude word for that strategy — was desirable. It is not desirable: it is the absolute opposite of what we need if we want to move forward. I recognise that some DUP Members seem to understand that point.

Thirty years ago, fair employment was some kind of pipe dream. Now, it is effectively in place. Today, the demand for integrated education, or different forms of shared education, and integrated housing, are growing. Sports bodies, such as the IFA and the GAA, are engaging

and working together, yet the body that is supposed to be providing leadership to the community — the Executive, led by OFMDFM — are failing to deliver.

When one looks back 40 years to the assassination of Martin Luther King and to the way in which other societies in the world have moved on, the types of ideas that Sinn Féin speakers have raised would have been laughed out of court in the US; they would have been laughed out of court in South Africa; and, please God, they will soon be laughed out of court in Zimbabwe as well.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Our community has been enriched by a wide variety of people from different backgrounds, whether they arrived three months ago or 500 years ago. That is the key message that must go out today. It is not a matter of saying: let us pretend that we can live in some separate but equally miserable set of communities. We must oppose the nonsense that Sinn Féin Members have said in that respect.

6.15 pm

Whether it is called community relations, good relations, or cohesion, sharing and integration, it is not an optional add-on; it is a vital necessity as a cross-cutting theme of every aspect of Government policy. There are sound social, economic and environmental reasons why a shared future should be given a much higher priority, and why the CSI strategy is badly needed.

I thank those Members who have supported that in different measures, and I urge the House to support the motion as amended.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 22; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr P J Bradley and Mr Burns.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray,

Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

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

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 18; Noes 40.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGlone, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Ms Lo.

NOES

Ms Anderson, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs O'Neill and Ms S Ramsey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it not convention that when the House divides, Members are supposed to go through the Lobbies? Are you satisfied that every Member who voted on the motion did so?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That issue has been drawn to my attention. Members should know that they enter the Lobbies through the doors at the bottom of the Chamber. I would ask the party Whips to ensure that that happens in future.

PRIVATE NOTICE QUESTION

Employment of Foreign Nationals

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have received a private notice question, in accordance with Standing Order 20, to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I call the junior Minister the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson.

Mrs D Kelly asked OFMDFM, in light of junior Minister Donaldson's concurrence with the view of Minister Sammy Wilson, that employers should give jobs to locals ahead of foreign nationals who live and work in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their skills, experience or abilities; and recalling the longstanding body of UK and European legislation outlawing discrimination on grounds of race or nationality, to explain how these remarks align with legislation to promote good relations, community cohesion, and integration between people from different racial groups.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received the private notice question from Mrs Kelly.

In the Programme for Government, the Executive agreed to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government makes clear that equality, fairness, inclusion and the promotion of good relations will be the watchwords of all our policies. We have underlined that by making £1 million available under the ethnic-minority development fund for projects and developmental work with ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland.

If a person is legally entitled to work here, as most EU citizens are, the law is very clear that employers are required to recruit staff on a fair basis.

The Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 applies to all employment applicants and employees who are legally entitled to work here, and outlaws discrimination on the grounds of colour, race, nationality, or ethnic or national origin.

Mrs D Kelly: It is regrettable that junior Minister Donaldson merely reiterated part-speeches that were given to various gatherings on the responsibilities of OFMDFM. In light of what the junior Minister said about EU legislation and about legislation in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, I draw his attention to the comments that Minister Sammy Wilson made at the weekend that firms should give jobs to locals ahead of foreign nationals in the current economic downturn.

On BBC's 'Stormont Live' television programme, the junior Minister concurred with some of those remarks. Will the junior Minister now ask OFMDFM

to ask Minister Wilson to withdraw his remarks? Will he also acknowledge that if local firms were to follow Minister Wilson's advice, they would be prosecuted under existing legislation, and that the comments send out a very poor message to foreign nationals who have come to work and live here? Indeed, some of those foreign nationals work in the Assembly.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): I will not ask the Minister of the Environment to withdraw his comments — that is not my job. Immigration rules dictate who is entitled to work here, and the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 applies only to those people who are entitled to work here. Employers must comply with the statutory obligations of any employee who is entitled to work here.

However, in times of economic downturn, it is perfectly legitimate to question whether immigration policy needs to be restricted further for economic migrants. Minister Wilson is entitled to participate in that debate and discussion. Indeed, that debate might be more rational if others contributed to it in a more rational way.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

The Retention of Jobs and Benefits Office Posts and Services in Omagh

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In 2006, management at the Social Security Agency (SSA) initiated a strategic business review to assess its operational structures in order to ensure that the service could continue in light of funding cuts outlined in the comprehensive spending review. The Social Security Agency management also cited staffing problems and raised part-time working, term-time working and sick absences as issues that needed to be addressed. I suggest that that is contestable.

The review had various phases, but it concluded with one preferred option — a centralisation of back-office processing on 16 sites in the North, each of which would deal with one benefit only. In many cases, that would mean staff moving from their current place of work. It has been calculated that 850 Social Security Agency staff will be forced to redeploy and that 200 jobs will be lost. That is in addition to the 674 posts that were already lost as a result of 2004's 'Fit for Purpose' review.

The Minister for Social Development approved the public consultation that was launched on 27 November, and I understand that that consultation closes later this week. It is for that reason that I tabled this Adjournment topic with the Business Office on 6 January. The title of the debate is, "The Retention of Jobs and Benefits Office Posts and Services in Omagh". I record my appreciation of the Minister's attendance. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully and remedy the situation by taking the appropriate and necessary action as soon as possible.

I pay tribute to the highly professional staff in the local jobs and benefits office in Omagh who do a first-class job. People in Omagh felt so strongly about the proposals that they lobbied their local government representatives and district councillors to hold a special council meeting to address the issue. Chairman of Omagh District Council, Councillor Martin McColgan, convened a special meeting to discuss the matter.

6.45 pm

How will the proposals impact on the public? We know that face-to-face contact on a walk-in basis will no longer be available and that interviews — which could take weeks to arrange — will be available by appointment only. We know that the proposals are contrary to the findings of a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey that was commissioned by the agency management, which found that the majority of customers who were surveyed stated that their problems could be resolved by direct face-to-face contact only.

Anne Marie Fitzgerald, who is a councillor on Omagh District Council, recently recounted, at a council meeting, her experience of making representations on behalf of a young male constituent who had literacy difficulties. Members should remember that one in four adults in our society has problems with literacy. She did her best to secure face-to-face contact on a walk-in basis with the staff at the jobs and benefits office in Omagh in order to assist a constituent who would not have survived the telephony system. That story made an impression on me; if that service had been unavailable, somebody would have been lost in the system.

Many people from ethnic minorities do not use English as their first language and require more assistance. Therefore, many people would be lost if the new arrangements were to pertain. Public services would be greatly reduced, and the most vulnerable members of society will be the losers. Furthermore, the strategic business review will be used as a platform to realise further future staffing efficiencies. That is the true aim of the proposals — not delivering better services to customers.

Moreover, the new telephone systems are untried and untested here. That may lead to more unnecessary frustration for the public at a time when they need a vital service. Unemployment figures are currently soaring, and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance, income support and incapacity benefit has risen steadily in recent months. Current forecasts indicate that the situation will continue for the foreseeable future. During this time of economic uncertainty and hardship, people do not need such upheaval in the jobs and benefits offices. Although I appreciate that resources and staffing levels have been increased to cope with the rise in demand, such upheaval is unnecessary.

The use of customer access phones has proven unworkable in Britain and many Jobcentre Plus offices have removed them altogether. The removal of 850 staff from front line local offices to centralised sites will take jobs away from towns that are already socially and economically deprived. That goes in the

opposite direction to George Bain's report, which identified Omagh as an important location for the retention and expansion of public-sector jobs.

I understand that the specific proposals for Omagh will retain the social fund administration function but jettison the income support function to Derry and jobseeker's allowance to Enniskillen, with a net loss of 19 posts — from 80 to 61 — in Omagh. Many staff co-signed a letter to the Minister on 16 December stating their concerns. Many contributors were women who reported facing lengthy travel on poor roads to reach work. They said that the arrangements do not contribute to a good work/life balance and outlined that the necessary childcare arrangements are not in place.

The review is just so ill-conceived that I must take this opportunity to call on the Minister for Social Development to shelve completely the strategic business review of jobs in benefits offices. I call formally on the Minister to do exactly that, to do it immediately, and without delay.

It has been said to me that, at best, the review is ill-conceived — particularly at this time it is having a hugely disruptive effect on the whole benefits system — and at worst it is unwise and irresponsible. I understand that Pat Doherty MP has also written to the Minister, and he has met with her to raise questions about equality impact assessments and how the absence of those impacts on workers in places such as Omagh and Strabane. People who work in jobs and benefits offices have emphasised to me the impact that it will have on their work-life balance, involving extra travelling time, and so on.

More than anything else, the issue is about the quality of service to the customer. The priority should be to retain and secure a quality, accessible benefits service for people, and to secure current satisfactory working arrangements for the valuable public-sector workers who carry out those administrative functions. The review is really about staff efficiencies; it is not about improving accessibility for applicants, or delivering a better service for customers. I am aware that there is considerable opposition to the strategic business review of the jobs and benefits office inside the Minister's own party. I noted in the Order Paper and the other documents that are provided by the Business Office that her party colleague MLAs in other constituencies have also been trying to raise this issue.

I call on the Minister for Social Development not to delay, not to pursue this foolish path, and to set aside immediately the strategic business review, which is not about caring for customers, but is really about management and staff efficiencies.

Mr Buchanan: I support the Adjournment topic. Mr Deputy Speaker, I know that you have said that we have five minutes to speak, but if I run over that time, I

trust that you will give me a little leeway, as this is a very important issue for Omagh, and I would like the time to put forward the case. I thank the Business Office for ensuring that this important matter was brought to the Floor of the House, and also thank the Minister for being present for the debate. I hope that she will give due consideration to the concerns raised during the course of the debate and act upon them appropriately.

The strategic business review was initiated by the Social Security Agency in 2006, followed by the launch of a public consultation on 27 November 2008, which is due to close on Thursday 29 Jan 2009. That consultation includes proposals that, if carried through to fruition, will have devastating consequences for staff, for jobs, and most of all for the services continually provided in the Omagh jobs and benefits office to the most vulnerable in the community.

Although I am aware that the issue affects every constituency, I want to focus specifically on Omagh this evening. I will deal with three individual points — the staff, the jobs and the services. First, let us examine how the staff will be affected. The Omagh jobs and benefits office currently deals with the social fund, income support and jobseeker's allowance, and over the past 20 years has provided such an excellent level of service that the chief executive of the SSA has provided reports to the Minister, not only of targets being met, but of the excellent progress that has been made by the staff.

I commend those staff who, through their continual commitment, often while working with staff shortages, still deliver a first-class service for the community that should make any Department proud. However, the current proposals, which seek to relocate income support to the Foyle office in Londonderry, and jobseeker's allowance to the Enniskillen office, will mean that some staff will have a daily round trip in excess of 100 miles and others will have a daily round trip of 70 miles.

The knock-on consequences for staff who have commitments — such as taking their children to school or nursery — will effectively render it impossible for them to continue in their jobs if they are forced to relocate to Londonderry or Enniskillen.

Long travelling distances will also result in longer working days that will, in turn, affect the health of the staff. Their performance in work is likely to suffer because they will be stressed and tired as a direct result of the added travel and longer days away from home. I ask the Minister whether it makes sense for people to travel from Omagh to Londonderry while other people pass them as they travel from Londonderry to Omagh to work in offices. I cannot see the sense or the logic behind that.

In one of the local papers, the Minister said that the relocation of jobs would be within reasonable travelling distances. It takes one hour to travel from Omagh to Londonderry on a good day when there is not much traffic, and it can take one and a half hours when there is a lot of traffic or bad weather. Is that reasonable travelling time? Perhaps the Minister should come to West Tyrone and make those journeys. She may then begin to understand what the staff would face if the proposals become reality.

Let us examine the job situation. Under the Minister's proposals, those jobs are to be centralised. That is in complete contradiction to the Bain Report, which encouraged decentralisation. Where do the Minister's proposals fit into the Bain recommendations? I remind her that the regional development strategy identified Omagh as a main hub. It is the key town in the west, with a population of some 50,000 within a wider travel-to-work catchment of some 300,000 people.

A key feature of Omagh's economy has been the strength of its service sector, with 78% employment and over 50% of its workforce employed in the public sector. It also has significant development potential for office accommodation, which could be easily adapted for the decentralisation of central and Government jobs.

I was delighted to hear the announcement from TEREX Finlay this morning regarding the future of the Omagh plant. In the midst of today's uncertain economic climate, that company has taken steps to consolidate the position of its equipment with no planned redundancies. It has identified Omagh as a centre of excellence, and it has done what it could to make sure that it could remain there. However, rather than consolidating its position in Omagh, the Department for Social Development plans to wreak havoc in a service that delivers for the people, with the potential of job losses from the Omagh office, while completely ignoring the Bain Review, the regional development strategy and Workplace 2010.

Let us examine the service that is provided. What impact will the Minister's proposals have on the people who use the jobs and benefits office in Omagh? The impact on the public will be a severe reduction in the current service provision, as face-to-face contact will no longer be available on a walk-in basis. It will be by appointment only, which may not be available for weeks. Although there is much talk of a telephone system, the majority of people who require that service are elderly or are disabled in some way, which renders any telephone system inadequate to deal with the difficulties that they face on a daily basis. From talking to constituents who require face-to-face meetings with staff to resolve their difficulties, I know that no telephone system — irrespective of how good it may be — could compensate for such meetings.

Should the Minister refuse to listen and set aside her current proposals, she will do a great injustice to the most vulnerable people in the West Tyrone community who will, without doubt, suffer the consequences as a result.

7.00 pm

The consultation document is crystal clear. The review is not, as claimed, about delivering better services to customers; it is about staff efficiencies, which will be achieved through the centralisation of back-room staff, and that will deliver a severe blow to service-delivery standards. Therefore, I urge the Minister to review her decision and to ensure that vital public services, and adequate staffing levels, are retained in Omagh, so that a strong network can be provided to meet the needs of communities not only in Omagh but throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for your leeway.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I assure other Members that they will be afforded the same leeway — eight minutes in which to speak — because fewer Members will speak than was envisaged at the beginning of the debate.

Mr Elliott: Although I will put forward my case, I do not expect to require the extra leeway.

Job redevelopment — as I describe the process — is ongoing throughout the Province, so we are now thankful for public-sector jobs. In an economic downturn, particularly with respect to the construction industry and other sectors that are affecting employment levels in the west of the Province, public-sector jobs are vital. Omagh has one of the highest proportions of public-sector jobs outside the greater Belfast area.

A sea change appears to be taking place in Departments and agencies, which are moving away from affording customers — the public — front line, face-to-face access. The further that process continues, the more difficult it will be for people to access the services that they require. I am hugely concerned about the increasing reliance on telephones, email and, to some extent, the Post Office to access services. Those methods of communication do not have the same impact as face-to-face contact. Moreover, it is difficult for the most vulnerable people in society — the elderly, the disabled and people looking for work, who make so much use of public-sector services — to access services or get the information that they need.

Today, the Social Security Service issued a statement referring to that situation:

“Under the strategic business review, telephone arrangements to meet customers' needs will be enhanced and modernised to the latest industry standards.”

It should have used the word “tele-phoney”, because, having attempted to access Government agencies and Departments, I know that it can be an absolute nightmare — press 1 for this, 2 for that, and 28 for

something else. One must spend half an hour on the phone before reaching the person whom you want to talk to. Indeed, the new planning regime has adopted that system. However, out of respect for the flexibility that Mr Deputy Speaker has shown Members, I will not digress from the subject any further.

Customers in Omagh, like those in other parts of the Province, require face-to-face access. Therefore, I ask the Minister to review the provision of services. I want jobs to be decentralised to Omagh, Coleraine, Enniskillen and elsewhere, and that can be achieved by maintaining front-line services in the Social Security Agency and in other bodies, such as the Housing Executive.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This serious issue also affects Strabane, where I come from, so, although the Adjournment debate concerns services in Omagh, I support the motion. Given the hour, and the fact that it has been a long day, I appreciate the Minister's presence in the House.

I want to highlight the situation in Strabane. The general view is that the economic downturn has created a context in Strabane, where there is already a very low base.

I know that you have allowed some leeway, Mr Deputy Speaker, with regard to comments about other areas, and I will get on to the general topic. However, I want to put on record the situation in Strabane. It was raised yesterday by the MP for the area, Pat Doherty, and Councillor Michaela Boyle and Colman McCrossan, who deal with such issues in the constituency office daily.

Some 43 jobs in Strabane will be reduced to 10, and I want to put on record my concern about that. The Minister has a listening ear, and I want her to remember that statistic when we talk generally about the issue in Omagh, West Tyrone and elsewhere.

Mr Elliott mentioned the new "tele-phoney" system — that was very apt. I do not know how it is going to work. Automated call distribution — will this work? The experience of ringing a call centre is exactly as Mr Elliott described — press 1, and so on. There are some tunes that I know by heart, from ringing particular organisations.

I do not want that to happen in this instance, particularly as it will involve the most vulnerable in society, as has been said. It is those people who need to have face-to-face contact. One Member mentioned the importance of face-to-face contact; I think that it is a necessity. This morning, I spoke to my party colleague Mickey Brady about the issue. We were not talking about Strabane or Omagh specifically, but he said that there was no way that employment and support allowances could be resolved satisfactorily across phone lines. Applicants cannot be told how to fill in the forms over the phone. He has experience of this, and I would like the Minister to respond to that concern.

I was surprised to read that feedback from the Social Security Agency front line staff showed that most enquiries could be dealt with by phone. I am challenging that; that is not what we hear in our constituency offices — that most of the enquiries from the most vulnerable people in society, such as the elderly, the poor and people on low incomes, who need face-to-face contact, can be dealt with by phone. I was very surprised by that. I hope that I have quoted it correctly; I think that it came from a fit-for-purpose survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers. Social Security Agency front line staff said that most of the enquiries that they receive could be dealt with on the phone. That is not the information that we hear in our constituency offices.

The Minister has been in Strabane, in my constituency, a number of times. I hope that she thinks of West Tyrone, and of Strabane in particular. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome today's Adjournment debate. I thank the Member who proposed it and those who have participated. Although the subject of the debate is Omagh, where, I think, Mr McElduff's concerns are exaggerated, it allows me to put the Social Security Agency's strategic business review proposals into some perspective.

The publication of the proposals has generated a great deal of interest, but I am concerned about the amount of misinformation that has been circulated. Some people who are opposed to any change in the structures of the Social Security Agency have made claims about the proposals which range from wild speculation to simple untruths.

It is regrettable that much of the misinformation has come from the party that introduced the Adjournment debate, and I shall return to that point.

My aim is to ensure that the consultation is informed by balanced and measured discussions. Let me make it clear: no decisions have been taken, or will be taken, until we have had time to give full consideration to the responses to the consultation exercise. Incidentally, the consultation is still open, and Mr McElduff referred to the fact that it will remain open until Thursday 29 January. I appeal to everyone with views on the strategic business review — including Members of the House — to participate in the consultation. I repeat: no decisions have been taken.

Not only have no decisions been taken, but many of the claims that have been made about the proposals are entirely spurious. Under the agency's proposals, as they stand, there will be no office closures, no staff redundancies and no reduction in customer services. Customers who are entitled to benefits will continue to be serviced by their local office, and a walk-in, face-to-

face service will continue to be available. Anyone who says otherwise, such as Martina Anderson MLA who stated that in one of today's newspapers, is plainly wrong. However, plainly wrong is a regular experience for that Member.

The draft proposals do involve a significant amount of staff movement. I am concerned about that, and I have heard the views of Members here today. Of course, I do not wish to pre-empt anything that might flow from the consultation. Nevertheless, I have been aware for some time, not least from representations made by my party colleagues and fellow MLAs from across the Chamber, that important issues are involved. The Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Tommy Gallagher told me this evening that he has constituents in Enniskillen who work in Omagh.

At the SDLP annual conference last weekend, I stated:

"I do not find acceptable a situation where hundreds of people will have to travel long distances to a new place of employment, particularly staff in part-time jobs or those on relatively low pay, or who have childcare responsibilities, and I am also aware that now is not a good time for major upheaval."

Nevertheless, the Social Security Agency cannot stand still. The current social security structures in Northern Ireland are over 40 years old. They are based on a service model that sees customers having to travel to offices, regardless of circumstances. Many of the people it serves have told the agency that if it were to introduce a free quality telephone service that would allow them to do business from the comfort and privacy of their own homes, that would be welcomed — and I take on board what Mrs McGill said.

At the same time, there is the desire for the existing face-to-face service to continue to be available locally. I want to emphasise the point that the package of modernisation proposals have been designed to complement — not replace — the existing quality front line service to customers. No existing front line services will be taken away as a consequence of these proposals, nor will anyone be forced to use the telephone, wait for a lengthy appointment, or deal with a call centre. They will be serviced by agency staff experienced in social security benefits, with the resources to resolve their enquiry. The real challenge is for the agency to deliver further improvements to the customer experience.

Members also spoke today about the potential loss of service caused by change. I want to emphasise that there will be no loss of service.

I will turn now to the issue of jobs. No member of staff will be made redundant. Indeed, just yesterday, I announced the recruitment of an additional 150 staff for the Social Security Agency, and more will follow if they are required.

Mrs McGill raised the issue of the employment and support allowance. I was concerned, because I knew that claimants could not get through on the telephone. As a result, we have appointed additional staff to deal with the high volume of telephone calls, and a large number of claims have already been completed through the telephone system. As of today, I have instructed officials to ensure that there is an MLA and MP hotline, as there is for other benefits, to ensure that public representatives have direct access to senior officials to resolve issues on employment and support allowance on behalf of their constituents.

Mr Elliott: There is an issue about cost savings, yet the Minister said that there will be no reduction in staff. I am trying to square the circle. Will the Minister clarify how we can ensure that there are no staff reductions in front line services and save money at the same time?

The Minister for Social Development: We are still in the midst of a consultation — there are only proposals on the table, and no decisions have been made. I am keen that there will be no diminution of service to our constituents, who are the people who urgently require the services provided by the Social Security Agency.

I must address a point that was made by one of Martina Anderson's colleagues. In the latest weekly sideswipe at my Department, he said of the review:

"It would create further levels of unemployment reducing staff levels, with up to 490 job losses."

That is totally wrong, but it is not surprising — Sinn Féin really must move on from that type of thing.

I am all too aware of the economic downturn and the need to ensure sufficient staffing to address increased unemployment registers. However, contrary to speculation, additional resources that were secured to address the current economic position do not remove my desire to improve the service. Central to the issue that we are discussing is the customer — the ordinary person in the street or the townland who requires our services and who should receive benefits if they are entitled to them.

I remind Members that the proposals are simply that — proposals. They are out for public consultation. I will listen carefully to all the views expressed and will not make any decisions until the consultation is complete. Mr McElduff mentioned the need for an equality impact assessment: that will be carried out. I gave Mr Doherty and his colleagues that assurance when I met them yesterday. I have also outlined areas where I have concerns.

There are shrill voices that make lots of noise but are devoid of any appreciation of the facts. Those people call on me to suspend the public consultation, but they will have to wait. The public shall have their say,

because that is their right. My Department and I will then do what is best for the people who use the agency, for the agency itself and for those who work in it.

Members raised many issues, most of which I addressed in my speech. If I have not answered any of those issues fully, I will write to the relevant Members.

Adjourned at 7.19 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Transfer 2010

Monday 2 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer to an item on today's Order Paper and to Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(3). When the Business Committee discussed the motion on the Consultative Group on the Past, no one could have known just how controversial the issue was to become.

Two amendments have been considered and accepted for discussion, and many Members wish to have the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. However, because of the amendments, unfortunately, only three Members from my party will have an opportunity to speak. I understand that many other Members are in a similar position. Is there any provision under Standing Order 10(2) or Standing Order 10(3), which will allow a suspension of Standing Orders to enable an extension of one hour to be added to the time allocated to the debate?

Mr Speaker: Thank you for your point of order. There is no such provision under those Standing Orders. In fact, a motion to suspend Standing Orders must be tabled on the Order Paper. I refer the Member to page 55 of the 'Northern Ireland Assembly Companion'. There are no provisions available today to allow for the suspension of Standing Orders.

Mr Wells: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is clearly a glaring omission in Standing Orders when an issue of such great importance comes before the House at short notice, yet it is not possible to suspend Standing Orders to allocate extra time for the debate. Can the matter be referred to the Committee on Procedures to consider whether we can find a way round the problem?

Mr Speaker: I am happy to do that for the Member. The House does not have the authority to extend the time for a particular debate. That is very much set with the Business Committee. It alone decides the time that is allocated to a debate in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that she wishes to make a statement on Transfer 2010.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Nuair a bunaíodh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin i mí Bealtaine 2007, bhí ceist an oideachais ar cheann de na príomhcheisteanna a bhí againn. Tá an méid seo amhlaidh go fóill féin. Ba é an 11 plus a rinneadh anuraidh an ceann deiridh.

When the Executive came into being in May 2007, education was one of the most pressing issues facing us; the same is still true today. Last year's 11-plus will be the last. I have reflected long and hard on what has been said to me over the past 16 months. In addition, I have taken detailed and considered account of the changing environment in which our education system is expected to function.

The education debate has become narrowly focused on the contentious issue of academic selection. In an ideal world, the debate of the past year would have been much broader. I cannot defend a system that is built around and geared towards the needs of 40% of our children. As Minister of Education, I am responsible for the education of all our children. Every year, thousands of children are failed by our education system. For the most part, they are already disadvantaged. They attend the schools that are suffering most from the impact of falling school numbers.

From the outset, therefore, it is important to state that the process that we are now involved in is one of necessary change. It is not simply change for change's sake. It is a process of change with the sole aim of building on the successes of the current system, while addressing the serious inequalities and weaknesses that also undoubtedly exist.

I have always been clear that I do not believe in a one-size-fits-all approach. I believe strongly in equality and social justice. I wish to have a system that is child-centred, and which delivers the educational outcomes that society needs for the challenges that we will face in the years ahead. That means building a system that will sustain a range of different types of schools and provision and which values them all equally. We cannot ignore the challenges that are presented to our system by underachievement and demographic decline. We must ensure that finite resources are used efficiently and are not wasted. It is much better to see the decline in the numbers of schoolchildren as an opportunity to bring about well-managed change that can deliver better outcomes for all.

As I have said, my responsibility as Minister of Education extends to all children and all schools. I cannot stand by and watch good-quality secondary schools and their teachers bear the brunt of demographic decline. As more and more grammar schools take in a greater percentage of children with B2, C and D grades at 11, in pursuit of numbers and funding, the pointlessness of an academic test at 11 is underlined. The flip side of that is a corresponding reduction in the number of pupils and teachers in the secondary sector.

Tá an fócas atá agam dírithe ar an bpáiste agus ar an oideachas a sholáthraimid dóibh; níl sé dírithe ar institiúidí a chaomhnú san fhoirm ina bhfuil siad faoi láthair díreach mar mhaithe leo féin. Lena rá i mbeagán focal, ní mór tús áite a thabhairt do riachtanais an pháiste seachas do riachtanais nó do cheanglais institiúid ar bith. Caithfidh an institiúid freastal a dhéanamh ar an bpáiste – agus ní an bealach eile thart.

My focus is on the children, and on the education that we deliver for them. It is not on preserving institutions in their current form simply for the sake of it. In short, the needs of the child must come before the needs or requirements of any institution. The institution must serve the child, not the other way round.

I appreciate those people in the grammar sector who continue to deliver a quality education for many children. My proposals will not affect that level of quality in the slightest; indeed, they will enhance it. However, a small number of schools cannot hold the vast majority to ransom. It is simply not tenable for around 30 schools to dictate education policy in their own narrow interests.

Those who have sought to prevent change must reflect on the reality of the new political landscape that we now live in.

This is not the old Stormont regime, nor is it government by remote control from Westminster. Local Ministers from across the community, who have been elected by local people and are accountable to them, are taking decisions. Republicans, nationalists and unionists are here on an equal basis. I was elected on the basis of a programme of change, and I intend to act on that. For decades, British Ministers ignored the weaknesses in our education system and avoided the contentious issues. A British, or indeed a unionist, education Minister would never have scrapped the 11-plus.

Sinn Féin's approach is different; we are not afraid to tackle the difficult issues. We are committed to a programme of change that delivers equality and social justice, addresses disadvantage and tackles institutional discrimination in education and every other facet of society. That programme will deliver for disadvantaged communities, nationalist and unionist alike. The children of the Shankill Road, for example, have been consistently

failed and disadvantaged by academic selection and rejection. I am not prepared to ignore that reality.

Those who put forward the notion that the only way in which quality education can be delivered is through academic selection ignore the reality across the world. In almost every other country, children attain quality education without there being recourse to academic selection. The best education systems in the world are non-selective.

Is cuid de chreatlach oideachasúil leathan í réiteach na ceiste faoi aistriú iarbhunscoile, réiteach atá bunaithe ar an gcuraclam athbhreithnithe nua a bhfuil soláthar roghanna níos fearr, deiseanna níos fearr agus torthaí níos fearr mar aidhm aige. Tá níos mó i gceist leis seo ná an díospóireacht faoin aistriú iarbhunscoile féin a bhí mar phríomhábhar sna ceannlínte le cúpla mí anuas.

The resolution of the issue of post-primary transfer is part of a much wider educational jigsaw, based on the new revised curriculum, which is about delivering improved choice, opportunity and outcomes. The debate is about much more than post-primary transfer, the issue that has dominated the headlines in recent months.

At present, some young people have as few as eight subjects from which to choose at A level. The entitlement framework will ensure that young people have a choice of at least 24 courses at Key Stage 4, and 27 at post-16, with a balance that ensures that at least one third of those courses are academic; one third vocational or technical; and the remaining third made up of an appropriate combination of the two. Those substantial changes will deliver positive outcomes.

Schools and colleges will have to co-operate, and share facilities and expertise, in order to deliver that expanded curriculum. In March 2008, I announced plans for area-based planning to facilitate the construction of a new system. That work is progressing. In December 2007, I announced in the Assembly the framework around which children would transfer to post-primary level; that the following year's 11-plus would be the final examination of that type; and that, in future, children would transfer on the basis of a menu of criteria — community, geographical and family. I also committed myself to further consultation with education stakeholders and political colleagues in the Assembly and Executive.

As a result of that consultation, I proposed a compromise, which, if accepted, would have allowed for a phasing-out of academic selection over three years. In May 2008, I brought those proposals to a meeting of the Executive, but DUP and UUP Ministers refused to discuss them. I offered to hold a single-issue Executive meeting on the matter. Again, the DUP rejected that proposal. I also wrote to every Executive Minister, offering to discuss my proposals with each

on a one-to-one basis. No DUP Minister availed himself or herself of that opportunity.

An tseachtain seo caite, chuir mé páipéar faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin arís; agus arís eile ní dhearnadh aon phlé air.

Tríd an bpróiseas ar fad, rinne mé iarracht teacht ar chomhaontú le comhghleacaithe ar an gCoiste Feidhmiúcháin agus mé ar lorg reachtaíochta don bhealach nua chun tosaigh.

Last week, I again submitted a paper for the Executive's consideration, and, again, it was not discussed.

I have attempted throughout to reach a consensus with colleagues in the Executive, and have sought to legislate for the new way forward. However, the DUP and UUP made their position clear. They support a system that was designed in the previous century to meet the needs of a previous century.

On many occasions, particularly in the Assembly, I have been disappointed by the nature of the debate. Instead of focusing on children, parents and teachers, some Members have sought to reduce the debate to personal abuse, insults and base politicking. I have refused to engage in that sort of nonsense. I am not prepared to allow an issue of such importance to be reduced to a contest of who can shout loudest. The issue is too important for that, and I believe genuinely that we could, and should, have had a much more constructive engagement over the past year.

12.15 pm

Despite the consensus among educational stakeholders on the need for change, that has not been mirrored at a political level. Indeed, it is clear from the public contributions made by the DUP and UUP that they will continue to block agreement, and will prevent legislation passing through the Assembly. However, we are where we are. The time for decision has been reached. The 11-plus is gone forever, and I welcome and celebrate that achievement. Regulations governing transfer procedures end this year. I have exhausted all the options for achieving agreed new regulations. We now need to make decisions about transfer 2010. I will not allow the DUP and UUP to block the process of necessary and well-managed change. I now intend to move forward. Parents, teachers and pupils need clarity and certainty.

Sa pháipéar a chuir mé faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin mhol mé moltaí comhréiteacha trína mbeadh trí bliana iontrálacha déthaobhacha. Dhiúltaigh an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin iad a phlé, agus mar sin de níl mé sásta creatlach reachtach a iarraidh do na moltaí seo agus tá mé anois ag tarraingt siar an choimisiúin a thug mo Roinn do CCEA teist a ullmhú do phróiseas aistrithe 2010. Ní féidir le mo Roinn teist a chur ar fáil a mbainfear úsáid aisti i gcomhthéacs iontrálacha gan

chreatlach reachtach a shainmhíniú úsáid na teiste sin. Mar sin de, i dtaca leis an bpróiseas um iontrálacha iarbhunscóile sa bhliain 2010 ní bheidh teist á cur ar fáil ag an Roinn Oideachais.

In my paper to the Executive, I proposed compromise proposals for three years of bilateral admissions. The Executive refused to discuss them, so I am no longer pursuing a legislative framework for those proposals. I am, therefore, withdrawing my Department's commission to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to produce a test for use in the 2010 transfer process. My Department cannot provide a test for use in an admissions context without a legal framework defining that use. Therefore, for the post-primary admissions process in 2010, there will be no Department of Education-provided test.

In the absence of regulations, my Department is issuing guidance. Schools will be obliged in law to "have regard" for that guidance. On equality grounds, but also because of the risks of dysfunction, the guidance recommends that schools do not use academic admissions criteria. If a school chooses to use such criteria, it will have to provide for itself the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that such criteria require.

The guidance consists, first, of a clear, factual description of the legal context in which post-primary admissions will operate, and in which there is much continuity. Secondly, it contains recommendations to schools on admissions criteria. The guidance recommendations have been issued for consultation.

Moltar sa treoir go mbaineann gach scoil úsáid as modh mar chéad chritéar a chinnteoidh go mbaineann iarrthóirí atá i dteideal béilí saora scoile iontrálacha amach ag an leibhéal céanna agus a fhaigheann gach iarrthóir eile.

The guidance recommends that all schools use as their first criterion a measure that will ensure that applicants who are entitled to free school meals gain admissions at the same rate as all other applicants. For example, if 20% of applications to a school are from applicants who are entitled to free school meals, at least 20% of the school's places should be allocated to free-school-meal applicants. That is in order to address the current situation, whereby such children have been disadvantaged in access to grammar school places. One in 17 children in academically selective schools is entitled to free school meals, while one in four children in other schools has the same entitlement.

Thereafter, the guidance recommends, in no order, the following criteria: sibling; eldest child; feeder or named primary school; nearest suitable school; parish with nearest suitable school; catchment area with nearest suitable school; and random selection, which is a tiebreaker. The guidance recommends that the

geographical criteria — the parish and catchment area — are used in conjunction with the nearest suitable school criterion as a means of ensuring that rural and outlying applicants are not disadvantaged by their address. The school categories that define school suitability for the purposes of this measure, and for transport, will be as they are now. The guidance will assure parents, children and schools that although there will be no admissions criteria regulation for transfer 2010, much of the process will be as before.

The role of the Department of Education will be largely unchanged, and it will continue to set the admission and enrolment numbers for each school. Post-primary-school boards of governors will continue to be the statutory admissions authorities for their schools, and will continue to draw up and publish admissions criteria. Transfer booklets will continue to be issued to parents from November 2009 or December 2009, and those will contain each post-primary school's admission criteria for admissions in 2010. Primary schools will continue to assist parents in advising them on the best options for their children and will assist in completing the transfer form in which parents will show, in rank order, their preferred post-primary schools.

Primary schools are already teaching the revised curriculum. My Department and I will ensure that that continues and that the curriculum is no longer distorted by the process of selection. From February 2010, parents and children will apply using the transfer form and by listing their preferences. The system of preference application will be administered in precisely the same manner as is currently used; where schools are oversubscribed, post-primary-school boards of governors must select children for admission by application of the criteria. Admission decisions will be issued in May 2010.

In accordance with a 2006 legislative obligation, one new element is that the Department of Education will establish a body, which, in respect of children with exceptional circumstances, will arrange admissions to suitable post-primary schools outside the standard competitive process. That body is intended to be for those children with compelling medical reasons to attend a particular school and for looked-after children. Details on that will be given as part of the transfer 2010 communication process.

Beidh mé ag scríobh chuig príomhoidí agus chuig boird gobharnóirí bunscoileanna agus iarbhunscoileanna agus chuig boird oideachais agus leabharlainne; beidh mé ag scríobh go díreach chuig tuismitheoirí freisin. Tabharfaidh mise soiléireacht don phróiseas atá anois againn agus tabharfaidh mé muinín do thuismitheoirí go mbeidh próiseas bainistithe iontrála ann, cé nach ndéanfar rialáil ar chritéir iontrála sa dlí.

I will write to the principals and boards of governors of primary and post-primary schools, and to the education and library boards. I will communicate directly with parents. I will bring clarity to the situation that we are now in and reassure parents that although the admissions criteria will not be regulated in law, there will be a well-managed admissions process. There is still much to be gained from discussions around the key decisions made at 14 years of age, and I will continue to work on that with schools. The area-based planning exercise, which focused on the entitlement framework, will help to inform those discussions.

The guidance recommendations will be equality proofed and are being issued for a 12-week consultation: comments are welcome within that period. What are not subject to consultation are the facts, as set out in the guidance, about the legal position in which the process of post-primary admissions in 2010 will operate. From today, schools should have what they need in order to be able to respond to the anxiety of the parents of those primary 6 children due to transfer in 2010. In particular, grammar schools now know that they must decide whether to attempt to use academic admissions criteria, through the operation of their own tests, or, to cease to use academic admissions criteria. I hope that grammar schools chose to stop academic selection, not just because of the serious difficulties that are likely to accompany any independently operated procedures but because of the interests and needs of the children involved. Transfer 2010 represents, for the first time, an opportunity for all grammar schools to make their excellent provision available in a fair manner.

Transfer 2010 represents an opportunity to spare all children the ordeal of assessment for admissions purposes. It represents an opportunity to end the inequality of ability-based transfer in which grammar schools are disproportionately the preserve of better-off pupils.

I understand why a school with long-established traditions of academic excellence will wish to continue those, and I want such schools to continue those traditions. The Department's admissions guidance asks a grammar school to sustain those traditions, not by exclusion but by the quality of its teaching and learning. All grammar schools should ask whether, in order to succeed, they require an admissions process that fails most children. I believe that the breakaway grammar schools will, in time, accept that their pupils are better served if they are part of, rather than outside, the mainstream education system.

I am also convinced that when political colleagues see the educationalists working within the guidance and delivering a quality education for all children, much of the rancour of recent months will be replaced by a realisation that the old system could not continue. Perhaps, at that time, we will return to the issue of legislation.

Idir an dá linn, tá an treoír againn anois a dhéanfaidh rialáil ar iontrálacha chuig iarbhunskoileanna sa bhliain 2010. Iarraim ar na hiarbhunskoileanna uile breithniú cúramach a dhéanamh air seo agus a bheith ar chomhsheasamh linn agus córas á chruthú a dhíríonn ar riachtanais na bpáistí uile sa mhílaois seo. Bogaimis ó chóras atá bunaithe ar phribhléid agus ar stádas, ó chóras diúltaithe agus teipe agus leagaimis bunsráitheanna córais atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chothroime agus ar shármhaitheas; córas a thugann deis do na páistí ar fad a gcumas féin a bhaint amach; agus córas a chaitheann go cothrom leis na páistí ar fad.

In the meantime, we now have guidance to govern admissions to post-primary schools in 2010. I ask that all post-primary schools consider that guidance carefully and join with the rest of us in creating a system that is tailored to the needs of all children in this millennium. Let us move away from a system that is built on privilege and status — a system of rejection and failure. Let us lay the foundations of a system that is based on social justice, equality and excellence — a system that gives all children a chance to realise their full potential and which treats all children equally. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Today marks the public admission of the failure of the Minister of Education to gain consensus. Regrettably, the Minister of Education of the Northern Ireland Executive has pulled down the shutters on consensus and on any way of reaching an agreement. Unfortunately, unlike her ministerial colleagues in Sinn Féin, she has taken an approach of do as I say, not as I do.

I want the Minister to be clear on a number of issues and, perhaps for the first time in this House, give us an answer. Much of the substance of the statement is the old rhetoric of the past. Has the Minister considered whether, without Executive agreement, she has the power to bring forward the guidance that she is publishing? Has the Minister taken specific legal advice on that issue in light of the provisions of the ministerial code and section 28A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which states that a Minister has no ministerial authority to take decisions that are, strictly speaking, Executive decisions? Those include significant or controversial matters. I am sure that the Minister will agree that transfer 2010 is a significant and controversial matter.

Will the Minister publicly publish today the correspondence that she has received in the past few weeks from the Northern Ireland Commission for Catholic Education (NICCE), the Catholic Heads Association (CHA) and the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) with regard to the use of a CCEA paper?

Will the Minister make all that information available today to the Education Committee and to Members, in order that they can see the nature of that correspondence and of the silo that she occupies alone, behind closed shutters?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for his question. First, no credible alternative has been provided to me. The only alternatives that have been provided by Members of the party opposite were alternatives with the status quo. I am not prepared to continue with the status quo, for reasons that I have outlined often. I am not alone in that. The vast majority of people want an end to the 11-plus and the creation of an education system that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. That is what we are doing.

The only proposals that I have had are to keep the status quo, which is an attempt to block change. Change will happen, because it must. Change must happen for our children. We cannot continue to fail children in the numbers that we are at present.

In relation to the question about powers, I have the legal power to issue guidance, which is what I am doing. I also have the power to ensure that last year's was the final 11-plus. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Thankfully, the 11-plus has gone. I am acting within the legal advice that I have received.

On the matter of consultation, I made it clear in my statement that we now have a 12-week consultation period. I look forward to receiving people's detailed proposals on the Department's guidance. I will ensure that all such proposals are studied.

Mr Speaker: I once again remind the House of the convention that applies to ministerial statements. The Chairpersons of Committees get quite a bit of latitude when introducing their questions. That has not changed. However, from here on in, I expect short introductions to questions.

More than 29 Members want to question the Minister on her statement. If Members make lengthy introductions or ask multiple questions, we will not get everybody in. If a single question is asked, with a short introduction, the vast majority of Members will be able to ask their questions. It is important that Members use a short introduction and an actual question.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. As she said, parents, teachers and pupils need clarity. I believe that the measures that the Minister has set out provide that clarity. I welcome particularly the Minister's

commitment to write to boards of governors and to teachers to provide more information.

What advantages will there be for schools that follow the Minister's guidance?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. The advantage for schools that follow departmental guidance is that they will be part and parcel of the education system. They will not be operating outside that system. They will help to build and to show leadership in forging an education system that is fit for the twenty-first century — one that creates pathways for all our young people, whether academically inclined, vocationally inclined, or both.

Mr B McCrea: I was tempted to congratulate the Minister on her ability to build a consensus. Sadly, I cannot do so. I have difficulty with any statement from the Minister that uses "consensus" when the policies are so divisive, uses "equality" when the Minister discriminates against hard-working parents and pupils, and talks about "democracy" when what is meant is dictatorship.

The question that the Minister must answer has been put by other Members: will she publish the legal advice that she has received, in order that we may determine, once and for all, whether we are disappearing into an 'Alice in Wonderland' regime or getting down to the proper governance of the Province?

Will she admit that as far as the people of Northern Ireland are concerned, she has done more than any other politician to bring the Assembly into disrepute?

The Minister of Education: Rather than focusing on legal advice and guidance, it would be much better to focus on children's needs. I would much prefer to hear the Members opposite talk about the children of different working-class communities who are failed by the current system. Efforts must be concentrated towards those children. Clarity and certainty must be provided for parents, pupils and teachers. I have provided those in my statement. I ask Members —
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I ask Members to put children, not legal debate or ideology, at the centre of the issue.

Mr D Bradley: Is it not the case that the Minister, rather than telling the Assembly anything new, reiterates existing non-academic transfer arrangements, which will do little or nothing to alleviate the anxiety of parents, pupils and teachers? It does nothing to avoid the unregulated system that will fill the vacuum that has been left by the Minister.

The Minister of Education: I note that the Member's party is opposed to academic selection. I

very much look forward to working with it and, indeed, all other parties to advance transfer 2010. I have explained clearly how transfer will work. I hope that all schools will choose to work with the Department; the vast majority of them will do so. There are 1,238 schools in the North of Ireland. A small percentage of them want to operate a breakaway system. Let us put the needs of 100% of children first. I look forward to the SDLP working with me and fulfilling its manifesto commitments.

Mr Lunn: The statement refers to the guidance that will govern admissions in 2010. It states that schools will be obliged, in law, to have regard for that guidance. Will the Minister explain what the terms "in law" and "have regard" mean, because they seem contradictory? If something is in law, it must be observed; if it needs only to have regard paid to it — for which, clearly, there is no legal basis at present — that is a contradiction.

The Minister of Education: For schools to "have regard" for the Department's guidance means that they cannot disregard it. It means that the guidance is an important document for them to consider when they develop their admissions criteria and in performing their roles within the admissions process. If a board of governors does not comply with its duty to have regard to guidance that is issued by the Department under article 16(b) of the Education (NI) Order 1997, the Department can issue a directive under article 101 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 to instruct it to do so. The Department can also consider issuing a directive under article 101 if the admissions criteria that are set up by a board of governors contravene any statutory provisions, such as equality legislation, for example.

Miss McIlveen: At last, the Minister has conceded that she cannot abolish academic selection. She has failed to answer the question that was asked by my colleague Mervyn Storey and by Mr Basil McCrea. For the record, therefore, what authority has the Minister received from the Executive to launch consultation on that guidance? Furthermore, what legal authority does she have to do that in the first instance?

She has been particularly evasive about the legal advice that she has received. Where did that legal advice come from? Did it come from the Departmental Solicitor's Office? Did she take advice from outside the system?

The Minister of Education: I approached the Executive on two occasions to discuss compromise proposals. The party opposite refused to even discuss those proposals. In the interests of parents, pupils and teachers, I have taken legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office. I have the power to issue guidance, which I have duly announced today. I

take my equality duties seriously. I have ensured that there will be a full consultation period.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister on her statement. I agree with her that the institutions must serve the child rather than the other way round; it is important to remember that. Will she outline the differences between the transfer systems in 2009 and 2010? Perhaps that will provide clarity for those in the Assembly who do not seem to be listening.

The Minister of Education: The difference between transfer 2009 and transfer 2010 is that, in 2010, children will not be selected on the basis of two one-hour tests provided by the Department of Education. In little more than four or five days, many children will receive the results of the test through their doors. They have already suffered the trauma of doing the test, and to add insult to injury, many of them will suffer the further trauma of receiving a piece of paper telling them that they have failed the 11-plus and cannot get into the school that they want to get into; that is the reality of the situation, no matter how we dress it up.

The difference between transfer 2009 and transfer 2010 is that the departmental guidance will ensure that, in 2010, children transfer on the basis of equality, social justice and excellence. The guidance will ensure that children have access to a wide range of schools that can meet their needs.

Mr McCausland: As a representative of the greater Shankill area, I must say that it is totally inconsistent, if not hypocritical, for the Minister to refer to the children of the Shankill to support her arguments, given that she withdrew funding programmes that were intended to support schools in that area. That shows how much she cares about those children.

This morning, Gerry Adams said that the Minister of Education:

“is charged with implementing Sinn Féin policy”.

Will the Minister acknowledge that the St Andrews Agreement secured the retention of the right of schools to select on the basis of academic criteria? Therefore, given that Sinn Féin is only one of four parties in a mandatory coalition, will she also acknowledge that she cannot implement Sinn Féin policy by prohibiting selection on the basis of academic criteria?

The Minister of Education: I refute the allegations that schools on the Shankill have not received the funding that they need.

Mr McCausland: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Schools on the Shankill have received funding, and I am glad that they do. I ask the Member to look at the statistics of what is

happening to young people and schools on the Shankill. Just like young people from the Falls, New Lodge, Creggan and other areas, children from the Shankill are not getting access to the education that they deserve. The reason for that is not due to any failure on the part of secondary schools — it is because of the failure of the system.

We have systemic failure; the system needs to be changed, and that is what I am doing. The changes that we are implementing will benefit children from the Shankill; the changes will benefit all children rather than just a small number of children. Once again, I ask everyone to work with me so that we can bring about those changes. Members know that I have prioritised the problem of underachievement; I have raised the issue at every single North/South Ministerial Council meeting. It is top of the agenda of every North/South Ministerial Council meeting, such as the one in Derry last week, and that will continue to be the case.

Mr Elliott: The Minister has continued her confusion in respect of the Province’s education system. In light of the non-answer that she gave to Mr McCausland’s question, I once again press the Minister to clarify that she will accept an academic selection process that may be used by post-primary schools in the Province.

The Minister of Education: I urge all post-primary schools throughout the North to administer the guidance that the Department is sending out today. I urge post-primary schools to work with us in changing the system. I have also made it clear that I do not think that any school should use academic selection, and the departmental guidance does not recommend academic selection. We do not need academic selection because it is irrelevant. We are in a new century, and we need to move forward on the basis of social justice, equality and academic excellence.

Mr Adams: On a point of order. Is it in order for the Chairperson — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I am happy to take a point of order after the ministerial statement.

12.45 pm

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Minister agree that this debate will not comfort parents or teachers? If the Executive had discussed the paper at last Thursday’s meeting, how different would the content of today’s statement have been?

The Minister of Education: I am thankful that the paper brings clarity and certainty, and, as I said, I will communicate the information to parents, pupils and all schools. I would have preferred — had we achieved compromise — to have discussed the issue at the Executive in May. However, its inclusion on the agenda was blocked.

Furthermore, I would have preferred to have discussed it at the Executive last Thursday, but the DUP blocked its inclusion on the agenda. That party must ask itself questions: why is it afraid to create a world-class education system for all our children? How does blocking a discussion at the Executive help children in areas that DUP Members represent, such as Kilcooley, Shankill and Rathcoole? I suggest that it does not.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. I welcome the Minister's statement on the transfer test.

Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire maidir leis an teist CCEA.

The Minister mentioned the CCEA test that will form part of her compromise proposals. Given her statement today, what is the future and status of that test?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. The test was a contingency for an agreement. A test cannot function without a legislative framework that defines and regulates how it will be used. In the interests of compromise, my proposals featured a test in order to give grammar schools three years to adjust to a long-term future without selection and tests. That proposal will now not progress because others were not capable of equivalent concession and refused even to allow the proposals to be included on the agenda of the Executive meeting.

We need to put children and their needs — not institutions or tests — at the core. Over the years, the system has failed too many children, and from now on, the child will be placed at the centre in order to ensure equality and social justice for all children.

Mr Poots: I note that three languages have been spoken today, and that the Speaker received a translation of only one. The third language, gibberish, was not translated. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister acknowledge that she has moved from saying "I will" to "I wish" and that she can now do nothing — legally or with the consensus of the House or the Executive — to prevent grammar schools from applying academic selection as a criterion?

The Minister of Education: Bueno, gracias por lo que ha dicho. A mí me gustan las lenguas y creo que es muy importante que hay un debate muy bueno en esta casa. Como Edwin Poots, creo que es importante que las lenguas estan en las aulas.

I am glad that the Member supports languages. It is important to support languages, and the revised curriculum will ensure that we have the opportunity to teach different languages. While our children in P7 and P6 are practising tests, children in other European countries are learning languages. If Members travel

abroad, they will see children from different countries speaking English, Spanish, French and German fluently. I share the Member's huge interest in languages.

The second part of the Member's question relates to powers. The real stories are that the 11-plus is gone and that, under transfer 2010, children will transfer from primary schools to post-primary schools on the basis of fair admissions criteria.

If schools choose to become breakaway schools, or to depart from the system, that is up to them. However, I would ask them to put children at the centre; that is what I am going to do. For too long, everyone was making policies without thinking about the children. Think about those children as they get the results of that test next Saturday morning. Think about them. It is not fair.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and the fact that she is giving all children a chance to realise their full potential, and that she is creating a system that will treat all children equally. How will the guidance on admissions for children who are entitled to free school meals work? In addition, how would the Minister respond to those on the opposite Benches who claim that she is involved in social engineering? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Education: What we have at the moment is social engineering, whereby working class children are disproportionately affected and disadvantaged. In relation to the admissions quota for children entitled free school meals, currently children who are entitled to free school meals are not transferred fairly. One in four non-grammar children is entitled to free school meals; one in 17 grammar children is entitled to free school meals. On top of that, children who have special needs are much more likely to attend secondary schools, so secondary schools have a lot of challenges in respect of the education that they provide. I want to put on record that many of them do an excellent job in very difficult circumstances.

The admissions quota that my guidance recommends will ensure precisely that applicants who are entitled to free school meals have exactly the same chance of admission as all other children. I am levelling an old inequality, not creating a new one. That criterion would not mean, as some have suggested, bussing around large numbers of children — and certainly not to the degree that it is done at present. I was looking at statistics in the Department on Friday, and it is shocking to see the number of young people who are bussed in to Belfast from other board areas. For those who are concerned about school closures and rural schools being affected, that is one of the key issues that must be examined.

Mr Ross: I note the Minister's vision for 2010. It is certainly clear that the vision is not 20/20 if those are the proposals that she brings forward. I was interested to hear the Minister say that she was attempting to find consensus with colleagues. If that is the case, why did the Minister refuse to set up a subgroup of the Executive, as has been the case for other controversial issues?

The Minister of Education: I wanted the Executive, as the highest authority, to discuss the proposals, because the education of our children is very important, and I know that all Ministers are interested in being part of those discussions. On two occasions I brought my compromise proposals to the Executive. On two occasions, the UUP and DUP refused to discuss them. I have, therefore, brought forward guidance. It is more important that the entire Executive discuss the proposals than a subcommittee. I also said that I would have meetings with all my Executive colleagues, and I wrote to them to that effect. No DUP Executive Minister responded to say that he or she wanted a meeting. I look forward to meeting to discuss the guidance, and to hearing people's comments during the 12-week consultation period.

Mr K Robinson: I listened carefully to the Minister's concern for the children of the Shankill Road. Perhaps she will do something for them by addressing composite classes, the underfunding of schools on the Shankill Road, and pupil:teacher ratios in Shankill Road schools, along with other primary schools. The Minister's statement refers to establishing a body to deal with exceptional circumstances. How will that body define exceptional circumstances, and how will it be assembled?

The Minister of Education: With regard to the Member's first point, of course all the policies that we are bringing forward — a jigsaw of policies that are interconnected, as I said in my statement — are to ensure that we deal with educational underachievement, and the Shankill Road is one of the areas in which that must be dealt with.

I am considering and reviewing the common-funding formula so that we can target on the basis of need and get money to the schools that have many disadvantaged pupils. That is very important, and I know that the Member shares my view. I have also put a serious focus on underachievement by establishing a literacy and numeracy task force and 'Every School a Good School'. We will not deal with underachievement overnight, but we will improve it.

Members will be aware that the chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate issued a report last week. The chief inspector is in his first year in post, and his report was very interesting. He said that almost two thirds of year 12 pupils achieve at least five GCSE subjects, but that figure drops to just over one half when English and maths are included. He also

said that almost 1,000 pupils leave school each year without any GCSE qualifications. That concerns me greatly. Nobody in this House would like their children — after 12 years of school — to leave without any qualifications at all. That is simply not acceptable.

The Member asked a very discerning question about the exceptional-circumstances procedure. That is a very important procedure, so we will issue regulations and consult on those.

Mr Gallagher: I return to the Minister's point about welcoming and celebrating the end of the 11-plus. The real story is that the Minister still does not have a system to replace the 11-plus. The guidance that is before us today is a poor substitute for regulations.

Why is the Minister not giving more attention to the age of 14, which is a key age in the lifetime of schoolchildren? If she made proposals and listened to some of the partners in education, the Minister would find a great deal of support for a way forward based on a 14-plus arrangement.

The Minister of Education: The end of the 11-plus may not be the real story for the Member and for other people, but it is certainly the real story for the children who will not have to sit the 11-plus. For too long, too many of our children have sat a high-stakes test that classified a huge percentage of them as failures and gave them unequal pathways in their lives ahead. Thankfully, the good news story is that there is no 11-plus. We now have very clear guidance with very clear admissions criteria. I look forward to working with all the schools on the matter.

I have placed huge emphasis on the age of 14, as have the area-based planning groups that I set up. That is a much better age for children to make choices that determine pathways. At the age of 14, young people at least have power in making those choices. At the age of 10 or 11, it is not the children who make the choices. We need to empower our young people so that they are active participants.

Last week, Reg Empey and I launched a career strategy. Then — and again during my statement today — I said that 14 is one of the key ages. The SDLP is opposed to academic selection, so rather than carping at the proposals, I ask that party to join with me in bringing about the badly needed change in our education system. I very much look forward to working with the SDLP.

Mr Weir: Today, we have heard so much wishful thinking from the Minister that she would be better off sending her proposals to the 'Jim'll Fix It' programme rather than to the Executive, so much are they grounded in fantasy.

The Minister made a concession to my colleague Miss McIlveen in relation to the Departmental Solicitor's Office. In the interests of clarity and transparency, will

she outline the issues on which she sought legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, and will she confirm whether she will publish the legal advice that she received from that office?

1.00 pm

The Minister of Education: I have brought forward guidance under article 30 of the 2006 Order, which gives the Department of Education the power to issue admissions guidance. Once again, rather than putting the interests of children first, a party is reverting to legal argument. Anyone who is interested in the future of children would not have blocked the discussion of transfer 2010 at the Executive table. Even at this stage, I ask the DUP to reconsider its approach to this matter. Let us put children at the centre, because that is what we are here to do.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Member who spoke previously should note that 'Jim'll Fix It' and unionist domination can only be found in history — they are over.

I welcome the Minister's proposals, which are a step forward. I too regret the failure by the parties opposite to reach a political accommodation on this matter. However, we must make progress and deliver definitive approaches to educating children. The Minister will be aware that several grammar schools — regardless of the sector that they are from — will put pressure on primary schools to teach towards a test. What support will the Minister give to primary schools to guard against such pressure?

The Minister of Education: Sin ceist an-mhaith. That is an important question. I have been meeting with primary-school principals, and, last week, in Hilltown, County Down, I met some principals to discuss proposals for transfer 2010 and how to create a more equal system. Thankfully, the vast majority of primary schools are delighted that the curriculum will no longer be distorted by the 11-plus.

I have discussed the revised curriculum with principals, and there is a statutory duty on them to teach it. In addition, the Education and Training Inspectorate has a role to play in monitoring and evaluating the revised curriculum. I will write to every primary school, and I will be working with principals to ensure that they do not come under pressure from the breakaway grammar schools that are attempting to dictate what they should, or should not, teach. The Department is the authority that is responsible for producing the curriculum, and the revised curriculum is in place. If parents or principals feel that they are coming under undue pressure, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has a procedure by which they can complain and, if after evaluation a claim is substantiated, the Department can act.

After the next set of results come out, for the first time ever, the primary-school curriculum will not be distorted and children will not have to sit tests in a primary school to determine their progress to post-primary education. That is a major step forward that will liberate primary schools, and all the teachers' unions — the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Ulster Teachers' Union and the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers — are delighted that there is no longer an 11-plus examination, because they are opposed to it.

Ms Lo: I suspect that there will be anarchy, rather than clarity, in the transfer procedure. Given that boards of governors will draw up admissions criteria, which will probably include a selection test, is the fact that children will have to undergo a series of tests not worse than the old 11-plus?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, the 11-plus is sat in primary schools. Thankfully, that will no longer be happening, so there will be no distortion of the primary-school curriculum, and that is a good start. Moreover, I hope that all schools work with me to implement the guidance, so that we can create a world-class education system without the need for academic selection — it is not necessary. We must put children at the centre. The status quo is the absolute worst option, and thankfully, we will not have that.

We have change in the system, and it is hoped that everyone will work with us. However, as I said earlier, there are 1,238 schools, and we cannot allow 3% of those to dictate education policy for all the schools. We have to move forward, and now is the time for leadership.

Mr Paisley Jnr: In order to put some pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in place, will the Minister state whether she took advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office? What was the nature and scope of the advice sought and the advice received? Did she seek or receive legal advice outwith that of the Departmental Solicitor's Office? Will the Minister confirm clearly that all boards and schools are free to read and consider her guidance note but not to implement it? Furthermore, will she confirm that grammar schools are free to read and consider her guidance note but, subsequently, entitled to use academic admissions as a criterion for entrance to their schools?

Will the Minister confirm that she will engage with grammar schools, rather than refer to them as "breakaway grammar schools" that are outside the "mainstream education system", as she does in her statement. Does she accept that categorising the grammar schools in such a derogatory fashion does nothing to achieve the consensus that she claims to want to reach?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have informed all sides of the House continually that if Members insist on asking

multiple questions, the Minister can decide whether she wants to answer one, two, three, four or five of them.

The Minister of Education: Suffice it to say, I have answered the question already. However, in the interests of courtesy, I will answer it again. First, comprehensive legal advice was sought on the issue of guidance. Secondly, I have always said that I want to work with all the schools, and I hope that the breakaway grammar schools will work with us in relation to the guidance, because that is how our education system can progress.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has created uncertainty, rather than certainty. Will she admit that her main proposals for determining admission to oversubscribed schools will be through random selection? How will putting children into a lottery create certainty for them? Is that a means of putting children first?

Does the Minister recognise that investment in early-years provision and extended schools is an effective way of tackling underachievement and more appropriate than trying to destroy something that is excelling?

The Minister of Education: I agree with the Member's comments in relation to early-years provision and extended schools, and I look forward to the support of his party — and that of the party opposite — when I introduce proposals for funding for the extended schools in the Budget. Members will know that this is a successful programme. We are carrying out an early-years review, and I share with all the Members the view that there is a need for substantial resources to be put into early-years provision. I look forward to their support in relation to that.

With regard to the earlier part of Mr Beggs's question, the guidance recommends that all schools use, as their first criterion, a measure that will ensure that applicants who are entitled to free school meals gain admission at the same rate as the other applicants. The guidance also recommends criteria relating to feeder schools; the parish in which the individual lives; the individual's siblings; whether the individual is the eldest child in his or her family; the catchment area; and the nearest suitable school. Therefore admission to schools will not be based on random selection, as the Member suggested; it is much broader than that. If the Member reads the proposals and takes an honest view of them, he will see that.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her statement, which, she says, provides clarity to children, parents and teachers. It provides clarity in respect of the scope and status of the guidance that has been issued, but it does not remove the contention and confusion that will exist where we have an unregulated system, with schools running their own admissions criteria and setting their own tests.

If the Minister is telling us that she has had to park the idea of legislation, what would allow her return to

a basis for legislating? It will be a collective failure on the part of the devolved project if we have an unregulated system of school transfers.

The Minister of Education: I submitted compromise proposals, which the DUP blocked by refusing to discuss them in the Executive. I have to move forward in order to bring clarity and certainty — that is what I am doing, through the guidance. We can create a new, well-managed system, and schools can work with us to put that system in place. We must put the children at the centre of the process. I look forward to working with Mark Durkan's party in doing that.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. How will the Minister's guidance deal with the issue of rurality? How will rural children be treated as a result of the guidance? I want an assurance that rural children will not suffer any inequality.

The Minister of Education: Sin ceist an-mhaith. On 15 May 2008, I made a commitment to ensure that the proposals would not disadvantage rural applicants. That is done by controlling the degree to which schools can prioritise local applicants. For example, if a popular Catholic grammar school, or a voluntary grammar school, which would attract children predominately from the Protestant community, were to follow the recommendation in the guidance, children who live 10 miles away, but for whom that is the nearest Catholic or voluntary grammar school, would enjoy admissions priority equal to that enjoyed by children qualifying for any geographical criteria that the school used.

The school categories that would define school suitability for the purpose of that measure are: denominational grammar; non-denominational grammar; maintained secondary; controlled secondary; Irish medium; and integrated. Under that recommendation, all children would be considered equally local when applying to schools nearest to them in each of those categories. Therefore, if the recommendation is followed, no child will be disadvantaged by virtue of having an outlying or rural address.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how her announcement will avoid there being a postcode lottery?

The Minister of Education: What we have at present is a postcode lottery — the proposals will create a much more equal system. The biggest indicator that the current system is a postcode lottery is the fact that, of children who receive free school meals, one in four attends a secondary school and one in 17 attends a grammar school. We must ensure that we have a fairer system, in which children from disadvantaged backgrounds are entitled to equality.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her statement. I understand her frustration, but does she not recognise that she is creating a system in which there will be more anarchy? If it is inevitable that schools will have their own academic tests, is it not fairer and more responsible for the Department to impose its own tests, rather than have a free-for-all? Furthermore, if there is a situation in which pupils are not prepared at primary school, and their parents therefore feel the need to pay for tuition, is there not a danger that that will create more inequality in the system rather than remove it?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his positive comments. I do not view it as inevitable that schools will conduct their own independent or breakaway tests. I ask that all schools work with the Department and adhere to the guidance. That is how we can create the best system. We will manage the system very carefully and in the interests of all children. We will retain our academic excellence, but we will ensure that that is available to more children than it is currently. We will continue with our revised curriculum and entitlement framework so that all children can access a very broad curriculum.

Mr B McCrea: Will you resign if —

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: I do not accept that there will be a free-for-all — the vast majority of our children transfers on the basis of the guidance that I have introduced. Some schools — a small number — have said that they will depart from the guidance. Let us see whether they do. I hope that they will reconsider, but I cannot continue to let the education of 3% of the school population distort the new policies for the remaining 97%. We must deal with underachievement and bring equality to the system.

Thankfully, we no longer have 10-year-olds sitting two one-hour tests. The Department will not provide a test; the Department does not consider it good practice for 10-year-olds to take tests with such high stakes.

1.15 pm

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome today's statement. The undoubted impact of this comprehensive statement is that there is now the opportunity to have a rational debate in which all sections of the community can participate and make their own judgments. I am grateful to the Minister for her contribution.

Given the blocking tactics and the increasing hysteria of the parties opposite, will the Minister confirm that there is no scope under the regulations to distort the revised curriculum?

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat. I agree with the Member that there should be a rational debate, because that is in the interests of all young

people. I look forward to developing that debate as the Department formulates its guidance.

As for the blocking tactics that the Member mentioned, I am on record as saying that I would have preferred all parties to have worked together in the past. However, let us put the past behind us and move the debate forward in the interests of all children.

The revised curriculum is working; teachers at every school that I visit say that they are beginning to enjoy teaching the revised curriculum and are seeing the benefits of it. It is starting to dawn on primary schools that never again will teachers in primary school have to teach to a test. Never again will children sit in a primary-school classroom and take two one-hour tests.

I was at Croke Park on Saturday night to watch Dublin play Tyrone, and I would like to congratulate Tyrone before Barry McElduff gets in. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: It was a wonderful celebration of the 125th anniversary of the GAA, at which I met many teachers. One teacher from Tyrone simply told me that she had been teaching P7 for 20 years and would never have to teach the 11-plus again. Her eyes were dancing, and it was wonderful. I told her that she would never have to teach the 11-plus again; that is the good-news story.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Francie Brolly. *[Interruption.]*
Order.

Mr Brolly: I apologise for not being ready with my question.

What weight should grammar school boards of governors who intend to continue testing give to the guidance that the Minister issued today?

The Minister of Education: I hope that all schools will work to the guidance for transfer 2010 that I presented today. Everyone needs to take a step back, and I ask everyone, including the grammar schools that have said that they will operate breakaway tests, to read the guidance carefully, and consider their position. Many will see the benefits of the guidance, and I look forward to working with them.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of the questions to the ministerial statement. There are three points of order: Mr Poots, first of all, then Mr Adams and Carál Ní Chuilín.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask the Office of the Speaker to study the Minister's statement, particularly her assertion that:

"The 11+ would never have been scrapped by a British or indeed a Unionist education minister."

My understanding is that, although Martin McGuinness started the process, Angela Smith, who was a British

direct rule Minister, concluded it. Will you clarify whether that is correct, and, whether, therefore, the Minister has been misleading the House on that issue?

Secondly, will you pay particular attention to the section of the statement that was used as a means to attack other political parties in the House? Will you rule on the appropriateness of such a statement being used to single out other political parties for attack?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not the job of the Speaker, or the Office of the Speaker, to check the accuracy of ministerial statements.

Mr Poots: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, is it in order for anyone to mislead the House? If someone has misled the House, should he or she not be brought to order, particularly when it is drawn to the attention —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to reflect carefully on what he is saying.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, a Cheann Comhairle. I appreciate that you and the previous Ceann Comhairle have tried to ensure that the debates here are robust, open but civic, and civil. During the debate, I noted, first, that the Chairperson of the Committee for Education — when he was present — consistently and persistently interrupted and heckled the Minister. Secondly, in the course of his remarks he used the term “Mein Kampf”. Will you rule on whether that is an appropriate use of language? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: Order I hear what the Member has said. I am happy to look at the matter in the Hansard report. Ministerial statements are part of the business of the House, and I understand that some Members may get excited about some of the debates. However, I have said to Members on all sides of the House, irrespective of the topic of the debate, that it is important that they temper their language as far as possible. In some of the debates, that may not always be easy. I understand that: I have been there and, on many occasions, I have worn the T-shirt. Nevertheless, I have said, over and over again, that it is important, irrespective of the debate, for Members to temper their language.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Further to that point of order, a Cheann Comhairle, I assume that you check the Hansard reports. Will you check today’s debate and note that Basil McCrea said that Caitriona Ruane brought the House into disrepute? I believe those comments to be unparliamentary. Will you make a ruling on that? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: My office goes through the Hansard report after all business in the House to read what Members have said, irrespective of the debate. We will do that today.

Mr T Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have said that you read the Hansard report in detail. When doing so, will you look at the number of questions that were put to the Minister that were not answered? She went off on her normal rant —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I have said that it is not up to the Speaker to decide whether a Minister has answered a question. The Minister decides how he or she will answer a question. I raised that issue last Monday. Once again, Members are on their feet asking the Speaker to decide whether a Minister has answered a question appropriately. That is not the Speaker’s job, nor is it the job of the Speaker to sit in judgement on how a Minister might answer a question.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

Members will note that the statutory rule is brief and technical. It merely serves to update the list of registered housing associations that fall within the remit of the social sector standardisation process. It will be useful to the House if I provide some background information on standardisation before highlighting the changes that the regulations will bring about.

As the House will know, the new capital value system was introduced in April 2007. Direct rule Ministers decided that it would not be appropriate to apply it to the social rented sector — the sector where housing allocation is based on social need not market choice.

Furthermore, it was considered undesirable for tenants occupying the same sort of house in different locations to be paying significantly different amounts in rates. Under the old net annual value system, there was little or no variation in rates liability for similar houses in different locations within the social rented sector. Also, rents in that sector were, and continue to be, standardised according to property type. In addition, it is practice for the Housing Executive and the housing associations to collect rates with the rent, so standardisation of rate payments made a lot of sense.

Provision was made in the Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to allow a system of standardised rates in the social rented sector. That was achieved through regulations made under article 23A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. The Rates (Social Sector Value) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007 prescribed the housing associations to which social sector values apply. At present, that lists 37 housing associations. However, since 2007, a number of those have amalgamated, ceased to exist or changed their name. The updating of the list of housing associations contained within the schedule to the existing subordinate legislation is the sole purpose of this new statutory rule. It is essentially only a care-and-maintenance provision.

In order to prevent an affirmative resolution process having to be continually used simply to update the list of prescribed housing associations — possibly on an annual basis — I propose that any future amendment to the list could be made under the negative resolution procedure. I intend to bring that change forward through the rates (amendment) Bill, which I hope to present to both the Executive and the Assembly shortly.

Although I consider the current level of scrutiny to be somewhat excessive for such a minor technical change, the affirmative resolution procedure will continue for any other changes requiring substantive use of the enabling power in article 23A of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. Members of the Executive and of the Committee for Finance and Personnel were advised of my intention to make the statutory rule. No comments were received on the proposed introduction, and the Committee was content with the regulations. I therefore recommend that the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Finance and Personnel considered the proposals for this subordinate legislation at its meeting on 3 December 2008 and was content with the Department's proposals. As the Minister outlined this morning, that legislation primarily facilitates a housekeeping exercise to update the list of housing associations contained in the previous Rates (Social Sector Value) Regulations 2007, to which a social sector value will apply. In other words, rates bills for properties in the social rented sector will be calculated as a proportion of the rent paid on the property as opposed to capital value.

The Committee subsequently considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 21 January, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. At that meeting, the Committee for Finance and Personnel agreed unanimously to recommend to the Assembly that the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motion that seeks the Assembly's endorsement of the provisions of that Order.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am very grateful for the comments from the Committee Chairperson, and I thank the Committee members and the Chairperson for the positive way in which they dealt with that particular issue. As I said, it is not a matter of great controversy, but I thank the Committee for its handling of the issue. I commend the Order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Social Sector Value) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 be affirmed.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS**Education Bill****Extension of Committee Stage****The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 30 September 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill (NIA Bill 3/08).

I want to explain to the House the Committee's reasons for requesting an extension to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill to 30 September 2009. I remind Members that the Committee encouraged the Minister of Education to bring forward a single Bill on the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA).

We were informed that that would not be possible, because it would cause major delay. Therefore, we have a unique situation where two Bills are part of one legislative programme — two intimately linked Acts that will establish the ESA.

1.30 pm

I remind Members the target date for the enactment and commencement of the Bill before the House is 1 January 2010. The second Bill will be introduced before the summer recess, and the target date for the commencement of its provisions is 1 January or 1 April 2010. Those target dates rightly reflect the immense amount of work that will have to be done to establish a fully functional ESA.

As I said during the Bill's Second Stage on 8 December 2008, several Committee members — myself included — had significant concerns about several important aspects of the first Education Bill, some of which impact directly on the second Bill. At that time, I detailed nine areas of concern. Since the Bill was referred to the Committee in December, the Committee has scrutinised several of those areas, and for some Committee members and me, significant concerns remain.

As I said, that reflects the immense amount of development work that the Department of Education and the ESA implementation team have to do with education stakeholders. The Committee needs to see those gaps filled and clarified for it to have the necessary confidence that the ESA can deliver better local and regional services to schools.

This Bill is extensive, with 55 clauses and eight schedules. The Committee questioned senior departmental officials about the need to have the Bill on the statute books by the summer recess. Given that

the Act will not come into effect until January 2010, in addition to the magnitude of the development work to be addressed that the Committee has identified and the fact that the Bill is significant and complex, the Committee has agreed an extension of the Committee Stage until 30 September 2009.

The Committee understands that extending its scrutiny until the end of September will not preclude the establishment of the ESA on 1 January 2010. There was another proposal for an extension until 1 June 2009, which was supported by two Committee members, compared with the seven-to-two support for the date in the motion.

The Committee does not want to delay the Bill unduly. If the Committee gains confidence in the first Bill, and in what the second Bill will bring, it can report to the House earlier than 30 September. Committee members emphasised the importance of prompt delivery of papers from the Department addressing the Committee's concerns in that respect.

The Committee has a statutory duty to scrutinise the Bill in a full and proper manner and to report to the House accordingly. I assure Members that that is the Committee's intention and ask that they support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: My party does not support the extension of the Bill's Committee Stage, certainly not until September. We have deep concerns that any further delay to the implementation of the ESA will have a detrimental effect on education services.

Education boards are being wound down — senior staff are leaving, taking early retirement or moving on. Therefore, the services being delivered by our education boards are not what they were even six months ago. I respect the right of every Statutory Committee to scrutinise legislation, because that is their job — at the Bill's Second Stage, I said that the Committee had an important role to play. However, my party believes that that work can be done before the summer recess and that all the concerns raised can be ironed out. The Minister has allayed many of the concerns that Committee members raised, publicly and privately, with her on the Bill before Christmas.

The Minister said that the second Bill will be linked to the first Bill by a commencement Order. Therefore, all the concerns of Committee members have been answered. A certain member and a certain political party in the Committee have political objections to the Bill, and they have stated publicly that they will oppose it. Regardless of what happens between now and the Committee Stage, they will oppose the ESA Bill. For political reasons, they should not be allowed to delay the most important changes to education in a generation.

We will oppose the commencement Order. If the amendment is passed, I hope that the Committee for Education will move this important piece of work before the summer.

It is worth noting that countless Committees meet for many hours to consider Bills, but the Committee for Education meets for only two-and-a-half hours a week to consider this important Bill. There is nothing to stop us from meeting all day or even a couple of days a week to consider the Bill and to ensure that it goes through. If the Bill is delayed unduly, it will have a detrimental effect on the education services in this society.

Mr B McCrea: I suspect that the previous Member who spoke was referring to me and to the Ulster Unionist Party when he mentioned the opposition to the Bill. I wish to place on record that our opposition is not because we are worried about efficiency; it is because of the evidence that has been presented to the Committee. The Hansard report from the Committee's evidence session states:

"The Minister's recent statements outlined that the Bill is designed to deliver a proposition that differs from the original ESA".

We support the original intention. We do not support the current position, because evidence presented on 14 January states:

"ESA is a public body to deliver public policies, as signed off by the Assembly and the Minister. The political level and political process have to determine the policy. ESA can only take them and deliver."

We will not accept some political diktat on the issue. We are prepared to support the Chairperson and his Committee in asking for an extension to consider the issue, but, as yet, we remain unconvinced. I want to make it clear that we support the extension, but we have not changed our position. I believe that Members beside me also share those reservations.

If at some time we share the confidence of the Chairperson, we will review the situation. However, we remain very disconcerted by what we see as a Trojan Horse.

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 30 September 2009, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Education Bill (NIA Bill 3/08).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Consultative Group on the Past

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allocate additional time where two or more amendments have been selected. It has agreed to allow up to one hour and 45 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each 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 Simpson: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims.

This debate touches on Northern Ireland's legacy of hurt, tears, anguish and broken hearts, and it deals with the very real loss that thousands of people live with every day. Metaphorically speaking, we are treading near the graves of thousands who lost their lives in our community. Those who perished in the Troubles were our neighbours, our family and our kith and kin. I hope that everyone will remember that fact during our deliberations on the matter. As someone who lost close family members to the Troubles, I know the stab and the sting of that. For that reason, there is much that I wish to say here today, so I must ask for patience from Members, as I will not have time to take interventions.

According to the Consultative Group on the Past, the nearest relative of a victim should be paid £12,000 blood money. Under that proposal, the families of the innocent people who lost their lives at Omagh, Greysteel, Claudy and La Mon, or on the Shankill Road and elsewhere, would be treated the same as the terrorists who were responsible — if those terrorists consequentially died as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The family of sectarian killer Thomas Begley would be treated in exactly the same way as his victims. That is something that we cannot, and never shall, accept.

The members of the Consultative Group on the Past seem to have persuaded one another that elevating murderers, bombers, gunmen and other criminals to the status of innocent victim is a noble course of action. They are very, very wrong and have made a gross miscalculation — one that has tainted the totality of their work. I understand why the Consultative Group on the Past has taken such pains to insist that what it has proposed should not be called "compensation". I agree — a better term would be "a bribe", "a pat on the head" or "hush money".

Can we ever imagine that a child murderer or serial killer, who acted because he or she suffered a psychotic breakdown, would be put on the same level as their victims, or that a child murderer or a serial killer, who acted because he or she had fallen under the spell of a doomsday cult, would ever be put on that footing? The answer, very simply, is a resounding no. However, we are asked to accept that child murderers and serial killers who acted out of sectarian hatred for their neighbours should be given that equal status. That is a monstrous suggestion.

In the same way, the people who planted, or abandoned, the 300lb bomb in Castlewellan at the weekend would be seen in the same light as the innocent men, women and children whom their device could have killed. Why are we asked to accept that offence against decency? There is only one answer: we have been asked to buy into the lie — for a lie it is — that, in some way, everyone is guilty and everyone is a victim. That was a lie when it was first coined, it is a lie today, and it will stand a lie for ever. Those who used their membership of the Consultative Group on the Past to pursue and promote that lie should hang their heads in shame.

I accept that the families of some dead terrorists may have known nothing about their relative's activities, but we should keep in mind one fact: in many cases in which terrorists died as a result of their terrorism, they were buried with full paramilitary trappings, and with the approval of their families. In those cases, those families gave their public approval and support to their relative's terrorist activities. Such cases should not be treated in the same way as the cases of innocent men, women and children who were slaughtered. I am forced to ask where the members of the Consultative Group on the Past have been living. In what cave, or down what hole, did they conduct their deliberations? On what planet did they draw up their report?

The report says much about remembering. For many people, the issue is not about remembering but about not being able to forget. They are not able to forget the sight of their loved ones, or, rather, what was left after the terrorists had finished with them. Now that group wants those people to be lumped together with remembrances of the one who visited that path of sorrow on them.

The Consultative Group on the Past was given its task by the Secretary of State, and its recommendations will ultimately have to be either accepted or rejected by the Prime Minister. During a recent intervention at Prime Minister's Questions, my colleague Nigel Dodds accurately judged the mood of Parliament on the issue. I wish that I could describe in detail to this House the sense of revulsion that honourable and Rt Hon Members of the House of Commons feel about

the matter. The loud cheers of agreement for my honourable friend's comments from Labour, Tory and Liberal Democrat Members alike demonstrated that any proposal that is designed to create parity between murderous criminals and those whom they murdered will face significant and sustained opposition.

1.45 pm

The Eames/Bradley group was given a task of gaining consensus on how we might deal with the past in Northern Ireland. By any impartial measure, it has failed. There are so many things that I wish to say, and that need to be said. I know from personal and sore experience just how much so many families have suffered across Northern Ireland down through the years of the Troubles. They have so many needs, and we owe them so much.

However, that shoddy recommendation is not one of those things. It should never have been spoken. It will stand as a mark of shame, and I trust that it will never see the light of day. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Ford: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"takes note of the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past, shares the grave reservations across the community at the suggestion for £12,000 'recognition payments', but recognises the potential for the other recommendations to provide an effective way to assist victims and to address the past and its legacy, consistent with the objectives of reconciliation and the creation of a shared future."

The Alliance Party tabled the amendment because, although, in broad, general terms, it welcomes the report of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, my colleagues and I feel that we have been seriously let down by the members of the group in the way in which they have conducted their business, particularly over recent months.

The Alliance Party was not the only one to hold meetings with the consultative group over an extended period while it was going about its business. I gather that other parties held meetings with it very recently.

The Alliance Party told the group that many difficult issues needed to be dealt with if reconciliation and a shared future for society were to be promoted. However, we gave broad, general support to the thrust of what it sought to do. At no time up until the group met journalists to give a briefing four or five days before its report was fully launched was mention made of the £12,000 payments — the so-called recognition payments. I cannot understand why a group that had engaged in such a wide way with people from right across society and with different political parties was completely incapable of realising the effect that those recognition payments would have on the public response to its recommendations.

Mr Simpson has already illustrated that response. I offer two short quotations from the early part of his

speech. He referred to “blood money”, which is not necessarily an assessment with which I agree, but it is one that is widespread across our society. He said that the report had elevated terrorists:

“to the status of innocent victim”.

It has certainly clouded the distinctions between different groups of people. That is a major problem. The report is serious and detailed, and with the exception of the recommendation for recognition payments, MLAs and others must work hard to assess the report and its recommendations, and consider what response to make.

It would be an absolute tragedy if the positive work contained in the report were to be lost because of one utterly unacceptable recommendation — that for these financial payments. There are other ways in which people from different backgrounds can learn to understand one another’s suffering. If a policeman’s widow were told that her story was to appear in the same book as that of an IRA member’s mother, in order to serve to recognise their suffering and what they had been through, that would not have prompted as negative a response as that which the idea of these payments has prompted. The recommendation has been hugely damaging, so it is not surprising that Mr Simpson has dwelt on that aspect of the report. Most of us accept the bulk of what he said and will agree that the motion is a response to the report.

It is, however, a response to only one part of the report. We must accept that there is no hierarchy of suffering, but there is definitely a hierarchy of circumstance. The suggestion of a blanket payment has clouded that distinction, and that is the major problem for people in dealing with the report.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the Member feel, as many others do, that this payment was announced in line with what happened in the South of Ireland? The group took it for granted that what was done in the South could be done in the North.

Surely that shows that they were far out of the facts concerning the attitude of people from all sides of the divide?

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think we can take it that Dr Paisley is not holding up the South as an example of good practice. I agree with him that it was an example of bad practice. It is not the case that two wrongs make a right. What was done in the South may or may not have been appropriate there — I am not an expert — but it is certainly inappropriate here. However, society needs to move on, and difficult decisions will have to be taken, but we must not cloud the moral distinction by that fairly arbitrary sum of money that is being suggested.

What concerns me about the motion is not what it says, but what it does not say. The motion ignores the details of the report — and it is a very detailed report — and its many positive proposals. Although it is an understandable — I might almost say knee-jerk, if that is not considered offensive — response a few days after the publication of the report, Mr Simpson and his colleagues, as much as everyone else in this place, will have to take serious note of other aspects of the report. There is a strong emphasis on the need to look at societal relationships, to promote reconciliation and to tackle sectarianism. Can anyone suggest that we do not need to do that in this society if we are to change? That is why there is considerable merit in the concept of a legacy commission, with three strands looking at reconciliation, justice and information recovery in order to promote peace and stability in this society.

Those who hold office in this place, and those who talk much about what they have done to provide for society by their leadership of the political process, also need to speak to their supporters on the ground, and those with whom they associate, to ensure that that mutual recognition and working together is engendered across society. The process is far too important to be left to the Executive, or to even the Assembly.

The timing of the report is, possibly, a bit late. Although I do not accept the idea of a South African-style truth and reconciliation commission, there is no doubt that the incentives in that process for people to tell the truth in a short timescale, were major, positive incentives. Those have been lost to us. However, I do not agree with those who suggested in various recent comments in the press that we can leave this process for another generation. To leave things for another generation — bringing up a generation in a divided society — is to run the risk of repeating the cycle of the past 40 years. That is something that we cannot allow.

We must ensure that there is a short and focused process — a five-year time limit seems about reasonable — in order to get movement in a timescale that would cement what has been done in this place into wider society. I welcome other aspects of the report. Matters that many found offensive, such as suggesting an amnesty for the on-the-runs, are clearly ruled out. Surely Mr Simpson and his colleagues are not going to run away with ideas such as that?

A balance must be found between justice and information recovery. The blunt reality is that, 30 and 40 years on, many victims will never see justice in the conventional sense, as much as we wish they could. If all that we can achieve for them is information recovery by way of incentives for people to tell the truth about what happened, that may offer some measure of consolation. It may, sadly, be the only measure of consolation available. However, it does not seem wise for unionists to continue to insist on the

process of justice when evidence is not available or accessible. They must recognise that in the report by the Consultative Group on the Past, there are ways forward that would represent a benefit to them, if not all that they would hope.

The full disclosure of information may satisfy the concerns of many who were bereaved or injured. We need to find encouragement to get that process moved forward. We need, too, seriously to examine building on the healing-through-remembering idea of a day of reflection and reconciliation, because we need to tell all our people that they have a part to play.

Although some of that activity may initially be done on an individual or small-group basis, let us see what can be done, through the recognition of mutual suffering — without in any way implying equal responsibility — to build things up and move people forward. I wish that there were an opportunity for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to engage in that process from 21 June 2009; however, that may be too much to hope for.

I am concerned about the suggestion in the report that parties should, at some future stage, sign up to the principle of non-violence. For some parties, that was never necessary, and for others, that has already been done; however, it is an example of what needs to be done on a broader basis. I agree with many of the sentiments expressed by Mr Simpson, and with the wording of the motion. I agree with much of what is contained within Sinn Féin's proposed amendment. There is a huge gulf of ideas around this issue, and, I believe, the amendment that I am proposing meets all those needs.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaim leasú a dó.

I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "and" and insert

"recognises the grief felt by the families of all victims who lost their lives as a result of the conflict; and following publication of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past, urges everyone to enter a constructive debate on the way forward."

First, I want to commend the effort of the Eames/Bradley group for finding ways in which the legacy of the past can be dealt with. Over the past 18 months, panel members have devoted a lot of time and effort to compiling the report, and are to be thanked. Sinn Féin will now reflect on the proposals within the report, and I think that everyone should do the same — this is not the time for knee-jerk reactions. Individuals, and political parties, are entitled to their view; however, we should all approach the report with the degree of consideration and concern that it requires.

Mrs Foster: Although political parties have the advantage of being able to give consideration to the report, many victims have been re-traumatised by what

they are hearing in the media. On Friday, in my constituency office, I listened for two hours to a lady explaining how she had been re-traumatised. It may be grand for some people to reflect on the report; however, we must have cognisance of those for whom it is not.

Mr McCartney: I agree absolutely. Indeed, perhaps comments made by some people, particularly those in political life, have added to that trauma. It is disappointing to hear some of the language that has been used in dealing with the report. Last Thursday, I listened to Elaine Moore, a panel member, speaking on Radio Foyle. She said clearly that she understood and accepted that many people will not accept the report, and that they are entitled not to. However, she cautioned people, particularly those in political life, not to use language such as "repugnant" or "repulsive" in describing the report. I think that she was correct to say that, as that displays an arrogance that this difficult subject does not warrant or deserve. Those taking part in the debate should show leadership, and should, by all means, state their position. However, we must be mindful of other people's right to be heard, and — I agree with the Member — we should be very cognisant of the people who are being re-traumatised by the report and who may not have a political voice, or indeed, any voice at all.

Sinn Féin will now take time to go through the report in detail. We will continue our dialogue with various victims' and survivors' groups, and we will meet with the two Governments as part of the dialogue process. Sinn Féin is mindful of all the difficulties involved in truth recovery, particularly for victims and their families. However, we believe that as society seeks to leave conflict behind, so, too, there is a requirement on all of us to address the tragic human consequences of the past. Throughout, we will be guided by a number of principles, which formed the basis of our call for a truth recovery process — we were the first political party to call for such a process.

All those processes should be victim-centred and should deal with victims on an all-Ireland basis, not within the strict confines of the Six Counties. Full co-operation by all the relevant parties is essential to the success of any commission. There can be no hierarchy of victims, and all processes should be politically neutral. Any future panel must be international and independent. With that in mind, any panel set up by the British Government cannot fulfil the necessary criterion of being politically neutral and independent.

Indeed, it creates the notion and the fallacy that the British Government were not participants in the conflict. That is not only wrong, but it leaves the people who were killed or injured as a direct result of

state violence wondering whether, yet again, they are being pushed to the margins of the process.

2.00 pm

Dr Farry: I respect the Member's comments at the beginning of his speech that everyone needs to consider the report with an open mind. However, his latter statement that the group is tainted because it was set up by the British Government contradicts his earlier comments.

Mr McCartney: It does not. Sinn Féin met the panel on several occasions before and during the process, and we cautioned it. The recent inquiries that have been set up under British legislation have met with obstruction and destruction of evidence. The Bloody Sunday Inquiry is a good example of that. We cautioned the panel that if it were not politically neutral, the outcome would not be what the victims needed.

It is wrong that the British Government set up the panel, because it creates the fallacy that the British Government were not participants in the conflict. In addition, the report talks about "alleged" collusion, which leaves people wondering whether they have to make the case that collusion took place, rather than stating clearly that the British Government were involved in the killing of Irish citizens. The report should have said that.

In our ongoing discussions, we will continue to argue that one of the purposes of any future panel or commission should be to examine the causes, nature and extent of the conflict. An objective of any process should be healing, both of the victims and of society in general. We also have a common aim to enable society to build the peace and, therefore, reconciliation should be the core aim of any truth process. Respect and generosity should inform the parties that are seeking to reach agreement.

We also must be mindful that, if we are serious about building a united society, that demands that all those difficult issues are dealt with in an inclusive way as a necessary part of putting the past behind us. Looking after victims, victims' families and survivors is significant and important to all of us. The Sinn Féin amendment states clearly that a constructive debate should take place on the way forward that puts victims at the centre and recognises the grief of all families and their pursuit of the truth. I urge all to support our amendment. Go raibh maith agat

Mr McFarland: I pay tribute to the efforts of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past. I know some of its members well, and they are people of honour and integrity. They have also had access to sensitive material and have had discussions with victims that the rest of us have not had. I have no doubt that they believe that they have done their best with the issue. The report's flaws have been identified

already, and my colleague Tom Elliott will mention those later. However, I have concerns about other aspects of the report.

Before commenting on that, I wish to stress the importance of the innocent victims of the conflict. We must look after their medical and psychological needs and ensure support for their families, who must not be forgotten. They must be allowed to tell their stories about what they have gone through, because that is a key aspect of the healing process. Perhaps that area could be left to the Victims' Commissioners; that is what that office was set up to do. It is sad that some aspects of the report were leaked to the press before it was announced, because it has resurrected painful memories that many of the victims had put behind them.

I wish to speak about the issue of dealing with the past, particularly the establishment of the legacy commission. Back in 1998, the deal was that, however difficult, we would draw a line under the past and move on. That was the understanding of all who took part in the process.

However, in the meantime, the SDLP managed to persuade the Government to involve the Police Ombudsman in dealing with the past, and we ended up with a one-sided truth commission. After that, Sinn Féin dealt with the Government and there then arrived an attempt to ignore criminal records — the on-the-runs issue, which was eventually stopped in Parliament — amnesties, and the equating of terrorists with members of the security forces. I recall that in 1999, the NIO planned to have an IRA volunteer and a British Army soldier symbolically lay down their weapons on the lawn at Hillsborough Castle — just amazing stuff.

I want to examine the report from the Consultative Group on the Past in a bit more detail. In particular, on page 18, for example, lo and behold we have the return of the issue of setting aside of criminal records by way of statute. What about ordinary decent crime? Somebody who has served six months for tax evasion will not have his or her record expunged, yet someone who committed mass murder has that record wiped clean. That is amazing.

There are other examples of confusion in the report. Page 17 contains a strange recommendation that would allow the legacy commission to interfere with how we hand out money. The report states that the legacy commission should oversee the "even spread of economic benefits". That is a bit strange, because that is what the Assembly does; that is why we have TSN and the Equality Commission. Therefore, the Consultative Group on the Past's report interferes in the Assembly's political areas.

Other confusing proposals that relate to historic cases and thematic proposals may cause most concern.

More detail is provided on pages 128-29 of the report. There, it is stated that the legacy commission should have the power to call for people and papers. However, who has those documents? The answer is that the Government have them. I cannot for a minute imagine that the Provisional IRA has a great swathe of documents, and I cannot see the loyalists having documents. Therefore, we are back to the one-sided truth commission. The IRA's green book forbids its volunteers from giving evidence. Hence, we end up, again, with a very strange, one-sided truth commission. Society may pick over those issues if it wishes. However, the Ulster Unionist view is that we should draw a line under the past and move on.

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

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I join my colleague Raymond McCartney in opposing the motion and supporting the amendment.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on this extensive report, which, I suspect, none of us has had time to read in any great detail. I am a little disappointed by a number of points.

The report does not go far enough. The legacy commission that it proposes would be established by the British Government and, therefore, cannot be truly independent. The British state was a protagonist in the conflict here, not a mere observer.

Another issue, and the essence of the debate, is that our priority and focus must be on treating with respect, and supporting as much as possible, all relatives of those who died. There must never be a hierarchy of victims. Previous debates have shown the hurt and pain that is caused by the demonisation of some families, and there have already been references today to families being re-traumatised.

I was at the launch of the report last week, and I witnessed at first hand the trauma experienced by relatives who attended the event. I spoke afterwards at a meeting with families of people from Ballymurphy who were killed by the British Army, and relatives of Damien Walsh — a 17-year-old gunned down by loyalists while the SAS watched.

All relatives are traumatised. People must not single out particular families; that is wrong.

If we are to move towards a society that is based on equality and justice, in which human rights are respected, no one should fear the truth. I do not believe that truth will be achieved under the current arrangements; any process must be international, independent and victim-centred. The lead should be taken from some of the victims' families and the generosity that they have shown throughout deliberations.

Much can be said about the report; however, it must be examined in detail. The families of all victims of the conflict, who are the essence of the debate, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. None should be demonised, and there must not be a hierarchy of victims. When any initiative is taken in respect of victims, survivors and families, they must be spoken of in a measured way, and their points of view must be heard. Society must be built on the foundations of equality and human rights, and victims and survivors are central to that aim. That will help in the long-term development of good relations and reconciliation, which are in the interests of all people.

I reiterate that there must be no hierarchy of victims. All victims' families feel the same pain and anguish, and they have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Attwood: As Alan McFarland suggested, the members of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past are good people. I know some of them well and value them greatly. During the past 18 months, they have represented the last and best hope for our generation to deal with the past and to make progress on an ethical basis. For that reason, as Mr Ford suggested, the report should not be casually dismissed.

The Eames/Bradley report makes some good proposals. It is correct that it puts victims and survivors front and centre of what must be done; it is correct that all of its proposals are human-rights compliant; it is correct that it supports the telling of personal stories, and its proposals for remembering are timely; it is correct to establish units to integrate the work of the Historical Enquiries Team and that of the Police Ombudsman on historic cases, as long as powers and resources meet necessary requirements; it is correct to affirm that no one will be deprived of the right to prosecution where evidence and opportunity exist.

However, the Eames/Bradley report has also got some matters wrong. It is wrong to not have stated that the British Government have reneged on their commitment to a Finucane inquiry; it is wrong to hint that there may be an amnesty for past crimes in five years' time.

In its statement last week, the Eames/Bradley group challenged the many people who, like it, had not used violence, saying:

“Our attitude, our prejudice, our defence and justification of our own community to the detriment of the other community has played its part.”

If they are suggesting that the harsh words, dangerous attitudes and reckless leadership of some people may have contributed to bringing others into violence, they are right to say so.

However, last week in the Europa Hotel, the Eames/Bradley group was wrong not to be more specific and

upfront in telling the people who know most about the violence of the past 40 years, and who committed the worst deeds during those years, that they have primary responsibility in the pursuit of justice. Such an explicit requirement would have created the ethical context and fundamental bedrock on which the Eames/Bradley group's truth and justice mechanisms might settle. The failure to make that explicit statement must be rectified.

Some people said that that approach was an effort to encourage the commanders of illegal terror groups — not least the leaderships of the IRA and the UVF who have been in control for decades — and also the elements of the police, army, security services and the state, who know the most information and did the worst deeds, along the path to admit the truth. Members are aware how such groups and individuals behave. Look at the continued suppression of truth by the British Army and the Force Research Unit on Pat Finucane's murder. Look at the suppression of truth by the IRA on the murders of Jean McConville and the rest of the disappeared. Look at the UVF and its certain knowledge of a north Belfast serial killer in its ranks.

2.15 pm

Ultimately, truth, justice and healing will be prejudiced and stalled if the people who know the most and did the worst fail to step forward at leadership level. As we all know, they have failed to step forward in a complete or credible fashion thus far; that is their respect for truth and justice. Those individuals and elements should have heard fully and explicitly about their primary responsibility for truth and justice from the Eames/Bradley group. However, some of those same people will now attempt to unpick the Eames/Bradley report or to reconfigure it in their own interest.

The Eames/Bradley information recovery and thematic proposals — on loyalist collusion, republican cleansing of Protestant farms in border areas, MI5's setting malign strategic intelligence objectives in Northern Ireland, and the general infiltration of the IRA, UDA and UVF that was influenced by the security services — is such a fundamental threat to those most concerned by disclosure that they will resist the Eames/Bradley proposals, which they present as an alternative to prosecution and inquiries.

In recent days, there has been heightened concern about payments being made to victims. The SDLP believes that victims and survivors have requirements, including financial requirements, that should be measured and addressed against need and individual circumstances; that will be the real challenge for decades to come. A one-off payment creates a fog at the very least; as we have heard, it creates new trauma at the very worst.

Such is the concern about the recognition payment that the matter should be revisited at the very least.

There should be no question that addressing the needs of victims and survivors is shorthand for suggesting that there should be equality between those who caused that grief and those who suffered it; that must not and cannot be the case.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a victim; it is only by God's grace that I am here today at all. It is important that the needs of victims are met, but that must be done in a sensible and productive way. The idea of innocent victims, whether they were members of the security forces or simply civilians who happened to be caught up in one of the many bomb attacks in Northern Ireland, being treated the same as the terrorists who carried out those attacks is nothing short of ludicrous.

The terrorists set out to kill; bombs were planted and guns were fired with the sole intention of killing as many as people as possible. How can men with a complete disregard for human life be classed the same as men, women and children who were brutally slain in acts of terrorism? If a man plants a bomb intending to kill and is accidentally caught up in the blast and kills himself, why should his family be classed the same as those families who lost innocent people? It is due to that terrorist's actions and desires that anyone was killed at all. It is irrelevant that the son of a terrorist may feel the same grief as the son of a civilian. The terrorist made his choice, knew the risks and probably took many lives before his own was taken.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that the suggested £12,000 payment is abhorrent? Lord Mountbatten's family said in the newspaper yesterday that it would not accept that payment, and Airey Neave's family said that it will not accept it. For the record, we, as a family, would not accept the £12,000 either.

My colleague Allan Bresland served along with my cousin who was murdered by the IRA. The families of people who served Queen and country will be offered £12,000, but does Mr Bresland agree that it is wrong that people who carried out terrorist acts will also qualify for that £12,000? Indeed, the people who killed my cousin were shot by the Army, and their families would, therefore, qualify for the payment. Is there not something totally wrong when there are such extremes?

Mr Speaker: A minute will be added to Mr Bresland's speaking time.

Mr Bresland: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with him 100%. Men who had no intention other than to kill should not and cannot be treated the same as the families of innocent victims.

It is a key point of law that no man should profit from crime, and we all know that murder is a crime. By rewarding the families of murderers, Eames and

Bradley are spitting in the face of the law of a civilised society. It is ridiculous that Eames and Bradley believe that £12,000 is the value of a life, which is supposed to be sacred and protected.

Moreover, the suggestion of offering money to the families of those who killed is offensive. What happened to the need for truth and justice? That concept appears to have been eradicated except for inquiries into collusion by the security forces. Many deaths caused by terrorists are still unresolved or have secured no prosecution. That is what the families want — not a pay-off that aims to make them forget the past.

The money that has been offered will never replace the need for truth and justice. The Consultative Group on the Past should focus on that matter rather than on finding a quick and easy solution that attempts to please everyone. Members know that, historically, attempting to please everyone pleases no one, and that will be the case again. Few people — if any — have expressed a positive viewpoint on the proposed payment, which will solve nothing.

Although the use of weapons to achieve political goals is no longer commonplace, we must use willpower and courage. The victims and politicians of Northern Ireland must stand up and speak out against the report. The proposal to attribute each victim an equal status is wrong, and the people of Northern Ireland must make a clear statement. The Eames/Bradley report cannot be accepted as a realistic way of dealing with the past and looking to the future. Furthermore, Eames/Bradley seems to have forgotten those who were injured over the past 40 years. Why are terrorists and civilians treated equally while those who have suffered mentally and physically are forgotten?

Lord Eames has repeatedly stated that the proposal is about recognition rather than compensation. Where is the recognition for those victims who survived? Moreover, he has stated that he intends to abolish the hierarchy of victims; however, he has simply created another one. He proposes to create a hierarchy between those who were killed and those who survived. Victims' needs must be addressed. An equal classing for murderers and innocent victims in the hope that they will sell the desire for truth and justice is not the way to progress. Rewarding murderers will not cease the suffering caused by years of terrorism in this country. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: As we all know, the Eames/Bradley report contains 31 recommendations, each of which merits detailed consideration and reflection. Today's debate is, therefore, somewhat premature. We owe it to those who lost their lives, to those who continue to suffer and to our children to make the effort to consider the findings of the distinguished panel, which has outlined a way to deal with our troubled past.

Although the report seeks to challenge all of us about our personal contribution to the conflict and asks how we will build a better and reconciled future, it fails to challenge robustly those who committed the worst acts and knew the most information. By the end of 1998, 3,703 people had been murdered: 562 paramilitaries, 1,036 members of the security forces and 2,105 civilians. Statistics show that republicans were responsible for 58.3% of deaths, loyalists for 29.7% and security forces for 9.9%. The greatest single taker of life was the Provisional IRA. However, we have yet to discover how many deaths were a direct result of security force collusion and the running of agents.

The Glenanne gang is believed to have been responsible for up to 77 murders. The truth behind many murders could be quickly established by opening the British security services' filing cabinets. The Stevens Report is still under lock and key. The IRA, the UDA and other groups needed to step up to the mark, but neither co-operated with the Eames/Bradley panel. The report should have stated more clearly where responsibility lies for the recovery of truth and the gathering of information. Justice demands that, where possible, prosecutions must be pursued. The recommendations on that topic merit more detailed scrutiny. Truth and justice are not either/or options, and it is wrong to ask families to choose. The needs of victims and survivors must be central to how we deal with the legacy of our past.

Although many organised victims groups do great work, the vast majority of victims do not belong to one. I had the privilege of meeting one such family last week. Their great-uncle, Bernard Devlin, was murdered in the Belfast pogroms in 1920. Their cousin, Damien, was murdered by the UVF in 1988; their brother Raymond in 1982 by the IRA; and their brother Gerard by the LVF in December 1997. The Devlin family are therefore more qualified than most to speak on dealing with the past and on the future. In their submission to the Eames/Bradley group, they said:

“We hear a lot about ‘getting over it’, ‘moving on’ and ‘stop harping about the past’. This is hurtful to the families. Learning from the past will not cause past mistakes to be repeated. Forgetting to look at the past and why mistakes were made ensures they will be repeated.

The Troubles are not just of this era. They are beached in base sectarianism and rabid nationalism and loyalism which has spawned killers who hate because they have been taught to hate.”

That family, who have suffered so much but never took up guns, say that the true commemoration of the Troubles will be an end to sectarianism. That is the real challenge for all of us, but especially those two parties who currently hold the positions of First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Having examined the report, listened to the voiceless victims, and recognised that there were many in our community who fought injustice by solely

peaceful means, while also accepting that all mother's tears are the same to all, the SDLP shares reservations across the community about the suggestion of a £12,000 recognition payment, but we are prepared to listen to the debate today and to hear what people across the community are saying. However, there is simply no moral equivalence between those who had no choice and those who took up arms. We all know that there are those who want to rewrite history. That recommendation will be abused by those who seek to block out their murderous past.

At the funeral of Gerard Devlin, Bishop Patrick Walsh said:

“Those who engage in acts of violence, those who encourage acts of violence by bitter, hateful words, those who disparage the builders of peace — they carry enormous responsibility before God and their fellow men at the present time.”

Those words are clear and unambiguous, even 12 years on. They have a simple truth about them, which it would be best not to ignore, if we really are to learn the lessons of the past so as not to repeat them.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be William Irwin.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Respite Provision for Carers

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an assessment of respite provision for carers. (AQO 1926/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My Department is currently undertaking work to provide a clearer and fuller picture of current and future respite provision and need. Under the comprehensive spending review, the learning disability programme of care has been allocated £33 million over the three-year period, while physical and sensory disability has been allocated £10 million. Part of the investment in each of those programmes of care is to provide new or enhanced respite services.

Over the same period, targets and priorities for action will ensure the provision of an additional 200 packages of respite care for children and adults with a learning disability, which will benefit over 800 people. By 2011, a further 200 packages will be provided to carers of people with physical and/or sensory disabilities. Over the next three years, an additional £1 million has also been earmarked for investment in mental-health dementia-respite services, which, from 2010-11, will provide an extra 2,000 weeks of respite for people affected by dementia.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Like many Members, I work very closely with carers groups, so I recognise the importance of respite care. Does the Minister agree that if the Northern Health and Social Care Trust goes ahead with its proposals to close residential homes, even greater pressure will be put on carers, particularly in my own constituency of East Antrim?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member will be aware that a consultation process about those proposals is underway. As Minister, I cannot comment on that issue for fear of prejudicing that consultation process. However, I recognise the strong need for support for carers. Thanks to Mr Basil McCrea, one of the first

things that I did as Minister was to meet the Down Lisburn Carers Forum. From talking to that forum and to other groups subsequently, it was clear that our support for carers was falling short. That is why I announced the additional investments.

We are also following the Caring for Carers strategy, studying the carers' strategy and implementation group, and reviewing the respite position. In addition, we carried out an assessment of the care provision and concluded that more respite care is needed. As far as residential care is concerned, care in the community and independent living is a key departmental strategy that was endorsed by this House. How that strategy works on the ground is a matter for consultation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. He mentioned that some help would be provided for carers. I recently received correspondence from people who suffer from what is known as Angelman syndrome. Will the Minister confirm whether those who care for people who suffer from that syndrome will receive some of the carers' assistance that he outlined in his reply?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Respite is available for anyone who is assessed as needing it. Particular conditions are primarily a matter for the carers' strategy and implementation group, although I see no reason why respite cannot be provided to support the folk on whose behalf the Member spoke.

Respite takes many forms. A range of support must be provided because there are an estimated 185,000 informal carers in Northern Ireland at any one time, many of whom require support.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister clarify whether there are any additional, specific measures for people who care for others on their own, such as lone parents?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am sure that the Member is aware that respite care takes the form of flexible short-term provision, day activities, residential respite care and domiciliary support, so a good range of respite services are available. There is also a range of other types of domiciliary care support.

We are reviewing the entire situation. However, although a substantial amount of respite care is available, it is not enough. I have announced a series of measures, including: 200 learning-disability packages, which will benefit 800 people; 200 sensory- and physical-disability packages, which will benefit a further 800 people; and 2,000 support weeks for people affected by dementia.

Although those measures are being implemented, I need to know definitively how much support is required,

which is why I have commissioned the review. That will be important when deciding the future direction that we should take, because, fortunately, our elderly population is living much longer. As Members will be aware, the over-65 population will double in the next 50 years, so we must plan not just for today but for the medium and long term.

Epilepsy

2. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is in discussions with Chicago-based experts on specialist treatment for epilepsy. (AQO 1927/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Officials from my Department have held discussions with clinicians at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago about the treatment of a particular child who suffers from epilepsy. In addition, officials have had discussions with a recognised expert in the management of intractable epilepsy at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, as well as regular discussions with clinicians in paediatric neurology at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and for the extra funding that was announced last week and today for all children with complex needs. Members are aware of several high-profile cases, and I am particularly conscious of one in my constituency of West Tyrone. Will the additional funding from the Minister's Department help those high-profile cases, particularly, for example, the Caldwell case? I mention that case because I met that child's mother here at the launch. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As the Member will understand, I am not at liberty to discuss individual patients. As far as I am concerned, all children with that condition have needs, and they all have the right to be treated equally.

The measures that I have put in place will strengthen existing services. The improvements to services are significant not only for intractable epilepsy but for several complex conditions; we are devoting some of the extra money that I secured from the Budget to help children with complex needs. Northern Ireland has skilled, highly trained practitioners covering a range of disciplines, and I am confident that we can continue to improve services so that all children get the support that they need.

I am aware of high-profile people who felt the need to go to Chicago. In my opinion — which I am sure that Members will understand — the Health Service is for all people, and we have a special arrangement with Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London

— one of the world's leading children's hospitals — to provide whatever treatment the regional service in Belfast cannot provide.

Mrs I Robinson: I must disagree with the Minister on one point. He said that Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children indicated that it could cope with children with intractable epilepsy; however, we have a letter from a consultant, Helen Cross, which states that she can in no way give the service that Chicago has provided for the high-profile children to whom my colleague referred.

Now that the Minister has found sufficient funding to improve services, will he reimburse the families who — through no fault of their own, because the provision did not exist in Northern Ireland — had to go to Chicago in order to save their children's lives? Will the Minister compensate those families for the money that they have spent?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I welcome the return to the House of Iris Robinson; I am glad to see her in good health.

One of the world's leading experts on the condition is Professor Helen Cross from Great Ormond Street Hospital. I have not seen her letter, but I understand that she stated that she accepts referrals but does not take long-term personal management of the patient. That would be carried out by the paediatric neurologist in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

I remind Members that I made an important announcement about improving services for children with complex needs. That does not relate solely to children with intractable epilepsy, but to children with cerebral palsy and brain injuries, for instance.

The Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago does not provide any service that is not available at Great Ormond Street. The service is comparable; in fact, one of the world's pioneers in the ketogenic diet — a tool for treating the condition — is Professor Helen Cross.

Members should be careful about running down our service. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is important to remember that we provide physiotherapy, occupational health therapy and speech therapy. Furthermore, we have highly trained and highly skilled dietitians to monitor the ketogenic diet and specialised medical care. In fact, the Belfast Trust is taking steps to appoint an additional consultant paediatric neurologist as soon as possible.

The Royal Victoria Hospital staff have assured us that they will do whatever they can to facilitate a smooth transition for children returning home. I regret that children or parents felt that they had to go to

Chicago. The services that they are receiving in Chicago are no better than those that they would receive in Great Ormond Street Hospital. However, there is one major difference: on admission to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children or Great Ormond Street Hospital staff will ask the patient what they can do to help him or her; staff at the Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago ask for the patient's credit card. That is the difference.

I cannot devote taxpayers' money to private healthcare in America, unless all avenues and channels — first, in Northern Ireland, secondly, in the UK, and thirdly, in Europe under the E112 referral — are exhausted. Those protocols have to be followed.

In at least two of the cases that we have talked about, referrals to Great Ormond Street Hospital were refused. In one case, it was refused twice.

[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker, do I have to respond to remarks that are being made from a sedentary position? Welcome back, Mrs Robinson.

Last week, I met Anne Monaghan, who is employed by the Caldwell family. She told me that it cost £100,000 to keep Billy Caldwell in Chicago and that that amount was easy to raise. She said that there was no problem raising that amount of money. That is their approach.

We are reinforcing that. We have a good service, and we have a link with Great Ormond Street Hospital. That is about as good as it gets.

I do not make the decisions; clinicians make the decisions and I take advice from them, starting with the paediatric neurologist at the Royal Victoria Hospital, which is a good hospital.

Mr Gardiner: I welcome the announcement that the Minister made last week in relation to investment into special cases of epilepsy. Does the Minister agree that there is no better place in Northern Ireland than the Royal Victoria Hospital — right on our doorstep — to carry out further investigations and in which investment should be made?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The announcement that I made in respect of children with complex needs will ensure that every child will have an individual care plan and will avail of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, and so on. Those provisions will be overseen by the first point of care — the GP. The services will be provided locally with reference to the regional hospital at Belfast, and beyond to Great Ormond Street as necessary. Therefore those children will receive that support. Furthermore, a number of youngsters require, and will receive, visits from community children's nurses.

2.45 pm

I have also announced recurrent spending of £200,000 to reinforce paediatric epileptic services, which include additional dietetic support, paediatric nurses, scan sessions and links with Great Ormond Street Hospital. In addition, I plan to develop satellite services in the west of the Province. I have assessed the service that we provide and, very good as it is, it is clear that there is a need to reinforce it, because of the demand and the need. We are working closely with Great Ormond Street Hospital to provide that service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Community Care Services: Larne

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many elderly people receive community care services in Larne.

(AQO 1929/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that 933 elderly people receive community care services in the Larne area. Those services include social work support, domiciliary care, residential care and day care. In addition, the trust provides community nursing, acute care at home, case management, dementia services and allied health profession services to older people.

Mr Ross: The Minister will be aware that, in recent years, many elderly people have found it difficult to get community care packages and, when they do, it amounts to, perhaps, 15 or 20 minutes' care a day. Therefore, does the Minister agree that it would be a backward step to close any residential care homes in east Antrim unless they are being replaced by new facilities?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not recognise the Member's claim of 15 to 20 minutes' care a day. Care is delivered in a number of ways — for example, through home help, domiciliary care and residential care. There are extensive budgets and provision with regard to care for the elderly. In fact, after acute services, care for the elderly accounts for the largest part of the health budget, amounting to more than £600 million per annum.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust provides many thousands of care packages, including a number in the Larne area. The proposals are simply that: proposals that are out for consultation. Mr Ross must remember that efficiency savings of £700 million over three years are being forced on me, voted for by Mr Ross and his party. The entire DUP voted for it —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In fact, the entire DUP fought for that. I see that I am hitting a soft spot. It is important to remember that, when I refused to accept the draft Budget, some people on those Benches stood up and said that it would be a scandal if health got another penny piece and argued that health should have got no more money. I was not prepared to accept that advice, and, with the support of a number of people in society, we substantially increased the budget.

Therefore, the proposals are nothing like as bad as they could have been. The Minister of Finance and Personnel at that time said that those were efficiencies, not cuts, although I know that Mr Easton has personally disagreed with that.

Mr McKay: A LeasCheann Comhairle, does the Minister agree that the elected representatives for the areas affected and the families of those involved by the recent announcement with regard to residential care homes should have been informed prior to its public announcement? We had a meeting with the Northern Health and Social Care Trust just before Christmas and there was no mention whatsoever of possible closures.

Furthermore, does the Minister agree that public consultation meetings on that issue should be held in local areas? I am going to a public meeting in Coleraine tonight about the possible closure of a centre in Ballycastle. Does the Minister agree that a further meeting on that issue should be held in Ballycastle?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Member asked a number of questions, and I will try to respond to them. The trust manages the consultation process. If the Member has a complaint, no doubt that will be part of the responses at which I will get a chance to look. The situation is quite simple: I have to find savings of £700 million over the next three years. That was not my idea and I do not want to have to do that, but I have to do that as that has been enforced on me.

If I do not find that money, I am going to have to start to cancel a number of services. They will include, for example, those to which I just referred, services for children with complex needs, cancer services, stroke services and screening services for bowel cancer. All of the new service developments that I have been able to announce have to be funded, and they are funded by efficiency savings because I did not get enough money to run health — everyone is aware of that. A funding gap of £600 million exists in my Department, and, if the DUP had got its way at the time, the situation would have been much worse.

I will study the proposals extremely carefully — they will all come to me eventually. I have no decision to make on non-contentious proposals; however, I must make a decision on those that are contentious. I

am a long way from reaching that point. Before making a final decision, I must wait for the consultation process to finish, read the recommendations and scrutinise the proposals. If the Member considers that a consultation process is required in Ballycastle, he should take that up with the Northern Trust.

Mr Beggs: The three residential care homes in my constituency affected are Lisgarel, Greenisland Residential Home and Clonmore House. Is the Minister aware that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's proposals to close those care homes have created a huge level of concern? Will he assure the House that, when the trust reaches its conclusions, he will fully acquaint himself with the entire consultation process? That will highlight the vagueness and weakness of the proposals, and, if those elements are addressed, the most vulnerable people in society will not be abandoned.

Will he ensure that the joined-up working, particularly supported housing and respite care, as well as the residential care provided at Lisgarel, will be fully recognised? That is not the case according to the criteria used by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Supplementary questions should be brief.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I give Mr Beggs the assurances that he seeks. I am aware of the grave concern in the area, and I have taken some steps to address it; for example, to try to provide some reassurance and comfort, I spoke to local newspapers, and they published some of my statements. However, no decision has been made; the closures are not a done deal.

The proposals do not contain a single done deal, and any contentious proposals must come back to me for ratification. I will scrutinise each of those, and I will base my decision, as always, on the simple criterion that patients come first. No cuts will be made to front-line services. I will consider the views of patients carefully, and I will listen closely to the views of Lisgarel residents too.

The trust put forward the proposals. Efficiency savings of £700 million must be achieved, of which the trusts' share is £467 million, and the Northern Trust must find £82 million of that. That money must be found; otherwise I am cutting other services. That is the situation in which I find myself, and it is not one in which I want to be.

Some DUP Members have been particularly vocal on the issue, but they could sort out the shortfall in funding. That party holds the purse strings and, in light of the proposals, if it wants to give me more money, that would be hugely helpful.

Primary Care Provision: Rural County Tyrone

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what strategy his Department is pursuing to improve and develop primary care provision in rural parts of County Tyrone that are a significant distance away from an acute hospital. (AQO 1930/09)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In order to reduce dependency on hospitals for treatment and care, I am committed to enhancing primary and community care services across Northern Ireland. Over the period of the comprehensive spending review (CSR), £44 million has been made available to boards and trusts to provide additional primary care services, including: developing patient education and case management programmes for people with chronic diseases; improving community-based palliative care services; employing specialist community nurses to deliver services to people in their homes, and promoting the use of technology to help to reduce the number of unnecessary hospital referrals and admissions.

The primary and community care infrastructure programme aims to put in place a physical infrastructure that is fit for purpose and provides integrated, modern health and care services to local communities. The new, enhanced local hospital complex planned for Omagh will include a health and care centre and allow access to a wide range of secondary and primary services.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of the serious concerns in Carrickmore and Fintona. The health and care centres there were recently in line for development through capital investment, but the money, I understand, was withdrawn. Will the Minister agree to meet me and representative GPs from both centres?

Carrickmore is furthest away from all the acute hospitals. The Minister said that primary care has a key role to play in the health solution for west Tyrone. In the absence of an acute hospital, we need our primary care provision built up. Will the Minister agree to meet with me and relevant GPs to discuss those matters?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Primary care is a central plank in the strategy, as, through primary care, we can keep people out of hospitals. Therefore Mr McElduff's points are well made.

He referred to rural areas. About half of the GP practices in west Tyrone are in rural areas, and those practices provide a wide and important range of services, which will be able to be centralised when the new buildings are built. That does not necessarily

mean that there will be a massive increase in the number of services. However, the proposal is for a one-stop shop, as opposed to many stops. Mr McElduff tackled me about the matter last week during a meeting about the hospital in Omagh. I said that I would be happy to look at primary care provision, and I still have to do that.

Health and care centres are planned for Carrickmore and Fintona. However, the Member is aware that I needed £7.8 billion to renew Health Service infrastructure over the next 10 years, and I received £3.3 billion. I have less than half of what I need; therefore, I must prioritise. The Western Health and Social Care Trust will make those decisions. The spend on new hospitals in Enniskillen and Omagh, provisions at Altnagelvin, and new healthcare provisions at Omagh and Lisnaskee are major parts of that budget over the three-year CSR period and beyond. Getting more money into the Western Health and Social Care Trust will depend on my increasing the entire budget.

Mr Buchanan: Given that County Tyrone has to depend solely on primary care since the recent announcement that the last strand of acute services is to be removed from the Tyrone County Hospital by the end of this month, would it not have been good practice to have had all those primary care facilities in place prior to the removal of acute services, since that is what the people in County Tyrone will have to depend on? I would welcome the opportunity to have a meeting with GPs and the Minister on those issues.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Tyrone County Hospital is an old administrative unit. Health services are delivered regionally, and subregionally, through the trusts. The Western Health and Social Care Trust area includes Omagh and most of County Tyrone and has two acute hospitals, Altnagelvin Hospital and the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. Around £260 million is about to be spent on rebuilding the hospital in Enniskillen. The enhanced local hospital in Omagh will be rebuilt at a projected cost of £190 million. In addition, there will be other primary care investments, such as those in Omagh and in Lisnaskee. Considerable amounts of money are being spent in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area to address concerns.

It is my desire to build health and care centres at Carrickmore and Fintona, and it is my desire to build centres in many other places. I will need to see the capital budget envelope increased, and I am looking at ways to do that. However, Members will appreciate that that is very difficult in the current circumstances. At the same time, I am trying to handle the 3% CSR efficiency savings, which will take £700 million out of the Health Service over three years. I assure Members that that is not easy. As I have said over and over again

in House, if Members have better ideas about the way things should be done, please let me know; I am listening.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister understand that the concerns that the people in rural parts of County Tyrone have about primary care provision have been heightened by the emergence of plans for private provision? Does he agree that there is a real danger that public provision of that important level of primary healthcare could well be weakened by private provision? Does he have any plans to address that issue?

3.00 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have no knowledge of that private company — Primacure. I think that it got planning permission and made an announcement. It has had no discussions with me or the Department, nor, as I understand it, with the relevant trust — the Western Health and Social Care Trust. My position on healthcare is absolutely clear; there should be cradle-to-the-grave healthcare, and it should be free for all. From time to time, we have to opt for private purchase and provision, but that is always to reinforce the principle rather than to breach it.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Loading Bay Waiting Times

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to change the waiting times at loading bays from the current limit of five minutes. (AQO 1946/09)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Loading bays are provided to facilitate the loading and unloading of goods that, by reason of their size or weight, cannot be reasonably conveyed by any other means than a vehicle. Loading bays may be used for as long as is necessary to convey goods to or from premises. Vehicles are not permitted to wait in loading bays for any purpose other than loading and unloading. Traffic attendants enforce those restrictions and observe vehicles in loading bays to ensure that they are properly using the facility. A traffic attendant will issue a vehicle with a parking ticket if it is observed parked in loading bay without loading or unloading.

Since the commencement of the decentralised parking enforcement contract in October 2006, the policy of Roads Service in my Department has been to allow a five-minute observation period for all vehicles before a parking ticket is issued. However, following a recent enforcement policy review, Roads Service officials decided to adjust that period to 10

minutes for commercial vehicles only. All other vehicles will retain a five-minute observation period. That policy change has been effective from 19 January 2009.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the recording system.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the extension of the waiting time for commercial businesses, albeit that it is only an extension of five minutes. I am sure that the Minister is aware from his experience in his own constituency, and in other constituencies, that the five-minute waiting period has caused problems. The Minister referred to issues that involve the National Car Parks Limited (NCP) attendants. It is important that businesses are given a bit of latitude. The traffic attendants should not be waiting about for vehicles to exceed the five minutes or not. I am sure that there are other cars that are breaking the law. Can the Minister ensure that NCP will not be as rigorous in its approach to businesses and will not issue tickets if a vehicle has been parked for one second over the 10 minutes? That is what is happening in some parts with the five-minute waiting period.

The Minister for Regional Development: A balance must be struck, and I think that NCP employs some degree of common sense when dealing with all those issues. However, spaces in town and city centres are very contested as far as parking and traffic movement is concerned. If a vehicle is parked for longer than the allowed waiting period, it prevents another vehicle from loading or offloading to other premises. A balance must be struck between keeping loading bays ticking over — keeping the space available as often as is possible — and allowing people to reasonably do their business. The Member has welcomed the extension of the waiting period for commercial vehicles from five to 10 minutes. As I said, NCP adopts a common-sense approach, but there is also an onus on its attendants to keep traffic flowing in town centres, where there are obviously congestion issues. They must ensure that people do not delay unduly, and, in doing so, prevent other traders from getting goods in and out of their premises.

Mr Brady: Is loading and unloading permitted in streets with yellow line restrictions?

The Minister for Regional Development: The answer is yes, unless it is otherwise stated. Loading and unloading is permitted on yellow line restrictions and the change of observation time for commercial vehicles from five to 10 minutes also applies to areas with yellow lines.

Roadworks in Belfast and Ards

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment on the economic impact of roadworks in the Belfast and Ards area.
(AQO 1947/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I understand that the Member's question relates to street works that are carried out by utilities. Unfortunately, it is simply not possible to ascertain the economic impact of such street works by utilities in the North. Any such economic impact would be based largely on the cost of related traffic delays, and the magnitude and severity of those effects is difficult to quantify. I understand that that is similar to the position in England, where two recent studies that were carried out to determine the cost of traffic delays due to street works came up with significantly different answers.

I fully appreciate the Member's concerns about the number of roadworks being carried out by utilities. However, modern society cannot function without essential services such as water supply, waste-water disposal, electricity, gas and telecommunications. That is why utility companies were given the right by Westminster to locate their equipment under public roads. Such services cannot be installed and maintained without some damage to the infrastructure of the road and disruption to traffic. However, we recognise the frustration of road users at the disruption that is caused when roads and footways are opened by the utility companies and, in particular, when there is poor co-ordination between them.

Roads Service has a duty to minimise disruption to the public and to protect the road network, so it has implemented effective arrangements for utilities to share information on planned work, to minimise traffic disruption and ensure that roads are properly reinstated.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will not be surprised that I am returning to the subject of the roads on the Ards Peninsula, a place that he visited not that long ago. Economic development is talked about; however, there has been no economic development on the Ards Peninsula for many years because of lack of investment in local roads. Will the Minister provide assurance that there will be further investment in roads, particularly those on the Ards Peninsula, which will give us some semblance of economic progress?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct: I visited the roads on the Ards Peninsula and, like many roads across the North, they could do with being repaired and upgraded. It is no secret that the structural maintenance budget is not what Roads Service and others estimate is required to keep roads here at a necessary standard. Thus, we

continue to argue every year, as part of the Budget and in-year monitoring processes, for additional funds to be made available to Roads Service. Those funds should be spread equally and evenly across all Roads Service divisions so that all areas get an opportunity to receive improvements.

The Member knows that we are playing catch-up on roads infrastructure, not just on the main routes, but on all roads across the North. Although we do not have a sufficient budget to treat all roads as we would wish to; when money becomes available, we must ensure that it goes to areas where there is the most pressing need and ensure that it is spread equally across all divisions.

Mr Shannon: Does the Minister agree that allocation of the roads budget should follow the work of the service facilities? The Minister has been in our neck of the woods at least twice, so he will be well aware of the substandard state of the roads due to service facilities and reinstatements. Is the Minister aware of the damage being done to vehicles because of service facility roadworks? The claims from drivers on those roads are substantial. Does the Minister agree that more money should be spent on roads in the Ards and in Belfast?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said, many areas have pressing needs, including the Ards. Since I took up my ministerial post, I have had the good fortune to visit many constituencies across the North.

As I said in my original answer, utilities are very important and are part of the service infrastructure. If people want to develop economic opportunities in the Ards, then infrastructure for water, waste-water removal, electricity and telecommunications is required. Such infrastructure is necessary for economic development. Roads Service cannot prevent utilities from laying infrastructure under roads or from repairing, or amending, such infrastructure. However, we try to organise the works so that they do not cause huge disruption and we require utility companies to reinstate roads to a satisfactory condition. From experience, I know that people across the North often complain that that does not happen. Therefore, Roads Service must keep checking with utilities so that any damage done to roads is repaired and that roads are reinstated properly.

Mr McGlone: In light of the significant increase in compensation claims that have been made for damage to vehicles due to potholes on our rural roads and the cost of that to the Department, why is so little money being put into roads maintenance in areas such as mid-Ulster where the roads are as bad as they have ever been during my time as a councillor?

The Minister for Regional Development: I can supply the Member with figures to show that, over the

past number of years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of money that has been spent on roads maintenance, but it is still not enough. When the Member and his colleagues from that corner of the House argue for more money for social housing, I hope that they will argue equally for more money for the provision of rural roads. When those Members are looking to raid other budgets to augment the social housing budget, I will gladly take money from them for the roads budget.

It is all very well for Members to argue that certain issues should be key priorities for the Executive, but the roads maintenance budget for rural roads and roads infrastructure is not at the required level. We argued that as part of the budgetary process, but I did not hear many other voices supporting us. We can normally top that up with in-year monitoring funds, but this year has been particularly difficult because the budget is stretched, and there are many loud demands being made from other areas of the public spend about what money should be applied there. Therefore, I am glad to hear the Member arguing for an upgrade of the budget for rural roads, and I am sure that the next time that he mentions social housing, he will mention rural roads in the same breath.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that supplementary questions should relate to the original question.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí.

The Minister intimated that Roads Service has a role in relation to traffic delays and street works. Will he outline that role? How does Roads Service monitor it?

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service's role is to minimise disruption to the public and to protect the road network. It puts in place arrangements for utilities to share information, to plan work in order to minimise traffic disruption and to ensure that roads are properly reinstated. Roads Service, in partnership with the utilities companies, has a computerised register, which is known as the Northern Ireland street register and notification system (NISRANS), where planned street works are notified before the start of works.

The advanced notification system allows Roads Service and utilities to co-ordinate works that are likely to occur around the same time or on the same road. It also allows utilities to stagger works in order to minimise disruptions. Emergency and urgent works are notified retrospectively.

In addition, Roads Service has introduced the Street Works (Amendment) Order 2007, which is based on the Traffic Management Act 2004, and it includes provision to reduce traffic delays related to street works. The legislation also includes direction-making

powers aimed at minimising congestion through the reduction of delays related to street works.

Street Lighting

3. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps have been taken to reduce the energy used by street lighting. (AQO 1948/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The energy efficiency of street lighting is a major consideration for my Department's Roads Service. It is committed to maintaining the standards of street lighting, while, at the same time, reducing its energy costs. It has already undertaken a number of energy conservation measures, including the increased use of energy-efficient lanterns for new and replacement street lighting installations, replacing the highest wattage street lights, where possible, with more efficient energy-efficient lanterns while still maintaining street lighting standards and trialling the use of energy conservation measures, such as reduced burning hours and the use of white lamps, which allow for lower lighting levels.

Mr Ross: Is the Minister aware that some councils in England and Wales recently took the decision to turn off street lights, much to the disappointment of the Automobile Association — which states that it will cause road safety issues — and the police, who are worried about increased crime? Does the Minister agree that a more common-sense approach would be to investigate new technology, such as LED lighting for street lamps? Such lighting has been used in China and in the United States, where it has been reported that there could be up to 50% energy savings on this new technology.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct in saying that the feasibility of turning off all, or some, street lights between certain periods has been considered and assessed, but it has been rejected on safety grounds. However, it is incumbent on Roads Service to continue to monitor developments and to reconsider all options when next reviewing energy conservation plans.

As I said in my original answer, Roads Service has already begun to assess new technology and its effectiveness, because the issue is about the cost of street lighting, not just the lighting pollution issues in the countryside. The cost of street lighting energy has risen, and it has placed a burden on Roads Service's budget, which impacts on the last question, which related to structural maintenance. The cost of street lighting is continuing to rise, and, wherever possible, Roads Service has been examining new technology to try to introduce new elements to street lighting, which will reduce the cost, and the effects, of pollution.

3.15 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish the Minister every success in getting more money from the Executive for roads. When will the next review of the energy conservation plan — with particular reference to street lighting — take place? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service will next review the street lighting energy conservation plan in the 2009-2010 financial year.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Minister tell the House what his Department is doing to explore and implement alternative sources of energy technology, such as solar power? That would surely reduce costs and, perhaps, the Department's carbon footprint.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Someone still has a mobile telephone on. I ask that it be switched off, because it is interfering with the recording system.

The Minister for Regional Development: It could not be a solar-powered telephone that is interfering with the recording system. *[Laughter.]*

Solar-powered lighting for street-lighting purposes is not currently considered as viable. However, rapid developments in the efficiency of photovoltaic cells and lamp technologies will likely make solar power a realistic solution for street lighting in the near future. Roads Service will continue to monitor advances in such technology, and will conduct trials at the earliest opportunity when the technology can meet the needs of street-lighting operations.

Road Safety

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many meetings have been held between his Department and the Department of the Environment in relation to road safety issues; and if the future of the NI Road Safety Council was discussed. (AQO 1949/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I assure Members that I give a high priority to road safety generally, and that I am fully committed to making a significant contribution towards achieving a reduction in the number of casualties on our roads. To that end, I met the previous Minister of the Environment on 10 July 2007 and again on 10 March 2008 in order to discuss a range of safety issues associated with the road safety strategy for the North. Furthermore, road safety is an important item for discussion at the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meetings, at which the Minister for the Environment and I discuss road safety issues with my counterpart in the South.

Roads Service has also developed excellent working relationships with the National Roads Authority, and

officials meet regularly to discuss road safety issues and to share best practice. More recently, I met Minister Wilson and Minister Ritchie to discuss plans for the development of Belfast city centre, and we agreed that our Departments would conduct a high-level review of the emerging plans in order to ensure that any resulting proposals recognise the importance of traffic safety, while meeting the needs of the essential user groups, including pedestrians, traders and public transport users and providers.

Roads Service officials regularly meet the Department of the Environment (DOE) officials in order to review the current road safety strategy and exchange ideas for improving road safety. As a result, DOE is preparing a new road safety strategy, which is due for publication in 2010. I have agreed that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) officials should participate in developing that strategy.

The future of the Road Safety Council is a matter for Minister Wilson and his Department. My Department is not represented on that body, which is funded by the DOE to promote voluntary road safety activity. I am aware of the report on the Road Safety Council, and of Minister Wilson's decision. That body's future is not a matter for my Department.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for giving such a detailed answer. I know that he is dedicated to road safety, as we all are. Will he acknowledge the contribution that the Road Safety Council has made in giving leadership and a strategic role to so many small voluntary committees across Northern Ireland? In addition, would it not make better sense, given that a new strategy is about to be introduced, that roads and road safety be met under the remit of a single Department and a single Minister?

The Minister for Regional Development: When the original six Departments were divided into 10, elements of the original DOE were moved to different Departments, but responsibility for road safety stayed with the DOE. Roads engineering and its contribution to road safety went to DRD and Roads Service. There is a crossover in some of those arrangements, and I acknowledge the work of the Road Safety Council. As I said, my Department is not represented on that body, and its future is a matter for the Minister of the Environment. Road safety issues are dealt with by a range of bodies, North and South and cross-border, all of which are making a very important contribution. We were all heartened to see that the number of fatalities and serious injuries on our roads are reducing steadily North and South of the border. However, there is much more work to be done.

The Department of the Environment is responsible for road safety, and Minister Wilson has to make a decision about the Road Safety Council. As my

Department is not represented on that body, it is not a matter for me. However, those organisations or agencies that contribute to road safety are doing valuable work, and I encourage them to continue to do so.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What are the Minister's plans for excluding all traffic from Belfast city centre?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my answer to the lead question, I met Ministers Wilson and Ritchie to discuss the development of Belfast city centre. As the Member knows, three Departments have interests in the city centre. Roads Service is responsible for road engineering and the enforcement of waiting restrictions on the streets; the Department of the Environment has interests in road safety education; and the Department for Social Development is responsible for the Streets Ahead programme, which administers the streetscape work. Furthermore, the PSNI is responsible for enforcing traffic regulations and waiting restrictions.

The Ministers met recently, and some of the discussion was prompted, in part, by the tragic fatality in Belfast city centre. Devolved Government provides an opportunity for Ministers to meet regularly to ensure that individual plans that might impact on the streetscape of Belfast city centre or on public transport and the way in which it moves around the city — which is my Department's responsibility — co-ordinate and make sense and to ensure that road safety and the safety of pedestrians are at the forefront of any plans that are considered.

Ministers met, and we asked senior officials of our Departments to examine existing plans and bring back some options and recommendations. We expect to meet again in May to consider those options, and we will then be in a position to outline a way forward.

Mr Beggs: Do Roads Service officials regularly engage with local road-safety committees? I declare an interest as a member of such a voluntary committee. In view of DRD and DOE's overlapping responsibilities, will the Minister tell us whether he was consulted about the proposals to end funding to the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland? Will he assure us that Road Service staff will continue to engage with local voluntary committees to improve everyone's safety?

The Minister for Regional Development: As I said in my answer to the lead question, the DRD is not represented on that committee, and it is understandable that it was not involved in the Environment Minister's decision: we had no part in that. I assure the Member that Roads Service is keen to co-operate, not only at senior, but at local level with all who have an interest in road safety to ensure that the numbers of deaths, serious injuries and accidents are reduced. That is in

everyone's interest. Roads Service will want to continue with that work.

Journey Times

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development what strategies his Department has in place to meet its public service agreement and business plan target of reducing journey times on the key transport corridors by 2.5% by 2015, compared with the figure in 2001. (AQO 1950/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: I wish to clarify that public service agreement (PSA) 13 states that, by 2015, we will reduce journey times on key transport corridors by 2.5% compared with 2003 — not 2001, as the question states.

When that challenging target is achieved, it will bring significant benefits to our economy. The 'Investment Delivery Plan for Roads', published in April 2008, sets out the priorities and plans of my Department's Roads Service for the 10-year period, 2008-2018. It aims to address bottlenecks on the strategic road network and gives priority to the key transport corridors.

The investment delivery plan contains a programme of major road improvements based on the funding levels indicated in the investment strategy. That strategic road improvement programme identifies improvements not only to the key transport corridors, but to the link corridors and the remainder of the trunk-road network. The network connects our main provincial towns and cities to the Belfast metropolitan area, the regional gateways and the roads network in the South.

In order to achieve PSA 13, Roads Service has significant schemes for key transport corridors in the planning and under construction. Those under construction include the M1/Westlink/M2 works; the 12-kilometre dualling of the A1 around Newry; the 20-kilometre dualling of the A4 between Dungannon and Ballygawley. Roads Service is on target to have completed, approximately, a further 160 kilometres of dual carriageway in the key transport corridors by 2015.

The promotion of public transport is another objective of PSA 13. The Department has plans in place for the increasing the usage of public transport, including improvements to the rail and Goldline services which have the most impact in decreasing car journeys on the strategic road network. I am confident that the strategic road-improvement schemes, combined with the promotion of public transport, will result in the achievement of that challenging target and reduce journey times on the key transport corridors.

Mr B McCrea: Is it just my opinion, or have the journey times on the Westlink deteriorated to the point where we are back to where we started? As I understand it, the business case for the improvements was that much of the traffic coming into Belfast was through-traffic, and we would see a great improvement as a result of them. I see a real problem with that. Will the Minister explain why that should happen, and whether he has any plans to deal with it in the foreseeable future?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is just the Member.

As a regular user of the Westlink, I must tell him that everyone that I have spoken to about it has remarked on how the journey from the south into Belfast, and leaving Belfast in the evening, has improved dramatically since the work began. That may not have been so this morning, as two lanes that were opened in advance of when they should have been, to facilitate Christmas traffic, are having work completed on them. The works on the Westlink are almost at completion stage. There has been substantial improvement there.

Plans are being developed by the Roads Service to remove the junction at York Street, which has caused a bottleneck. They are in the early stages of design, but there are plans. Following that, there will be a continuous flow of traffic — to take the full extent of it — from Arklow towards Rosslare, right up as far as Larne. There will be a dual carriageway along the entire eastern seaboard of the island. I think that that is good news.

The Member will be aware that it is very difficult to build our way out of traffic congestion. That is why another key part of the public service agreement target is to improve public transport and improve usage of public transport. Although we have been spending significant money on the Westlink and, I would contend, improving the journey times and experience on the Westlink, we have also been investing significantly in park-and-ride facilities, in improving the rail network, and in trying to encourage people out of their cars and onto public transport. The growth in passenger numbers on public transport shows that the investment that we are making there is bearing fruit.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain what progress has been made in the provision of a dual carriageway on the A5, A6 and A8 routes? Is the Minister aware of the Stand up for Derry campaign?

The Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, the answer to the second part of the Member's question is yes.

I was pleased to announce the preferred corridor for the A5 Derry to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageway schemes last November. The

design of those schemes, which will receive a £400 million contribution in funding from the Irish Government, is proceeding at pace. I expect to be in a position to announce the preferred route for both projects in summer 2009. I also hope to announce the preferred route for the dualling of the A6 Derry to Dungiven scheme in the spring, and will bring forward a departmental statement on the Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway scheme in response to the inspector's report later this year.

Work on the A5 and A8 schemes could possibly commence in 2012 or 2013, subject to the normal statutory processes. I anticipate commencement of the A6 Derry to Dungiven scheme in a roughly similar time frame, with similar provisos. Work on the Randalstown to Castledawson scheme could commence in 2011, with completion expected in 2014.

Mr Dallat: I am pleased that the Minister has already referred to the A6. Does he agree with me that the travel times could not be realistically reduced without a bypass at Dungiven? Will he give us an assurance that that will happen long before 2015?

The Minister for Regional Development: I have had this discussion with the Member, the Regional Development Committee and with people I have met in Dungiven and here many times before. I think that they, and many other people, are convinced by the assurances that we have given that we will take forward that scheme as quickly as possible. We do not anticipate any undue delay in that. Work on the design of that scheme, and in bringing forward the options around it, is well under way, and we look forward to further announcements later in the year. The Member can be assured that I see the road as a priority, and I intend to make sure that there is no delay.

Public Transport

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to increase resources for public transport. (AQO 1951/09)

The Minister for Regional Development: The regional transportation strategy assumed a total investment of £3.5 billion over the 10-year period 2002-2012, which comprised the pre-2002 baseline level of £2.1 billion being maintained, and included £1.4 billion additional funding, but with the caveat that the final outcome would be subject to the normal budgetary processes.

The result has been that transportation has been successful in attracting finance, and the Budget for the period 2008-2011 provides significant levels of capital funding for public transport of £51 million this year, rising to £54 million next year, and £90 million in 2010-11. My Department is committed to undertaking

a review of the current regional transportation strategy and is carrying out a stocktaking exercise in implementing the strategy to date, including budgets secured, and the rate of implementation of the projects.

3.30 pm

The review will determine key outcomes for local transport, including emissions from traffic, the safety of travel, and the accessibility of transport services. It will seek to address a number of developments that have occurred since 2002, including the focus on climate change and sustainable development. The findings from the review will inform my Department's bids for future budget and investment strategy exercises.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Winter Fuel Payment: Upper Bann

1. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister for Social Development what is the estimated number of homes in Upper Bann that will benefit from the additional proposed payment of £150 to assist with winter fuel costs. (AQO 1966/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I expect the Financial Assistance Bill to be given Royal Assent on Friday 6 February. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) will then designate a Department to deliver a fuel credit or fuel payment. I am unable to confirm precisely when that fuel credit or fuel payment will be made, as there are still a number of key decisions to be made around how it will be processed. Those decisions will not be made final until the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has designated a Department to deliver that credit or payment. It is likely, of course, that the designated Department will be the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Approximately 8,000 households in Upper Bann — and I stress that that is only a rough estimate — will benefit from the payment. Although it will not be immediate, the aim will be to get the payment out as quickly as possible to those who need it.

Mr Simpson: The Minister has answered my supplementary question, which concerned the timescale for the payment; I am sure that all Members agree that it is essential that that payment be made as quickly as possible to those who need it.

The Minister for Social Development: I could not agree more with Mr Simpson, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development and Member for Upper Bann. The most important thing is to ensure that

we address need, and that means getting a payment or a credit out as quickly as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: Can the Minister confirm whether she has been in communication with OFMDFM to discuss the practical details of the proposed fuel payment?

The Minister for Social Development: Yes, I have. In anticipation of the passing of the Financial Assistance Bill, my officials have been working alongside officials from OFMDFM to map out the practical details of the proposed scheme — assuming that DSD is the designated Department.

Members will be aware that the proposal for a fuel payment originated with my Department. However, the funding was announced by the Minister of Finance and Personnel, with further details to be outlined by OFMDFM. On Thursday 29 January, I met the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and agreed that the payment will cover all households in receipt of pension credit as well as households in receipt of income support. That is approximately 45,000 households over and above the number announced by the Minister of Finance on 15 December. Clearly, that has financial implications, as the cost will be £7 million more than the £15 million that was secured in the December monitoring round.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give any indication as to how the payment will be administered and delivered? Will it be a cash payment or a fuel credit? She has already answered the second part of my question, which concerned when that payment will happen.

The Minister for Social Development: Obviously, those are the details that are being discussed by me, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and by my officials and officials from OFMDFM. The Executive and the Assembly have to wait for Royal Assent before the First Minister and the deputy First Minister can designate a Department. The formal process must be completed.

Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps her Department has taken to protect those currently on the waiting list of the warm homes scheme when the two successful tenderers are appointed. (AQO 1967/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The budget available for the very popular warm homes scheme has been fully committed for the financial year 2008-09.

My Department is on track to meet its public service agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy-efficiency measures. I submitted a bid in the June and December

monitoring rounds for additional resources to clear the waiting list. Unfortunately, neither bid was successful. However, some outstanding referrals for assistance will be carried forward and assessed under the new criteria, and I expect that the majority of those outstanding warm-home referrals will receive assistance under the new scheme. Inevitably, some applicants who are on the waiting list will not be eligible for assistance under the new scheme.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is unfortunate that some people who are in the current scheme will not qualify for the new scheme. Will the Minister further clarify whether the splitting-up of the delivery of the warm homes scheme from one contract to two contracts will speed up the process? Will that result in the numbers on the waiting list falling? Will it mean that new schemes can be introduced in the 2009-2010 financial year?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr Buchanan raises an apt question. The whole purpose of the review of the scheme was to focus on the issue of need, particularly of those who need it most. I hope that that very popular scheme will continue to be popular and successful. Most importantly, we must ensure that those who are in need, particularly people in rural communities, benefit from the warm homes scheme. If the Member wishes to raise individual cases, he can bring those details to my attention.

Mr Burns: Why has the eligibility criteria for the warm homes scheme been changed?

The Minister for Social Development: In June 2008, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published a value-for-money study on the warm homes scheme. The Audit Office highlighted several areas for change, including the eligibility criteria. I mentioned that issue in my reply to Mr Buchanan. The Audit Office criticised the fact that families with children, and householders aged under 60 years of age, were eligible only for the warm-homes element of the scheme, which provides insulation and basic energy-efficiency measures.

Before a subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing in October 2008, my Department accepted all the Audit Office's recommendations, and we proposed several changes to the current scheme. My Department recently finished a consultation exercise on the proposed changes, and more than 90% of respondents supported changing the eligibility criteria. In changing the criteria, lone parents and low-income families will qualify not only for insulation measures but for heating measures. Those will improve the energy efficiency of their homes.

I am sure that all Members will agree that, particularly at this time of economic hardship, it is right to refocus the scheme, in order to maximise the

energy-efficiency gains that are achieved for every pound that is spent.

Ms Lo: I have been approached by several constituents who have been on the waiting list for a couple of years and are fearful that they may be written off because of a shortage of funding in the Housing Executive. Can the Minister clarify the position on that?

The Minister for Social Development: Ms Lo has highlighted the popular nature of the scheme. If she provides me with details of those constituents, I am more than happy to have their cases investigated and explored, in order to provide her with the necessary answers, which will, hopefully, help to alleviate the situation.

Child Maintenance

3. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Development how many non-resident parents pay child maintenance to a parent who cares for a child or children. (AQO 1968/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I am pleased to inform the Member that there is a very positive story here. At the end of December 2008, 14,500 non-resident parents were paying child maintenance. That was an increase of 25% on the number of non-resident parents who were paying child maintenance when I took office in May 2007. At around 21,000, the number of children who benefit from the payments is the highest ever.

This year, we are on target to collect £20.5 million through the statutory maintenance scheme — another record figure. Those gains are a result of hard work and determination on the part of DSD staff. I pay tribute to them and their excellent work in often-difficult circumstances.

Members heard earlier about the importance of putting children first. That is exactly what is being done by my Department's child maintenance and enforcement division.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for answering the question and for providing the detail. Will the Minister provide an estimated percentage of how many absentee parents her Department is unable to pursue? Furthermore, does she plan to raise the issue at the North/South Ministerial Council, given that some absentee parents live in, or purport to live in, the Twenty-six Counties?

The Minister for Social Development: I have met the current Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Mary Hanafin, and her predecessor, Martin Cullen, to discuss the latter point and a range of other social

security matters. I raised certain social security matters at the most recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. If Mr Doherty has particular issues relating to his constituency that involve both Ministers and both jurisdictions, provide me with the details, and I will be happy to deal with them.

The Member raised the issue of non-resident parents. There is a duty and responsibility on all of us to encourage everybody to honour children and to put them first in society. Therefore, everyone must pay for the children for whom they are responsible.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister outline what her Department has done about the issue of non-resident parents, particularly in relation to the Republic of Ireland? Has the matter been raised at meetings of the North/South bodies? Is there any mechanism that allows our statutory bodies to pursue parents in the Republic of Ireland? It is an issue, because parents who do not want to pay maintenance for their children might quite easily skip across that land border — something that is unique in these islands.

The Minister for Social Development: I partly answered that question in my reply to Mr Doherty.

I have had, and continue to have, meetings with the Minister for Social and Family Affairs, Ms Hanafin. I also met her predecessor, Mr Cullen. I have raised a range of social security issues, including child maintenance and the peripatetic nature of claimants, which also happens vice versa.

As with Mr Doherty, Mr Craig may want to bring specific issues to my attention, face-to-face, and I will be happy to discuss them with the Irish Minister. I raised such matters, and general social security issues, last week. I hope that the DUP will take the chance to fully support the North/South Ministerial Council.

3.45 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she tell the House how many people are in arrears on child-maintenance payments? How much money is owed in total, and what steps are being taken to recover it?

The Minister for Social Development: At present, just over 5,000 — one in four — non-resident parents rob their children and pay no child maintenance; that leaves 6,500 children in Northern Ireland without any maintenance. That is unacceptable.

Throughout the years, staff in the old Child Support Agency and, currently, in the child maintenance and enforcement division, have seen too many examples of non-resident parents going to extreme lengths to evade their responsibilities and probably to misrepresent their circumstances in order to avoid paying maintenance.

When my Department launched enforcement measures in September 2008, part of that was a media-advertisement campaign, which is still rolling. It asks the probing question:

“Are you robbing your child?”

As a result, many people have come forward and paid significant amounts of money.

When the period between September 2008 and December 2008 was examined and a comparative analysis carried out for the same period in 2007 and 2006, the amount of money that has been collected has increased substantially. That proves that advertisement campaigns work — as they did in the anti-drink-driving exercise — to alleviate a situation or, as in that instance, to improve a situation and put children first.

Housing Executive Budget: Shortfall

4. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the anticipated shortfall in the Housing Executive budget in 2009-2010 and 2010-2011. (AQO 1969/09)

9. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues to fill shortfalls in her housing budget. (AQO 1974/09)

20. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues to fill shortfalls in her housing budget. (AQO 1985/09)

The Minister for Social Development: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 9 and 20, which are similar, together.

Members will be aware that a substantial part of the housing budget is predicated on capital receipts from house and land sales. Members will also be aware that due to collapse in the land and property market, combined with the global credit squeeze, capital receipts have almost dried up.

During the current year, more than £95 million of capital receipts was projected; however, less than £10 million materialised. Some of that £80 million shortfall was made good through in-year monitoring rounds and diversions of DSD resources from other budget lines. In that way, the shortfall was reduced to £35 million. Despite that, living in hope of extra resources from quarterly monitoring rounds is completely unsatisfactory when delivering an important capital programme.

Unless there is dramatic improvement in the economic environment, my Department anticipates shortfalls of about £100 million per annum in each of the next two years. That is equivalent to the loss of 1,000 newbuild houses per annum. If the Assembly is

serious about achieving Programme for Government targets for housing, that must have a secure financial footing. I am trying to persuade my Executive colleagues on the matter.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for confirming the stark situation that her Department faces in the next three years. The Finance Minister has now accepted that her inability to build and renovate houses has a materially disproportionate effect on the construction industry. Independent of that factor, can the Minister indicate how the Executive can help to make good the housing shortfall that has arisen from the collapse in the Housing Executive's house and land sales?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Attwood for his question because it goes to the very nub of the problem. Neither the Executive nor anyone else is to blame for the shortfall in the housing budget. I acknowledge that the Executive face pressures in addition to housing.

However, investment in the social housing newbuild programme is the best way to boost the economy and the construction industry, quite apart from helping the homeless and people in housing stress. On 27 November 2008, I presented my Executive colleagues with a paper that made that case strongly. It stated specifically that we need to sustain social housing investment for economic reasons alone; we also have the social asset.

Although it has not been accepted so far, I have also made the case that we need to revisit the priorities of our three-year Programme for Government and Budget so that we can refocus resources on the areas that bring the most immediate economic benefit. The assumptions on which the current Budget and Programme for Government are based are no longer valid. We are now in an economic downturn, the depth of which we could never have envisaged. Furthermore, unemployment levels have risen, which could not have been earmarked or highlighted in January 2008, when the Budget was declared and voted on in the Assembly.

It is not only me who is of this view. Six or seven weeks ago, Professor Mike Smyth of the University of Ulster said:

“There is a strong case for revising the priorities set out in the NI Executive January 2008 Budget. For instance if capital expenditure could be redirected towards social housing, it would help to offset the collapse in private sector housebuilding.”

In a ‘Belfast Telegraph’ article last week, another leading economist, John Simpson, called for a review of priorities.

So far, my ministerial colleagues have been content with a stocktake rather than a complete review, but I assure my colleague Mr Attwood that I will continue to try to bring them round to my way of thinking. The only way to find a solution to this problem is to have a

review of the Budget priorities. We must ensure that housing is put on a sure financial footing. We must move away from the hand-to-mouth feeding of social housing, because that is no longer a tenable way of financing housing.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that her Department has surrendered tens of millions of pounds in the monitoring rounds? Her Department is seeking additional funding even though it cannot spend the funding for which it budgeted; does that not put a question mark over that Department's competence?

The Minister for Social Development: I am very surprised that a former Minister would make such a suggestion. He is under a total misapprehension and is trying to ditch the issue. The DUP and Sinn Féin have tried to flog a dead horse. It would suit the DUP to encourage the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that a proper review of the Budget priorities takes place. It may have escaped the Member, but we are now in a severe economic downturn; that is why a review is needed.

We should want to put housing on a sure financial footing rather than try to score political points at the expense of the people. It is wrong to prevent people from having access to houses, and it is wrong to prevent the proper finance from being available to put social housing on a sure financial footing for the first time ever. That is the very least that the DUP, and those on the opposite Benches, could do.

Mr K Robinson: I note carefully the lecture that the Minister has given to the House and to my colleagues in the DUP. However, given the shortfall in her budget, how does she propose to deal with the likely increase in demand for Housing Executive accommodation due to the economic downturn? In particular, I have an interest in social housing schemes in the Monkstown area.

The Minister for Social Development: Mr Robinson's question is apt. That is the reason why, for the first time, a social housing development programme must be put on a sure financial footing. That did not happen throughout decades of direct rule Administration, and I hope that my ministerial colleagues have a complete change of heart and take on board my points about the need for social housing and how investment in social housing could act as a necessary stimulus to the economy. Such investment could put people back into work, sustain existing jobs, create new jobs in the construction industry, provide a valuable asset and address housing waiting lists.

I agree that many people will, sadly and regrettably, find themselves in difficult economic circumstances through no fault of their own. That is why it is even more important that the Executive act collectively to

ensure that housing is put on a sure financial footing, that significant resources are invested in it, and that there is a complete review of the Budget priorities to enable that to happen.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister confirm — in case there is any lack of clarification — that the stocktaking exercise has, to date, produced absolutely nothing for social housing?

Secondly, she mentioned the potential loss of 1,000 newbuilds over the next couple of years. Will she outline what will happen to the Housing Executive's repairs and maintenance budget, which is, in some senses, equally important to those who live in houses that require such repairs?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Ford for his question.

On foot of the December monitoring round, I sought an immediate meeting with the Housing Executive, which outlined clearly the details and implications that could arise. As I had requested at the Executive meeting, I sought an immediate meeting with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. On reflection, he allowed me, subject to Executive approval, to redirect £10.5 million to enable much-needed heating and kitchen replacements and other maintenance schemes to take place. I agree; that is one way to help the construction industry. However, it is also one way to assuage the fears of tenants whose housing requires urgent repairs.

The classic point in all of this is that we need to review Budget priorities and — and I make a plea to everyone — to ensure that the social housing development programme is put on a sure financial footing in order to enable a proper programme of house building to cater for housing need throughout Northern Ireland.

Meeting with Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

5. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on her recent meeting with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

(AQO 1970/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I met the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, James Purnell, in November 2008, and we discussed a wide range of issues that are relevant to our responsibilities for social security, child support and pensions. Those included welfare reform, where I highlighted my concerns about potentially insensitive implementation, and the reform of the social fund. Furthermore, we discussed the disability living allowance and extending

its availability to people with severe sight impairment and other specific conditions. Moreover, I pressed Mr Purnell to broaden the eligibility criteria for winter fuel payments and to provide greater assistance to carers.

I intend to meet Mr Purnell — at my insistence — on a regular basis.

Mrs M Bradley: To what extent do decisions on social security that are taken at Westminster have an impact on social security policy in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Social Development: Section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes provision for the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Minister for Social Development to seek to secure a single system of social security for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That reflects the long-standing policy of parity in that area, where we have the same rules of entitlement, the same rates of benefits and share common computer systems.

Social security in Northern Ireland is not self-financing, and we rely heavily on subsidy from Britain to maintain the same level of benefits. On average, we receive about £185 million per year from the Great Britain national insurance fund to fund contributory benefits, and we receive £2.3 billion per year to fund non-contributory benefits. That funding is predicated on the maintenance of parity, yet there is one party in the Chamber that regularly flirts with the danger of undermining the principle of parity. Inevitably, therefore, decisions taken at Westminster are of huge importance for social security in Northern Ireland; we have little option but to implement them. We can, however, influence social-security policy as it develops at Westminster, and no one has been more involved in that work than my colleague Mark Durkan MP.

I call on those who criticise parity legislation in social security to address the draft legislation when it is processed in Westminster. In particular, those who refuse to take their seats in Westminster but who take remuneration there should reconsider their position.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time. I propose that Members take their ease until we resume the debate.

4.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Consultative Group on the Past

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims — [Mr Simpson.]

Which amendments were:

(1) Leave out all after “Assembly” and insert

“takes note of the proposals of the Consultative Group on the Past, shares the grave reservations across the community at the suggestion for £12,000 ‘recognition payments’, but recognises the potential for the other recommendations to provide an effective way to assist victims and to address the past and its legacy, consistent with the objectives of reconciliation and the creation of a shared future.” — [Mr Ford.]

(2) Leave out all after “and” and insert

“recognises the grief felt by the families of all victims who lost their lives as a result of the conflict; and, following publication of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past, urges everyone to enter a constructive debate on the way forward.” — [Mr McCartney.]

Mr Irwin: Representing a constituency that suffered heavily at the hands of republican terrorists, I was shocked to learn of the first reports that the Consultative Group on the Past had tabled a proposal to award £12,000 to such individuals. The scenes at the launch of the report were not surprising, given the depth of feeling and immense hurt that such a proposal caused, and people from both sides of the community have contacted me to tell me of their dismay at the proposal. On Friday a Roman Catholic businessman rang me to convey how disgusted he was, and he wanted me to convey that disgust to the House today.

It is totally unacceptable to the innocent victims of the IRA's bloody campaign in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, and it is an insult to the dear memory of those who were murdered at the hands of that organisation.

Mr Poots: Does the Member recall that a bomb exploded in Banbridge town, and a 12-year-old boy by the name of McCrum — whose brother is a DUP councillor — was killed in that explosion? The Member may also recall the attempted murder of my father in 1976. Subsequently, the individual who carried out that attempted murder was himself killed in an IRA feud. Does the Member agree that there can never be any comparison between a 12-year-old boy

who was murdered by an IRA bomb and the republican who was pulling the trigger on other people and who ended up getting shot himself in a feud? There never can be any comparison between the innocent boy and the terrorist who pulled the trigger.

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

Mr Irwin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I fully agree with what he said.

The families of those who were murdered by republican terrorists do not want the focus to be on some form of buyout or pay-off — what they want is justice. They want convictions and sentences to be passed on those who were responsible for the many crimes that were committed against them. A payment of whatever amount can never replace their loved ones.

In keeping with the motion, I wholeheartedly accept the importance of meeting the needs of victims. However, the pain and suffering of the families in question must not be increased by treating the victim and the perpetrator as equals. The callous individual who decided to brutally take a life cannot be compared with the innocent victim whose life was taken. Those are two opposites — they cannot be equated.

I accept that Lord Eames and Denis Bradley have been set a most difficult task. However, such a horrendous suggestion makes the objective study of the report extremely difficult for innocent victims. They cannot see past that awful proposal, and no wonder. From a victim's perspective, the proposal has created a massive obstacle in taking the report any further as regards studying any possible benefits that it may have brought to them. In effect, the report has been poisoned by the payment proposal.

The report has been dealt a very damaging blow. One must question how the Consultative Group on the Past could arrive at such a position if, as it states, it held many meetings with victims to hear their views. I must ask whether the group was actually listening, because the reaction of a large number of groups and campaigners has been one of dismay and shock.

Our troubled past will not be dealt with by awarding payments or by any form of truth forum. The needs of victims will be met only when justice is served on those who coldly murdered and maimed their loved ones. Equating the terrorist with the innocent victim is folly, and the Consultative Group on the Past must realise that. I support the motion.

Mr Elliott: At the outset, I thank the proposers of this motion, Mr Simpson and Lord Morrow, for securing the debate. Most importantly, I stress that my thoughts — throughout this past week — have been with the real victims of the terrible campaign that

occurred in Northern Ireland and further afield over the past 40 years.

It has been a very difficult journey for those people. I make it absolutely clear that there is no way that I will ever, ever accept that there is equality between those who were the perpetrators of the violence — from whatever side they came — and the real victims. Those who were murdered or had their lives destroyed cannot be equated to those who carried out heinous acts. We have heard about many atrocities today. I think about the Enniskillen and Omagh bombs. We also heard about Banbridge and many others. I cannot accept that the people who carried out those acts can be put on the same level as those who were the victims.

I talked to many victims over the past week. We must appreciate that every victim deals with their experiences in a different way. Earlier, Arlene Foster talked about some people's re-traumatisation — it is almost a re-victimisation. We can sense that every time that we talk to them. We feel that they are reliving those experiences, whether they were 10, 20, 30, or — in some cases — 40 years ago. People were trying to get on with their lives, but — all of a sudden — they have been turned upside down by the heinous proposal that emerged last week. It is not morally right, and the Ulster Unionist Party does not accept that it is right.

I heard Lord Eames and Denis Bradley suggest that victims sought recognition. The victims that I talk to want recognition, but not on the same level as those who were minded to murder their colleagues, family members and friends, and who blew up and destroyed parts of the Province. They want recognition that their family members who were murdered were different to the perpetrators.

The report is so contaminated by the proposal for recognition payments that the rest of its recommendations are in jeopardy. The proposal is like a rotten apple in a bag of apples; if it is not removed, the rest of the apples will rot as well. In other words, that part of the report will contaminate the perception of the rest of it.

Mr McFarland: Does the Member agree that equating victims with perpetrators, security forces with terrorists, and continuing a one-sided truth commission is no way for this country to go forward?

Mr Speaker: The Member will be allowed an additional minute in which to speak.

Mr Elliott: I agree with my colleague. In the past week, we have heard many such comments. The Member raised the additional point about the possibility of a truth commission. The people who murdered and bombed in this society will hardly stand up now and tell us the truth. If they did, I would not believe them for a minute. It is deplorable that we should be considering equating those two types of people.

Furthermore, society is hugely concerned that the victims' process will have further ramifications. I welcome the £36 million that OFMDFM will put in over the next three years; however, I want to be convinced that none of that money will go to the people who perpetrated the violence. The House must ensure that those who directed, and carried out, the violence in the Province do not get any of that £36 million, and that is why Members must have a proper definition of the word "victim". It is unfortunate that we did not take the opportunity when we had it last year to change the definition, and until it is clear that perpetrators and those who were murdered are not equal, we will never be able to deal properly and reasonably with victims' issues.

As far back as 2006, my colleague Derek Hussey, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, rejected the definition of a victim that the Westminster Government were adopting. My party stands by that rejection and will not allow perpetrators and those they murdered to be treated as equals.

Mr McCausland: I support the motion, and I speak as someone whose constituency has seen more than its fair share of violence. Over 40% of the deaths in the Troubles occurred in Belfast, despite the fact that it has only one fifth of the region's population, and the overwhelming majority of those deaths occurred in north and west Belfast.

Many of the Eames/Bradley proposals are unacceptable because they draw a moral equivalence between terrorists and victims, and the general offer of £12,000 is simply an outworking of that fundamental flaw. When he was introducing the report, Denis Bradley, one of the co-chairpersons of the consultative group, said:

"We cannot wash our hands and say that we are not part of the problem."

If everyone is guilty for the Troubles, then the paramilitary, terrorist organisations, which were responsible for 90% of the deaths, will have their central, and active, role downgraded, and that is wrong. Is Denis Bradley saying that the woman whose husband was murdered by terrorists was as much a part of the problem as the terrorists who murdered her husband? Is there equivalence between the Shankill bomber Thomas Begley and the innocent folk he murdered?

Last week, I attended a meeting with several people who had lost relatives in the Troubles, which was organised by the Commission for Victims and Survivors. Anyone who listened to those stories could not have helped but be moved by them. Those folk, and many others, need help, but I am not convinced that the Eames/Bradley proposals will do much for them.

4.15 pm

There is also the issue of truth recovery, but not one sentence in the report is devoted to how information will be obtained from paramilitary organisations. The IRA refused to co-operate with the Eames/Bradley group, and Gerry Adams has declared already that republicans will not co-operate with the legacy commission, as its three members will be appointed by the British Government.

Speaking on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' on BBC Radio Ulster, Denis Bradley, the co-chairperson of the Eames/Bradley Consultative Group on the Past, admitted that, although the legacy commission would have a certain amount of power over state agencies and be able to compel the production of documents and the appearance of witnesses, it would have no such power over paramilitary organisations, including the IRA. Moreover, paramilitary organisations do not keep formal records of their army council meetings. Therefore, the focus of attention of such a process would be on the actions of the security forces, while paramilitary organisations would be able to get away with broad denials and escape relatively untouched.

Gerry Adams has stated that the IRA will not co-operate, and we have evidence of his approach to truth recovery. During a panel discussion at the West Belfast Festival —

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate for a Member to misquote a fellow Member, as has just happened?

Mr Speaker: Please clarify your comments, Mr McCausland.

Mr McCausland: It was clear that Gerry Adams said what I have attributed to him. During a panel discussion at the West Belfast Festival on 6 August 2008, I challenged Gerry Adams, who was standing at the back of the hall, to assist the process of truth recovery by telling us what he knows about the story of IRA terrorism and his involvement. In the Chamber on 3 November 2008, I referred to some aspects of Mr Adams's past, and he denied that he had ever been a member of the IRA. That charge has been made many times by journalists, academics, unionist politicians and some politicians in the Irish Republic, but Gerry Adams denies the charge each time that it is made.

I will read from a source that he cannot dismiss so readily; it is a booklet called 'Freedom Struggle', which was published by the Provisional IRA in 1973. It was banned in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and, subsequently, it was republished in the United States of America. In the booklet, the Provisional IRA refers to a meeting between the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, and five IRA leaders in London in July 1972. It is described on pages 68, 69 and 70 of the booklet.

The IRA booklet states:

“the following conditions were demanded of Whitelaw before any truce talks would begin”.

Those conditions are listed on pages 68 and 69 of the booklet.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What relevance do the Member's comments have to the motion that is being debated?

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Please allow the Member to carry on.

Mr McCausland: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is clear that there are Members on the other side of the House who do not want the truth; that is the problem. They are not prepared to face up to the truth.

The second of those conditions was:

“The immediate release of a senior officer of the Belfast Brigade from internment”.

History — and official documents that have been released under the 30-year rule — reveals that on Sunday 18 June 1972, Whitelaw met John Hume and Paddy Devlin, who said that they believed that the IRA was willing to talk if the Government released Gerry Adams. Whitelaw agreed, and the meeting was held.

Mr Poots: What is the point in having a truth commission if some people will not tell the truth but expect the security forces to do so?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCausland: I am indebted to the Speaker and the Member for the extra few seconds; they will help to make up for the seconds that were lost by the unwillingness of Sinn Féin to face up to the truth.

The person who was released and who then took part —

Mr Molloy: Will the Member agree that if someone is interned —

Mr McCausland: The person who was released and who then took part in the London talks —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I ask Mr McCausland to take his seat; he has given way.

Mr Molloy: The Member did give way, and I thank him for doing so. An internee is not convicted. Therefore, an individual who is released from internment to take part in a meeting is not a convicted member of any organisation.

Mr McCausland: If Mr Molloy did more listening and less talking he might be better informed, as a member of the IRA delegation was, indeed, Gerry Adams.

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Moutray: In the foreword to its report, the Consultative Group on the Past said that it was:

“overwhelmed with the level of engagement from across our society.”

I hope that it has now been overwhelmed by the level of revulsion that accompanied its report. Although the group may have engaged directly with a great number of people, it has not reflected in its findings the real mood of the community. Rarely have I witnessed such an enormous public backlash. The authors of the report and their defenders have no credibility whatsoever when they assert that their findings are reflective of the feelings that exist in our community.

Lord Eames and Denis Bradley boasted about the depth and breadth of their engagement with the public. They talked about public meetings, websites, individual interviews and the email responses that they received when compiling their report.

Mr McCausland: Would the Member agree that the evidence set out in the booklet from which I have quoted, which was published by the Provisional IRA, is that the person who was released — whom we know to be Mr Adams — was a senior officer of the Belfast brigade? Perhaps that little reminder from a Provisional IRA publication will help Mr Adams's failing memory of the time that he was a senior officer of the Belfast brigade, as is stated in this publication, and assist him in his own personal truth recovery about events such as Bloody Friday, which was organised by the Belfast brigade of the IRA just two weeks after the talks in London.

Does the Member agree also that what is proposed by the Eames/Bradley report will not in any way assist victims and will, rather, do a disservice to them, particularly the victims of terrorist organisations, who will receive neither justice nor truth?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for his intervention — I find it most helpful and illuminating, as, I am sure, do many other Members.

Assuming that we accept that such widespread engagement was a feature of the work of the Consultative Group on the Past, I am at a loss to understand how it could have produced a set of findings that are so repulsive to such a wide spectrum of people throughout this community. The group has failed spectacularly to achieve consensus, and, in so doing, has probably damaged the cause of reconciliation and addressing the legacy of the past.

Mr A Maginness: Is the Member not aware that the Consultative Group on the Past was established, very firmly, on a cross-community representative basis and that the consensus that it reached could, therefore, be fairly described as a cross-community consensus?

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for his intervention. Based on what we see before us, I certainly would not believe that the report was open and balanced.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member acknowledge the number of contributions today in which Members spoke about members of their own families? Indeed, I lost my brother at the hands of the Provisional IRA, when the scum blew them up on their way home from doing a day's work.

I do not know why the Member opposite believes that the report is representative of both sides of the community. However, will the Member acknowledge all the contributions that have been made today, in which Members have spoken poignantly about members of their own families who were victims? No one wants their hands on this dirty money, which is offered in order to try to bail out the Provisional IRA.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am well aware that he — like many others in this House — speaks, unfortunately, from all-too-personal experience. I have spoken to many people in my Upper Bann constituency since the report was published, including victims and ordinary members of society. Not one person indicated that, in their opinion, there is a moral equivalence between terrorist criminals and those who they sought to murder and injure through illegal criminal activity.

Comparing the views that my colleagues and I encountered with the report's findings, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Consultative Group on the Past was working to a predetermined agenda which was shaped by the bias and prejudice of its members. Why did the group hold meetings in public and take the mood of the population if its intention was always to ignore and insult them in its final report, and to force its own views through, regardless of what it heard? The people who I represent will be appalled by any move to create moral parity between terrorist murderers and the innocent people who they murdered.

If the Assembly accepts that recommendation, why does it not also tell burglars that they are as much victims as the householders, the muggers that they are as much victims as the bloodied and terrorised pensioners, and the rapists that they are as much victims as the wounded, violated and traumatised women who have been scarred for life at their hands? That is unthinkable.

Although the Assembly will not decide which, if any, elements of the report will be implemented, I assure Members that my party will fight tooth and nail to ensure that the proposal for a morally obnoxious £12,000 pay-off never sees the light of day. I support the motion.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McNarry: At the weekend in Castlewellan, thanks to brave people who risked their lives, a dangerous 300-lb bomb was safely dismantled. Had the bomb exploded, killing innocent passers-by and the bomber, would the precedent set by the Eames/Bradley group be tested through an award of £12,000 to the bomber's family in years to come? Is that not good enough reason to conclude that the report is contaminated? Is that not good enough reason to determine that the report had its day in the Europa Hotel, and that there it should stay?

The apology about the timing of the presentation of the report is irrelevant. To equate the dastardly deeds of killers — willing members of a killing machine — with those whom they murdered, says much about those who compiled the report, and it makes them apologists for terrorists. To spurn the call, and, with it, the opportunity to withdraw the offending recommendation only confirms to me that the panel was determined to promote, rather than avoid, a controversy. It was spurious to say that the £12,000 was a recognition payment. Aside from glorifying acts of murder, what does that payment recognise or acknowledge?

I do not know the context in which Jarlath Burns relayed the following comment, nor who made it originally, because he will not divulge that person's name, but he said that the tears of an IRA widow are no different from the tears of an RUC widow. Did anyone pause to think, as they listened to those words, that the tears may be real? However, I never heard an IRA widow call for the terrorism to stop. Did Jarlath Burns?

I retain my respect for Lord Eames. Sadly, he is associated with a momentous error of judgment, but he has given so much in the past that, although I am appalled by the report and his participation in it, I will not turn my back on him. Mark my words: the report can make no worthwhile journey, least of all into this place, where the strains are constant and the differences are exposed for all too see — not only today, but probably tomorrow, and certainly in the past.

However, the Assembly can, and should, produce its own recognition award by ensuring that the offence and hurt that the report has caused are quickly removed and the proper dignity of real victims restored. A terrorist is a terrorist by choice; the victims were given no choice. Murder is murder is murder — it ends there.

The report is contaminated, and I support the motion.

Mr Durkan: I support either of the two tabled amendments. If the Assembly were to support the motion as it stands, it would be in danger of giving a falsely condensed conclusion on a report that has much more worth than some Members have reflected.

4.30 pm

We need to recognise that neither the Assembly, nor any of its Committees, would have been in a position to deliberate on the sort of issues that the consultative group deliberated on. We would not have enjoyed the range of contact and confidence that the group developed. We must recognise that the group has tried to make a significant contribution on the sensitive and vexed issue of how we leave the past behind us morally, and how we try to meet the diverse needs of all victims for truth, remembrance and recognition. Did the consultative group measure everything as well as it meant to? Obviously not, given the reaction to, and consternation about, a particular proposal. The way in which those details emerged — not in the context of the full and proper publication of the report, but by press briefings in advance — led to a weekend media scramble in and around issues.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that there can be no equivocation and no equality between the perpetrators of violence and those poor people who were murdered in the Province?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I accept that fully. I have never suggested, implied or argued in any way that there was moral equivalence between those who perpetrated violence and made victims and those absolutely innocent victims who did not choose to be part of any combat or any act of violence whatsoever. I have never offered any moral equivalence.

During its meetings with the Eames/Bradley group, the SDLP made the point that it was concerned about some of the language being used about there being fault on all sides and everybody being guilty. That, in many ways, was hurtful to the many innocent victims who had no guilt and who did not contribute to the conflict.

At the funeral of a judge in 1974, many people listened to Bishop Edward Daly call on people to stand up to the nihilism of the paramilitaries. He said that there would be challenges in standing up to them, but that they could not shoot us all. Many people made that choice. The SDLP is clear: it does not want the treatment of the past to blur the responsibility for the violence and suffering. Nor does it want the treatment of the past to suggest to future generations that the Troubles were, somehow, a necessary and inevitable prelude to the peace process — they were not.

The SDLP has made it clear that people must take responsibility for what they perpetrated, and those who were responsible for violence and creating victims must stand the cause of truth some assistance now by bringing forward as much truth as they can. The wider

proposals in the report about a legacy commission to deal with the past should not be lost sight of in all the brouhaha surrounding the recognition payment. We must look at the wider issues of how we leave the past behind morally, and how we learn the lessons of the past and keep the truth of the past — not just for victims, but for wider society and future generations.

We cannot simply pass over the past, but nor can we pore over it endlessly. The consultative group has given us some useful proposals for dealing with issues of information recovery and truth. As regards the issue of recognition, I think that the group was responding to the pressures and concerns reflected by victims' groups that they have not had due recognition. Many people pointed to the scheme that operated in the South and said that there was nothing like that here. Many victims' groups have pointed out those who are doing well out of the peace process — various people in various positions, and money going to this organisation and that organisation. That compared badly to what they were getting as victims, either as part of a victims' group or as individuals. As part of an attempt to respond to that need, the group may have strayed into a recommendation that could have been considered more carefully and presented better.

Nevertheless, I hope that the Assembly will not stand in the way of good coming out of the work that has been done already in the report. We should not stand in the way of the victims and survivors forum and the Victims' Commission deliberating appropriately on the report's recommendations. If we are all sincere about wanting a victim-centred approach, and if we are all sincere about trying to meet the needs of survivors, let victims and survivors work through some of those issues themselves without the rest of us savaging a report that contains a lot more merit than some Members have reflected.

Ms Purvis: The motion, in its original form, has a number of critical flaws. This is the first plenary sitting since the release of the report from the Consultative Group on the Past. Rather than take this opportunity to examine all the major issues that are presented in the report, which are critical to the well-being, recovery and reconciliation of this society, the motion focuses on only one aspect of the report's recommendations: the acknowledgement payments.

Perhaps we should not be surprised that the motion is inadequate, as it was written and tabled before the report was even publicly released. The authors of the motion put pen to paper to condemn one aspect of the report at a time when most people had not seen it, let alone read carefully through all 190 pages. That is cynical or clairvoyant, perhaps best summed up by my predecessor who said that unionism is clairvoyant, and it is never good news.

People in Northern Ireland are crying out for help. The findings of the report made that very clear. The help that they seek is in the form of justice, truth, mental and physical assistance and aid, and even financial assistance in some cases. Those are very raw needs that are not being met currently or satisfactorily.

Therefore, rather than begin to dismiss out of hand the various elements of the report, I encourage Members to engage with it fully. It is time to be honest about what has gone on here and about how we will deal with our past. Now that the report is publicly available and we have had a chance to read through it, let us look at it in its entirety, including the context that is given for acknowledgement payments. There is no doubt that the issues with which the report deals are complex. It is intended to offer a means by which we can begin to take the final step out of conflict. There is nothing simple in those terms of reference.

Eames and Bradley are attempting to create a strategy and structure that will allow our society to progress. What we need to judge in the report is how well the recommendations meet the needs for recognition, rehabilitation and even reparations. The key elements of the report are, therefore, the structures that are created. The legacy commission is part of that, as are information and story-telling. Likewise, trauma and counselling services are part of that, and, yes, acknowledgement payments are part of that, too. Those payments must be seen in that context.

The primary argument of those opposed to the payments is that the report fails to recognise and honour the hierarchy of victims. Some of those touched by the tragedy of the Troubles want nothing to do with that money, and that wish must be respected. However, there are many unheard voices, too — of people who want and need those acknowledgement payments. It is a means to recognise all that they have been through, and to offer some form of reparation for what they have suffered.

It is, perhaps, bad luck that the report has been launched in an election year, when we are already seeing all sorts of bad habits and the old rhetoric of “us and them” coming back. Perhaps using their powers of clairvoyance, the authors of the motion, and their party, could, perhaps, outline for us the vision for the future that this report and the people of Northern Ireland call on politicians to create. It is time for a better and shared future, and elements of the report, if implemented faithfully, will help us to get there.

I would support both amendments, which vastly improve the motion, but I cannot support the motion in its original form.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion, but I support the

amendment that is tabled in my name and in the names of Raymond McCartney and Jennifer McCann.

Rather like Dawn Purvis, I believe that because the motion was tabled before the report was published, it does not really deal with the content of the report, nor does it give a true reflection of the entire report. It picks up on the issues that were leaked. One might be given to think that the issue of £12,000 that has been talked about was created as a distraction rather than a reality, and that it was highlighted in order to take people's focus away from dealing with the real issue — the real issue being the truth, because the truth cannot be bought that cheaply.

Although the report is very detailed, we have severe reservations about it, particularly on how it was established. The report was commissioned by the British Government to clear them and to give them a smokescreen so that they could deny people the right to tribunals and inquiries. That is exactly what the report has recommended — to bury tribunals and inquiries, so that any chance of the British Government facing a court or a judicial review is ended.

Although the issue of victims, and the definition of a victim, is very sensitive, the debate has been levelled and even, which is important. The report has evoked memories and received a sensitive response from the families of victims — as Alan McFarland said, the debate has brought back memories for many families. That is the same for republican families who often accepted their lot and did not expect any British soldiers or RUC men to be brought to trial.

State killings and harassment have been part and parcel of British rule in Ireland. I took part in early civil rights marches and know that the leader of the DUP often blocked such marches and brought people onto the streets to ensure that those who demanded basic civil rights were put off the streets. The first killing that I remember was that of John Gallagher by the B-Specials at Cathedral Road in Armagh, for which no one was ever brought to book. Was that killing due to terrorism or was it aided by the state? We never got an answer.

The campaign to drive off the streets those who demanded basic civil rights was co-ordinated by the B-Specials, the DUP at that time, and those involved in the structures that brought about loyalism. Those people were involved in the bombing at the Silent Valley reservoir and other bombings at locations around the country to distract attention. The Free State Government have already paid out to the families of victims involved in such campaigns, such as the one at Ballyshannon, which I did not hear anyone complain about.

The £12,000 payment was a deliberately created distraction. We wanted an international and independent truth commission that would be centred

on victims and ensure that victims have input. That has not happened, which is how we measure the report. Did it deliver? Can it deliver? The families see that the report cannot deliver the truth for them.

Many accusations were made about Gerry Adams, and he was misquoted. Mr Adams never made a statement with regard to the IRA — on several occasions, he has said that he could not speak for the IRA.

Payments were made to members of the B-Specials, the RUC, the UDR and the reservists, who were all paid to carry out state killings.

Dr Farry: Northern Ireland must deal with its past; drawing a line under the past or sweeping it under the carpet, as some people inside and outside the Chamber have suggested, is not a viable option. One only has to look at the example of post-Franco Spain, where the truth was swept under the carpet for many years and there is now a demand to address it.

4.45 pm

Most societies coming out of a period of conflict or serious violence go through a process of transitional justice — from war crimes trials in Bosnia or Rwanda, through to truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa. We, too, have to come up with our own process. However, in very few, if any, of those international experiences is it ever suggested that there should be moral equivalence between the people who are involved in the situations and those who are the victims. Indeed, in that case, Northern Ireland may be going out on a limb.

The issue of timing has raised its head, and perhaps we are looking at these issues too soon, as some people have suggested. Perhaps we are not quite ready or not quite mature enough, or perhaps we are a bit late in coming to terms with these issues. Perhaps we should have tried to address them at the same time as the Good Friday Agreement. At that time, there may have been better incentives on the table for some people to comply with a process of justice or truth. However, we are where we are today, and we have to move forward on that basis.

There is much good in the recommendations of the Eames/Bradley report. They have navigated through the competing demands for truth, justice and understanding. In the current circumstances, the legacy commission framework may be the best option to address the needs of victims for truth and justice, because, realistically, there will not be a large number of criminal prosecutions, and if people are convicted, they will not do any serious time in jail. Equally, we only have to look at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry to see that as a society, we cannot afford to go through a public inquiry one case at a time.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: I am sorry, but I have a lot to get through.

There will be major difficulties in all of this for the British state. No one is under any illusions in that regard, but they operate to a system of rule of law, and they may well comply with whatever is down on paper. However, there are requirements on paramilitaries and others with information to come forward, and it is not entirely clear how that will be addressed, but perhaps that is an issue for another day.

The issue of the £12,000 recognition payment is, quite rightly, causing massive outrage across society, and I understand what people are going through in that respect. However, there is a risk that that recommendation will undermine the rest of the report. Some people have said that it has fatally contaminated the report, but I would not go that far, and I beg people to step back from the brink in reaching that conclusion.

Money should not be the issue. Indeed, whenever issues of money are being considered, we must recognise that victims have different financial needs, and a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. The issue of compensation and financial support should be addressed by the Commission for Victims and Survivors, rather than by Eames/Bradley. The reason for the commission not addressing the issue is beyond me, and an explanation must be given for that.

The biggest issue to come out of the debate is the risk of some type of moral equivalence being given. There may not be a hierarchy of suffering; every mother's tears may be the same when it comes to a lost life, but we must recognise that there is a hierarchy of circumstance, responsibility, culpability — call it what you will — and there is no way that we can get away from that. The people of Northern Ireland will not accept that, irrespective of what any report says should be the case.

There is a concern that efforts are being made to rewrite history, to pretend that things that were done in the past are acceptable from today's prospective, but, again, no one will wear that. The whole concept of amnesty, which was discussed previously, carried a lot of those implications.

Our amendment is the best way forward, as it recognises the major flaw of the £12,000 payments which is so exercising public opinion at the moment. It also recognises that there is a lot of good in the report that we must take into account. We are not asking Members to endorse the recommendations of Eames/Bradley today, but rather to recognise that the potential exists to address building a shared future and dealing with the past.

On paper, Sinn Féin's amendment is not bad. It recognises that we all suffer, but there is a degree of hypocrisy in saying that the report has been contaminated by the British Government.

In isolation, the DUP's motion may well be acceptable on one issue alone.

Lord Morrow: It has been said that this is the era when right is made to look wrong and wrong is made to look right.

A cursory glance at the report of the Consultative Group on the Past comes close to confirming that view. It has opened up many wounds again, in particular for those victims and survivors who had stoically tried to carry on with life as best they could, and whose dignity and forbearance has been shattered.

The publication of this highly insensitive and offensive document has turned back time for many families. To be a victim once is virtually unbearable; to be tormented twice is grossly unjust. The report brings no comfort whatsoever to the innocent victims of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Let me be very clear: I do not underestimate the enormity of the task; however, it is now apparent that the Consultative Group on the Past has missed an opportunity to address the legacy of the past properly. The manner in which it referred to the "blame game" trivialises the fundamentals of right and wrong, truth and justice.

The Consultative Group on the Past had a moral duty to place the blame where it lay — with those who took up arms. However, instead, it has blatantly dodged the issue, pathetically attempting to justify and condone violent activity by the few. To blame the whole of society for what has happened and to excuse the perpetrators is highly offensive. The report challenges the very moral fabric of society, but offers no such challenge to the terrorists; it is a crude attempt to rewrite history and to airbrush many crucial facets out of a troubled past. A report that equates the guilty with the innocent cannot expect to be treated with any degree of respect. The idea that ruthless paramilitary organisations that carried out a relentless sectarian murder campaign should be equated with our innocent victims is nothing short of shameful.

The question has been asked: are the tears of the mother of a paramilitary killer any different from the tears of the mother of a victim who had no involvement whatsoever in violence? I happen to think that there is a difference, particularly when the mother of a terrorist declares her support for her offspring's murderous activities. In this report, those who were charged with preserving law and order are placed on the same level as the anarchists whose objective was to destroy the state. Likewise, the young woman who was blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb as she stood at a bus stop is no more thought of than the wretch who planted the bomb.

Moreover, the authors of the report propose a shared memorial. What illogical, irrational thinking was applied in that instance? On reading the report, one

could easily assume that its authors have not lived in Northern Ireland but have been drafted in from another planet. Indeed, one could be forgiven for concluding that the report has little or nothing to do with truth and reconciliation but has, rather, a revisionist agenda. Such a sinister attempt to sidestep the facts of history for political expediency is a tragedy.

Understandably, much mention of the report has focused on the reprehensible proposal that the taxpayer should pay £12,000 to the relatives of terrorists. To say that that is outrageous is an understatement. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme existed to allow people who had been injured or bereaved to make claims; quite rightly, that compensation scheme excluded those who had been convicted of terrorist offences. The proposal in this report primarily benefits the non-innocents who received nothing under that scheme. It is incredible that such a recommendation should be proffered, but, alas, that is not the only appalling proposal in the report.

Duplication with the Victims' Commission and the sum of £300 million to right all wrongs aside, if I were a member of a paramilitary cabal, I would feel that I could not have done better had I written the report myself. It is fair to suggest that the perpetrators, as ever, gain much and give little. I refer, of course, to the repugnant recommendations to incorporate into statute the guidance that was produced by the Quigley/Hamilton working group that employers should not discriminate against those with conflict-related convictions. Likewise, the semi-obscure suggestion that although there is no amnesty, a line should be drawn — presumably under potential prosecutions — is an amnesty by another name.

Furthermore, there is the nonsense of the recovery of information process. I may be wrong, but I venture to suggest that the paramilitaries have little by way of records. Such absurd thinking permeates the whole report. Time after time, the onus lands on the state and the taxpayer to make amends to those who entered into violence of their own choice and free will. It is time that the tables were turned; the Consultative Group on the Past should have grasped that nettle.

I listened to the BBC's 'Hearts and Minds' programme. When it was put to them that the information-recovery process would be somewhat one-sided, Lord Eames and Denis Bradley said that undoubtedly the IRA would feel under pressure from the community to offer whatever information it had. Such naivety is, at best, misplaced and foolish. It is time to get real. The Robert McCartney murder is a prime example of how the IRA deals with pressure. Despite the weight of the entire international community demanding information — and even after calls from the White House — the IRA, then as now, remained silent and keeps its depraved secrets.

There is a matter that should be of grave concern to us all. It is expressed ever so subtly in the report, but it has ominous undertones and far-reaching implications: the proposed merger of the Historical Enquiries Team with the office of the Police Ombudsman. When one considers the remit of both bodies, there can only be one reason for the proposal: it is another iniquitous attempt to equate violent criminals with the forces of law and order who were the first line of defence in combating terrorism. Make no mistake: it is another back-door attempt to destroy the sterling reputation of the RUC GC.

Those who were fighting for a united Ireland tell us that it is the British who are the problem. No doubt that includes those of us who sit on these Benches. However, since the President of the Irish Republic has already branded us Nazis, why should republicans have any compunction about carrying on where she left off? It is ironic that the IRA supported Hitler during the Second World War.

This unfortunate report has fallen far short of the expectations of the innocent victims of Northern Ireland. The keynote address delivered by the co-chairmen addresses the politicians, stating that many of them are “still novice parliamentarians”, who:

“too often failed to address and resolve”

political problems. It is interesting to note that the group has no problem in identifying the shortcomings of the politicians — and neither do I — but they are unable to differentiate between the guilty and the innocent. If this report is implemented, the most ruthless of the killers will be turned into folk-heroes; they were anything but.

The best way forward with this highly insensitive report is to apologise to the innocent victims for its offensive nature, withdraw it, and give an assurance that it will never be repeated.

Those who still seek justice will find no comfort in the report. Relatives of the security forces and civilians, whether murdered at their place of work or blown to pieces in the relentless bombing campaign, relatives of the disappeared, the McCartney family, and the Quinn family can take no comfort whatsoever from this report. The copious sum of £300 million to implement all this suggests that throwing money at the problem will make it go away.

The blood of the innocent still cries for justice. The overwhelming truth of this report is that the sums may be plentiful, but the justice is scarce.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if this amendment is made, the other amendment will not be called and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 24; Noes 71.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Burns, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr A Maginness, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Dr Farry and Mr Lunn.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Doherty, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 40; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms J McCann and Ms S Ramsey.

NOES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buchanan and Mr I McCrea.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of meeting the needs of victims; and condemns proposals from the Consultative Group on the Past which equate perpetrators of violence with innocent victims.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Programme for Government and Budget

Mr Speaker: In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time when two or more amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make his winding-up speech. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak in the debate will have five minutes.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to revise the priorities set out in the Executive Programme for Government and budget in light of the current economic crisis; and to direct further expenditure into social housing, retraining and upskilling.

At the outset, I want to point out that I am content with the Alliance Party's amendment, which is a useful addition to the SDLP's motion. However, I wonder what the Ulster Unionist amendment adds to the motion. Perhaps, that party will reconsider its amendment during the course of the debate.

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

Of course, the motion involves reconsideration of the current Programme for Government and Budget, particularly in light of the economic downturn. Primary responsibility for those issues rests with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister.

From speaking to people whom I meet, I get the feeling that the Executive are not regarded as doing well. If people were to mark them out of 10, they would, perhaps, score five. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not the time for Members to have conversations at their places; there is a debate going on.

Mr O'Loan: People do not see vision, strategy, drive or imagination. They are glad to see the Executive, particularly OFMDFM and the Finance Minister, doing business; however, they do not see that business being done very well, and they do not see the leadership for which they are crying out.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I ask the Member to make only a brief intervention because I have much to say.

Mr S Wilson: I will be brief. The Member calls for imagination; will he share his vision of where the Programme for Government should be cut so that more

money can be spent on housing and the other goodies that are listed in the motion? Perhaps he has no imagination.

Mr O'Loan: Perhaps the Member should have listened to my speech first; he would not have needed to ask that question if he had.

Recent conversations that I have had — particularly with people in construction and development, although I am not focusing solely on that sector — illustrate a general lesson. People are asking what Housing Executive contracts there will be in April, but they cannot find an answer. I recently spoke to a developer who wants to develop a plot of land. He has done all the right things, such as speaking to health officials, housing associations, and the Housing Executive. He has even gone as far as amending his planning application on the basis of what those people have told him.

However, he came to me because he is not sure whether he is going in the right direction, as he cannot get clarity from the Government on whether his plans are sensible in light of Executive strategy. The Executive strategy is not coming across clearly, and the attached Budget is not known. That problem can be extrapolated across the entire range of policy issues and right across Northern Ireland.

Last week, I quoted a senior DFP official who said:

“Some spending programmes initiated a year or more ago were valid spending programmes in the context that applied at that time. In the different economic and political context that now exists, some of those programmes might have run their course.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p87, col 2*].

That is the exact sentiment that our motion expresses.

I ask Members to consider the strategic stocktake, in which there was £1 billion of bids over two years. The Minister's response was that half of that was not real and that the rest would be dealt with when something else dropped out. That is the Mr Micawber answer: “something will turn up”. Is that really the OFMDFM and DFP answer to the economic downturn? Indeed, if some of the bids are not real, is the £35 million DFP bid not real?

In the DRD bids on the revenue side I see pension contributions to Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee; concessionary bus and rail fares; rail fuel and safety costs; roads maintenance; the oil-price increase; street-lighting; increased energy costs; and last, but certainly not least, the lost income from the deferral of water charges, which alone is a mere £200 million. Which of those pressures or issues will disappear over the next two years?

Countries such as Germany, the Netherlands and Canada are investing in training for the unemployed. Those countries are ensuring that their workers are better trained for the upturn and keeping workers in employment in order to do that. Last week, I quoted

John Simpson who supports that approach. I repeat the call for certainty for the housing budget. The Executive still back the target for social housing but in respect of finance, can the Minister not do better than “something will turn up”?

Small building firms and small building suppliers deserve better. Indeed, can we not go even further? The Scottish Government view building more houses as a key way of countering the downturn and are implementing substantial spend to do that. Why do we not copy that good idea?

I stated my support for the Alliance Party amendment. That party is correct when it says that investment in renewables is a win-win issue that will help the environment and provide economic growth.

5.30 pm

I want to discuss a few other issues. The word “competitiveness” has fallen low down in our vocabulary. Our future is to compete in a global economy, but we need a strategy to make that happen. I refer to Minister Sammy Wilson's comments about employing local workers. If we ignore the possible racial overtones, an element of protectionism was implicit in those remarks. There is no future in that protectionist attitude here.

Mr S Wilson: Is your policy to put local people on the dole?

Mr O'Loan: Mr Wilson's comments are on record. That is not what I said. Our future is to compete successfully in a global economy. There is no future in protectionism in labour or any other area. His statement indicated a lack of coherence in his own party and in the Departments for which it has portfolios.

I refer to the Bain Report on the location of public-sector jobs. Many agencies will experience huge changes under the review of public administration. Will that process be conducted piecemeal, or is the Minister of Finance and Personnel serious about that issue? Will there be huge unregulated job losses in rural towns? What budget is required in order to conduct the process properly? We have heard no answers to those questions, and the relevant Ministers are all over the place because they are not receiving a strategic lead from Departments.

The delivery of departmental plans is a major issue that was discussed at considerable length by the senior departmental official who spoke to the Committee for Finance and Personnel recently. The more one looks, the less it appears that the Programme for Government is being delivered coherently. The situation looks tidy — we have a Programme for Government, and public service agreements that support it. However, it is not functioning, and those who should be leading it do not

know what is happening under their eyes. We are not getting efficient joined-up government. The Programme for Government and the departmental plans need to be revisited.

There has been no strategic way to deliver public-service efficiencies. Members will remember that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) was launched with a fanfare. What has PEDU achieved? Not a lot. The DUP has proposed a series of silly, trivial motions on the number of Departments. Although we need a serious debate on how to achieve efficiency in Government, we end up with a debate on a trivial sub-issue.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: No; I will not give way.

When we need a serious debate about how to engage with civic society, we end up with a trivial, infantile motion on the Civic Forum. When we need good delivery of government, we get electoral point-scoring. Moreover, I can name many other issues such as the Department of Finance and Personnel's dismissal of Varney — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Loan: The Civil Service estate needs to be reformed after the collapse of Workplace 2010. Other issues include the Financial Assistance Bill — the curious dog that has yet to bark in the night — and the further efficiencies that may be demanded from the pre-Budget report.

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

Mr O'Loan: For all those reasons, we need to revise the Programme for Government and the Budget thoroughly.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"calls on the Executive to rewrite the Programme for Government and to bring forward an appropriate budget proposal in light of the current economic crisis."

The Ulster Unionist Party acknowledges and welcomes the SDLP and Alliance Party positions on the issue. However, many more fault lines emanate from yesterday's blueprint for a Programme for Government and its linked Budget. Therefore, our amendment is not specific or prescriptive but is all-embracing and clear about what it requests from the Executive — a rewritten Programme for Government, with a Budget that is commensurate with the current economic crisis.

We could have a problem if the joint First Ministers and the Minister of Finance and Personnel resist that proposal, unless they can convince the House that the

current Programme for Government and its rigidly linked Budget are fit for purpose.

Frankly, I do not believe that they can. I do not believe that those with money and those short of money; those with a job and those without a job; those with a business and those in dire straits; those needing to contract, and even those wanting to expand, believe it either. I say to the joint First Minister and the Finance Minister: if you know better, convince us.

The Ulster Unionist Party amendment is sending a serious signal, not only that the Programme for Government should be rewritten, but an equally strong message that the Executive should show an urgent willingness to revisit the Programme for Government and the Budget that was agreed for 2008-2011. It was said then that growing the economy was the top priority, that we needed to meet the challenges of global competition and that the Programme for Government was not set in stone, but would be reviewed annually, not only to respond to progress but to take account of changing circumstances. Thus, it was signed by Dr Paisley and Martin McGuinness. I contend that it is not being lived up to and that it is certainly not taking account of changing circumstances.

The first primary focus was to grow the economy. That was the main plank of the Programme for Government. The commitment was to create a minimum of 6,500 jobs. However, on 10 December 2008 at a meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, evidence given by DFP's strategic policy division on the regional economic strategy was clear. The senior official could not say where Departments are with regard to the delivery of targets. He did not say what was actually being done, except to seek cover by indicating the usual need to conduct a review of targets. In other words, he doubted that they would be met.

In respect of creating a minimum of 6,500 jobs the official said his feeling was:

"some PFG targets and milestones that relate to external events are under stress. Take, for example, the ability of Invest NI to attract 6,500 FDI jobs — that is an incredibly challenging target".

He added:

"I worry about whether some specific milestones can be reached because of the external factors involved."

Like that senior official, I, too, am worried about the delivery of targets. Not only is there a hole in the Budget, it seems that there is an emerging hole in the delivery of the Programme for Government, because the assessment of that senior official — who, after all, speaks for the policy division of the regional economic strategy team — is:

"It will be interesting to see the risk assessments that Departments have carried out on their targets."

It most certainly will be interesting. When will we know, or even be told, if there are targets in danger? It is clear that there is a hole in the delivery of the PFG targets, and the failure to provide the 6,500 new jobs will be only one of a number of casualties in the scheme of targets that will not be met.

The economy is now in recession, and unless the argument is convincing, there is no alternative to rewriting the Programme for Government that covers 2008-2011, which also includes some longer-term aspirations and intentions. I contend that targets are in danger and that the proper thing to do is to reassess delivery in light of, and in response to, changing circumstances.

Can we meet the commitments that are written into the current PFG? Can we provide 6,500 jobs by 2011, 5,500 of which will be above the private-sector median; secure £120 million of private-sector investment by 2010-2011; grow the creative-industry sector by 15% by 2011; support 45 new businesses to become first-time exporters by 2011; reduce child poverty by 50% by next year; increase to 125,000 the number of children participating in sport by 2011; and ensure a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games? Also, can we establish a library authority this year; generate £300 million of capital realisation by 2011, and deliver 5% efficiency savings each year for three years on departmental administration costs? I do not think that we can, which will make it harder to recover from any failure to implement immediate and necessary rectifying action.

I have warned of a black hole in public finances for months, and now the commentators agree with me. The Finance Minister said that he hoped to cover that hole through easement measures. That is a somewhat polite way of saying that he hoped that the Northern Ireland Departments would repeat their usual annual underperformance by underspending, as they have always managed to do in the past. That is a deliberate distraction from dealing with the impacts of the economic downturn on our own people.

Those impacts have been alarming. Last month, the number of people who claimed unemployment-related benefits increased by 1,800. The construction industry accounted for 44% of the rise in the number of claimants. The total number of people who are out of work could increase from 34,000 to 50,000. The point of reordering priorities has long since been reached.

Everybody in this House understands that only the actions of national Government can meet some of those challenges. However, that does not mean that the Executive can do nothing.

It is interesting to watch the main party in the Executive and note the growing similarities between the DUP and the Labour Party; similarities that have

not gone unnoticed here or in London. That is not surprising when one compares Mandelson-speak to Robinson-speak regarding the economy and the glaring likeness when one matches the dynamic duo of those double Ds in finance — the dodgy Darling and the dithering Mr Dodds. The count of control freakery and the reinvented prince of darkness are well suited in their meeting of minds on Labour policies during the recession. However, they transmit here as one who is failing to bring home the bacon, while the other is trying to save his bacon.

Members of the DUP want us to trust them — they think that they know better than the rest of us. However, that stance does not wash in this debate. Arrogance will not create jobs or ease unemployment, never mind reduce the problems in our economy.

I repeat that our amendment urges the Executive to rewrite the Programme for Government. They should consider the stated priorities, correct them where they cannot be met and move to adjust the disciplines that are required to see Northern Ireland through this recession.

If the deputy First Minister — or joint First Minister, or whatever his title may be — cannot do that, he should make a clear statement of intent to this House. He should tell us why the Programme for Government sits intact and untouchable. I challenge him to tell us today that the targets will be met on schedule. I do not think that he can, but the challenge is there; he has the opportunity to meet it today.

Ms Lo: I beg to move amendment No 2: At end insert

“, the promotion of energy efficiency, the development of renewable technologies, and maximising the potential of a green economy.”

During the consultation on the draft Programme for Government in 2007, the Alliance Party opposed it on three main counts: it failed to prioritise tackling segregation and sectarianism; it made no proposals to indicate true emphasis on the economy; and it did not pledge to deliver public services in a sustainable way. Only the United Community group voted against the final Programme for Government.

We support the SDLP motion because we have long called for the Programme for Government to be revised. It should not have taken such a deep economic crisis to encourage other parties to back us on that point. We commend the Members who urge the Executive to revisit the Programme for Government with regard to the key issues of housing and skills, but we remain concerned that the motion does not tackle the core social issue of segregation in our society. It also does not address the core financial problem of a dependent economy or the core challenge of sustainability.

Our amendment seeks to prioritise the green economy as a means of coming out of recession with a competitive advantage over neighbouring regions.

That means setting high standards for energy efficiency within the public sector, removing red tape from procedures for implementing renewable-energy schemes, and funding our universities, which would be able to attract more talent during a recession to carry out research on new, green technologies. In those ways, Northern Ireland could become a centre for green economic services.

5.45 pm

It is feared that the Northern Ireland economy may decline by up to 3% this year, with little chance of recovery until next year. Unemployment may reach 50,000, with approximately 16,000 job losses within the year. We are facing the worst economic crisis since the mid 1970s. Compared to other UK regions, we have a much larger public sector, and the Executive must do what they can to help the local economy to survive this economic tsunami.

I am a member of the Committee for Social Development and the Committee for Employment and Learning, and, so, social housing and skills are important matters to me. Approximately 40,000 people are on the Housing Executive's waiting list, and due to the shortfall in receipts from house and land sales as well as other reduced income, such as developers' contributions, it is doubtful whether it has the money to meet its target of beginning 1,500 newbuilds by the end of this financial year.

Approximately one third of the Housing Executive's spend is dependent on revenue from house and land sales, and that system, which is bound to be affected by economic fluctuations, is being badly hit by the current downturn. The housing allocation in the 2007 Budget was based on a buoyant economic climate, before the recent drop in property values and the credit crunch. Therefore, it is only fair that the Executive should review the housing budget so that DSD can meet its priority of addressing the chronic housing shortage in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the construction industry is crying out for work, and in order to keep the industry afloat, it is calling on Departments to speed up their capital spends.

This year, unemployment is set to rise, and many people will lose their jobs for the first time in their lives. Manufacturing is in decline, and the retail sector is being badly hit. However, it was reported that approximately 10,000 vacancies were unfilled in late 2008. The construction and engineering industries badly need more plumbers, electricians and other skilled workers. The Executive must prioritise retraining the workforce, so that skills can be matched to economic requirements.

More and better vocational training must be encouraged, rather than pushing all our young people through the academic route of university degrees, which do not necessarily equip them for a job. In addition, we need more apprenticeships, which must be flexible for people who wish to retrain in a new career.

In a briefing to the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Engineering Training Council said that 40% of the sector's core workforce could benefit from upskilling in order to keep up with new trends and technology. A recent independent report identified upskilling as central to making progress out of the recession, and it identified Belfast as being behind most UK cities in that regard.

Undoubtedly, we must also reform the type of economy that we have. The Executive said that they would make the economy their number one priority, but they failed to change their economic policy. Consequently, Northern Ireland's private sector has been overexposed to the economic crisis. Furthermore, there have been no attempts to move on from the low-technology, low-wage base, upon which the private sector is over-dependent, and there have been no attempts to encourage the development of a high-technology, high-wage economy.

Economic policy remains wedded in the past, based on support by Government rather than general encouragement of entrepreneurship.

Northern Ireland cannot hope to compete with other developing countries as a low-wage economy. Rather, we will have to provide upper-end value to be able to compete. That means a fundamental shift of policy. We cannot continue to do things the way that we have always done them. When we talk about achieving a more efficient Government, we must include energy efficiency; we must remove the bureaucracy that is faced by those who wish to use renewable energy sources, and assist the businesses that wish to research and invest in it.

A green road out of recovery is required. We need more funding for the warm homes scheme, which will improve house insulation and provide more efficient heating systems to help to cut the costs of people's energy bills. Furthermore, we need to encourage the construction sector to build energy-efficient homes.

Improving public transport would not only meet increased demand, as more people will be using buses and trains during the economic downturn, but help the environment by assisting us to reduce our carbon footprint. That is why the Alliance Party has added to the motion by tabling an amendment. We agree with the content of the motion, but the core theme of sustainability must be made central to any revision of priorities.

Mr Hamilton: It would be wrong to deny that we are in difficult economic times. Official statistics prove that we are, and also prove the prescience of the Programme for Government — backed up by the Budget — in making the economy and economic growth in Northern Ireland our number one priority. The Budget and the Programme for Government were supported by the Minister for Social Development, who, it seems, is the sole focus of the SDLP motion.

The motion calls on the Executive to revise the Budget and the Programme for Government, but what more can the Executive do in that regard? The Executive cannot say that they really, really, really prioritise economic growth or that their priority is the economy squared. We are going through an economic problem, and the economy, in all its multiple facets, has been prioritised.

I am at a loss as to the SDLP's preoccupation with social housing, but I understand it; it is within the remit of that party's sole Minister. The SDLP see social housing as the cure for all our economic ills. That is ridiculous. Social housing is not even the sole cure for problems in the construction industry. If one wanted an urgent capital spend in the marketplace or a rapid boost to the construction industry, it would be better done by investment in roads maintenance, for instance. The SDLP's preoccupation with a single issue is narrow-minded and foolish.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me finish my point.

It is nonsensical to be preoccupied with a single issue. There are limited resources, as the SDLP knows well, and it is foolish to preoccupy oneself with one issue. Other Members, including myself, are concerned about various aspects of the economy which are suffering. We are concerned about fishermen, farmers and the fuel poor — for whom the Minister for Social Development has responsibility. There are many more areas in need of assistance.

Mr A Maginness: There is a DUP obsession with what they perceive to be an SDLP obsession with the construction industry. Last week, the Construction Employers Federation emphasised the need for investment in the construction industry. John Simpson said the same thing, as did Mike Smyth. Do not believe us; believe them.

Mr Hamilton: The Member —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I want to make my point.

I hear the plea for the investment of more money in the construction industry, but that is what is happening. There are record levels of investment going into our construction industry through the investment strategy

for Northern Ireland. It is not as if social housing is getting a bad deal. Over the next three years, there are plans to spend over £600 million on roads; over £600 million on water infrastructure; over £500 million on healthcare; over £800 million on schools and colleges; and, in excess of all those, £925 million on social housing.

There are plans for an investment of £1.5 billion this year, which is a record level of investment in capital infrastructure in Northern Ireland. That will rise to £1.7 billion and will rise —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way; my time is limited. My colleagues and I do not have as much time as the Member's party because of the curtailing of the debate.

Another £1.7 billion will be spent on capital infrastructure next year, and £2 billion will be spent in the following year. That will be spent on a wide range of projects across the board, which begs the question: if we were to revise the Budget and reconsider our investment strategy and the Programme for Government, where, precisely, will the money to re-prioritise come from? Money does not grow on trees; the avenue leading up to Parliament Buildings is not full of trees with money growing on them. Money and resources are limited; there is not an infinite amount of money, and no more money is available from the Treasury.

Are Members suggesting that, in any way, we increase rates in the middle of a recession? Do they want to get back onto the escalator and put industrial rates up to 100%; I do not believe that that is what they want to do. However, no new money is available, so we must consider making budget cuts — that is, making cuts to one budget so that money can be moved to another budget.

In such circumstances, it is the big-spending Departments that are likely to suffer. That includes the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which receives 50% of the Budget, or the Department of Education, which receives approximately 20% of the Budget. Given the furor kicked up by the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Budget was set, it is highly unlikely that he will want to hand over money to the Minister for Social Development to ease her supposed pain.

There is silence from the Benches opposite about where money would be shifted from in order to put it into what they say are the priorities. Not only do I not hear them say that money should not be cut in some areas but some say that spending should be increased in certain areas. For example, I will single out John Dallat, who is a one-man Budget black hole. During his contributions over the past month, he has asked for

money for everything from rural signposting to the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry.

Far from wanting to take money away from budget areas in other Departments, the SDLP wants to increase the money being spent on those budget areas. If we were to rewrite the Programme for Government, as has been suggested in some Members' doom-laden remarks, we would have a less ambitious and less adventurous Programme for Government.

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

Mr Hamilton: The Programme for Government is prescient in its prioritising of the economy, and I ask Ministers to redouble their efforts to achieve the ambitious targets that are included in that document.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the Ulster Unionist Party amendment. The Alliance Party amendment is a good suggestion but, unfortunately, it cannot make the SDLP motion into a viable option in these circumstances.

The SDLP Minister has surrendered — especially in relation to the Social Security Agency — vital capital and resource finance to the tune of £81.5 million in the past six months. Given that that service will become increasingly important as the consequences of the global economic downturn are reflected in our society in the form of rising unemployment and a major escalation in demand for social security support, it must be questioned whether those budgets should be given up at this time. However, doing so was the choice of the Minister for Social Development.

In the monitoring rounds in the six-month period between June and December 2008, the Minister for Social Development received an additional financial resource of £85.5 million for social housing.

Mr Cobain: The Programme for Government states that we will get 1,500 new homes. How many homes will we actually get in the next financial year?

Mr McLaughlin: That is an important point, and I thank the Member for raising it. It is a good question that the Minister may, perhaps, answer at some stage. I want to consider one aspect of that issue. During the Budget discussions, the Minister for Social Development said:

“give me the money and I will build the houses.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 22, p134, col 2*].

Did the Minister mean to say that she will buy the houses from the developers who built houses that they could not sell on the open market? Will the Minister explain how buying houses off the shelf helps the local construction industry? Doing so might help to pay the interest charges on the land banks that some developers hold, but it does nothing for the construction industry.

6.00 pm

A key consideration in the Budget process of the Assembly is that it is genuinely difficult to identify or raise new money, other than by increasing rates, from outside the block grant. The Budget process is, therefore, a negotiation between the parties and Ministers on the equitable division of a financial cake that is of a predetermined size. Any proposal to throw that process into the air would provoke a bidding frenzy among Departments and their Ministers, and create paralysis in the Executive. Also, it would, inevitably, support the view that the SDLP motion is, in effect, an admission that it failed to negotiate its budget properly, and that it has since failed to manage its budget, including the massive increments that it received from the in-year monitoring rounds.

The monitoring rounds are the established mechanism for reviewing and, if necessary, revising, the priorities in the Programme for Government. The SDLP, with the support of all its Executive colleagues, has, in fact, been the main beneficiary of that process. I would have thought that the Minister for Social Development would have acknowledged that and recognised that she received that vital support.

However, the bottom line, which is missing from the motion and the amendments, is how to find the additional finance, other than by cutting other front-line services. Also missing from the motion is the detail that should have been provided in support of such a motion. Which front-line services and Departments does the SDLP intend to raid, and which budgets does it intend to slash? The SDLP has no proposals on how to find the extra money. In the current circumstances, there is, if anything, less available money. That is clear to anyone who is prepared to examine the facts.

If the SDLP considers that it failed in its budgetary negotiations, it must put its hands up. The party should fess up, and accept that it made a mess of that the first time round. If, in the SDLP's view, social housing is so important that it merits a review at the next monitoring round, it should appeal. I am sure that ministerial colleagues who share the SDLP's commitment to social housing will do what they can. From the allocations that have been made, it is evident —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr McLaughlin: If the Member does not mind, I will not give way because I am almost finished.

From studying the allocations that were made, it should be clear that the Minister for Social Development has the support, and she has received generous support, of ministerial colleagues who struggle with their budgetary deficits. Every Department struggles to meet the challenge of coping with an initial financial deficit and the consequences of

the economic downturn. Those issues affect all Ministers in the Executive.

The SDLP's primary motive for bringing the motion was its initial failure to negotiate properly. Secondly, it is failing to deliver its targets. Thirdly, by undermining and undercutting the social agencies' ability to respond to the emerging poverty crisis, it has created a further a crisis that is coming down the road.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The business on the Order Paper has not been disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business has been completed, whichever is the earlier.

Mr Poots: Mr O'Loan referred to people using their imagination; he certainly used his earlier. In the midst of a global credit crunch in which millions of people are losing their jobs and banks have lost hundreds of billions of pounds, Mr O'Loan imagines that the entire problem in Northern Ireland will be solved by building more social housing.

With such an immense and extremely vivid imagination, Mr O'Loan should not be sitting here today; he should have been in Davos to advise the world's economists on how to progress. Barack Obama could do with such a man in his advisory group to help him to improve the situation in the United States of America. Perhaps he could develop social housing in the United States; that would solve the problems in that economy too. The Assembly has been truly enlightened by Mr O'Loan's overactive imagination, which leads him to suggest that social housing is the cure for every ill in Northern Ireland.

Mr F McCann: Does the Member agree that another issue has escaped Members? During the December monitoring rounds, when community groups were under pressure, especially those involved in neighbourhood renewal, the Minister for Social Development handed back £1.6 million.

Mr Poots: That is the remarkable thing. Whenever I posed the question to the Minister earlier, I must have hit a boil because I got an angry reaction and a lot of verbiage came spouting out.

Thankfully, the Executive made the economy their number one priority when they were drawing together the Programme for Government. The fact is that others were arguing that the Executive should invest more in social development; others were arguing that the Executive should invest more in health, but the Executive, in their wisdom, recognised that the only way to drive this country forward was through driving the economy forward. The global crisis makes things considerably difficult. It is not of our making, but we are probably in a better position to respond to that crisis, given that the Executive identified the economy as a key priority in the first instance.

I would like to take an intervention from the SDLP. I really desire an intervention from the SDLP, and for it to tell me what particular parts of the Budget should be cut. The SDLP has not identified any savings anywhere — not a single saving.

I will certainly take an intervention from Mr O'Loan. I want to hear you —

Mr O'Loan: I return to Mr Poots's earlier point about my alleged failure of imagination. I did not refer to the Maze stadium — and I could have used that as a rather nice example: there was a place where there was a total failure of imagination by those who are walking away from that scheme — but that is one point on which Mr Poots would probably agree with me.

Mr Poots: I thank Mr O'Loan for his intervention. Again, however, the SDLP does have any answer about where the money will come from. Perhaps I will give a few suggestions, and the SDLP can tell me what it would cut. There is £265 million in the Health Service to go towards the building of important health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital; the Ulster Hospital; Downe Hospital, which is, I believe, in Minister Ritchie's constituency; Altnagelvin Hospital, and perhaps Mr Durkan would like that budget to be cut; and Craigavon Area Hospital, and perhaps Mrs Kelly would be in favour of cuts in that proposal.

A total of £127 million is to be invested in the Belfast sewers project. Perhaps we will just have flooding in the lower Ormeau and Markets area for many years to come and cut that budget instead. I am sure that Dr McDonnell and Mrs Hanna would support that cut; £89 million is to be spent on waste-water treatment works; £83 million is to be spent on four major projects for the Department for Employment and Learning, and I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party would be delighted to give that back. Ballynahinch and Downpatrick are in the South Down constituency of the Minister for Social Development, who wants to build more social housing. A total of £200 million is to be spent on 14 projects to be constructed by the education and library boards.

Perhaps Members of the SDLP will give me an answer this time. However, I do not see any of them wanting to intervene; they are strangely silent on this occasion. Will they not tell me which of those budgets that they would like to see cut so that they can have additional money for social housing?

Mr Durkan: The SDLP has not advocated any cuts on the capital expenditure side whatsoever. If anything, we have complained about the lack of delivery and performance on capital expenditure. In the last period of devolution, the SDLP created the platform for the investment strategy, and also said that there needed to be central drivers for managing that capital expenditure. Other parties opposed that, and we are still suffering

the cost of the lack of coherent driving of capital expenditure. The problem there is a lack of performance, rather than a lack of budgeting.

Mr Poots: Again, we have the call to use our imagination, but there is no imagination from the SDLP as to where the money will come from. In fact, it criticised my party for wanting to reduce the burden of administration; it criticised my party for wanting to reduce the number of Departments and MLAs. The savings may be small; nevertheless, those savings can be redistributed to other, more worthy, causes. We know that the SDLP loves red tape, it loves the burden of administration, and it loves applying more equality and human rights legislation at every opportunity, which burdens businesses and taxes the public. My party will deliver for the people.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. In the Chamber last week, Sinn Féin said that everyone in the House has, in the past, supported the need for additional funding for social housing. Sinn Féin has also supported that call in the Committee for Social Development and is on record for saying in the Chamber that having a home, a settled place in which to live, is important — indeed, vital — for quality of life, health, mental well-being, security and educational attainment.

Let us look at the motion, why it was tabled today, and, more importantly, who tabled it. The SDLP is promoting motions such as this in many councils across the North, and many people will look on this one as an attempt by the SDLP to give its Minister a leg up, a Minister who blames everyone else for many of her own mistakes.

We have only to consider how she behaved in the aftermath of the December monitoring round and during the debate on the economy, when she and a number of her colleagues tried to give the impression that she was being picked on and bullied by her Executive colleagues. She suggested that somehow her budget was raided, even though she supported the package at the Executive meeting. Thus, although Sinn Féin would normally support the call for additional resources to be directed towards an effective social housing programme, I question the motives of those who have tabled the motion. All Ministers are open to criticism when they appear in the House, but the SDLP gets annoyed when someone dares to question its Minister. SDLP members call it harassment.

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No.

Let us deal with the real issues behind the motion and what can be done to increase the level of social housing in our communities. Sinn Féin believes that if there are additional resources available, they should be

directed towards the building new social houses. However, does that mean redrawing the Programme for Government? No, it does not. We want the Minister to explain what measures she intends to introduce to increase the number of social newbuilds.

Mr Cobain: Will the Member be asking the joint First Minister what programmes he will introduce under the Programme for Government to meet the expectations of the anti-poverty programme?

Mr F McCann: The Member knows my record on arguing for social housing.

Mr Cobain: Will you be asking the joint First Minister —

Mr F McCann: I would ask anybody to bring to bear —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr F McCann: I would ask anybody to bring finance and resources to bear, if they are available, to ensure that social housing is being built across —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No, I am running out of time.

Mr A Maginness: I want to ask you about your record —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has refused to give way.

Mr F McCann: Let us deal with the realities of the motion and what can be done to increase the level of social housing in our community. Sinn Féin is saying that if additional resources are available, they should be directed towards the building of new social housing. We require the Minister to explain what measures she intends to introduce to increase the number of newbuild social houses. Is she developing a strategy that will allow her to realise more newbuilds?

Several weeks ago, at a meeting of the Committee for Social Development, I raised with the Minister the issue of the land that is in her control, and how that land could be used in a strategic way to half the cost of social newbuilds. My understanding is that housing associations are crying out for land that is owned by her Department, and by the Housing Executive, to build social housing.

We also raised the possibility of entering into partnership with developers, offering land for houses in mixed-use developments. I have spoken to staff in housing associations, and they have told me that their grants have been cut by 20% in the past year, which has had an impact on their ability to build. They have informed me that the only way to recoup those cuts is to raise their rents, which are fast approaching the rates charged in the private sector. *[Interruption.]* When we

will start to see any social housing through the use of article 40 agreements? *[Interruption.]*

Major developments are ready or are about to go on site. How many social housing units will be realised? Will those be in addition to the social housing programme? How many social houses were built in the past two financial years? How many were used for family housing and how many were apartments that were bought from private developers who were unable to sell them?

The Minister must play her part and proactively develop new strategies to ensure a steady flow of social housing newbuilds. In this time of great economic uncertainty, what has the Minister done to initiate social inclusion clauses in the new procurement arrangements? Will she insist that all contracts issued include the training of apprentices? If possible, will she also have built in to those contracts the requirement that materials be sourced from local companies? Will she consider how the small construction contractor can be catered for in that new arrangement? Many contractors will find that the tenders are beyond their reach financially, so what can be done to ensure that they remain in business?

When the Programme for Government came before the House, the Minister for Social Development supported it, and she has said consistently that she will meet the targets included in it. Targets can be met in many ways, and not all the answers lie with the Executive.

6.15 pm

The SDLP and its Minister may find that there are available assets in the Department for Social Development. The Minister may find that a strategic approach can assist in the development of additional social housing; if the resources are available, I have no doubt that her Executive colleagues will allocate additional resources for social newbuilds, as they have done in many monitoring rounds.

We have long waited for a clear strategy to address long housing waiting lists and high levels of homelessness — it is time for the Minister to deliver such a strategy.

Mr Shannon: The priorities that were set out in the Budget were not pulled from a top hat at a moment's notice — they were agreed by each Minister in the Executive. The economic downturn means that we must uphold more firmly the issues that we had previously agreed to address, namely child poverty and fuel poverty, which were prioritised by the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The targets for reducing child poverty are commendable, and the current state of the economy means that there is all the more need to focus on them. We must look for new ways to do the best that we can

to achieve those high targets — a 50% reduction in child poverty by 2010 and its eradication by 2020. In Northern Ireland, 100,000 children live in some degree of poverty and 44,000 live in severe poverty, which underlines the problem. That situation will get worse with daily job losses.

Aa' hae tae sae, that aa' caun unnerstaun tha raisin fer this motshun. As yin whau woarks oan tha grun aa' caun unnerstaun tha social hoosin is needit — hooaniver aa' unnerstaun that this need is bein met oot o' tha Program fer Government an Budgit. Indeed it wus mi' guid fortyin laust week alang wi' tha Meinistar tae cut tha sod fer 40 new hoosin units in Newtownairds, aw o' thees er fer social hoosin needs wi' a lukin fort tae iver 300 muckle mare bein bigg'd.

I can comprehend the reason for the motion, because, as someone who works on the ground, I understand the need for social housing. However, the Programme for Government and Budget are addressing that need. It was my privilege last week, along with Minister Ritchie, to cut the sod for 40 units dedicated to social housing in Newtownards, with a further 300 units proposed for Ards Borough Council area. The area served by Ards Borough Council has approximately 3,000 people on the waiting list for social housing, and I have a desire to see that need met, the same as all other Members do in their areas. The Programme for Government set a target of 5,000 new homes for social housing.

If there was an option to increase funding for social housing without taking from any other Department, I would be all for it, but that is not the case. As my colleagues across the Chamber said, funding would have to be taken from other sources. I cannot see any Department that would give away funding and still meet its projected needs and aims.

At Question Time, Minister Conor Murphy was here. Do we take money from roads maintenance and have even more accidents and serious injuries due to the substandard roads that run through the Province? Roads in the Ards Peninsula were given as an example of that. Do we take money from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), and leave farmers to wait even longer for their payment or leave the fishermen even more alone than they already are? For the first time, the Assembly set aside £700,000 for the fishing industry, which demonstrates commitment to that sector. Do we turn the heating off in the renal unit of the Ulster Hospital when funding has already been cut?

Programmes such as Sure Start Lower Ards Peninsula and Lifestart Mid-Ards are living from month to month, because funding is no longer assured for long periods due to constraints on the Department of Health? Can our health system afford any more

cutbacks? Should we divert the money used by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to provide help for small businesses at a time when investment in businesses in the Province, big and small, is a necessity if we are ever to trade ourselves out of the current economic mire? Should we take the cap off the rates to give businesses even more bills that they cannot pay, which will mean more people on benefits? What areas do Members think that we could take funding from without having an adverse effect on other realms of life?

In previous debates on this issue, I have stated that the Programme for Government established aims, not a wish list. Those aims are methods of achieving a credible goal — a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland with respect for the rule of law.

The Programme for Government was approved by the Ministers in the Executive and agreed in the House, and the Minister for Social Development was part of that process. It seems to be easier to lay the blame at the feet of others rather than to put in the hard work that is needed to make an effective difference for everyone.

Times are hard for everyone, and we must try to make our resources stretch as far as possible, in the same way in which everyone else must do so. However, we cannot pull resources until they snap, as some Members here expect us to do, for that is what the motion suggests.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Shannon: The motion suggests putting other Departments under more strain, which would surely snap them. I urge Members to support neither the motion nor the amendments.

Dr McDonnell: We must revise the priorities that are set out in the Programme for Government, because everything — everything — has changed since it was first compiled. There is a global economic crisis, and there is a local economic crisis. People are being hit hard, and, every day, more and more hard-working, decent people are being forced to join the dole queues and worry about how they will provide for their families.

People are very worried. For a while, they looked to the Assembly and the Executive for help, but all they got was a political regime that is afraid of its own shadow and is unable to make a single major decision on anything of substance.

We must review the Programme for Government and the Budget, and adjust the priorities accordingly, because the Programme for Government was a Thatcherite programme — I make no apology for saying that. Sinn Féin and the DUP crafted it from day one. It was an unmitigated disaster then, and it is an unmitigated disaster now. That is why my party

opposed it at the time, and that is why we continue to question the wisdom of many aspects of the Programme for Government.

Today, we are living in very different economic times. The Programme for Government, which was wrong when it was produced, continues to do nothing to change or alleviate the circumstances in which we find ourselves. There is a pressing responsibility on the Executive to do all in their power to respond to the economic crisis and, wherever possible, to help people to remain in their jobs. If the Executive are at all serious —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: No; I will not give way. If the Executive are at all serious about doing all in their power to respond, they must fundamentally review and revise the priorities set out all those months ago.

My friend Alban Maginness adopted the same position that I am taking, but it is not just an SDLP position. In the past six weeks, distinguished economists have drawn our attention to the need for a review of the Programme for Government. In order to revise it, the Executive must take immediate action to help counter the worst effects of the economic crisis. Furthermore, long-term planning through an investment strategy is needed in order to help put us in a position of strength, so that we can take advantage of opportunities when the crisis is over.

The Executive must introduce capital projects to support local construction and related sectors. Investment in major capital and regeneration projects, such as housing, schools, hospitals and roads, has the potential to stimulate the economy and to keep people in secure employment.

There has been some discussion on the matter, and it is not simply a matter of allocating money — that alone does not make things happen. Somehow or other, our systems and Departments are clogged up, and projects are not even getting to their starting point. Therefore, we must get them to that point, and we must bring some of the spending forward by three to six months to start creating jobs and getting people into them, and, where possible, to prevent people from being laid off.

Work could begin on tackling the £217 million backlog in school maintenance, and work could begin on the 130 desperately needed new school buildings, 30 of which have been in the pipeline for around six years. Work could also begin on building social housing, which is also desperately needed. We have discussed that issue at length, so I will not go into it in any further detail. One Member mentioned the £265 million that is required for new hospitals, for which people are crying out. All that work could be brought forward, started and pushed on.

The money has been allocated. I know that money is scarce, but we are not using effectively the money that we have. There are infrastructure projects in the pipeline that are badly needed and long overdue and which have huge counter-recessionary potential. Although we are fast-tracking those projects in order to counter the recession, we must have the vision and the foresight to plan and prepare our economy for future needs.

We must be ambitious; we must invest in all those things that are necessary in order to position us properly. Belfast needs a light-rail system; we need vital road and rail improvements, an all-island alternative energy market, green infrastructure and digital infrastructure. Alongside all that, we must invest in our people.

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

Dr McDonnell: We must re-train and re-skill people so that they are in the right position when this crisis is over.

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Just over a year ago, the Assembly endorsed the Executive's first Programme for Government, which was agreed unanimously by all Executive Ministers, and which set out our collective determination to work together to build a shared, better and more sustainable future for all our people.

In that context, we made the economy our top priority, underpinned by our commitment to target resources and efforts towards those in greatest need. We made that commitment at a time of great confidence and optimism in the global and local economies. Our economy appeared to be performing well; employment was at a record high, unemployment was at an historic low and the contribution of the private sector to economic output was increasing. However, we recognised that, despite appearances, all was not well, and that there were significant structural weakness that had to be addressed if we were to provide the conditions for sustainable economic growth — growth that was essential if we were to provide the opportunities and means to enhance quality of life, reduce poverty and disadvantage, increase health and well-being, tackle the divisions in our society and build stronger, more sustainable and empowered communities.

We recognised the need to move away from an economy that competed on the basis of low cost to one that competed on the basis of the skills and flexibility of its workforce. To that end, we set out in the Programme for Government how we would focus on increasing productivity, supporting growth and well-paid, highly skilled jobs, and on addressing our high rates of economic inactivity.

Alongside the most ambitious programme of infrastructure investment in a generation, we

introduced measures to develop the skills and flexibility of our workforce; to promote innovation and increased investment in research and development by companies; and to encourage a culture of enterprise and business growth and the development of a more innovative and competitive agrifood sector in order to ensure that everyone, including the most vulnerable in society, had the opportunity to contribute to, and benefit from, increased prosperity. We also set out measures to address poverty and exclusion, and the persistent educational and health differentials. We were resolved that no one should have their lifetime opportunities limited, or, indeed, determined by an accident of birth. We sought real equality of opportunity; which is why the Executive agreed the largest ever allocation to health and education.

As several Members said today, much has changed in the intervening year since the Assembly endorsed the Programme for Government. As a result of developments in the global economy, we find ourselves in a more difficult and uncertain environment than any of us could have anticipated. Long-established giants of the financial world and the high street have fallen by the wayside, and locally, the impact of the global economic downturn and the credit crunch are already being felt.

Every announcement of redundancies further increases the uncertainty with which our businesses and hard-working families face the future. We know that behind each of those announcements there are real people, not figures on a spreadsheet. They are our families, our friends and our neighbours, and they face uncertainty that is compounded by the hope that sprung up during our recent period of growth. We must act, and do what we can to bring certainty and lay plans for future growth.

Those problems are not of our making; the crisis will require a co-ordinated international response; we cannot, on our own, solve the global credit crisis. However, we are far from powerless, and in these difficult times Government must act. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of the local private sector and the foundations of a dynamic innovative economy. That is why encouraging enterprise and business growth was a key theme in the Programme for Government. Many of the measures in the Programme for Government and Budget aimed to assist that sector by addressing the cost of doing business and encouraging people to set up businesses.

6.30 pm

In response to the economic downturn, we have taken further measures to aid that sector. The results of the independently conducted small-business finance barometer were reported today in the press. In the light of the measures that we have taken, it is encouraging

that this survey of the sector indicates that, at a time of recession, not one business surveyed considered that it would have to close, and a quarter of them expected to expand. The resilience of our small and medium-sized enterprises is to be applauded, and this Administration will continue to do all that it can to support them through this challenging time.

We are all agreed that the Executive and Assembly must take action to minimise the impact of the global crisis on the local economy. The old economic models and certainties have crashed: we must act to alleviate the hardship that many face. It is our duty to work together to chart a clear course through the economic difficulties; identify where we can have an effect; make the right choices; and act collectively. We must remain focused on protecting those most in need and restructure our economy so that we can take advantage when recovery begins. We need to build economic growth that is sustainable and shared.

The Alliance amendment fails to recognise the Executive's commitments to the principles of sustainability, particularly in relation to economic growth. Sustainability is one of the two cross-cutting themes that underpin the Programme for Government, and the principles of sustainability underpin our approach to all activities, including economic growth and social progress. That is why, as part of the package of measures that we announced on 15 December, we made an additional £21 million available to the warm homes scheme to make housing more energy-efficient. Our focus must be on ensuring a more sustainable future for all; recognising the principles of living within environmental limits; using procurement guidelines to ensure economic, social and environmental impacts; and promoting opportunity and innovation.

A focus on sustainability presents us with opportunities, in addition to the challenges that we all recognise. New economic opportunities are afforded by the rapid growth in eco-innovation and environmental technology markets and in targeting resources to build infrastructure and support local business. The global and local economic context has changed, but the imperative that lay behind our choice of priorities in the Programme for Government has not. Recent developments in the global economy have vindicated our decisions and demonstrate the importance of retaining the economy as our top priority in the Programme for Government, underpinned, as it is, by our commitment to targeting resources and efforts to help those in greatest objective need.

Having our eyes firmly fixed on the economy has aided us during the storm. Many of the programmes that we put in place are already addressing the underlying problems. However, no programme can be set in stone. Flexibility must exist if we are to take account of changes in circumstances and ensure that

we are focused on addressing the key challenges that we face. The Executive are committed to the ongoing review and necessary revision of the Programme for Government. We have already acted: the measures that we announced on 15 December to address the economic downturn are part of that ongoing review. They build on the strong base that we already have in place and aim to alleviate hardship for families and businesses and provide an added stimulus where it is needed.

Our focus has not changed — nor should it. The package of measures that we announced on 15 December was developed in the light of the discussions that we held with stakeholders across all sectors and followed discussions at the Executive table. From that we concluded — and all Ministers agreed — that the core problems could best be addressed by focusing action around five themes: energy and fuel poverty; debt arising from the increased cost of living and unemployment; support for the housing market and construction industry; support for household budgets; and support for businesses.

Although some of those are key elements of the Programme for Government, we have placed added emphasis on them at this time. We have also committed additional resources to new areas of work and programmes to reflect the current downturn. This is not a Government that have failed to act. We will do all that we can to promote our economy and to safeguard jobs. For those whose jobs have been lost, we will continue to provide support and training to make finding another job more achievable.

We have already enhanced the employment service with 130 new staff, who have been recruited to deal with the rise in unemployment, and to search for new work. There are 23 new careers advisers in place, who have also implemented the critical sector's initiative programme, delivering a suite of training programmes that will cost £15 million over three years.

The SDLP and its colleagues have suggested that the Programme for Government is no longer fit for purpose; that the priorities must be revised if we are to overcome the current difficulties by directing further expenditure into social housing. Those proposals are not unique or innovative. They will neither alleviate the immediate difficulties nor provide the conditions for long-term sustainable economic growth.

The SDLP motion misses the point that the Executive recognised the need that existed for social housing and made its provision a priority. Let no one be mistaken: the Executive will not accept the current levels of homelessness or of families living in unfit accommodation. That is why the Executive committed £420 million for new social housing over the three

years, which can be topped up with receipts from proceeds of house sales.

We have invested in the Department for Social Development so that it can deliver. That remains the case. The Minister for Social Development has been given additional resources over and above what was allocated at the time of the Budget. That clearly lays out our commitment to social housing.

We have invested in social housing, not for economic impact or short-term political gain, but to alleviate the problems faced by those who are homeless or living in unfit accommodation. We must ensure that money spent on any project maximises the benefit to the local economy in both the short and long term. This is not a motion on homelessness or about alleviating housing overcrowding. The Executive agree on targeting those issues.

The proposers of the motion suggest that future economic growth is predicated on investment in social housing. It is their great idea, but it fails to recognise that the housing market is depressed, housing receipts are falling, property prices are falling, and private developments remain empty. Do the proposers of the motion seriously believe that the long-term future of the construction sector in those conditions will be secured by their narrow approach? It is short-sighted, it is party political, and it demonstrates a lack of understanding and of political leadership.

Every Administration on these islands is faced with the same challenge. It is not unique to us. The response of each Administration has been to focus on investing in infrastructure while alleviating the short-term hardship. From London to Dublin, from Cardiff to Edinburgh, the imperative is to build an economy that is competitive in the global environment — an economy based on skills and innovation. It is an approach that has been replicated globally across the developed and developing economies.

We recognise that the housing programme is not unique in suffering the effects of a shortfall in capital receipts. It is an issue that cuts across all areas of the investment programme, and it is clearly impossible for the housing budget to be insulated from the consequences. It is unrealistic to expect substantial transfers of capital from other programmes into social housing.

Let us be clear: there is no new money. What is given to one Department must be taken from another. If we are to direct further expenditure into social housing, the question is: where does that money come from? Which hospital or school will not be built? Which roads should we set aside? Which constituencies should be told that their needs must be put aside? A number of my colleagues across the way posed the question to the SDLP. All that we received in answer was a deafening silence.

It was a bit rich of Alasdair McDonnell to describe the Programme for Government and the Budget as an unmitigated disaster. I presume he believes that Margaret Ritchie — who voted for the Programme for Government and the Budget — is also an unmitigated disaster.

The investment strategy was designed to build the basis of our future prosperity, and it is vital that we continue with the major capital building programmes that have already been outlined. The most effective way in which we can help the construction sector is to ensure that the investment strategy continues to be delivered on time, avoiding unnecessary delays and the unacceptable levels of end-year capital shortfall that have occurred in earlier years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the deputy First Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

The deputy First Minister: The construction sector is of significant importance to the economy, providing, as it does, a major source of employment, directly and indirectly. The Executive will continue to support the construction industry.

Mr B Wilson: I fully support the SDLP motion. The deputy First Minister said that circumstances have changed in the last year; we have moved from a very calm and expanding economy to a global crisis. However, he claims that we do not need to review the priorities that are set out in the Programme for Government.

The debate has had very little to do with review; rather, it seemed to be an attack on the Minister for Social Development and on the housing programme. That is totally wrong. Obviously, unemployment in the construction industry and homelessness are serious problems, and amendment No 2 offers the potential to do something about those problems.

I am also concerned about PFI projects. One of the problems is that capital programmes are running behind schedule, which is happening because money is not being spent. A number of PFI projects did not get the go-ahead because of the credit crunch. Therefore, the jobs, which those projects may have provided, are no longer being created. For example, Lagan College has been delayed because the private sector has not been able to sort out its finance. The project has been in the pipeline for seven years, and the credit crunch means that it is unlikely to go ahead in the immediate future. Projects that have been held up because of PFIs should be expedited.

President Obama wants to find new ways to expand the economy and get people into work. He has identified two areas through which that can be achieved; social housing — which is exactly what we are saying — and the green economy, which is a very important potential growth area. Members may be aware that last week, the Green Party launched its

candidate for Europe at Harland and Wolff. We chose that venue in order to highlight the role that the company is playing at the forefront of renewable energy. Currently, Harland and Wolff is assembling 60 wind turbines and is involved in the construction of SeaGen in Strangford Lough. Wind and tidal energy are potential growth areas that must be looked at. The technologies rely on particular skills that exist in Northern Ireland, and we should be trying to put those skills to work to develop a new green revolution.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr B Wilson: I am sorry, I have very little time.

When I voted against the Budget, one of the major decisions to which I referred was the ending of the Reconnect grants, which were to provide micro-energy. At the end of the financial year when those grants were stopped, I said that that would lead to unemployment — and it has led to unemployment in the renewable-energy sector. At that stage, more than 3,000 applications that were in the pipeline could not be met because the budget ran out.

6.45 pm

People were also encouraged to train, and 800 people were trained in the Renewable Energy Installer Academy. They were gaining the skills to install the new renewable technologies, and they are now unemployed because the grant was stopped. Training of skilled workers and the use of new technology should be encouraged. If the grant were reintroduced tomorrow, dozens of people could be re-employed. Three thousand people wanted grants to install the systems, so that would be an immediate way to create jobs and to develop a green economy. The Action Renewables report said that 5,600 jobs in renewable energy could be created. Such measures should be considered, and I certainly support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: It appears that this is not a good time to be in Government. Things are bad and are likely to get worse. People will blame the Government; after all, who else is there to blame in, what is for many people, an unfortunate set of circumstances? We have to grapple as best we can with the challenges that face us.

The SDLP motion should have been broader in order to consider more issues than housing and retraining. I also have some difficulty with amendment No 2, which refers to the green economy. Green energy would probably be able to account for only 1% of our energy requirements. A competitiveness study has shown that green energy affects between 2% and 3% of the top line in manufacturing. That means that it would affect 1% of that 2% to 3% of energy. I am not sure whether we want 5,000 more jobs in an area in which we are already more productive. The big challenge is productivity. The acronym PIIGS —

Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain — refers to the economies that are bankrupt and unable to deal with the issue.

Many people have asked where the money will come from. I accept the argument that no more money is available, which means that money would have to be taken from one Department and given to another. I cannot see Departments volunteering to give up money. The argument that individual Ministers should be allowed to deal with the cuts is at least as good as the argument that they should be managed collectively.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome that dose of realism from the Member. There is a lack of additional money, so money must be reallocated from elsewhere. Does he have an insight into the mind of, for example, his colleague the Health Minister? Would the Health Minister appreciate 5% being sliced from his budget to be reallocated to some of the priorities that Mr Basil McCrea and some Members from other parties have talked about?

Mr B McCrea: It is obvious that we share the same position on that. It is difficult, and cuts will have to be made. In the December monitoring round, the Minister of Education put in bids for £33 million and received £6 million. The rest of the money was for inescapable expenditure. That means cuts must be made to other front-line services because the money was for, for instance, job evaluations. One might as well say that the Minister must manage as best she can within her budget. All Departments have to make efficiency savings of 3%. The Department of Education is supposed to find efficiencies by making teachers redundant, but it does not have the money to make that happen. It has to find £26 million, and last year it had to find £60 million.

What are we going to do now to rebalance the economy? I am sure that, like me, Members heard on the news this morning that some people want to call the bottom of the market and say that confidence is back.

I am afraid that I cannot do that; I believe that there is worse to come. There is an issue about trust and about our trying to build for the future. In regard to housing, I regret that I must also say that I do not see a return to the halcyon days of 20% growth. It is open to argument whether we should invest our limited resources in an area that gives no returns.

We must look for higher productivity; we must look for export opportunities; and we must look at manufacturing. However, those things take time to develop. Amendment No 1, as proposed by my colleague David McNarry, calls on the Executive to address our difficulties. I hope that the deputy First Minister takes note of what happens when my party makes reasonable suggestions.

Mr O'Dowd: Does the Member agree that the argument from his Benches would be more credible if his party brought an alternative, costed Programme for Government to the House to be debated and voted on?

Mr B McCrea: I do not know whether the Member heard me, but we are adopting a reasonable position that involves understanding the difficulties. I hope that the deputy First Minister is listening. We are offering to work with others because the situation requires all of us to deal with the matters in hand. I do not know whether I have stated that clearly enough, but it is what we are saying.

A year from now, there will be a fundamental change in our economy: we can no longer rely on construction and house building as engines of growth; we must find something to replace them. Another challenge is where to find the money that is needed. I do not believe that the private sector will accept the argument that the public sector can sail on regardless with its guaranteed spinal — inflationary — increases while the private sector must resort to three-day weeks.

That will not work. Social unrest is a real and serious problem. My plea is that we work together. Notwithstanding all our difficulties, it is only if we work together that people will trust us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mark Durkan to wind up on the debate on the substantive motion. The debate must finish at 7 pm, and I may have to interrupt to bring it to a close at that time.

Mr Durkan: The debate ranged over several issues, and not all Members ranged as far as others. Some concentrated on attacking the Minister for Social Development.

In proposing the motion, Declan O'Loan highlighted how Committees are being told by senior departmental officials that some of the targets and presumptions in the Programme for Government have been overtaken by events. Committees are constantly told not to take those provisions for granted. In such circumstances, it must be credible to have an honest, open and sensible overall revision of the Programme for Government.

In proposing amendment No 1, David McNarry asked whether the Programme for Government and what he called the rigidly linked Budget were fit for purpose. He said that a review was needed to take account of changed circumstances.

In proposing amendment No 2 on behalf of the Alliance Party, Anna Lo highlighted the green economy as an area of growth; she also reinforced her commitment to social housing.

Simon Hamilton criticised what he said was an SDLP obsession with social housing, but ignored the fact that we have called for an overall revision of the

Programme for Government at the same time as discussing issues such as retraining and upskilling.

Mitchel McLaughlin concentrated on attacking and criticising Margaret Ritchie. However, he also pointed out that a key consideration of the Budget process is the limited ability of the Executive to raise money.

Edwin Poots challenged whether all problems would be solved by building social housing in the midst of a global credit crunch. He made the mistake of assuming that we who proposed the motion are saying that social housing alone will solve all our economic problems. Mr Poots also counterposed investing in health and social housing with having the economy as the number-one priority.

Many of us believe that strong economic benefits come with investing in health and social housing and through placing a key emphasis on high capital expenditure. In the past, many Members worked to improve the levels and form of capital expenditure. We are committed fully, not only to the infrastructure ends that that can achieve, but also to the benefits that it can release.

Fra McCann concentrated on social housing. Again, he confirmed that he has yet to take out membership of Margaret Ritchie's fan club. I do not believe that she is particularly expectant.

Jim Shannon stated that he understands the need for social housing. He referred to the high numbers — 3,000 people — who are on the housing waiting list in the Ards Borough Council area. He also referred to funding problems for Lifestart and Sure Start in Ards. Last year, many Members who raised problems with the Budget and the Programme for Government pointed out the damage that would be done by the absence of a ring-fenced children's fund and a funding package for children and young people.

At that time, we were told that it would be sorted out and that three Departments would receive the money. Some of those Departments — for example, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — now say that they did not receive any money from that supposedly ring-fenced fund. The reason why groups such as Lifestart face those difficulties is because they cannot busk around various Departments in order to get a bit of their budget here and a bit of it there. The children's fund needs to be recreated. That could emerge from a revision of the Programme for Government.

Alastair McDonnell pointed out that many of the Programme for Government's presumptions and projections have been completely overtaken by events. Clearly, many of its promises and targets have travelled south in the current economic circumstances. Dr McDonnell made a point not only about funding allocations, but about whether the money is even flowing, and about delivery delays.

Speaking for the Executive, the deputy First Minister stressed the context in which the Programme for Government was introduced. He said that they are keeping their eye firmly on the prize and that the economy is their number one priority. He pointed out that, obviously, the Executive did not create the wider economic conditions that now buffet us all; instead, he set those very much in the international context.

He failed, however, to take the point from Members who want to revise the Programme for Government that the case that we set out is very much that, in the light of what we know now about wider economic circumstances and the pressures that they create, priorities must be considered, not only between Departments, but within them, in order to revise the Budget and Programme for Government.

In fact, if the Assembly carried out the proper annual Budget exercise that it is supposed to, it would proof the Budget and the budget lines of each Department in order to determine whether Ministers and Departments are spending on priority areas; whether they must meet other pressures; and whether they must relax certain promises that they have made. That is what a proper and robust scrutiny of the Budget and the Programme for Government should achieve.

Brian Wilson highlighted the Reconnect grants that have been abandoned. Again, that contradicts commitments that were made in the Programme for Government to sustainable development and energy efficiency.

Similarly, the Assembly was told about the Programme for Government's great support for enterprise and for people who start small and medium-sized enterprises. However, the Administration removed the grant from the Start a Business programme. Therefore, the one basic funding element for people who start a business has been withdrawn.

Not all of the Government's decisions live up to the promise and language of the Programme for Government. Basil McCrea highlighted the lack of additional money and stated that Ministers will not volunteer to take funding cuts. Ministers must examine budget lines in their respective Departments, as do departmental Committees. The Assembly must play its role to scrutinise that expenditure in order to ensure that public money goes to where it most needed and where it can make the greatest difference to public services and long-term economic development.

That is why, contrary to Edwin Poots' comments, when the DUP put forward a motion to cut the number of Departments, the SDLP tabled an amendment that reached much further to try to ensure that there is due priority in public expenditure; that less money is spent on the system and more on front-line services. It is precisely for those reasons that the Programme for

Government must be reviewed and revised. Although the deputy First Minister said that the programme does not need to be revised, most of his speech was an argument in favour of its review and revision. Indeed, he said that the Executive review and revise the programme as they go along.

Therefore, the Assembly has heard contradictory arguments: on one hand, that no change is needed; and on the other hand, that those changes are being provided. More strategic focus is needed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if that amendment is made, amendment No 2 will not be called, and I will proceed to put the Question on the motion as amended.

Question, That Amendment No 1 be made, put and negatived.

Question, That Amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and negatived.

Adjourned at 7.01 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 3 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wished to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in inland waterways sectoral format. However, the Minister is indisposed this morning, so the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who also attended the meeting, will deliver the statement.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in inland waterways sectoral format.

The meeting was held at Waterways Ireland's headquarters in Enniskillen on 16 January 2009. The Executive were represented by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Gregory Campbell MP MLA, and me, and the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív TD.

This statement has been agreed with Minister Campbell, and I am making it on behalf of both of us.

Mr John Martin, the chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, provided a report on developments during 2008. The Council noted the completion of work on the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen in September, and the subsequent relocation of staff into the new accommodation.

The Council noted the continuing progress on the restoration of the Royal Canal to the Shannon, including works at Lyneen Bridge. The Council also noted that an additional 242 m of moorings were provided on the

Erne system, 36 m on the Lower Bann and 36 m on the Royal Canal. The Council noted the successful removal of the old swivel bridge and installation of a new bridge over the Shannon navigation at Portumna, County Galway. The Council commended Waterways Ireland for an award for maintenance excellence, awarded in the maintenance and asset management category at the Irish Maintenance and Asset Management Society company awards, for its bridge-survey system.

The Council reviewed progress to date on the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal, and noted that Waterways Ireland had met a wide range of statutory agencies and the majority of landowners who will be affected by the project. The Council noted Waterways Ireland's decision to undertake the preliminary design stage internally. The Council also noted that, following the acquisition of land and receipt of planning permission, Waterways Ireland will let the contract for the design and construction of the project to a single entity. The Council welcomed Waterways Ireland's successful enhancement of the facilities and services on the Lower Bann and Erne waterways to further develop access to those waterways and waterside activities.

The Council agreed proposals for a number of property disposals in the context of a range of development projects on the waterways. The Council also noted the draft 2009 business plan for Waterways Ireland, which is under consideration by both sponsor Departments and Finance Departments, in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. Both sponsor Departments will work together to finalise a business plan and to bring it forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting. The Council noted Waterways Ireland's annual report and accounts for 2007, which were presented prior to being laid before the Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in inland waterways sectoral format would take place at a date to be arranged. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure met representatives of Waterways Ireland. We were told that one of its key priorities for 2008 was to begin the design and land-acquisition processes on the section of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. In April 2008, we also met representatives of the Blackwater Regional Partnership, who strongly put the case for the reopening of the Ulster Canal.

In light of those submissions to the Committee, were timescales mentioned during the discussions on the reopening of the Ulster Canal? When is the land expected to be acquired and planning permission

received? The Minister will need no reminding that the Blackwater Regional Partnership is made up of partners from Armagh, Monaghan and Tyrone who came together in 1994 to form a strategic local authority alliance.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I thank the Member for his question. The Member is well aware that the Ulster Canal flows through my constituency. It is an issue on which I am very keen, and I wish to see it expedited. Waterways Ireland has had discussions with representatives of a wide range of statutory agencies, and has met 46 of the possible 50 landowners, representing approximately 97% of the ownership of the linear length of the canal. Waterways Ireland has decided to undertake the preliminary design stage internally, and following the acquisition of land and receipt of planning permission, a contract for the design and construction of the project will be let out to a single entity.

Waterways Ireland reports on progress at a monthly monitoring meeting with the sponsor Departments. Although no specific timescales were given at the meeting, I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will want to reflect on the Hansard report and may reply to the Member in writing. I know that time is one of the issues, and that both Ministers are very keen on seeing progress, but obviously there are other agencies involved, so it is impossible for me to give a definitive answer on timescales. However, I can assure the Member that everyone at the meeting was in favour of the project progressing as quickly as possible.

Mr McCausland: I am sure we all agree that inland waterways and their development make a major contribution to the tourist product in Northern Ireland.

Was any consideration given at the meeting to the impact of the proposed tourism developments and on how we can maximise their potential benefit for Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Our waterways have enormous potential to attract tourists. The Waterways Ireland marketing and promotion strategy, which was launched in 2004, will be reviewed this year. That strategy has five key marketing objectives: awareness creation; development of a corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; working in partnership with other bodies; and building a platform for sustained development. Those objectives are met through a range of marketing activities, including the publication and distribution of promotional material, guides and charts; attendance at relevant trade and consumer shows; advertising campaigns; press familiarisation visits and other promotional activity by way of a signage programme, the development of an award-winning website and many other marketing tactics.

Waterways Ireland delivers its marketing and promotion strategy in partnership with a range of local authorities, trade organisations and tourism bodies, including the NITB (Northern Ireland Tourist Board), Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland. From a product development perspective, Waterways Ireland, in partnership with relevant local authorities and tourism bodies, has begun the development and formulation of recreation and tourism development plans with the inland waterways as a centre around which other tourism activity can be clustered. It is anticipated that those development plans will be in place at the end of this year.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for her statement, which she delivered under very difficult circumstances.

First, I note the positive progress that has been made on the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal. As other Members said, we all welcome that from a tourism point of view. What is the estimated cost of the proposals that the Minister has outlined?

Wearing her other hat, can she tell the House what steps are being taken by the inland waterways agency to tackle the invasive progress of that most unwelcome visitor from the Republic of Ireland; namely, the zebra mussel?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The estimated capital cost of restoring the entire Ulster Canal is £171.5 million. That includes site investigation, environmental impact assessments and project management, as well as construction costs. The estimated cost of restoring the Clones to Lower Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal is €35 million. The construction cost of that project is being funded entirely by the South, and when built, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will contribute to ongoing operational costs. Waterways Ireland intends to seek planning permission by mid-2010 on that section of the canal, which will be followed by tendering for detailed design and build contracts.

There is nothing in my briefing this morning about our wee friend the zebra mussel. However, as the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I am well aware of the impact of the zebra mussel on the fishing trade. I am sure that Ministers will examine how to protect our waterways from invasive species such as the zebra mussel, although there is a fairly strong acknowledgement that its presence is widespread across the island and might be difficult to keep out entirely.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement on Waterways Ireland. Will she outline the tourism potential of the investment in the development of access to facilities in the Lower Bann area and the promotion of sports activities there? How will local authorities be

involved in that? I had hoped that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure could have been here to answer questions about the tourism potential of the River Foyle, but I will ask Ms Gildernew to answer my questions, as she has some remit to maximise its potential.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, having read the Hansard report, will write to the Member, and will answer any questions that I am unable to respond to today.

In 2007, Waterways Ireland established the Lakelands Initiative along with NITB, Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism, Fáilte Ireland, Shannon Development and Tourism Ireland. Under that initiative, resources have been pooled, and the concept of a lakeland corridor from Fermanagh to Limerick is being developed. The initiative encompasses a 30-mile corridor around the Erne System, the Shannon-Erne Waterway and the Shannon Navigation. A range of marketing materials has been developed under the catchline “Discover Freedom”, with direct access to tourism markets abroad through the dedicated website.

The Loughs Agency, which is under my Department’s remit, is responsible for the Foyle tourism initiative. The Member is aware that we gave out grants last year to develop the tourism potential of the River Foyle in order to attract people to the area. I want to work with other agencies to develop the tourism potential of that beautiful part of Ireland.

10.45 am

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. My question follows on from that which the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure asked about the completion date for the restoration of the Ulster Canal. The Minister said that she had met the majority — 46 out of 50 — of landowners along the length of the canal. What was their reaction? Did they all agree with what has been proposed, or did some object? I ask that question because we all know that it takes only one objection to delay a programme.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Kieran is listening well this morning. Good man. Waterways Ireland met 46 out of a possible 50 landowners — 97% of the ownership. From listening to the comments that Minister Ó Cuív and Minister Campbell made at the meeting, I think that most of the responses were fairly positive. At the meeting, I, in my capacity as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, offered to help to deal with any difficulties that may emerge, because I am keen to see the restoration of the Ulster Canal progressed.

Although the work may create a nuisance factor or cause some annoyance initially, benefits for the entire area are to be derived from it. No farmer who lives along the length of the canal wants to deprive his community

of those potential benefits, so we can work together on the matter. Waterways Ireland conducted those meetings, so I do not have the specific answer that Mr McCarthy seeks; however, I think that, by and large, the landowners were fairly amenable to the proposals.

Lord Browne: I welcome the enhancement of the facilities and services on the Lower Bann. Can the Minister outline the work that has been undertaken to date on the Lower Bann, and any future work that is planned? Has the monetary exchange rate had any detrimental effect on that proposed work?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, quite a bit of additional mooring has been provided. Along the Lower Bann, 504 m of additional mooring was provided between 2000 and 2008. The Maid of Antrim, which is now in private ownership, operates day trips on both Lough Erne and the Lower Bann. Another private operator is based in Coleraine. Waterways Ireland has been working to improve the infrastructure, including the provision of new moorings — for example, at Mount Sandel in Coleraine — which are used mainly by private boats and water-sports enthusiasts. Any decision to locate a hire-boat centre to provide day trips is a commercial decision.

Waterways Ireland is keen to encourage additional commercial operators to work on that attractive waterway, and if there are any such proposals, I am sure that Minister Campbell will be happy to examine them.

Waterways Ireland gave an excellent presentation and showed some beautiful photographs of the Lower Bann, which were obviously taken on a lovely day. I studied at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, and the sun was not always shining there. The before-and-after pictures of the Lower Bann were particularly impressive. Excellent work has been done on that stretch of river.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that she is deputising today, but she may be able to answer my questions anyway. First, in light of the economic downturn that we are clearly experiencing, both in the Province and in the Republic of Ireland, can she confirm that the moneys that have been allocated to the Waterways Ireland scheme still exist and that there will not be any delay in processing the scheme?

Secondly, close co-operation is not always there between the boat owners and the anglers who use a canal or river. Can the Minister confirm whether those two groups have built up a relationship and that the angling organisations’ viewpoints on proposed Waterways Ireland schemes have been listened to, so that fishing can continue alongside the boats?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You can answer either question, Minister.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am definitely not answering the second question, because I do not think that there is an answer that the Member wants to hear.

The first question was about the economic downturn and whether the works would go ahead. Minister Ó Cuív was keen to point out that the work on the Ulster Canal — which is 100% funded by the South — will go ahead, which is very welcome. In the present climate, we do not know what the next 12 months will bring, so I do not want to say anything that could cause difficulty down the line.

As regards the relationship between anglers and boat users, we must realise that we are not the only people who use the waterways, so we should have respect for one another. The phrase that comes to mind is:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

It is important to remember that we all should take enjoyment from our waterways and that nobody has the exclusive right to those waterways.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her statement. With regard to the Ulster Canal, it is interesting to note that there is a budget price for the restoration works, but the preliminary design stage has not yet been completed. The time frame should be firmed up fairly quickly because that is a very important part of the work.

The Minister referred to the number of property disposals. Will she clarify the nature of the properties and their estimated value?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, the outline business case indicated a capital cost of £171.5 million for the restoration of the entire canal. The estimated cost to restore the section from Clones to Lough Erne is €35 million. I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will take on board the Member’s question and answer it in full, because I do not have the details in front of me. I am sure that he will get back to the Member in writing.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Minister satisfied that Minister Campbell has not ducked his ministerial responsibilities in relation to North/South matters? Surely there is no collusion between Sinn Féin and the DUP on that matter.

I thank the Minister for her very brief statement about Waterways Ireland. What additional work streams were added to the programme? I noted that the Minister said that the date of the next meeting was yet to be arranged. Why are there not regular calendar meetings? What particular vision or programme do the Ministers have for developing Ireland’s loughs?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member asked several questions, and I will not answer all of them. Given the time of year that is in it and the weather conditions, it is

reasonable enough for anybody to be ill. The meeting was extremely positive and businesslike. I have attended quite a number of those meetings, and the latest was no different. It was conducted in very good spirits, and it was an excellent meeting. I have no doubt that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is genuinely ill, and it is remiss of the Member to make that accusation.

A schedule of meetings was agreed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council plenary meeting, which was held on 23 January 2009 at Magee College in Derry. I have no doubt that those meetings will be ongoing. They are extremely important and their usefulness is obvious to all of us.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the statement. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Waterways Ireland. It is one of the best cross-border bodies with regard to practical work. I note that progress on the canals is measured in metres. Coming from the north coast, which the Minister knows well, may I ask when metres will become kilometres? Given that the area that I represent has lost 3,000 jobs in the past two years, when will the Lower Bann be connected to the River Shannon, so that international tourism can take off in the way that it has done in the Republic?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am not the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, so I do not have the answer. It was not discussed at the meeting to which we refer.

As I have said, the potential of water-based tourism is obvious to all of us — it was extremely obvious to the three Ministers who attended the meeting. We want to encourage the link-up of the island’s navigation systems. The Member is correct: Waterways Ireland is a very good organisation, and it has carried out its work very professionally. Its headquarters building is beautiful and has already won a number of awards. I urge any Members who pass through Enniskillen to go to see it.

We can encourage more people to visit Ireland in order to take part in water-based activities, which are enjoyable and calming, although, for me, such activities are only calming if I leave the children at home. I thank the Member for the question.

North/South Ministerial Council Language Body Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language body sectoral format. As I said earlier, the Minister is ill and, therefore, is unable to attend this morning, so the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, who also attended the meeting, will deliver the statement.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I shall make the following report on the third North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language sectoral format since the restoration of the Executive and the Assembly. The report has been endorsed by both Ministers.

On 16 January 2009, as previously, the meeting was held in Enniskillen, and the Executive were represented by Gregory Campbell MP MLA, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and me. The Irish Government were represented by Éamon Ó Cuív TD, the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Gregory Campbell chaired the meeting, which dealt with matters relating to the North/South 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 shall now summarise the matters that the Council discussed. The Council received progress reports from the chief executives — Mr George Patton and Ferdie Mac an Fhailigh — of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge on developments in 2008. The Council welcomed the strong working relationship between the two agencies, which have collaborated on a range of projects, including the production of a film in Irish about Ulster-Scots language and culture, which is scheduled to be broadcast on TG4 during the first quarter of 2009; sponsorship of the Belfast International Horse Show; the organisation of the Young Ambassadors scheme in Downpatrick in 2008, whereby young people from the United States of America engage with the agencies in language and culture research; and joint funding by the agencies with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland of two arts development officers for language arts posts.

The Council noted the draft 2009 business plans for the North/South Language Body and its agencies, which are under consideration by both sponsor Departments and both Finance Departments, in line with budgetary processes in the two jurisdictions. The Council agreed that those plans will focus on key ministerial priorities in respect of each of the agencies. Both sponsor

Departments will work together to finalise the business plans and to bring them forward for approval at a future NSMC meeting.

The Council discussed staffing matters in Foras na Gaeilge, and it reviewed the decentralisation of Foras na Gaeilge staff to Gaoth Dobhair. That follows on from discussions held by the North/South Ministerial Council in language sectoral format in October 2007 and July 2008.

The position on outstanding consolidated annual reports and accounts was reviewed by the Council, which noted the complexities in compiling, auditing and consolidating annual reports and accounts. The Council welcomed the assurances given to members by the agencies' chief executive officers that that work will continue to be given the utmost priority, and it requested a progress report for the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

Ministers noted and endorsed Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch protocol, which governs funded activities outside the island of Ireland by Tha Boord.

In closing, Minister Ó Cuív stated that he favours hosting the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format in Gaoth Dobhair on a date to be agreed by officials and sponsor Departments. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development said that the matter of outstanding consolidated annual reports and accounts was reviewed at the meeting. Given that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is examining how the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure manages its arm's-length bodies, particularly with regard to financial accountability, that news will be of considerable interest to the Committee.

Therefore, I ask the Minister whether the annual accounts of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have been signed off, and if not, what has caused the delay? Has delay been caused by historic difficulties in the Ulster-Scots Agency?

In addition, to simplify that entire accounting process and to allow quicker production of the books, could the requirement for the consolidation of the two sets of accounts be dropped?

What is the date of the next meeting?

11.00 am

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Go raibh maith agat. Mr McElduff's questions require a lot of detail, but as he is the Chairperson of the Committee, I am sure that he is anxious to ask those questions. I will answer them as

best I can. The accounts for 2000 and 2001 were qualified by the NIAO (Northern Ireland Audit Office), and there was a delay in signing off the body's consolidated accounts. That eventually happened in 2004, and the report and accounts for 2000 were not published until 2005. As a result, the clearance of subsequent annual reports and accounts was also delayed.

The report from the body for 2001 was published in June 2006, and the reports for 2002 and 2003 were published in May 2007. It is expected that the report for 2004 will be published this month. The NIAO must audit the accounts chronologically — hence the delay.

Following the Audit Office's decision to qualify the accounts for 2000 and 2001, the then chairperson of the Ulster-Scots Agency disagreed with the decisions and refused to sign off the accounts — hence the resultant problem.

At the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on 16 January, both Ministers noted the assurances given by the chief executive officers of the agencies who worked to clear the backlog that annual reports and accounts will be given the utmost priority.

The annual reports and accounts of the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaelige have to be consolidated to form the annual report of the North/South Language Body, as defined in the North/South Co-operation (Implementation Bodies)(NI) Order 1999, prior to being laid before the respective Parliaments. Therefore, it is provided for in legislation.

The North/South Language Body reports and accounts for 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 have been published, and it is expected that the report and accounts for 2004 will be published this month. The annual report and accounts for subsequent years will be progressed as a matter of priority.

The North/South Ministerial Council noted the importance of ensuring that the North/South Language Body accounts are progressed urgently, in keeping with good corporate governance, and Ministers agreed that the issue should be cleared as a matter of priority.

Lord Browne: I am pleased that the North/South Ministerial Council discussed staffing in Foras na Gaelige. However, I understand that approval, in principle, was given to the filling of Foras na Gaelige posts in 2001. Will the Minister explain the reasons for the delay in filling those posts? Have they all been filled?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A number of issues contributed to the delay in Foras na Gaelige attaining its agreed complement of staff. First, the Irish Government's decentralisation policy applies to the Foras na Gaelige posts, and there have been protracted negotiations between unions and management regarding which posts will move to Gweedore. There have been problems with staff

retention in Foras na Gaelige due to market forces and the recruitment of specialist staff who speak Irish.

Mr K Robinson: I note that the Minister is continuing to do the double here this morning. I am delighted that the film that is being produced in Irish about the Ulster-Scots diaspora will be screened on TG4. However, I hope that it does not interfere with the excellent films that that channel carries.

Will the Minister confirm that one of the two posts that have been suggested for the arts development officers for language arts will have sole responsibility for the development of Ulster Scots, given the enormous gap that has opened between Ulster Scots and Irish over the years? Will she confirm that the young ambassadors who come to Downpatrick will be exposed in equal measure to Ulster-Scots cultural heritage and Irish heritage?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I welcome Ken Robinson's questions. I do know whether I have the necessary detail that the Member requires, because I have not had a lot of time to go through it. Forgive me if I cannot answer the question in full, but I am sure that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be happy to respond to the Member in writing.

It seems that you will be watching the cowboy film at 9.00 pm on Friday night, Ken.

It is very important that production of the film is going ahead and that it will be broadcast on TG4 — I am sure that we all look forward to seeing it.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an ráiteas, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil inniu. Tím ón tuairisc go mbeidh dhá phost nua á maoiniú ag an fhoras teanga i gcomhair leis an Chomhairle Ealaíon. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an mbeidh an dá phost nua seo ann in áit an phoist a bhí ann cheana féin sa Chomhairle Ealaíon, sin é oifigeach na n-ealaíon traidisiúnta.

I thank the Minister for the statement, which I welcome. As has been mentioned, two new posts are to be funded jointly by the North/South Language Body and the Arts Council. Will those two new posts replace the post of traditional arts officer that existed in the Arts Council previously?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Discussion of that matter did not take place at the meeting on 16 January, so I am not in a position to answer that question. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. I note also the strong working relationship that exists between the two agencies, which have collaborated on a range of projects — long may that continue.

The Minister mentioned a film in Irish about the Ulster-Scots language. As someone who is not an Irish-speaker but who respects those who speak Irish, I am interested to know whether the film will have subtitles. Does the Minister know what length the film will be? Has there been any chat about a reciprocal arrangement whereby, in the not-too-distant future, a film may be made in Ulster Scots about Irish language and culture?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I welcome the Member's question. As with the previous question, the detail of this issue was not discussed at the meeting on 16 January. My grasp of the Irish language is not what I would like it to be, but I watch TG4 frequently and am aware that many of its programmes are subtitled; therefore, I am content that you will be able to enjoy it.

Mr McCarthy: When is the film scheduled to be shown?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am not sure — *[Interruption.]* Sorry? *[Interruption.]*

I do not know when it is likely to be scheduled. I am filling in for the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure at very short notice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCarthy will have to get a programme.

Mr Shannon: The report that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development presented on behalf of Minister Campbell refers to the remit of the board of the Ulster-Scots Agency. Specifically, it mentions activities and travel outside of, as it says here, the island of Ireland. At present, there is a geographical restriction on the Ulster-Scots Agency that does not apply to Foras na Gaeilge. The remit of the Ulster-Scots Agency has been amended to allow its board members to travel to Scotland, along with their staff. Can that remit be amended to support travel to Scotland for those who are involved in the Ulster-Scots community?

I should like to ask a second question, if that is all right. The statement refers also to the Young Ambassadors scheme. The Ulster-Scots Agency, along with Foras na Gaeilge, sponsored 20 students from Virginia to attend a Rabbie Burns night at Corr's Corner Hotel. There was a lot of interaction in relation to the American students and their culture, which they very clearly had. Is it intended to continue that project? I have asked two questions, but I would especially like an answer to the first one, if that is possible.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am glad to see that the Member chances his arm with other Departments as well as with mine — I do not feel so bad now.

As the subject of ambassadors was not discussed at the meeting, I am not in a position to answer that question.

The Member's second question was about the restriction on the Ulster-Scots Agency operating outside the island. In 2005, a protocol governing the approval, processing and accountability of funded activities and travel outside the island of Ireland was agreed by the sponsoring Departments and the agency. There is no restriction on the agency's board or staff operating outside the island of Ireland, provided that such expenditure contributes to the promotion of Ulster Scots on the island. Presumably, that applies to both agencies.

The discussion at the meeting, which was very helpful, centred on community groups and others going to Scotland, for example, to research the Ulster-Scots language, and so forth. The agency is reviewing its financial assistance scheme and considering extending the provision for travel arrangements outside the island of Ireland to community groups. Any changes to the financial assistance scheme must be cleared and agreed with the sponsoring Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel. Officials will review the detail of the proposal in the coming weeks. My understanding is that the scheme provides financial assistance for travel to Scotland, where the bulk of research and literature on Ulster Scots is found.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and it is great to see her and Gregory working so well together. When the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure cannot attend a debate and Michelle steps in to take the flak, that sends out a clear message of joined-up government at its best.

The Minister has partially answered my first question, but I would like more information. In response to a question from Lord Browne, the Minister mentioned staffing levels at Foras na Gaelige. Will she outline the steps that are being taken to deal with that staffing shortfall?

Will the Minister also update the Assembly on the work being done by Foras na Gaelige to review how it funds its core organisations?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, I welcome the question, but I am not in a position to give further detail on what is being done to achieve a full complement of staff at Foras na Gaelige. I am content that the Minister will respond to the Member in writing.

Equally, I am not in a position to answer the second part of the Member's question. However, I welcome the questions, particularly because I can bat them back to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he is back on his feet.

Mr McNarry: I am tempted to ask the Minister to use some licence and to confirm the scrapping of the national stadium. Perhaps she will also confirm that there will be no Irish-language Act; that would certainly tie in with Sue Ramsey's promotion of the Ministers' dual roles. In case I am corrected about that, I will move on.

Perhaps the stand-in, stand-up Minister could provide the Assembly with more detail on the sponsorship, cost and expected impact on tourism of the Belfast International Horse Show. Will she also explain, for the benefit of those who may not know, exactly what language arts are, and who can apply for the two development officer posts mentioned in the report?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Although the Member puts me in the attractive position of abusing my role this morning, I will resist the temptation to make statements that are not in my remit. However, as neither subject was discussed in great detail, if at all, at the meeting on 16 January 2009, I am not in a position to answer the Member's questions.

Mr Poots: Was the closure of 'Lá Nua', the Irish-language newspaper, discussed at that meeting? Was there any mention of the disappointment of Irish-language enthusiasts at the support given to the newspaper by Foras na Gaelige, or was it the view that an Irish-language newspaper is simply unsustainable because of insufficient public demand?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Most Members in the Chamber have been understanding of my position this morning. However, it is particularly unpalatable that the previous Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure should ask that question. Before his demotion, he would have known that certain decisions left 'Lá Nua' with no option but to close. The subject of the Member's question was not discussed at the meeting of 16 January and, therefore, I am not in a position to answer it.

11.15 am

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Report on the Review of Teacher Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. In accordance with the Business Committee's agreement to allocate additional time to Committee Chairpersons when moving and winding-up a motion on a Committee report, up to 15 minutes will be allowed to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Review of Teacher Education; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is always a major event for any Committee to bring an inquiry report to the Floor of the Assembly, and this is no exception. The Committee for Employment and Learning regards this report as a significant example of the Committee working at its best. An issue arose and the Committee investigated and aired the relevant opinions. A report has been compiled and this debate has been brought to the Assembly so that the issues can be discussed and moved forward.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning, and thank him for his help and support throughout the inquiry.

The Committee is not seeking to make any binding or final conclusions in the report, and it is not a stand-alone document. The Committee's stakeholder review of teacher education has allowed a full range of opinions on the issues surrounding changes in teacher education to be brought into the public arena and a debate started. The objective of the review, as decided by the Committee at its meeting on 28 May 2008, was:

"To collate and consider the opinions and views of those involved in, and affected by, proposed changes to teacher education and to produce a report of recommendations to the Minister for Employment and Learning".

The Committee believes that it has fulfilled that aim. Today's debate on the report is a starting point and an opportunity to highlight the issues in teacher education. A lot of discussion is needed to build a consensus around those issues and then to agree a strategy to take

teacher education forward. I welcome to the Public Gallery those who have an interest in the subject.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has no remit to consider changes to the structure of the North's education system. That is an issue for the Minister of Education and the Committee for Education.

The Committee's decision to undertake the inquiry was prompted by two particular issues. First, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College felt that the changes to their funding model questioned their viability; and secondly, the decision by the authorities at Stranmillis University College to agree to a proposed merger with Queen's University.

In closed session on 12 March 2008, the Committee was briefed by the Minister for Employment and Learning on his plans to bring in a new funding formula for the two university colleges. On 16 April, the Committee heard the colleges' views on the new formula, which, both colleges believed, might make them non-viable unless additional sources of income were identified. The next day, Stranmillis agreed to a proposed merger with Queen's University, which, it said, would bolster its financial and institutional viability. The Committee was alarmed and dismayed by the speed at which the merger manifested itself. It was also unhappy with the announcement via the media, without any stakeholder debate and without Committee or Assembly input.

On 23 June, the Committee brought a motion to the Floor of the Assembly to seek the delay of the new funding formula for the colleges. The motion, which I withdrew after the Minister announced a number of proposals, served to highlight the issues in the Assembly.

In 2003, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) commissioned a review of the way forward for teacher education. That review's remit included mapping the professional development of the teaching profession, from induction, through to early, and then continuing, professional development; taking consideration of the review of public administration (RPA) and the Bain Review; the roles that both Departments play in initial teacher education (ITE); and the changing demography of the pupil population and the subsequent impact on teacher numbers. We are still waiting for that review to be published. Perhaps the Minister will confirm whether that will happen in the next month.

The providers of teacher education have been waiting almost six years for the review to be published, as it would give them a framework to be able to plan ahead.

The Committee is conscious and concerned that decisions are being made on teacher education without any agreed overarching strategy having been established. Those decisions involve changes to the funding for Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges and the

proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University.

The long-awaited review of teacher education must provide the basis on which consensus can be built around the issues of the reported oversupply of teachers and the changing demographic of school-age children. Once there is consensus on those issues and an overall strategy is agreed, the teacher education providers will have a solid foundation on which to build for the future.

The Committee is anxious that the future of teacher education should involve a synergy between the need for a professionally equipped teacher supply and the need to address the scale and cost of future teacher provision. There should be an agreed demand-led strategy for the provision of teacher education. However, that must be intelligent and flexible and take on board the fact that teacher education does not end after initial training.

The Committee has expressed its concern that in the absence of an agreed overarching strategy, change has been piecemeal and the processes involved open to question. A particular concern has been the impact of the new funding model on the thinking of Stranmillis and St Mary's University Colleges. The Committee has doubts about the way in which the number of allocated initial teacher education places is arrived at, the role played by the substitute teacher register in the process, and the unresolved issue of teachers who are trained in Britain and who return to the North in large numbers seeking work. No amount of reducing ITE places here will cut those numbers in the short to medium term. Are we really prepared to watch local schools struggle to find locally trained teachers?

During the evidence sessions that the Committee heard when compiling the report, it emerged that officials from the Department have been suggesting for years that they might make a move away from the historical funding model for Stranmillis and St Mary's, which protected the colleges from the ebb and flow of student-teacher numbers and allowed them to focus on teacher education, with a regulated number of additional students on diversified courses to balance out the total. That strategy was supported by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The new model, which has now come into being, is largely based on student numbers alone, and will see the colleges struggle with the existing caps on numbers of students on the diversified courses and annual reductions in ITE student numbers. An outside observer might almost say that the new funding formula will likely cause the two colleges to have to seek alternative, perhaps drastic, solutions.

In recognition of the Committee and the colleges' concerns, the Minister has provided moneys to both colleges this year to help them adjust to the new funding

model. In the case of St Mary's, he has also allocated money for a study to be commissioned into potential additional income streams for the college. Stranmillis, as has been mentioned, has sought to secure its viability by embarking on a proposed merger with Queen's University.

At this point, I should say that I personally do not believe the merger to be in the best interests of either Stranmillis specifically, or teacher education generally, in the long term. I am aware that a number of other Committee members share that view. However, the Committee's report does not seek to prejudge the merger. Both sides of the case have been presented. That said, the Committee has been concerned by the speed of the decision and would admit to uneasiness about how thoroughly other options have been explored, such as those outlined by the Taylor Report that the college commissioned last year.

In addition, the Committee heard a great deal of concern expressed about the survival of the Stranmillis ethos in any merger. The Minister and the Committee share the belief that the merger is highly unlikely to happen in time to achieve the target date of September 2009, even if the various necessary departmental and Assembly processes signal agreement. The Committee is also concerned by the lack of consultation on the merger, as perceived by the students and staff at Stranmillis. The Committee and the Minister have made representations to Stranmillis and Queen's about those concerns.

It is the Committee's view that the absence of an agreed strategy for teacher education and the change in funding for the colleges has placed Stranmillis in a situation whereby its authorities are convinced that the proposed merger is the only route to long-term viability.

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I will give way briefly.

Mr Easton: Some members of the board of governors at Stranmillis have said that the merger is a done deal. Does the Member agree that those comments are a bit premature?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: Personally, I agree that they are, but, at the moment, I am speaking on behalf of the Committee, and I do not think that view is shared by all its members. That is why I explained that my view on the merger is a personal one, but I agree that such comments add uncertainty to the issue.

The absence of an agreed strategy for teacher education, and the change in funding for the colleges, has convinced the authorities of Stranmillis University College that the proposed merger is the only route to long-term viability. Is the use of desperate measures

from some providers the best way in which to decide the future of teacher education?

In the report, the Committee has brought into the public arena suggestions that were made in evidence that might give the two colleges greater viability. Such suggestions include structured systems of induction; early and continuing professional development, which the teacher-education providers would fund and roll out; planning the numbers of students over the long term, using institutional viability as a consideration; greater options for providers to pursue work in specialist areas, such as in Irish-medium education at St Mary's University College and early-years learning at Stranmillis University College; potential sub-degree work in positions that are allied to teacher education, such as those of classroom assistants; and diversified courses with sustainable student numbers. Those are merely a few of the possibilities.

The chief inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate's report, which was released just days ago, indicated that the Irish-medium sector would benefit from an increase in the number of courses to allow its practitioners to develop their language skills and resources. St Mary's University College is seeking such work, so would that not be a good illustration of joined-up government?

I ask the Minister to note that in evidence from a group of stakeholders, fears were raised about equality of opportunity and access to the teaching profession should the merger of Queen's University and Stranmillis University College take place. The Committee appreciates that several of the recommendations in the report are relevant to the Minister of Education and commends the Minister for Employment and Learning for seeking the views of his ministerial colleagues. The Committee formally sent the report to the Committee for Education, which it noted. We did that in order to play our part in taking a joined-up approach to such issues.

The Committee is also keen that recommendations that are not associated with the key themes of the report not be neglected. To that end, the Committee commends the Minister for providing additional funding for educational and training resources for the deaf community, and it supports his continued dialogue to seek the best provision of facilities and services for that section of the community.

Again, I emphasise that the Committee's primary purpose when it undertook its inquiry into teacher education was to seek the views of all those involved in the sector, and to allow those views to be aired so as to create a forum for debate. The Committee wanted to hear the varied opinions of providers and stakeholders so that its members could make useful recommendations to the Minister for Employment and Learning and, in some cases, the Minister of Education. The report does

not seek to make any recommendations on the structure of the education system here. As I said at the outset, that issue is beyond the remit of the Committee, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and, therefore, this debate on the report.

I commend the report to the Assembly and look forward to the rest of the debate and the Minister's response. On behalf of the Committee, I thank all the stakeholders who contributed to the report, as well as the Committee staff, who worked hard over the past number of months to bring the report to the Assembly.

Mr Easton: In supporting the motion, I want to bring several concerns to the attention of the Assembly. I commend the research that was undertaken in the preparation of the report. The stakeholders' review afforded the Committee an opportunity to listen to the concerns that exist on changes in teacher education. That those concerns were fully explored and expressed added considerable value to the report. It would be remiss of me not to commend all those who gave of their considerable knowledge and expertise in the compilation of such a comprehensive report with a firm research foundation.

Time does not allow me to fully explore the 119 recommendations in the report, so I will highlight key areas.

The proposed merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University, and the process leading up to that, is a cause for disquiet. It has been referred to, correctly, in the body of the report as being "unnecessarily hasty".

We would do well to pay due regard to the old maxim: "Act in haste, repent at leisure". There are distinct advantages to taking a cautious approach to the proposed merger. First, the issue of equality is at the core of my concerns. It is also at the core of concerns helpfully expressed by the Transferor Representatives' Council. The Assembly must apply its mind to the real fear that exists with regard to the number of students from a Protestant background who would have access to a place at any merged institution at Stranmillis. All right-thinking people would regard it as fundamentally unacceptable to not act to prevent a scenario in which the number of Protestant teachers in the profession and in our schools is eroded.

11.30 am

A scenario clearly exists whereby the new merged institution would become a centre of excellence, attracting students from both main religious traditions here. Given that the Catholic certificate would still be accessible, it would afford Catholic teachers the distinct advantage of continuing to have access to all the educational sectors here. Meanwhile, their Protestant counterparts would continue to be excluded from the Catholic maintained sector, but, at the same

time, they would have to compete with their Catholic counterparts for places in the remaining sectors. That is unfair, and it cannot, and must not, be allowed to happen. That situation discriminates against Protestants, and it has to end.

In addition, there is considerable merit in considering the proposal from the Transferor Representatives' Council that teachers trained at Stranmillis college be channelled into the controlled sector, as St Mary's college prepares its teachers for the maintained sector. I, in common with the Transferor Representatives' Council, do not regard the controlled sector as secular, given the non-denominational assemblies and biblically focused religious education.

It is imperative that any proposed new merged institution have a Christian ethos. We acknowledge the historic link between the controlled sector and the Protestant Churches. I regard it as right and proper that the controlled sector should go forward with a Christian ethos. I would also like to see further development of the proposed suggestion that there could be a Protestant equivalent to the Catholic certificate required for teaching in the controlled sector.

The Assembly acknowledges the need for a clear process for the teaching profession, from initial teacher education and induction, through to early professional development, and, subsequently, to continuous professional development, to be set in the proper context of an agreed overarching strategy.

There is merit in exploring what financial mechanisms could be put in place to allow for a comprehensive system of induction for early and continuous professional development for teachers. It is interesting to note that Stranmillis college and St Mary's college regard that potential income as contributing to a more sustainable future for both colleges.

In conclusion, there is much to commend in the report. I wish to emphasise the real and present concerns emanating from the proposed merger between Queen's University and Stranmillis University College, the methodology of the announcement of the proposed merger, and, critically, the feeling of stakeholders most closely involved in the merger. I ask the Minister to consider a partnership approach — rather than a full merger — between Queen's University and Stranmillis University College, on the Stranmillis site. Both colleges would use the site, but they would keep their independence.

It must be a source of distress to the Assembly that staff and students feel insufficiently consulted in working through the options for Stranmillis and in the subsequent process of creating a merger. The strength of representations made to the Minister and to the institutions cannot be underlined strongly enough in that respect.

The report goes some way towards getting it right, and it highlights the issues that require attention and clarification. I commend the report to the House.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Having come latterly to the Committee, I must say that I was greatly impressed by the attitude of Committee members and stakeholders in supplying information and in looking at the problem. In particular, I commend the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for their work in that respect.

Some issues need to be considered when looking at the current situation. First, a huge backlog of maintenance work was required on Stranmillis estate, and, in March 2007, David Taylor was commissioned to investigate options for the college. From a financial point of view, the issue could not be swept under the carpet, and it had to be taken very seriously.

Having been through teacher training and knowing the work that it involves, I am concerned at the oversupply of teachers. The Committee cannot close its eyes to the fact that many young people who are keen to take up teaching as a vocation cannot get a job at the end of their training and may be found doing all kinds of jobs as an alternative. That is a waste of many years of study, the expense of training, and all the background work. It is compounded by the disappointment of being unable to work in the vocation on which they had set their sights.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that, despite guidance given by the Department of Education for ten years, the re-employment of recently retired teachers continues to add to the problem?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I was about to raise that as my third point; the Member must be a mind reader.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I take on board the Member's point and that of his colleague. In my introduction to the debate, I said that we had waited six years for the completion of the review that was initiated by the Department for Employment and Learning and by the Department of Education. If the Minister can tell us at what stage the review is, we might have a basis for moving forward. Several of those issues involve both Departments, and we need the evidence before us so that we can take decisions, and not allow decisions to be forced on institutions by a lack of information.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Chairperson for her helpful intervention; it highlights the issue.

That issue has an enormous bearing on the education and training of teachers. So many teachers have taken retirement and the golden handshake only to return to work daily as supply-teachers. They do not get paid during the summer holidays, but they take up

places that young teachers who have been recently trained cannot obtain. The Committee was obliged to consider the whole scope of teacher education.

Many issues are relevant; however, the merger gives us an opportunity to get to the heart of the matter. The Taylor Report gave us the options, but the status quo was not one of them. Something must be done. We have to consider the two teacher-training colleges and their associations with the two universities. The University of Ulster was not terribly interested at first in assisting the Committee to work through the problem. Queen's University, however, which seems to be the natural partner for both colleges, was interested. We must consider whether a complete merger is best or whether teacher training is best self-contained and in its own college.

The Committee strongly recommended to the Minister for Employment and Learning that he meet the Education Minister to discuss more widely the possibilities. One of those was that the two colleges might provide sub-degree courses, such as a foundation degree for teaching assistants, to make the most of the colleges' expertise in providing links with schools and employers.

Having read the report and listened to the evidence, Members can do only one thing — commend the report to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Someone's mobile phone is switched on, and it is interfering with the sound system. I remind all Members to switch off mobile phones.

Mr Attwood: I concur with other Members in thanking the staff and former staff of the Committee for Employment and Learning, as well as the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, who have handled this report with charm, humour and rigour.

The Committee's report is a major part of the story, but, in my view, it is not the entire story. I concur with the Chairperson of the Committee in finding it curious and odd that in the middle of a teacher-training review — which has, admittedly, been horribly mishandled by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning — Stranmillis University College could unilaterally decide to go down the road of merging with Queen's University. I find that odd, and not very acceptable. In many ways, it pulls the carpet from under the Department's authority.

However, there are other curious issues. I am curious to know why the merger proposal with Queen's University became the only show in town. In December 2007, Stranmillis University College told the Department that:

“it was difficult to see Stranmillis's unique identity being sustained”

— in what Stranmillis University College referred to as a “takeover” by Queen’s University. Yet, within days, the University of Ulster advised the Committee that their view was that:

“it seemed that at Christmas time things changed direction.”

How was it that, when Stranmillis University College looked at various options and told the Department that the Queen’s University proposal was a “takeover”, within four months it was the only show in town, and that the proposal from the University of Ulster had suddenly disappeared into the ether?

There are other curious points about this particular process and how the Department conducted itself, because the Department, Minister and officials have told us that they have an open mind about the proposed merger. If that is so, why did the Department advise Stranmillis University College and Queen’s University on 24 April 2008 about how they should conduct their media campaign in light of the proposals? If the Department was at arm’s length from what was happening, why did an official tell Queen’s University and Stranmillis University College that:

“through future media interviews, it should be made clear that... the proposed merger had... the unanimous support of the Governing Body.”

Equally curious, in my view, is that, given what Stranmillis University College refer to as a “serious and increasing deficit” in their funding, why was it that the first time that some members of the board had heard about the funding formula and deficit issue was on the morning that the decision to merge with Queen’s University was taken? More curious is why the Department told the board of governors on the morning of the decision that they would “have to live with it” when it came to the funding formula?

Questions have to be asked about how arm’s length, independent and open-minded the Department has been in the proposal, given that evidence. It may well be that the merger between Queen’s University and Stranmillis University College is the right option — I do not know. However, I do know that the way the proposal emerged and, as some people have said to me, the way it has been engineered, is not how issues of such importance should be handled. It raises essential questions about who has command and control of education and teacher-training policy in the North.

It may be that Queen’s University is too big and Stranmillis University College too anxious to turn down the merger proposal. What must not happen is that those institutions in the North that have served the society so well should be put in jeopardy and their viability questioned. That also extends to St Mary’s University College on the Falls Road, which, in its submission to the Committee, gave the most rigorous and exhaustive proposals about the future of teacher

training, outlined a sustainable future for the college for teacher training, and outlined how that college can continue to develop its authority, good standing and appeal to all students in the future.

11.45 am

Ms Lo: In common with other Members, I thank the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, the Committee staff, and all those who contributed to the report. I concur, too, with Dr Coulter: it is a very good Committee with which to work, under the good leadership of Sue Ramsey.

I would like to speak about the oversupply of teachers. A key fact to emerge from the Committee’s inquiry is that teaching is an extremely popular choice of profession in Northern Ireland. It has also been shown that the quality of teacher education in Northern Ireland is very high, the result being that all teacher-training courses here are oversubscribed. The reality is that those who cannot get a place on a course here will, generally, seek an equivalent course in Great Britain, and return here once their training is completed. Those people are known as “GB returners”, and they contribute significantly to the reported oversupply of teachers here.

Another significant factor in the reported oversupply of teachers here is that there is a cultural tendency among graduates to go into the professions. That can be traced to a disproportionately low number of opportunities in the private sector here at graduate level. Relatively well-paid jobs in teaching are attractive to graduates, and the profession is seen as fairly secure and comes with a pension. Obviously, school holidays are compatible with family life, and that, too, is seen as a bonus. A shift in our economy away from dependence on the public sector, and greater opportunities in the private sector, are likely to bring a corresponding fall in applications for teacher-training places. That issue needs to be examined.

There is no suggestion on the part of the Committee that high demand for teacher training should mean that there should be no ceiling on the number of teacher-training places that are available. However, the Committee holds to the view that without an overall strategy for teacher education, simply reducing the number of teacher-training places without assessing the impact of that on the teacher education providers — particularly the university colleges — is, potentially, irresponsible.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Some level of oversupply of teachers and teacher-training places can give flexibility of capacity and allow greater competition for jobs, which can lead to higher standards. It could also allow for the reduction of the pupil/teacher ratio in classrooms, and provide capacity that might facilitate additional teachers giving help in small groups to those pupils who need it. So

often we have heard teachers say that classes are too big, that there are far too many pupils to look after in one group, and that too many students leave school with low levels of attainment. Is there no creative and targeted way in which our additional teachers can be used to drive up standards?

The Committee is not seeking to ignore the issue of a reported oversupply of teachers. However, members would like to see that issue resolved as part of an agreed overarching teacher education strategy, and not on the current basis, which is causing concern for the viability of some teacher education providers. The Committee's report is designed to stimulate debate on the issues surrounding teacher education.

It is not a stand-alone document that makes final conclusions. Let us have the debate and reach consensus on the way forward, but let that necessary debate not take place against the backdrop of some teacher-education providers fearing for their future.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for tabling the motion, and I acknowledge the work that has been undertaken in producing the report.

I wish to focus on the new funding model and the fact that St Mary's and Stranmillis are unsure of their future. The Department for Employment and Learning has initiated a new funding formula because student enrolment numbers are falling at both colleges. That means that income from student fees also falls, which leads to the Department's element of the grant rising to compensate. Thus, the Department pays more, yet fewer students are being educated.

The colleges knew that the new funding model had been discussed over a period of years, but they were not aware of the precise time for the Minister's announcement on the matter. The colleges were waiting for teacher education to be agreed and for the funding change to be developed around that. Stakeholders were aware that departmental officials would consider moving from the historical funding model for Stranmillis and St Mary's to one that was closely based on the Higher Education Funding Council for England model.

As we are aware, the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have yet to publish their review, so the new funding mechanism has been presented to colleges in isolation, without the expected offset of additional funded work. The colleges, therefore, have been confronted with a potentially uncertain future and have been asked to seek other options. It would have been more beneficial if that had been agreed as part of an overall strategy to take teacher education forward, which would have avoided the uncertainty that is presented by gradual changes.

In their evidence to the Committee for Employment and Learning in April 2008, St Mary's and Stranmillis

both relayed uncertainties about the formula. St Mary's thought that its financial viability and contribution to teacher education would be seriously threatened by the new formula. Stranmillis said that the constraints imposed by the new formula would make it difficult for any small college to propose ideas to raise money.

St Mary's accepts the logic of the funding mechanism that is linked to the numbers, but it suggests the introduction of a fixed-cost element to the mechanism. It suggests that it be allocated a fixed premium that is not dependent on numbers. Stranmillis wants funding for the reward and development of staff to be ring-fenced, and it would prefer the funding to offset employers' contributions to teachers' pensions to be retained as a separate funding stream.

It has been suggested that the Minister should discuss issues around the new funding formula with the colleges' management with a view to providing clarification on whether incorporating changes to the mechanism might allow Stranmillis to consider that it can explore other realistic options for its future in addition to the proposed merger with Queen's.

The conversion arrangements that were introduced by the Minister, which provided £50,000 of additional funding, have been welcomed by both colleges. It will give them time to consider their options. St Mary's was also appreciative of the extra £30,000 that it received for the consideration of the strategic options for its future.

Overall, the fundamental priority is to ensure that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning work together on the review to ensure that teacher education continues to be of the highest quality, and, in doing so, ensure that they protect public funds.

Given the fact that the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning jointly commissioned a review of teacher education in 2003, I urge the Minister and the Executive to consider all of the recommendations in the report that has been discussed today.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate and the report that the Committee for Employment and Learning has produced.

First, it is useful to ask how the debate arose. When the Committee was first made aware of the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University and the imposition of funding formulas on St Mary's University College, there was concern among all of the political parties. The Minister came to the Committee and said that he wanted to work with it, but there seemed to be a perception that he would impose funding models.

Some Members have mentioned ethos in St Mary's and Stranmillis, and the Minister has said that he does

not see any ethos-free zones in education here for the foreseeable future. The issue is not all about the merger. The report offers realistic recommendations to the Minister to try to deal with the issue.

There have been several reports on education here and about newly-qualified teachers trying to get jobs. We know, and the Minister will say, that the oversupply of teachers is a problem, because of the number of places available in St Mary's and Stranmillis colleges. The figures for 2007 bring that home — of the approximately 800 students who graduated, 38 secured places in the Catholic maintained sector. Eighteen secured full-time posts and 20 were employed to cover maternity leave. Therefore, we face a problem in how to develop teacher education.

Reports on the issue include one from the Comptroller and Auditor General; the Taylor Report, which was commissioned by Stranmillis; and the Osler Report. In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning has compiled a report that we have not seen. Today's recommendations, therefore, should spur the Minister into looking at the issue and at how to address the problem.

Stranmillis University College has made its position clear as regards the financial difficulties it faces for its estate due to the decline in numbers. The Taylor Report recommended a merger. However, all of us are concerned about the way in which that announcement was handled by the chair of the board of governors. The Committee was not fully informed, and neither Minister seemed to have a handle on the situation. Hence, there is concern about Stranmillis and the merger.

At the same time, we must consider whether the future of Stranmillis University College lies in a merger with Queen's University. Between them, Stranmillis and St Mary's provide an excellent supply of teachers to schools in both the state and Catholic maintained sectors. St Mary's place in west Belfast, where it has been for almost 100 years, must also be safeguarded. Teaching staff there are concerned about what is being advocated and imposed on St Mary's in this new model by departmental officials and by the Minister for Employment and Learning.

The Committee report refers to early and continuing professional development and induction at St Mary's. For example, the Irish-medium sector is growing, and St Mary's supplies teachers to that sector. Therefore, we appeal to the Minister to take the report's recommendations on board. I believe that they are based on a realistic assessment of the current situation. We know that there are issues about student-teacher numbers, the places available for newly-qualified teachers, and the returning to work of retired teachers. However, those issues were not within the remit of this report, which attempted to show — without the use of

alarmist language on the merger and St Mary's — how progress can be made on the development and implementation of a realistic strategy.

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

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle

Mr Irwin: Teacher performance has been in the spotlight in recent days, with the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate, Stanley Goudie, calling for improvements and arguing that standards of achievement remain too low in Northern Ireland.

It is against that backdrop, and with that focus in mind, that the Committee presents its report and calls on the Minister to endorse and implement the recommendations urgently. The Committee listened intently to the views of the training colleges on the proposed new funding formula.

The Committee believes that the changes involved in the proposed merger require an inquiry to take account of the views of all stakeholders and to establish a basis on which to move forward. That is the only way to ensure that a sensible debate takes place and that some consensus is achieved.

The lack of a longer-term strategy to manage changes in teacher education was of major concern to the Committee. Problems of oversupply and the need for value-for-money solutions were recognised by the Committee, which shared the concern that the absence of the teacher-education report — commissioned by the Department of Education and DEL — is leaving teacher-education providers in a vacuum.

The delay in its publication has, in the Committee's view, hampered institutions' forward planning to enhance and improve their teacher-education courses.

12.00 noon

The Committee sought to provide a platform for stakeholders to present their concerns and views so as to allow the Committee to present meaningful and structured recommendations to both Departments' Ministers.

Committee members want proven local capacity and capability in teacher education to be protected in a context of development of a wider teacher-education strategy that combines both common sense and value for money. The Committee does not believe that that capacity should be reduced in the short term, only to be required again at a later date. The Committee wants an agreed long-term strategy for teacher education and hopes that the debate that the report has generated will be the first step.

The Committee believes that changes in teacher education must be considered carefully and must flow from consensus. A synergy must be found between the

need for a supply of professionally equipped teachers and the need to deal with the scale and cost of future teacher provision. That is the Assembly's duty to the taxpayer. Intelligent, flexible solutions are required. I support the motion.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh thuairisc an Choiste. Ba mhaith liom fosta an Coiste a mholadh as an obair atá déanta aige. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas fosta le Cathaoirleach agus le Leas-Chathaoirleach an Choiste.

I welcome the report and commend the endeavours of the Committee Chairperson, the legendary and universally acclaimed Sue Ramsey, the Deputy Chairperson and other Committee members. I agree largely with other Members' comments about Stranmillis University College; however, my remarks will focus on St Mary's University College. The college, a Cheann Comhairle, has been at the heart of west Belfast for over 100 years. In recent years, its relationship with the community has deepened.

The college has shown remarkable ability to adapt to changing circumstances. It has introduced non-teacher-training courses through its liberal arts degree. As a result, it has gained the distinction of becoming the university with the second-highest level of participation from students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in universities throughout the Six Counties and Britain.

That was achieved despite irresponsible decisions by some Government officials, who, in recent years, sought to cut teacher-training places. In addition, senior DEL officials have tended, inexplicably, to hark back to a 1980 report that called for the amalgamation of all teacher-training provision.

The Committee's work has helped to deal with that incoherency by providing a more rational picture to facilitate informed decision-making. However, an agreed framework is required. Objectives and direction must be provided. The fact is that, 10 years ago, the Audit Office recommended that there should be academic diversification at colleges that provide teacher training. In 2008, the Minister agreed that the allocation of sufficient diversified places was essential to secure the viability of St Mary's University College. I welcome that; it is consistent with good practice elsewhere. For the record, I commend the Minister for that decision.

The numbers that are allocated to St Mary's University College for enrolment on the BA Liberal Arts degree and teacher-training degrees will determine its viability for considerable time to come — all the more so now that the Minister has introduced a new funding model, which is directly responsive to student numbers. Therefore, before student numbers are finalised for the incoming year, I urge the Minister to meet stakeholders in order to ensure that the college's viability is secure.

The time has come to provide long-term certainty for people who are employed, are enrolled or seek to enrol at St Mary's University College in the time ahead.

I am sure that the Minister agrees, a Cheann Comhairle, that provision of third-level education in Belfast and west Belfast should be cherished and cultivated and that the record of excellence at St Mary's has been well proven.

The principal of St Mary's has told me that applications to the college have risen dramatically. For September 2009, there was a 42% increase in applications to the diversified BA Liberal Arts degree and an increase of almost 30% in applications to the Bachelor of Education degree. Those figures are a potent reminder of the accessibility and good standing of that institution. The Minister, when he had a different remit, helped to bring about the West Belfast and Shankill Task Force report that highlighted the valuable role that St Mary's plays in aiding local regeneration.

I commend the Committee's report. It will allow the Minister to consolidate and enhance provision for St Mary's in the open way in which he has approached the issue thus far. I hope that that approach will be grasped by all in the time ahead. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The key points of the debate have already been made. However, I, too, compliment my fellow Committee members, the Chairperson, the Deputy Chairperson, the Committee Clerk and everyone who was involved in producing the report. I will concentrate on a couple of points, and I declare an interest as having been formerly involved with both St Mary's and Stranmillis colleges.

The first of the report's 'Key Conclusions and Recommendations' states:

"The Committee strongly recommends that the Education and Employment and Learning Ministers bring forward their review of teacher education to the Assembly".

Their delay in doing that was mentioned several times at Committee meetings, and it is vital that the review be brought forward.

The second recommendation states:

"The Committee urges the Education and Employment and Learning Ministers to ensure that a long-term view is taken of teacher education provision in terms of flexible capacity and that value for money is pursued in tandem with quality of provision."

I highlight the reference to "quality of provision". Stranmillis and St Mary's colleges have history and tradition, and the quality of their education provision over many years cannot be challenged. How that quality of provision can be continued is central to the debate.

When I hear discussion of 'Every School a Good School', what springs to my mind is every teacher a good teacher; I made that point at some of the Committee's

evidence sessions. Whatever the future arrangements for teacher training, every child deserves every teacher to be a good teacher. We would then have: every school a good school; every teacher a good teacher; and every child willing to learn. My experience is that children are willing to learn, but that difficulties sometimes arise with classroom experience.

In the Committee's discussions and evidence sessions, much was made of mergers. Whatever the future holds, there must be quality of provision for young people who want to be teachers; they deserve a rewarding teacher-education system.

Mr K Robinson: Lest a false impression arise from the debate, does the Member accept that people who are training to become teachers in Northern Ireland — in St Mary's, Stranmillis or any other location — require much superior qualifications than those that are required in other parts of the British Isles?

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

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will not waffle; I am not in a position to agree or disagree on that point. I am aware of the learned gentleman's background, and, therefore, I presume that he is correct and accept his point.

The situation at St Mary's has been well articulated, and the report states:

"St Mary's model of an autonomous, specialist teacher education provider, with a distinctive ethos, educational vision and mission should be sustained and enabled to co-exist with other models existing in the university sector".

That point is important.

I want to make a final point about the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) in order to ensure equality in my remarks. That body was concerned that the number of young people from the Protestant sector who wanted to train in a particular educational environment would decrease. It is important to accommodate every ethos, background and educational environment with equality of provision. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I thank those Members who contributed to the debate, and I thank the Committee for its constructive approach to this important issue and for its work towards producing what is a comprehensive report.

My fundamental priority is to ensure that initial teacher education in Northern Ireland continues to be of the highest quality. The calibre of our teaching workforce is well known and makes an immense contribution to our society and economy. I will try to address as many points as possible but, in essence, the Committee report seeks to address two separate but related issues: the future funding position of the university

colleges and the proposed merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University.

Members will be aware that initial teacher education intake numbers are set by the Department of Education. The Minister of Education has informed me that her Department will write soon to provide initial teacher education numbers and to outline the academic intake for next year. That is a normal annual process. Once those numbers have been confirmed, my officials will calculate the funding that the intakes will generate. Funding for university colleges will impact on issues such as the intake numbers for diversified places and any conversion funding for the next academic year.

I note the Committee's recommendation for a graduated level of diversification that could comprise approximately one third of the total numbers. I will examine that interesting proposal carefully. It is important that the Committee has recognised that the colleges' primary business should relate to teacher training. I fully support that notion.

I have always made it clear that in recognition of the current circumstances, I will provide conversion funding for up to two years. I am grateful that the Committee has recognised that funding has been allocated to the colleges this year, the purpose of which is to ensure that neither college suffers a drop in income compared with the 2007-08 academic year. That has been the case in the current year. Until we know the position for 2009-2010, we will rely heavily on the initial teacher education intake numbers that are supplied by the Department of Education, and will not be in a position to determine what level of conversion funding, if any, will apply to the forthcoming academic year.

12.15 pm

I should remind Members why we have had to consider a new funding formula. The result of the old funding formula was that the fewer students were enrolled at a college, the more money was allocated to that college. Perhaps, Mr Speaker, with your vast experience in politics, you would be able to defend that in front of the Public Accounts Committee, but I would struggle to do so. It should be remembered that that is why the issue has arisen. The lower the number of students, the greater the amount of money that went to the college. I am not going to spend time explaining that, but that was the outworking of the formula.

In relation to future activities of the colleges, I note the Committee's comments, particularly in relation to St Mary's, about the possible types of provision that the colleges will deliver. I have written to my Executive colleague the Minister of Education in relation to the spectrum of professional development. Ultimately, delivery in that area will be determined by the new education and skills authority. Similarly, any provision

for Irish-medium teacher education will be determined by the Minister of Education.

I am pleased that officials from both Departments are in the Officials' Box today. We are working very closely on these issues, because that is the only way that it can be done in practice. I have had a lot of briefings for this debate from the Department of Education, and we are taking forward a number of the issues together. St Mary's has commissioned some work, and I hope that that will prove to be of benefit.

The second issue that has been raised by the Committee is the proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University. I recognise the concerns over certain aspects of how the proposed merger was announced, but we have to move on from that. I have now received the draft business case and economic appraisal, and departmental economists are examining the business case to ensure that it complies with all green book standards. When that and other associated internal processes are completed, the business case will be considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel. If that Department grants approval to the business case, I will give it my full consideration.

As the Committee is aware, any merger can only proceed following a series of stages, including public consultation and the consideration of appropriate legislation by the Committee and the Assembly. I note the Committee's concerns over such issues as communication, the future use of the site, the Stranmillis ethos, and the position of the transferor's representatives.

As you may know, Mr Speaker, in regard to the latter matter, which was raised by several Members, in 2005, Stranmillis University College was incorporated by legislation to bring its legal status in line with that of other higher-education institutions. As part of that process, the automatic right for members of the three main Protestant Churches to be represented on the governing body of the college was removed. Although my party opposed that at that time, legal advice to the Department for Employment and Learning was that to retain the Churches' representation would contravene equality legislation.

I understand that the Minister of Education is prepared to meet the transferors' representatives. I had a meeting with them last year. Obviously, the issue is very sensitive, and will have to be taken forward. If and when a proposed piece of legislation comes before the House, Members here will have an opportunity to deal with that issue at all levels.

Time and again, the other issues that arise are things like land use, and so on. I have made it absolutely clear that although the assets are currently in the control of the board of governors, should legislation be required and the college cease to exist, the assets will revert back in whatever direction we determine in the

legislation. There will be no free-for-all. We will have the final say on that. It will be in the legislation, and the House will have its say on that, should the issue arise. There will be no fire sale of land or assets to anyone.

It is an interesting point that, when Stranmillis was established in 1922, the land originally belonged to Queen's, and was transferred by the then Ministry of Finance. Ultimately, it will reside with the Department to determine, and if there is legislation, this House will have the final say on it.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I appreciate the Minister's explanation of some of the steps that have been taken on land speculation. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I have a duty to inform the Minister that the Committee has not had a knee-jerk reaction to some of the speculation, and it is systematically examining the information that is before us.

The Minister will appreciate that when the Committee decided to embark on its inquiry, the issue of the merger with Queen's University came up the day after we talked to representatives from Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. In Committee on 16 April 2008, the chairman of the governing body of Stranmillis University College said that a final decision would not be taken tomorrow. He went on to say that a decision might be taken to enter into negotiations, but that that would be a decision of which the Committee would be informed.

The Committee took what he said at face value but then learned about the merger in the media the next day. It is easy to appreciate the uneasiness among Committee members when all that happened outside our control.

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I understand that, and I have already indicated to the Committee that I was not happy about the way in which the merger was announced. I am simply saying that, over time, I have received several representations from MLAs, by letter or in meetings, expressing concern about the land issue. I am simply saying that we will be able to deal with that in the House, should the need arise. There is an assurance that nothing will happen to that land that does not have our agreement and consent.

Several Members have made thoughtful points in the debate, and I will try to cover as many as I can. Alex Easton commended the research that was done, raised the issue of the disquiet that was caused by the proposed merger with Queen's University, as did other Members, and mentioned the ethos issues. I will brigade a few of my comments on the merger issue. It must be obvious to everyone that the issue has been around for several years. As I understand it, discussions involving the University of Ulster also took place,

although I suspect that the two universities did not approach the issue from exactly the same point.

I do not believe that the University of Ulster proposes to develop a campus in south Belfast. I believe that it was more interested in working with Stranmillis University College on the additional courses and academic qualifications that the university could offer, verify and accredit, because a university college requires a university to accredit its courses. That was the general direction of the university's interest, rather than in establishing a campus in south Belfast. As we discovered yesterday, the University of Ulster has said that it has other plans. We must be a wee bit careful about making assumptions.

That said, I support the view that the governing bodies of the university colleges must have a responsibility to explore all the options. My Department has received only one formal option from the governing body of Stranmillis University College. If it produces another option, or a variation on it, we are obliged to examine it. I can consider only what the governing body of Stranmillis University College puts to me; it is an independent, incorporated body.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter mentioned maintenance issues and estate issues. Several other Members also mentioned the issue of oversupply of teachers. We have put a great deal of capital into the site — many Members will have seen the fantastic new facility that has been built — but huge maintenance issues remain. There is a long maintenance backlog, and there is no disguising the fact that many millions of pounds will be required to deal with that backlog. The University of Ulster has submitted papers in which it outlines the work that will have to be done, but, one way or another, regardless of whether there is a merger, the maintenance issue cannot be ignored.

The issue of teacher numbers has vexed us for a long time. Mr Butler referred to the fact that in 2006-07, only 27% of all teachers were employed in a permanent or significant temporary post.

That is a big issue. I accept the point that Anna Lo and other Members made about not destroying an asset simply because of one year's figures; I would not be party to that. For young people to put so much of their time and effort into a course that lasts four years and not to see a positive outcome is a bad thing. However, we must examine the totality of the matter.

I have said many times in the House that I am not proud of the fact that the review of teacher education is taking so long. The Minister of Education and I have reached the final stages of the review's completion, and we hope that it will be available fairly soon. I cannot be as precise as to say that it will be ready in one month's time, but we are working to conclude it as quickly as we can.

As for Mr Adams's point about St Mary's University College, I acknowledge the fact — as everyone can see — that it is a centre of excellence, as is Stranmillis University College. The courses offered at both are very popular, which is a sign that those institutions are regarded highly. The reason that so many people apply for those courses is due to the size of the private sector here, and that demand means that for each place available, sometimes almost 10 people apply.

I believe that those colleges have very good futures, and my objective is to get them to offer as much teaching-related activity as possible. The Minister of Education and I are holding ongoing discussions. The report contains some very good ideas, and we must and will examine them all. As we move forward, I hope that we will be able to offer the comfort and assurances that are needed. Unfortunately, however, arithmetic cannot be avoided at some stages and we must deal with that.

Mr Newton: I thank the Committee Clerk and his team for the production of an excellent report. The full report runs to more than 600 pages, which indicates the amount of work that was involved. I also commend the Chairperson of the Committee for the authoritative manner in which she presented her remarks on the report. This debate has been conducted in a practical and non-emotive manner. Certain aspects of the report could have led to emotive exchanges. Therefore, I commend everyone for the manner in which this debate has been conducted.

That said, this report cannot be a stand-alone document in addressing the matter of teacher education; rather, it is a contribution to the debate, and both the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education have a responsibility to take the matter forward in tandem.

Throughout the report, the Committee has stressed the need to apply a value-for-money concept to every aspect of the future provision of teacher education. In recommending the report, the Committee does not have a hard and fast view on what constitutes the best teacher education model for the future, but it does have a clear understanding of the importance of delivering value for money in this policy area, as it would in any other area. In deciding future policy, synergy must be found between the need for a professionally equipped teacher supply and the need to address the scale of future provision, because that is the Assembly's duty to the taxpayer.

If I were a potential student teacher, would I be attracted by a Russell Group university teacher-training place? I believe that I would be attracted to such provision.

The Committee, however, does not accept that high demand for initial teacher education in Northern Ireland should justify a disproportionately high number of places

being made available. Future policy must involve a demand-led strategy that is intelligent and that recognises that education does not end after initial training.

However, we cannot afford to keep training teachers for over-supplied areas. We must concentrate our efforts on vacancies that are traditionally hard to fill. Several Members mentioned the statistics on the over-supply of teachers, so I will not go into those.

12.30 pm

I will now turn to the ethos and equality issues, which will be primary to the future debate about teacher education. The Committee heard a lot of evidence about the ethos of Stranmillis. Many of the contributions suggested that the proposed merger with Queen's University might mean that the distinctive ethos of the college would be lost. The Committee also voiced its concerns for the Stranmillis ethos if the proposed merger goes ahead. The Minister for Employment and Learning said that he does not see Northern Ireland becoming an ethos-free zone. The Committee believes that the issue of ethos in teacher education is important and should be discussed, rather than being lost in the general debate about a proposed merger.

The Committee was impressed by the Transferor Representatives' Council's evidence. The TRC indicated that it wants Stranmillis to be a modern training institution, strengthened by the research and practice that Queen's University could bring to it — assuming that the merger proceeds. However, the council also suggested a mechanism that will ensure that its Christian values — and respectful awareness of those values — are renewed and fostered among teachers who are preparing to work in schools that have that unique ethos in which the majority of pupils are from the Protestant community.

That matter leads into equality issues. The TRC expressed concerns about the number of students from a Protestant background who might gain places in any merged institution at Stranmillis. I commend the Queen's University authorities for indicating that access to the Catholic certificate in religious education — which is currently provided by Stranmillis and accredited by the University of Glasgow or St Mary's College at Strawberry Hill — would continue to be available at any new institution.

Should the merger proceed, the TRC suggested that the merged institution is likely to be a centre of excellence and will attract students from both traditions. I believe that a state-of-the-art, high-quality Russell Group university would be attractive to people from all sides of the community who want to be teachers. As the Catholic certificate would still be available, Catholic students would enjoy the benefit of having access to all educational sectors here, but Protestants will continue to be excluded from the Catholic maintained sector while

having to compete with their Catholic counterparts in all other sectors. Protestants would be at a disadvantage in that situation.

The TRC seeks reassurances that a new merged institution would have a Christian ethos. This report recommends that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Education should note the council's concerns about the possible effect on the number of students from the Protestant tradition who would enter the teaching profession, should the merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University go ahead. The report also recommends that the Education Minister should engage with the TRC to explore its concerns surrounding the integrity of the controlled sector. All that the council seeks is a level playing field.

Before I attempt to address the points that were raised by other Members, I will say a few words about the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP). CACDP has no remit to undertake teacher education or the preparation of college lecturers. However, the Chairperson and the Committee agreed to take evidence from it.

CACDP suggested that steps should be taken to provide the development of tutors who wish to gain a formal further education teaching qualification. That would put them on a footing with lecturers and would help to create a pool of qualified tutors who could teach and develop badly needed interpreters. The report recognises and quantifies the need for deaf people to be given the opportunity to compete on an equal footing with all other students.

Although that matter is outside the Committee's remit, its members have expressed support for an appropriate initiative to address the identified education needs of deaf people.

Although Members raised some concerns about the report, their remarks were generally of a supportive nature. Alex Easton expressed concerns about the merger process. He commended the report in its entirety, but to illustrate his disquiet about the proposed merger, he quoted the well-known maxim: act in haste, and repent in leisure. In addition, he raised concerns about Protestant places being secured.

The Rev Robert Coulter, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, maintained that Northern Ireland is oversupplied with teachers and that that is a significant matter. In an intervention, his colleague Ken Robinson brought up the issue of early-retired teachers returning to jobs, which is a matter that was discussed in the Committee. Robert Coulter went on to mention paid teachers, and he echoed concerns about teachers returning to the profession having taken redundancy payments. He indicated that the University of Ulster did not seem particularly interested in a full merger, and questioned whether a full merger between Stranmillis

College and Queen's University was necessary. He suggested that some sub-degree work might be made available in Stranmillis College.

Mr Alex Attwood has played a major role in the Committee, and his legal skills and background have given him some advantage in this area. In the Committee, he has never been quiet about matters relating to St Mary's College in particular. He said that he finds it odd, and unacceptable, that the merger between Stranmillis College and Queen's University was announced in the press before the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education published their report of the review. Like Robert Coulter, Mr Attwood is concerned about why the University of Ulster's proposal was not put forward, and he raised questions about why the Stranmillis College board was not better informed about the new funding formula. Indeed, some board members heard about the formula's implications only on the day the decision was made to merge the college with Queen's University.

Anna Lo also emphasised the fact that there is an oversupply of teachers in our community, and she indicated that any reduction of ITE places must be handled responsibly. All Members would agree with that. Ms Lo insisted that a debate is required and that consensus must be sought on the way forward. David Hilditch, as well as other Members, made several important points about the new funding formula, and he indicated that St Mary's College has suggested several ways around the funding mechanism.

Paul Butler expressed his support for the content of the report and, again, commented on the funding model and the proposed merger. He emphasised that the Minister for Employment and Learning must consider the report's recommendations, and then produce a developed strategy in conjunction with the Minister of Education. In addition, he outlined concerns about Stranmillis College's merger with Queen's University, particularly with respect to staff jobs. Like David Hilditch, Mr Butler highlighted St Mary's ideas about how early professional development, continuing professional development and Irish-medium work could support and maintain St Mary's.

My colleague William Irwin spoke about the oversupply of teachers. He also said that the absence of a review by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning meant that no strategy was in place and that any change must be well considered — as Alex Easton said — and based on consensus.

Mr Gerry Adams, the MP for East Belfast —

Mr Easton: West Belfast.

Mr Newton: My apologies to that party's leader; I will not say any more.

Mr Gerry Adams, the MP for West Belfast, talked about the courses provided by St Mary's University College and its significant appeal for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. He said that St Mary's University College will depend heavily on the BA Liberal Arts degree for viability in the future. He also said that St Mary's plays a vital role in the west Belfast community.

Claire McGill finished her speech without mentioning Strabane; that is most unusual for her. Members wait for her to mention Strabane at every Committee meeting. She urged the Department of Education and DEL to publish their review and stressed that there was a need for a long-term review of teacher education; she is not interested in short-term fixes. Mrs McGill also emphasised the high quality of service that is provided by St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

Ken Robinson, who is not in the Chamber, commended the high quality of teacher training in Northern Ireland and endorsed the report. He also placed emphasis on the Transferor Representatives' Council's equality issue.

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

Mr Newton: I am sorry that I did not have enough time to comment on the Minister's remarks, but, in general, he commended the report.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the report of the Committee for Employment and Learning on its Review of Teacher Education; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to implement, as a matter of urgency, the recommendations contained therein.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

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

2.00 pm

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Civic Forum

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

A valid petition of concern was presented on Monday 2 February in relation to the motion. The effect of the petition is that the vote on the motion will be held on a cross-community basis.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the ongoing review of the Civic Forum; notes that it has not met since 2002; notes the absence of any value from the Civic Forum to date; notes the lack of a widespread public concern about the absence of the Civic Forum; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister not to establish a new Civic Forum, but instead to investigate modern ways to interact with the public, including online interactive means of helping to shape public policy.

The motion says as much as is needed to say at any time and in any place about the Northern Ireland Civic Forum. The forum was born of a belief that it would be the great and the good who would bring about the final settlement in Northern Ireland. Therefore, places on the Civic Forum were found for those who shunned politics and who left it to others to get their hands dirty in political debate and risk their lives giving political representation.

It was hoped that the forum would ride to the rescue of the Belfast Agreement, and so it was stacked with pro-agreement nodding dogs. The fact that a growing majority of unionists rejected that failed agreement was denied at every turn. Those are the core elements of the Civic Forum's DNA, but there are other aspects to consider.

As a result of the facts that I have laid out already, it was necessary that certain inclusions and exclusions be applied. We have heard much in recent days from both the UUP and the SDLP about what they have called a power grab. That is very strange. Does anyone remember a deafening outcry from the UUP or the SDLP when the then First and deputy First Ministers were given the right to appoint 10% of the forum? I, for one, certainly do not.

That provision allowed David Trimble and Seamus Mallon to have their own placemen sitting on the Civic Forum. It also meant that, although there were to be 18 members from the voluntary and community sector and four members representing the culture sector, there would be no official place for the largest community and cultural organisation in the Province, namely the Orange Order. Such an appointment could not be tolerated because it was well known that the Orange Order was uneasy about the Belfast Agreement.

So much, therefore, for the core of the Civic Forum's being and its intended role. What about its operation? On the first day — that of its launch — it was decided, with no discussion with the members of the forum, to provide simultaneous electronic translation from Irish into English. That was a move beyond what took place in the Assembly or even in Dáil Éireann. That decision was deemed necessary in order to heap pressure onto the rest of us who still, quite rightly, view the Irish language as hopelessly politicised because of the antics of people such as the members of Sinn Féin.

Members should consider also the forum's work, findings and recommendations. Not a single original recommendation came from the Civic Forum and was taken up by the Executive. The forum proved to be an utter waste of time, effort, resources and public finances, amounting to £500,000 a year, when it was active. The Assembly need not take my word for it — Members need only consider the accelerated falling-away in attendance from the forum, to such an extent that, when the final suspension to date was ordered, less than a third of its members were present.

In 'The Irish News' on 4 April 2007, no less a person than Lord Kilcooney stated that the Civic Forum was:

"a luxury the people of Northern Ireland cannot afford".

That was a belated but welcome conversion. I trust that we will hear that comment reiterated by his colleagues in the House today.

The Civic Forum was not necessary when it was created; it was not heeded when it spoke; it was not valued enough by its members for them to attend; it was not noticed when it fell; it is not missed in its absence. It encumbered the ground for long enough during its brief, pitiful life. It was put out of its misery in suspension, and it should never see the light of day again.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. The concept of the Civic Forum was developed during the lengthy discussions that led to, and were part of, the negotiations on the Good Friday Agreement. It was accepted that many imaginative and innovative steps were required to address the many decades of political failure, particularly the many long years of unionist one-party rule. Recognition was required that during that period

there had been many abuses and denials of human rights and of the rights of the other. There was anxiety to ensure that protections were built into the political process and that society could work through the problems, some of which had a long legacy.

During those negotiations, the establishment of a Civic Forum was agreed, and the Good Friday Agreement made provision for it, not only as a means of ensuring more transparency in a political process that is mysterious to many, but of creating a degree of buy-in and participation in that process. It should be accepted that the Civic Forum was problematic and challenging to some political parties, but it provided an important function; its processes were an exemplar of how to deal with issues in a transparent way. Even the most difficult and sensitive issues could be rehearsed, debated, researched, and reported on in the forum, in a way that complemented and supported the formal political process. It was a good idea then, and it is a good idea today.

The political process is now some years old; although now re-established, the process has often stuttered. However, that process, and the establishment of the Assembly as a means by which local political control could be exerted over people's lives was not a bad idea. Extremely difficult issues had to be resolved, and the concept of mandatory power sharing, which is a feature of the Assembly, reflects the considerable tensions that remain to be resolved through the agreement of the parties.

The parties are moving in the right direction, and the Executive are now functional. The Executive are sometimes described as a mandatory four-party coalition. However, that is something of a misnomer or misrepresentation; there is nothing mandatory about the number of parties, and nowhere is that number specified. It is simply in the gift of the electorate to determine which parties receive sufficient mandates to entitle them, under the rules, to be part of the Executive.

Mr A Maginness: The coalition is not mandatory in the sense that it has been misrepresented by some people. Parties do not have to join the coalition; in that sense it is voluntary as much as it is mandatory.

Mr McLaughlin: The Member made my point for me, and I welcome that comment from Alban Maginness. Any party can decide that it does not want to be part of the coalition now or in the future. However, it confers on those parties with sufficient mandates a responsibility to form the Executive and to act subsequently according to the ministerial code and legislation that governs this place.

To return to the topic of the debate, the idea of the Civic Forum is not to challenge the authority of this place. In many ways, it was designed to facilitate a greater understanding of the processes, and a greater

rehearsal, examination and analysis of the challenging issues that could cause conflict or division among parties, or create problems for the overall process. There have been enough years of failure and political vacuum.

If the Civic Forum was a victim, it was due to the difficulties that were at the heart of the political process. During the first mandate, as it has become known, the Executive was more often dysfunctional than functional, and the Assembly was more often in suspension than in full operation. In spite of that, in its brief period of activity, the Civic Forum went on with its work and demonstrated its value to us all.

I ask the party opposite to consider the value of allowing society to be part of this process in the manner described by the existence of the Civic Forum. It will address the issues that are relevant to the work that we are doing here but in the context of the overriding authority of the Assembly to make decisions and to set and implement policy. There is nothing to fear from opening up the process, and there is nothing to fear from transparency.

Mr McFarland: In the final hours of the final day of agreeing the Belfast Agreement back in 1998, the Women's Coalition managed to get a sop — the Civic Forum. It was full of worthy people from civic society, NGOs, etc. Unfortunately, when it met it produced little, its attendance dwindled month by month, and, in the end, many members of the forum met —

Mr A Maginness: I am really taken aback by the Member's criticism. I thought that he would be more forthcoming on the matter. The Civic Forum had a short time in which to act in a deliberative manner and its demise was the result of political circumstances that were beyond its control. However, at any rate, is there not value in the voluntary and community sector having some connectivity with the political process? That, in effect, is what the Civic Forum is all about.

Mr McFarland: The Member should have waited for the rest of my illustrious speech.

The forum produced little, attendance dwindled, and those on the forum would admit that it was of little use. The Ulster Unionist Party supports its being laid to rest with dignity.

In 2006, the Preparation for Government Committee produced a report in which all parties in the House agreed that the ways in which civic society engaged with the Assembly should be reviewed. I was heartened by the comments of the now First Minister, Peter Robinson, who, when asked what should be done about the Civic Forum, said, clearly, that it should be abolished.

My party is behind engagement with civic society. We need a system for dealing with civic society, but how should we go about that? We are against a European-style partnership model or another non-elected quasi-

parliamentary organisation. However, we have a system that is well tried: anyone wishing to engage with the Assembly — NGOs or whoever — can directly link with our Assembly Committees by building up relationships with Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons. If Committees have any sense, they will build up relationships that allow NGOs, or those parts of civic society, to talk to them when they have problems. That is the way in which we should engage with civic society, and it is the established system in this place.

The Ulster Unionist Party agrees with the motion. However, I am confused because at St Andrews, the party to my left — the Democratic Unionist Party, which claims to be against the Civic Forum — agreed to an all-Ireland version. Perhaps that party will explain today why it is so against the Civic Forum, why —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McFarland: — at St Andrews, it agreed to the all-Ireland version of that.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McFarland: My view is that —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McFarland: — the Civic Forum should be laid to rest in peace —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. Mr Hamilton has asked the Member to give way, and he has decided not to give way. Mr McFarland has the Floor.

Mr McFarland: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I did not hear the Member. I will give way if he wishes to speak. *[Laughter.]*

2.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: Obviously, I was not bellowing loudly enough. The Member mentioned the St Andrews Agreement, which he knows full well is an agreement between two Governments and not an agreement between political parties. He referred to the all-Ireland civic body, but is he aware that its genesis was in the Belfast Agreement? Perhaps that was another issue that he and his party colleagues slept through discussions on — much like the Civic Forum, which he referred to as a last-minute sop that his party did not see coming down the line.

Mr Cobain: There is no Belfast Agreement — that was destroyed.

Mr McFarland: Not only that, but we were assured that the matter was all tied up, and that never again would anything emerge from here that unionists did not like — the St Andrews Agreement promised that. *[Interruption.]* We await the appearance of the all-Ireland civic forum. UUP members believe that the Civic Forum should be laid to rest. We strongly believe

that civic society must engage with our Government and the Assembly, and we firmly believe that that should be done through the Assembly Committees. That is the right place to deal with people who wish to give us their views.

Mrs D Kelly: Another day in the life of this dysfunctional Assembly and Executive — while the global economy is in meltdown and Governments everywhere are garnering their resources and best brains to cope with the crisis, legislators in this Assembly are reduced to taking part in little more than sixth-form debates. While the First Minister and deputy First Minister procrastinate on strategic decisions regarding the economy, investment, education, infrastructure and housing, the DUP and Sinn Féin send their Back-Benchers to table smokescreen, sham-fight motions that seek to draw the public's and the media's attention away from the fact that there is a stark absence of legislation and vision from the two main parties in Government.

Before Christmas, when Sinn Féin agreed to attend Executive meetings again, the public — you and I — were promised that Ministers would burn the midnight oil —

Mr McElduff: On a point of order.

Mrs D Kelly: Point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will call the point of order, Mrs Kelly, thank you.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want the Deputy Speaker to make a ruling on the relevance of Mrs Kelly's remarks to the debate on the Civic Forum.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Kelly, please continue with your speech.

Mrs D Kelly: It is quite clear that the truth hurts. The public were promised that Ministers would burn the midnight oil in an attempt to lead Northern Ireland plc out of the economic crisis. However, seven weeks on, we are back to our debates while people are losing their jobs and homes on a daily basis, the road networks continue to disintegrate and farmers' wages continue to decline.

Mr Ross: Is the Member seriously saying that, in a time of economic crisis, Government should be ploughing more money into a Civic Forum that achieved nothing for the people of Northern Ireland?

Mrs D Kelly: If Members had any experience of the Civic Forum, they would know that when the forum had an opportunity to meet, it produced very good papers on social inclusion. The publication of that paper has been delayed for the past 18 months by the party opposite. Perhaps the Civic Forum might get some decisions made around here — perhaps we might

see some papers and ideas rather than just listen to sixth-form debates. *[Interruption.]*

It will come as no surprise to Members that the SDLP is opposed to the motion. After all, it is another cynical move by the DUP, in a year of elections to the European Parliament, to satisfy the demands of the Mr and Mrs Noes who continue to exist within the party — with one eye, of course, on its arch-critic Jim Allister.

The motion is nothing more than further evidence that the DUP wishes to grab power. Not content to grab power from Ministers who are not under the control of Peter Robinson and the deputy First Minister, they now wish to grab power from the community. It is yet another attempt by the DUP to chip away, bit by bit, at the Good Friday Agreement as it attempts to delude itself, and its voters, that it has not signed up to all the institutions. Although others might be content to have their eye wiped, the SDLP will stand up to the DUP and tell it like it is.

In previous mandates, the Civic Forum was not given a chance due to the collective failures of Sinn Féin and the DUP. It produced an excellent paper on social inclusion and, if properly reconstituted, it has much to offer to help to increase civic participation in our democratic structures on issues such as the review of public administration, a shared future and the economic downturn.

The forum also has a responsibility to work with our counterparts in the South of Ireland to form an all-Ireland consultative forum to challenge the Governments on their policies for addressing the economic downturn and to give a voice to the people.

While DUP Back-Benchers deflect attention from the important issues, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are holding inter-sectoral meetings to discuss with civic society how to cope with the economic downturn. I fear that they are speaking out of the corners of their mouths. I rest my case.

Ms Lo: We oppose the motion, but understand the concerns that it raises.

Mr McCarthy: No, we do not. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party recognises that the Civic Forum did not perform as expected; however, we prefer to reform, rather than abandon, it. It is important to note that the Civic Forum is a requirement in the Belfast Agreement to engage wider civic society. The engagement of those in wider society who have a diverse range of expertise and experience should be of value to the governance of Northern Ireland and offer a process to enrich — not diminish — traditional representative democracy.

The Civic Forum cannot easily be judged on its past effectiveness because, to a large degree, it was a hostage to the political process. Each suspension of the

Assembly put the forum into abeyance, which created long periods of inactivity and drift. Since restoration, there has been considerable uncertainty about the forum's future.

If the Civic Forum is to continue, its role and remit must be more clearly identified. The well-established structures of the Assembly Committees and the all-party Assembly groups for liaison between Members and civic society on various issues mean that clarifying a role for the Civic Forum is more important than ever. Clarity is not just important to justify the expenditure associated with the forum; it is also important to justify to members of the forum the time commitment expected of them.

To avoid duplicating the functions of other bodies, the Civic Forum should not be a lobbying body, nor should it act as a consultative channel. However, it should be given a role to address, in a less adversarial setting, some of the thornier issues that society faces. Although there are good examples of where such a policy has been effective, there are others where it has not, such as the Bill of Rights Forum.

As Departments often work in silos, the Civic Forum can provide a more joined-up and cross-cutting approach to address complex social issues, such as poverty, community relations or environmental sustainability. The make-up of the forum should be as broad as possible, which could be achieved if it is composed of representatives from different sectors and has seats that are filled through an open-application process.

The Alliance Party is concerned that any appearance of political patronage, particularly associated with individuals nominated by the Office of the First and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), could have a negative impact on the dynamics of the forum and could undermine public confidence in the independence of the individuals concerned and in the forum as a whole.

In conclusion, the Alliance Party would support an effective Civic Forum, working in partnership with the Assembly and providing advice to Government on socio-economic and cultural matters —

Mr Simpson: The Member takes a great interest in voluntary organisations, and, as a member of the Committee for Social Development, she will be aware of the Committee's effectiveness when it takes evidence from different organisations.

Mr McFarland made a very positive suggestion, which was that members of civic society could address relevant Committees here. Surely that would be better value for money?

Ms Lo: It works quite differently with the Committee on which the Member sits, in that people are called in to give evidence on certain issues. However, this is a much wider approach, bringing all the groups together and

contributing to debates on issues such as the Programme for Government, for example, or policy issues —

Mr McFarland: Surely there is nothing to stop those groups from coming together every day or every week — in fact, I think that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) already does so — to discuss whatever they want and then produce a common view to an Assembly Committee if that is what they want to do. It seems silly to have a separate non-elected Parliament costing large amounts of money to do something that should happen anyway.

Ms Lo: We are not talking about large amounts of money. Furthermore, one must also think about the voluntary sector, as it is under-resourced; therefore, it would not be feasible to call NICVA to have meetings every day of the week.

We would support an effective Civic Forum, working in partnership with the Assembly and providing advice to Government on socio-economic and cultural issues. However, we agree that a new approach is needed to ensure that such a reform provides value for money.

Mr I McCrea: I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion. The Civic Forum was established in 2000 under section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and it adopted the following mission statement:

“The Civic Forum will exercise effective community leadership and directly influence the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive, healthy and plural society.”

However, during its two years of operation, it failed to exercise community leadership, and it failed to influence directly the building of a peaceful, prosperous, just, cohesive and plural society. In fact, if we are to believe that the intentions of the mission statement were to exercise community leadership, surely that would have been manifested in its membership.

The Civic Forum failed mainly because it was not truly representative of Northern Ireland society; its make-up was anti-unionist, anti-orange and anti-evangelical. The Civic Forum was regarded by many people as anti-unionist, as its membership was designed to ensure that the majority of unionist opinion, which was opposed to the Belfast Agreement, was in the minority on the forum. Proof of that was seen in repeated efforts to suppress the opinion of that majority.

The Civic Forum is without doubt anti-orange, as the Orange Order, which represents the largest cultural movement in the Protestant community — representing thousands of members and supporters — was denied a place on the forum. It is also particularly sickening for people who regard Orangeism as a culture and as an identity that the spokesman for the Bogside Residents' Group was given a place on the forum.

Furthermore, the make-up of the forum was anti-evangelical. Before the forum members were appointed,

the appointment process was overseen by several consortiums, as they were called at the time.

2.30 pm

They were tasked with looking at a specific stream of appointments; for example, voluntary or community appointments. One of those consortia was appointed to oversee the Church representatives. At its first sitting, Dr David Stevens of the Irish School of Ecumenics attended as the specially invited guest and virtual spiritual advisor of the civil servant who headed up the consortium. That was arranged without any discussion with the invited groups and no regard for the anti-evangelical stance of the Irish School of Ecumenics. Dr Stevens was removed only after a written protest by the Caleb Foundation.

Undoubtedly, the Civic Forum was unelected and unnecessary. It was also unrepresentative of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. Thousands of people from the unionist, Orange and evangelical communities felt that their voice was not heard within the Civic Forum. For that reason, the forum will never merit any respect or trust from those of that background.

The Civic Forum had no proper checks and balances on the chairperson, who was appointed by the First and deputy First Minister and, as such, was not accountable to the body. It was not only unelected, unnecessary and unrepresentative — it was also very expensive. That talking shop cost the ratepayers of Northern Ireland in excess of £750,000 in its two years of operation.

We should learn from the failures of the Civic Forum, and I call on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to refuse to establish a new one. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The concept of the Civic Forum is positive and inherently good. Politics, it is said, is much too important to be left to politicians alone.

The Civic Forum was set up through strand one of the Good Friday Agreement to protect and ensure better governance. It is a part of the overall political architecture, along with the Assembly, the North/South Ministerial Council and the east-west arrangements. It is meant to be a truly consultative mechanism on social, economic and cultural affairs.

The forum did not get a chance to succeed, as a result of political instability and political underdevelopment during the period when it was expected to deliver. My colleague Mitchell McLaughlin made the point that, when the Executive and Assembly failed, nothing happened in the Civic Forum either, and it lacked dynamism or momentum. The forum was unable to operate properly during times of suspension, although it met in plenary format 12 times during that period.

I acknowledge that it is right and proper that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have arranged

for a formal review of the mechanisms whereby civic society may promote its views.

The last part of the DUP motion urges the First Minister and deputy First Minister to:

“investigate modern ways to interact with the public, including online interactive means of helping to shape public policy.”

I welcome the fact that the motion acknowledges the role of civic society in shaping public policy. That is positive.

The review examines all the options, and the last part of the DUP motion is an area worth exploring — namely, models of civic partnership. In view of current changes in the social and economic environment, it is important to hear — not in an ad hoc or hit-and-miss fashion, but in a structured way — from, for example, the construction industry. In a new civic forum, I would like to hear from the construction industry, which is so important to this society and economy, in a structured manner. I want to hear from the community and voluntary sectors.

Equally, I would expect leaders of the voluntary and community sector to report back to organisations on, perhaps, a quarterly basis: organisations such as those in the Omagh district like Omagh Forum for Rural Associations, an umbrella group for rural community groups; FOCUS (Forum in Omagh for Community Understanding and Support), an umbrella group for town-based community groups; Omagh Ethnic Communities Support Group; and Omagh Women's Area Network.

There is a strong voluntary and community sector in Omagh, and I would like to think that whoever ended up representing the community and voluntary sector on a civic forum would properly reflect the views of the groups that I just mentioned. There should be a requirement for reporting back. It is a good idea to take a critical review stance with regard to the membership of the Civic Forum.

Ian McCrea suggested that it was not representative enough, and he made some strong points until he took exception to a Bogside residents' spokesman being on the Civic Forum. Surely, it is not good practice to discriminate against people on grounds of political opinion, including the Bogside residents' spokesman? The Bogside residents have every entitlement to be heard in a civic forum. Mr McCrea's point was strong until he started to discriminate against people who do not share his political opinions.

Mr I McCrea: If the Member takes great offence at my description of, or discrimination against, the Civic Forum member from the Bogside, will he not accept that the whole forum discriminated against many members of the unionist, Orange and Protestant Churches' tradition?

Mr McElduff: The merit of Mr McCrea's case should be examined by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the review of the Civic Forum. It should, at least, be listened to, and given a strong hearing. Equally, I suggest that it is wrong for the Member to discriminate against anyone from the nationalist tradition — from Derry, for example — who has a contrary political opinion to that of his good self.

The Assembly's engagement and outreach strategy is also very important. We need to reach rural communities, provincial and county towns, and meet the people as an Assembly. That is why I welcome the roadshow idea that is, I believe, being developed by the director of engagement.

Mr Ross: I welcome the opportunity to speak, and congratulate my colleagues on tabling the motion. In considering the motion, we must ask ourselves whether the Civic Forum was value for money, and whether it served any real purpose. What did Northern Ireland get from the tens of thousands of pounds that were ploughed into the Civic Forum? It was described by some as a second Chamber of sorts, its membership was appointed from civic society, and it was somewhat based on the assumption that we in this Chamber cannot represent the views of those who elect us.

I have heard and read comments made by Members over recent days, saying that the Civic Forum is the voice of the people. In that case, what is the point of us? Do we not represent those people? Do we not consult with the public, and listen to their views? It has already been said by my colleagues, but it seemed to many that the Civic Forum was comprised of people who simply may not have been able to get elected in any other way. It was not representative of the community as a whole; rather, it was made up, for the most part, of those who were seen as safe or friendly by the then First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We have enough quangos and organisations in Northern Ireland already without reconstituting that one. It is recognised how over-governed we have been here in Northern Ireland —

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I resisted getting involved earlier, but two members of the DUP have now characterised the membership of the Civic Forum in that way. Mr Ross said that members of the Civic Forum were, for the most part, “safe or friendly” to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and Mr Ian McCrea referred to the members of the Civic Forum as “anti-unionist, anti-Orange and anti-evangelical”. Is it in order for people to be portrayed in that way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order; it is a matter of opinion that Mr Ross is entitled to express in this Chamber.

Mr Ross: As I was saying, we are already over-governed in Northern Ireland. We have had 26 councils; there are 108 MLAs at Stormont, and that is in addition to our MPs in Westminster, our peers in the House of Lords, our MEPs in Europe, as well as other bodies such as the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

Our party has been consistent in seeking to slim down government. The Local Government (Boundaries) Bill reduces the number of councils from 26 to 11, and the Assembly backed a motion to reduce the number of Executive Departments. Ultimately, we will have to look at reducing the number of MLAs and examining whether, in the current economic climate, the various North/South bodies are really value for money for Northern Ireland taxpayers. Having tens of layers of government — or big government — does not make for good government. We cannot afford huge wastage and duplication of services at present. We should be seeking to optimise the use of taxpayers' money.

Anna Lo spoke of the huge sums of money that are associated with the Civic Forum. The major issue is not, perhaps, the huge amount of money, but whether people are getting value for money. Dolores Kelly said that the debate is a deflection from the big issues. I would ask her how many hospital operations, childcare places, residential care-home places, even social houses or roads maintenance could be provided with the money that was ploughed into the Civic Forum. That money would be much better spent on front-line services.

Mrs I Robinson: Does the Member agree that the last forum was made up of people who were rejected by the electorate, and that it was another case of nodding and winking?

Mr Ross: Yes, I made the point that many people believed that the forum was made up of people who perhaps could not get elected. I would like to turn to the issue of —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Very briefly.

Mr A Maginness: We have the list of names of people who were members of the Civic Forum; will the Member go through that list and name those who stood for election and were rejected?

Mr Ross: Bill Jeffrey was one, and another that springs to mind is Gary McMichael, who could not get elected to this Chamber and who was then appointed to the Civic Forum. I want to move on; I gave way so much the last time that I missed out on any speaking time.

I now turn to the issue of the Civic Forum being a voice of the people. My colleagues and I on these Benches hold weekly constituency surgeries in our offices — indeed, the DUP boasts a plethora of offices throughout the country — to ensure that, at every

level, our representatives are accessible to the people that they represent. We are directly answerable to the public; the public, essentially, interview us at every election time and decide whether we return to this Chamber. We do not need a Civic Forum to tell us what the public think, because my staff and I talk to the public every day through meetings, letters, emails or telephone calls. The public tell us what they think and what they want us to do here. If other Members do not feel that they are getting that communication with the public, perhaps they need to reassess how they are doing their jobs.

In East Antrim, people are coming to me with issues such as care home closures, education, health, public transport and people losing their jobs in the current economic times. Therefore, they do have that voice and they come to us for that reason. Mr McFarland spoke about groups in civic society having a voice. Well, they do have a voice, and he outlined how they can interact with Assembly Committees. In addition, many groups in civic society regularly meet with the all-party groups that have been set up in the Assembly.

How can civic society play a role? That is a question that we have talked about, and which, as the motion says, needs to be examined further. Over recent weeks, the Assembly Commission has received a number of questions about how to improve public interaction with the institutions at Stormont in order to help people to understand what goes on, whether improving the video link from the Committee rooms or the Chamber. Every day, hundreds of people come to visit Parliament Buildings, including youth groups which I meet almost daily. It is a positive thing that more young people are coming to see what we do here and that they can interact in that way.

It is important that more people respond to the Assembly's public consultations than has been the case. There are steps that we can take in order to ensure that the level of interaction with the public is improved. However, that will not be achieved by reconstituting a Civic Forum; it will be done through better thinking and better interaction with the public.

Mr Elliott: I was just listening to Mr McElduff — and I am sure that he will keep me right if I do not quote him precisely — but he said something such as politics is much too serious to leave to just the politicians. I agree with him in that respect. However, there are many ways that the public can interact with politicians, rather than through just a Civic Forum. I am not entirely sure how much interaction there was between the Civic Forum and politicians.

I for one would not want to deny Mr McElduff the opportunity to liaise with and discuss issues with people in the Omagh area — and in the Fermanagh area when Omagh becomes part of the greater Fermanagh

council — because he will have to do that anyway. I, too, would welcome such an opportunity.

2.45 pm

I wish to consider what might happen beyond the life of the Civic Forum. Many of us will accept that, although the Civic Forum was a reasonable talking shop, it did not do a lot of positive work. I am pleased to hear many Members talk of a reduction in bureaucracy, in the number of Government Departments and in the whole Civil Service attitude. The Civil Service can be over-bureaucratic, but bureaucracy can be found outside the Civil Service too. We need to be careful of that, because there are two sets of bureaucracy.

Some Members talked about their parties' wishes to reduce the number of Departments, but, at the same time, they talk about introducing a new Department for policing and justice. Not long after they got their hands on OFMDFM, they wanted more advisers for that Department.

Mr Ross: Will the Member acknowledge that any future Department of justice will not be a new Department; justice powers will simply be devolved from the NIO to the Assembly?

Mr Elliott: I understand that that will be a new Department under the Assembly. The Member has tried to say that the current Government will reduce numbers. There was no need to appoint new advisers to OFMDFM, just over a year ago, if the Government did not think that that was necessary.

Most Members sit on Statutory Committees and are aware of the huge number of lobby groups in society. I welcome the opportunity to liaise and co-operate with those groups, most of which bring valuable work to the Committees. The Rural Community Network, the Ulster Farmers' Union and Barnardo's, for example, all bring that bit of expertise that we need. They do so in a specific way — unlike the Civic Forum.

The Civic Forum brought together everyone who had a viewpoint, whether it was a rural, an urban, a health, a social development, or a regional development viewpoint. Those interests all fought their own corners, but, when Committees receive information from lobby groups, it is relevant to the Committees' jurisdiction and inquiries and, as Mr McElduff said, to issues that affect our own constituencies. There are many ways of receiving information without the Civic Forum.

Almost every week, Members receive notices of all-party working groups, which also play a valuable role in the Assembly on specific issues. They provide another way of commanding the expertise that is needed in the political field. To return the original point, that is a way of ensuring that politics in Northern Ireland is not just left to the politicians; it involves the wider community, the wider public

service, and voluntary and community representatives. Those are all important issues.

At the time of the St Andrews Agreement, we heard that an all-Ireland civic forum would be established. If we are trying to get rid of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland, the last thing we need is an all-Ireland civic forum.

Mr Hamilton: The Member missed the earlier part of the debate, and he must not have been listening elsewhere. Will he accept that the truth is that the genesis of the North/ South civic forum was the Belfast Agreement, to which his party agreed and signed up?

Mr Elliott: We have all heard the DUP say that the Belfast Agreement is dead and gone, so I wonder why the Member is so surprised and why he keeps bringing up the issue. Perhaps the DUP was not at St Andrews, but I clearly remember that it was. The DUP brought out a document that said that an all-Ireland civic forum would be considered. Once we get rid of the Civic Forum in Northern Ireland because we do not think that it can do the work, the last thing we need is an all-Ireland civic forum.

Mr Attwood: We must be crystal clear about one thing — the motion is not merely a punchbag for DUP Members, whose speeches thus far have been carefully researched and deliberately worded, with the intention of achieving a very clear strategic outcome. To be fair, DUP Members have a very clear strategic intent. It is not simply a matter of the party's doing down the Civic Forum.

When it comes to talking about people rather than institutions, we have once again heard some very unfortunate turns of phrase from the DUP. Stephen Moutray said that the Civic Forum should be "put out of its misery" and that it should:

"not see the light of day again."

Ian McCrea described the Civic Forum's membership as being "anti-unionist, anti-Orange and anti-evangelical." Those statements are part of a pattern of attitudes towards some of the people of Northern Ireland, and towards the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, and, as such, people must wake up, catch on and draw conclusions.

An attempt is being made to unpick one of the structures that brought about agreement politics in the North, and to dismantle the architecture of those agreement politics as expressed through the Civic Forum, 10 Departments and the North/South Ministerial Council. Let us not be naive about the DUP's ambitions and intentions. The motion is part of that pattern, and of a family of motions, designed to achieve that strategic outcome.

I can perhaps live with that, but I cannot live with the demeaning and diminishing of people involved in

the old Civic Forum, who, in my view, over 40 years, stepped up to the mark in many places and in many communities in Northern Ireland to keep this society more stable than it might otherwise have been. How many times over the past 40 years were we within touching distance of civil war's emerging from civil conflict? Civil war was averted on every occasion for many reasons, including the core stability of our families and communities.

How many times, in moments of greatest jeopardy, did people in civic society step up to the mark and show leadership on the streets of our communities, at city-centre rallies, and in statements that urged people to remain calm, step back and avoid pushing the conflict any further? I believe that the Civic Forum was an expression of the culture and character of our community organisations. It was an expression of the political world's saying that, without those people and groups, civil conflict might have tipped into civil war. Without them, we might not have had our best hopes realised in the Good Friday Agreement. Without them, our society might have been more unstable, and more vulnerable to our worst fears than to our best hopes.

Therefore, when I hear the DUP verbally beat up Civic Forum members — as has happened today — it is not the forum that is being beaten up but the community that stood with all of us in the days of threat and terror over the past 40 years. DUP Members should be ashamed that some of their language, and the content of their statements, leads people towards that conclusion.

I would rather say to Members who want to hear — I do not think that there are many — that they should look at the European experience of engaging with civil society in order to maintain stability and to build cohesion and partnership. One need look only 100 miles from here to see how, over 35 years, the National Economic and Social Council in the Republic has been central to the creation of a new fabric of society that makes that society work better economically, socially and culturally. That is the road down which we should go. Yes, reconfigure the Civic Forum in the manner in which Anna Lo and others suggested, but do not throw out that which is best in our society today, because, if it is thrown out today, the consequences may be a society in future that is less stable than it otherwise would have been.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As my party colleagues said, when the negotiations that led to the Good Friday Agreement were ongoing, Sinn Féin argued strongly for the inclusion of a civic forum as a necessary part of the agreement. My party believes that there must be engagement with civic society in its capacity as business, trades unions, the voluntary sector and others in order to discuss cultural, social and economic issues.

Members are aware of the Civic Forum's brief existence, which has been mentioned several times in the debate. However, despite what Mr Moutray says, the forum, during its brief existence, produced some good work, published reports and carried out key research.

Despite that good work, however, there were lessons to be learned. In recognition of that, OFMDFM initiated the review to examine the forum's structure and role and to consider innovative ways of engaging with civic society. As the Assembly awaits the outcome of the review, it is clear from listening to Members who took the time to view OFMDFM's website and to read the responses that have been forwarded to the Department that there is demand among various sectors for that type of engagement — despite what the DUP member suggested in his opening comments.

Disability Action, for example, states that one of the main achievements of the forum that existed between 1999 and 2002 was that it:

“gave a focus to economic, social and cultural debates which would otherwise not have been included in the political agenda current at that time.”

It also states that the Government must ensure that they consult people who are significantly and directly involved in civic society.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People also stated that:

“it is important that OFMDFM encourage participation by children and young people in fora such as this, especially on issues that have an effect on their lives.”

Other Members referred to NICVA. It believes that the role of a civic forum is still appropriate today, and that it offers the opportunity for a more deliberative context and a more structured avenue to enable groups to express their views.

Those are only three examples of about 60 responses that OFMDFM received. They call for the re-establishment of the Civic Forum, although not necessarily in its original format. The review will examine that issue in order to determine, we hope, new and innovative ways of engaging.

I do not believe that anyone would argue against the latter part of the motion, which calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to investigate modern ways of interacting with the public, including online interactive means to help to shape policy. In this day and age of modern technology, there is no reason why there should not be more of that type of interaction. Again, the review will consider that as a case in point. OFMDFM has responded to several questions by stating that the review will examine that very matter in order to determine how such technologies are being used to consult the public in other areas.

I suggest that the Assembly await the outcome of the review. Members must be clear: the Civic Forum proposals were part of the Good Friday Agreement, and it was legislated for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The legislation provides that there will be a forum as envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement.

Regardless of that legislative imperative, the role of the forum is to include civic society in the work of the Executive and the Assembly. It is about hearing the views and voices of other people; it is about listening to people's viewpoints and experiences; it is about enhancing the Assembly's decision making and making it relevant to people.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member kindly tell me — because I am a bit lost — what there is to prevent Disability Action and the other groups that she mentioned from meeting the Committee that represents the relevant Department? Those groups have total access to the Long Gallery, and all Members are happy to sponsor their events. The door is not closed on anyone's efforts to highlight their needs to the Assembly — which is an elected body.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for that intervention. The Health Committee, on which we both serve, has met numerous groups on various occasions, and we will continue to do that. I welcome that. However, as my colleague mentioned earlier, the establishment of a forum will provide a structured approach to allow groups to come together and put their voices collectively to the decision makers of the House.

Although some Members have expressed strong concerns about the role and model of the Civic Forum, they should not delude themselves that the views of civic society can be set aside. The Assembly is here to listen. It is not good government to send out a message that the Assembly's doors are closed and that it is not interested in listening to people. The Assembly must recognise that there will be a civic forum, as legislated for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Let us set our collective will and expertise to developing a forum that will enhance decision making and promote inclusion. Go raibh maith agat.

3.00 pm

Mr Hamilton: In order to counter some of the accusations that have been made, I make it absolutely clear that I and my party value highly the input that so-called civic society makes and has made to Northern Ireland through the years. Indeed, far from discouraging engagement, we positively encourage engagement. However, we disagree with other parties on whether the Civic Forum is the best way of encouraging positive engagement with civic society, the business sector, the community and voluntary sector, cultural groups, and others.

There are many reasons why we should seriously reconsider whether the Civic Forum is the right way to promote that sort of engagement. Many of those reasons have already been mentioned, one of which is cost. In the two years that the Civic Forum was running — and those were not even full years — it cost in excess of £750,000. That may not be a massive amount of money in the grand scheme of the overall Northern Ireland Budget. However, it is a massive amount when measured against the output that the Northern Ireland people receive for the money that they have put in.

I have heard a lot of talk about how the Civic Forum did this, did that, did a lot of good things and produced a lot of good reports. However, no one who defended the Civic Forum today cited a single example of a positive action that it took or any recommendation that the regime at that time deemed good enough to enact in legislation or to take forward through the House or a Department. I am happy to give way to anyone who can cite a single, good, Civic Forum recommendation that the then Executive, which was governed principally by the UUP and the SDLP, took forward.

I cannot accept the idea that the Civic Forum is needed to encourage interaction between political representatives and civic society. Countless Members have already said that that engagement happens day in, day out in the Committees of the House. It also happens through the meetings with all-party groups, individual Members, party groups, and people who make presentations to various forums in the Assembly.

Indeed, Departments are already involved in better forums than the Civic Forum. One example is the Economic Development Forum, which is chaired by a Minister and includes other Ministers and senior departmental officials. That is a much better way for the business sector to engage on issues about which it has great concern, and the influence exerted by civic society groups in that forum actually pays off.

It is not as if we are turning deaf ears to what people are saying. We are listening to what is being said, and we are responding. I can think of no better example than when, just before Christmas, hundreds of older people visited the Assembly and stood out on the steps outside. Many of us went out to see them, and we listened to their call for action on the bleak winter that they faced due to fuel poverty; the Executive has responded positively to their call. I am sure that others can recall examples of when influence was exerted on Members, individually or collectively, and positive responses were made.

We are the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland. I am concerned that another body — even if it did not seek to challenge the decisions made in the Chamber — would be manipulated by the media

through the juxtaposition of its views against ours. I had bitter experience of that sort of situation when I sat on the Bill of Rights Forum with other Members. That experience showed me clearly that some members of civic society need to grow up. Some of them took positions on issues that they had no business taking positions on and stood in opposition to majority political opinion as exerted by people in this House. That is a difficult and dangerous path to continue to go down.

Mrs D Kelly: Is the Member effectively recommending the censorship of the views of independents and individuals? Is the DUP's real problem that it will not control the Civic Forum and that independent members of that forum will, indeed, be independent? There is a saying that one does not bite the hand that feeds. Is the DUP saying that it wants only nodding dogs in positions of power and influence?

Mr McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me respond to the first intervention first. The Member's intervention and previous comments suggest that she would like there to be a second chamber, one that was not merely a talking shop but one that had actual power. Perhaps, that is because, as she keeps telling us, her party has no power in this Chamber. I will now give way to the Member.

Mr McLaughlin: I confess that I did not hear Mr Hamilton make the comments that the Member who made the previous intervention has suggested he did. However, I am interested in Mr Hamilton's contribution. Last week's events at the launch of the Eames/Bradley report were unfortunate, and I know the DUP position on that matter. However, no one could fail to be touched by the amount of grief and trauma experienced by the various families, from all sides of the community, who attended that launch. Could the Civic Forum help to articulate and develop an approach to such matters? The political process has, to date, been unable to do so.

Mr Hamilton: I want people — and not necessarily special interest groups via the Civic Forum — to engage with the Assembly. I was interested in the comments made by George Reid, former Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, at the NICVA conference recently when he talked about engaging with people and the Assembly.

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

Mr Hamilton: That is a better way to approach the matter rather than through the Civic Forum, which is a costly waste of money.

Mr Shannon: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and as a taxpayer, I have been watching the progress of the Civic Forum carefully.

I always hoped that people would see sense and that the forum would officially be considered defunct and unnecessary. As Members know, I am not one to forecast doom and gloom, but it is an MLAs' job to provide hope for the people of Northern Ireland in the future. However, everybody knows that the UK faces a difficult journey to return to economic prosperity, and we should ensure that every penny is well spent and benefits the Province. The Civic Forum is neither beneficial nor provides a good stewardship of money.

Lets hae a' luk at tha facts. Tha facts er that tha forum wus set up wi' tha help o' tha Bilfaust Agreemunt as a' wae tae infoarm tha fowk o' tha Proavince oan tha wae fort. This wus tha raisin ahint it an why it wus set up. Tha reality is that it haesnae met since 2002 an ther haes bin nae less woarkin wi' tha fowk — indeed ther haes bin a' gae dael mare. If ye wur tae gaun doon oan tha street an ask oany bisnissmaun hoo they feel er hae they miss'd oot oan tha forum pittin fort ther views the muckle an maist o' them wus ask whut wus tha forum in tha furst place. An ther second comment wud be that it wus mi' jab as yin that wus elected tae pit fort ther point o' view.

Let us look at the facts. The forum was established under the auspices of the Belfast Agreement as a means of interacting with the people of the Province on the way forward. The forum has not met since 2002, and there has been no less community interaction — indeed, there has been much more. If we were to ask local businessmen on the street if they have missed the forum representing their views, the huge majority would ask, first, what the forum was and, secondly, comment that, as an elected representative, it is my job to represent their viewpoint.

Even its own members felt that the Civic Forum was not the best way to use time and resources. That fact can be ascertained from members' horrendous record of attendance — only six of 61 members attended every meeting, which indicates the extent of their interest and tells a tale of how valued the forum was. Those facts tell a story themselves, and we do not need to examine the matter further. If MLAs attended plenary sessions with the same regularity as members attended forum meetings, reconsidering the value of the Assembly and its work would be justified. Why is the situation different for the Civic Forum? The taxpayer demands value for money, and the forum does not provide that in any shape or form.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not hypocritical for the DUP Benches to complain about value for money, given that one of its Ministers squandered almost £4 million on a proposed stadium at the Maze that has never progressed and has no intention of doing so?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his intervention. However, the Member will see value for money when the three sporting organisations receive their part of the money.

People involved in the finance sector will say that we have missed paying the expenses but have not missed diverting funding from other areas to a Civic Forum that is not useful or necessary. In all practicality and reality, the Civic Forum's role to liaise with businesses and community workers is already being fulfilled by MLAs' interaction with people in advice centres, and so on.

Mrs I Robinson: To counterbalance that comment from the Alliance Party Member, I would like to say — and I am sure that my colleague in the Health Committee will agree with me — that the £700,000-plus cost of the forum would go a long way towards paying for the three-dimensional tesla scanner required for children with intractable epilepsy. Not only that, but it would allow autistic children and those with acquired brain injuries to avail themselves of equipment that does not presently exist in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for her intervention; her words are very wise. Kieran McCarthy and I both represent the same constituency, and, as we spoke about yesterday, that £700,000 would go a long way towards maintaining the roads of the Ards Peninsula — which Kieran and I speak about every day of the week.

It is important for us to be involved in interaction with our people. We do that through our advice centres and through communication with community groups each and every day of the week. We attend meetings of those groups, and my office deals with some 200 items of business per week — that is 200 items of interaction carried out in my office every week. If that is not an indication of what one can do as an Assembly Member, then that is a question that we should be asking ourselves.

There are also more inexpensive methods of interaction, such as the Internet — a medium which is not selective, nor biased according to gender, race or creed, and the use of which would enable more time and money to be poured into the essentials of what we are trying to achieve. I urge Members to support the motion, and ask them to join me this afternoon in making it clear that the Assembly is cost-effective, time-effective and work-effective, and is streamlined as much as it can be.

Mr Dallat: I will try to be constructive in my speech, as ever. What causes me difficulty this afternoon is the modesty of the DUP, the members of which are pretending that they are not woodpeckers chipping away at the Good Friday Agreement. The contribution made by Ian McCrea was the most valuable. He made an overwhelming argument in favour of the Orange Order and other fundamentalists

becoming involved in the new Civic Forum. I would, of course, support that.

In regard to the kernel of the issue, I would have thought that DUP members would know better than most — since they are experts at it — that communication is a two-way process between humans; an exchange of knowledge and understanding. That practice has kept democracy alive for thousands of years. In all honesty, does the Assembly believe that it has reached the level of maturity where it can sweep all of that aside, dispense with it, and not have to rely on the lifetime of experience of academics, educationalists, people in the voluntary sector, and a lot of people who kept this country going through 30 years of violence?

We are in danger of developing a degree of decadence, which, in itself, is not a healthy thing in a democracy. It leads to arrogance — “listen to us; we know what is good for you”. That has led to the downfall of democracy in many parts of the world, but usually only after a lifetime of poor leadership, poor management, and a failure to listen to others. Here it has happened remarkably quickly. I do not think that we have the God-given right to act on behalf of everyone without reference to other people. We must allow people to feel part of the ownership of this new experience, which 71% of people in the North, and almost 100% in the Republic, voted in favour of in 1998. That was the first indication that we were moving into something that could be described as democratic.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: As the Member has been speaking across the Floor at me, it is probably better that she does it through the Chair.

Mrs I Robinson: I thank the Member for giving way. I am not so proud as to worry about the reason why he allows me to interject. Is the Member aware that, since 1998, there has been another election, and that the St Andrews Agreement was the agreement on which we all went to the electorate? The DUP became the largest party, because it reflected what the people wanted. That is why we are sitting here as the largest party, while the Member's party is the second-largest republican party.

3.15 pm

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: Yes, of course.

Mr Attwood: Is the Member not curious that Mrs Robinson has just confirmed that the DUP went to the electorate on the basis of the St Andrews Agreement, when, in the past 30 minutes, her party colleagues have disowned it? Is the Member not surprised by that contradiction?

Mr Dallat: No. I am never surprised by what I hear in the Chamber from the Members opposite.

I will deal with the issue that Mrs Robinson raised.

Mrs I Robinson: Iris.

Mr Dallat: If the Member wishes to be called Iris, I will do that gladly. Does she realise that tens of thousands of people who breathed life into democracy in 1998 have not been to the polls since then. *[Interruption.]* Is it any wonder, when we witness the performances here?

Let us get real and accept that we desperately need advice and wisdom from the kind of people who would make up a new civic forum. I will give the House a serious example, and I want the Members opposite to listen carefully. The Civic Forum dealt with literacy and numeracy. Some 240,000 people in this society between the ages of 16 and 64 were denied the right to basic skills in reading and writing. The report that the Civic Forum produced reverberated through the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning, and many other Departments.

As a result, many more people today have the ability to read and write. If the Civic Forum did nothing else, it gave those people the tools and the skills to have their voices heard. Today, however, it appears that the DUP does not want those voices to be heard, because they may start to ask questions about how the Assembly is run. They may discover that it is not good value for money for us to spend our time discussing a bogus motion, which has absolutely nothing to do with the crisis that we are in at the moment. I do not have much more to say than that.

Ms Purvis: I will begin by encouraging Members to take a step outside and have a good look at this Building. Better yet, they should take a stroll down the Newtownards Road and look up at that long, steep hill on a day like today, with the wind, sleet and rain blowing at a sharp 90-degree angle. In order to get here, my constituents have to wait in the rain for the Metro bus to travel up the Newtownards Road, where they are delivered to the gates at the bottom of the hill. Visitors must then trek up the hill to the far side of the Building and go through the visitors' security check. By the time that they have reached the reception desk, they have had their workout for the week. The front steps are now blocked off, and there is no parking in front of the Building. If visitors dare to drive here on a sitting day, they will find that the car parks are jammed by mid-morning, and they may find themselves having to park somewhere near the Ulster Hospital.

This is not a Building that naturally invites civic participation. Those who do not have a privileged parking space outside the door must expend a fair amount of effort in order to arrive here in a decent condition to engage in the democratic processes that are meant to be conducted within these marble halls.

As we all know, democracy without the full participation of society is anaemic. It is too easy, in a Building of this size and location, with the distractions and demands that come with elected office, to lose the connection with what is real and be unable to determine what is fantasy.

The Civic Forum was designed to bridge that gap and to ensure that civic society, in all its forms, had a regular presence and role in the business of the Assembly. From its beginnings, the Civic Forum has been met by apathy, sometimes bordering on contempt, by those who were meant to organise it and implement it. Those who now characterise the Civic Forum as a failed experiment should direct their critical focus on those members of the Executive who had, and have, responsibility to make it work.

Civic forums work. They work for local government in London and Edinburgh. Civic forums work for the Scottish Parliament and for the European Parliament. If there are suggestions for enhancing the political effectiveness and levels of participation in the Civic Forum through technology, by all means let us examine those. However, attempting to substitute technology for the voice of real people is cynical, mean spirited and strange.

What is to be feared from letting the people of Northern Ireland have a stronger voice in the Assembly and its business? What does the DUP fear? Does it fear itself or an organised and well-structured civic society? If the motion is passed, it will add more fuel to the fire of public scepticism of the Executive and it will support the view of those who feel that the folks on the hill do not have their best interests at heart. I strongly oppose the motion, and I urge the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to focus their efforts on re-establishing the Civic Forum by making it bigger, bolder and stronger. That can only help.

Mr McCausland: Before I summarise Members' contributions, I can honestly say that in the past six years, since the demise of the Civic Forum in 2002, I have never had one constituent say to me that he is concerned about that body. In the past six years, I have never met anyone, whether it is on the Newtownards Road, the Ballysillan Road or the Shore Road, who has said that they want to see the Civic Forum come back and that they feel passionately about it. Most people do not even know that the Civic Forum has disappeared, because it made so little an impression on them. In fact, some media researchers, whom I spoke to yesterday as they were looking into this issue, asked me what had happened to the Civic Forum. It says a lot about the Civic Forum that the media does not know about it and the public do not care about it.

In proposing the motion, Stephen Moutray spoke about places for the great and good. He said that the

Civic Forum was packed with pro-agreement nodding dogs — the first mention of that phrase during the debate. He said that no recommendations of the Civic Forum were taken up, that it was marked by poor attendance, and that it was unneeded, unheeded, unnoticed and not missed.

Mitchel McLaughlin spoke about how the Civic Forum would help to address years of political failure. If one looks at the membership of the forum, one will see a number of political failures, such as those who could not manage to get elected to anything for a range of parties, from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition to the Workers Party. The fact is that people in the Civic Forum were — in my view and in many other people's views — not representative of Northern Ireland. Mr McLaughlin spoke about its important function, but I listened carefully and he did not really say what that was.

Alan McFarland made the valid point — and he is absolutely right — that the Civic Forum was the brainchild of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, which is now gone. That is another example of the fact that the Civic Forum's membership comprised people who did not think that they could get elected to anything else and who wanted to find a way into an organisation.

During an intervention, Alban Maginness said that the Civic Forum was cut short by the collapse of the Executive. However, the fact is that it was already in terminal decline and that it was simply being put out of its misery.

He asked that non-governmental organisations —

Mr A Maginness: The phraseology in the motion is: “that it has not met since 2002”.

That suggests that the forum itself is to blame for not meeting. My point was that it did not meet because of circumstances beyond its control.

Mr McCausland: That is absolutely right. The forum did not meet because it was already on its way out. In fact, seven out of 60 members had ceased to attend — they had resigned from it. That would be akin to 10 Members of the Assembly resigning. The drop-out level was tremendously high, as was the non-attendance record of those who remained.

During an intervention, Simon Hamilton said that the Civic Forum was born out of the Belfast Agreement, and that is absolutely true. It was very much a creation of the Belfast Agreement and groups such as the Women's Coalition.

I listened to Dolores Kelly, but she did not tell us very much except that the SDLP will stand up to the DUP. That is a frightening thought; it is really worrying.

Anna Lo spoke about the need for reform and about the fact that the forum is a requirement of the Belfast Agreement. For some of us, that may be one of the many reasons why it should not come back. She said that there was considerable concern about the forum's future. However, as I pointed out, nobody ever stops me in the street to stress that considerable concern.

Ian McCrea set out the background to the forum. He said that it failed to provide community leadership and to influence the building of a peaceful society. He again emphasised the refusal to provide a place on it for the Orange Order, which is the largest community organisation in Northern Ireland. He also said that the forum was unnecessary, unelected, unrepresentative and extremely expensive, at a cost of around £750,000.

Barry McElduff reminded us that the forum was part of an “overarching political architecture” — a grand phrase. He said that it should contain representation from the construction industry. We should then include representation from the manufacturing, farming and fishing industries, the IT sector, and others. I gather that the forum's first meeting was held in the Waterfront Hall, probably in the BT Studio. After everybody whom Barry McElduff wants on it is included, someone will need to book the main arena of the Waterfront Hall, or even the Odyssey Arena, because — *[Interruption.]*

That may not be quite what I would have suggested.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: No; I am very short of time.

Mr McElduff: Is the Member aware that the Greek form of democracy took place in a stadium?

Mr McCausland: Yes, but the stadium in Greece may not even have accommodated all the people whom Barry McElduff wants to include.

He also referred to a member of the forum who was a member of the Bogside Residents' Association. Mr McElduff was concerned about comments that were made about that individual. Interestingly, that person represented not the Bogside Residents' Association on the Civic Forum but the Irish-language community. That may say more about the Irish language than it does about the individual.

Alastair Ross commented on the need to achieve value for money. He said that we have too many quangos. Under the review of public administration, he pointed out that the number of councils will be reduced from 26 downwards. Mr Ross also said that we are over-governed and that we are seeking to reduce the number of Departments and MLAs. Furthermore, he said that we should save money, end the wastage and put more money into front-line services.

Tom Elliott spoke about the number of lobby groups that engage with the Assembly already through our Committees and in other ways. Alex Attwood said that we were demeaning and diminishing the Civic Forum. The fact is that one member of the forum was quoted in the press as saying that it was:

“a wasteful talking-shop which never made a single original suggestion”.

I have talked to other members of the previous forum who share a similar view.

There are ways in which to engage with civil society, but the problem is that there are some organisations that act like gatekeepers to society. They think that nobody is allowed to represent society except them. As we experienced during the Bill of Rights Forum process, some of those organisations were extremely unrepresentative. Apart from the one or two organisations that generally stayed out of the political discussion during the lifetime of the Bill of Rights Forum, the fact is that in almost every case, the so-called representatives of civil society voted with the SDLP and Sinn Féin and against the UUP and the DUP. I understand why the SDLP and Sinn Féin are so much in favour of there being a forum. The only party that voted with the UUP and DUP from time to time was the Alliance Party. Therefore, I can understand why Alex Attwood is so supportive of the Civic Forum.

Michelle O'Neill spoke about the submissions to the review process. When one studies those, there is no agreement among them — they are at odds with one another. They cannot even agree on what sort of forum should be used. The level of disagreement is quite staggering.

Simon Hamilton spoke about the contribution of civic society. Who is civic society? Some people who regard themselves as the voice of civic society may not be. Recommendations were made, and the previous devolved Administration were supposed to take those up. When I asked about those, nobody produced a single, solitary recommendation that the previous Administration took up and implemented. Simon Hamilton said that it was much better to take up the model of the Economic Development Forum, in which the business sector engages with the relevant people in the Assembly. That is a very good model with which to work.

Mr Hamilton also referred to the Bill of Rights Forum. Along with other Members here, I sat on that forum. If that was anything to go by, we should not have a Civic Forum. In fact, Mr Hamilton rightly said that some people needed to grow up. Jim Shannon called for sense, and said that the forum was defunct.

John Dallat spoke for some time, but he did not really tell me very much. I could not find anything much to write down, other than that our not having the forum is a great way in which to save £750,000.

3.30 pm

Dawn Purvis spoke about difficulties accessing Parliament Buildings, and on a wintry day such as today, I can understand that concern. However, the fact is that every day hundreds of people come through this Building to see the Assembly at work; to talk to and lobby Members; to lobby and engage with Committees; and to take part in all-party working groups. There is a range of reasons why people come here, and we should encourage more interaction. She said that the people of Northern Ireland should have a bigger say. I do not disagree; I want the people of Northern Ireland to have a bigger say. Too often, however, it is the gatekeepers who have the say.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to support the motion, and I commend it to the House. Deciding not to establish a new Civic Forum would be a good way to save £750,000 a year, which could be put into front-line services. Therefore, we would get value for money and if the Civic Forum were to disappear for ever, I doubt whether anyone would be too concerned.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 41; Noes 44.

AYES

UNIONIST

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Rev Dr Robert Coulter, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dodds, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCallister and Mr I McCrea.

NOES

NATIONALIST

Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Brolly, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane.

UNIONIST

3.45 pm

Ms Purvis.

OTHER

Dr Farry, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Attwood and Mr Boylan.

Total votes	85	Total Ayes	41	[48.2%]
Nationalist Votes	38	Nationalist Ayes	0	[0.0%]
Unionist Votes	42	Unionist Ayes	41	[97.6%]
Other Votes	5	Other Ayes	0	[0.0%]

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Women's Organisations

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

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community; and calls on the Executive to action cross-cutting Departmental commitments and for the Office of the First and deputy First Minister to monitor outcomes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to commend the motion to the House. Women's groups are close to my heart, and the lack of funding has a major impact on every constituency in the North. Every Member will be aware of women's organisations that do sterling work in the communities that they represent. However, that is now in jeopardy, and if the Assembly does not take decisive action, I fear that much of their great work will cease.

In 2005, a review group was established in response to concerns about the funding of the women's sector. The motion and, I believe, the amendment address those same concerns. Although limited in scope, the group's report recognised the value of the work being carried out across a range of areas, such as community development, childcare, training, education and many others. It also identified significant gaps in the responsibilities of several Departments that were affecting the ability of women's groups to sustain their services.

Over the past four years, the situation has continued to deteriorate, and many organisations now lurch from one short-term funding stream to another as they struggle to survive. I, therefore, support the amendment, because a new review would supplement the limited work that was carried out in 2005. Matters have now reached a head, and funding is finally running out for many groups and organisations.

In my Foyle constituency, I have been working closely with several women's groups that now face into the abyss because funding is no longer available.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member serves alongside me on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Is she not concerned about the

failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a decision on Peace III funding, which has a direct impact on women's organisations in particular?

Ms Anderson: I am concerned that £1.1 million of funding for neighbourhood renewal was returned in December 2008. That is also of major concern to the women's groups. It would be a travesty for organisations such as the Galliagh Women's Group and the Creggan Preschool and Training Trust — and Members could cite many more — to be allowed to go to the wall because of a lack of funding. I applaud those organisations for providing an invaluable service to their local communities.

I also commend the dedication and commitment of those workers who, despite the absence of funding, have carried on working voluntarily to maintain the services. Many Members could list such groups and organisations from across the North that do likewise. The fact that they work voluntarily gives some idea of the character of the people involved in those projects, but they should not have to do that.

One of the cross-cutting themes in the Programme for Government is to proactively change existing patterns of social disadvantage and deprivation. Community-based women's organisations have a key role to play in achieving those goals, and they have already shown that through the work that they have done. However, it is clear that the kind of cross-cutting departmental commitments that are required to sustain the sector, and which are called for in the motion — and, indeed, the amendment — have not yet materialised. Too many groups and organisations are falling between two stools because Departments are refusing to fund them as they feel they are the responsibility of another Minister.

It is clear that the current arrangements are not as robust and effective as they should be — because money that is earmarked for neighbourhood renewal, and to which I referred earlier, is routinely being surrendered during quarterly monitoring rounds. That is happening at a time when the organisations that are delivering the services on the ground are being starved of funds. However, I do not want to get into the blame game on that issue, because I do not believe that the people at the coal face — those who are facing the blunt end of the cuts — want to see a slanging match between Members over whose Ministers are, or are not, to blame.

There can be no doubt that there is a collective responsibility here, and that is precisely why the motion called on the Executive to action cross-cutting departmental commitments to address those issues. It is OFMDFM's responsibility to monitor outcomes. After all, that is where the Gender Matters strategy and the duty of equality are located. In the past, we have

had too many so-called cost-cutting strategies that have failed to change outcomes in our community.

It is time to take a new approach; one that will be effective and robust, with ongoing tackling and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that it will deliver. The need for such an approach has always been recognised by the OFMDFM Committee. For example, in its response to the child poverty inquiry, the Committee concluded that OFMDFM, as lead Department, should:

“have a role in challenging departmental Delivery Agreements to ensure the relevance and robustness of departmental targets and actions.”

The Committee went even further and recommended that OFMDFM and DFP should consider introducing a scheme of financial incentives and penalties to ensure that cross-departmental priorities, such as child poverty, are delivered on. It was the lack of an effective structure to ensure the implementation of any given strategy that prompted — I believe — the inclusion of clause 2 in the Financial Assistance Bill. Clause 2 gives the Executive the opportunity, and the authority, to take effective action when social need has been identified — in child poverty, affordable childcare, or through the problems faced by the women's sector.

Without that kind of structure and ongoing monitoring there is nothing to ensure that strategies — any strategies — will be implemented to their original intent. We can have all the great strategies, plans and programmes in the world, but they mean absolutely nothing if we do not have the means to implement them. They would remain on a shelf gathering dust somewhere in the bowels of this Building.

However, we are in a new political dispensation, and we must deliver for all the people of the North on the basis of equality. That includes the women's organisations, which, with some justification, feel that they are being airbrushed out of public policy programmes and funding streams. They see themselves as the weak link — always the first to bear the brunt of budget cuts.

We all understand that Departments have financial pressures. The fact is that there is simply not enough money in the block grant from Westminster to go around. It is precisely for that reason that Sinn Féin supports the transfer of fiscal authority to the Assembly. Only then, when we take control of our own destiny, and cut the purse strings from Britain, will we be able to deliver the kind of change that the people rightfully demand. The sooner some of the other parties in the Chamber accept that analysis, the sooner we can get on with building the shared and better future, based on equality and human rights, to which we are all committed.

I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after “Executive” and insert

“to initiate a cross cutting review to ensure (i) that the current mapping of the provision of services is adequate; (ii) the most effective use of resources to address the identified needs of the sector; and (iii) the equitable distribution of those resources.”

Although, in general, I agree with the sentiments of the motion, I do not agree with the comments of the Member who spoke previously, Ms Anderson, about cutting the “purse strings” with Britain.

A number of women’s organisations have been unable to secure appropriate funding to deliver services, as Ms Anderson pointed out. However, I feel that it is necessary to amend the motion to represent what is, in my opinion, a more practical approach to the problems that the organisations face. The amendment is designed to bring focus to the debate on women’s organisations, not to alter a motion for the sake of it. If there is a magic circle of groups that benefit from the current funding arrangements to the detriment of others, that imbalance must be identified and addressed. If there is duplication in services, we owe it to the taxpayer to ensure efficiency in provision.

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

According to Charlotte Whitton:

“Whatever women do, they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily this is not difficult.”

The Executive’s gender equality strategy recognises that women in Northern Ireland face a number of unique challenges and disadvantages. That is why it is essential that the resources that Government allocate to women’s organisations be properly targeted and distributed equitably. Questions are being asked as to why groups such as Women’s Forum Northern Ireland, the Women’s Guild, the Women’s Institute, the Northern Ireland Women’s European Platform, Training for Women Network, Women into Politics — the list goes on — are not adequately funded.

This year, the Department for Social Development provided funding to women’s organisations to the tune of £2.9 million. Under the Positive Steps policy, the Department has a particular responsibility to encourage participation from women in marginalised and disadvantaged communities, and that includes support for the Women’s Centres Regional Partnership (WCRP). I am sorry to report that there is a belief that that is a flawed structure that could support more than the 14 centres that it currently supports. Women from the Protestant and unionist community are under-represented at the highest levels of WCRP, which does not encompass all key strategic women’s organisations in Northern Ireland, or even OFMDFM’s Gender Advisory Panel. A concern has been expressed to me that WCRP is not representing the wider sector and is, perhaps, following the agenda of its four directors.

In 2005, a DSD review was carried out by the Review Group on Women’s Organisations, and a report was completed and submitted in July of that year. One of the main flaws in that review and subsequent report was that, instead of gathering fresh information, it relied on a 2001 Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust (NIVT) report on the sector. Such information was four years out of date, and, as a result, key groups were missing. Therefore, the terms of reference referred to a map of the existing infrastructure and services, but the reality was that they continued to rely on the 2001 information.

Many in the women’s sector have expressed a concern that the original mapping was flawed and that the current funding distribution is based on a flawed model. The 2006 strategy is regarded by many as merely a box-ticking exercise. The terms of reference require a review, but, to date, only an evaluation has been carried out by DFP. That evaluation was completed in December 2008, but the problem with such an evaluation, rather than a comprehensive review, is that there is no opportunity for the rest of the sector to contribute. The mapping of the sector can identify and alleviate gaps, where they exist. In 2009, we are still using the flawed model of 2001 services and infrastructure. That was out of date in 2006 when the WCRP was established, and no attempt has been made to improve it since then.

Of course, funding for women’s organisations does not come from DSD alone. DCAL, via Sport Northern Ireland, has made a planned investment of £354,784 over the period 2006-09. That investment supports netball, hockey and camogie, and will end on 31 March this year. However, decisions on future investment in performance sport between 2009 and 2013 are pending. Since 2006, DETI has funded a number of organisations on an ad hoc basis, including Women in Business and Women in Enterprise, to a total of £332,208.

The Department of Education, via its youth and community relations branch, has approved funding of £100,000 to Belfast and Lisburn Women’s Aid to bring its youth service facilities up to the necessary health and safety standards. To date, £83,728.51 has been allocated. In addition, £21,333 has been awarded in 2008-09 via Youthnet.

4.00 pm

I am trying to make the point that, given the demands on the public purse, the amount of funding is not the issue. Instead, the return on investment is the key issue. No one is disputing the positive impact that women’s organisations can have in their local communities, but proper and adequate mapping will ensure that the Government have a full picture about what is happening in the sector across Northern Ireland. That will identify gaps in provision and

eliminate duplication. Given the strained financial times in which we find ourselves, surely that is a key goal. All sides of the House want to see the best possible return from investments made in the sector — value for money should be the key issue.

As we move forward, women's groups must engage with Government in a way that dispels the cynicism in the sector that I and other Members detect. That is not a view that is just expressed within the community that is represented on these Benches. Sometimes, there is a sense that mainstream funding is determined by who groups know. However, groups in Ardoyne face the same issues as groups in Kilcooley.

For example, Kilcooley women's centre receives funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Irish Republic, the Christian Brothers and neighbourhood renewal. Despite only having six members of staff, three of whom are part-time, in the period September 2005 to June 2008, that group supported 672 women in education who achieved 889 qualifications. Of those women, 621 progressed to further education, 59 found full-time employment, 41 found part-time employment and four started their own business. The centre also created and sustained five new jobs and provided 142 childcare places. That group is outside mainstream funding; how favourably would some groups that have 20 or 30 staff, and receive what has become recurrent mainstream funding, compare with that?

In response to questions from my colleague Mr Weir, the Health, Social Development and Agriculture Ministers outlined the amounts of funding available to each women's group for 2008-09. Kilcooley women's centre kindly mapped that information — pardon the pun — a copy of which I will leave in the Assembly Library for Members' information. That map demonstrates the Belfast- and Londonderry-centric nature of funding. I understand that those cities are the main population centres in Northern Ireland, but where is the representation for women in Ards, Fermanagh or Strabane?

The amendment calls for a review that should address the major criticisms of the current arrangements. I have spoken about the flawed foundations, the incomplete representation and inconsistent funding, but there are even problems in a wider context. According to the Northern Ireland Women's European Platform, the current system does not meet the targets of the gender equality strategy; it frustrates the delivery of cross-departmental service provision; it does not lend itself to appropriate recording to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; and it does not permit NGOs for women to develop organised civil society.

The current system is too piecemeal and lacks a coherent strategy to encompass the entire sector. As a

result, in addition to wasting resources in implementation, the views and concerns of women in Northern Ireland are not adequately represented at regional, national and supranational levels. A cross-departmental approach would provide and promote greater partnership across the sector, which would allow a more strategic approach to ensure that priorities for women are met, duplication of work is eradicated and there is value for money.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment. It is useful to discuss the funding of women's organisations.

More Members should be better aware of the valuable work of women's organisations. Women's centres can play a role over a distinct district area, while others exist to provide a particular service and to address identified needs, such as childcare, or, perhaps, to support people who may be suffering from domestic violence.

In the past, childcare and other women's issues were often overlooked in the adversarial world of macho, constitutional politics. However, I am pleased that the Ulster Unionist Party and I have been highlighting the need to invest in the young, thereby addressing childcare provision, for example, which is a key issue to the women's sector. Many organisations that have been funded in the past have been providing that service.

For the past six or seven years, I have been involved in the Northern Childcare Partnership in the Carrickfergus area, which successfully gained Sure Start funding for Horizon Sure Start, which benefits young mothers and children in Larne and Carrickfergus. Some women in that partnership gained, and developed, confidence through their involvement in the Women's Forum, with the result that they have been better able to contribute to the improvement of health services through discussions with childcare services that took place on the partnership. Furthermore, training courses provided by the local Women's Forum have encouraged some women back into education, giving them additional confidence, and, ultimately, enabling them to get back into the world of work and contributing to the economy.

Domestic violence is a difficult issue for anyone seeking help. It is a very personal issue, and many people keep it to themselves. Women's groups can be an important first step whereby individuals can share their burden with others and, ultimately, gain confidence and be directed to support that may be provided by organisations such as Women's Aid.

As other Members said, funding of women's organisations has been of a very temporary nature. They received European funding, the Executive programme fund for children and neighbourhood renewal funding, but all of them short-term funding. On occasion, therefore, much of the training and experience, and the teams that were built up, were lost

when that funding came to an end. Clearly, there is a need to review that.

Indeed, the changing picture of the need for quality, affordable childcare is another reason why the funding issue must be addressed. Many women's organisations and centres provide quality, affordable childcare, and that will become increasingly important given the nature of changes that have been announced to benefits. In the future, single parents will be required, when their children reach secondary-school age, to undergo training or employment, or risk losing their benefits. There will be an increased need to provide additional childcare. Therefore, we must ensure that the valuable services and childcare places that are provided by many women's organisations and centres will continue.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the decision that was made to take the children's fund away from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has created many of the problems that we are all now experiencing across Northern Ireland?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for his contribution. I am aware that gaps have developed as a result of the decision to end that funding. There is no doubt about that. Indeed, the Department for Social Development's voluntary and community unit has had to provide emergency packages to sustain 13 women's centres through that period. Therefore, I welcome the fact that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, through Sinn Féin in its motion, and through the DUP in its amendment, has recognised the gap that has been created by the ending of such Executive programme funds. They are now, some two years later, belatedly beginning to recognise that gap that has occurred, and are attempting to fill it.

There is a need to act swiftly in this area, so that the skills and the training are not lost, and so that the contribution that women's centres and organisations have made will be recognised fully.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome junior Minister Donaldson to the debate.

I thank the proposers for tabling the motion. What would we have done otherwise? There is no legislation before the Assembly today — none whatsoever. There is no Executive Business. So, here we are: another day, another afternoon, and another sixth-form debate in the Assembly. Nonetheless, I shall roll up my sleeves and play my part in the ongoing drama and saga of the DUP sham fight.

The SDLP will support Sinn Féin's motion. Whereas, on the face of it, there is little wrong with the DUP amendment, I am surprised that Sinn Féin is not more cautious about part (iii), which requires:

“the equitable distribution of those resources.”

Miss McIlveen defined what was meant by an equitable distribution of resources. However, if we are already targeting all our resources on the basis of objective need, then an equitable distribution of resources should not be a matter of concern for anyone in the House. I trust that we are not entering into a new round of tit-for-tat distribution of resources rather than targeting them on the basis of need.

The motion expresses:

“concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community”.

I do not know why Sinn Féin is surprised about that. Ms Anderson said that Government has “airbrushed” women's organisations out of the Programme for Government and the Budget. Is Sinn Féin not one of the two main parties that set out the Budget and the Programme for Government and denied the SDLP the ability to review them and take stock?

Ms Anderson then went on to blame — Westminster. Now, there are many arguments for breaking the link with Westminster, but if that did happen, how would Sinn Féin be able to play the blame game? Its Members would be silent on that front.

The motion goes on to call on the Executive:

“to action cross-cutting Departmental commitments”.

Few Members will have a difficulty with that — except that Sinn Féin and the DUP, in the Programme for Government and Budget, took away the cross-cutting departmental funding to action anything.

We heard Miss McIlveen talk about the gender action panel of OFMDFM. Members might be surprised to learn that the panel has not even bothered to meet since last May, and that there is no action plan for the strategy on gender action, never mind any money. So, I do not know why the motion should be a surprise to either of those two parties.

What we are seeing this afternoon is mere lip service being paid to the organisations in the community that are facing real hardship. The SDLP is not fooled: we voted against the Programme for Government and the Budget because we knew what they would mean for the communities that we represent.

It might come as a surprise to some Members, perhaps more to Sinn Féin Members than to others, that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has £10 million at her disposal to spend on alleviating rural poverty. She has £10 million — but no action plan or strategy on how to spend it or get it out to the community that needs it.

Let us face it: these are not women's issues — these are family issues; and the sooner we take that point on board the better the delivery will be.

It may also come as a surprise to those on the Sinn Féin Benches that the school sports strategy, which the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Education have a responsibility to deliver, and for which millions of pounds have been set aside in the Programme for Government and the Budget, has been held up by the Minister of Education. She has not agreed the strategy, and it has been delayed. It was due to be published last October.

I support the motion. There is a need for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to start looking at what Ministers under their control are doing to deliver cross-cutting actions with the money in their budgets.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is almost up.

Mrs D Kelly: I think that that will do. *[Laughter.]*

4.15 pm

Dr Farry: That will be a hard act to follow. I congratulate Mrs Kelly in achieving a first in this House: getting Martina Anderson to accept an intervention.

Some Members: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Farry: She wins the sweepstake.

The Alliance Party is content with the motion and the amendment, although we see more merit in the amendment. We take issue with remarks by the proposers of the motion and the amendment in justifying their respective cases; however, as always, we will judge by what is recorded in the Official Report.

I recognise the good work of the women's sector in Northern Ireland; there is a health and vitality in it, notwithstanding the issue of resources. I had the opportunity, when I was Mayor of North Down, to see much of that up front. I was particularly pleased to help to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of North Down and Ards Women's Aid as part of my official duties.

There is a breadth of activity in the women's sector: from childcare to education and training, general advice, engagement on healthcare issues and the provision of practical help on issues of domestic violence. It is also worth recognising the important good relations outcomes that often result from work done in the women's sector, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect.

I also recognise the strong leadership role played by women in the ethnic-minority sector in particular. Indeed, in my own constituency, and possibly elsewhere, it can at times be difficult to get men to engage in the community sector, whereas women are very willing to participate in programmes across society.

It is important to stress that this is not about placing women's issues in a silo; it is about ensuring that people can engage in society on a free and equal basis and that everyone has proper opportunities. We must recognise that there have been historical patterns of

discrimination and indirect policies that have led to a lack of opportunities for women.

As other Members said, this also relates to wider issues such as families. We must recognise that we are living in a very changed environment. We previously made the point about the flawed mapping exercise conducted by the Department for Social Development several years ago. It can today, with the benefit of hindsight, be seen as more out of date and in need of updating.

We must also recognise the changing environment as a result of the ending of Peace II funding; the ending of that funding may have created many of the immediate financial challenges. It is worth stressing that we should not necessarily lament the shift from Peace II to Peace III. Peace III has its merits, and there is an argument for a much stronger focus on a shared future and reconciliation. That places a responsibility on Government to intervene and pick up the pieces with resourcing, and to do what they should be doing rather than looking to external funding to offer short-term relief.

Those are ongoing concerns: the Government should be giving a sense of guarantee in the continuation of funding.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member is quite right about mainstreaming. However, neither the proposer of the motion or the amendment has explained where they would take money from in order to carry out the work that they want done.

Dr Farry: The Member makes a valid point. We are often lectured by the DUP and Sinn Féin for criticising the Budget. It is ironic, therefore, to hear parties that champion the Budget and the Programme for Government point out the inadequacies of both documents in debates such as this. I am not sure what planet they are living on, because their positions are utterly illogical. I am mystified why Sinn Féin — a supposedly left-wing socialist party — signed up to the Budget and the Programme for Government. I cannot get my head round that.

The other change that we must take into account is the effect of the economic downturn — the recession — that we face. That will have a disproportionate effect on women; we should be in no doubt about that. In part, that is due to the fact that women tend to suffer disproportionately from disadvantage and poverty already, and the recession will affect them even more. In the same sense, the economic policies being pursued by the Executive have a disproportionate effect on women who are overly dependent on under-funded public services. We must stress that point as well.

We must be very vigilant and ensure that, if they are struggling to maintain their levels of employment, companies handle the situation fairly. Women must not

bear the brunt of redundancies as a result of wrong assumptions and the traditional, but outmoded, view that men are the breadwinners. We have moved past those outmoded attitudes, but it is important that we remain aware of the dangers.

It is important that the Government have a proper strategy and that we recognise the breadth of Departments that are involved. The Department for Social Development has an important role to play through its voluntary and community unit, yet a whole range of Departments is involved. I want to see women's issues become a core element of the current review of economic development policy.

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

Dr Farry: There is much to do, and my party is happy to support the motion, although we may be leaning towards supporting the amendment at this stage.

Mr Shannon: It is not often that I speak on women's issues, but I am here to support my colleagues and their proposed amendment. I am very pleased that the proposer of the motion has accepted the proposed amendment.

In every fair and modern society, there must be parity among all classes, creeds, colours and sexes. Any hint of partiality towards cannot be tolerated if society is to move forward. Gone are the days of the boys-only club — of which, I am sure, I was a member of one or two — and of rules that excluded women from certain occupations. That is a positive step forward. Therefore, if it appears that any kind of sexism is impacting on funding for women's organisations, a review must take place to ensure that that is not the case.

The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, on which I sit, has tried, through its child-poverty recommendations, to advance the notion that adequate childcare provision is needed in order to enable ladies to return to work. That is one of our priorities; it is something that we are trying to do; and it is something on which we are making progress. I hope that we begin to get a response.

We would not accept it if ethnic minorities were being sidelined, nor should there be any sidelining on the grounds of gender. For that reason, as I said, I support the proposed amendment, and I am happy that the proposer of the motion has done likewise. Some Members suggested that a review to assess the situation and ensure that there is parity across the board would focus solely on funding. It is not all about funding, because much of the funding is in place — there is duplication. Rather, it is about ensuring that that funding goes to the right place and is spread across the Province.

Many women's organisations play a large role in the rural community, and, in many cases, they are the backbone of that community. Much good work is done by organisations such as the Women's Orange Order, which helps the sisterhood as much as it can. I hope that the Women's Orange Lodge receives the same funding as any other group, and I will be very pleased if that is the case; however, we will have to wait and see whether the motion delivers. Another group that does not receive deserved recognition is the Women's Institute. Has it been funded correctly? I presume that it has not been. It is very important that the work that it does in supporting the community and its membership be recognised through funding. Questions have been raised to which we seek answers.

There is a desire for Northern Ireland to move forward, and that means all people being equal. If that is in doubt, a review is necessary. It is my fervent desire that that be done soon, in order to put any questions to bed. Any findings can then be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Dolores Kelly mentioned rural poverty, and the money that is available through DARD to tackle it. In her shotgun approach, she fired off a couple of salvos, and everybody got hit — including the Member herself from the ricochets. However, it was very important that she made those comments, because it is imperative that we all look at ourselves and at how we deliver.

I commend the Ballybeen Women's Centre, a group that has worked extremely hard to try to help the people in that area. It has been industriously involved in ensuring that ladies can obtain qualifications, and its awards ceremony is an indication of what it can achieve. That is one of the organisations to which funding is not as active as it should be.

Ms Lo: Will the Member agree that those groups provide real value for money? They help to get women into jobs and training, which is good for the local economy as a whole.

Mr Shannon: I agree with the Member's comments. It is important to have those types of groups all over Northern Ireland, which is what the DUP amendment seeks to achieve.

Before any departmental action is enforced, we must ascertain what is currently being done and whether it is sufficient. I support the amendment, and I ask the House to support it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. I have been under a misapprehension for many years, because I understood that the SDLP claimed to be a socialist party, yet its Minister voted for the Programme for Government and the Budget. I hope that Mrs Kelly is not too bored, because she obviously had nothing else to do with her afternoon but sit in the Chamber

and listen to what might be considered to be an important debate on women's groups and the need for funding.

As with many groups in the voluntary sector, women's groups continue to have great difficulty in accessing adequate funding to continue their invaluable work in the community. Funding for those groups continues to diminish, and, recently, some of them have received no funding at all.

The Department for Social Development has lead responsibility for supporting the regional infrastructure of the women's sector. There has been no agreed analysis of the sector's needs with regard to infrastructure and, in particular, the infrastructure that is required to support its capacity to deliver services to the disadvantaged communities that are most in need of them.

In November 2008, the Assembly debated voluntary sector funding, and it was accepted that the social compact has been largely aspirational and ineffectual. Anyone who has been involved in the voluntary sector for many years, as I have been, will be aware of its contribution and the fact that funding for it is piecemeal. That cannot be allowed to continue. The absence of a statutory basis for the compact has limited the impact of practical attempts at its implementation.

NICVA is calling for legislation to replace the compact, and it has called on the Minister for Social Development to introduce a pre-legislative policy paper. That would be, in effect, a White Paper, which would provide the context for policy and funding relationships with the voluntary and community sector. However, the Minister seems to be lukewarm about agreeing to that request, and she has not given any specific answers on what she intends to do about it.

Many women's groups such as Women's Aid and the Rural Women's Network do invaluable work in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. Indeed, I am saddened that Newry, along with areas such as Strabane, was not mentioned by Miss McIlveen. Women's Aid in Newry does an important and valuable job, but the funding it receives is also piecemeal. It receives some funding from the Housing Executive under the homelessness strategy. Funding is aimed at specific areas, and other aspects of its work are not taken into account. The organisation does other important work apart from —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member acknowledge the fact that the strategy to tackle domestic violence, particularly support for Women's Aid, is the responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr Brady: The objective of this debate is to focus all of the Departments who are responsible for funding towards a common cause. In addition to Women's Aid and the Rural Women's Network, Home-Start does invaluable work with childcare in my area. Those groups need sustainable funding.

The Executive now have the opportunity to introduce a pre-legislative policy paper that would define and clarify the relationship between Government and the community sector. The role and value of women's groups should be recognised, and there should be a firm commitment to multi-annual outcome-focused funding. The diversity of the voluntary and community sector should be recognised, and the Assembly should view that sector, and particularly women's groups, as an essential requirement to the health and well-being of society.

4.30 pm

For many years, the voluntary sector has lobbied for mainstream funding, which is something on which all the relevant Ministers should focus their attention. Fundamental questions must be asked about the role of the voluntary and community sector, and what Government wants and expects from it. The role of women's groups and their effect on the community cannot be overestimated. It is incumbent on all of us to give those irreplaceable groups access to proper and sustainable funding that will allow them to continue to fulfil vital roles in our communities. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who moved the motion and the amendment. We support both. I also want to put on record my appreciation of the wide range of work that is done by women's groups across communities. I will touch later on some of the work that is done in the area of health, because I sit on the Committee for Health. Domestic violence, sexual health and well-being, and childcare — all of those are hugely important issues.

The proper, long-term funding of all groups has been one of the big issues that I have encountered since becoming a member of the Health Committee. The fact that so many groups spend so much time chasing after funding for a year, 18 months or two years is a big pitfall and is not a productive use of time and energy. We must look at the whole system of how, and for how long, groups obtain funding.

Another huge concern is the inequality of funding. Some groups get money and others do not. The rationale behind such decisions must be examined in order to establish how funding is distributed.

I accept what other Members have said in the debate. It is very much about getting cross-governmental working, not just here, but across councils, the police —

Mr B McCrea: Is the Member aware of the Atlas Women's Centre in Lisburn, its excellent work in encouraging many women to develop their lives, and the challenge that it faces through lack of funding? The centre somehow failed to win support in a recent city council funding package. Does the Member agree with me that this policy should apply to local government,

which should be encouraged to prioritise funding for women's aid associations?

Mr McCallister: My honourable friend raised an important point — the closer to the ground that we bring these issues, the much easier it is to gain access, to solve them, and to work with all parts of Government.

I also draw Members' attention to a round-table event between the Department of Health and the police that will take place at Stormont. It will look at some of the excellent work that has been, and continues to be, done, with a particular focus on domestic violence.

The debate is about creating the conditions in which Government, local government, the police and community groups work together. I am at a loss to know — it is a bit of a mystery — how cutting our links with Britain would do anything in that regard. We are, however, used to Ms Anderson making such remarks in all her speeches.

Apart from distributing resources fairly around the various groups, the other big factor is that those groups have to be delivering something. There must be a mechanism by which to evaluate them. That was certainly highlighted in the Health Committee's report on suicide and self-harm. Many groups must be evaluated in order to ensure that they serve a purpose and represent best value for public money.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member join me in commending the Health Minister for his initiatives on domestic abuse and domestic violence, particularly the campaign over the Christmas period and liaison with the police, and for the real sense of engagement that those initiatives that involve the Policing Board and the Health Minister have given to Women's Aid and other women's groups, which feel that they are being listened to at long last?

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for my colleague's intervention. It is a hugely important issue.

Ms Lo: It must be borne in mind that women's groups that receive funding from the Peace programmes, DSD or other Government sources are subject to stringent monitoring.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for that important point. Monitoring and evaluation of groups must be carried out to ensure that money is used well, and all Members will have examples in their constituencies. Funding must not become centred in Belfast or Londonderry; there are huge problems in rural areas.

I am pleased that the House is unlikely to divide on this important motion.

Mr A Maginness: I wonder where some Sinn Féin Members would be if Margaret Ritchie were not in the Executive, because they spend most of their time

attacking her and little time criticising the Finance Minister, who introduced a flawed Budget that is Thatcherite in essence.

Mrs D Kelly: A Budget for which Mickey Brady voted.

Mr A Maginness: I will come to that point in a moment. A junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister agrees that the Budget is Thatcherite.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; I am having fun. I am aware that the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Brady is agitated. My friend reminds me that he voted for the Budget. The complaints and implicit criticisms of the Budget with regard to women's organisations are well placed. However, the Member and his colleagues must, of course, take responsibility for that Budget and for the very criticisms that he has made about funding for women's organisations.

As far as the DSD Minister and the Health Minister are concerned, their Departments have funded women's organisations. Although demand can never be satisfied, £2.9 million is not bad going. Of course more money should be made available. However, the DSD Minister must, at least, get credit for the money that she has already distributed. I am aware that it is impossible for Sinn Féin to see beyond the fact that the DSD Minister belongs to the SDLP.

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Ms McCann never takes interventions from me, so why should I take an intervention from her? When she learns to allow interventions from other Members, I will allow her an intervention.

The children and young people's fund has been abolished, which has resulted in the underfunding of crucial support for families. Again, that was supported by Sinn Féin. If its members are critical of that, they must examine their own record on the matter and criticise the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which brought about that reversal of policy.

As regards DSD's contribution to the Foyle constituency, I point out to Ms Anderson — if she were not more interested in her private conversation — that, at a rough glance, well over £300,000 has gone to women's organisations in that constituency. No credit is ever given for that sort of funding.

Neighbourhood renewal is also demand-led, and if there is criticism that money is not being used, it is because the demand has not been properly assessed and presented. *[Interruption.]* Does the Member wish to make an intervention?

Mr F McCann: During the December monitoring round, £1.6 million of neighbourhood renewal money was handed back. That money could have been used.

Mr A Maginness: I hope that I will be given another minute in which to speak.

My point is that neighbourhood renewal is demanded. If money is not being used, it is because the demand is not being properly presented, through programmes, to the Department. If the demand had been properly presented, the money would have been used.

Mrs D Kelly: For the record, in the November monitoring round, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister handed back more than £1 million from the Ebrington Barracks and ILEX project. Indeed, only last week, OFMDFM handed back thousands of pounds from a north Belfast community empowerment network.

Mr F McCann: There was no November monitoring round.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that like the children's fund, this is a serious and cross-cutting issue? Does he also agree that the removal of the children's fund was yet another power grab by the DUP/Sinn Féin axis that went badly wrong? The people who have suffered as a result are the very women's groups that we are trying to help today.

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with that point, and I am grateful to my friend for raising it. That reinforces the point — *[Interruption.]*

Unfortunately, Sinn Féin Members suffer from a form of political amnesia. I am working on the formula for an antidote. If any medical or political experts can assist me, I will produce a remedy that will cure them. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Purvis: The Kilcooley Women's Centre provides essential services for residents of the Kilcooley estate and surrounding area. It is a glowing success story. Of the hundreds of women who have participated in the centre's programmes, almost 900 have achieved qualifications, and more than 600 have progressed into further and higher education. Dozens more have been able to achieve full-time or part-time work as a result of their participation.

One of the most remarkable achievements of Kilcooley Women's Centre, and other similar organisations, is that it has accomplished all that with no core Government funding. Despite its proven track record, Kilcooley Women's Centre struggles to get adequate funding to deliver critical services to the area. It is the same story for other women's organisations, such as the Walkway Women's Centre and the Greenway Women's Centre, which provide essential programmes

and services to assist women to acquire the information and to develop the skills that they need to enjoy full participation in education, society, the job market and, hopefully, politics.

There has been some progress. A number of women's organisations now receive core funding through the Department of Health and the Department for Social Development's community investment fund. In some places, moneys have been found to cover the cost of childcare, a provision that is critical to helping women into education and training.

However, women's organisations remain largely dependent on short-term, project-based funding. That leaves them in a constant state of start-up and shutdown, and having to manage high levels of financial insecurity. The uncertainty can mean that the skills and experience of valuable staff is lost too easily, which ladders an organisation with the additional burden of having to train new staff when funding eventually returns.

Those organisations are left in that state despite unequivocal evidence of the value that their services bring to society. Women's organisations are on the front line of dealing with complex issues and connecting with hard-to-reach women, particularly those struggling with deprivation and exclusion.

The community education provided by women's organisations is critical in encouraging women to go into further and higher education. Unfortunately, the Department for Employment and Learning has been slow to recognise that fact and even slower to fund it. The Peace programmes recognised that contribution and funded such programmes directly. However, the Department for Employment and Learning has, unfortunately, not reached the same conclusion and ties those programmes to further education colleges, which many women are unable or still unwilling to attend.

4.45 pm

Women who undertake education and training in the community give much back to those communities. In turn, that builds social capital in the area. Investing in community-based education and training is an investment in the entire community, not only in the individual who completes the programme. As such, those organisations' work is critical to achieving the priorities outlined in the Programme for Government. There will be no growth without the development of essential skills and social capital in our most deprived and excluded areas. We know that providing women with the resources, support and skills to lift them out of poverty has the potential to enable entire families to escape poverty — a key goal established by the Executive.

Funding for other essential services is starting to disappear. The childcare provision that has been funded by the Department for Social Development has made a real difference, but those moneys might disappear

next month. Groups with childcare places that are funded through the neighbourhood renewal programme have been informed that the money will not be available after 1 April 2009. Our society cannot develop without considering the well-being of women. When I look around the Chamber, I have no doubt that politics in Northern Ireland could benefit from the increased participation of women.

The amendment appears to be a Tippex clause. It may seem to add an element of fiscal structure. However, in reality, certain Departments may use it to white-out the intentions of the original motion. I hope that I am wrong, but I remain to be convinced and will, therefore, abstain from the vote on the amendment. I support the motion and encourage the Executive to engage on this critical issue.

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Donaldson): I am thankful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I commend the Members who proposed the motion and those who tabled the amendment. Ms Purvis was absent when the proposer agreed to accept the amendment. Therefore, she cannot abstain from the vote on the amendment, because there is now, in effect, a single motion. She will have to revise her voting strategy.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister appreciates that discussion has taken place and that a consensus has been reached on the motion. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. I will briefly discuss some Members' comments.

Ms Anderson moved the motion and accepted the amendment that stands in the name of my friend the Member for Strangford Miss McIlveen. I have taken careful note of Ms Anderson's valid points on issues that must be addressed, which we will consider in conjunction with other relevant Departments. Indeed, we will seek to address issues of genuine concern that have been raised by other Members during the debate.

In her intervention during Ms Anderson's speech, Mrs Kelly said that OFMDFM was delaying the release of Peace III funding. That is not the case. The Department has approved an award of £2,766,000 to the Training for Women Network, and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) issued a formal written offer on 22 December 2008. The period of assistance is 30 months, and the SEUPB has already made an initial payment of £400,000. I hope that Mrs Kelly updates her research.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. Does he acknowledge that the decision was reached only after much lobbying by the Training for Women Network and has been awaiting the approval of the First Minister and deputy First Minister since August 2008?

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): If Mrs Kelly was aware of the facts, she would know that there were legal challenges to the European funding. Therefore, the Department was not at fault over the delay.

In a democracy, if people want to challenge the funding process, they must be given the opportunity to do so. Scoring cheap points, which are not based on reality, is unhelpful in a debate such as this.

I commend the comments of my friend the Member for Strangford Miss McIlveen. She is right to point out that there is a concern in the sector about the under-representation of Protestant women and groups from the Protestant side of the community in regard to the distribution of funding. That must be considered, and we must review the distribution of funding to identify gaps in that provision. Miss McIlveen and other Members, including Ms Purvis, mentioned as an example the Kilcooley Women's Centre and the excellent work that it undertakes in north Down. I had the privilege of meeting representatives from Kilcooley, and I am aware of their achievement. It is important that such groups are able to compete for mainstream funding and that they get their fair share.

The Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs spoke about a gap in funding, and said that that was because of the ending of the Executive programme funds. During one of his several interventions, the Member for Lagan Valley Basil McCrea said that the decision to end the children's fund was a power grab by the DUP and Sinn Féin. In fact, if Mr McCrea knew anything about Government, he would know that the children's fund was controlled by OFMDFM, but that that control was given up, and the funding was redistributed to other Departments. That is called power sharing, not power grabbing. The only grabbing going on in the Chamber today is headline grabbing by some Members who really ought to check their facts before they make such silly, nonsensical comments. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The junior Minister has the Floor.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): Mrs Kelly referred to a delay in the gender equality strategy — we are seeking to take that forward. All the Departments have provided OFMDFM with contributions to the gender equality action plan. We will submit proposals to the Executive later this year, together with a report on implementing the strategy. However, again, Mrs Kelly is wrong to suggest that the gender advisory panel has not met; in fact, it met in January 2009. Again, if Members were to check their facts before making contributions in the Chamber, we may have a more reasoned and rational debate.

My friend the Member for Strangford Mr Shannon praised the work of women's groups, such as the

Ballybeen Women's Centre in his constituency. He is absolutely right to refer to the excellent work that it does.

The Member for Lagan Valley Mr McCrea referred to the Atlas Women's Centre in his and my constituency. I am aware of its work, and I am hopeful that funding will be forthcoming shortly from DSD to enable it to continue that very important work in the Lisburn area.

Mr B McCrea: Will the junior Minister join with me in calling for all sources of funding to be sought for that excellent organisation? There are a number of other sources, and perhaps we can work together on that particular issue.

The junior Minister (Mr Donaldson): Indeed, I am happy to power share with my friend from Lagan Valley, and to take joint responsibility for seeking to help the Atlas Women's Centre.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Brady was happy to acknowledge that he had been a volunteer. *[Laughter.]* He also said that he had engaged in voluntary work in his local community. We commend him for that.

There were contributions from other Members, including Mr McCallister from South Down; Mr Maginness — who made some points of which we will take note — and Ms Purvis, to whom I have already referred.

Mr Farry said that the problem lay in the funding of the sector. In fact, many of the women's groups that I, and others, have talked to said that their main concern is the fair distribution of funding. That is the problem that the motion seeks to address. It is to ensure the equitable distribution of available funds.

I pay tribute to the work of women's groups across Northern Ireland, and several of those groups have been mentioned already. Miss McIlveen talked about the Belfast and Lisburn branches of Women's Aid. Recently, I had the privilege of visiting the Women's Aid centre in Lisburn, which does excellent work in providing sheltered accommodation for women who have been victims of domestic violence. It is important that we ensure that there is a fair distribution of funding to organisations such as Women's Aid.

I commend the Department for Social Development for its work on women's issues. The total funding provided by that Department this year is almost £2.9 million, which is intended to deliver services, including education and training support — we have heard how important that is — access to childcare, respite childcare and referrals, information and advice, counselling, healthcare, personal development and family support groups. Those are all important areas of work that must be taken forward. We will continue to work with DSD and other Departments, including the Department of

Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education, to ensure that we have a co-ordinated approach to those matters.

We will examine ways of improving those services, because there is always room for improvement in Government. Indeed, that is implicit in the motion, which we have accepted along with the amendment. We must do things better, and ensure that the work that is taken forward by women's groups is funded, supported and provided for, so that women have access to services, educational support and childcare facilities that will enable them to progress and to develop at a personal and family level. OFMDFM wants that work to be given a high priority.

Let us not overlook the contribution of groups that support women's enterprise. Networking and support are crucial to small and medium-sized enterprises in surviving the current economic downturn, and much of that work has to take place outside Government. However, Government also have a role in harnessing and supporting entrepreneurial talent and nurturing sound business skills wherever they are found in the community. In working with women's organisations to meet the Programme for Government commitments, OFMDFM will continue to engage with Executive colleagues, including DSD, given its key role.

I commend the proposers of the motion and the Members who tabled the amendment. We note carefully what has been said in the debate by all Members, and we need to afford the matter the appropriate priority and to secure the best possible return on investment for women and for the communities to which they contribute across all funding streams. To that end, as I said, we will bring an interim report to the Executive on funding for women's organisations. That will signal the continuing direction of travel and will inform the comprehensive review that will form part of the mid-term review of the Executive's gender equality strategy.

Mr Weir: The debate has been, largely, very constructive. Although it has risen above sixth-form quality, I am sad that some Members felt that they were wasting their time. I was disappointed with the SDLP's contribution to the debate. Indeed, to use Mrs Kelly's words, I could engage in tit-for-tat exchanges and spend the entire five minutes dealing with the inadequacies of DSD on this issue. However, I will concentrate on the more positive aspects of what is an important debate.

5.00 pm

Most Members who spoke acknowledged the valuable work that women's organisations have done and continue to do in the areas of childcare, training, capacity building and education.

Given that several Members mentioned it and that I am a Member for North Down, it would be remiss of

me not to welcome, in particular, the excellent work of the Kilcooley Women's Centre. Indeed, my colleague Miss McIlveen provided detailed statistics about the centre, which Ms Purvis later reiterated virtually word for word; however, it is good to see that the PUP and the DUP are singing from the same hymn sheet for once.

As Dr Farry said, we live in a changing environment; consequently, it is important that we secure the maximum support for women's organisations. Ms Purvis, Mr Beggs and Mr McCallister also made that point.

One of the problems that has beset funding — and one of the issues that the amendment seeks to raise — has been the piecemeal and somewhat temporary way in which it was granted and how that has prevented an opportunity for joined-up support for women's organisations.

The amendment deals with three aspects, which will perhaps reassure Ms Purvis. The purpose of the amendment is to add to the motion, not to take away from it; that theme was developed throughout the debate. The first aspect is mapping. In proposing the amendment, Miss McIlveen highlighted the fact that the last substantive mapping happened in 2001. Indeed, many of those who work in the sector question how thorough the 2001 mapping was.

Leaving everything else aside, it is time that we had another thorough process, because the existing one is eight years old. The aim is to provide a joined-up approach. Although DSD provides the biggest single source of funding, various Departments provide different funds.

It is important that we provide as much joined-up action as possible. We must also provide access to information, particularly for smaller women's groups that perhaps do not have the same resources as the well-funded groups that have a plethora of different funding sources, organisations and Departments. Those small groups must be able to access information in a way that is most beneficial to them. Therefore, the vital purpose of the mapping exercise is to take stock of where we are and to examine the direction in which we are going.

The second aspect of the amendment is the need for the most effective use of resources. In these difficult circumstances, it is important that we get the best possible value for every penny that goes into the women's sector. That means that we must operate in a strategic direction and ensure that services are not duplicated. Indeed, as someone put it to me, it is not simply a question of re-inventing the wheel; rather it is about putting added value into everything that we do.

The third aspect of the amendment is the need for equitable funding. That is not, as has been alleged, tit for tat, because it crosses the sectarian divide. It is undoubtedly the case that some of the funding has

been very Belfast- and Londonderry-centred, as shown by the mapping exercise.

Some Members mentioned the investment that DSD made; however, not a penny of it went to women's centres in Fermanagh. We must ensure that the allocation of resources is equitable. Several Members said that we have an inclusive process that ensures that everyone can access resources and that the valuable work of women's organisations is supported in the best possible way. That is the purpose of the amendment, and it marries closely with the motion itself. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. Much has been said about the contribution that women's organisations and groups make to society. In introducing the motion, my colleague Martina Anderson set out the types of contributions that those groups make. She said that community-based women's organisations have a key role to play in tackling social disadvantage and deprivation.

She said that we can make all the strategies that we want, but those strategies will not matter if people and groups on the ground do not receive funding. We have listened to a lot of debate, and there is agreement that women constitute a diverse group and have many talents and experiences in every aspect of life. No one denied that women's organisations and groups are experiencing a funding crisis, both at a policy-making level and the community-based level at which those front-line and essential services are delivered.

I was somewhat disappointed that Michelle McIlveen flagged up the funding that is available, rather than the lack of funding. However, I agree with her that the funding is too piecemeal and that there is a lack of a coherent strategy. The mapping exercise will hopefully firm up a strategy. My colleague Mickey Brady talked about the wider community and voluntary sector being a key social partner that works with Government to deliver social and economic change. In that respect, I agree with the junior Minister that the SDLP contribution was very disappointing, given the seriousness of this issue. The SDLP chose to attack various parties in the Chamber instead of showing a united front in support of women's funding.

It was also acknowledged that the women's sector is well placed to deliver services. Many Members talked about the fact that that sector has delivered those services for many years and how the lack of dedicated funding is having a major impact on those services. Dawn Purvis outlined the difficulties that those women's groups and organisations underwent to secure funding. She also talked about the quality of services that those bodies provide. She suggested that they connect and access women who are hard to reach, and I agree. Very

often, women who do not feel confident — such as young mothers — would feel better going to a locally based women's centre to train and learn skills, rather than going to a college.

Many people raised the issue of affordable quality childcare and its importance. Roy Beggs talked about that, as did Stephen Farry and Dawn Purvis. Jim Shannon talked about how women in rural communities are excluded. That is a very important issue, particularly in relation to the lack of affordable quality childcare in rural communities. That adds to women's social exclusion.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I see that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is with us. I understand that DARD has a rural childcare and anti-poverty strategy. Has Jennifer McCann's party colleague shared with her when that strategy might be published?

Ms J McCann: I do not have any information about that. However, in the rural communities —

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry for interrupting. Unlike the previous Agriculture Minister — Dolores Kelly's party colleague Brid Rodgers — does the Member acknowledge that the Agriculture Minister is investing in women for the first time ever? Is that not to be welcomed? Dolores should say something nice before the day ends. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms McCann should continue.

Ms J McCann: Mention was made of the role of women in family life. That comes through in many of the debates that we hold. We often talk about the role that women have in caring for children and elderly parents. I mention that because the economic downturn has affected advice services in women's organisations. More than ever, there is a clear need for advice services to be made available to people; particularly to those people and families who find themselves in debt. There is a need for specialist debt advisors, based in local communities, to whom people could go for that type of help. Women's centres could provide that help.

Once again, we are talking about chasing after bits and pieces of funding, when people's time could be spent more productively — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Ms McCann has the Floor. There are too many private conversations going on.

Ms J McCann: John McCallister said that we must consider core funding groups and organisations that deliver those services.

Junior Minister Donaldson said that he would address some concerns, and I welcome his announcement of an interim report on women's funding, which is a good development. One of the UN Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) main recommendations is

for Governments to provide increased and sustained funding to organisations that are involved in working towards women's equality. In addition, it has called for information about that funding so that it can be included in its next report. Therefore, although individual Departments are responsible for ensuring that their policies are gender proofed, OFMDFM bears overall responsibility for gender equality, and that is why Sinn Féin is calling for it to monitor departmental actions in respect of the CEDAW commitments. Therefore, I am glad to hear that the interim report is forthcoming.

Finally, given that women's organisations and groups are seeking the Assembly's help, it is important the Assembly demonstrates leadership. Unfortunately, given the tone of some Members who spoke in the debate, I am sure that many of those groups and organisations will be disappointed. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern about the number of women's organisations that have been unable to secure funding to deliver services for the community; and calls on the Executive to initiate a cross cutting review to ensure (i) that the current mapping of the provision of services is adequate; (ii) the most effective use of resources to address the identified needs of the sector; and (iii) the equitable distribution of those resources.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Closure of Maghera High School

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Armstrong: I oppose the closure of Maghera High School, so I am here to encourage the Minister of Education to keep it open for the foreseeable future. The decision by the Minister and the North Eastern Education and Library Board to close the school has left people in Maghera and the surrounding area distraught.

Anger and sadness are coupled with the belief that the school could have been saved, had Minister Ruane, the Department of Education and the North Eastern Education and Library Board been prepared to work flexibly with the school to keep it open. Instead, teachers, pupils and parents were pressurised into the situation in which they now find themselves.

Maghera High School plays a crucial role in the town's wider community and in surrounding areas, including Curran, Cullnady, Upperlands, Tobermore, Tamlaght O'Crilly and Inishrush. For many years, the school has served local people well, and its closure will be resisted by all right-thinking people.

As the only controlled-sector school in the town, Maghera High School mainly serves the local Protestant community, which is a minority in the area and already feels vulnerable and isolated. During the Troubles, the community survived the onslaught of republican violence, only to face the closure of its school at a time of peace. That is shameful.

Due to its location, Maghera High School impacts little on traffic congestion in the town — the same could not be said for other schools in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the school is a prime example of a community asset. It has a swimming pool that is used by more than 700 pupils from other schools in the area, and it serves the entire community. In the House, we hear much talk about a shared future. However, thanks to the decision to close Maghera High School, it will be extremely difficult to have a shared future in Maghera.

To close that school, especially at this time, sends out all kinds of negative messages to the local Protestant community in Maghera. Feelings are running high, and I have even heard some people say that what is happening in Maghera High School amounts to educational ethnic cleansing.

5.15 pm

Much more could have been done to help the school to survive if the Department of Education and certain senior officials had been determined that it should remain open. Why, therefore, is the school closing? Mention will, no doubt, be made of the problem of falling rolls, but that is a common problem in rural areas, and Maghera High School is not unique in that regard. The small number of pupils at the school was, in fact, one of the reasons why some parents chose to send their children to Maghera High School, but that parental choice has been removed.

Those who made the decision to close the school did not take due account of the number of houses that are being built in the school's traditional catchment areas of Maghera and its rural hinterlands such as Cullnady and Upperlands. Those new houses provide the real prospect of increasing the numbers of pupils at Maghera High School in coming years, and that factor should not have been overlooked.

It is my belief that the school was run down deliberately. Furthermore, school-bus routes were introduced, which collected children from Maghera's outlying villages, but bypassed Maghera town, and travelled onwards to Magherafelt. That could be only detrimental to Maghera High School. Once rumours began to circulate that the school was in danger of closing, parents, understandably, became nervous and chose not to send their children to the school, because they feared closure and upheaval to their children's education. As a result, the eventual closure became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of the most shameful aspects of the issue is that Maghera High School is not being closed because it is in a state of disrepair or because it is a building in which pupils' education would have suffered due to their being taught in classrooms that were not fit for purpose. On the contrary; it is a school of superior and sound buildings. That is in stark contrast to the venue in Magherafelt to which the Maghera High School pupils are expected to transfer in the autumn.

Ironically, it is Magherafelt High School that is in great need of repair, and we have been awaiting progress for some time. The original consultation document that was issued in November 2007 announced that planning for a new £10.5 million post-primary school on the site of Magherafelt High School was at an advanced stage, and that site works were expected to commence in mid-2008 — this is 2009 — with the school due to open in 2010. There was always no chance of that happening. The best-case scenario is that the much-needed school might be ready in September 2011.

Any progress at Magherafelt, however belated, is welcome. However, what about the current and future

pupils of Maghera High School? Even if one were to accept that Maghera High School should be closed and its pupils accommodated elsewhere, it defies logic to transfer them from a perfectly good set of school buildings to what will, effectively, be temporary classrooms on a building site. That will do nothing to bring out the best in any pupil. One must not forget that the pupils' education and well-being should be the priority in this issue.

Maghera High School should, at the very least, be kept open until such times as Magherafelt High School is totally rebuilt and in a fit state to accommodate the Maghera pupils in a permanent accommodation and provide them with the first-class school and education that all pupils deserve. It is ironic that that was the recommendation that was passed to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, but in February 2008, it decided, on a vote of 18 to 5, to accept an education committee recommendation to close Maghera High School on 31 August 2009, or as soon as possible thereafter. However, a recommendation was made that Maghera High School should not be closed until the new school at Magherafelt was completed, but the board did not vote on that.

The possibility of continuing to use Maghera High School until the new building is completed at Magherafelt was discussed at length but, as I said, no decision was taken. I cannot help but feel that that was an opportunity lost. A strong suspicion remains that there were those in the board who had made up their minds to close the school and that that was the only option that they were prepared to entertain. Even so, it is not too late for common sense to prevail and for the Minister to reverse her decision.

It is a crying shame that those buildings are being abandoned. If a bit of vision were shown, not only could the school be kept open, but it could be used by other agencies to deliver training, for example. That idea would require further exploration and the involvement of the relevant Departments; however, surely it would be preferable to retain a community asset than to settle for the sight of an empty school being vandalised.

Many people talk a good game about respecting rights, particularly the rights of a child, but what about the rights of the children at Maghera High School? Surely they have the right not to have their school life disrupted and to complete their education in a school that is fit for purpose.

I cannot accept that the concept of a shared future is advanced by removing Protestant secondary school pupils from Maghera. Over the years, the high school has built up links with St Patrick's College in Maghera, with the two schools participating in joint initiatives and events such as careers conventions and presentations by the police on road safety. Such events have provided

excellent opportunities for social interaction and for promoting good community relations among all the young people of the area.

As I stated earlier, the school is a prime example of a community asset. It has a swimming pool that is used by more than 700 pupils from other schools in the area, thus serving the entire community. Allowing that facility to be lost hardly demonstrates a commitment to a shared future.

The closure is wrong on so many levels. It will have a detrimental effect on pupils who are already at the school, as it will condemn them to a period of study in temporary classrooms on a building site. It will signal to the Protestant community of Maghera and the surrounding district that they have no future in the town, and it will have a detrimental effect on community relations in the area.

Once again, I urge the Minister to revisit the issue, even at this late stage, and at least keep Maghera High School open until Magherafelt High School is up and running and fully able to meet the needs of the children of that area.

Mr I McCrea: I thank my colleague from Mid Ulster for securing the Adjournment debate. It seems that we have the same interests in that I, too, requested a similar debate; however, I think that he has used his position and influence on the Business Committee to secure his. Either way, we both agree that the issue needed our attention.

It is unfortunate that we must debate the Minister of Education's decision to close Maghera High School. The decision is an insult to the minority Protestant community in Maghera, and I suspect that that is one of the motives that drove the decision. We have debated many issues in the House since devolution was restored; however, this evening, we are debating one of the most important issues affecting the teachers and pupils of Maghera High School as well as the parents of those pupils and the wider community in Maghera.

The decision to close the school has been the worst-kept secret of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. When considering the closure of the school, that education board forced parents to take a long-term decision in the interests of their children and to enrol them in other nearby schools. That is, in effect, how the demise of Maghera High School began.

For over a year, I, and my DUP colleagues on Magherafelt District Council, have continually opposed the closure of Maghera High School. My colleague Councillor Anne Forde tabled a motion calling on the council's support for the status quo to remain. Her motion received unanimous support, including that of councillors from the Minister of Education's party. My colleagues and I wrote to every member of the education and library board, asking

them to vote in support of the retention of the school. Along with representatives of the school's board of governors, teachers and parents, we met the board's chief executive. A group, including colleagues from the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party, also formed a cross-party delegation that met the Minister.

I also spoke to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and he raised the issue in that forum. However, to date, we have not been able to change the mind of the Minister. The number of pupils at the school has been steadily declining over the past several years because of the school's uncertain future: in 2006, there were 200 students; in 2007, the number fell to 150; and in the current school year of 2008-09, the number stands at 134. That latest decline was caused by a combination of sixth-year pupils having to attend another school to take A levels and a smaller intake of only 18 new students. Undoubtedly that is because many parents, faced with the stark reality of the Minister's decision, had to consider their children's future.

Maghera High School's determined efforts to improve community relations in the town include, as Mr Armstrong mentioned, making its swimming pool available to many pupils from both sections of the community. Maghera High School has co-operated, worked together and shared facilities with schools from across the religious divide, including St Patrick's College in Maghera and St Paul's College in Kilrea. Whereas Maghera High School has been on the front line of improving community relations in the town, this decision, and the Minister who made it, are on the front line of destroying them.

In 2007, Maghera High School outperformed 18 schools with its GCSE results, and from a detailed analysis of Northern Ireland statistics, it is evident that it serves the community.

In making her decision, the Minister gave little or no consideration to where the students will be placed when the school is closed. I remind the Minister that the newbuild for Magherafelt High School has not even commenced, and an additional two mobile classrooms must be erected to accommodate the extra pupils from Maghera High School. Given the poor condition of Magherafelt High School, it is unthinkable that almost 150 pupils will be sent from a school with good facilities to one in which the conditions are almost as bad as some in the Third World.

Furthermore, when the work on the newbuild commences, the children will be subjected to the building site that Magherafelt High School will become. Had the Minister put back the closure of Maghera High School until the new buildings were complete, at least she would have demonstrated that her decision had been thought through. However, as it stands, it is

evident to many, and particularly to the minority community in Maghera, that the decision is reckless.

I have tried to detail the concerns of my constituents and the needs of the community in Maghera. I remind the Minister of the statement that she released when announcing the sustainable schools policy:

"Schools will be reviewed against these criteria on a case-by-case basis to ensure all relevant facts, including local circumstances, are considered in the best interests of the education of our children and young people."

Today, I ask the Minister whether she will review the future of Maghera High School based on the "local circumstances" and in the "best interests of the education" of children in Maghera. I support the Committee for Education's request that the Minister review her decision based on that policy.

However, I, the teachers, pupils, parents and the feeder schools want the Minister to find some way to retain Maghera High School. Not to do so would be detrimental to the already dented community relations in Maghera; I hope that she will reconsider her decision.

5.30 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I pay tribute to Mr Armstrong for tabling the Adjournment debate, which I supported at the Business Committee. Perhaps some of the terminology used does not, in any way, facilitate the case for the school, but I will come to that later.

What is a school? A school is a centre of activity; a centre of excellence; a centre of education; a centre of social, and, of course, cultural activity. That all applies to Maghera High School. From my contacts with the school, I am especially aware of the good working relationship with St Patrick's College in Maghera, which also supports the school in its campaign to retain its function and existence in Maghera.

I have been contacted by local parents and teachers on behalf of Maghera High School, which is complimented highly, and I support entirely the retention of the school, given the high standard of education it has provided to the people of south Derry. Unfortunately, there has been much talk in the community, provoked mainly by the Department and the North Eastern Education and Library Board, about the uncertain future of the school. That has been referred to already, and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; it creates uncertainty in the community and uncertainty among parents and, therefore, diminishes the role of the school.

In this instance, it can be seen that there has been a long-term agenda. Those of us who attended meetings with the chief executive of the North Eastern Education and Library Board tried to maintain some degree of certainty in the community around the future and viability of the school and around the service that it

provides to the local community. Indeed, I and other colleagues attended a meeting with the Minister to present the case on behalf of the school.

The school has potential, the teachers have hope, and the community has a future. The Bain Report suggested that smaller schools which were the only option for a minority community in a particular area should not be subject to the same viability criteria quotas as other schools. The Minister should reflect on that, given the circumstances of Maghera High School in the south Derry area.

‘Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools’ has been mentioned and, according to page 47 of that policy, the matter should be revisited and reassessed in light of the criteria.

A point was made earlier — although referring to ethnic cleansing may not have been the best way to articulate it — about the shared future. We in the Assembly and the Executive should be doing all in our power to implement a shared future where communities can live and work together, and can learn to come to terms one with the other and respect each other’s difference. That difference can reflect and complement itself through education and be an enriching process.

The shared future policy provides for that diverse society, and anything that diminishes that should not be seen as a contribution to that shared future. In that circumstance, any proposal to close Maghera High School diminishes that shared future for the wider community in south Derry. For that reason, I support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr W McCrea: I thank Mr Armstrong for tabling the Adjournment debate. It is timely and important, and it has the tremendous support of the community in its desire to retain the services of Maghera High School. I have served as a member of Magherafelt District Council for 35 years and, during that time, Maghera High School has always been a beacon of educational excellence. I pay tribute to the staff who, under enormous pressure through the years of terrorism, retained a dignity and an excellence of education against great odds.

Indeed, there was a genuine belief that, for a period, ethnic cleansing of the Protestant community was being carried out in that area. Therefore, the school staff rightly deserve to be recognised for their contribution, particularly the cleaning staff — the school stands out from many others for its high standards of cleanliness and maintenance. I pay tribute to all those staff.

As a result of many years of terrorism, pupil numbers have decreased. However, that in itself did not reduce the numbers to their current level. In fact, the Department and the education and library board did more to destroy pupil numbers in Maghera than the terrorists ever managed to do over 30 years. The

Department and the board allowed a continual threat to hang over the school’s future, so parents had to ask themselves whether their child would be able to complete their education there or whether they would be moved to another school midway through their education. The board’s recent debate on the future of the school, its decision to recommend its closure and the Department of Education’s proposal to close it all helped to aid and abet a self-fulfilling prophecy, and pupil numbers decreased. That is a tragedy.

Let us be frank about the matter. The sustainable-schools policy has been mentioned, but rural proofing is also an important consideration. I am the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has said that every decision that Executive Ministers make should be rural proofed. In Maghera, it is a rural community that is under threat. If the proposal to close Maghera High School is being rural proofed and tested to see whether it offers sustainability, account must be taken of the fact that a small Protestant community educates its children there.

We have told the Minister that there is no justification whatsoever for closing the school, should she and the board decide to do that. I have heard the Minister say so many times that she is thinking about the children. However, the Minister is not thinking about the children if her suggestion is to move them from an excellent school — by virtue of the standard of education that it provides and the condition of its buildings — to mobile classrooms or to a building site in Magherafelt. That shows that no thought whatsoever has been given to the children. I beg the Department of Education and the Minister to reconsider that decision. In particular, I beg the board to reconsider its decision. Before the board took the decision, my colleagues and I wrote a letter to each individual board member, begging each one not to back the Department’s decision. The board must also carry a certain amount of responsibility for the proposed closure.

I ask the Minister and the board not to proceed with the foolish decision that they seem to be on track to take. I ask them not to remove children from a good school, which provides an excellent service and has well-maintained property, and not to move them to mobiles in Magherafelt. Magherafelt High School does not need repairing; it needs the brand-new school that Magherafelt was promised. It is absolutely impossible to move the children of Maghera High School to Magherafelt High School — there is no room for them there. There are already mobile classrooms at Magherafelt High School, so to add more would be to create an estate of mobiles, some of which are already falling to pieces.

In the time that I have left, I appeal to the Minister to reverse the decision. Moreover, I appeal to her at

least to give the community an assurance today that she will allow the school to remain open until the new school that has been promised to Magherafelt is built, so that children can be taught in new buildings and at an excellent facility.

I prefer that the school is kept in Maghera. The teachers there have provided an excellent education for the children under very difficult circumstances, and the parents have saluted that provision. No one wants a better education for children than their parents. I make a solemn appeal to the Minister: if she does not change her mind on closing the school, will she ensure that there will be no extra mobile classrooms in Magherafelt and that the children will be allowed to stay in the excellent school buildings in Maghera until the new school opens?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I did not intend to speak in the debate. However, having listened to certain contributions, I cannot help but respond. The comments of some Members in the debate are an example of how not to win friends and influence people.

The comments about sectarianism that were directed at the Minister and at the Department of Education cannot go unchallenged. The same Members who point a finger at the Minister and the Department fail to point that finger at the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which is where the development proposal came from. It was the board that drew up the development proposal, examined the school's case history and, as Mr Armstrong said, approved the proposal by a majority. The proposal was then sent to the Minister of Education for ratification. That is how school closures are brought about. At least, Mr McCrea Snr referred to the board's role; the other Members who spoke did not. Instead, they chose get involved in basic and naïve sectarian politics.

I have no doubt that all of the staff at Maghera High School are excellent — the mark of our education system is that the vast majority of people who work in it are dedicated. I also have no doubt that the school has provided excellent results in education. However, the fact is that pupil numbers have declined. We can talk about the conspiracy theories, or that that the Department of Education and the board have deliberately run the school down. However, I am confident that no one from those two bodies knocked on doors in Maghera and told parents not to send their children to the school because it would close.

There is another factor that has led to the demise of Maghera High School and other post-primary schools across the North, which has not been mentioned — our old friend, the grammar school system. I have no doubt that hundreds of children are being bussed out of Maghera to grammar schools. Those schools are

grammar schools in title, but they accept children who achieve a grade 'D' in their 11-plus exams. Therefore, they are all-ability, rather than grammar, schools, and they are no lesser schools for that. However, as a consequence, fine schools like Maghera High School suffer — the same thing is happening in Fermanagh, Belfast and other places.

Dr W McCrea: Does the Member not know that there are other schools with fewer pupil numbers than Maghera High School that are being allowed to remain open? Equality is required.

Mr O'Dowd: Each school must be judged on its own merits, and each development proposal from a board or the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools must be judged on its own merits. Parties supporting academic selection cannot complain when that system drives the closures of fine secondary schools across the North. There is an example of that in my constituency, in a community that needs its secondary school. I am deeply concerned that it will lose its secondary school, not because of the lack of fine buildings, fine teachers or an ethos, but because many parents are bussing their children out of the town to grammar schools 15 miles up the road.

Mr I McCrea: I accept what the Member says, and I have no information to doubt his description of the situation in his constituency. However, grammar schools are not the reason for the demise of Maghera High School.

I honestly believe that the North Eastern Education and Library Board continually held the threat, or the consideration, of closure over Maghera High School, and that is what drove parents to take a realistic decision for the future of their children.

5.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome that intervention. I am not saying that that is the sole reason for the decision, but it is a reason that cannot be ignored in the debate.

It must also be remembered that there are 50,000 empty school desks, which will have an effect on our school estate. Regrettably, there will be more debates of a similar nature in the Chamber, as Assembly Members, rightly, bring forward concerns about their local schools. However, as the school population falls, unfortunately, there will be school closures, which are driven by economics and by educational reasons.

The Executive and the Assembly are under increasing fiscal pressures. The Department of Finance and Personnel rightly expects all other Departments to run an efficient shop. The Minister of Education, or any other Minister, cannot run an efficient Department by keeping open financially unviable projects. I hate to refer to any school as a financial project, but, at the end of the day, finance comes into it. Therefore, the

Minister of Education and other Ministers are under pressure to ensure that the projects that they are running are financially viable. That is another reason why we will lose more schools.

I appeal to Members opposite to look at the entire picture when they are talking about rural school closures.

Mr B McCrea: I had always intended to speak on this topic, because I have visited the school. I have also written to the Minister about the issue, and I have raised it at the Committee for Education. I did not intervene during the debate — though I am quite capable of intervening, as Members will know — for fear of not making friends and of influencing people in the wrong way.

I understand that there are financial issues at stake. We accept that there has been a reduction in the number of pupils attending the school and that that will have some impact, but the issue is about a change of policy. When the North Eastern Education and Library Board considered the matter, it was doing so under a previous policy, which put finance at the very core of the issue. The new policy, which has been brought to us, looks at sustainable schools in a different way. It looks at the impact on culture in rural areas and a whole range of other issues, such as special needs, which, quite rightly, should be considered. The issue is not just about finance, although finance is important.

In all of the new criteria brought forward, Maghera High School achieved the highest possible score. It is a great school, and the building is not falling apart. It has excellent facilities, which are shared by the community, and they will be shared further. Therefore, when Mr O'Dowd told me to look to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, I did so. However, now that there is a new policy, it may be a good idea to review the school — which has a great deal of community support — against that accepted policy.

I asked the Minister if she would do that, and the Minister said — and I will stand corrected if I am wrong — that she felt that it was too little, too late, because the school had indicated its willingness to work with St Patrick's College, and it had identified the problems to do with the curriculum, staff cover and other issues. Nevertheless, the school has so much more to offer, and it has come forward with good ideas. The school was asked to bring forward ideas, and it suggested that an outreach centre could be set up for further education, because, in Magherafelt, which is some distance away, there are colleges and technical colleges, but people do not like to travel. Other Members mentioned the issue of travel, because it really affects people's uptake of services. Is it really reasonable to ask people to travel 10 or 15 miles from

Upperlands to another school? It is simply not the way to do things.

Mr I McCrea: I am not sure how often the Member travels through Magherafelt, but anyone who does so regularly will know that, at the best of times, it is a bottleneck in the mornings, afternoons and evenings. The added traffic, the increased numbers of buses and parents leaving off their children will further exacerbate our problem.

Mr B McCrea: The only time that I travel through Magherafelt, I add to the bottleneck. Usually, I am travelling somewhere else.

My visit to the school was an eye-opener. It is a great school with great teachers and great interaction with special needs. It is the sort of school to which everyone would want to send their children — whether or not there is academic selection. It is too good a school to lose. All I ask, on behalf of all sides of the community and in the presence of elected representatives, is that the Minister undertakes to reconsider the decision in the light of the new policy.

How her decision to close the school is understood in the wider community is an issue. Some Members were disappointed in the use of terms such as “ethnic cleansing” and “sectarianism”. They are regrettable aspects of our past, and we do not want to make them a part of our future. There is a viable Protestant community in Maghera — albeit a minority — that wants to live, work and educate its children in harmony with its Roman Catholic neighbours. It has indicated a willingness to do so. It wants to share and go forward together, and it wants to find creative ways to address issues and work together. A decision by the Minister to reconsider would send out a powerful, positive message that would be to the advantage of everyone.

I accept that there are schools that will be the subject of rationalisation. However, taking that to its logical extreme would mean that we should close every school bar one, build the biggest school in the world and site it somewhere around Templepatrick. That is not right. Schools are about education, but they are also about so much more, such as community and involvement with people.

The situation provides an opportunity. I accept that the Minister and I have exchanged words, and I do not expect her to say that I have won her over. However, she may be surprised to hear that I believe her when she says that she puts children first. This is an opportunity to put all our children first within the new sustainable policy. I ask her please to demonstrate, by her actions, that she means what she says. The rewards will be significant.

I am also drawn by what the Minister says about equality. I accept that she believes in it. She deals with

other smaller schools that we do not close, and for good reason. Let us see some equality in action.

An economic tragedy is happening over the whole of Northern Ireland, the island of Ireland, the Western World and the whole world. The people of Northern Ireland — and particularly those of Maghera — want our community and political leaders to get together, do the right thing, provide some leadership and save the future for our children. That is what this is all about.

I urge the Minister strongly to reconsider the proposal in the light of the new policy so that we can try to keep open an excellent school.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Armstrong for bringing this debate to the House as it gives me an opportunity to explain in some detail the reasons why I agreed with North Eastern Education and Library Board's proposal to close Maghera High School. To be fair to the Member, he raises the issue of this school with me on every occasion, even when we meet in the corridor.

Members can be assured that I do not take lightly a decision to close any school. I fully empathise with the views expressed by local representatives and those directly involved. However, my overriding concern in such matters must be for the educational interests of the pupils concerned.

Some people here appear to think that only schools in one sector have been closed in my time as Minister. Nothing could be further from the truth. The list of schools that have been closed shows that they are from all sectors: the Irish-medium, integrated, controlled and Catholic sectors. I ask Members, please, not to play the sectarian card. This is not an issue about religion; it is about the educational interests of children and young people. It is important that people recognise that.

I meet political representatives before I make any decision on schools, because I do not like making decisions without knowing the full facts. I have met the two gentlemen opposite, I have met Billy Armstrong and Patsy McGlone, and I have read — in detail — all of the documents that were sent in relation to the consultation process.

Enrolment in Maghera High School is, undeniably, very low. This year, there are 133 pupils attending, 15 of whom are in the sixth form. My Department does not insist that schools below particular enrolment thresholds should be closed, only that they should be reviewed to ensure that they are providing a quality educational experience for their children. Each case is evaluated on its own merits.

I join with John O'Dowd in saying that I think there is a little bit of hypocrisy in the debate. We are discussing many different policies. Sustainable schools;

special needs; area-based planning — there is a range of policies being debated. We are also discussing transfer 2010. We discussed transfer 2010 yesterday, when I brought forward my proposals. Let us not pretend that there is not demographic decline. Let us be honest about this, we all know that one and one make two, and we all know who will be affected if there are 50,000 empty desks in our classrooms, and grammar schools take children who achieve grades A, and then B, and then C, and then D.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not. I have listened to what people have said. Good-quality secondary schools will be affected. By burying their heads in the sand, people are contributing to the closure of good-quality secondary schools.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not. I have listened to what people have said. Good-quality secondary schools should not be put in that position. That is the position that the two parties opposite are putting them in.

Dr W McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No, I will not give way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has made it clear that she does not want to give way. It is the custom of the House to leave it at that.

The Minister of Education: I am asking people to put the interests of children before the interests of institutions. We need to deal with reality, and the reality here is that we have demographic decline.

Dr W McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister has talked about hypocrisy, which is a serious point of order. The Minister's colleagues on Magherafelt District Council unanimously implored the Minister to change this decision. Will she tell us whether they are hypocrites also?

Mr Deputy Speaker: As far as I recall, the Minister did not address that remark to an individual.

Dr W McCrea: Were they hypocritical?

The Minister of Education: I did not say that individuals were hypocritical; I said that there is a debate here in which people need to be realistic and understand the current state of our education system and the deep inequality within it.

I want to make clear, to anyone listening to the debate in the general community, my support for the wonderful work that secondary schools have done. They have done that work against all the odds. They have done that work in a very unfair system, in a system where grammar schools accept children with

grades A, B, C and D, and then reject children on the basis of so-called perceived academic ability.

6.00 pm

Secondary schools have special-needs children, and a much higher percentage of children receiving free school meals. That is why, in the new proposals that I have brought forward, free-school-meals children are at the top of the agenda. Unfortunately, that is all too late for schools such as Maghera High School. I want to put on record my appreciation of the work that that school did. My comments are made in the context of understanding the situation in which Maghera High School found itself.

The Department asks for a review once enrolment thresholds reach a certain point. That review looks at a broad and balanced education experience for the pupils; access to a full set of subject choices that can be pursued to the highest level; the improvement and sustainability of high standards of educational attainment, and the possibility of a reversal of declining enrolment. Those four points are integral elements of the recently published sustainable schools policy. That policy is important for the future development of education, including area-based planning and the delivery of the entitlement framework.

Given its low numbers, it is very difficult for Maghera High School to adhere to the entitlement framework. That is not the fault of the school; it is the fault of demographic decline. We cannot have a situation where, in year 13, there are two young people in a business studies class; three young people in a health and social care class; two young people in a technology and design class. Or, in year 14, four young people in an art and design class; five young people in a health and social care class; one young person in a technology and design class — the list goes on. When there are such small numbers, it is very difficult to provide a broad curriculum. That is why we are changing the system, so that there can be fair play for schools across the North.

People are speaking about children's rights. Every Member here knows that I talk about that every day, because I firmly believe that children have rights. They have the right to an equal education system; the right to an equal transfer system; the right to equal access to a broad-based curriculum; the right to make sure that they are not sitting in classrooms with one or two other children. Education must be much broader than that. Therefore, the sustainable schools policy will help us to ensure —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. When I requested to speak in the debate, it was made clear to me that I was to speak on only constituency matters. We have, I think, moved into a discussion of policy that is not directly related to the

debate. That is regrettable, because I had hoped to discuss the matter specifically to hand.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not see how the Minister can explain her case without discussing policy.

The Minister of Education: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that it is in everyone's interests and concerns everyone's constituency how children transfer from primary school to post-primary school. We are talking about the secondary-school sector, and how I can talk about demographic decline and numbers without referring to policy, I do not know.

I also want to make it clear that the particular needs of rural communities such as Maghera were a central consideration in the development of the sustainable schools policy and transfer 2010. As my colleague said earlier, currently, there are buses of children transferring, leaving their towns and villages to go to schools in other towns and villages. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: The new policies that we are bringing forward will change that. Unfortunately, it is not in time for Maghera High School.

Mr B McCrea: Why? Put the children first.

The Minister of Education: If Members will let me make my point — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I must call the Member to order; he has continually interrupted and the rules make it very clear that once you have spoken, that is it.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Maghera High School and Magherafelt High School are located nine miles apart, and are the two schools primarily serving the post-primary secondary-school needs of the Protestant population in rural Maghera.

Many of the pupils who attend Maghera High School live within 3.5 miles of Magherafelt High School. Therefore, it is anticipated that the majority of the pupils who attend Maghera High School will choose to transfer to Magherafelt High School in September 2009, but we will keep a close eye on that and see what the parents decide. Magherafelt High School has some surplus capacity to accommodate those pupils, and that will be supplemented by temporary accommodation, pending the availability of the new school, which is expected to be completed in the summer of 2011.

I wish to address the specific points that Members raised on the needs of statemented pupils, cross-community relations, and the use of Maghera High School's swimming pool. Magherafelt High School already has a number of statemented pupils, and it has expertise in meeting their needs. The transfer of the learning support centre from Maghera High School

will enhance Magherafelt High School's existing provision. Staff from the centre will move with the pupils, and that will ensure continuity. The board is currently in discussions with the school to address the accommodation implications of that move.

Magherafelt High School has good relations with all schools in the area and, thus, the North Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed its view that pupils who transfer will not be disadvantaged in the area of cross-community work.

I note and pay tribute to Maghera High School, because it is part of the North Eastern Education and Library Board rural area learning community. There are six schools in that learning community — two controlled schools and four maintained — and I know that Maghera High School works closely with Garvagh High School, Magherafelt High School, St Colm's High School, St Mary's Grammar School, St Patrick's College and St Paul's College. I pay tribute to all of those schools for the way in which they work together.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that many of the groups that use the swimming pool at Maghera High School have already made alternative arrangements. A meeting is planned in the near future that will involve the school, the North Eastern Education and Library Board and leisure representatives from the local council to explore what else can be done to assist swimming groups that have been unable to arrange an alternative venue.

Finally, I pay tribute to the teaching staff and the board of governors at Maghera High School. I know that this is very difficult time for them and for the children and their parents. I pay tribute to the valuable service that they have offered to young people in that area over the years. Go raibh maith agat.

Adjourned at 6.07 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 9 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to raise a point of order with regard to the debate on the Consultative Group on the Past on Monday 2 February, primarily in relation to the remarks that Nelson McCausland made about my party colleague Gerry Adams, which I believe were wrong, inflammatory and, certainly, unparliamentary. Did the Ceann Comhairle have an opportunity to review the Hansard report?

Mr Speaker: Order. That issue has already been raised with me, and I will deal with it this morning. First, I say to the whole House that that is an issue to which I did not expect to return so soon. However, these matters must be faced up to, and dealt with.

I have warned all Members, on many occasions, to take care about what they say about other Members in the Chamber. Although they may be covered legally in some circumstances against action, they are not covered by parliamentary procedure. If Members make direct allegations of criminal behaviour against other Members, when there have been no convictions, I will rule such allegations as unparliamentary. I say to the whole House that Members who sit in another House will know that. Erskine May, on page 440, is absolutely clear on the subject of direct allegations against other Members.

That being so, I reflected on what was said by Mr McCausland during the debate on the Consultative Group on the Past on 2 February 2009, and I took counsel on the matter. I believe that direct and unsubstantiated allegations of criminal behaviour were made about another Member. I am afraid that that was not the first time that the Member made such an allegation. I regard the remarks as unparliamentary and, therefore, ask and call on Mr McCausland to withdraw them.

Mr McCausland: Mr Speaker, I do not intend to withdraw the comments, because they were true.

Some Members: Hear. Hear.

Mr McCausland: I was quoting from a book that was published by the IRA, and which I now intend to place in the Assembly Library so that everyone can — *[Interruption.]*

Some Members: Hear. Hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. I would ask the Member to take his seat. I advise the Member that, as he has not withdrawn the remarks, I now order him, under Standing Order 65, to withdraw immediately from the Chamber and its precincts during the remainder of today's sitting.

The Member withdrew from the Chamber.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask Members to take their seats. Does the point of order relate to that particular ruling?

Mr P Maskey: It certainly does.

Mr Speaker: I will certainly not take points of order on that issue. If Members want to discuss it with me, I am happy to do so after the debate. However, I will not take any points of order on the ruling that I have made today.

Mr P Maskey: Can I raise a point of order on a separate issue?

Mr Speaker: First, let me finish. I want to say to the whole House — and I have said it over and over again — that it gives me no pleasure whatsoever to do what I have done today. Once again, I refer Members to parliamentary procedures elsewhere, whether they are in Westminster, Scotland or Wales. Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language. Once again, I say to Members who are also Members of another House that they would know that.

Mr P Maskey: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I must draw to your attention to the unparliamentary characteristics of certain Members' reactions when their colleague was put out of the Chamber —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already ruled that I will take no further points of order on that issue from any side of the House this morning. I have made that absolutely clear.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is your point of order about the same issue?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No, Mr Speaker. It relates to a general ruling. Can you provide the House with serious and considered guidance about the use of sources and how Members should quote from such sources? If, for example, a Member is referred to in a published work that is accepted and is not challenged in the courts, are Members at liberty to quote from that manuscript? Can

you take advice and guidance — perhaps from another place — about how sources are used and quoted from in this House? Many Members would find it helpful to know the limitations within which they are entitled to operate and, indeed, how they should use those sources?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely happy to come back to the Member directly, or to the whole House on the issues that he has raised. However, I say to all sides of the House, we all get information from various books and papers; the main issue for the House is how we use that information. It is not a matter of going to the Library and reading certain material, but of how one uses that material. I am certainly happy to speak to the whole House or to the Member directly in order to explain the procedure on the use of such material in the House.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have noted what you have said about Members obtaining information and the question of how it might be used. Does your ruling not gag Members and prevent them from using certain information or quoting from particular sources? Can you clarify that it is permissible for Members to use such information and that your ruling is simply about to how they use it?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely happy to examine guidance on behalf of all Members on how they might use material in the House.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Members to take their seats. I have already ruled. We have almost ventured into the subject on which I have already made a ruling. If Members can demonstrate that their points of order relate to totally separate issues, I am happy to take them. Sometimes, points of order grow legs in the House. We end up discussing matters on which I have already made rulings.

Mr S Wilson: Mr Speaker, if you are saying that you are going to look at guidance, are you saying that there is no guidance at present? If there is no guidance, how could you make the ruling that you have?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me make it absolutely clear that there is clear guidance. Listening to the Member, one would almost believe that we make it up as we go along. We certainly do not. The Member is also a Member of another House and knows exactly what the parliamentary guidance is there. It is absolutely clear.

Mr Storey: On a different point of order, Mr Speaker. In the House last Monday, the leader of Sinn Féin, in his comment to you, made reference to remarks that I made in the House. He said that, in my remarks — and

I quote from the Hansard report — I made reference to ‘Mein Kampf’.

That is absolutely untrue, and I ask you, Mr Speaker, to tell the House what action you have taken on the matter. On the basis of the action that you have already taken in the House today, I ask that the Member is asked to withdraw his remarks.

Mr Speaker: The Member came to see me, and we spoke about the matter. I have also spoken to Mr Adams on the matter. Neither I, my Clerks nor the Hansard report recorded any remark of that nature having been made, and I wrote to Mr Adams this morning to indicate that absolutely clearly. We have looked at the Hansard report, examined the issues and taken counsel. As far as I am concerned, as the Speaker, no such remarks were made by Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, the Member also made reference to my absence on the occasion of his remarks. When the opportunity arises, and when the Member is present in the House today, will you, as the Speaker, ask the Member to withdraw the statement that was not accurate?

Mr Speaker: Let us move on. I have already — *[Interruption.]*

Order. I have already written to the Member this morning. Let us see how the Member reacts to these issues. *[Interruption.]*

Order. Mr Storey also knows that he came into my office to see me. We spoke privately on the issue, and I told him exactly what I was going to do. Let us be absolutely clear.

Mr Poots: On a different point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised a matter with you in relation to a statement made by Ms Ruane, the Minister of Education, last week; I also followed that up in writing, and I asked what action has been taken on that issue? It would be grossly unfortunate for democracy and the House if a Member is thrown out for telling the truth, yet a Minister can get away with telling blatant untruths.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is referring to the accuracy of a ministerial statement. As the Speaker, I have no intention of getting involved in whether a ministerial statement is accurate or not; that is not my job. I am very happy to talk to the Member about this issue outside the Chamber. Indeed, I am extremely happy to talk to any Member from any side of the House about an issue that he or she feels strongly about. I operate an open-door policy at my office — come in and talk to me.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It may be useful for the House, and its Members, if some directive were to be provided. I listened carefully to

you saying that you have written to Mr Adams. Did Mr McCausland receive the same facility? Was a letter sent to him?

Mr Speaker: Let me make it clear, there was nothing unparliamentary in what Mr Adams said. There are two totally separate issues here. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I repeat that I am happy to talk to any Member — about any of the issues that have been raised this morning — outside the Chamber. Now, I am going to move on.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it a separate point of order, Lord Morrow?

Lord Morrow: It is a separate point of order.

Mr Speaker: OK; let us hear it.

Lord Morrow: As Chief Whip of the DUP, I want to state that we do feel that we are being victimised.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Ní Chuilín: On a separate point of order, go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I asked for a ruling on remarks that Basil McCrea made about Cairtriona Ruane during a debate last week. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Speaker: I have written to Basil McCrea about that; we have been busy writing this week. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I have spoken to Mr McCrea about that matter. Nothing that Mr McCrea said was unparliamentary; it is simply the cut and thrust of debate. I will call Mr Attwood, and then I am going to move on.

Mr Attwood: On a separate point of order, Mr Speaker. You have just said that you are not going to get involved in matters concerning the accuracy, or otherwise, of a ministerial statement made to the House. You are not going to get involved.

I ask you to review Erskine May, which makes it clear that if any Member — not least a Minister — deliberately misrepresents in the Chamber, the Speaker is obliged to bring that matter to the Minister's attention. Indeed, the precedent in another place is that a Minister who deliberately misleads should resign. I ask you to review your ruling that you will not get involved in issues that relate to the accuracy of a ministerial statement. That is not sustainable.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: As the Member knows, there are a number of avenues that Members can take if they feel that a ministerial statement is, for whatever reason, inaccurate. If the Speaker gets involved in deciding the accuracy of ministerial statements, it could become a minefield. The Member can talk to me privately if he wants.

Mr Weir: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: Is it on the same subject?

Mr Weir: It is on the same subject. In light of your ruling, will you clarify whether a Minister can say absolutely anything and not be held to account, whereas a Member who tells the truth risks being thrown out of the Chamber?

Mr Speaker: That point almost borders on the first subject. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I want to make it absolutely clear that the Speaker is not responsible for how ministerial statements arrive in the House or their authenticity. I am willing to accommodate ministerial statements because I recognise that they allow Back-Benchers to hold Ministers and the Executive to account. As I keep repeating, there are a number of avenues that Members can go down if they feel that a ministerial statement is, in whatever way, inaccurate. I am happy to talk to any Member about the roads down which they can go.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order —

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask both Members to take their seats. I have opened the House up this morning to points of order. The only reason I have done so is because Members have said that their points of order are different, and nothing to do with the subject on which I have ruled. However, when I allow points of order, they almost border on the ruling that I have made. I am happy to take Members' genuine points of order on separate subjects.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order —

Mr Speaker: I will take John O'Dowd first, then Ian Paisley Jnr.

Mr O'Dowd: My point of order relates to the broad thrust of the debate. Are Members crossing into questioning the rulings of the Speaker? The Speaker's role is difficult enough, and there is a mechanism to correct situations where Members feel victimised. We have spent the past 15 minutes questioning the ruling of the Speaker.

Mr Speaker: As I have said in the past — and I will repeat it again — I make rulings, and Members make points of order to challenge that ruling. I want to make it absolutely clear that I will not allow that. Members are indicating that they want to make points of order on separate issues, but it ends up being almost the same point of order.

Mr Paisley Jnr, I take it that this is a separate point of order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: You are in the Chair to protect Members' rights, which are absolutely crucial to the good running of this place and to its support in the

community. I want clarification on your ruling. You said that it is not unparliamentary to refer to someone as a Nazi or as a supporter of 'Mein Kampf'. Is it the case that Members can use that term and describe each other as Nazis, but, ludicrously, cannot refer to situations in our own country? I want clarification about the use of the term "Nazi" in the House.

Mr Speaker: Members must be careful with the language that they use in the House. How they use that language is the issue for all sides of the House. I will take no further points of order on any issue.

If any Member wants to speak to me about these issues outside the Chamber, I am very happy to do so.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Financial Assistance Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that the Financial Assistance Bill has received Royal Assent. The Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 4 February 2009.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

North/South Ministerial Council

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. One amendment has been selected and published in the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech.

I must inform Members that a valid petition of concern was presented on Wednesday 4 February in relation to the motion. The valid petition of concern relates only to the motion and not to the amendment.

I inform Members that the vote on the motion will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr Simpson: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the impact of global economic conditions; notes the benefit of the border to the Northern Ireland economy at this difficult time; notes the relatively positive relationship with the Republic of Ireland; and calls on the Executive to consider whether the North/South Ministerial Council is of any value to the people of Northern Ireland.

Before speaking on the subject, having read the amendment tabled by the Alliance Party, the DUP will support that amendment.

The Democratic Unionist Party believes in sensible North/South co-operation between this part of the United Kingdom and our nearest neighbour in the Irish Republic. There are times when working together can be of mutual benefit to the people of both countries. For the DUP, North/South co-operation has to be based on recognition by the Irish Republic of the sovereignty and independence of Northern Ireland as a region of the United Kingdom.

The Belfast Agreement-style North/South co-operation that was delivered was never acceptable to the DUP, because it was characterised by free-standing institutions that were not accountable to the people of Northern Ireland. That is why the DUP worked tirelessly through political negotiations to bring all North/South co-operation under the control of the Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly. That process culminated at St Andrews, where we ensured that accountability was introduced in respect of decisions made by North/South bodies. By that, the DUP prevented a repetition of the situation that prevailed in the past, whereby North/South bodies could act in defiance of the wishes of the Assembly. That represented a major step forward.

In tabling the motion for consideration, we are motivated through a desire to save the taxpayers of Northern Ireland expenditure, which could be redirected

into front line services such as schools, hospitals, roads, and much-needed economic infrastructure. People are looking to us in these difficult times to provide value for money and efficient government. My party believes in streamlined, cost-effective government. Although others might still wish to defend expensive, useless talking shops, such as the Civic Forum, through tabling petitions of concern, we are trying to cut back on red tape and the waste of taxpayers' money.

I welcome the support given by the UUP recently in the Chamber to our cause for reducing the number of Departments, and for the scrapping of the Civic Forum. The DUP has a radical reforming agenda. We want to reduce the number of Government Departments from the present figure of 11 to a more practical six. We want to erase the Belfast Agreement's legacy of expensive and cumbersome Government. We support reducing the number of MLAs. It is our desire to save money and to ensure that people get the best possible service for the lowest possible cost. The North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, which comes under the control of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), had an overall budget of over £130 million, of which almost £40 million is from the Northern Ireland Executive.

The purpose of the motion is to ask whether that expenditure represents good value for money. That is a serious and genuine question, which is not motivated by any party political consideration.

I am disappointed by the knee-jerk reaction of the nationalist parties in submitting a petition of concern. I will refer to that in a moment. That being the case, people, particularly nationalist politicians, should question whether the formalised structures devised in 1998 by the UUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin are an appropriate mechanism for achieving their objectives.

Businesslike co-operation between Ministers on both sides of the border is a far better approach than having occasional meetings, in which agendas have to be padded out simply to spare blushes and enable Ministers to say that a meeting has taken place. The motion seeks to address that situation. It is aimed at achieving greater efficiency, greater cost-effectiveness and greater benefit for Northern Ireland in these straitened economic times.

The motion need not have spooked the nationalist/republican Benches in the way that it so evidently did. We are entitled to ask why those Members have been so spooked by the motion. After all, all sides of the House should be able to support the motion.

The motion considers four aspects. It notes the impact of global economic conditions — what do the SDLP and Sinn Féin find so intimidating and terrifying about that? Have they not noticed what is happening? Have they not been watching the events of recent months?

The motion also notes the economic benefits of the border during these difficult times. Why should that spook Sinn Féin and the SDLP? It does not seem to have spooked traders in Newry and Londonderry in the same way that it has spooked their political representatives.

The motion notes the relatively positive relationship with the Irish Republic. Where is the problem with that? Why should Sinn Féin and the SDLP be so alarmed by a unionist saying such things? Have they forgotten — or do they want the rest of us to forget — that according to the Southern Government, the constitutional issue is settled? Even Gerry Adams has given up all talk of Irish unity occurring any time soon.

The motion also calls on the Executive to consider whether the North/South Ministerial Council is of any value to the people of Northern Ireland. Why would that cause such panic in the SDLP and Sinn Féin ranks? Why would they be so spooked at that suggestion? Have they no confidence that the North/South arrangements and structures can sell themselves? Are the benefits not so obvious that they can speak for themselves?

John Hume, the former leader of the SDLP, used to lecture us on how one cannot eat a flag. It is sad to see that under his successor, and in defence of his “Durkanomics”, the SDLP is trying to convince us that we can eat structures, bureaucracy and quangos. There are some Members who appear to be opposed to change, who are stuck in the past, and who want to impose second best on our community. That is not the way of the DUP.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after ‘Executive’ and insert

“to institute a review of the North/South Ministerial Council aimed at ensuring it provides better value for the people of Northern Ireland.”

The Alliance Party supports fully the review of the number of Departments and the number of MLAs. The Alliance Party wants to see an efficient, effective and accountable Government in Northern Ireland and an efficient, effective and accountable North/South Ministerial Council.

12.30 pm

In its response to the Programme for Government, the Alliance Party noted three core themes on which the Executive should focus. The first theme was segregation and exclusion in Northern Ireland; the second was rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy; and the third was delivering public services in Northern Ireland in a more sustainable way.

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

Certainly, in respect of the first and second themes, and possibly the third, Northern Ireland is distinct from the rest of the UK and Ireland. It is fair to point out

that segregation along sectarian lines typifies Northern Ireland in way that is not true elsewhere, even if there are parallels in other parts of the UK and Ireland.

It is also fair to point out that Northern Ireland's economy is public-sector dependent in a way that goes far beyond that which exists in any other UK region, even in the north-east of England and Wales, which have lower GDP per capita. In fact, there are as many people employed in the public service in Northern Ireland as there are in the Republic of Ireland, despite the latter having well over double the population.

Even in the area of sustainable public services, which includes housing, pollution, and transport, Northern Ireland has a legacy of poor performance that must be overcome. In all those areas, therefore, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have genuinely different fundamental problems that will require different solutions. Why, then, does the Alliance Party not simply support the motion as it stands? I suggest three main reasons for our proposing the amendment.

First, through positive engagement, Northern Ireland can learn much and, indeed, teach a lot to the Republic of Ireland. That engagement should largely be private- and voluntary-sector-led, but it is important that it proceeds at Government level, too. In many areas — such as segregation and its links to racism, social exclusion during economic growth and decline, and a new immigrant workforce — we have similar issues.

Secondly, our economies are intertwined in a way that unionist politicians choose to underestimate, but which business leaders appreciate fully. I recognise and acknowledge, therefore, the points that Mr Simpson made in his statement about co-operation. Our economies are not intertwined simply because we share a land border, but because we share common banks, common key industries in many sectors, and many other common interests.

Thirdly, more often than not, sustainability requires a cross-border approach — to agriculture, to tourism, to the environment, and on many other issues, such as the recent development of the single electricity market. None of those is restricted to the island of Ireland, but they illustrate how the North/South Ministerial Council can play a part in developing linkages that are in all our interests.

Therefore, we reject the underlying point of the motion, that the North/South Ministerial Council's very existence should be questioned. We reject that not because the NSMC is part of the Agreement — like anything our institutions must evolve and develop — rather, we reject it because the North/South Ministerial Council has the potential to improve relations further, not simply to the level that is outlined in the motion.

During the recent banking crisis, a major cross-border element was involved.

Implicitly, we accept that the North/South Ministerial Council has not reached its full potential. I wonder whether a person on the street could point to any concrete achievements of the Council. Our reaction to that is not to question its existence; rather, it is to ask what can be done to make it function more effectively and demonstrate its value.

In recent times, we have seen changes in the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and that has brought about the membership of unionist parties. Change can be brought about, and it is important that a review is carried out.

Improving cross-border linkages is in all our political, economic and environmental interests. There is no evidence that abolishing the North/South Ministerial Council will achieve anything. However, there is plenty of evidence that the value of its work can be greatly enhanced, and we should consider how that could be done.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In immediate follow-up to Sean's point, he need have no fear whatsoever: the North/South Ministerial Council is not going away.

I begin by congratulating — Comhgháirdeas — the excellent North/South co-operation that we witnessed on Saturday at Croke Park, when Ireland came together to beat France in an international rugby match, which was an important sporting occasion. If we had two separate teams, we would not have packed a punch that would have beaten les Français. Brian O'Driscoll needed Paddy Wallace on Saturday.

Last week, it was the Civic Forum. This week, it is North/South co-operation. The DUP is guilty of picking sham fights that have more to do with the electoral battle ahead with Jim Allister. This is all about Jim Allister and the Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV). The North/South Ministerial Council is not up for grabs — it is not contestable.

Any attack on — or undermining of — North/South co-operation or the North/South Ministerial Council is a complete waste of time in relation to this Assembly's business. The North/South Ministerial Council is legislatively based; it is in the Good Friday Agreement, and it is in the St Andrews Agreement, of which the DUP is very fond. A bit of political honesty is called for — this has more to do with electoral competition in the forthcoming European elections in June 2009 than it has with anything else. I presume that we can expect plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. We can expect far more behaviour of a similar character in the months ahead. That is why we submitted a petition of concern.

Members must remember that the Assembly is not a free-standing political institution; it is interdependent with the North/South Ministerial Council. My message to the DUP is that it should never forget that fact.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Member establish whether it was Sinn Féin or the SDLP that submitted the petition of concern?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member can check that for himself; copies are available to Members in the Business Office.

Mrs D Kelly: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. To save the Member time; the SDLP submitted the petition of concern. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McElduff: It takes two parties to sign a petition of concern. The SDLP does not have sufficient political strength to submit a petition of concern on its own.

The review for which the Alliance Party amendment calls is already in place, and the results will be published before the end of this year. It is not about benefiting the Six Counties; it is about benefiting the whole island of Ireland.

Earlier this morning, I had occasion to meet primary school children, teachers, staff and parents from Strabane. One lady, who lives in Lifford, said that if she fell sick at a weekend or during an evening, she would like to be able to access the GP out-of-hours arrangement one mile away in the town of Strabane, rather than having to go to Letterkenny, which is approximately 15 miles away. At the moment, there is a lady with a lot of schoolchildren in Room 342 who wants that point to be heard today in the Chamber.

Everybody knows that the border impacts negatively on social and economic life. At a recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, progress on the A5 was, thankfully, reported.

Mr Poots: In the interests of North/South co-operation, does the Member support the painting red of postboxes in Donegal?

Mr McElduff: I believe, Mr Deputy Speaker, that due to the fact that I gave way, I will be given additional time in which to speak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will have one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr McElduff: I will deal with Mr Poots's intervention issue in due course. Who painted the postboxes red in the first place?

The North/South Ministerial Council reflected on the progress being made on the A5 north-west gateway to Aghnacloy and the A8 Belfast-to-Larne road projects. In addition, it reflected on the intensified co-operation on child protection, including the cross-border awareness campaign; the official opening of the new Waterways Ireland headquarters in Enniskillen;

further progress on the developing situation at the all-Ireland Middletown Centre for Autism; and work on removing financial obstacles to cross-border mobility.

Therefore, good work is taking place within the North/South Ministerial Council, and I can assure Mr Simpson that it would pass with flying colours any test based on value for money or the effective and efficient use of public resources. What we really need is more extensive and more expansive North/South co-operation and integration. It is ridiculous for a small island, with fewer than six million people, to have plans to locate several acute hospitals back to back, without reference to each other. That is my speech — onwards with North/South co-operation.

Mr McFarland: In 1994, I was involved in a study that highlighted approximately 80 entities, such as councils, that were involved in cross-border activities. In 1996, in the Forum for Political Dialogue, we discovered that that figure had nearly doubled to 150 entities, which was clear evidence that the number of bodies involved in cross-border activities was rapidly multiplying under direct rule. However, the Belfast Agreement stopped all that, and brought cross-border co-operation under control by creating six bodies, covering six areas of co-operation.

I do not think that anyone has a problem with closer co-operation with neighbouring states — that makes lots of sense. The Ulster Unionist Party believes that that matter was sorted out in 1998, and each NSMC meeting since then has required agreement between a unionist Minister and a nationalist Minister. Since 1998, those Ministers have reported back to the Assembly, and I am not aware of a single instance in which there was a problem or a default in respect of those meetings.

Therefore, this debate is another DUP stunt. However, that party must be careful not to re-open negotiations, because given its history at St Andrews, that is a highly dangerous approach to take.

Mr Molloy: The Member said that there have been no problems with North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Will he explain why Ulster Unionist Party Ministers failed to turn up during the previous mandate?

Mr McFarland: I shall move on to my second point. Let us examine the DUP's negotiating skills at St Andrews. It managed to remove the unionist veto, which would have prevented Martin McGuinness from becoming the deputy First Minister; it agreed to the setting up of an all-Ireland civic forum; and it agreed to examine further areas of co-operation.

Furthermore, under the ministerial code amendments that the DUP managed to negotiate at St Andrews, Ministers have since been forced to go to North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Until then, unionists were able to interfere with wayward nationalist Ministers.

Members will know that during the first Assembly mandate, David Trimble called a halt to all North/South activity because people were messing around here.

I am afraid that all that was lost at St Andrews, so why has the DUP tabled the motion? Is it an attempt to claw back the mistakes that it made at St Andrews?

Mr Hamilton: The Member cited the supposedly robust and macho stance taken by his former — or, perhaps, it is his current — leader, Lord Trimble. Will he remind Members about how the court case went concerning that robust and macho attempt at stopping North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

12.45 pm

Mr McFarland: I think that it is fair to say that we managed to halt wayward nationalist activity and North/South Ministerial Council meetings for some time.

Given the negotiating skills that the DUP displayed at St Andrews, it would be dangerous for them to start to renegotiate the value of the North/South Ministerial Council now. The Alliance Party's amendment calls for a review of the Council, but that is already being carried out by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with a DUP staff member and a Sinn Féin staff member. I wonder how independent that will be. Although the Ulster Unionist Party supports the Alliance Party's idea that there is a need for a review, which is ongoing, we believe that it should be independent and carried out by people from outside the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports efficiencies. It is quite in order to review institutions, but there is little point in having a stunt debate today, particularly since the motion is subject to a petition of concern.

Mr Attwood: Mr Simpson asserted that nationalism need not have been spooked by the motion. I assure Mr Simpson that the SDLP is not spooked. We have looked at the hard evidence that has been gathered over not only the past number of days and weeks, but stretching back over months and years. We have concluded that elements in the DUP want to take the new order of politics on this island and recreate it in the image of the old politics that they knew and loved.

I say to Mr Simpson, through the Deputy Speaker: the North/South Ministerial Council and the architecture that is part of the Good Friday Agreement on a North/South basis are not negotiable. I note that Barry McElduff, on behalf of Sinn Féin, has adopted the SDLP analysis of the evidence. The evidence is clear in not only today's motion, it was clear in the recent debates on the Civic Forum and the number of Departments. The motive behind those debates was to take bites out of the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement for political reasons. Sinn Féin is wrong to say that the

DUP's moving of the motion is purely tactical in advance of its battle with the TUV. There are elements of that, but this runs deeper. This is a strategic move, because it declares the intentions and ambitions of elements in the DUP to take the new order — for which some struggled and negotiated painfully, and which has been advantageous for the people of this island — and return to the past.

I know that the DUP was not present at the negotiations surrounding the Good Friday Agreement, but it must understand that the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement arose from an analysis that if political and sustainable stability was to be achieved on this island and between these islands, one needed to deal with three sets of relationships: the relationship within the North; between the North and the South; and between the islands of Britain and Ireland. That is the core concept and value of the Good Friday Agreement. Out of that comes the political balance and arrangements that were in the Good Friday Agreement and which continued in the St Andrews Agreement.

If one begins to unpick that balance of relationships and institutions, and that architecture, one begins to unpick the buy-in that so many people on this island committed to with regard to the Good Friday Agreement and the referenda that were held in the North and South.

Therefore, the DUP must understand that if those balances were the essence of political agreement in 1998, and that that architecture gave expression to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, all-Ireland arrangements are essential for nationalists who want to share the life of the rest of the island. Those balances are essential for unionism, too, in order that unionism has an agreed relationship with the rest of the people of this island. However, if one begins to pick and choose, and have an à la carte approach, one must understand that that is beginning to unpick requirements that are essential for longer-term stability and prosperity on this island.

This morning, and on other occasions prior to the debate, the DUP created a smokescreen as to the motivation behind the debate. As one of its Members said, they do not want to have structures in place for the sake of having structures in place, and that the DUP wanted to do away with unnecessary bureaucracy.

Why is the North/South Ministerial Council being picked on? On 21 October, the DUP leader, as First Minister, came to the Chamber and said the following about the bureaucracy of the British-Irish Council:

“The Council considered progress on the strategic review of the British-Irish Council. It noted the proposal for the remit of the standing secretariat to be expanded to provide for an enhanced role in managing the work of the British-Irish Council and supporting the agreed work programmes”. — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 34, p160, col 1*].

We agree with Peter Robinson; in order to maximise the benefits of the British-Irish Council, there is a need

for bureaucracy. Why, then, does the DUP not agree with its own leader? There is also a need for bureaucracy when it comes to the North/South Ministerial Council, in order to maximise the benefits for all the people on this island.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and the amendment. As a constituency worker, I know that there are few things worse than living with bad neighbours, and I know the strain that that can put on families in both homes. I urge Members to read the motion and the amendment because they state quite clearly, in economic terms, why things must change. Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are similar in many ways. We have gone through years of hostility and horrific atrocities, although Northern Ireland has borne the brunt of that. However, we have moved on to a new stage and have become a new kind of neighbour, as it were.

It makes sense to have a good relationship with your neighbours, rather than a bad one, if that is at all possible. The past few years have shown that it is possible for the people of the Province to have a working relationship with the people of the Republic. I do not wish to trivialise the problems of the Province and the Republic in any sense but, if I may, I will use the illustration of a neighbourhood dispute.

Where there is a neighbourhood dispute, community police will often intercede, arrange meetings between the two parties and come to arrangements that are beneficial to all. Once community relations are better and the community is running smoothly, the police no longer need to facilitate the meetings and can use their time more effectively in other areas. The parallels, as I hope that I have illustrated, are obvious.

In my reasoned opinion, we have a good neighbourly relationship at present. Structures have been set up that allow us to make the best of the border and benefit each independent nation, and those structures are carrying on without the plenary meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. That calls into question the need for those meetings and the money that is spent facilitating those meetings, during which things are discussed that are already in motion and are working for the benefit of all involved. The costs are far too much.

The people of the Province — as well as the people of the Republic — would, if consulted, prefer that the moneys spent on running sessions on things that are now running naturally and effectively should be spent on things that are needed now, during the credit crunch. Things that will make a practical difference to the lives of the people — for example, more social housing, heating for the elderly, more free dinners for children at schools, better health services and better roads.

It must be remembered that the North/South implementation bodies and Tourism Ireland Ltd, which

comes under the control of the North/South Ministerial Council, had an overall budget of £130.67 million last year, of which just short of £40 million came from the Northern Ireland Executive. To me, that does not seem to be good value for money. That £40 million could make a vast difference in improving such things as social housing, which every Member in the Chamber would like to see happening, and dealing with issues that are much more important than supporting another talking shop.

In this difficult economic time, the people of the Republic believe that that money should be spent in a more practical fashion. The North/South Ministerial Council is not accountable to the people of the Province. That, in itself, is a landmine, when it is added to the fact that structures are in place already that make it easy to co-operate on mutually beneficial matters. The Council's remit has been met, its work has been completed and it is now redundant.

I was disappointed to learn that a petition of concern had been presented in reference to the motion. That has been mentioned in the Chamber already this morning. It must be due to the fact that some Assembly Members in the Chamber have misread or misunderstood the motion. We are not saying that there should be no co-operation with the Republic — we need co-operation for business matters. We are saying that that co-operation must be considered and should not come in the form, and with the expense, of the Council, as it does at present.

My fellow Assembly Members all want more money for front line services in their constituencies. Matters such as the Council have outlived their practical usefulness and can make room for other things that are necessary.

Therefore, I ask every Member in the Chamber to understand that the DUP is saying that as long as everyone benefits from good neighbourly relations, they should continue. However, we need not continue to pay out unnecessary money in a way that is neither cost-effective nor time-effective.

Mr P Maskey: The Member made some great points during his contribution, and he made the case for all of us that a united Ireland is the best option. Will he join the rest of us and call for that as soon as possible?

Mr Shannon: A united Ireland would never be beneficial to citizens of the United Kingdom or to the future well-being of the majority of people in the Province. I cannot, therefore, agree with the Member, but he knew that before asking the question.

I would be surprised if any Member votes against the motion based on a belief that the money could not be better spent. The reason for the motion is the desire to reduce the amount of red tape and the costs, but not

the practical benefits, of neighbourly co-operation. More money should be invested in front-line services; that is what everyone who voted for us wants in the current hard times. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am concerned that the motion serves no other purpose than to divide the House. The proposers may not be comfortable with North/South partnership, which is fair enough, but the DUP signed up to it. As a republican, I was not happy about taking my seat in the House, but I did so in the context of the Good Friday Agreement. The motion reflects that the DUP, as Barry McElduff said, is moving into election mode. The party has become obsessed with Jim Allister and is positioning itself for the European elections; nothing more.

The people in the street whom we represent are concerned about paying bills and mortgages, and with feeding and clothing their children, and so forth. They do not want resources to be wasted by bringing a motion to the Floor of the House where it has no likelihood of success, as its proposers knew from the outset.

I echo the sentiments of Martin Luther King whose view of the world in 1967 applies equally to Ireland and the world in a new century:

“We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together — black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu — a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.

The Good Friday Agreement is internationally recognised and presents the potential architecture for the development of all-Ireland governance. Its premise is the need for the formal promotion of North/South relations, thereby creating the dynamic for building an inclusive Ireland. The creation of the North/South Ministerial Council and implementation bodies was an important aspect of the Good Friday Agreement for nationalists and republicans. People in the North and South endorsed the agreement. The logic is underpinned by strand two of the agreement, and it can be undone only by the people. If unionists want to sabre-rattle, so be it, and if they want to beat their chests and attack anything Irish, that is their prerogative. However, they do not reflect the view of their community, which has moved on without them.

Strand two of the agreement also makes an integral provision for the development of an all-Ireland inter-parliamentary forum. It is widely recognised by policymakers, businesses, local authorities and NGOs that the creation of a balanced development of policy on an all-Ireland basis is the way forward. The development of the all-Ireland economy, spatial integration, social networking and human rights

harmonisation is already under way, but it must be built upon.

Sinn Féin wants the number of North/South implementation bodies to increase with, for example, the creation of an all-Ireland energy body to work on how the island can address climate change — indeed, such direction is needed because the Minister of the Environment continues to bury his head in the sand as far as climate change is concerned. The energy body’s remit would include the determination of an all-Ireland energy strategy and the overseeing of its development. As such, it must be given powers to compel the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and its equivalent in the South to adopt policies that are grounded in all-island thinking.

The need to move away from dependence on external oil supplies and embrace domestic and alternative energy forms is needed.

1.00 pm

There is also a need to promote the development of alternative energy sources such as biomass, wind, wave and solar power. It is said that our unique coastline and weather conditions have the potential to meet the needs of the entire EU energy demand over the next generation through the utilisation of wind power and the electricity interconnector to Europe.

We need an all-Ireland implementation body for rural development: disparities between regions across Ireland are severe, and they are likely to intensify in the absence of an all-Ireland policy that seeks to protect the Irish agriculture and fishing industries. Sinn Féin proposes a new implementation body that will address the core area of developing rural and social infrastructure. The body would provide resources for aquaculture; fishing and fish processing; marine-based facilities, inshore fishing and sea angling. It would progress greater equality —

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

Mr W Clarke: — between the regions of Ireland. It would co-ordinate resources and build a social infrastructure, which is necessary for the development of agriculture in Ireland. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Hamilton: I will begin by noting that in 2009 there is a much more positive relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That, in my view, is as much to do with personal relationships, the passage of time and the acceptance of realities on the part of many, than it is to do with fabricated structures and institutions.

My party accepts that cross-border co-operation is not only a good thing on certain occasions but is absolutely necessary in certain areas, particularly

where there is mutual benefit. Sometimes co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is as essential as co-operation across borders and across the world. I can think of several recent examples where cross-border co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has had a positive impact: for example, in some of the animal health issues; the dioxin scare; the agreements between the police and the guards and the financial services sector agreement that was reached back in June 2008 between the then Finance Ministers, and now the First Minister of Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister of the South. Those are all good areas of co-operation.

However, the common characteristic of those three areas is that none of them lies within the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council, proving the point that positive — even essential — co-operation can take place between our two states on an ad hoc basis where necessary and without the need for artificial institutions to be created.

Given some of the previous comments, there is an opportunity to review some of the more recent North/South Ministerial Council behaviour and some of the activities that went on in the North/South axis as opposed to the east-west axis.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on a second. We all remember the hideous imbalance there was between activities on the North/South axis compared to the east-west basis. There were all sorts of disparities: there were 65 meetings of the NSMC during the period of devolution compared to around 10 meetings of the British-Irish Council. Given that the DUP is now in the lead position, I am glad to see that there is more activity on the British-Irish Council: it meets more often — in fact, it has met when the North/South Ministerial Council has not met; there are more work streams going on, and there is more positive work happening on the east-west axis in comparison with what happened in the past, when Mr Basil McCrea's party was in charge.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for giving way — as he always very kindly does. Is he advocating a deregulated system for cross-border co-operation, and does he welcome the idea that Caitríona Ruane can somehow saunter across the border unescorted?

Mr Hamilton: The Member knows that she does saunter across the border every day to take her kids to the local grammar school in Newry. The point that my party makes — and I presume that it is one that the Member's party agrees with — is that there is no need for artificial institutions or structures to advance cross-border co-operation where it is of mutual benefit and is of particular benefit to Northern Ireland,

especially when there are savings to be made to the public purse in these difficult times.

The difficult times that we have experienced highlight not only why we do not need a North/South Ministerial Council, but the economic benefit to Northern Ireland of the border. It was not so long ago that Members on the opposite Benches, and their colleagues outside, were fawning over the Celtic tiger. Unionists' worry would not have been the North/South Ministerial Council — that would have been the least of our worries — rather, it would have been an all-Ireland economy and total economic integration with the South.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Bear with me for a second. In recent months, not only have we witnessed a retail phenomenon, whereby people from the South are coming across the border to shop — and being chastised by their Finance Minister for being unpatriotic for doing so — but, in the last month alone, unemployment figures there have risen by some 36,000. That is close to the total unemployment figure for Northern Ireland. Moreover, economic growth in the South is to fall by 4% over the next year, leading to an unemployment total of 400,000. We can see the economic benefit for Northern Ireland of having the border and of being part of the fifth-largest economy in the world, while enjoying the safety net of the welfare state.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member join me in calling for a single-issue meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to examine current economic challenges, including the downturn in the construction industry? The Council would be a useful vehicle through which to address those issues, for the benefit of everyone on the island.

Mr Hamilton: Neither I nor my colleagues would have any objection to holding meetings with Ministers in the South to talk about economic issues. Of course, Ministers from the South will now be travelling to Northern Ireland to try to shelter under our umbrella.

In conclusion, accusations have been made that the DUP is pushing an agenda, but let us consider the points raised by the Members opposite. They are absolute zealots when it comes to the North/South Ministerial Council. Even if there is a better, more cost-effective and adult way of securing cross-border co-operation — similar to the way in which states across the world co-operate across borders — those Members will not blink or move away from that structure at all.

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

Mr Hamilton: We want to have a mature, normal relationship with our neighbours in the South; not the sort of artificial one that we have had in the past.

Mr Elliott: It was interesting to listen to Mr McElduff — he always provides thought-provoking comments. He mentioned the Ireland rugby team's win at the weekend, and the great success of that sporting organisation. It is just a pity that some other sporting organisations in our society are not so inclusive. I am thinking, in particular, of the Member's beloved GAA.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not the subject under debate. Mr Elliott, please address the motion.

Mr Elliott: I was about to mention the North/South element of the GAA, which is clearly focused on the nationalist/republican community.

It is interesting to note that North/South co-operation and agreements are nothing new in this society. Before I was born, there was the Erne Drainage and Development Act (Northern Ireland) 1950. As I understand it, that was the first piece of legislation that went through the Northern Ireland Parliament and the Irish Parliament under exactly the same terms. That provided not only for the hydroelectric power scheme in Ballyshannon in the Republic, but also for much better land management in respect of the Upper Lough Erne system in Northern Ireland.

Thus, North/South co-operation is nothing new. However, we must ensure that that is what it is — co-operation, which brings mutual benefit to both areas. I do not want to return to the bad old days of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In those days, people in the Republic of Ireland establishment had arranged themselves in such a way that they were almost running sections of the Northern Ireland Government through Westminster procedures, simply because they had a foothold in Northern Ireland. Thankfully, the Ulster Unionist Party was at the forefront of cutting that practice out and we at least ensured that established organisations were in place that are subject to a control mechanism and are responsible to the Assembly.

Mr Hamilton: The Member mentioned some of the creations that came out of the Belfast Agreement. Although his party supported the agreement, I recall that he did not support it at the time. Does he agree that Tourism Ireland, for example, has been an unqualified success in better promoting Northern Ireland's tourist attractions?

Mr Elliott: I would not say that Tourism Ireland has been an unqualified success in promoting the benefits of Northern Ireland as a tourist destination, but it is doing just as well as the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Therefore, we do not have any flagship to hold up there, particularly in Fermanagh.

While Mr Hamilton was speaking, I was thinking about his remarks about the good co-operation on the dioxins issue. I notice that the motion refers to a:

“positive relationship with the Republic of Ireland”.

The dioxins problem was a disaster for Northern Ireland and a disaster for co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic. Someone can contradict me if I am wrong, but I am led to believe that the Republic of Ireland Government and officials knew of the dioxins problem down there for almost a week before they thought it feasible to tell any of our officials or Ministers up here in Northern Ireland Assembly. I do not hold that up as an example of good co-operation; I hold that up as an example of a selfish outlook, and what they could do for themselves and themselves alone. When it then came to us seeking compensation, because the problem originated in the Republic of Ireland, they turned their noses up and told us to look after ourselves. Therefore, the dioxins scare is not a great example of co-operation.

I return to the 1970s and 1980s. Let us be blunt: murders were carried out in this Province, and there was not much co-operation from the Republic of Ireland Government and security services at that time when members of those terrorist organisations were allowed to roam free and roam over the border without any chance of getting caught. Therefore, any co-operation that now exists is welcome, but it must be set in the context of what we had, and to which we do not want to return.

I support efficiency savings provided that they deliver — we do not want talk about efficiency savings that does not deliver anything. I am thoroughly disappointed that the party that tabled the motion has not been able to do what it planned to do, or hoped to do, when its representatives signed the St Andrews Agreement. All that we heard at that time were proposals for possibly more North/South co-operation.

With regard to a North/South parliamentary forum, the Agreement states:

“The Northern Ireland Executive would encourage the parties in the Assembly to establish a North/South parliamentary forum bringing together equal numbers from the Oireachtas and the Assembly, and operating on an inclusive basis.”

It is just a pity that they did not do that at the time of the St Andrews Agreement when they had the opportunity.

Mrs D Kelly: It would seem that many in the Chamber need a history lesson. Members opposite referred to artificial institutions and structures — are they not aware that the border itself is an artificial structure in that it is some 80 years old, whereas the island of Ireland is centuries old. The division of Ireland was caused by the threat of violence from unionism at that time. Do Members not realise that? Do they not realise also that the Good Friday Agreement was an historic compromise whereby the nationalist people of Ireland — all those who aspire to the re-unification of Ireland, its people and its territory — agreed to the removal of articles 2 and 3 from the

Irish constitution? That was the price that nationalists paid, and the compromise that they made, for peace.

Mr K Robinson: Will the Member accept that, prior to the removal of articles 2 and 3 from its constitution, the Republic of Ireland was the only country in the European Union that laid claim to the territory of a neighbouring country, which was an international disgrace that needed to be rectified?

Mrs D Kelly: The circumstances in which Ireland was divided were an absolute disgrace. Nonetheless, we are where we are. Some Members opposite have gone some way to point out some of the positive improvements in North/South relationships, because they realise that we operate in a European context and, as the credit crunch has taught us, are part of a global village. Those Members are now noting the positive relationships and the benefits to people, North and South, from the promotion of opportunities through the North/South bodies.

1.15 pm

It was entirely disingenuous of some Members to say that the motivation for the motion was to save taxpayers' expenditure. If the DUP is so concerned about that, it should look at the expenditure on the Ulster-Scots Agency. That would save the taxpayer millions of pounds — *[Interruption.]*

I can talk all day if Members want me to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member may talk for a maximum of five minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I understood that it was six minutes. I could talk for Ireland, never mind for five minutes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Hamilton accused some Members who wish to protect North/South bodies as being absolute zealots. I am afraid that the SDLP is guilty of that charge. We are absolute zealots in relation to North/South bodies because we cannot rely on Sinn Féin Ministers to protect them, and we have one Minister in the Executive.

Mr Simpson said that the agenda had to be padded out to save Members' blushes, but that is not the case. In fact, the DUP and other parties have placed restrictions on it.

Mr McElduff: Can I ask for a progress report? How are you getting on with establishing an all-Ireland party with Fianna Fáil?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr McElduff, please refer all your remarks through the Chair and not directly to the Member.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP has so much for sale that a number of parties are interested in looking at what we have to offer. In fact, Mr McElduff borrowed some of

the language that I used last week for his contribution. However, imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, so I will take it as a compliment.

The DUP says that it is interested in efficient and small structures in government. One would have to ask then why the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was expanded to include special advisers to the junior Ministers. It is so interested in efficiency in government, yet there is no Executive business today or tomorrow, there is no Assembly business today, and there is no legislation this week. Another week has passed by, and the DUP still has no business before us, even though Ministers were to meet —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is not the subject matter of this debate, Mrs Kelly. Please return to the debate in question.

Mrs D Kelly: I was merely pointing out and rebutting some of the remarks made by Members opposite who said that the DUP was interested in efficiency in government and in good government. However, it is very clear that it is not up to the job. If one wants to look at examples of good practice, one only has to look at the Peace programme and the cross-border agencies and how they are delivering on a cross-border basis —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — for the people of all of Ireland.

The SDLP opposes the motion and the amendment. The petition of concern relates to both.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How does one follow Dolores Kelly?

My party is concerned about a number of issues relating to the motion, and, therefore, we will be voting against it. That is also why the petition of concern has been submitted.

It is clear that the DUP is in election mode, and I do not hold that against it. They feel the need to embolden themselves.

The SDLP feels that it must attack Sinn Féin in every speech. Alec Attwood pointed out that the DUP is unionist. We know that: it is in the name of the party. What does the DUP want to achieve as the leading unionist party? That must be measured, examined and debated. On some occasions, Sinn Féin will agree with the DUP: on others, it will differ. However, Sinn Féin will strongly differ with any party that tries to dilute the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement. The North/South Ministerial Council is a main pillar of that agreement. None of us would be here today to debate the subject if the North/South Ministerial Council were not there. It is integral to the progress of the agreement,

and despite claims by the DUP that it has somehow drawn in North/South co-operation, the opposite is the case.

Whether North/South co-operation be formal or informal, it will continue — for a number of reasons, including common sense. The motion refers to the benefits which the border has brought to the North's economy. The existence of the border has caused greater detriment to the North's economy than any other factor. Partition has caused greater detriment to the economy of Ireland than any other factor. Whereas we, in the North, can shield ourselves from recession to a certain extent with public-sector jobs, that cannot continue for ever. The harsh winds blowing through the world's economy have reached here, and the situation will get worse. The economy of the Twenty-six Counties is in dire straits, but my party still firmly believes that the direction of travel for the people of Ireland should be towards operating as a single economic unit. We must participate in the global economy as such a unit.

In current circumstances, we have North/South co-operation through the North/South Ministerial Council —

Mr McElduff: Does the Member welcome the fact that the DUP Chief Whip is familiarising himself with the contents of the Good Friday Agreement? He has the document in front of him.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome that fact.

Areas of co-operation are wide, and there is a need to improve on them. We are operating two economies and services back-to-back, and that is detrimental. Mr McElduff has already referred to primary care in the Health Service; however, all strands of the health services are operated on a back to back basis, which is both detrimental to efficient delivery of services and costly.

Education is another area where we must look across the border for co-operation. Particularly in Mr Elliott's constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, small, rural primary and secondary schools are under severe pressure. We must not say to children that they cannot cross the imaginary line to attend the school of their choice, or that school transport should not serve children on either side of that line. It makes sense in neither education nor economics.

Mr Simpson referred to the economic savings that would be made. He said that the North/South Ministerial Council costs £140 million each year, and that £40 million of that came from the Executive. The mathematics suggest that someone else is investing £100 million in the Council, to the benefit of all the people of Ireland, and especially those of the border regions.

I am concerned at the amendment sponsored by the Alliance Party. I know that it is a unionist party, but, even as Europeans, Alliance Party members should

want to ensure that the North/South Ministerial Council is good value for the people of Ireland — not just for those of the North. That is why Sinn Féin opposes the Alliance Party's amendment: it is narrowly focused.

Sinn Féin opposes the DUP's motion. To debate it is a waste of time, but this is not the first debate to have wasted the time of Members, and I doubt that it will be the last. Regardless of how many motions of this nature the DUP tables, petitions of concern will be brought against them and they will fall automatically.

Let us work on, using the structures that we have, to deal with issues that we can address and improve the lives of people across the island of Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: A point of clarification: Mrs Kelly said that the petition of concern applied to the amendment as well as to the substantive motion.

The petition of concern applies only to the motion, not to the amendment.

Lord Browne: I support the motion and the amendment. How many of us here could have predicted, when this Assembly first met two years ago, that we would now be in the midst of the worst economic meltdown since the great depression of the 1930s? Two years ago, money seemed to be growing on trees on both sides of the border. The air was thick with grandiose plans for spending on infrastructure, and schemes for all manner of extravagant cross-border projects. I think that everyone would agree that in today's radically changed economic circumstances, our first spending priorities must be the preservation of the jobs of our workers, and the provision of a safety net for the weakest members of society.

We have all seen stories in the media in recent days about the bonuses being paid to top executives of failed banks. I am sure that most of us would wholeheartedly agree that such payments are outrageous. How can we, as Members of this Assembly, justify to our constituents the expenditure of almost £5 million to date on the North/South Ministerial Council, and the proposed expenditure of over £3.5 million over the next four financial years? I am not arguing that it does not make sense for Ministers and civil servants in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to hold bilateral meetings to exchange views on matters of mutual interest — in particular, the possibilities for minimising the effects of the economic downturn on both sides of the border. However, I am sure that this could be achieved at much less cost to the taxpayer, and I think it would be useful for the Executive to investigate whether current spending on the North/South Ministerial Council can be fully justified. I support the Alliance amendment; a review of the costs of the Council should be carried out.

I am somewhat sceptical of the advantages of membership of the European Union, and I remain

unconvinced of the merits of the case for further moves towards European Union integration. However, I recognise that membership has brought considerable benefits for some in our community: the common agricultural policy has provided a secure income for farmers, and access to the wider European market has been beneficial for the development of export businesses. However, we cannot just cherry-pick the policies we like and reject those we do not. The recent outburst by both private- and public-sector representatives in the Republic, condemning Irish citizens who cross the border to shop in Northern Ireland, is an unfortunate example of that self-interested attitude.

There have been calls in recent years for Northern Ireland to abandon the pound sterling and adopt the euro alongside the Republic of Ireland. Leaving aside the obvious anomaly which this would produce, of one country in the United Kingdom with two currencies, the present crisis has revealed the economic costs of a loss of control over interest rates and the value of currency. Spain, for example, which is a member of the euro zone, has surrendered control over these vital policy tools. The number of people out of work there has now reached over 3.3 million, and many companies are struggling with declining sales and liquidity problems.

In the Republic, the official estimates for 2009 suggest that the Minister of Finance will face an opening deficit of €13.3 billion, which is 7% of GDP. I am not suggesting that we in the United Kingdom are not facing very serious problems ourselves, but the fact that the UK can set its own interest rates — unlike the Republic, which is part of the euro zone — and manage its own exchange rates. That may allow us to avoid sky-high unemployment, and the possible consequence of social unrest, and in these circumstances, I believe that the border represents a real economic benefit. I support the motion and the amendment.

1.30 pm

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In relation to Mrs Kelly's remark, you were good enough to clarify that the petition of concern does not cover the proposed amendment. Does it cover the motion as amended?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am happy to clarify that the petition of concern covers the motion as amended, because at that point, it will become the substantive motion.

Mr Paisley Jnr: It has been a good-hearted debate, and like Members on this side of the House, I support the motion and the proposed amendment from the Alliance Party. The previous Member who spoke, my noble friend from East Belfast, spelled out, loud and clear, some of the current economic issues that perplex not only our country, but most other countries. He debunked the theory, which came from the party

opposite, that if there was a single unitary economic entity, everything would be alright. To date, there are 27 nations in the European Union, in which different economies are openly trading back to back; some countries have shared monetary systems, others have different monetary systems — unity is not a recipe for success. We must spell that out loud and clear.

Mrs Kelly the Member for Upper Bann put forward the theory that one of the failures of the Assembly is that no legislation is going through today, and that there must be more legislation. A marker must be laid down clearly stating that more government does not necessarily mean good government and that more legislation does not necessarily mean good government. Less government, and the rollback of governmental interference, is usually a good thing for people, the economy and the country.

I want to get to the kernel of some of the arguments that have been put forward, particularly by the SDLP and Sinn Féin, who are beating their chests about the importance of the North/South Ministerial Council. The motion does not debunk that; indeed it indicates that the DUP is all for practical co-operation and relationships, good sense, good neighbourliness, and for using the opportunities that exist. However, we have heard the almost irrational response — a petition of concern no less — that the motion has to be stopped as it is the DUP trying to stop the unity Ireland state express. We should recognise that that express was stopped a long time ago. Do not take my word for it; take the words of the former Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern.

When interviewed by the London editor of 'The Irish Times', Frank Millar, for a recent book, 'Northern Ireland: A Triumph of Politics', he said:

“You know what folks, forget about the unity issue, this arrangement, this sharing of the island, this is the way that it's going to be.” When asked would 50% plus 1 be the basis on which to achieve it, ie a unitary Irish state, ‘No, no.’ he replies, clearly dismissive of the idea that unity could be accomplished on a simple sectarian headcount. ‘50% plus 1 is not the way to do it; the only way it can be done is if a sizeable amount of people on the island of Ireland, North and South, believe that this is the way forward. 50% plus 1 is not the way to do, that would be a divisive thing to do and there is no point in having votes that find out whether you have got 1% over or 1% under.’”

I think that that should put a nail in the coffin of those who constantly say that we are trundling toward a united Ireland, and, indeed, that the motion by the DUP is an attempt to stop that. A united Ireland has been stopped, and no less authority than the Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland admitted as much in that interview.

Mr Hamilton: Further to the point made by the former Taoiseach, does the Member concur that as shown by recent polling and in studies by Queen's University, a substantial number of people in Northern

Ireland who would vote for nationalist and republican parties, support the maintenance of the Union?

Mr Paisley Jnr: I think that that is obvious; there are traders in Newry — Catholic and Protestant, working together — who recognise that the border is the best single impetus that they have had recently to overcome some of the economic woes that the country is facing.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member support my call to his colleague Nigel Dodds, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to include a question in the 2011 census asking people to state their constitutional preferences? Let the people decide and do not be afraid of accurate and truthful information.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I am not afraid of it. Do not stand up to get a slap in the face. Bertie Ahern has told you loudly and clearly that you are not getting a united Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member must refer all his remarks through the Chair.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will refer all slappings to you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Many calls have been made for all of Ireland to work together. I would have loved to have seen one practical example of that. The Member from Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott referred to the recent scare over pig meat. As a Member from a largely rural constituency, I was concerned that dioxins were affecting our economy when it was clear that the source of the problem was the Republic of Ireland. When we asked the Republic of Ireland to act as good neighbours and stand up and share the burden, give compensation to our farmers on an equal basis and admit that some role and responsibility lay with that jurisdiction, there was utter silence.

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

Mr Paisley Jnr: When I was a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I noticed the time that was wasted on those meetings, which could have been done by videoconference, instead of the panoply of conferencing.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I have to slap you down. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: I support the amendment as proposed by my party colleague Mr Neeson, and, if the amendment is accepted, I will support the motion as amended. I draw the attention of the House to the nonsense of a situation in which the Alliance Party can propose a sensible amendment and our votes will count on that amendment, but our votes will not count on the substantive motion.

The debate has had a political aspect and an economic aspect. The motion emphasises the economic benefits or otherwise of the North/South Ministerial Council and the other areas of co-operation between the two areas of the island. Various Members, including Dolores Kelly, Lord Browne, Ken Robinson and Tom Elliott have given history lessons. Apart from that, the theme of the debate has been that all Members, to some degree, have recognised the benefits of North/South co-operation and, indirectly, therefore, the benefits of the North/South Ministerial Council.

The motion indicates that the DUP wants to do away with that body, so I am glad that Mr Simpson has agreed to accept the Alliance Party amendment, which makes it clear that the North/South Ministerial Council must stay, but that it could be subject to a review. Mr McElduff said that a review is imminent; I was not aware of that, but that is OK. The Alliance Party calls for a review by the Executive; I imagine that the same review is already in place, so that is fine.

Everyone has been supportive of co-operation, apart from one or two comments. Jim Shannon mentioned "bad neighbours", but he also said that we need to co-operate economically with those "bad neighbours". I see that as support for the North/South Ministerial Council.

Willie Clarke gave a litany of the achievements of the North/South Ministerial Council and the bodies that are indirectly related to it. Simon Hamilton did likewise, but he spoiled it by pointing out that all the achievements that he had listed were outside the remit of the North/South Ministerial Council. Barry McElduff mentioned the A5, the A8, Waterways Ireland and the Middletown Centre for Autism. The proposer of the motion, Mr Simpson, was also constructive in his support for the North/South Ministerial Council.

Mr S Wilson: Is the Member trying to destroy my colleague Mr Simpson's reputation by saying something positive about him?

Mr Lunn: I do not wish to destroy anybody's reputation, but Mr Simpson's contribution was constructive in respect of the long-term future of the North/South Ministerial Council. That was in some contrast to the party that sits to my left, which appeared to want to outdo the DUP.

Mr O'Loan: I wish to refer, in particular, to what the Alliance Party's amendment fails to do. The amendment leaves intact, in the motion, the reference:

"notes the benefit of the border to the Northern Ireland economy at this difficult time",

which echoes the exact language of Peter Robinson's New Year statement.

Considering the complexity of the issue and the significance of the border for our politics, our economy and our social relations, does Mr Lunn accept that reducing any discussion of the border to merely the number of people who come up to shop at Sainsbury's in Newry and its equivalents does not do justice to the necessary politics of our time?

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for that. Mr Speaker, if the intervention lasts more than a minute, do I get more than an extra minute?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: Thank you.

I take the Member's point. At present, the benefit of the border is entirely directed towards the North. Of course, times will change, and that benefit will swing the other way. However, the implication of the motion is that there is, at present, a benefit to Northern Ireland.

In fact, the Member talked about the wording of the motion, and I do not like the phrase "relatively positive relationship", but I will let it pass. I take it that that means relative to the way it was 25 years ago, so that is OK.

As I said, there has been a theme in the debate of general support for the Council, and I am glad of that. I understand nationalist Members being — I think that the words used were — "spooked" or "suspicious". Mr Attwood accused people of taking bites out of the agreement, because there is a developing pattern of sniping at various aspects of the cross-border bodies. However, those bodies are here to stay. I am not sure why some Members are so worried about the motion that they are relying on a petition of concern.

We hope that our amendment is accepted. I believe that John O'Dowd called the Alliance Party a unionist party. We can rest easy, because next week somebody on the unionist Benches will call it a nationalist party. That is fine with us, for as long as it continues.

Lord Morrow: I support the motion and the amendment. Much has been said in the debate, but little of it was relevant.

I take issue with John O'Dowd, who said that the debate was a waste of time. I regard it as anything but that; it has been a good and a useful debate that has put down markers for the future.

Alex Attwood, to his credit, has caught on to the fact that there will be changes in the future. He may have been the only Member who acknowledged that, and he did so for different reasons than he might have liked. However, I believe that he acknowledged that things cannot continue as they are, and that the DUP is planning changes. Mr Attwood is absolutely right, and time will reveal those plans. There will be more about that at another time and on another stage.

I want to comment on some Members' remarks. First, we brought the motion to the House with sincerity, because we believe that given the present economic climate, this is the ideal time to cut out a lot of the bureaucracy and red tape that is involved in the running of government. I believe that it was Alan McFarland — he will forgive me if it was not — who said that more people are employed in Northern Ireland's public sector than in the whole of the Republic of Ireland's public sector. Perhaps it was not Mr McFarland, but someone made that remark.

That may be a good enough reason to cut back on bureaucracy and red tape, because dramatic changes have followed the demise of the Celtic tiger economy, and things will never be the same again.

1.45 pm

We now hear a lot of bleating from across the border because people there find it difficult to live and to pay the unaffordable expenses and prices that are asked of them in a state that is virtually bankrupt. I do not say that with any malice: I say that simply because that is what economists tell us. It is highly unlikely that the Southern economy will survive. It is heading into very deep water. That poses the question of why anyone would want to add more bureaucracy to an economy that is already in virtual free fall.

Mr Neeson stated that he wants the number of Departments and MLAs to be reviewed. My party is at one with him on that matter. Perhaps that is why the Member has earned the tag of unionist, because he simply agrees with some of what my party has been saying. My party wants bureaucracy reduced and there to be fewer MLAs and government Ministers. We do not believe that there is any good reason why the current situation should continue. My party will, of course, be working overtime in order to ensure that that change happens.

Mr McElduff had much to say. In one of his comments, he used the phrase — and I am unsure as to whether he realised that he was using it, but he used it nevertheless — political honesty, which is a wonderful commodity but one that is in very short supply. I am sure that he would agree that if that were applied in every circumstance, we would see things differently, because, as another Member pointed out, there is little doubt that the North/South Ministerial Council has brought about nothing of any significance whatsoever: nothing for the nationalist community; nothing for the unionist community; nothing towards the well-being of the Irish Republic; and nothing towards the well-being of Northern Ireland. One must ask why, under the living sun, it should survive, particularly in the current economic climate.

Now that Sinn Féin and the SDLP are coming closer together on various issues, and there seems to be a

conduit opened between them where there seemed to be a cold war, which they have now overcome, and if they can agree on who actually put down the petition of concern — Mrs Kelly assures the House that it was the SDLP, while Mr McElduff is not sure — perhaps those parties could sit down and discuss whether there are good economic reasons for continuing with the North/South Ministerial Council. At least suspend it for a while until the country is up and going again economically and demonstrate to the people at large that that waste will not continue.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for giving way and, in particular, for nailing Sinn Féin's view of the motion, which is that it is a sham, because the Member indicated that the DUP had ambitions for the future of the North/South Ministerial Council. Can the Member confirm whether it is now DUP policy that the North/South Ministerial Council should, in the Member's words, be suspended? Is that the DUP view, and is that what it is telling the Irish Government?

Lord Morrow: Yes; and I would say to Mr Attwood: just watch this space. I know that you have told Sinn Féin that it must get up very early in the morning to be ahead of the DUP. Therefore, rise early in the morning and you will see what will happen in the not-too-distant future. As a matter of fact —

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: I shall in a minute.

As a matter of fact, during a previous debate, I said that Sinn Féin should sleep with one eye open because the DUP will be bringing forward proposals.

Mr O'Dowd: As regards to sleeping with one eye open, I have a young son who did not let me sleep all night, so I was up very early this morning. Can the Member explain to the House how the DUP will suspend, stop or cancel meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council? He is reading the Good Friday Agreement, and he will realise that his party cannot do that under its terms.

Lord Morrow: Yes, I have the Good Friday Agreement, which was well spotted by Barry McElduff. He noticed someone bringing it into the Chamber, which was extraordinary work by him. Despite its name being printed all over it, he deducted that I had the Belfast Agreement in my hand. So, well done.

The DUP's hand is not in the Belfast Agreement; that is not our work. Therefore, we have a responsibility to bring about its demise, and we will.

Tom Elliott was quick to make some useful comments, and rightly so, about the lack of co-operation during the war of genocide when terrorists skulked across the border and there was no co-operation on extradition. Those were good and valid points.

However, he went on to lay the blame for all the current misdemeanours at the door of the DUP — it is surprising that Tom Elliott would do that — and said that we have ambitions for an all-Ireland Civic Forum. We do not; the St Andrews Agreement was between two Governments, and everyone should know that.

I have the Belfast Agreement in front of me. It was signed off by Mr Elliott's party, and I am certain that the SDLP was also involved. I do not know whether Sinn Féin was huffing at that time, but I think that it was doing other things.

Paragraph 18 of strand two of the Belfast Agreement states:

"The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Oireachtas to consider developing a joint parliamentary forum, bringing together equal numbers from both institutions for discussion of matters of mutual interest and concern."

The DUP was not there, and I notice that Tom is not here now either.

Paragraph 19 states:

"Consideration to be given to the establishment of an independent consultative forum appointed by the two Administrations, representative of civil society, comprising the social partners and other members with expertise in social, cultural, economic and other issues."

Despite that, Mr Elliott says that we are setting up an all-Ireland Civic Forum. The Civic Forum is in the Belfast Agreement, but has anyone seen it meeting anywhere?

Mr McFarland: The Member's party assured us that the document from which he is quoting is dead, and that unionists will never have a problem again. However, at St Andrews, the DUP not only made provision for the Civic Forum and cross-border bodies, it agreed that Ministers would be obliged to go to North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Ministers are forced to do that by the ministerial code and cannot opt out. There is no longer any way of stopping the North/South Ministerial Council but there was under the Belfast Agreement.

Lord Morrow: Mr McFarland misses the point. The point is that Mr Elliott said that we were setting up a Civic Forum, but the Ulster Unionist Party had already made that provision in its Belfast Agreement. The authors of that great piece of work — *[Interruption.]*

Mr McFarland is now trying to mix it a bit. The provision was made in his party's Belfast Agreement and had nothing to do with the DUP. He should not try to palm off onto us something that his party created.

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

Lord Morrow: Dolores Kelly said that it was unfortunate that Ireland was ever divided.

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

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 47; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Neeson, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr W Clarke and Mr O'Loan.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 46; Noes 39.

AYES

UNIONIST:

Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr T Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Donaldson, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Sir Reg Empey, Mrs Foster, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McFarland, Miss McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Ms Purvis, Mr G Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

OTHER:

Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McCarthy and Mr Shannon.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr W Clarke and Mr A Maginness.

<i>Total votes</i>	<i>85</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>[54.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Supported Housing

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

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability.

I commend my colleagues in the Business Committee for securing today's debate. I note the fact that the Minister for Social Development has come along to listen to this debate. It is a pity that the Health Minister is not also here, because this is a cross-cutting motion.

We tabled this motion because we feel strongly that more needs to be done to provide adequate supported housing. That must be done in a cross-departmental manner because there is a collective responsibility on all of the Departments — particularly on the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) — to support people, and supported housing provides a lifeline for vulnerable people in our communities. It enables them to live independently, and it promotes their inclusion in wider society. We must do all within our power to ensure that that becomes a reality for those people.

Like me, I am sure that many other Members have met people in their constituency offices who have raised concerns about elderly relatives who stay in hospital for longer than necessary due to the fact that no supported accommodation is available. That must change, and we have tabled today's motion to call for action to ensure that such things do not happen.

The Bamford Review encouraged more co-operation among Departments. We await the Executive's response to the consultation that took place recently. The Executive's response to the Bamford Review contained many ambitious targets, many of which I believe, with the best will in the world, will not be realised unless there is a clear, definitive and concrete work plan among DHSSPS, DSD and other Departments. Such a work plan must come to the fore in the period ahead.

The Health Committee visited Muckamore Abbey Hospital and met many people who are detained there.

At first hand, we were able to see the situation for those who have experienced serious delays in being discharged due to the fact that there is a lack of supported housing in the community. I met two very young men, Sammy and Richard, who have been waiting three years and seven years respectively for discharge. However, they cannot be discharged into the community because there is no supported accommodation available. We cannot allow that to continue. Those two young men are in the prime of their lives, yet they are being detained in Muckamore Abbey Hospital because there is nothing in the community to support them.

The patients such as those who are in Muckamore are not the only section of society that requires supported housing. The needs of other groups in society must be met — for example, those who need to be housed due to domestic violence, homelessness or other numerous and varying reasons. Currently, those needs are not being met.

Today's motion calls for a review of the waiting lists for supported housing because the most vulnerable people in our society should be supported by a clear strategy so that they can live their lives as fully and as independently as possible. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way — I caught her just at the end of her speech. This is an important debate, and I know that the Minister for Social Development will respond to the debate on behalf of the Executive. However, many of the issues that will be raised in the House today will probably relate to health.

A cross-departmental strategy is needed to deal with these issues — whether they are issues of health or social development. Rather than assuming that the debate will automatically be read by the Health Minister, perhaps the Speaker's Office could provide the Health Minister with a copy of the Hansard report, because we are well aware that this is not just a social development issue or a health issue. This is a community issue, and it is about cross-departmental work — from the Executive right down to Committee level. Perhaps the Social Development Minister will tell us whether she will formally give a copy of the Hansard report to the Health Department.

A Member: Was that a speech?

Ms S Ramsey: Of course that was a speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the normal convention is that interventions are shorter than speeches.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch): As part of the Committee for Social Development's review of the

budget for the Supporting People programme, it heard evidence from several organisations that are involved in the provision of supported housing. Sometimes, it is all too easy to accept an argument made by a voluntary or community organisation, and to then make bland statements in the House in praise of that organisation's work. However, in this instance, the Committee has been genuinely impressed by the professionalism, commitment and dedication of the voluntary and community organisations that provide supported-housing services.

The Committee for Social Development closely questioned those organisations, and it was impressed by their commitment not just to their vulnerable clients but to providing quality and value for money. The organisations were keen to demonstrate the range and excellence of the services that they offer to vulnerable groups and the relatively low cost of delivering those services.

The absence of joined-up government is the major complaint from those organisations. Rather than a single system that focuses on vulnerable individuals and their needs, there are several separate systems, focusing on benefits, health or housing matters. The absence of joined-up thinking means that those organisations spend a great deal of time aligning the benefits to which individuals might be entitled with their housing needs, and then matching those with health-treatment needs. Each system has its own application process, budget limitations and varying eligibility criteria — a source of exceptional amounts of frustration among the voluntary and community organisations to which the Committee spoke.

Undoubtedly, the Minister will say that the provision of supported-housing services for Muckamore Abbey residents carries a significant price tag, and I do not dispute that the provision of such services will require time. However, while I accept that there are difficulties, it is essential that the Departments of Health and Social Development work more closely together to deliver the best-value outcome for Muckamore Abbey residents.

The Committee for Social Development supports the spirit of the motion, in so far as it refers to the need for joined-up working between the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health.

Mr Armstrong: I am pleased to speak in the debate, and I am happy to support the motion. I have always thought that a society can be measured by the way in which it treats its most vulnerable citizens, and supported housing is one of the few matters that command the support of all parties in the House.

It is the nature of the Social Development portfolio that the Department and the Minister are tasked with improving the lot of many of the most vulnerable in

our society, including tackling fuel poverty, dispensing social security benefits and dispensing state pensions. Supported housing affects vulnerable people who cannot fend for themselves and who require support and assistance in order to lead a normal life in the community. Obviously, some people cannot be released from care facilities and abandoned in a flat or a house.

The recommendations of the Bamford Review form part of the background to this debate. However, although we support the goals of the Bamford Report, we must accept that public policy operates in the real world, not in a vacuum. Unfortunately, the present economic situation means that budgets — whether they are the Executive's, departmental or household — are being cut.

With that in mind, one must have a realistic expectation of what the Minister and her Department can do. However, it is imperative that the Minister redoubles her efforts to ensure that every penny that her Department spends is spent in the most effective and efficient way.

There are real problems with the issue of supported housing. Those who require such assistance tend to be extremely vulnerable and, often, suffer from the most severe learning difficulties. Supported housing tends to be quite expensive, and, as the DSD budget has come under pressure, it is no surprise that the supported-housing scheme is feeling some pain.

Even when funds are available for supported-housing projects, it has often proved difficult to receive planning permission from councils, because, often, local communities assume, wrongly, that supported housing means bail hostels or accommodation for undesirables. Those are misconceptions, and much more needs to be done to educate the public as to who is being helped by supported housing.

Supported housing helps some of the most vulnerable people in society and, with improved information and education developments on supported-housing provision in DSD, progress can be achieved in local communities, with the help of leadership from local representatives.

As I said, societies are often judged by how they treat their most vulnerable and what priorities those groups are given. Our society should be judged in that way. Although the Minister's intent and support for supported housing is clear, it is regrettable that she is hamstrung by a much reduced capital budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mrs Carmel Hanna.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Partitionism

1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) if the statement made by the deputy First Minister at the North/South Ministerial Council on 23 January 2009 that partitionism is evil breaches the Pledge of Office's requirement to promote the interests of the whole community represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly towards the goal of a shared future.

(AQO 1986/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): The Member appears not to be aware that questions about breaches of the Pledge of Office by Ministers rightly fall to be considered by the Assembly or, ultimately, as a matter of law, to the courts; they do not fall to Ministers themselves. Therefore, OFMDFM has no role in determining whether the deputy First Minister's comments constitute such a breach. If the requisite number of Members table an appropriate motion and if the Assembly concludes that a Minister has failed to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office, it may pass a resolution censuring him or her, or pass a resolution of no confidence, following which the Minister can be excluded from office for a specified period.

Mr McCallister: The Business Office accepted the question as a proper one to put to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Will the First Minister state whether the deputy First Minister was attending the North/South Ministerial Council in his official capacity and, if so, when did the First Minister officially sanction the deputy First Minister's comment that partition was evil? If the First Minister did not sanction that comment, what action is he going to take to deal with it?

The First Minister: First of all, I do not think that the Member should attempt to implicate the Business Office in relation to the substance of his question; it was the substance of his question, not the eligibility of it, that I drew attention to. The deputy First Minister did not make the remarks at the North/South Ministerial Council. As was the case for Mr McCallister, I became aware of the comments through

the press. However, the deputy First Minister did not make the comment that Mr McCallister has ascribed to him. The deputy First Minister did not say that partition was evil; he said that partitionism is evil.

Therefore, one must look at the definition of partitionism, and we find that, not for the first time, republicans have a different definition than that provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. For republicans, partitionism is defined as the practice of advocating the removal of the border, but behaving in a manner that reinforces it. Incidentally, it is usually used as a term of abuse to other nationalists. However, in my view, partition is good, not evil — Northern Ireland has benefited greatly from it. It could also be suggested, however, that partition is something that the Republic of Ireland engaged in when it annexed the Republic from the United Kingdom.

Mr Ford: I suspect that, had the deputy First Minister responded to the question that was just answered by the First Minister, there might have been a different answer. However, in order to bring about some collectivity, will the First Minister give an assessment of the progress that has been achieved in recent months toward the goal of a shared future?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have warned Members that the supplementary question must lead from the original question. The Member has gone outside that; therefore, I will move on.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for detailing the sanctions that can be imposed and how that can be done. Given that his office has responsibility for equality, are any sanctions to be imposed by his office in relation to the recent comments of Minister Wilson?

The First Minister: I think that the question asked by the leader of the Alliance Party was more germane than the question that has just been asked. The Member knows that if a Member believes that a Minister has acted contrary to the Pledge of Office, there are steps that the Assembly can take. There is no step that can be taken by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in relation to such an issue.

As far as Minister Wilson's statement is concerned, I would have thought that we would wish to have a robust debate on all of the issues. I am not sure which of the Minister's statements the Member is referring to; however, if it is the most recent one on climate change, the Minister has provoked a debate in Northern Ireland that I suspect would not have taken place had he not made those comments.

Every individual must be entitled to have a view on the issue. However, the view of the Democratic Unionist Party is on record and in its manifesto; it is that view that the DUP will uphold in the Executive.

Mr Speaker: Members, let us have supplementary questions that relate to the original question. Mrs Kelly caught me out on that occasion. *[Laughter.]*

She knew what she was doing. Members, be extremely careful when asking supplementary questions.

Ministerial Code

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what changes have been made to the ministerial code since 20th March 2007.
(AQO 1987/09)

The First Minister: During that period, no changes have been made to the ministerial code. However, Members will be aware that, during the debate on the Financial Assistance Bill, the deputy First Minister and I gave a commitment to bring forward a draft amendment to the code for the approval of the Assembly. We secured the Executive's agreement to that on 15 January, and today we tabled a motion to request the Assembly's approval for a draft amendment to paragraph 2.4 of the ministerial code. That paragraph sets out those matters that a Minister would bring to the attention of the Executive for consideration and agreement.

The purpose of the amendment is to require the First Minister and deputy First Minister to bring to the Executive for agreement a proposal to make a determination on designation under the legislation. It similarly requires the Minister to designate the Department to seek Executive agreement on the scheme for financial assistance. Our existing obligations under paragraph 2.4 of the code would, in any case, have required us to bring those matters to the Executive. We have already circulated a draft Executive paper to Ministers to seek their agreement to a draft determination on designation, and, shortly, we will provide Ministers with the text of that determination.

We hope, however, that our draft amendment to the code will demonstrate, beyond any doubt, that the Financial Assistance Act is not, as some Members claimed, an instrument to facilitate intervention by OFMDFM, but a means by which the Executive — collectively — can effect essential change.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the First Minister for his reply. Does he agree that his answer puts an end to the suggestions by some Members about the Executive's role as set out in the Financial Assistance Act? Will he tell the House whether he has received any apologies from those who suggested otherwise during debates? Does he agree that the new ministerial code has transformed decision-making in Northern Ireland to the extent that, for example, it prevented the Minister of Education from proceeding with her plan to abolish academic selection?

The First Minister: Sadly, I suspect that my response will not put an end to the allegation, because Members continued to make that allegation despite receiving assurances during the debates on the various Stages of the Bill. The deputy First Minister and I approached the issue on the basis of securing a collective decision from the Executive, and we had a private meeting with the Minister for Social Development to discuss how to take it forward. However, I suspect that, although the proof of the pudding was in the eating, some people will not partake of that dish.

The only issue that I have with Member's final question is his positioning of the word "new" before ministerial code, because that is now as it always was. The main distinction, which came from St Andrews, is that the ministerial code became statutory. Therefore, it requires every Minister — not only the Minister of Education — to ensure that they bring any controversial, significant or cross-cutting matter to the Executive for their decision. That requirement benefits the collectivity of the Executive. There can never be the fully collective Government to which a voluntary coalition lends itself, but the ministerial code brings the Assembly as close to that as the existing system permits.

Mr Brady: A Cheann Comhairle, will the Minister tell the Assembly whether amendments to the ministerial code will delay the provision of financial assistance to those living in fuel poverty?

The First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will not delay that provision. We took the legislation forward in a manner that brought it before the House and ensured that it passed faster than anybody else had indicated was possible.

Royal Assent was announced from the Chair this morning, and we are moving on to the stage of changing the ministerial code. We will move immediately on the issue of designation — it is no secret that that will be to the Department for Social Development, so that it can bring forward a scheme to allow payments at the earliest possible moment.

Civic Forum

3. **Mr Easton** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many individuals have written to the Department or responded to the consultation process, about the reinstatement of the Civic Forum.
(AQO 1988/09)

8. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration it will give to an online interactive alternative to a formal Civic Forum.
(AQO 1993/09)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 8 together.

The review of the Civic Forum has sought to canvas as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the structure, operation, composition and membership of that body. The review aims to determine the most appropriate mechanisms and arrangements for engaging with, and obtaining, the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

The consultation phase of the review ran from 29 May 2008 until the end of August 2008, attracting 60 written submissions. An analysis of responses indicated that a majority — 44 respondents — favoured some mechanism of engagement with civic society, of whom only 19 respondents explicitly made reference to the need for a civic forum. There was very little demand for a return to the same structure of forum that operated between 2000 and 2002.

I can confirm that none of the written submissions suggested an online interactive relationship between Government and civic society. However, during the series of meetings that the review team held with former members of the Civic Forum, nominated bodies and academics, which ran parallel to the consultation exercise, one academic described innovative approaches to citizenship participation and referred the team to an article on online citizenship that he had jointly authored. The review team was also approached by a local businessman, who advocated consideration of a web-based process similar to that used for gathering the views of citizens on legislation in the American state of Idaho.

Those proposals will be considered, along with the other representations made during the consultation phase, in the review team's initial analysis. It is expected that that report will come to us in the near future.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister give an undertaking that he will not establish, or re-establish, a body that has no real purpose and is a complete waste of taxpayers' money?

The First Minister: Every Member — especially those with ministerial responsibility — will recognise the real value of having an interaction with civic society. However, the nature of that interaction is the issue that the deputy First Minister and I are looking at in the first instance, and which the Executive will also want to examine. I am sure that neither he nor I will want to have an interaction that could be described as a waste of money and time. We will want to have the best possible interaction, and, given the tight financial situation we face, we will want to ensure real value for money.

Miss McIlveen: Will the First Minister list a single achievement of the Civic Forum?

The First Minister: The questions get harder and harder. The Civic Forum met on a number of occasions, it provided papers to the previous First Minister and deputy First Minister, and its role was to be a body that would provide advice. However, everybody recognises that the reason for the review of the Civic Forum is to ascertain whether it is possible to get better advice and a better system that will advantage all our Ministers.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister confirm that there is a legislative imperative in the Northern Ireland Act to bring forward legislation to bring into effect that section of the Good Friday Agreement?

The First Minister: That same agreement required a review of the value of the Civic Forum to be carried out, which is now happening. It will be carried out on the basis of ensuring that we do not simply dogmatically have something because it is in the Belfast Agreement. We shall determine its value and see how best it can be improved.

After all, if democracy is important to everyone here, we want it to be a journey that will ensure that we get better and better interaction through better and better structures. There is no question that the Executive will want to have good interaction with civic society: the issue is whether the Civic Forum that was set up in 2000 and ran to 2002 can provide that kind of interaction or whether there is a better way to achieve our goal.

2.45 pm

Mr K Robinson: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive report. Will he tell the House how many public servants are currently working on matters relating to the Civic Forum? Perhaps he will also tell us how long they have been doing that work, as no decisions appear to have been taken.

The First Minister: The review has been under way for a considerable period. We have received 60 responses to it, and the team will, therefore, proceed to make recommendations based on that advice. They will talk to stakeholders in addition to considering the responses that were received from the 60 groups and individuals. Thus, work is ongoing. However, the one certainty is that much less money has been spent over this most recent period than was spent over the Civic Forum's lifetime.

Mr Attwood: The First Minister will be glad to hear that my question will be easy to answer. Last Tuesday in the Chamber, the First Minister's DUP colleagues referred to the Civic Forum as being:

"stacked with pro-agreement nodding dogs." [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p214, col 1*].

They said that:

“its make-up was anti-unionist, anti-orange and anti-evangelical.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p218, col 1*].

They also hoped that:

“it should never see the light of day again.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 37, p214, col 2*].

Does the First Minister agree that to characterise so many so wrongly is unfortunate and an unnecessary slight on the many in this community who have made the journey to which he has just referred.

The First Minister: The composition of the Civic Forum was tainted by the fact that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were able to make nominations directly, without any application of the principle of merit. It says something that the present incumbents are prepared to consider mechanisms that do not amount simply to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister having patronage, but rather that ensure that we encourage the kind of engagement that allows the best people to come forward — they are the people who can provide the most accurate account of civic society’s viewpoint and needs.

Anti-Poverty Strategy

4. **Mrs McGill** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the anti-poverty strategy will be published; and if this strategy will go to full formal consultation or consultation through the anti-poverty forum. (AQO 1989/09)

Child Poverty

7. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it supports the plans to extend the proposed UK legislation on child poverty to Northern Ireland; and, if so, when public consultation on this legislation will take place. (AQO 1992/09)

The First Minister: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 7 together.

The Northern Ireland anti-poverty strategy, ‘Lifetime Opportunities’, was published in November 2006. After devolution, we examined the strategy to ensure that it was fit for purpose for the new Administration. After consultation with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Executive agreed in November 2008 to adopt formally the broad architecture and principles of Lifetime Opportunities, along with the key aims and priorities outlined in the Programme for Government, as the basis of its strategy to tackle poverty and social inclusion in Northern Ireland.

Two extensive periods of consultation took place during the development of the Lifetime Opportunities strategy, and there are no plans, therefore, to carry out further formal consultation. We are in the process of re-establishing the ministerial-led poverty and social inclusion forum, which will enable key sectoral interests to feed into the process. We are also finalising the terms of reference for the new anti-poverty ministerial subcommittee. We aim to convene the first meeting as soon as is practicable. Our hope is that that subcommittee will ensure that there is effective cross-departmental working on key actions that will result in tangible progress against poverty.

I now turn to the proposed UK legislation on child poverty. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Treasury have sought comments from Ministers in each of the devolved Administrations on a consultation document that outlines the UK Government’s intention to place on a legislative basis its target to eliminate child poverty in the UK by 2020.

The consultation document was published on Wednesday 29 January, and the consultation will run until 11 March. It is expected that the child poverty Bill will be introduced on a UK-wide basis after Easter. We are considering the proposals and have written to our Executive colleagues seeking their views and comments. We will also seek the views of the OFMDFM Committee, and we anticipate that our Executive colleagues will consult their respective Committees as appropriate.

The UK Government have no plans for a Northern Ireland-specific consultation on the proposals. However, members of the public and organisations here can respond directly to the United Kingdom Government consultation. We intend to respond formally to the consultation through an agreed Executive response.

Mrs McGill: I thank the First Minister for that comprehensive answer. Who will participate in the new anti-poverty forum?

The First Minister: It is vital that the Executive makes a determination on all such matters. As I said, the broad architecture of the overall strategy has been accepted, and it is now for the ministerial subgroup to present proposals on the outstanding issues. When that is done, the Executive will take a decision, and the Assembly and its Committees will be informed.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive response to my colleague Claire McGill and me. However, I am disappointed. How do the First Minister’s Executive colleagues feel about the absence of a formal consultation on the child poverty Bill? Does he agree that the provisions in the Financial

Assistance Bill can be used to address child poverty issues?

The First Minister: My heart is warmed by the Member's desire to be deeply involved in the UK consultation on this issue. If the Bill were a piece of Northern Ireland legislation, there would have been direct consultation with the Northern Ireland community. However, as Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom, its people are fully entitled to make submissions as part of the consultation process.

The Member is correct that OFMDFM has had to tackle poverty with its hands tied behind its back. The new legislation provides us with a mechanism that enables us to proactively address those issues and meet the targets that were set in our Programme for Government.

Mr Moutray: What was the Executive's response to the OFMDFM Committee's report on child poverty?

The First Minister: We appreciate the considerable work that Committee members put into the report — they probably spent between 12 and 18 months working on it. The report contained 47 key recommendations, which apply to almost all Government Departments. Consequently, OFMDFM attempted to separate the issues and send them to their relevant Departments. The Departments sent back their responses, which we compiled. I hope that the Committee has been made aware of the Executive response before it is finalised. The Executive response is with the Committee, although it has not been published yet — it would be wrong for me to indicate my view until the response is published.

The bottom line is that getting people a good job is the best step towards removing them from all issues relating to poverty. In many ways, therefore, it is a cross-departmental issue, and, unfortunately, the current economic climate makes our task more difficult.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the strategy's actions and targets be measurable objectively, and how well funded will they be?

The First Minister: The targets will be the same targets that were set in the Programme for Government, and, given our present circumstances, they will be challenging. The Programme for Government targets were set, but we always recognised that, from time to time, they would need to be revised if more energy or funding was needed in a certain area of activity in order to reach those targets.

There is a strong view on the parts of the Executive and OFMDFM that every possible step must be taken to reach those targets, even though they have been

made more difficult. That is an area of activity to which the deputy First Minister and I are committed.

Mr Speaker: Questions 5 and 6 have been withdrawn; questions 7 and 8 have been answered; and questions 9 and 10 have been withdrawn.

Sterling/Euro Exchange Rate

11. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the impact the exchange rate between sterling and the euro will have on the delivery of the Programme for Government. (AQO 1996/09)

The First Minister: This might have been a good time for us to have a discussion on the value of having so many questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given that six questions have been withdrawn and Members are, obviously, duplicating the rest, but that does not relate to Mr Shannon's question.

We recognise that short-term fluctuations in exchange rates can have a positive and negative effect on our economy. Such fluctuations are occurring against a background of continuing uncertainty in the global economy. Current economic conditions and developments in the financial markets present us with significant challenges. That makes it more important than ever that the Executive and individual Departments collectively remain focused on delivering on the commitments in the Programme for Government. Therefore, although we will review our priorities and targets regularly to ensure that they remain relevant and focused on addressing the key challenges that we face in the medium to longer term, changes in the exchange rate must not make us lose focus.

Mr Shannon: I thank the First Minister for that reply. I am sure that the global economic slowdown is on everyone's minds, including that of the First Minister. What impact will that have on Northern Ireland's economy?

The First Minister: I could take half an hour to answer that question alone. One area of activity relates to jobs, which is critical to so many people in Northern Ireland. Although our unemployment rate has been increasing substantially, it is not increasing at the exponential rates of the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. I believe that the latest figures for Northern Ireland showed an unemployment rate of 4.2%. The Republic recently announced an unemployment rate of 9.1%. The UK average is 6.1% or 6.2%. However, Northern Ireland has the lowest level of unemployment of any region in the United Kingdom. Given the Republic of Ireland's figures, it has the lowest level of unemployment in the whole of the British Isles. No one should take any credit for

that. It simply means that the way in which the Executive have approached the issue, along with the fact that there is a very high level of public-sector activity in Northern Ireland, have assisted in ensuring that we have a slower rise in unemployment.

There are a series of other matters relating to the construction industry. The Member will be well aware of the real difficulties that the construction industry faces in spite of the fact that the Executive have a much larger capital programme than has ever been the case. However, the increase in our capital construction programme has not been able to fill the void that has been caused by the lack of activity on the housing front.

3.00 pm

The construction industry faces serious difficulties. I could describe the state of each industrial sector, but at some stage the Speaker might become impatient.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in implementing the recommendations contained in the Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses.

(AQO 2006/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): I am conscious of problems in process and procedure in respect of this issue, but they are not all the fault of my Department. Renewable energy projects contribute to the economy and should be supported.

The review concluded that evidence existed to merit and warrant the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) funding of the project and that it was in line with the wider aims of Government policy. The project aims to protect and enhance the environment and encourage use of renewable technologies to assist with meeting the energy costs of rural businesses across the North. The industry has told me that that is greatly needed, especially in the current economic climate. It was recognised that, with an emerging technology and a lack of local experience, the project entailed risks. The Department took steps to manage those, and it will assess the lessons it has learnt and those learnt by the industry. Together, we will be able to manage those risks better in the future.

The Department has accepted the report of the Review of the Wind Energy for Rural Businesses

Project. The recommendations contained in it, and the implications for this and other projects, are being considered by the Department. It will consider the lessons learnt, and how they can be incorporated into procedures as we move towards closure of the current rural development programme and the implementation of the rural development programme for 2007–2013.

One of the recommendations is that, subject to approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department should consider making an offer of an ex gratia payment to each of the applicants who purchased the Powerbreeze turbines. A business case requesting approval to offer ex gratia payments was forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel in December and, while it awaited a response, my Department facilitated a meeting with the Powerbreeze applicants to advise them of the current situation.

On 29 January, DFP conveyed written approval for DARD to make an offer of ex gratia payments and, in the near future, the Department will enter into negotiations with the 11 Powerbreeze applicants to offer payment.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her answer. Wind generation is not rocket science — it has been around for a long time. Does the Minister accept that DARD showed serious failings in respect of wind energy for rural businesses? She mentioned an ex gratia payment; should she not consider 100% compensation to those farmers who have been adversely affected?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department cannot take full responsibility for everything that went wrong with the project. The review identified that actions of the various stakeholders contributed to the problems that arose. However, the Department commissioned the independent report and accepts that it has partial responsibility for what went wrong. It would not be appropriate for the Department to offer 100% compensation when it is not 100% to blame.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us whether each applicant will be offered the same amount?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The short answer is no. Capital and installation costs varied from applicant to applicant. The average cost of each turbine was £51,000 and the average contribution to that from applicants was approximately £31,000. The Department will base its offer of an ex gratia payment on a uniform percentage of each applicant's eligible costs.

Mr Gallagher: Individual farmers and landowners have opportunities to provide energy from wind on their holdings. However, they face difficulties raised by the Planning Service under the new supplementary

planning guidance. Has the Minister discussed those problems with the Department of the Environment?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have had many discussions with the Department of the Environment on planning, particularly in relation to the policy planning statement (PPS) 21 working group. However, I have not discussed specific cases of wind energy projects on farms. It will probably emerge in future discussions.

Milk Auction Prices

2. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the recent auction prices for milk. (AQO 2007/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am aware of the significant reductions in milk prices at recent United Dairy Farmers' milk auctions; I understand that they resulted primarily from a weakening of international markets. That is a very worrying development, which, if sustained, could have undermined the profitability of the dairy industry, which makes an important contribution to the North's agrifood industry.

I was teleconferencing with Hilary Benn in October when the significant seven-pence drop occurred, and I was able to use that price drop in my discussion with him to raise the issue of export refunds. Following that, Executive colleagues and I worked hard to secure the reintroduction of export refunds for dairy products, which were agreed at last month's EU management committee meeting. Our continuing lobbying resulted in a major shift from the usual position of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on export refunds when its officials abstained in the vote held in Brussels.

The introduction of export refunds for dairy products is an important step in the right direction, and our efforts to secure a successful outcome have been welcomed by the Ulster Farmers' Union and Dairy UKNI. I was encouraged to note that, following the reintroduction of export refunds, there was a better price for milk at the January auction. I hope that this will be the dawn of brighter days ahead for the dairy industry.

Mr P J Bradley: Month after month at the milk auctions when we learn the new prices and compare them with cross-channel prices we discover that there is a differential of 10 pence per litre, which means £500 per cow per lactation. Adding to that the extra cost for feed, fertiliser and fuel, does the Minister agree that if that downward trend continues it will lead to a continued exodus from our farms? Does she have any intention of doing anything to support the industry in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Perhaps the Member is asking about direct support to dairy farmers. However, the operation of the dairy sector falls under the common agricultural policy; therefore any support in addition to the price-support measure such as intervention and export refunds and the single-farm payment would have to be agreed at EU level.

However, although I cannot provide further direct financial support, we should seek to benefit fully from measures already in place; that is why we pressed for the reintroduction of export refunds. I also welcome the recent EU Commission announcement that it will continue with intervention purchases beyond the fixed ceiling, if necessary, until 31 August. There are measures in the rural development programme to help the dairy sector and to help all farmers. The farm modernisation scheme, which opened last week, provides measures by which farmers can apply for financial assistance.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for her reply. I draw Members' attention to the list of Members' interests. What discussions has the Minister had or does she plan to have with the industry to assist with milk products exports; and what other measures will the Minister pursue to return the dairy sector to profitability?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We had discussions with processors in the lead-up to the reintroduction of export refunds. The role of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is to help the dairy sector as opposed to processors. Help is available under the rural development programme. Axis 1 of the programme covers support available for focus farms and benchmarking, both of which have dairy sector representation. Support is also available under the farm modernisation scheme.

Axis 1 of the rural development programme also includes agriculture and forestry processing and marketing grants schemes, supply-chain development, and farm family options. There is also significant grant aid available under the farm nutrient management scheme, which closed on 31 December 2008. In addition, under the regional food programme, the Dairy Council was awarded £162,500 for generic research and promotional activities.

The Department carries out a wide range of activities aimed at supporting the dairy sector, including the provision of technical support to producers and processors, the provision of knowledge and technology transfer programmes, and benchmarking and services that enable farmers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their farm businesses. The industry also receives significant support from Government through the Agri-Food and

Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), including dedicated dairy technologists. My aim is to have a sustainable and vibrant dairy industry that continues to make a significant contribution to the local economy and to rural areas.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she accept that following the reintroduction of export refunds only a very minimal increase in price was received by the United Dairy Farmers at a recent auction? Dairy farmers are still losing money on every litre of milk that they produce. Does the Minister accept that there needs to be an increase in export refunds in order for the industry to return to some sort of viability?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I fully support farmers in their quest for a fair and sustainable price. Although I do not have any direct influence over retail prices, I believe that I have a role to encourage and facilitate discussion in order to increase the understanding of issues. When export refunds were introduced we were slightly disappointed with the levels set. In order to strengthen the dairy sector we have to get away from our dependence on milk powders.

Fishing Quotas

3. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she would change her Department's policy to enable boats under 10 metres long to carry their fishing quota over from month to month. (AQO 2008/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Traditionally, under-10-metre vessels are small inshore vessels fishing for small amounts of fish. All under-10-metre vessels here, and in England, Scotland and Wales, are allocated equal monthly quotas from a central quota pool. In the South, there is no under-10-metre sector, and all vessels fishing for white fish and prawns, regardless of size, are allocated a quota from a central pool. Monthly allocations are agreed with the industry in advance, depending on fishing plans and quota availability.

Our under-10-metre quota pool has been adequate, and the system has been adequate for most vessels. In recent years, more specialised small vessels capable of fishing for large amounts of quota species have entered the under-10-metre fleet. Although I appreciate that those vessels struggle with the monthly allocations, the under-10-metre quota pool system was never designed to be used by such vessels. However, in acknowledgment of the difficulties experienced by some small vessels fishing mainly for prawns, flexibility already exists to spread prawn allocations

over a three-month rather than a one-month period. Vessels that need a larger quota are free to leave the under-10-metre quota pool and to lease the quota that they need.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response. However, owners of under-10-metre boats have told me that they are unable to transfer the quota from month to month; they may be able to do that for prawns, but they cannot do it for the other species of fish that they catch. There are approximately 80 boats under 10 metres long in the three ports, of which 30 are in Portavogie, the area that I represent. Would the Minister be prepared to initiate a consultation document or be prepared to meet the owners of those boats to discuss the matter further so that we can get a solution to their problem?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I recognise that, technically, the under-10-metre sector does not come under any producer organisation. However, my officials or I would be happy to meet that sector to consider a way forward to see if we can better organise a system that suits the sector.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us when the Department will be making the recently announced hardship payments to fishermen?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: First, the Department has to make a scheme, in the form of a piece of subordinate legislation, and invite fishing businesses to make claims for the harbour, landing and light dues paid by them. I expect that it will be possible to make those payments before the end of the current financial year.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that the inability to transfer the monthly quota is wasteful of the fishing quota that is given to Northern Ireland? Furthermore, does she accept that she needs to have a better working relationship with DEFRA, the lead agency in EU negotiations, in order to improve the outcomes of the EU fisheries assessments?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will be very disappointed to hear that I have a good working relationship with all the Administrations that were involved in the December Fisheries Council. We work very well — and very hard — together; we were very pleased with the outcome of last year's Fisheries Council. However, we accept that there will be challenges in future. We work for all sectors, and the under-10-metre sector is no exception. As I said in answer to the previous question, I am happy to meet that sector to see what we can do to make life easier for it.

3.15 pm

North/South Meetings

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the next meeting of the North South Inter Departmental Meeting between her Department and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will take place; and to detail the planned schedule of future meetings. (AQO 2009/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Formal meetings between the permanent secretary of my Department and the secretary general of the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (DAFF) are held regularly, and I expect the next meeting to be arranged in the next few weeks. Thereafter, I expect meetings to take place on a three-monthly basis at least.

In addition to those formal meetings, senior officials in both Departments have regular discussions on a range of subjects of mutual interest on a day-to-day basis. In order to improve and increase the level of North/South contact and work between our Departments, I have established a North/South unit in my Department to help co-ordinate the extensive North/South work that is already ongoing and to scope areas of future work and co-operation.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for that response. Does the Minister agree that such meetings are an important part of the economic well-being of the agricultural community on the island of Ireland, particularly during the economic downturn? Can she enlighten the House on why there seems to have been some slippage at Executive level in the efforts at North/South co-operation? I am heartened to hear that some level of injection of enthusiasm has been made into that, and can she provide further details on that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can speak only for myself, but there has been no injection of enthusiasm; I have always been very enthusiastic. Since I became Minister, I have attended two formal North/South Ministerial Council agriculture sectoral meetings and three aquaculture and marine sectoral meetings. I was due to attend a further agricultural sectoral meeting on Thursday 5 February in Dublin, but it was postponed because severe weather conditions prevented many attendees, including the accompanying Minister and some officials from my Department, from going. I hope to rearrange that meeting for a date in the near future.

In addition to the rearranged meeting, I hope to attend a further three agriculture meetings and three aquaculture meetings this year. The next aquaculture meeting is planned for March. I have also held several bilateral meetings with my DAFF counterparts, Mary

Coughlan TD and Brendan Smith TD, to discuss topics such as the electronic identification of sheep, bluetongue vaccination, the all-island animal health and welfare strategy and the CAP health check.

I have also had bilateral and trilateral meeting with my DAFF and Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs counterparts, Brendan Smith and Éamon Ó Cuív. Those meetings included discussions on animal disease, the farm nutrient management scheme, the December Fisheries Council, rural development issues and, more recently, discussions on the contaminated feed issue. Quite a bit of business has gone on.

Mr Poots: What discussions has the Minister had with her counterpart on the dioxins issue? Has she raised the fact that information that would have been vital to Northern Ireland in fighting that issue was withheld by the Republic of Ireland Government for at least three weeks? Does she realise that, as a consequence of that, her fortress-Ireland policy on animal health is in tatters? When does she expect to receive compensation from the Republic of Ireland Government, which was the body for licensing the operation that allowed the contaminated material to enter the food chain?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Two or three questions were asked, and I hope that I can deal with them all. I advise the Member to read the papers, because he should know by now that compensation will not be forthcoming from the South because of financial and legal problems. However, they are assisting us in putting together a co-financing package, and I am meeting Mariann Fischer Boel about that tomorrow.

The Member said that information was withheld. The information was not communicated to us, as opposed to its being withheld, which makes it sound as though it was done deliberately. There has been considerable contact between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and DAFF at official level in dealing with the dioxin-contaminated feed incident. Officials in my Department have had regular communication by telephone and email with counterparts in the South to exchange information and update on developments, and that is ongoing. Between 8 December 2008 and 26 January 2009, meetings and teleconferences were held on 26 days.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for being frank in her answers. Will the Minister advise on the specific aspects of the engagements that officials in her Department have had with the counterparts in the South? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In addition to the list that I gave in a previous answer, officials are dealing with Southern

counterparts in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on a daily basis. Numerous further topics are discussed that impinge on our respective Departments throughout the island, including animal and plant health, disease control, flood risk, food issues, forestry and rural issues.

Rural Development Programme

5. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the New Challenges under the Rural Development Programme as announced in Brussels on 19 January 2009.

(AQO 2010/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The President of the EU Commission, José Manuel Barroso, announced on 19 January that the Commission proposed to launch a €5 billion EU economic recovery plan funded by the reallocation of unspent CAP funds from the EU Budget. That was also referred to by the Agriculture Commissioner, Mariann Fischer Boel, at the EU Agriculture Council meeting held on the same day.

The Commission published the actual proposals on 20 January. The package proposes a total of €3.5 billion for energy projects, €1 billion for the extension and upgrading of high-speed internet access in rural communities, and €0.5 billion in additional aid to tackle the so-called new challenges that were agreed in the health check. Those new challenges are climate change, renewable energy, water management, biodiversity and dairy restructuring.

It is important to remember that the proposals have yet to be agreed by member states and MEPs. I welcome proposals to use unspent EU money in support of our farming and rural communities. However, I would like to see the scope of spending opportunities associated with the proposals widened to allow all sectors of agriculture to benefit. I will raise that issue with the EU Commissioner when I meet her tomorrow.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell Members how soon our farmers will receive the benefits of the €3 billion from the CAP health check?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Unfortunately, the current plan is to distribute the money on the basis of historical rural-development allocations, which means that we would receive a total share of around €2 million to fund both rural broadband and the new challenges.

The proposals have not yet been agreed. If they are, there will be conditions attached on how the money can be spent. I will consult with stakeholders before

any decisions are taken; therefore, at present, I have no definitive answer to the Member's question.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister support any application, or potential application — under the rural development programme — from the Orange Order for Orange Halls, which are an integral part of the rural community?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I said in my earlier answer that the allocation of funding must go out to consultation, during which I will seek the views of stakeholders. However, money is allocated on the basis of objective need. The Department will want to consider how the money will be spent. As I have said, it is €2 million, which is not a lot of money in the present climate, but we will consider how to best spend it.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister clarify how much of the current rural development programme funding — in percentage terms — will be spent on outside bodies administering some of those funds? I am thinking, in particular, of the farm modernisation scheme. On a side issue, has the Minister discussed anything with the Minister of the Environment on the issue of climate-change finance?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It is very early days, but I am happy to see Members taking such a keen interest in a programme that is not even on paper yet. I look forward to hearing the views of Members and stakeholders on how the money should be spent, but it is too early to provide definitive answers on the detail of the proposals.

Rural Transport

6. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline how she intends to work with the Department for Regional Development in developing a joined up approach to improving rural transport.

(AQO 2011/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Improving transport provision is crucial for many people who live in rural areas; in particular, for the most vulnerable in society. That is why I have identified rural transport as one of five priorities in my Department's draft rural anti-poverty and social-inclusion framework, which is currently out to public consultation.

My Department has been working with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) on the development of that framework by seeking to identify gaps and barriers to the provision of, and access to, rural transport. I also recently established a new interdepartmental committee on rural policy, which includes a senior policy official from the Department

for Regional Development. The committee will work with me on various rural policy initiatives that I am developing in order to help ensure a joined-up approach to rural issues across all Departments.

I will continue to work with the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken to improving rural transport. I will also explore opportunities for improving rural transport as part of the development of the rural White Paper.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she explain what type of support, and how much funding, will be available from DARD for rural transport? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My Department is currently developing a number of proposals. The overall framework is worth £10 million until 2011. Economic appraisals are being carried out in order to determine the funding allocations for each priority area. We are considering the ability to use SmartPasses on rural transport partnership buses; introducing a management-information system to collect data on use of rural transport partnership buses; developing a social-auditing programme to ascertain the social impact of rural transport; and supporting the development of a social-care scheme to be run by the rural transport partnerships.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's reply. In particular, I am interested in the use of SmartPass for rural transport. *[Interruption.]* That is good news for those of us who have reached that stage. The door-to-door facility that is run by DRD at present has the ability to provide better rural transport. However, questions remain about when it can cover most of the rural outlying districts. Will DARD take any measure to hurry the day when the door-to-door scheme will extend beyond towns?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I would never be as cheeky as to make comments such as those that were made by Members across the Chamber: it will be a long time before Mr McCarthy gets his bus pass. As I have said, my officials have been in discussion with DRD about a range of potential actions that can be developed to deal with rural transport and access issues. Door-to-door schemes have proved popular in west Fermanagh where, clearly, they address a social need. My officials and their counterparts in DRD are examining ways to further extend the scheme throughout rural areas — for example, through development of social-care schemes.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the Minister will agree that a bus pass is as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike if there is no transport system. Will the Minister tell the House what are the absolute minimum standards with regard to the availability of rural

transport that she will accept from her colleague the Minister for Regional Development?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: It is not up to me to put conditions on another Minister. The Minister for Regional Development and I have a good working relationship, as one would imagine. I want to maximise the work that we can do to improve services in rural areas. However, I do not put conditions on the Minister because I find that that is not a great way to do business.

Mr Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Axis 1 Focus Farm Measure

8. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in the delivery of Axis 1 Focus Farm Measure of the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013.

(AQO 2013/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The measure opened for applications in mid-August 2008. Prior to the closing date on 12 September 2008, 169 applications were received. Since then, applications have been assessed against the essential criteria, and 101 farms and diversified businesses have been visited. To date, 98 applicants have been interviewed. The environmental-sector interviews are due to begin by 9 February 2009. The selection process to recruit and appoint up to 60 focus farmers across the 10 sectors will then be complete. The measure will then be given over to the newly appointed managing agent for augmentation of farms in readiness for visitors.

Mr Bresland: What roles will farms that were previously funded under the Peace II programme have under the rural development programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Focus farms is a sub-measure of axis 1 of the rural development programme. The main object of axis 1 is to create a more competitive agriculture industry. Focus farms will contribute to that objective through farmer-led training of farmers. We have found that because it is delivered by peers, it is useful. We have had positive feedback from the previous programme.

Mr Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn.

Ear Tags

10. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures her Department will take in relation to the practice of having to replace missing ear tags at meat plants given they are almost

immediately disposed of once they are replaced.
(AQO 2015/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have always been aware that if an animal loses its tag on the way to a slaughterhouse, its keeper must purchase a new replacement tag; only then can the animal be accepted for slaughter. Quite understandably, that requirement has long been a source of frustration for many keepers. I presume that I am not the only MLA who has received phone calls from irate farmers who give out about the cost and inconvenience of sourcing a new tag and because it adds little to the traceability of their animals.

Recently, therefore, I announced that the requirement to replace cattle's ear tags that are lost on the way to a slaughterhouse no longer applies. If an animal arrives at a slaughterhouse with only one ear tag, provided that it is accompanied by the correct documentation and — importantly — that there is evidence that the second tag had been applied, it can now be accepted for slaughter without the need to apply a new tag.

The change has been broadly welcomed by the industry. I must re-emphasise that a calf will still need to have two tags: only when a tag is lost on the way to a slaughterhouse will the second tag not be necessary. I do not want anyone to think that we are down to a single-tagging system — we are not. Under EU requirements, we still have to double tag.

3.30 pm

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Broadband Speeds

1. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of Ofcom's Consumer Research recent findings in relation to broadband speeds. (AQO 2026/09)

12. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to assist broadband connections in West Tyrone. (AQO 2037/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment (Mrs Foster): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I shall answer questions 1 and 12 together.

The initial Ofcom report 'UK Broadband Speeds 2008 — Consumer Experience of Broadband Performance' was produced on 8 January 2009. It reports an average UK broadband speed of 3.6 megabits per second. The Northern Ireland average of 3.6 megabits per second is, therefore, fully consistent.

However, the report should be treated with caution due to the relatively low sample sizes upon which its findings are based. I await with interest the findings of the full report, which Ofcom intends to publish in the spring of this year.

As with every other UK region, we have areas where access speeds will be lower than the reported average. My Department is committed to the ongoing development of Northern Ireland's telecommunications infrastructure to deliver high-quality broadband services where there is empirical evidence of demand. I am particularly keen to ensure that the needs of our rural areas are addressed. My Department has gone to great lengths to deliver access to broadband services at affordable prices. Our local Access Broadband contract has ensured 100% broadband availability across all of Northern Ireland, including West Tyrone, since December 2005.

Just recently, we have put in place a further three-year contract to deliver ongoing access to a first-generation broadband service for those remote, rural users who are currently dependent on a satellite connection. Added to that, I have announced a strategic and significant investment in the west, which is funded under the broadband fund that I launched in August 2008. My officials and the supplier contracted to deliver this investment have met representatives of Cookstown District Council on a number of occasions. The council's telecommunications adviser described the investment as:

“an exceptional fit for the needs of the area”.

Finally, under a Programme for Government commitment, we are actively developing our specification for the delivery of access to next-generation, higher-speed broadband services to at least 85% of businesses by 2011. In addition, all the international connectivity services delivered through Project Kelvin will be available in Omagh and Strabane.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. I have sought reassurance in the past that she is doing everything in her power to connect rural customers on an equal basis of cost and speed, and I thank the Minister for her interest in the matter.

On a second but related point, I ask the Minister to give her assessment of the decision to locate the tele-house in Coleraine rather than Derry, which is a bit like the late-1960s decision in respect of the university. Derry was identified in the application —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. I have already said — during questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — that supplementary questions must relate to the original question. I am going to move on to Mr

Thomas Buchanan, who asked question 12, which was answered with question 1.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. Last month, the Minister announced Project Kelvin, which is a significant investment in our telecoms infrastructure. Omagh is one of the places where that is to be located. However, over the past week or so, I have heard some negativity, and there are concerns that the project will be delayed and not delivered on time. I am a little worried that some of the companies that we hope to attract will look elsewhere. Will the Minister give us some reassurance in regard to the delivery of that project?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was somewhat surprised by the comments of Mr Buchanan's West Tyrone colleague. Project Kelvin is going to Omagh, and the people of Omagh and West Tyrone should celebrate that, rather than questioning it.

I assure the Member that Project Kelvin will be delivered and that it will be delivered on time. The fuss over the siting of an unmanned tele-house is frustrating; it is sited for purely technical reasons. The benefits and prestige, to which many have referred, will come from what can be done with the products and services that Project Kelvin will provide for the whole of Northern Ireland and for its eight sites. There will be the same level and speed of service throughout Northern Ireland.

The Hibernia Atlantic solution will give us direct access to a multimillion-pound, worldwide telecommunications network, and those who react positively to it will forge ahead. I strongly urge all companies to take advantage of this significant investment. All political representatives and business bodies need to look at what Project Kelvin will bring to Northern Ireland and to think strategically about what can be done with it.

The NI Executive and the Republic of Ireland's Government have had to take tough decisions on finances. However, given that the project is important to our respective economic futures, we decided to fund it.

However, the actions of complainers continue to harm the project. Word has filtered through to me that the company executives who are involved have noticed what is going on and are not impressed with Northern Ireland or its political representatives. That frustrates and disappoints me. Those executives have dealt with Governments across the world and have not experienced such an outcry. I want to emphasise the importance of Project Kelvin, which represents a great chance to move ahead. The Republic of Ireland Government and I are delighted that it will be operational by the end of 2009.

Mr Durkan: I agree with the Minister about the significance of Project Kelvin for the region's

connectivity. Will the Minister confirm that all documentation on the proposals for Project Kelvin — up to and including the invitation-to-tender document — specified Derry as the location for the tele-house? Was she consulted when her Department informed companies that that specification could mean County Derry? When was that decision taken, and why were officials who are involved in the Northwest Gateway initiative and the North/South Ministerial Council not notified? Why was the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment not notified or consulted?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I can confirm that I was not consulted about that issue, because the decision was taken solely on a technical basis. When that discussion took place, the relevant details were posted on the Central procurement directorate's website for all to see. If the Chairperson did not see that posting, that is a matter for him. I am singularly disappointed that the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who acts on behalf of all of Northern Ireland, seeks to put Londonderry ahead of the rest of Northern Ireland. The tele-house is good news for the whole of Northern Ireland and — as my friend Mr Simpson rightly says — the Republic of Ireland. The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland and I are content with what has happened, and Mr Durkan should be, too.

Mr Elliott: I understand that new-generation broadband, including Project Kelvin, is not, at this stage, planned to extend to Fermanagh. What action is the Minister taking to redress that imbalance?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member is right; there is, at present, no direct connectivity in Fermanagh, per se. However, Fermanagh is linked to the entire telecommunications network, and will, therefore, indirectly receive the benefits of Project Kelvin. The Department is working with its colleagues in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in the Republic of Ireland, which has recently carried out a study on the possibility of providing a link-up from Monaghan, through County Cavan and into County Fermanagh. That would benefit businesses in Fermanagh greatly. We are proactively considering that proposal at the minute.

Economic Downturn

2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the current economic downturn and rise in job losses, what action she is taking to assist companies that are not classified as a client of Invest NI. (AQO 2027/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest Northern Ireland has brought

together economic development partners comprising Enterprise Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and local councils to hold 10 seminars for businesses that are not classified as Invest Northern Ireland clients.

To date, five of those events have been held, and the remainder will take place before the end of this month. The sessions offer businesses the opportunity to receive information on the range of support that is available to help cope with the impact of the current economic conditions. Moreover, one-to-one practical advice from business experts on a variety of issues — including cash-flow management and optimising export potential — is available.

Several other initiatives have been established to assist all businesses in Northern Ireland. For example, the Carbon Trust interest-free loan scheme can help businesses to maximise energy efficiency and thereby make considerable operating-cost savings. The scheme has, to date, offered £3.4 million to businesses in Northern Ireland, and 167 energy-efficiency and technical surveys have been completed. Furthermore, an export mentoring programme has been developed.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for the breadth of her answer and I welcome the initiatives that have been taken. As her Department carries out the review of Invest Northern Ireland, consideration might be given to including small and medium-sized enterprises that do not meet the criteria for inclusion in Invest NI's client list. In the present difficult economic circumstances, they should have the opportunity to be included, not on the basis that the Minister has outlined — welcome as her initiatives are — but on the basis of being permanently able to access support from Invest Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member is aware that the review is not just of Invest Northern Ireland, but of the policies and programmes of the Department. It is probably within that remit that we will take on board what he is saying, because Invest Northern Ireland has a very specific, defined role in relation to the potential for export or actual export. Therefore companies that are not engaged in such practices probably fall under DETI policies and practices. I imagine that there is no bar to the team that is carrying out the review of Invest NI and DETI taking consideration of the points the Member has raised.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for her answers. Given that small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland account for about 65% of employment here, will the Minister say what action her Department is taking to adjust the focus and resources of Invest NI to allow for direct investment in small and medium-sized enterprises and sole traders to make up

for the lack of available credit and to ensure that those businesses survive the recession?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As I said to my friend the other Member for East Belfast Mr Newton, there is a difficulty with Invest NI insofar as it has a specific remit and is dealing with companies that are exporting or have the potential to export. I think that the issues raised by the Member are in relation to working capital, and she is probably aware that the Business Secretary, who was here on Friday, has established a fund in relation to working capital, and we in Northern Ireland will want to avail ourselves of that through the banking system.

There is a problem with state aid in relation to working capital, and I understand that the national Government are seeking state-aid approval from Europe in relation to those measures. I hope that it will be forthcoming because, as the Member rightly said, the main issues for the companies that we speak to seem to be cash flow and the availability of credit. Those issues are the most difficult to deal with under the state-aid rules that we have.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Would the Minister ever consider recommending that Invest NI widen its remit to cover not only those companies that export goods but those companies whose business is not solely export-based? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The bar for exports is quite low; companies do not have to export very much. Many businesses that come under the criteria of Invest NI in Fermanagh, for example, just export to Cavan or Monaghan; it is not a huge difficulty for them to overcome. I am not going to pre-empt the review of Invest NI and DETI. The chair of the review team has called for evidence, and I am sure that if any evidence in relation to the remit of Invest NI is produced, it will be reflected in the team's report.

Productivity Goal Target

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the productivity goal target set out in the Programme for Government, which seeks to close the gap with the rest of the United Kingdom by 2015, can be achieved given the current widening of this gap. (AQO 2028/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: An ambitious target has been set to halve the private-sector productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, including the greater south-east of England, by 2015. The private-sector productivity gap had been widening; however, recent forecasts suggest that that is no longer the case and

that the gap is beginning to narrow. In addition, recent output data for the UK regions from 12 December 2008 will have further implications for the gap, and my officials are analysing the latest and forecasted position.

I can confirm, however, that the Programme for Government's productivity goal remains an important target for the Executive. My Department is committed to targeting investment in innovation and exports and to improving energy and telecoms infrastructure. Those measures, alongside actions from the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department for Regional Development, are aimed at producing a high-productivity, high-wage economy in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Mr Cree: Is the Minister satisfied that the targets in the Programme for Government can be met?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: One of the reasons why I extended the review team's remit to cover Invest Northern Ireland and my Department was to take the Programme for Government's targets into account. Given the current situation, that is an important thing to reflect on. The review team will examine those targets as well as all the other issues that must be addressed.

Dr Farry: Does the Minister accept that there is a danger that the Programme for Government targets will produce a false positive? The productivity gap may narrow, relatively speaking, if there is a deeper recession in the rest of the UK than in Northern Ireland, without there being an absolute improvement in Northern Ireland's position.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I have often stood here and said that all economies are relative; the Member has hit the nail on the head. Although we are going through a recession, it is deeper in other parts of the UK, and, therefore, the productivity gap will close — but not for the reasons that we would have liked it to close. I accept that point completely; that is why it is important that the review team examines that particular Programme for Government target.

Mr Dallat: Bearing in mind the recent publication of the Varney Review II and the absolute need to match the skills that industry demands with those that are provided by our universities and colleges, will the Minister outline the mechanisms that she intends to put in place in order to ensure that that happens in future and that we emulate some of the good points in the Republic's economy?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As the Member knows, my Department works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning in order to match skills to the jobs that

are available. The Economic Development Forum will meet this Thursday, and will discuss that issue, among others. I know that my colleague Reg Empey has done a lot of work on the issue of apprentices — in the construction industry, in particular — who, unfortunately, are out of work because of the downturn. It is important to keep an eye on the skills sets that we have so that they are not lost when the upturn comes. The Member is absolutely right; those are the issues that the Economic Development Forum will discuss this Thursday.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to meet with the Prime Minister and/or the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a solution to the crisis facing the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQO 2029/09)

15. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made to the UK Government in relation to safeguarding the investments made by individuals to the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQO 2040/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 15 together.

At our meeting of 15 January 2009, the Executive considered the issue of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS). It was agreed that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister would raise the issue of help for the members of the society with the Prime Minister, and impress upon him the need for the UK Government to provide support in the form of depositor protection.

On 26 January 2009, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister wrote to the Prime Minister, stressing that global uncertainties in the financial markets that were outside the control of the PMS were the main causes of its problems. The society's difficulties were compounded by the fact that bank and other deposits, on both sides of the border, were guaranteed, whereas the society's deposits were not. That contributed directly to the withdrawal of significant funds from the society in a very short period, causing it serious liquidity problems.

I am keen that an early date for a meeting can be agreed so that we can impress on the Prime Minister the seriousness of the situation for thousands of blameless ordinary savers, and persuade him of the moral obligation on the UK Government to treat Northern Ireland depositors with the PMS in the same way as those UK savers whose deposits in the Icelandic banks have been protected. However, I can only say that that will be a very difficult task.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the Minister's difficulty; a lot of people wish to speak to the Prime Minister. However, is she aware of the details of the guarantees that the Prime Minister has given to those people who deposited their money in the Icelandic banks? If so, will she be able to press the Prime Minister for equality of treatment for investors from Northern Ireland, enabling them to obtain similar guarantees?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: We have been working through the details of the Prime Minister's decisions as regards the Icelandic banks. However, we are also examining other ways in which he can help savers with the PMS. We do not want to put all our eggs in one basket, because we may be disappointed. That is all that I can say about that matter.

I note, however, that the Chancellor is now speaking about helping pensioners who have savings in banks, and I believe that he should also help those elderly savers who put their money into the Presbyterian Mutual Society believing, rightly or wrongly, that it was as safe as houses there, and who are now in great distress.

I am sure that many Members have been contacted by members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society and, indeed, by their children acting on their parents' behalf because the elderly members are not always able to communicate. It is distressing reading through those letters. We will do our utmost to help in any way that we can.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister, and the First Minister and others, for the work that they have done on this matter so far. Will the Minister outline the role of DETI with regard to the whole Presbyterian Mutual Society issue?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It is important to know what my Department's role is. The directors of the Presbyterian Mutual Society came to see me in, I believe, late October or the start of November, and said that they had dire liquidity difficulties. They came because they needed my Department to enact legislation that would allow them to appoint an administrator so that the creditors would not force a fire-sale of property. That happened very quickly, and I thank my Executive colleagues for agreeing to my paper going through so swiftly.

All that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does is to regulate the registration of industrial and provident societies. It does not have any other regulatory functions beyond that, and it certainly does not have any prudential supervisory role for industrial and provident societies. The Presbyterian Mutual Society is, in many ways, unique, in that of the many other industrial and provident societies in Northern Ireland, none took money and invested it in the way in which the PMS did.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. As the Minister said, many of us are concerned about the many people who had their life savings tied up in the Presbyterian Mutual Society and who cannot benefit from the savings protection scheme. Does the Minister share the concern that some of the activities of the Presbyterian Mutual Society went far beyond the remit of its founding principles, which are based on helping each other, particularly in regard to some of the investments made and some of the concerns, for example, in the administrator's report about, possibly, mortgage provision, which went way beyond that remit.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: In Great Britain, the industrial and provident societies, although registered with the Financial Services Authority (FSA), are not automatically within the scope of the financial services compensation scheme. Northern Ireland societies are exempt from FSA regulation provided that they do not engage in FSA-regulated activities. The administrator has reported that the FSA is in contact with him to seek some clarification on the nature of the business that the society undertook. I understand that the administrator is continuing to assist the FSA with those inquiries. I hope that helps the Member to understand where we are at with that particular issue.

Trade Mission to the Netherlands

5. **Mr Simpson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what investment opportunities were identified in the trade mission to the Netherlands. (AQO 2030/09)

11. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the recent trade mission to the Netherlands. (AQO 2036/09)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 11 together. Last week, I led to the Netherlands a delegation of 36 companies that represented a cross-section of Northern Ireland industry. I saw at first hand the determination of local companies to maximise their trading links with Dutch companies. During my visit, Northern Ireland companies undertook more than 100 appointments with customers and potential customers.

I also witnessed the signing of a significant agreement between the Wright Group, Ballymena, and the Dutch company VDL to supply buses to Arriva London in an £11 million contract. I also attended the launch of a new product range by C & J Meats of County Armagh. In addition, I attended a briefing with leading trade journalists representing the Dutch

tourism industry and was able to reinforce Northern Ireland's position as a tourist destination.

In the past, the Netherlands presented limited foreign direct investment opportunities. When I was in the Hague, however, I was pleased to be introduced to a number of potential investors that are considering Northern Ireland as a possible investment location. Although it is too early to assess the full potential benefits of the trade mission, my officials in Invest NI will be following it up with the participants over the coming months.

Mr Simpson: I thank the Minister for her reply. I understand that the trip was a good success. The Minister mentioned some companies that could consider Northern Ireland as a potential investment destination. One such company that did that is Vion. The Minister will be aware that its pork factory in Cookstown is experiencing difficulties because of the dioxin contamination. Will the Minister outline whether she has had any talks with that company, and whether she believes that some assistance can be given to it?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member is correct — Vion bought over the Grampian Country Foods plant in August 2008. The company regarded that as a substantial investment in Northern Ireland. The Vion plant at Cookstown is one of its best processing plants in the United Kingdom.

However, Vion has expressed considerable dismay at the fact that the Republic of Ireland scheme has not been opened to it in relation to the losses that it suffered as a result of the dioxin scare that emanated from the Republic of Ireland. Each week, Vion process 20,000 pigs — 8,500 of which come from the Republic of Ireland, probably from Counties Cavan and Monaghan. The company is greatly disturbed by the fact that it has not been allowed to avail itself of the Republic of Ireland's scheme.

I hope to speak to the chief executive of Vion within the next 24 hours to try to secure the 600 jobs in the Cookstown plant. I will do all that I possibly can to ensure that those jobs remain in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she see any potential for partnership between Northern Irish companies and Dutch companies in relation to renewable energy? What are the prospects for new contracts for online tour operators to boost our tourism industry? The Strangford constituency has lots to offer — in particular, the Exploris aquarium in Portaferry — and we would love to see more visitors coming. Can the Minister provide any encouragement that may have resulted from her trip to the Netherlands?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In respect of the Member's last point, there certainly was renewed interest in Northern

Ireland. I made reference to the first tourist of whom I am aware — King William of Orange, who visited us in 1688. They were more than happy to remind me that the House of Orange is still very much in existence.

The Member is correct: Northern Ireland has a lot to offer the Dutch market. Many fishermen make the trip from the Netherlands to Northern Ireland and travel to County Fermanagh and to Portrush on the north coast. I took time out of the trade schedule to have lunch with Tourism Ireland, and I briefed journalists about the benefits of coming to Northern Ireland. The strapline that we used was that there has never been a better time to come to Northern Ireland, because of the differential between the euro and sterling. We certainly wanted to drive that message home.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the report about her and Invest NI's trip to the Netherlands. Does the Minister agree that, at these times, it is also important to support local industry? I am aware of one small manufacturing plant in my constituency that has recently doubled its workforce to 70. It has outgrown its current plant, so it cannot take on any more workers. That company is having extreme difficulty in liaising with Invest NI. I hope that the trips abroad are successful, but does the Minister agree that Invest NI also has a strategic role in supporting local industry?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I absolutely agree with the Member, which is why over half of the budget of Invest NI is spent in relation to indigenous firms. The whole idea of having devolution is that we work closer together. Members should bring difficulties that they experience to the attention of the appropriate Minister. If the Member has a specific instance of a company that is having difficulties, and he brings that to me, I will speak to Invest Northern Ireland.

Before the Member came into the House, I made reference to the fact that Invest Northern Ireland has a very specific remit in relation to exports or helping companies to export. Perhaps we could try and work something out with the firm in the Member's constituency in relation to that latter remit.

4.00 pm

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

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Supported Housing

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability. — [*Mrs O'Neill.*]

Mrs Hanna: There is overwhelming evidence that well-supported care in the community allows people to live better lives than they otherwise could in a hospital, and if an alternative is available, few people would chose to live in a hospital ward. Nevertheless, the Society of Parents and Friends of Muckamore Abbey informs us that a few individuals who have lived in Muckamore for up to 50 years would rather remain there — it is their home. Some patients, and their families, do not wish to be pressurised into community care; they feel better cared for in their present setting. However, although most people in Muckamore Abbey Hospital wish to be resettled, they have been restricted by a lack of funding and suitable care models, and that is particularly the case for younger patients. In recent years, several wards have been closed, and there have been successful moves into community living, such as Springfield Court in west Belfast, which is a model of independent living in the community that Minister Ritchie opened in June 2007.

Unfortunately, according to ARC, the Association for Real Change, and the patients' group in Muckamore called "Tell it like it is", approximately 200 people are still waiting to be housed. Moreover, the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) noted that after 10 years, hospitals are still listed as addresses for hundreds of people. In addition, the Bamford Review's 'Equal Lives Report' states that all such people must be discharged by 2011. In the absence of new money and additional resources, community-based accommodation and support services have not been able to develop to the required level, and people with learning disabilities continue to wait.

Some of the people whom I am speaking about have complex needs and require considerable support for the whole of their lifetime, primarily in the area of health and social care. Therefore, individual needs assessments are required to dictate more specifically the most appropriate accommodation for them.

Consequently, it would have been more appropriate if the motion had been addressed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that the Saint John of God Association provides an excellent facility — which I visited — on the Glen Road in Belfast? Unfortunately, there is not enough capacity on the site to expand on the excellent work being done.

Mrs Hanna: Indeed, I do agree. However, although excellent models exist, they are insufficient, and there is a lack of consistency throughout the trusts. Furthermore, one in six carers is in poor health, and although the Minister of Health, Social Care and Public Safety is hoping to address the matter, there is a lack of respite care. That is part of the package that must be considered.

Families and carers who look after physically disabled people experience problems with house adaptations, equipment, and support from the health and social services. Although many adaptations, such as having an intercom system on the front door, making doors wider, and installing ramps, stairlifts and downstairs bathrooms can make a huge difference, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must first carry out specific needs assessments before people are ready to move into supported housing. That is an important point.

As well as a commitment to resettling people from hospitals and to investment in a range of domestic, local community-based housing, there must be a partnership with people with a learning disability, their families and carers in the planning and implementation of the resettlement programme. Specialist support must be provided for families and paid carers of individuals who have been resettled from hospital, and who, without such supported care, might have to be readmitted to hospital.

Too often, there is an over-reliance on the willingness of carers to provide support and independence, help with learning disabilities, personal social services, and supported daytime activities for those at home. Consequently, if the patient does not get out and about, there can be a lack of stimulation.

Resettlement requires a cross-departmental approach. Health and social services must first carry out assessments of people with disabilities; it must then work with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and interface with various Departments, agencies and services, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Housing, employment, leisure and transport are critical, and the absence of effective links between the providers of such services can deny, or impair, the usage and uptake of services and opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. I pay tribute to Professor Bamford, who taught me at university, for producing such a comprehensive review.

Bamford advocated that all those who live in a hospital for people with learning disabilities should be relocated to the community by June 2011. Furthermore, he proposed that all future newbuild accommodation for people with learning disabilities should be small, supported housing for five individuals or fewer.

Last August, I visited one such project in Grays Park Court in the Belvoir Estate — in my constituency — that is run by the Triangle Housing Association. It has five two-bedroom bungalows, which accommodate nine people with learning disabilities, some of whom came from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. One of the bedrooms is occupied by a staff member who provides support and care 24/7. It is a homely setting with group living, and it is nothing like an institution. Residents have their own bedroom, kitchen and living area, and they live independent lives.

The Executive's response to the Bamford Review was limited, but their consultation document promised that there would be a 25% reduction in the number of those in hospitals for people with learning disabilities by 2011. The health and social services trusts received £17 million to implement the recommendations relating to learning disabilities, but DSD did not receive any allocation for its social housing programme or the Supporting People programme, which aimed to build additional supported housing with supported services, as suggested by Bamford.

In reviewing the published five-year social housing development programme, the housing sector is concerned not only at the decline in the number of supported-housing schemes but at the fact that they have been pushed back to years 4 and 5 of the programme to facilitate a resolution of the revenue-funding programme.

In April, the Minister for Social Development said that DSD planned to start 61 units of supported housing for people with learning disabilities in 2008. In September 2008, she said that DSD would develop 38 new units for settlement of Muckamore Abbey Hospital patients during the next three years. At that time, there were 270 patients in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The Minister's announcements fell far short of what is needed for the resettlement of people with learning disabilities from hospitals.

Bamford recommended that funds should be provided to ensure that an average of 80 people per year are resettled over the five years from 2006 to 2011.

The Executive must allocate the necessary funding for supported housing if they are to recognise that people with learning disabilities have the right to be treated as equal citizens with access to mainstream

services. Furthermore, the Executive must recognise that many of those people have aspirations to live independently and to integrate into their communities as a means of achieving their full potential. Unless we have adequate money to build new supported housing, we will not see a reduction in the waiting lists to resolve the unnecessary delay in discharging patients from Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

Mr Craig: I congratulate the Members who proposed the motion; it is good that the issue is being debated today. Figures that I looked at indicate that approximately 270 people remain in Muckamore Abbey Hospital; that number must be reduced. I, along with other Members, acknowledge that some people do not wish to leave the facility, which is totally understandable, given the length of time that they have been there.

However, the needs of some of the patients at Muckamore Abbey Hospital could be met through supported-housing programmes. I witnessed such a programme in my own constituency, where Triangle Housing Association has put forward a development in the Ballymacash area. I, as a local representative, worked on that development and helped to bring it to fruition. We dealt with community representatives, dispelled a lot of the misunderstanding around such developments, and worked with the Planning Service, which seemed to have huge difficulties with the new, fold-type developments.

Only a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting that development to meet some of the first people to be relocated from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Those people recounted how they had been in that facility for almost 40 years, and told me that, for the first time, they have their own freedom to do simple things that we take for granted, such as getting on a bus, going to the local shops and doing some shopping for themselves. They had not been able to carry out such tasks for over 40 years, but they now have the freedom to do them. It was an absolute delight to see the joy on their faces.

I met one individual who was delighted with the new facility. Unfortunately, he was there for only four weeks before he passed away; he had four weeks of freedom on this earth, freedom and delight in that new facility. It is a crying shame that we cannot deliver more facilities like the one in Ballymacash for the people who must leave Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

I acknowledge that the Minister and her Department have received £4.6 million for the resettlement scheme. That may go some way towards relieving a lot of the pressures. However, having seen the complexity of the operation in Ballymacash, I have no doubt that that amount will not meet those needs fully. As a society, we need to redress that issue. It is something that all Ministers in the Executive must tackle now,

because Muckamore Abbey Hospital is supposed to be empty by 2011. Given the present rate at which people are coming out of that facility, I find it difficult to see how that target can be met. All Ministers must address that issue; it is not something that one Minister can do alone.

I am fully aware that this may simply not be an option for some people who suffer severe disability. A one-size-fits-all policy will not work in this environment; the needs of each patient must be assessed. Professor Bamford got it absolutely right in his review, in which he said that shelter and care are basic human rights. Where and with whom we live helps to define us as individuals and give us status. I witnessed that on the faces of those who moved into that new facility, and I saw how their lives were enhanced because of their new surroundings. It was a delight to see the change in those individuals.

The individualised options have much merit, as they offer a degree of independence as well as the support of 24-hour care. I realise that they are not a cheap option for society. That one development, which has approximately 20 people from Muckamore Abbey Hospital, has a staff of between six and eight people permanently looking after them; therefore, it is not a cheap option for society. However, I believe that society will be measured on how it treats those who are least well off. This is an option that we must follow. I commend those who proposed the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an tuarascáil seo.

I commend my colleagues for bringing the motion to the Chamber, and every Member will endorse the sentiments that it contains. I join my colleague in thanking the Minister for Social Development for being present to reply to the debate. As has been said, housing is only one element of what is required. Without a proper package of care and attention, any efforts will come to nothing.

There are some brilliant housing developments, but when talking about the provision of social housing, we often forget that certain people require specialised housing to allow them to live independently. Only by dealing with such people can many of the difficulties that they face be understood. That is particularly true of those living in residential care, and people who cannot be released from hospital because of the lack of suitable supported accommodation or because the home to which they would be released lacks certain facilities.

There are many good examples of good supported homes. Over the years, many housing associations have built up an expertise in the provision and running of accommodation for people with mental or physical disabilities, people with drug or alcohol problems, the

older population and many other sections of the community that require additional support. I know of many examples of supported accommodation that offer high-level care and high-quality accommodation. The Supporting People programme provided a major morale boost to those who delivered supported housing, and the Assembly must ensure its continued support.

I also commend those who provide the care and demonstrate dedication and determination in providing for those in society who require specialised accommodation. One facility in my constituency that provides for older people is under threat of closure. Grovetree House, near the Grosvenor Road, caters for older people, and is a community in its own right, providing excellent care in a warm, friendly atmosphere. The Assembly must ensure that it receives investment, rather than being faced with closure.

Mrs M Bradley: Does the Member agree that keeping people institutionalised who need such help prevents them from developing their own personalities and little bit of independence? Government should ensure that the motion marks the end of institutionalisation and leads to a positive outcome.

Mr F McCann: That is why my colleagues tabled today's motion. Anyone who is familiar with Grovetree House knows that it is a home to the people for whom it caters. Most of the residents are very old, and their families are able to visit and mix with them there.

At the weekend, I received an email from a guy who works near Muckamore Abbey Hospital. He stated that proposals are being developed to provide a new concept of supported living called a "mini-campus". That would provide proper care packages and be sufficiently resourced to ensure independent living of a quality not previously experienced, particularly by people who have been in hospitals such as Muckamore Abbey for 20 years or more.

The Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI) was hailed as the way forward in dealing with those suffering from mental-health and learning disabilities. Professor Bamford constantly referred to the need to get away from the dangers of the past. He highlighted the dangers of the long-stay hospitals that existed in previous generations, as borne out by Mary Bradley's comment on institutionalisation. Supporting individuals in suitable housing in ordinary settings will help them to access a wide range of mainstream services and resources. As Professor Bamford stated:

"People with challenging behaviour require specialist facilities with high staffing levels. It is important that the layout of the accommodation provides adequate personal space and there is access to daytime occupations and intensive staff support."

The crucial building block in any plan is the development of a strategy. The two Ministers named in

the motion must present a strategy to the Assembly on how to move forward. The Assembly has an obligation to ensure that those who are most in need in society are afforded the protection that they need, as well as the opportunities that others take for granted.

Many specialised housing associations have shown that with investment and good planning, buildings can be transformed into high-quality homes, making them an attractive choice for many older people. The concept of lifetime homes advanced the debate on the provision of homes designed for people with various disabilities. The same level of thought must be given to accommodation for people with mental-health problems and those with learning and physical disabilities. The accommodation can be provided in group or individual elements, but the crucial element is putting together a proper care package to ensure that people are safe, secure and properly cared for.

In conclusion, we must ensure that those in our society who require specialist accommodation can avail themselves of it. I support the motion. Furthermore, I ask both Ministers to bring a strategy to the House that can make a difference. Housing is only one element; what is needed is a specialist care package that will make life easier for the people who come out of institutionalised care.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members opposite for tabling this important motion on what is a complex debate. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has made a commitment to provide care in the community for individuals where possible. That commitment is based on the desire to give people as much freedom and independence as possible, and the greatest quality and normality of life that is achievable. The debate illustrates correctly that the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety must work together closely in order for that to happen.

The co-ordination of budgets and procedural arrangements between Departments during times of relative affluence is difficult, but at times of extreme constraint, it can be more complicated. Therefore, although we want to see the best possible outcome for people with complex needs, that fact must be recognised.

It should be remembered that the vast majority of people who are in need of sheltered accommodation are effectively and efficiently relocated into social housing in local communities. Housing associations should be commended for their tireless work, and the benefits that they bring, without fanfare, to individuals and society throughout Northern Ireland.

It has been assumed that the motion refers to people who are waiting to be housed and who have complex needs. Although recognising the difficulties there are at Muckamore Abbey Hospital — as others have

mentioned — it must be remembered that those difficulties are faced across Northern Ireland. People with complex needs require specific accommodation as well as care packages, and that involves the provision of both capital and revenue funding streams.

Historically, we have had a buoyant housing budget and have been constrained by a care budget. However, in light of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's commitment to care in the community and delivering for people with special needs, revenue streams are generally now available to provide care for people leaving hospital with complex care needs. Nevertheless, the Minister for Social Development is in a constrained budgetary position. Capital receipts are grossly inadequate in the current market, and the outcome of the last monitoring round was understandably disappointing for the Minister and her Department.

It is unfortunate that that reality is having a detrimental impact on the supported-housing units that are required in order that people with the most complex needs can be housed in the community. It is not surprising that such units cost more to develop and build. There is genuine concern that such specialised units are being squeezed to the margins in the current fiscal crisis. Today, the Minister needs to provide an update on her plans and the resources she has available to address the situation.

I do not doubt for a moment that the Minister is fully informed and is committed to her entire social housing portfolio. However, it has become obvious that her housing budget is inadequate. This requires Executive decision-making as well as decisions by the Minister for Social Development. Mr Craig referred to a cross-Government decision — I hope that by that he means that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will be involved in this process.

I note that the Minister kept the Supporting People fund at £61 million, but did not apply the 3% efficiency savings to it. It must be remembered that the vast majority of provision under the fund is being delivered, and that the target set in 2003 of assisting 12,000 people to live independently has been achieved already.

The Government here have been heading in the right direction. However, that does not make it any easier for those people who are unnecessarily housed in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The Minister must assure the House that the programmes are being run as efficiently as possible and that funding is being invested in the areas of greatest need.

We all know that the Budget is under significant pressure. The Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are acutely aware of that, and it is up to us to help them by providing constructive ideas about how best to proceed, rather than taking cheap and easy political shots.

Ms S Ramsey: I resent the Member's remark that cheap political shots are being taken. I proposed the motion to highlight the issue — based on a meeting with a group that John also met. We have talked about how health inequalities are the product of social, economic and health issues, and that is why the motion calls on both the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take action. The motion was not tabled to take a cheap political shot at either Minister; the Member knows me well enough to know that.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for the intervention. My remark was about the need for everyone in the Chamber to take a collective approach — and that issue will probably arise in tomorrow's debate. It was not particularly aimed at Ms Ramsey and her colleagues. My point was that we must all participate constructively in the debate instead of listening to some —

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

Mr McCallister: Every week in the Health Committee, we hear people blaming the Health Minister for the current situation, yet Committee members voted for and supported the draft Budget at the time. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the motion.

Mr Burns: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this topic, about which I care greatly. Muckamore Abbey Hospital is in my constituency, as are several supported-housing programmes. I will talk about one in particular today — a housing shelter in Crumlin, which is a supported living scheme for adults. It is a partnership between the charity Praxis Care, BIH Housing Association and the local health and social care trust. Praxis Care rents the houses from the BIH Housing Association. The scheme blends well into the community and is not really noticed. It is a perfect example of how people can be taken out of Muckamore Abbey Hospital and start living independently.

Those people have had difficulties in the past, but, nevertheless, they must be rehoused in our community. The SDLP very much supports the motion. Those people are well looked after by a good team of social workers, nurses and wardens. They try to lead independent lives. They go out to work every day; for example, they tend the Walled Garden in Hillsborough. As my colleague Jonathan Craig said, they also have the opportunity to go shopping. They have the freedom to go out to get their hair cut and to take the bus to visit their families. Indeed, they do the things that they were never able to do while living in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. They do not really cause any bother.

The secret to independent living is location. If housing units can be built in the right location within a community, residents can enjoy a great sense of belonging.

Ms S Ramsey: I hope that the Member agrees that the majority of people whom we have talked about today are patients in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. I want to put on record the fact that people are in Muckamore Abbey Hospital not because they have committed any crime, but because they have mental-health issues. When those people are brought into supported living, it is because they are upstanding members of the community and not for any other reason.

Mr Burns: I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree with her — no one is saying that those people have been convicted of crimes or that they are criminals. However, they do have learning difficulties and they require support in our community.

There are already plans to help such people in the community: the Health Minister has plans to create about 38 new supported-housing units over the next three years for adults who are currently awaiting discharge from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Although those plans will cost about £5 million, I commend the Health Minister for them, because it is not acceptable that patients are being held in Muckamore Abbey Hospital 10 years after their treatment has ended. They are ready to leave, but there is nowhere for them to go. I want more money to be spent on such schemes, but that is, perhaps, wishful thinking. I know that the Health Minister is under pressure to make a lot of savings and that every penny must be accounted for. However, if he could afford to spend more money, he should do so on such schemes.

The Minister for Social Development has an important role to play in the delivery of supported-housing units, and she will offer the Health Minister the support that he requires. The Social Development Minister plans to build many new supported-housing units over the next few years, and when she responds to the motion later, she will talk about her work on the Supporting People programme.

I strongly back the call for more supported-housing units. Much work has been done to deliver them and neither the Health Minister nor the Social Development Minister requires any reminding about the need for such housing. However, I remind Members that the Social Development Minister cannot build such houses if certain parties block her at every step of the way and raid her budget at every opportunity.

I have great sympathy for the people in Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their families. The Social Development Minister and the Health Minister will work together to do what is required. I urge other members of the Executive to get behind both Ministers and help them to deliver on their plans.

Mr Poots: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. It is regrettable that the last Member who

spoke played politics with what is such an important matter.

As public representatives, we have the opportunity to help many people in the community, and there is nothing as rewarding as helping those who are least able to help themselves. When we talk about people with learning disabilities, we refer to a wide range of people — those with minor learning disabilities, who can easily live in supported homes as the motion highlights, and others who need specialised care.

I am very familiar with Muckamore Abbey Hospital: my family and I visited my brother there virtually every week from the time that I was a child. He was transferred to the Beeches Nursing Home in Aghalee 16 years ago, and although the difficulties and upheaval that that move caused to both him and my family were not insignificant, the reward was great.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital is a good facility — the people who work there are second to none; they are very caring, and they do their job well. However, Muckamore provides a hospital environment — it looks like a hospital, and hospital food is served there. If we can do anything to help more people with learning difficulties move into a more homely environment then that is what we should be doing.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital is a 1950s concept. We have moved on. We do not want people with learning disabilities to live in a hospital if they do not need to; therefore I encourage the Minister of Health and the Minister for Social Development to make every effort to assist people with learning disabilities. People with more severe learning disabilities could be moved into residential homes where they would get the additional support that is required; others could be moved into supported homes where they could have a degree of independence and could build friendships. Homes could be built in a certain area for people with learning disabilities, and they could go to their vocational classes and have additional work provided to them. Everything that can be done should be done.

We all know that Ministers have a difficult job to do in prioritising budgets, but I assure both Ministers that they will benefit richly from any priority that they give to people with learning disabilities. When they are no longer Ministers, they will be able to look back and say that they did some good for a section of the community that may not have been able to do it for itself.

Mr A Maginness: Much has been said, so I will try to restrict my remarks.

I recently visited the Roe Valley Hospital, which is the last extant remains of a workhouse in Ireland; indeed, it is the best preserved remains of a workhouse. Poor people and those who needed relief were brought into the workhouse, where children were separated from their mothers and fathers, and wives and

husbands were separated from one another. They were all put into different parts of the workhouse to live — or exist. People were punished for communicating with one another; children were punished for trying to communicate with their parents and parents with their children. They were put into a hole, and they were not allowed to communicate with anyone. However, we have moved on from those horrific days when people were treated in such an inhumane fashion.

As Mr Poots said, in the 1950s and 1960s Muckamore Abbey Hospital was regarded as a modern way of dealing with people with learning difficulties. However, now we know that, rather than improving their sense of independence and their way of living, in fact, people became institutionalised and retarded, and the growth of their independence was restricted. However, now we have an opportunity under Supporting People and supported housing to allow people to develop and to exercise as much independence as they can.

I congratulate the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health for their work in that field, but we need more money to assist in the process. I am sure that everyone in the House believes that it is well deserved and should be supported, but there will be problems with regard to budgeting. Therefore, I hope that everyone who supports the motion will put legitimate pressure on the Department of Finance to provide the additional funding that is necessary.

The target for 2008-2011 is to resettle 80 people from learning-disability hospitals, such as Muckamore Abbey. The target for 2007-08 was to resettle 40 learning-disability patients into the community, and the target for 2008-09 is to resettle 20 people.

At the end of March 2008, that target was exceeded slightly when the figure of 41 was reached. That is good progress; one hopes that it will be maintained and that the very reasonable targets to resettle people will be achieved.

I hope that, by 31 March 2009, no child will be resident in a learning-disability hospital. The trusts indicate that the ministerial target will be met and that, by 2014, no learning-disability patient will have a hospital as his or her permanent address. I hope that both Ministers will be supported by Members in achieving those targets.

Ms Purvis: I thank Ms Ramsey and her colleagues for tabling the motion.

Important values and standards have been established by Professor Bamford's 'Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland)' and by the Executive's response to it. Those values include ensuring that people with a learning disability are treated as equal citizens, are included in mainstream services and in the life of the community, and are

empowered to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives.

Accordingly, the Executive set the targets that have already been outlined by Mr Maginness. They are meaningful goals which, if implemented in full, will make a great difference in quality of life for hundreds of people. It is my understanding that those targets are progressing as planned.

However, as policy is turned to reality, the complexity of the issue must be fully considered. Individuals with learning disabilities do not fall neatly into one category. They are individuals: their needs, likes, wants and abilities are richly varied — as many Members have pointed out.

My concern is that, as the focus shifts to meeting dates and targets, a key principle will be lost, namely: that all services and living arrangements should be tailored to the specific needs of each individual, rather than determined by blanket policies that are applied to all. That is particularly true when addressing the requirements of the current residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The most recent figures suggest that more than 180 individuals are still resident, and that population is large enough to create a broad diversity of need.

The policy assumption made is that all residents of Muckamore Abbey Hospital will do better if they are rehoused and resettled in the community. Those individuals who are considered to be in need of resettlement have stated a desire and readiness to leave the hospital and find a home in the community. The immediate focus, as suggested in the motion, should therefore be on those residents finding accommodation and support that meets their needs as quickly as possible.

However, it should also be noted that a sizeable number of long-stay residents, their families and carers have expressed to the Assembly a concern about the community-centred resettlement policy for Muckamore Abbey residents. It is their view that, for some long-term residents, a community situation would involve a major and difficult adjustment. They propose a different arrangement: perimeter accommodation for some residents who have lived at the Abbey for many years and who are comfortable in that environment, where services, support and highly-skilled staff are close to hand. That shows the complexity of needs of adults with learning disabilities, and it cautions us against using a one-size-fits-all approach to providing services — as Mr Craig outlined earlier.

Additionally, the Bamford Review highlighted that the strong focus on resettling hospital residents into a community situation was shifting attention and resources away from supporting the current and future needs of learning-disabled adults and children who live at home with their families or with carers. The vast

majority — approximately 70% in Northern Ireland — of individuals with learning disabilities live at home with their families. Those families need funding to allow them to adapt their homes to the physical needs of their children, for additional care and support in the home and for respite care.

For those reasons, we must consider the whole picture when we provide services to learning-disabled adults and children, and we must be sure that services are centred on the needs of the individual, rather than on the need to send out a press release, declaring that targets have been met.

I support the motion, and I call on both Ministers to quickly facilitate the resettlement into the community of those residents who are ready to leave learning disability hospitals; to make all decisions on resettlement in full consultation with residents, their families and carers; and to keep policy implementation focused on the specific needs of the individual.

4.45 pm

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):

I thank the Members who have contributed to the debate today. I welcome the opportunity to take part in and respond to the debate, not least because it gives me the opportunity to clarify and correct some of the issues raised and to politely suggest that the motion would have been better directed to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, I will leave that matter with the Business Committee, which is the best judge on that issue.

The debate contained several contributions from people who have direct personal experience of the matters under consideration. I appreciate the great sensitivity in these discussions because, after all, we are dealing with people who have distinct special needs that require special care. I would hope that we would be able to accommodate that in our society, notwithstanding the natural financial difficulties.

I will try to address all the questions or points that Members have raised. I assure the House that I will study the Hansard report of the debate very carefully, and if I have left any issues unanswered, I will write directly to the Member concerned.

The Supporting People programme has been a major vehicle for the delivery of supported housing since its introduction in 2003. One key to that success has been the alignment of the social housing development programme to the priorities of the health and social care sector. That strategic approach, across all of the partner agencies, has benefited some of the most vulnerable people in our society by providing independent-living support in the community, alongside the resettlement of long-stay patients from hospitals such as that named in the motion — Muckamore Abbey. Elderly people, those with a

learning disability, children and young people leaving care, and those suffering from a mental-health problem have been the main beneficiaries of that new, joined-up and more strategic approach.

The motion asks me to work with my ministerial colleague, Michael McGimpsey, to tackle delays in the discharge of long-term patients from learning disability hospitals, such as Muckamore Abbey. It is a pity that those who tabled the motion did not fully appreciate the significant strategic and co-ordinated work that is already under way to do just that. I will briefly spell out some of the work that is being undertaken jointly between our respective Departments to deliver health and housing solutions.

A regional resettlement team was established in September 2007 to oversee the discharge and resettlement of patients across all learning disability hospitals in the North. Chaired by a senior official from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the group takes its membership from trusts, boards, the voluntary sector, health and social services councils, and active discharge teams from each of the respective hospitals. My Department is also represented on that team, as is the Housing Executive, which is a key contributor to that work. That is proof, were it needed, that we are all working together on this issue.

I take on board the point made by Dawn Purvis —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I have little time, so I will continue if I may. Dawn Purvis referred to some issues within the regional resettlement team and to some of the issues that have been raised by families about the need for perimeter care.

I will refer that matter to the Minister of Health in order to see if those particular issues can be addressed. If the Member has particular instances that she wishes to raise, perhaps she could refer them to the Minister of Health and to me in order that there can be a full investigation in a sensitive way.

The deputy chief executive of the Housing Executive chairs a joint commissioning partnership between the four health and social services boards, the Probation Board, the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). Together, they are responsible for the regional commissioning of services and the endorsement of local needs and priorities as identified by four Supporting People area partnerships, which meet on a more local level to identify needs and issues in their respective areas.

Working together to tackle those issues is, therefore, not something that I need to be reminded to do by the motion; I am already doing that, as are my officials, and Minister McGimpsey and his officials. However,

we must not underestimate the scale of the challenge that we all face in delivering the supported-housing schemes that are required if we are to realise some of the wider objectives identified in earlier reports such as the Bamford Review or 'Ageing in an Inclusive Society'.

Over the next six years, we plan to deliver 82 new supported-housing schemes, which will deliver 994 supported units for those in greatest housing need. That will cost almost £125 million in revenue and capital funding. Members should not underestimate the scale of those plans or, after the next comprehensive spending review, the need to find the resources to deliver them. By 2014, 31 of those schemes will deliver 270 additional units specifically for people with a learning disability. Once again, that underlines just how much importance I attach to helping the people referred to in the motion. The total cost of that provision will be more than £38 million.

My colleague Carmel Hanna referred to the fact that I have visited some of those supported-housing units throughout Northern Ireland since May 2007, which is something that I was very happy to do. I was able to have direct conversations with some residents and to see how happy they were in their new homes and new environment. It is important that funding continues so that we can create more such facilities.

In order to demonstrate that I have taken account of the need to find long-term solutions for people in Muckamore in particular, and in other similar hospitals, I have, over the past two years, ensured that learning disability schemes received an increased share of Supporting People funding. I expect almost 20% of my budget for Supporting People this year alone to be allocated across 128 schemes in support of that vulnerable client group. Therefore, I can assure Members that I am all too aware of the need to provide more supported-housing schemes to assist the vulnerable, particularly those who remain in hospital and who need our help to make the transition into a supported-housing scheme — many of whom have been living in a hospital setting for almost all their lives.

Members should be encouraged by the success of our combined efforts to date. Trusts were asked to resettle 60 patients from hospital to community care by March 2009. That was achieved, indeed exceeded, before the end of November last year. Similarly, trusts were asked to ensure that all children were resettled away from hospitals by March 2009, and that, too, will be achieved. Targets have, therefore, been met, a point already made by my colleague Mr Maginness.

With regard to delayed discharges, challenging targets set for 2008 and 2009 will be exceeded through the work of the regional resettlement team.

Undoubtedly, progress is being made; the figures speak for themselves. However, none of us can be complacent. I remain all too aware of the challenge that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and I face in delivering supported housing for those who need it most. We need resources and the commitment of everyone in the Chamber — not empty rhetoric. I ask Members who have direct influence with the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that we obtain the resources to do that. That is very important.

I wish to touch briefly on some of the other issues that were raised. Jonathan Craig referred to the targets. One hundred and eighty-three people remain in hospital awaiting resettlement; they are on the primary-target list, and it is estimated that 163 of them require supported-living arrangements.

Mr McCann and Ms Ramsey said that housing is only one component. That is correct; there are many complex issues to do with care arrangements and there are complex care packages. Everyone is different, and they require individual attention. Many of those people need intensive staff support to meet a variety of needs within the model of supported living. When I visited supported housing, I was touched when I saw what many people and their families have to endure and the care that is required. I found that touching, and it has remained with me ever since. We will have to tackle that as a community.

DHSSPS set a target for Muckamore Hospital for 2007-08 to resettle 40 people. That was achieved, and the eventual figure was 41 people.

John McCallister referred to the reduction in the DSD budget as a result of the December monitoring round. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and DSD submitted a joint bid to implement the Bamford Review in the overall three-year Budget, and it remains a mystery why the DHSSPS bid was met and the DSD bid was not. It was a joint bid, and a joint approach is required if we are to tackle all the issues and help and assist the most vulnerable. I hope that the budgets can be reviewed in the context of the current economic downturn and in the context that everything is fluid and changes.

I trust that Members and people in the Gallery with an interest in the motion will be reassured that we are taking a strategic approach to deliver supported housing for all, particularly long-stay hospital patients. As I come from Downpatrick, I am well acquainted with many long-stay hospital patients who were born in Downshire Hospital and have lived there practically all their life, only to be discharged into the community in the past few years. I have personal family connections in that both my parents were trained and worked in that environment.

My personal commitment is underlined by the increased resources that I have already made available to addressing the needs of those in long-term care who need support to resettle in the community. My ministerial colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has that same commitment, and, through our combined efforts, we can make and are making a difference.

Once again, I thank the Members who contributed positively to the debate. I thank Members for the opportunity to speak on an issue that remains of particular interest to me, the work of my Department and each of our partners, who, as I have made clear, work closely with us at all levels in meeting the challenge before us.

5.00 pm

Finally, I yet again ask anybody in the House who has personal and direct influence with the Minister of Finance to do what they can to ensure that my Department receives the dedicated budget that it requires to deliver on the Bamford recommendations for all the people. There cannot be a one-sided approach; there must be a totally joint approach in order to provide the best delivery of care to the most vulnerable in our society.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and thank my colleagues for proposing it.

The strategic framework for mental-health services is detailed in the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (NI), which supports the fundamental principle that mental health and social care should be provided in the community, unless there is good reason for not doing so. Bamford supports a process of reform and modernisation of services that will result in the delivery of high-quality and integrated services and well-designed facilities.

The subject of the motion is Muckamore Abbey Hospital, but, as John McCallister said, this is something that impacts right across the board. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust, for instance, is currently in a public consultation process on its 'Changing for the Better' plan, which relates to service development and efficiency proposals. We can only hope that service development will take precedence over efficiency proposals.

There is a proposal to have continual resettlement of people with mental illness from long-stay hospital-based care. The Southern Trust proposes to continue to reduce the number of people with mental illness who are in long-stay hospital care. Those people must have a supported environment in the community. DSD must provide suitable housing for them, because, regardless of the aspirations voiced today and the targets that have been mentioned, a support infrastructure for

people moving out of long-stay hospital care must be accompanied by housing provision; otherwise, those people have nowhere else to go. Therefore, housing must be put in place before the support infrastructure. DSD must provide housing that is suitable for patients' needs and that will help integrate them into the community in which they live. As has been said, it is not simply a matter of putting people back into the community without that support infrastructure and expecting them to manage.

Jonathan Craig mentioned how other people in the community — the Planning Service, and community groups — had been very much involved in the initial discussions and planning of supported housing in his area. That seems to me to be a good model to follow. He certainly provided a detailed insight into how that approach impacts on, and improves the quality of, people's lives by giving them more independence. They are able to travel on buses, go shopping and so on. I believe that that is the way forward.

DSD, through the Social Security Agency, also has a vital part to play in respect of benefits and the provision of grants for community care through the social fund. Many people who move out of long-stay hospital care have not had to deal with the very complex benefits system. They need help in order to maximise their benefit entitlement. Unfortunately, the employment support allowance tends to target people with mental-health problems and those with disabilities. That must be borne in mind when those people are moving back into the community. They should be treated sensitively and properly, and given all the advice and help that is available to maximise their benefit entitlements.

It is incumbent on DSD to provide the housing that is needed in order to move such people back into the community. As I said earlier, there is not much point in trying to tackle delayed discharges of people if they have no homes to go to.

Among the Members who spoke in the debate, Michelle O'Neill said that adequate supported housing is necessary, and provides a lifeline for vulnerable people, but she said that there was a lack of supported housing. A clear, concrete work plan must be established, involving DSD and the Department of Health.

David Hilditch, as Deputy Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, said that the Committee was currently reviewing the Supporting People budget. He talked about submissions to the Committee by voluntary groups, in particular, and how the Committee was genuinely impressed by those organisations.

Those organisations offer quality and value for money. Their main complaint is the absence of joined-up government. Obviously, the need for joined-up government between DSD, DHSSPS and, indeed, the

Department of Finance and Personnel has been brought up time and again in the debate.

Billy Armstrong also pointed out that the measure of a community is how it treats its vulnerable people, and that is an issue that must be examined closely.

Carmel Hanna mentioned evidence that suggests that people have better lives in supported housing than they do in hospital stays. Obviously, certain people on long-term hospital stay can become institutionalised and want to stay in the confines of the hospital because they have been there for so long. No one would dispute that those people's health and social care requirements are more relevant to the Minister of Health than to the Minister for Social Development. There are insufficient models and lack of respite for carers. The Department of Health must carry out clear assessments of carers' needs. There should not be over-reliance on carers. Mrs Hanna suggested that a cross-departmental approach to the matter is needed.

Anna Lo talked about the Bamford Review and about small supported houses for five or fewer people, where, in some cases, staff members are in situ.

Jonathan Craig referred to supported housing in his constituency, which appears to be successful, and he gave evidence to that effect.

My colleague Fra McCann endorsed the motion's sentiments and thanked the Minister for her attendance at the debate. He rightly pointed out that housing is only one element of social housing provision. Specialist housing and residential care are required to allow people to leave hospital. He mentioned examples of supported housing in his constituency that have been very successful.

John McCallister mentioned that the issue is not only about Muckamore Abbey Hospital; it is one that impacts throughout the community and must be addressed urgently.

Thomas Burns supported the motion. He mentioned that Muckamore Abbey is in his constituency. He also discussed supported-housing programmes. He talked about people who move out of hospital and back into the community and said that they do not cause any bother. In her intervention, my colleague Sue Ramsey pointed out that those people are not in hospital for things that they have done; they are there, through no fault of their own, because of circumstances.

Mr Poots talked about his experience of Muckamore Abbey. I agree very much with his point that, irrespective of how good it is, it is still a hospital. He mentioned the impact that moving out of the hospital environment and into supported housing can have on someone. Certainly, I have my own experience of visiting Muckamore Abbey. In the 1960s my sister trained there as what was then called a "special-care

teacher". I visited Muckamore Abbey on many occasions. It was a good hospital; however, it is now redundant as regards what it was originally intended to be.

Alban Maginness gave Members a potted history of the workhouse. His point was that progress has been made and that many hospitals like Muckamore, in particular, were products of the 1950s and 1960s. They have served their purpose.

Dawn Purvis mentioned the importance of values and standards and that Bamford's policy must become reality. She discussed the complexity of all of the issues that are involved and added that the principle must not be lost. She said that the specific need of each individual must be addressed and that there is a diversity of need.

The Minister talked about action that has been taken and that which is ongoing, I got the impression that she was saying that the motion did not involve her much. The Minister talked about empty rhetoric, but she is becoming something of an expert in that herself.

The Minister also talked about targets being met, but it is a pity that that information is not more widely disseminated. That would be a good start in making people aware of what is happening. A LeasCheann Comhairle, I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to review waiting lists for supported housing; and to work, in conjunction with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, to tackle delayed discharges from Muckamore Hospital because of the lack of homes for people with a disability.

Adjourned at 5.10 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 10 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Efficiency Savings in the Health Service

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 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I beg to move

That this Assembly, while recognising that there is a need for efficiency savings within the Health Service, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in this 60th year of the Health Service, to ensure that these savings do not impact on front line services; and further calls for the budgets for the most vulnerable groups within our society, i.e. children, people with mental illness and older people, to be ring-fenced.

I am pleased to introduce the motion, which does not aim to score political points but aims to provide a voice for hard-pressed nurses across the Province and, more importantly, the most needy people in our society, namely the elderly, people with mental-health issues and special needs, and children.

The need to deliver the whole range of health, social-care and public-safety services more efficiently is not in dispute, and the Committee has always recognised that need. The requirement to deliver the cumulative 3% efficiency savings each year arises from the Executive Budget of 2008-2011, to which all parties signed up.

When the Committee considered the Executive draft Budget in 2007, we paid particular attention to the question of efficiencies. In particular, we recognised that if the Department was to continue to deliver vital services, it would be essential for the efficiency-savings targets to be achieved in full. The Committee also welcomed an explicit commitment from the

Minister that he would deliver those efficiencies and meet the target of £344 million.

A review of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, carried out by Professor John Appleby in 2005, concluded unequivocally that there was considerable scope for improvement in the way that services were delivered, and that action must be taken to address that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what he has done in response to Professor Appleby's comments.

Today's debate is not about whether there is a need for efficiency savings, but about how those efficiencies should be achieved. I understand that there was a division in the Committee on the wording of the motion. However, it is my understanding that there was general agreement on the principle that any savings measures must not impact on front line services. The difference arose in relation to the call for certain budgets to be ring-fenced. I leave it to others to explain their reasons for opposing the motion in full.

The Committee has been undertaking a detailed examination of how the savings are to be made, and the likely impact on services. As part of that, we met first the Minister, then trade union representatives. The Committee is now meeting each of the five health and social care trusts to examine the proposals that they have published for consultation. We have already met two trusts, and will meet the remaining trusts over the next couple of weeks, DV. When the consultation process is completed, the proposals by the trusts and the other health and social care bodies will go the Minister for his approval.

A paper provided to the Committee in October by the Minister indicated that there will be an estimated reduction of 2,475 jobs throughout the Health Service over the next three years. That takes account of both the efficiencies and any additional investments. The largest proportion of those jobs — some 925 — will be on the administrative side, mainly as a result of the new structures following the review of public administration (RPA). However, worryingly, it is estimated that there will be a reduction of 722 nurses and midwives — that must be a major concern. That number of nursing and midwifery posts cannot be removed without having a direct and detrimental effect on front line services. I believe that that will have most effect on the diminishing of time spent with patients and the quality of care available.

The Belfast Trust, in its evidence to the Committee, was keen to point out that it is not always a straightforward matter to define "front line staff". It argued, for example, that nurses can be employed in undertaking research work, that doctors can be employed in managerial posts, and that front line services cannot be provided without a whole range of support services

including, for example, clerical staff, engineers and laboratory staff. However, I believe that when any of us think of front line staff in the Health Service, we automatically think of nurses, doctors, social workers and other healthcare professionals — those who are providing hands-on care both day and night to patients in hospitals and in the community.

When we consider the 722 nursing and midwifery posts that will disappear over the next couple of years, even allowing for a small proportion that may not be working on the front line, it is difficult to understand how that will not have a serious impact on the care and treatment provided to patients.

I will also mention residential homes, as the proposals by all trusts include proposals to close or to rationalise residential homes in their areas. I spoke to a domiciliary nurse who works for a charitable trust, and who provides care in the community through one of the health trusts.

She said that she had to make life-and-death decisions over Christmas on which patients would get 15 minutes of care four times a day and which would not. She chose people who were living on their own and had no family backup, because those care periods provided the only opportunity for those people to have someone to talk to during the day. Rather than promote the idea that all resources should be directed towards community health services, we must also consider whether we have the competence and the staff numbers to fulfil our obligations to people who leave mental-health institutions and to elderly people in the community.

The health and social care trusts have been keen to point out to the Committee that, in surveys, people say that they want to remain in their own home rather than enter residential accommodation. No one can dispute that, because everyone has the right to decide what is best for him or her. However, when elderly people can no longer cope on their own and must move into a residential home, that becomes their home. The last thing that those people want or expect is to face the prospect of the home's closing down, meaning that they must move again. Unfortunately, that is exactly what a large number of elderly people throughout Northern Ireland is facing today. Children, and people with mental-health problems, are also particularly vulnerable. The Bamford Review highlighted the neglect of that aspect of healthcare over many years. No one in the Chamber will disagree that mental-health provision causes us all a great deal of concern.

The Bamford Review's recommendations need to be implemented urgently. Some additional funding has been identified in the Budget, but it would not make any sense, on the one hand, to provide additional resources while, on the other hand, to impose efficiency savings in those areas of healthcare that I have mentioned.

In proposing the motion, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety implores the Minister to ensure that although efficiencies must be made, they must not result in cuts in front line services. Yes, we must deliver services more efficiently and effectively, but we must also continue to meet the real health and social care needs of vulnerable people.

The Committee has identified the three most vulnerable groups in society: children; people with mental-health problems; and older people. The Committee calls for the budgets for those groups to be ring-fenced and protected. That is the only way in which we can protect the care and treatment that must be provided for those vulnerable people. I urge all Members to set aside political bias and support the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like the proposer of the motion, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I commend the members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for supporting my proposal. I made my proposal because of representations that were made to me by Members and others on their concerns about Health Service cuts, not because of party political interests.

In saying that, I did not realise that the motion would generate so much publicity. The subject of the motion has been aired all over the media this morning, so we may have hit a raw nerve with some of the issues that affect the health sector. In the sixtieth year of the Health Service, it is important to recognise and commend the good and positive work that is being done by people in the health sector and by staff on the front line, who are genuinely committed to patient care. Throughout the debate, and despite the row over efficiency savings, it is important to commend the core group of staff who have been working on the front line for a long time.

I welcome the Minister to the debate. I have no doubt that he will answer some of the questions that have come up. Our constituents elected us, so I, like all other Members, have a duty to raise issues, and I make no apologies for doing so.

The Chairperson of the Committee highlighted some relevant figures. I have only a couple of minutes in which to speak, so I will not go into them. However, it is important to recognise that less money is spent here on children's services compared with spending on similar services in England, Scotland and Wales. I recognise the Minister's commitment to funding services for children and young people, but it is crucial that front line services, which we know are historically underfunded, are not continuously hit by the impact of efficiency savings.

10.45 am

Protecting children and young people and ensuring that they are safe and that they get the support that they need to grow into healthy, independent adults is the primary purpose of the health and social care system. We must ensure that disabled young people have access to the kinds of services that give them the greatest opportunities to live their lives to the full. As I said earlier, front line services that focus mainly on our most vulnerable children and young people should not be the target for efficiency savings.

I know that the system is already under pressure. I remind the Minister, however, that several weeks ago, the Committee was informed that there are more than 1,000 unallocated cases in the social services sector. How can money be trimmed off that sector when there are more than 1,000 unallocated cases in the system? I cannot square that circle.

I am also concerned that some of the trusts are simply passing on the proposal of efficiency savings to the community and voluntary sector. They are telling the sector that it needs to save, but they are not naming the areas in which it should make those savings. Some trusts are simply saying that there must be blanket cuts.

As the Chairperson said, the Committee has already begun to hear evidence from each trust on how it proposes to make efficiency savings. We will continue to monitor, in detail, those proposals.

The Minister has said time and time again — and every Member in this Assembly recognises — that it is vital that efficiency savings are made. However, I do not think that efficiencies should be made at the cost of front line services.

One can examine the World Health Organization's definition of "health", and one can examine the Investing for Health framework, which says that health is determined mainly by a person's social, economic, physical and cultural environment. In response to a question for written answer, which was published on 6 February 2009, the Minister said:

"Health inequalities are the product of social, economic and health related issues."

Why, then, does it appear to communities as though cuts are being made to the services that were put in place to tackle such inequalities?

I listened to the reasons why some Committee members decided to oppose the motion and to talk about the issue of ring-fencing. The Minister, speaking on BBC Radio Ulster this morning, said that he has a ring-fenced budget. I simply do not know where that sits with other people's attitudes.

The unions informed the Committee of their concern about the efficiency savings and said that they view those savings as cuts. I have no difficulty in saying that

there is much wastage in the Health Service. However, I cannot see how that fits in with the proposed cuts to 925 administration posts, 722 nursing jobs, and 450 social service positions. The nursing unions featured heavily in the media this morning.

I am very conscious of the time. Time and time again, the Minister says that we should tell him if we have any suggestions. As a Committee member, I am trying to tease out some of those suggestions. What strikes me —

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

Ms S Ramsey: Certainly, I will. More than £1.5 million was spent on hospitality last year, and we should examine where that is going. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Although today's debate addresses an important issue, I fear that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been again dragged before the Assembly unnecessarily and for unwarranted reasons. However, I thank the Minister for attending and for showing his usual desire to facilitate the Health Committee and to be open to scrutiny and examination.

My colleague Mr Gardiner and I did not vote in favour of tabling this motion. It serves little purpose beyond giving a platform to the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned the Appleby Report in her remarks.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not want this debate to turn into a sham fight between the Ulster Unionists and the DUP. For the record, however, I suggested that the Committee should table the motion.

Mr McCallister: I am well aware of who suggested tabling the motion. My point, however, is that the Chairperson of the Committee used this motion to get herself onto 'The Stephen Nolan Show' and to try to convey an image that she is somehow championing the cause of health in Northern Ireland. Yet, everyone can remember that during the debate on the draft Budget, what she championed most was her husband's draft Budget, and she wanted us to stick with a much lower level of spending on health.

The Chairperson said that she called on the Minister to take account of the Appleby Report. When Professor Appleby was a witness at the Health Committee, he said that a key strand was to emphasise public health by engaging with people about their health. However, the DUP — in the Health Committee and in the House — voted against the establishment of a regional agency for public health and social well-being. The DUP's hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that this is a wide-ranging debate, but the Member should return to the motion and the business that is on the Floor of the House.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The debate must be put in context. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has repeatedly stated that efficiency savings will be attained through a range of measures such as improved procurement, more efficient prescribing and dispensing of medicines, improved productivity and reduced administration. He has also repeatedly stated that efficiency savings will not result in any cuts to front line services. He has been categorical about that issue. In that respect, we know that the Minister agrees with part of the motion.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that the DUP was not against a health promotion agency? The DUP wanted to keep such an agency within the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), so to say that the party did not want one in the first place is totally untrue. When nurses are lost because of natural wastage, they are replaced. However, under the proposals from the trusts, jobs will be cut and will not be replaced, which means that productivity will decrease and more agency staff will be employed. That will cost the Minister's Department even more money. Does the Member not agree that that is sheer madness?

Mr McCallister: Those comments highlight what I mentioned earlier. Yet again, Mr Easton got up and talked about a public health agency. Everyone in the House should read the debates on the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill in the Hansard reports. He was against the proposal because he did not want a focus on public health. He disagrees with the UUP and the Minister.

The efficiency savings were never the Minister's idea. They are Executive savings that have been driven at every stage by the DUP and, most fervently, by the Robinsons — even to the stage at which the Chairperson of the Health Committee was removed from the House. It smacks of opportunism to claim that the Minister should be cautious in how he approaches this very difficult issue.

Front line services rely on those efficiency savings being made. In light of the fact that the budget that the Minister received did not adequately meet the heightening need in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that savings that are acquired from improved efficiencies are pumped back into the service.

All the new service developments that the Minister has been able to announce have to be funded by efficiency savings. There is a funding gap of over £600 million in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but that figure would have been larger if the

DUP had had its way. In April 2005, Iris Robinson claimed that an increase of 9% —

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No; I am running out of time, and the Member has already had one bite at the cherry.

Iris Robinson claimed that an increase of 9% in the budget for the Department was grossly insufficient. However, a mere two years later, an increase of 3.8% was more than enough when Mr Peter Robinson — her husband — was in charge of the money. Political opportunism is regrettable in any area, but when politicians start to play games with people's health, the public — quite rightly — become very dismayed.

The Minister has been open with the Health Committee, the health trusts and the public. All proposals for efficiency benefits are just that — proposals. They will all go out for consultation, and people who wish to have their say about the proposals can do so.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Hanna: I support this important motion. We must achieve efficiency savings but not by using the blunt, crude instrument of 3% cuts across the board. With the tax base shrinking by the day, it is inevitable that there will be cuts. It was also inevitable that the previous budgeting assumptions, which were based on the Northern Ireland block grant, were thrown out the window.

The SDLP has been vindicated in voting against the flawed Budget. There is too much reliance on cutbacks to essential services that impact on the most vulnerable people in our society.

Members will be aware that there is a continuing gap in the health of people from the most affluent and most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. That is clearly reflected in life-expectancy rates, infant-mortality rates, cancer levels, obesity levels, teenage-pregnancy rates, hospital admissions for people with mental-health problems, and in the generally lower access to health care for people in the latter category. The statistics are well documented, and closing the gap must be the overarching aim of the Executive, the Assembly, the Health Minister and the Health Committee.

It has been predicted that more than 700 nursing jobs will go in the next three years. That reduction is dramatic, and the remaining staff will come under greater pressure than ever. As a registered nurse and midwife, I am deeply concerned about the impact that such cuts will have on service delivery. Nurses are the mainstay of the healthcare team. Of course, the Health Service must work smarter and more efficiently, and it must achieve a better skills mix. However, although there are jobs that could be done by people other than nurses, we should be upskilling rather than downgrading.

We need all the nurses we can get to fill the new posts that, I hope, will be created as a result of these awful efficiency savings. Even one nurse, providing support in the community, can make such a difference to patients, particularly those suffering from chronic illness and degenerative diseases, which are often a life sentence for them and their carers. Those patients are not at the sexy end of healthcare, but they require a lot more support, particularly nursing support. Residential homes are being closed and home-help services are being cut to the bone; there is not enough money to go around.

None of this is being seen by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and I do not understand why the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not tackle Civil Service bureaucracy, especially at the higher levels. He should also be tackling the problem of Departments working in silos — he is the Minister of Personnel as well as the Minister of Finance. He is not required to account for raising taxes; his role is to distribute funds fairly and equitably, with help from his numerous advisers and civil servants. The Department of Finance and Personnel is not Whitehall, and Northern Ireland covers a small area that requires a more sensitive approach, using local knowledge, in order to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society are protected. That is what devolution is supposed to be about — local management.

Allocating sufficient resources for mental-health promotion and early intervention makes good economic sense. Mental ill-health imposes greater costs on society than any other health condition, including cancer and heart disease, and the case for tackling the problem is particularly strong in Northern Ireland, where the rate of mental ill-health is 25% higher than in the rest of the UK. Therefore, we must prioritise good mental health, because it impacts on so many areas of people's lives and, indeed, on many Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department of Education (DE) and, through social housing, the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Although the Health Department has an alcohol and drugs strategy, the Executive and the Assembly should be more involved in working with parents, young people and the licensed trade, which has a vested interest. In addition, as Members heard in yesterday's debate on supported housing, there is an urgent housing need for the people who are moving out of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Some of those people have complex needs, so considerable resources are required.

I hope and trust that the Minister of Finance and Personnel acknowledges the impact that those challenges will have on many aspects of people's lives, and I hope that the Executive will be involved more proactively. The National Health Service belongs to no one but the public, and we must ensure that it serves

the interests of the public and, especially, the interests of the most vulnerable.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party will support the motion, basing its judgement solely on the wording in the Order Paper, because it appreciates that there are major concerns about how efficiency savings are being delivered in the health sector. However, I express my utter shock and horror at the sheer nerve and gall of the Members who are behind the motion; the same people who signed up to the Budget that is at the heart of the problems facing the Health Service.

DUP and Sinn Féin Members should hold their heads in shame, because they are responsible for the flaws. It is a case of their shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted, and, furthermore, it is those parties that caused the horse to bolt in the first instance.

11.00 am

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that his colleague in the United Community group Dr Kieran Deeny did not oppose the Budget or raise any issues concerning it in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety? It appears, therefore, that there is a problem with that alliance over what it agrees on health issues.

Dr Farry: If the Member reads Hansard reports, he will see where the Alliance Party stands on the Budget. We have been consistent on the issue.

Northern Ireland's health budget is inadequate. The DUP can talk all its wants about the record levels of spending that have been made in healthcare in Northern Ireland. I accept that a high proportion of the overall Budget — 48% — and the majority of new spending has been invested in health. However, that does not take into account the fact that, compared with the UK average, investment in health in Northern Ireland is flatlining. There have been considerable levels of uplift in health spending elsewhere in the UK but not in Northern Ireland. We are falling behind, and that is a simple fact with which we must come to terms.

The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland estimates that we could be £200 million behind by 2011.

Ms S Ramsey: It is important that the comments about Kieran Deeny were made. I do not know whether the Member has read the motion, but, when the Health Service budget came before the Health Committee, we proposed that it be equality proofed, because we were aware that the Health Service was underfunded. In fact, we said so time and time again. The Committee subsequently agreed that it should be equality proofed. Although we recognise that efficiency savings need to be made, I urge the Minister not to attack the most vulnerable groups.

Dr Farry: Sinn Féin must face up to the fact that it signed up to a right-wing, Thatcherite Budget. The

party's credentials and what its members say on the streets of Belfast, and elsewhere in Northern Ireland, to their electorate, are inconsistent with their behaviour in the Assembly. I am amazed by that.

One must consider costs, which are rising across the system. People are living longer, and we have more expensive drugs and technologies. Health will always require a higher percentage of the Budget in Northern Ireland than it does in other jurisdictions because we are a devolved Assembly, and we have less of a range of responsibilities than others. We face other difficulties with our Budget; for example, the cost of division and the populist approach that the Executive have taken, thus far, to public spending.

When people trumpet about measures that they have implemented on rates and such issues, they must bear in mind that the people who suffer are those who require access to quality public services, which are underfunded. Therefore, the poorest and most vulnerable people in society have been let down by the Executive, who have paid more attention to the better-off in society than to the worse-off.

Efficiency savings should be about shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices into resources for the new. I accept that there is a problem with how that is happening in the Health Service. Too often, it results in cuts to front line services, and such cuts must be reduced.

We need to focus on prevention and on public health. That brings Mr Easton's comments into context. We require a stand-alone public-health agency that will drive forward efficiencies in our health system and reduce costs, but one that will do so without using half measures.

The motion proposes to ring-fence money for vulnerable groups, and that is laudable. However, why was that not done when the Budget was struck? The Budget is the proper vehicle for taking those types of decisions. The DUP and Sinn Féin missed a trick there. It is too late for them to come crying about the delivery of efficiency savings now, when their Members did not take the necessary action to protect core aspects of the Health Service when the Budget was being drafted. They could have done that if they had anticipated what was going to happen. Therefore, it is a bit late to raise those problems in the Assembly now.

A clear definition of front line services is required. There may be times when it will be beneficial to have efficiency savings impacting on front line services, because it will mean that things will be done better.

Mental-health promotion and prevention is underfunded in Northern Ireland, compared with the UK average. Some 9% of our overall health budget is spent on mental-health issues, as compared with the UK average of 12%.

We talk about moving people out of institutions and into the community. That is a change of policy and practice, and it is something that we should consider and welcome. The Bamford Review recommended such a move, but it must be backed up by proper staffing in the community that will provide people with the proper resources.

We will support the motion, judged upon how it is worded. However, those behind the motion have a lot of thinking to do because they have been massively inconsistent; the people of Northern Ireland will find them out very quickly.

Mr Easton: I have to confess that I have been looking forward to today's debate because I hope to get an understanding of the Minister's definition of efficiency savings and how they differ from cuts.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; not yet.

Unfortunately, today we will probably see — and are seeing — attacks by the Health Minister on the other parties and the Ulster Unionists blaming the issue of efficiencies on everyone and anyone. However, the Minister should be aware that the issues raised by Members today are real concerns that are felt by Health Service staff and members of the public.

In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which serves my constituency, there are 182 nursing posts under threat and proposals for three residential homes to close. How can we lose so many positions for nurses when we spend so much money on agency staff? The loss of nursing positions will lead to a decrease in productivity and will have the knock-on effect of causing waiting lists to rise and more work being pushed onto others — it is sheer madness.

The Minister gave a promise — and I will remind him of it time and time again, if necessary — that there will be no cuts to front line services. Will he reiterate that promise and not close residential homes such as Ravara House in Kilcooley, Bangor, where over 20 residents live in fear for their future? That is morally wrong, and the Minister has a chance to put a stop to this madness.

The Minister will try to blame the entire Executive for agreeing to the 3% efficiencies. However, what he has failed to say is that the 3% efficiency savings come as a directive that is part of the comprehensive spending review. It is a Westminster directive, from the Treasury, and the whole of the UK has to find the 3% savings. It is not exclusively a Northern Ireland Executive decision; no one in the Executive agreed to cutbacks.

Mr B McCrea: That is pathetic.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Easton: I think that the Member has a problem with the truth.

The Minister will also tell us that if we have any better ideas, we should make them known. Well, here are some ideas that many of the trusts are failing to consider as part of the 3% efficiencies. Doctor and nursing vacancies need to be processed quickly. Since the debate that we had months and months ago, we have seen no action taken to deal with the issue and the medical ward in Omagh having to close as a result of vacancies not being filled.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; I will not give way.

Another target should be to reduce the non-attendance at outpatient appointments, which stands at 196,000 across the Province. Dealing with that would increase productivity and reduce waiting lists.

Mr B McCrea: Tell us where the money is coming from.

Mr Easton: I am trying to explain where efficiencies might be made, but the Member will not listen. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Easton: The number of cancelled clinics, currently standing at nearly 14,000, should be reduced — that would reduce waiting lists and increase productivity. Medical negligence claims, currently costing nearly £14 million, should be reduced. The trusts should reduce the number of independent sector providers, which are costing almost £6 million across the Health Service. The cost of mail, standing at nearly a staggering £7 million, should be reduced, as should the cost of phone bills, which are costing the Health Service over £8 million.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; I will not give way. The Member does not like to hear the truth; that is the problem.

Mr Cobain: Tell us how that can be done.

Mr Easton: I am giving the Minister some ideas about how to make the savings.

The Health Service energy bills, which cost nearly £29 million, should be reduced. We should be trying to make the trusts more energy efficient, and we are not doing that. The travel cost claims for the Health Service, which are costing £32 million, should be reduced. The Minister's own Department is spending nearly £400,000 on travel-cost claims — he must look into that.

The Minister should do away with bonus payments for senior officials, which have cost his own Department £180,000. Given the current economic climate, why are we paying bonuses? The Minister should reduce the

cost of art as capital, which is costing £700,000. If that were done away with, it could save two residential homes.

Management consultant fees, costing over £1 million, should be reduced. The Department should also, of course, try to reduce the cost of agency staff — £40 million across the health trusts. What is the Minister going to do about that issue? Sick leave, which cost the Minister's own Department over £1 million in 2007-08, must be reduced.

Today, the DUP has given the Minister some helpful ideas. He has the chance to change his mind and stop some of the cutbacks. Will he come to be known as the Minister for spin and cuts, like the Labour Party's Peter Mandelson, or as the Minister who delivers a first-class Health Service? I would not want to be known as the "Mandy" of the Ulster Unionist Party. Today, the Minister has a chance to put a stop to cuts in nursing and to the closure of residential homes.

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

Mr Easton: Will the Minister work with me and members of the Committee to come up with some realistic ideas?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a member of Sinn Féin, I fully support the motion that is before the House. The Committee also supported the motion, although not unanimously. This morning, as I was sitting in traffic at Sandyknowes, I heard a nurse, or perhaps someone who was speaking on behalf of nurses, speaking on the radio.

A Member: Was it Carmel Hanna?

Mrs McGill: No, contrary to what I heard someone say from a sedentary position on my left-hand side, it was not Carmel Hanna. My understanding is that the individual was either a nurse or Mary Hinds of the RCN (Royal College of Nursing). Given the exchange that has just taken place between Members, it is important to note that she was glad that the matter was to be debated in the House today. I am prepared to listen to her because she works on the front line.

I am not someone who runs to the media, but I heard several contributions to the radio programme from Members, some of whom are present in the Chamber. I learned something from listening to people who work on the front line. In a powerful statement, the nurse said that no one is against change, but the problem is that after change has been introduced, no one evaluates the results. I identify with that statement.

I am going to quote an example — and I thank the Assembly Research and Library Services for this. This is from the Western Trust, which covers my area, and it is to do with domiciliary care and workers. I have a

particular interest in that because, as the Minister will know — and I welcome his presence — there is a situation in Strabane. There is a proposal to close Greenfield residential care home. As Sue Ramsey said, such proposals are of major concern to our constituents, and it would be remiss of me not to mention that.

The Western Trust's proposal is:

"Implement regional needs assessment criteria for domiciliary care, replacement of meal preparation and domestic chores by domiciliary workers with another model".

The inherent weakness of that proposal is that it gives no idea of how "another model" will work.

Based on what I heard on the radio this morning and on what people in my area have told me, I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee and people who work on the front line that the provision of home helps for 15 minutes here and there does not work. The Committee has been asked to make suggestions, and I have no difficulty with that. My suggestion is that we listen to what the people in the front line are saying. Go raibh maith agat.

11.15 am

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. The matter has, no doubt, provoked much controversy between the Department, the Minister, and members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and it has raised concern among health professionals, especially the Royal Colleges.

I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber. The debate is important as it deals with efficiencies, and the difference between efficiencies and cuts in the Health Service. The motion has not been tabled by members of the Health Committee simply for the sake of having another debate on health in the Chamber; it has come from a collective, genuine concern to protect front line services and the most vulnerable in our communities. On several occasions, Mr McGimpsey said that he is ready and willing to listen. I hope that he not only listens but takes action on what he hears from Members today and from what has been presented to him. It appears that, in the past, the Minister has refused to listen and take on board the concerns of the members of the Health Committee regarding his definition of efficiency savings.

One of the first issues that the Minister must clarify is his definition of efficiency savings, which has been referred to by other Members. The Health Committee, and professionals at the cutting edge, have often heard that the Minister's definition of efficiency savings really means cuts to front line services. The Minister cannot use efficiency savings as a smokescreen to cut front line services, because Members will not buy into that.

I want to look at issues that will strengthen front line services rather than diminish them, because over the past 12 months we have seen the demise of front line

services. My colleague Alex Easton has raised several issues, and perhaps the Minister will take those on board.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: No, I will not give way. The first thing I want to look at is over-bureaucratic management —

Mr B McCrea: I just want to tease out —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I remind Members that they should not persist when it is quite obvious that the Member has no intention of giving way.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Perhaps those folk will learn as time goes on; they are slow learners, but their time will come.

Although the Minister may well say in his remarks today that he has begun to streamline, and he may point out that the boards are reducing to one and the trusts to five, I still contend that there are far too many managers. Over the past 10 years, the number of managers and senior managers has doubled. The number of managers has risen from 504 in 1998 to 990 in 2007, and the number of senior managers has increased from 623 in 1998 to 1,153 in 2007 — a rise of 33% over the past 10 years. We are looking at efficiency savings; therefore, will the Minister tell me whether it is acceptable for that trend to continue while, at the same time, he is reducing the number of nurses who are delivering health services at the front line?

Service duplication must also be examined. Many clinics are being cancelled for no good reason, and theatre facilities are being underutilised. Operating theatres in the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, which is in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, have not been fully utilised simply because the networking — which has been talked about so much by the Department and the trusts — has never been put in place.

Another area in which efficiency savings could be made is in the use of agency staff. A few weeks ago when an agency consultant came to Altnagelvin Hospital —

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

Mr Buchanan: — her patients were not there. All those issues must be tackled.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buchanan: Perhaps the Minister will listen today.

Mr Gardiner: I think that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety agrees with the sentiments of the motion, and I believe that he is already trying to do exactly what the motion proposes. In fact, I am sure that he would find it a lot easier to deliver on all health spending priorities if he had been given the budget that he asked for initially. However, he did not get it.

Of course, it was the honourable lady Iris Robinson's husband and fellow DUP member who, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, proposed a reduction in the health budget under the draft Budget. The DUP's then Finance Minister did that, despite the fact that, less than a year beforehand, the honourable lady had called on direct rule Ministers to increase spending on health. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Gardiner: It always struck me as inconsistent that when direct rule Ministers were running the show, more money was needed, but when her husband was running the show, less money was needed. *[Interruption.]*

It makes the honourable lady's every demand for prioritisation in the Health Service — the sentiments behind the motion — appear as though she is contradicting herself. She might dress up her position with the claim that new money can be found from efficiency savings. However, the scale of the cuts that the Finance Minister imposed on the Health Service will show that any efficiency savings will be small in comparison with the shortfall her husband has imposed on it. The Health Minister eventually accepted the budgetary settlement —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you. The Health Minister eventually accepted the budgetary settlement because the business of Government must continue. *[Interruption.]*

People simply have to get on with what they have been given — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Gardiner: — by an Executive that has many competing ministerial voices, all demanding money.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you. I did not give way before, so I will carry on.

Perhaps the honourable lady will be able to shed light on that apparent inconsistency in her position when she is summing up.

The Minister has made clear his total commitment to the Health Service. His belief in the original 1948 vision for the Health Service — that it be free at the point of need — is beyond doubt. The Minister and the Health Committee are travelling on the same road and in the same direction, the difference being that the Minister has Executive responsibilities for the Health Service. He does not have the luxury of grandstanding on this demand or that demand — and such grandstanding is done largely for the public relations benefits it brings — because he is charged with ensuring that taxpayers' money is used efficiently.

The groups mentioned in the motion — children, people with mental illness and older people — are all priority groups for the Minister. He has always demonstrated that his commitment to helping them is real. However, ring-fencing money reduces flexibility. If all internal Health Service budgets were ring-fenced then no flexibility would be possible. Given the fact that the Health Minister has to live within the total budget determined by the Finance Minister, he cannot be flexible and ring-fence — the two positions are contradictory. The problem with a motion such as the one under discussion is that it implies that what is being demanded is not happening at all. However, everyone in the House and in the Health Service knows that that is just not true.

I commend the Health Minister on his work for the Health Service and the people of Northern Ireland to date. He is known as the people's Health Minister and as someone who delivers and who will look after the care and welfare of the sick and the dying.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion, and I recognise, as most people now do, that there is broad support for tackling inefficiencies and eliminating waste in the Health Service. Like most people, I find it hard to see how, in the present climate, there can be any justification for continuing to pay large bonuses to senior managers in the service. The plans from all the trusts have now been published, and it is quite clear that, in order to achieve the comprehensive spending review (CSR) savings, they are targeting front line services.

The trusts made submissions to the Health Committee, and I am sure that Members, along with other elected representatives in their local areas, have held face-to-face meetings with them. The same themes arise in those meetings: the closure of residential homes; the removal of essential day-care services; and cuts in provision for the elderly and those with learning disabilities, such as home-help services, which have been severely hit. In the west, maternity services are in jeopardy and redundancy notices have been issued to nurses. Therefore, it is no wonder that there is such alarm and distress among patients and their families.

Many people do not understand the reasons behind those cuts, but they can be linked back to the Budget that the Assembly approved. Some Members need to be reminded that the Budget that they voted for included CSR cuts and efficiency savings, which were part of the package that has led to the current situation. That is why the SDLP, along with some other Members, voted against the Budget — it relied on market forces and placed far too much emphasis on economic competitiveness.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: No, I will not. I might finish early, so the Member might get an opportunity to comment if she asks the Speaker.

The Budget paid far too little attention to the needs of the weak and vulnerable in our society.

As I said, despite the increased demands on their services, trusts have made cutbacks in care for the elderly and care in the community — they are proposing sheltered accommodation and home-based care as alternatives to residential care. It will take many years for supported-housing initiatives to bear fruit. With little supported housing available and poor or non-existent home-help services, it is no wonder that there has been a public outcry and that so many people welcome the debate.

In cases in which home help cannot be found, trusts instruct families to use direct payments to recruit help. Families find that scheme far too complex to administer and cannot cope with it.

Given the Department's instruction for any reduction in the number of our nurses to be achieved through voluntary redundancy and natural wastage, the loss of well-qualified and full-time nursing staff is another worrying development. It is difficult to understand why full-time nurses in some trusts are not having their contracts renewed.

Mental-health services already account for 20% of the health burden, but receive only 10% of the health budget, so cuts to that service are very damaging — mental-health services require more investment, not less. The key services required for mental health, such as crisis-response services and vital outreach programmes, are very scarce and cannot be provided without additional resources. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and commend those who tabled it. We live in difficult times, and we must all tighten our belts, at home and in our jobs. That applies to all executive bodies in the Northern Ireland Assembly, because our constituents look to us to ensure that money is spent wisely and that service provision is not affected by any cutbacks in spending.

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

It is our aim to spend more on meeting the needs of the people of the Province, not less. To do that, we must make cuts to non-essential spending and focus on what is necessary to help people through the difficult times that the economic crisis has brought. We know that more people are feeling the pressure — many families are out of work and are breaking down because of the pressure. It is more essential than ever that appropriate and efficient measures are implemented to provide the support networks that can make a difference to lives, sometimes the difference between life and death.

11.30 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: The point that I tried to make to Tommy is that the amounts of money invested in training staff in the Health Service — particularly healthcare professionals — are large. Such a big investment means that if those members of staff are displaced, that investment will have to be made a second time. That is not an efficient use of money, and, if I recall correctly, despite protestations by SDLP and UUP Members, Ministers from both parties voted for the Budget. I may be wrong about that.

Mr Shannon: I concur with the Member's comments. As yin o' tha members o' tha OFMDFM Cimmittee a' wus saddin'd tae reed about aw tha fowk whau haud pit in fer fundin, an wurny oany langer gaun tae receive it throo tha childern an yung fowks funn, as it is nae langer in ackshin, an is noo spread iver intae differe'n't Depertmunt whau hae goet extra funndin tae meet tha needs that ther er.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, it is with sadness that I read all the requests from people who can no longer receive funding through the children and young people's fund, because that fund is no longer in action. It has fallen to individual Departments, which have received extra funding, to step up and answer the needs that that fund previously addressed. That is the main reason that I support the motion. Now, more than ever, the Department must set aside moneys for programmes that are designed to give the necessary support.

In my constituency, the Link Group in Newtownards helps alcoholics, young people and those who are displaced, and there are other support organisations such as Life Start, Sure Start and Home-Start; those groups have been supported by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I wish to comment briefly on their work, because they have applied for funding and have received some money but not enough to continue their work.

Mr McNarry: Rubbish.

Mr Shannon: That is the truth, and there is no way that DUP Members will sit here and listen to snide remarks from the pom-pom girls in the corner.

On the Ards Peninsula, many young families and single-parent families find it difficult to cope. Home-Start is a community group that is made up of volunteers and paid co-ordinators; it supports families with young children throughout the Province. Over 650 visits are made each week by volunteers, and almost 3,000 children are supported in Northern Ireland. Volunteers make home visits to young mothers, mothers and fathers who are grieving, and homes with multiple births and illness. The criteria that are applied are simple: anyone with a child under five years of age can get help from a volunteer who will come and do a few

hours' work; for example, volunteers assist by planning menus, shopping or carrying out simple tasks; they also provide a caring, listening ear. Those examples illustrate some of Home-Start's important work.

I also wish to mention the work of Loch Cuan House — a residential home. The motion is clear: the last line states that money for older people should be ring-fenced. We are concerned about the future of that home and its residents, the majority of whom are between 80 and 95 years of age. We have written to the Minister about the issue and have asked for meetings and assurances. All the Members who represent the area are keen to ensure that the work of Loch Cuan House continues and that before anything should happen to the residents, individual risk assessments should be made for each resident.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way, and I congratulate him on his willingness to take interventions and to engage in debate — unlike some of his colleagues.

I have two questions for the Member. First, does the DUP suggest that the ring-fencing of Budget allocations should be applied to other areas of public spending? Secondly, with respect to bonuses in the Health Service, to which his party colleagues have referred, does the Member realise that bonuses are paid throughout the public sector? Does he believe that that is a problem that should be tackled in all Departments?

Mr Shannon: The debate is about the Health Service. I accept the Member's points; those problems must be addressed in other Departments. However, I am short of time.

I could point to many other examples in which the ring-fencing of money is imperative, in my constituency and right across the Province. The two examples that I have given — Home-Start and Loch Cuan House — illustrate why it is important to ring-fence money to ensure that it is available.

We need to make sure that efficiency savings are savings from non-essentials. The Minister must ensure that no service is lost —

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

Mr Shannon: Indeed, services must be enhanced and become more readily available. I support the motion.

Mr Poots: This debate did not come about by accident. It is easy for people to blame the DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel and everybody else for what is going on. The efficiency savings that are set by the Treasury apply to all Departments — not just the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Appleby Report concluded that major savings could be made in the Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety. I do not think that Appleby was talking about cutting the number of nurses or closing residential homes; he was talking about real efficiency savings. The Minister of Health should apply efficiencies to his Department, not to services but to costs. The Minister must make efficiencies, not cut services, take away nurses or close the residential homes that are required for our elderly.

We need to deliver services more efficiently. There is not enough money for the community care side of community care packages. For example, if one is seeking a place for someone who is in medical rehabilitation — usually an elderly person recovering from a stroke in hospital, which costs hundreds of pounds more each week than community care — one will be told that there is no money in the community care budget to allow that person to go to a residential home or to go to their own home and have a care package provided for them. Institution-based care will not give the money to the community care side, and, consequentially, the whole budget loses. The Minister needs to get his act together and sort out such issues.

Agency nurses have been mentioned in the House before. Why do we not have more permanent nursing staff and more nurses in the hospital bank rather than pay private agencies considerable sums of money over and above what ordinary nursing staff would be paid? I declare an interest in that my wife has been a nurse for many years, and I know something about the situation. The amount of money wasted in that way is an absolute scandal.

Instead of dealing with the issue, the Minister proposes to cut the number of nursing staff. What will happen when need arises? Those staff will be brought back in through a private agency. That will cost the Health Service even more money, and it will be done in the name of efficiency. That is nonsense.

The auditing process that nurses and doctors have to go through leaves far too great a paper trail, which deflects them from important and necessary work. Other people are then employed — administrators — to crawl over those paper trails. It is a box-ticking exercise, it does not improve the health of our nation, nor does it improve the service that is provided.

My colleague Simon Hamilton asked a question of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety last year. Over the past 10 years, there has been an increase of 100% in senior management and 33% in administration.

Mr D Bradley: I point out to the Member some of the changes that have been proposed in the Newry and Mourne area, where band-5 managers are being moved out of such services as care for the elderly and supported living, with the result that hands-on carers at the front line will now have to carry out the administrative tasks

previously done by those managers. Administrators close to the front line service are being moved around, not the fat cats at trust headquarters.

Mr Poots: The Member is absolutely right. The number of directors is not being reduced, and those senior managers are still in place. In looking at efficiency savings, it is obvious that if there has been a 100% increase in senior managers over the past 10 years and a 33% increase in administrators, one does not reduce the number of nursing staff. It is not a matter of closing residential homes; one should go to the administration side to see what is necessary and of benefit to services and what is superfluous.

Faced with this situation, any Minister seeking the betterment of healthcare for the general public would come to the same conclusion that I have: cuts should be made in administration. That is where Appleby would expect cuts to be made, not in front line services. I say to the Minister: lift the jackboot off the nurses, stop hammering the elderly, and make the cuts and efficiencies where they need to be made — in the delivery of administration. There must not be one drop more in administration than is absolutely necessary.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome today's debate, as it will help to put into context the delivery of efficiencies within the Health Service. All Northern Ireland Departments have been tasked with delivering £790 million of efficiencies per annum by March 2011. By 2010-11, my Department has to achieve an efficiency target of 3%, which is £344 million per annum and £700 million over three years. Those funds must be released if we are to ensure that vital life-saving and life-changing services are implemented over the next few years.

That is not an easy task; a huge sum of money has to be found within the already limited funds available to health and social care services. I remind Members, however, that that figure was agreed by the Executive, with no dispensation to my Department for the high priority that the people of Northern Ireland place on public health and social services.

I have listened with interest to the comments made today, and over recent weeks, and it appears that Members no longer defend the Budget that they so enthusiastically endorsed when it was passed in January 2008. It is encouraging to hear Members talk about the inadequate health budget and voice their concerns about what they believe to be cuts in front line health services. I only wish that they had spoken so passionately about that when the Budget was being debated; perhaps there would have been a very different sentiment. So outspoken on the subject was the Chairperson of the Health Committee that she was asked to leave the Chamber; it was notable that, as I

recall, not one of her colleagues stood up and applauded her as she was taken out.

This is the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service, a service that we can justly be proud of for improving the health of the nation. Right now, however, we are facing huge challenges. Historically, there have been years of underfunding of health and social care, and Members have heard me highlight many times the £600 million funding gap between Northern Ireland and England. We need almost £300 million per annum to make our services match what is delivered in England, and another £300 million to match the investment that those services will receive this year and next.

There are many areas in which the gap between services here and in the rest of the UK is simply not acceptable. Expenditure per head on mental health, learning disability, and children's social needs is around 35% higher in England, despite higher levels of need here. If we had the same rate of heart disease as the rest of the UK, 300 fewer people would die each year. Death rates from bowel cancer are 16% higher than in GB. If we had the same adoption rates as in England, each year another 50 to 60 children in care would be adopted. That is unacceptable; it is not fair or right that people in Northern Ireland should be disadvantaged because of a lack of proper investment.

However, the situation could have been much worse. In August 2007, I was presented with the original draft Budget, which made absolutely no provision for service developments. It was only because I fought for extra funding that I was able to secure a significant increase in the resources available for those developments over the CSR period.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Without that extra funding there would not have been service developments, such as the introduction of bowel cancer screening, which will save up to 70 lives a year; an additional 700 heart operations and heart procedures each year; the introduction of the HPV vaccination against cervical cancer, which kills around 40 women each year; remote monitoring for up to 5,000 patients; an additional 200 units of respite and community-based care; improved family support services to help around 2,500 families each year; the extension of screening for breast cancer from age 65 to age 70, to name just a few.

In addition, I secured a package of measures that is designed to provide my Department with greater scope and flexibility to manage its budget.

11.45 am

Once again, I thank colleagues in the Chamber, Health Service staff and the public, who supported me

in fighting to secure a better deal for health and social care. However, that simply is not enough, and I face extremely difficult choices every day. While I continue to argue for more resources, I must live within the budget that has been set, and that means delivering some £700 million of efficiency savings. I reassure the House that each and every penny that is released through greater efficiency will be reinvested in health. Delivering on efficiencies is the only way to make investment possible in service developments in the next three years. If efficiency savings are not achieved, plans, investments and new services cannot happen.

I have always heard Members say that there are better ways of meeting the efficiency target, because they see cutting out waste and inefficiency as all that is needed. However, the trusts' efficiency proposals already cover those basic housekeeping and productivity issues, and they factor in considerable reductions from administration. For example, £53 million per annum will be delivered through RPA reform, which will reduce Health Service administration costs by almost 25%. That is a reduction of 1,700 staff, and reducing 19 trusts to six and four boards to one. An even more dramatic reduction will take place in the number of senior executives, from about 137 —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Just a minute.

The number of senior executives will be reduced by 97 to 40, which is a reduction of three quarters.

Expanding the generic prescribing initiative and reducing drugs costs will produce a further £40 million of savings each year. Likewise, improving the day-case rates, decreasing the length of stay in hospitals, reducing sick absence, treating people in the community instead of in hospital, improved preventative measures and better procurement will deliver some £140 million each year.

Does anyone in the House believe that in an organisation of £4 billion, saving on postage, travel expenses or ground maintenance will deliver the £700 million that we are required to achieve? Does anyone believe that the trusts have not already considered the potential for such reductions? Members need to enter the real world. Yes, savings can be made in those areas, and I expect trusts to maximise them; however, penny-pinching postage costs will just not do it. We have to change what we do, not just how we do it.

The Health Service is better and stronger than it has been at any stage in its history, yet it still struggles to keep pace with rising expectations and with growing threats such as obesity and the ageing population. Bevan himself drew attention to the inevitability of such developments. In the week before the National Health Service was launched, he said:

“This service must always be changing, growing and improving, it must always appear inadequate.”

Change is never easy; there is always suspicion and scepticism of proposed new approaches. However, in the past 60 years, change has been the only constant in the Health Service. Our understanding of how disease develops and how to detect and treat illness has improved vastly since 1948. New technology has not only brought unimagined medical advances, but it has changed how we work, communicate and make choices. No one can argue with change if it means shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices and reinvesting them in better and more efficient ways of doing things. That makes perfect sense.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for giving way; I will be brief, because I am interested in what he is saying.

In their presentation to the Health Committee just before Christmas, the unions expressed deep concern about delegating responsibility to the trusts to develop their own plans for efficiency savings, because many of the services were regional and leaving it to the trusts was causing more problems.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, I am concerned about communication. I strongly believe that unions must be well informed about what is proposed — they should never be taken by surprise. Therefore, I share the concerns of unions that feel that they have not received the degree of communication that they expected from trusts. I have made my feelings known to the trusts. I hope, and I believe, that the situation has dramatically changed since unions informed the Member of their concerns in December.

Let me make it clear — efficiency savings are not cuts. That is why, when I became Minister, I considered, and threw out, what had been proposed under direct rule and asked trusts to think again. Those proposals included closing Belfast City Hospital's accident and emergency service; charging for the domiciliary care that most of our vulnerable people receive; and reducing our number of adult day centres by 50%. I made it plain to the trusts, and I will make it clear to Members, that I will not countenance cuts.

I have been asked many times how I can be certain that efficiency savings are not really cuts to front line services. My first priority is to help our health and social-care staff to deliver high-quality services to the public. Our focus must be on staff, not on buildings, particularly when so many of our facilities are no longer fit for purpose.

Many of the measures that the trusts propose are subject to formal consultation. I expect that process to be concluded by no later than March 2009. As Minister,

I will have the final say. If formal consultations do not produce a clear position, cuts will simply not get through.

I have heard Members argue for an exemption from efficiency savings for mental-health services, learning-disability services, and elderly people and children's services. I share and understand Members' concerns. However, to grant such an exemption would rule out efficiency plans of well over £1 billion of the Department's budget, which amounts to more than 50% of the trusts' spend. If those services are exempt, from where will the balance be sought? I reassure Members that funding for the particular services that I have mentioned is ring-fenced. That funding will deliver real improvements for those more vulnerable groups.

On the point that Sue Ramsey and Tommy Gallagher made earlier in the debate, my proposals over the CSR period will ensure that investment flows to the most vulnerable in our society. Indeed, I have ensured that services for those groups will benefit from significant funding increases over the next three years, including a 17% increase for mental-health provision; 16% more for learning-disability provision to drive forward the Bamford recommendations; a 13% increase for services for elderly people; a 16% increase for children's services; and a 14% rise in services for people with physical or sensory disabilities.

Change is right for our services. Waiting lists and waiting lengths for community services have reduced, and that has resulted in earlier discharges from hospital. Moreover, crucially, in order to meet the needs of local communities, trusts are consulting the public on a number of their proposals. Final decisions have yet to be made.

I assure Members that any change in services will be handled carefully and sensitively. I will fully consider the local circumstances of each and every resident. Viable alternatives that provide an equivalent or better standard of care must be put in place. That is only fair. I will ensure that that is done, and that is what I mean by efficiency savings. It is not about cuts but about creating a better and more responsive Health Service.

I could go through, one by one, all the points that Members made, but I am not sure that doing so would be helpful. However, I must say a couple of things. Tommy Gallagher talked about services for elderly people being cut. That is bogus; that is nonsense. They are actually being increased. Services for elderly people, after acute services, take the largest chunk of the health budget, and I am increasing spending in order to meet need.

Jim Shannon talked about Home-Start. In fact, Home-Start had been targeted for cuts, and I, as Minister, stepped in to secure funding for the charity. Indeed, I was at a reception for Home-Start in Hillsborough Castle last week, and I can assure Members that the

welcome that I received was not that for somebody who was cutting Home-Start.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the Appleby Report is concerned, yes, Appleby said that the Health Service here could be more efficient. It has become dramatically more so. To understand that, one must merely consider waiting times at accident and emergency units, for diagnostics, for treatment and for care.

Appleby certainly looked at efficiency, but discount for need must also be considered. Our need is 10% greater. Personal social services' need is about 36% greater.

Taking that into account, the Department examines productivity in order to determine where efficiencies can be made. That is not about cutting funding, as some people seem to believe. The Appleby Report is about making money go further and being more productive. That is happening: the Department has driven down waiting lists; the length of hospital stays has been reduced; and bed utilisation has climbed. It will continue to work hard to make progress in precisely that direction.

As regards performance management, my Department has put in place structures and mechanisms to hold trusts responsible. It has set up the service delivery unit. As I benchmark —

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, I reassure Members that I will ensure that health and social care of excellent quality will be available to all people, in both urban and rural settings, in accessible, modern and fit-for-purpose accommodation. It is a time of immense change for the Health Service. That change must happen if the world-class Health Service that everyone in Northern Ireland deserves is to be delivered.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleagues in the Health Committee who have brought the motion to the Floor of the House and all Members who took part in the debate, particularly those who are members of the Health Committee. I also want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for his attendance and attentiveness during the debate, despite his colleague John McCallister's remark that he has been dragged before the Assembly again for no good reason. Mr McCallister is not in the Chamber at present. I strongly disagree with his comment. The Committee has brought the debate to the House because of concerns that have been relayed to it. That is why we have

brought the matter before the House. We make no apology for asking the Minister to be here.

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad that Mr McCallister has just returned to the Chamber. Perhaps he could tell the House whether he will drag the Minister for Regional Development before the Assembly for no good reason in the next debate.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Several key issues have been raised, particularly about front line jobs. As Members are aware, the Committee's motion calls for front line services to be protected. There has been discussion about what constitutes a front line service. Members agree that services that are provided by doctors and, in particular, nurses are regarded as being at the front line. This morning, Mary Hinds from the Royal College of Nursing said on radio that you cannot get a much more front line service than nursing.

The Committee has been told that almost 2,500 jobs will be lost during a three-year period. Among those jobs, 722 will be nursing posts. I doubt that anyone would argue that the loss of so many nursing posts could not be achieved without major impact on services to patients, whether they are treated in hospital or in the community. The Royal College of Nursing has also said that that will impact on patient care and that patients will suffer. Members who listened to this morning's radio reports will have heard nurses who took time to phone in to radio stations to say that they are under severe pressure, which is the reason for high levels of sickness among nursing staff. That experience must be addressed. Claire McGill said that the Assembly must listen to front line staff. That is exactly why Members are present at today's debate.

Some Members mentioned the high cost of employing agency staff to fill nursing vacancies. The same applies to costs for locum doctors. Greater effort must be made to achieve efficiencies in those areas. The Department must reduce the use of agency staff and ensure that posts are filled by qualified and experienced staff.

Reference has also been made to residential homes. In her opening remarks, the Committee Chairperson mentioned the threat that hangs over residential homes throughout all trust areas. Many Members, including Tommy Gallagher, Alex Easton and Claire McGill, expressed serious concerns about proposed closure of homes in their areas and proposals that have caused widespread concern among local communities.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust, for example, told the Committee that it had received a petition of 4,000 signatures against the closure of just one residential home. Obviously, that number represents more people than simply the families of the home's

residents; the entire community is affected, which is why people took time to sign the petition.

In addition, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in its evidence to the Committee, reported:

"The Minister has made it clear that unless suitable proposals are identified that are equal to or better than the care that is being provided, he will not support any recommendation that a trust might make about the closure of residential nursing homes."

I welcome the Minister's commitment, and his comments on the matter. However, I am certain that the Committee will want to follow up on what he said today and monitor the situation closely, because we do not want cuts to be made on the ground.

12.00 noon

A number of Members felt the need to raise the issue of home-help provision, which is another major area of concern. The home-help service is an easy target, and it always seems that it is the first service to be reduced when cuts are made. It must be realised that home help is a vital lifeline for people who want to remain in their own home. Reducing the length of time that a home help can spend in a house can, in many cases, render the service almost useless, and some home helps are able to visit for only 15 minutes a few times a day.

Home helps are often forced to provide a service over and above what they are paid for, and, indeed, it would cost the Health Service a great deal more money if home helps stuck to work-to-rule. As the elderly population increases, more and more older people depend on the home-help service to be able to remain in their own home. Therefore, it is vital that that front line service be protected.

Members have made a number of useful comments today, and I will highlight a few of them. Sue Ramsey commended the Health Service's good work. However, she also talked about the need to protect vulnerable young people and children, such as those with mental-health problems. She said that vulnerable people in society should not be targeted for efficiency savings. She also highlighted the concerns about efficiency savings that the unions expressed in Committee.

John McCallister made us aware that he did not vote for the motion in Committee. He referred to the Minister's statement that savings will not result in cuts in front line services. We await the outcome of the consultation exercise and hope that that will be the reality for the public. Carmel Hanna said that there should be smarter working in the Health Service and an emphasis put on upskilling. Her views need to be taken on board.

Claire McGill spoke about how nobody assesses the impact of change. She said that we must listen to the views of the nursing staff who rang the radio stations

this morning. Alex Easton also talked about the Minister's promise that there will be no cuts in front line services. He proposed a number of alternative ideas of how efficiency savings could be met. Thomas Buchanan spoke about the differences between efficiencies and cuts, and he said that there has been a 33% increase in the number of managers in the Health Service over the past 10 years. That concern needs to be assessed during the comprehensive spending review period.

Stephen Farry said that the motion may have come a bit late. I do not think that it is a bit late, because these are real concerns that must be dealt with. The cuts affect the most vulnerable in society. I welcome his statement that he will support the motion, even if his contribution to the debate was a little confusing.

Tommy Gallagher spoke about broad support for the tackling of inefficiencies; how there is no justification for senior managers being given large bonuses; and the concerns about cuts in the Health Service. Those are issues about which we are all genuinely concerned. Samuel Gardiner said that the vulnerable groups that have been mentioned are the Minister's priority. Once again, we await the outcome of the consultation process, as it will indicate the Minister's priorities.

The Minister put on record that meeting efficiency savings is not an easy task, and I agree with that. We all recognise the historical problem of lack of investment in the Health Service.

Dr Farry: That is a current problem.

Ms S Ramsey: We are going to be given an economics lesson now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): As I said, lack of investment is an historical problem, but it is something —

Dr Farry: Will the Deputy Chairperson give way?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Yes.

Dr Farry: Will the Member recognise that that is a current problem rather than an historical problem? A decision was taken that left the health budget short of money. Her party and the DUP voted for that last year.

Mrs O'Neill: I am not sure what world the Member lives in if he thinks that there is no historic problem of underinvestment in the Health Service here.

The Minister mentioned the Health Service's good work, and no one denies that we must commend those achievements. However, he was correct when he said that he must live within his budget at this time. The Committee wants to work with the Minister to determine areas of potential savings. However, we do not want

cuts to front line services, and today's motion addresses that issue.

The Minister questioned whether there are better ways to achieve savings. As some Members highlighted, there are several better ways to determine how to achieve efficiency savings. The Minister said that change is not easy. However, change masked as better services — which are, in reality, cuts — is even tougher to accept than change for good reason.

I welcome the Minister's reassurances that he will not make cuts and that services for vulnerable people will not be affected. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We recognise that all Departments must achieve efficiency savings, and we accept that as the Health Department has the largest budget share, it will be asked to contribute to the lion's share of the savings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw her remarks to a close.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): We accept that savings will not be achieved without pain, but we must protect vulnerable people on the front line. We must support our workers on the front line and ensure that front line services for those who are most in need are not cut.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, while recognising that there is a need for efficiency savings within the Health Service, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in this 60th year of the Health Service, to ensure that these savings do not impact on front line services; and further calls for the budgets for the most vulnerable groups within our society, i.e. children, people with mental illness and older people, to be ring-fenced.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Walking and Cycling to School Initiatives

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

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.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to invest further in walking and cycling to school initiatives to improve children's health and reduce traffic congestion.

I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Services and Sustrans, the UK's sustainable transport charity, for the useful background information that they have provided. Moreover, I commend Roads Service's Travelwise website, which is packed with useful information for anyone who is interested in sustainable transport issues. I urge teachers and parents who may be listening to or following the debate to take time to view the worthwhile ideas that are contained on the website.

The Safe Routes to Schools scheme of walking and cycling to school initiatives may be insignificant to some people. However, if I claimed to know how to improve children's health significantly, how to avoid significant future cost to the Health Service due to ill health, and how to reduce traffic congestion during peak times, improve journey times and improve the Northern Ireland economy, people might perk up their ears and listen. Safe Routes to Schools can deliver those things and can cause almost immediate improvements. Walking or cycling to and from school is an ideal way to get physical activity at no extra cost to children or families — given the credit crunch, it might even become a necessity for many.

I have introduced such initiatives to local schools in my constituency and am, therefore, aware that the programme is greatly valued and that the supporting documentation is of good quality. The integrated approach of road safety improvements — such as signage, crossing points and cycle lanes — classroom activity and parental involvement has proved a successful model.

Why do we need exercise? We are following American trends. Generally, we eat more than we need and are exercising less and less, the result of which is obesity.

The Department of Health's consultation document 'Fit Futures: Focus on Food Activity and Young People'

highlighted the growing problem of obesity, with significant increases among children. The effect of obesity on an individual's health and well-being, coupled with the reported increase in obesity, has resulted in its being described as a health time bomb.

Obesity is a health iceberg, with a range of underlying related illnesses. It can reduce life expectancy by approximately nine years; it contributes significantly to coronary heart disease, cancer, type-2 diabetes, stroke, and osteoarthritis; cardio-vascular diseases are being identified in young people for the first time, and type-2 diabetes is being diagnosed in significant numbers of children. Another positive effect of exercise is improved emotional and psychological well-being and self-esteem among young people.

Parents think that they are protecting their children by delivering them safely to and from school in a car, but by being wrapped in cotton wool, children are exposed to many deadly diseases because of ill health and lack of exercise. A quarter of young people aged between 11 and 16 in Northern Ireland are classed as obese. Obesity is the most serious — and growing — health concern for children.

Not everyone will be a sports star, but physical activities such as walking and cycling are the most common and versatile forms of exercise in which the vast majority of us can participate. A school located one mile from the home of a child is only a 10-minute brisk walk in the morning. Such a walk would burn about 100 calories, which is about as much as swimming for 10 minutes, playing football for 12 minutes, or doing aerobics for 16 minutes.

As many children, especially in towns and cities, live less than a mile from school, it is entirely reasonable to envisage, at some point, most children walking to school. As a P1 pupil many years ago, I had to walk a mile and a half to and from school. I did not realise it at the time, but I am sure that the fact that I exercised and followed up with sport has helped my health. There is a need to upgrade road crossings and to consider schemes such as walking buses to improve the road safety of children, as there is increased traffic on the roads.

Children are undoubtedly affected by their parents' approach to exercise. Research has shown that children with active parents are 70% more likely to walk to school than those with inactive parents who rely completely on the car. We parents have a responsibility in this area, and we must lead by example by going for walks, cycling, or taking other forms of sporting activity in our spare time.

Mr Ross: Does the Member acknowledge that if parents are worried about supervision and the safety of their child, they could walk along with the walking buses?

That would encourage children and their parents to get involved and would allow parents some supervision.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Member's intervention. If he has read the 'Safe Routes to Schools' document, he will be aware that that is a key feature that is promoted.

There are other benefits, such as traffic reduction. It is estimated that some 20% of cars at the peak morning traffic time of 8.50 am are taking children to school. When the roads are operating at their capacity, even a 10% reduction can result in a significant improvement to road users. That would lead to more efficient journey times for other commuters. Twenty-five per cent of car journeys are for fewer than 3 km, so encouraging one's children to walk or cycle where possible could reduce car usage. Of course, it would benefit their health at the same time. The perception that walking or cycling is unsafe has led many parents to rely on their cars to get their children to school; however, that completely overlooks the health risks associated with lack of exercise.

12.15 pm

The further development of Safe Routes to Schools and encouraging walking and cycling can result in environmental benefits. Whether the Minister of the Environment likes it or not, oil reserves are dwindling, CO2 levels are increasing and the associated climate change is occurring. We should be trying to conserve energy and to protect the planet. In these days of more stringent economic situations, we should also conserve funds and avoid spending additional money on cars.

Important environmental benefits can also be gained from a reduction in the use of cars for journeys to school. If more children walked or cycled to school, the roads would be clearer, which would create a safer and more pleasant atmosphere for pedestrians who already walk to school, and would encourage more people to walk. The congestion at school gates would be reduced, which would result in less exhaust pollution and thereby improve air quality. Children who are driven to school are not protected from car fumes; it has been found that in heavily congested areas, car passengers can be exposed to pollution levels that are two or three times higher than those experienced by pedestrians.

Sustrans recently undertook a project involving rural schools in Northern Ireland, in which it showed that it was possible to produce benefits for the pupils of those schools. Sustrans claims that the number of people in Northern Ireland who cycle to school has increased by 46% and the number of people who walk to school has increased by 61%, thereby saving some 250 tons of CO2. That equates to an additional 84,000 walking and cycling journeys in a year, showing that the benefits of cycling and walking can accumulate significantly.

Sustrans has calculated that if the same project was undertaken across Northern Ireland, it could lead to 26 million fewer car journeys a year. Significant differences could be made if such a project were to be undertaken. In his review of the project, Dr Michael McBride, the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, lauded the programme and said that it:

"can contribute to the improvement of the health and well being of the people of Northern Ireland."

That is significant.

By the end of the project, 33% of pupils from the schools involved were walking to school, compared with 20% before; 49% of children were being driven to school, compared with 64% before the project began. Some 79% of headmasters of the schools involved in the project rated it as very good or excellent. It is clear that progress is being made.

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

Mr Beggs: I ask Members to support the motion. It requires cross-departmental activity and support from all Departments.

Mr Dallat: I beg to move the following amendment:
At end insert

"and in the interim, given the current state of our roads, especially in rural areas, further calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school."

I thank Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain and Mr McCallister for tabling the motion. We wish to amend it in order to take account of the realities of an imperfect world, in which it is increasingly difficult to initiate the ideals that have just been expressed by Mr Beggs.

Over the years, the practice of children walking or cycling to school has diminished as the dangers have increased. Although that is true of urban and rural areas, children in rural areas often have to walk unreasonable distances in conditions that are simply unacceptable and in urgent need of revision. The assisted-transport scheme, as it is called these days, has changed little from its inception, and has taken no account of changing circumstances. Stubbornly, transport officers insist on sticking to their criteria for no other reason than consistency.

Members will know that children who live fewer than two miles from their local primary school cannot avail themselves of free transport. There are few Members who are not aware of families who fail the free transport test by a few metres. When it comes to secondary schools, the limit is raised to three miles, and many families who live 2.9 miles away from a school are put under enormous financial pressure to pay bus fares. Indeed, children who live in the same housing estate are treated differently because of the measurement rule. Those who live at the end of an

estate may qualify, while those who live nearest the entrance and the bus stop do not. That applies in Ballykelly, and is but one example.

Children from the same families, but who attend different schools in the same town, might be treated differently if one of those schools is situated beyond the qualifying distance and the other is not. That results in financial hardship for families on low incomes, particularly those who have two or more children at school.

The alternative, of course, is to walk to school, but no parents in their right mind would allow children to take Shanks's mare, considering the road conditions and the volume of traffic, which is increasing day and daily. Sadly, in a car-orientated world, there has been little planning for walkers or cyclists. In rural areas in particular, cycle lanes are mostly a pipe dream, and footpaths, where they exist, have been allowed to deteriorate over the years.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that cycle lanes, where they exist, are perhaps not used as much they could be?

Mr Dallat: I could not agree more, and more must be done to encourage their use.

We cannot, however, blame everything on the roads. Unfortunately, in too many cases, motorists have struck young pedestrians, killing or injuring them, because they lack the most basic respect for walkers or cyclists. It is sad that there is also the risk of evil people lurking about, waiting to endanger children. These days, that is a risk that parents simply will not take. In the short term, there is little likelihood that rural children will be able to focus on the benefits of a healthier lifestyle, a reduction in obesity and all the other benefits that come from walking or cycling to school, and that is regrettable.

The walk or cycle to school was one of the greatest joys of my school days many years ago. That was in the days when only a few people in my area owned a car, and yet they frequently stopped to offer a lift. However, when I did not get a lift, I had the time to stop and stare, to explore and discover the joys of nature, and to be inquisitive and fascinated by my surroundings. In contrast, today's rural children do not have that choice; it is simply too dangerous. The only alternative is for them to travel either by private car or public transport.

Unfortunately, the public school transport system has not adapted in the way that it should have. Cost appears to be the main reason why the old two-mile rule for primary schools and the three-mile rule for post-primary schools are stuck to rigidly. Those rules are at their daftest in a situation in which school buses with empty seats swish past the homes of children who happen to live marginally inside the two- or three-mile limit.

The current school transport policy is hopelessly out of date, unfit for purpose and in need of urgent review. It discriminates against poor families who cannot afford to pay bus fares, which runs contrary to the notion that all children must be treated equally in education. The children of families who simply cannot afford to pay school transport costs are exposed to the risk of death or serious injury — the statistics are there for all to see. Children, particularly younger ones, are highly vulnerable. The greatest risk to them occurs in the mornings and afternoons, which, unsurprisingly, happens to be when children are either arriving at or going home from school.

The risk arises —

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: I have only a couple of minutes left, but OK.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way, and I support his point. Does he agree that it is ludicrous that half-empty buses pass the homes of pupils who live two miles from a school? It seems logical to me, and probably to every Member in the Chamber, that buses should collect those children on their way past.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member for his contribution. Of course, he is absolutely right — it is crazy that school buses with empty seats pass the homes of those children.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Can the Member clarify whether he is encouraging children to walk and cycle to school or encouraging that more money be spent on more buses? Can he also clarify his point about the three-mile rule?

Mr Dallat: I am more than delighted to clarify that point. I fully support the motion. As a former teacher, I was very much engaged in road safety and encouraging children to cycle to school. As the Member is also from a rural constituency, I am more than surprised that he is not totally at ease with my amendment as it highlights the particular difficulties of children in rural areas who cannot walk or cycle to school because of the conditions that exist. Nevertheless, perhaps the Member's position will change as we proceed.

I am glad that the motion is being debated. I ask that all parties support our amendment, because it seeks to highlight the injustices in the free-transport scheme. That scheme needs to be challenged because it fails to recognise the special needs of rural children who are so disadvantaged in vital aspects of their education.

As this Assembly beds down, let us hope that there will be a recognition that much needs to be done to ensure that our schoolchildren have the right to walk or cycle to school in safety. It must be emphasised that a great deal could be done in our towns and villages to improve crossing points and the control of traffic. I am

glad that the Minister for Regional Development has attended the debate. A great deal has been done through traffic-calming measures, which is welcome. However, if we were to follow the examples of other European countries, there is a great deal more that we could do, and we could begin that work right now.

In conclusion, we fully support the motion. We are pleased that the Ulster Unionist Party has accepted the amendment, because it presents the overall reality of children who travel to school.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I commend the Members for their vivid memories of their primary school days.

Mr Wells: At the outset, I clarify that we will support the motion and the amendment. However, the issue that Mr Dallat has raised is of such importance that it would have warranted a separate motion in its own right. As constituency representatives, one of the biggest issues in our postbags last September was that of the cut-off points for the three-mile and two-mile rules. That issue causes a great deal of hurt and offence to rural dwellers. At a later stage, I urge Mr Dallat to propose that issue as a separate motion so that the Assembly can debate it in isolation, rather than tagging the issue onto another motion.

The Speaker has been very generous in allowing a somewhat tangential amendment to the main motion to be debated. The only common word between the motion and the amendment is “walking”, but well done to the Member. He managed to use the various tricks and trades — I am not sure whether of a Back-Bencher or Front-Bencher — to achieve his goal.

In Northern Ireland, 25% of all rush-hour traffic is generated by the school run. One only has to drive past any large school complex to see the utter chaos that the school run causes — not just in the immediate vicinity of the school, but the entire town centre or rural area, depending on where the school is. We seem to be in a state of mind in which Jonny is not safe unless he is driven from his front door to the very front door of the school in a Range Rover — at least — with airbags, safety belts and anti-lock brakes. It may have been before the Boer War when I went to school, but I walked to school. It was a long time ago, but there was never any thought of my brothers, my sister and I being driven to school, particularly to primary school. Nowadays, however, attitudes have changed.

We must reduce our global emissions. Let us talk about the reality of the situation — climate change is man-made. We, as a species, are destroying our planet through the production of carbon emissions and methane. We, as an Assembly, must do everything that we can to reduce those emissions. If the school run leads to 25% of the rush-hour emissions, we must try to reduce that dramatically.

In addition, we must instil in our children an appreciation that private transport is not always the best way to get to and from a facility that one might wish to use. Children must be encouraged to use public transport or, if possible, to cycle or walk.

12.30 pm

Many Members benefited from attending an interesting presentation by Sustrans in Parliament Buildings; it was educational to discover what that organisation is doing. Sustrans has demonstrated that cycling and walking can be encouraged and can benefit the community, pupils and the environment. Although its pilot scheme is being implemented in schools throughout Northern Ireland, the benefits that it will produce are small when compared to the overall problem. Nevertheless, I commend Sustrans's good work to Members, and I encourage them to read up on and investigate it.

Mr Shannon: As the Member rightly said, the Sustrans scheme is wonderful, and it has enabled children in my constituency to cycle to school. Nevertheless, given that a funding review of Sustrans is imminent — about which the Minister for Regional Development might wish to respond — does the Member agree that its funding should be renewed, so that its good work can continue?

Mr Wells: I hope that the motion will provide the Minister with a platform from which to announce continued funding for the Sustrans initiative. I noticed that he and I attended the same briefing, and a very pleasant young lady took him aside to give him an in-depth briefing about the work of Sustrans. Indeed, there was quite a lot of interest when he walked into the room, so I hope that he was persuaded by the young lady and that he will announce increased funding.

The Member for East Londonderry John Dallat managed to slip in the amendment, which the Democratic Unionist Party will support. In areas of traffic congestion and high carbon emissions, it is nonsense for half-empty buses to drive past bus stops, where children cannot get on because they are a few hundred yards on the wrong side of a boundary, particularly when the bus route that has been chosen, which might be the shortest way to a school, is the most difficult for pedestrians or cyclists to use. Therefore, there is much merit in the Member's suggestion.

It is particularly nonsensical that pupils are not even allowed to pay to use buses. Consequently, 10 children who are standing at a bus stop might be unable to pay to get on a 40-seat bus with only 10 children on it. That is nonsense. We need a joined-up approach to public transport to schools in Northern Ireland. However, as I said, Mr Dallat should consider tabling a full-blooded motion on this important subject, because I

believe that at least 20 or 30 MLAs would wish to contribute to such a debate.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. Sinn Féin does not have an issue with the amendment; it is attempting to encourage children to walk or cycle to school.

Many Members will remember routinely walking to school, and looking around the Chamber, I am sure that many of them did so in short trousers. Safety concerns and children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles have resulted in a dramatic decline in the number of children who walk or cycle to school, and the corresponding rise in the numbers of overweight and obese children and those who suffer from asthma is notable.

I wish to place on the record my thanks for the information supplied by the Assembly's Research and Library Services. As far back as 1969, reports indicated that approximately 50% of children walked to school. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. Access to vehicles has significantly increased road traffic. Furthermore, the amount of equipment — including school bags, hurling and hockey sticks, files, PE gear, and even laptops — that post-primary pupils must now carry means that walking or riding a bike to school is inappropriate, so that matter must be considered.

Mr Ross — who has left the Chamber — spoke about parents walking to school with their children. That is OK; however, one must bear in mind that parents are under greater pressure nowadays; they must work longer hours, and many of them simply do not have the time to walk to school with their children. We must consider that also.

More policies on family-friendly working would be of benefit; after all, the health benefits of walking will be felt by adults and children. Whether at school or at home, children should be encouraged to walk or cycle, and, possibly, be rewarded for doing so.

It has been said that 20% of the early morning traffic in urban areas comprises vehicles that are transporting children to school. Early morning congestion around schools on rural roads can bring traffic to a standstill, and parent/vehicle behaviour is a significant contributor to the problem. In the mornings, one can see cars parked two or three abreast at schools, and the traffic is unable to get through. That may act as a speed deterrent, but it is not something that we would advocate, and it must be addressed.

The environmental impact of the school run should not be underestimated. The majority of those journeys are short, and cars with cold engines consume more fuel. Furthermore, cars produce higher levels of pollution at the start of their journeys because they have to travel up to five kilometres before catalytic converters become effective. Therefore, walking or cycling short distances

will reduce the amount of CO2 emissions significantly and will contribute to the Assembly's commitment to reduce CO2 emissions by 2050.

Some excellent work has been undertaken by Ministers in this area. For instance, the Department for Regional Development has linked with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Rural Safe Routes to Schools initiative, which seeks to provide footpaths and cycle lanes close to schools. Such facilities are available at St Mary's Primary School at Derrytrasna, and at St Jarlath's Primary School in Blackwatertown — in my constituency of Newry and Armagh — the launch of which I had the privilege of attending a few months ago.

The Department of Education supports the Travelwise Safe Routes to Schools initiative. The Department of the Environment has also made a contribution through its road safety programme. Recently, Roads Service set out guidance for setting local speed limits in the North, which is at public consultation stage. That guidance contains proposals for reducing speed limits around schools at peak times. Those Departments are working collectively on programmes, and that is to be commended.

I urge that an assessment of routes at local level is carried out to identify measures that will allow more children to walk or cycle to school. Such measures will include lighting, signage, footpaths, cycle lanes and changes to road layouts. That will require significant capital investment in roads infrastructure to ensure that safe routes exist. For that, Roads Service will require additional funding, and I join other Members in urging the Executive to seek to provide that funding. I am keen to hear other Members' ideas on how that money will be found. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.37 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Lunn: I support the motion, which is appropriate and timely, given current circumstances. The Alliance Party will also be supporting the SDLP amendment, although I will talk a bit more about that shortly.

There is ample evidence of the increase in obesity in our children and the resultant health problems that they experience. No one would claim that simply being able to walk or cycle to school would solve those problems, but it would certainly be a good start. I imagine that, among parents, the main objection to walking or cycling initiatives would be based on road-safety issues.

Certainly, there are concerns over traffic density and speed, but those concerns should not deter the appropriate Departments from taking initiatives to encourage healthy exercise, as well as to reduce traffic congestion, particularly outside schools. As another Member said earlier, the area just outside a school is one of the most dangerous places to be. Parents who are setting down or picking up their children usually ignore no-parking areas, while their four-wheel-drive jeeps belch exhaust fumes.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People issued a briefing on the subject of road safety, which stated:

“Road safety education for children and young people must be an essential part of any initiative to increase walking and cycling to school.”

It also found that road safety is an issue of significant concern to children in Northern Ireland.

The Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland has been in existence for 45 years, and has a long and proud record of promoting various initiatives aimed at children, including general road-safety-awareness training, cycling proficiency testing and a recent initiative that involved walking groups of children to school under supervision. It has 18 local committees that all have a long track record of trying to educate young people on road-safety issues. It is a vital service; in fact, it is absolutely basic if we are to encourage children to walk and cycle to school.

I notice that the Minister of the Environment is now in the Chamber. The importance of the Road Safety Council makes his pending decision to withdraw its funding slightly surreal, if he does not mind my saying so. It is a decision that will undoubtedly result in the demise of several, if not all, of the local committees.

If children are to walk to school, properly positioned controlled crossings are essential. However, education boards are withdrawing manned crossing personnel, and requests for crossings, speed-limit zones or even signage outside schools are being refused regularly for

reasons that are only clear to the various Departments involved; that is, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development. Therefore, so far, I have criticised the Minister of the Environment, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Education.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving prior warning that he was going to lambaste me on the question of the Road Safety Council during the debate. Does the Member accept that the Department of the Environment values the work that the local committees do? Does he accept also that more money should be available for the delivery of services by the Road Safety Council at a local level and, I hope, by other bodies in areas where there are no Road Safety Council committees, so that the message of road safety can be conveyed, and so that we will see more children cycling and walking to school as a result?

Mr Lunn: I do not accept that from the Minister. His rationale for completely cutting out the Road Safety Council's core funding simply does not make sense. Fair enough, he is cutting the cost, but all that he is doing is transferring all the work on to unpaid volunteers at local level — that simply will not work. Furthermore, the central structure that the Road Safety Council provides will not be there, and it will be impossible, certainly in the short term, for local committees to liaise constructively to do some of the tasks that the Road Safety Council currently manages. However, I do not wish to devote my whole speech to the Road Safety Council.

The reason that I criticised all three Departments — I have not included the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for reasons of time — is to emphasise that the issue is cross-cutting. The motion is rightly directed at the Executive, and I hope that the Executive will take note of it and take action on the matter.

Members of the Alliance Party will support the SDLP amendment, although we, in common with other Members who have spoken, have reservations about how it relates to the motion. The amendment is, nonetheless, worthy; I, and many other Members, have received many complaints about the inconsistencies in the statutory walking distances to school. Therefore, I congratulate Mr Dallat and his colleagues on their initiative and ingenuity in having the amendment accepted.

As every other Member reminisced about their school days, I will do the same.

Mr S Wilson: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lunn: The Minister of the Environment mentioned 1963, and I remember it well. Every day, I cycled from Finaghy to Belfast Royal Academy. For those Members who are not familiar with Belfast, my

route included the main Lisburn Road, Sandy Row, the Boyne Bridge, Durham Street, Northumberland Street, Agnes Street, the lower Crumlin Road, the Oldpark Road, Manor Street and the Cliftonville Road. That would be some route nowadays, but it was safe then. I would love children to be able to cycle safely to school again; it would be therapeutic and beneficial exercise. The Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment.

Mr Bresland: It is important to note that funding of the walking and cycling initiatives would be beneficial on two levels: it would start to combat the rise in childhood obesity, and it will benefit the environment. Obesity in the United Kingdom is approaching an unmanageable level, particularly among the younger generations. The best ways to combat the rise in obesity are by teaching sensible eating habits and ensuring that children exercise regularly.

Walking and cycling are both good methods of exercise, and, if the Executive were to fund initiatives through which children could take such exercise daily, it would be a major move towards combating obesity in children. By making it safe for children to walk and cycle to school, and creating a way in which they can regard it as fun, children and their parents will choose to travel that way. Many of them would be in favour of walking or cycling rather than taking a bus, but the facilities do not exist in some situations, and children, therefore, must travel to school in buses or private vehicles. The environment would also benefit from a reduction in the number of schoolchildren using buses or private vehicles. Inevitably, that would reduce the number of vehicles required for school runs, and, as a direct result, the number of pollutants produced would decrease because less fuel would be needed.

Northern Ireland produces more than its fair share of emissions, and a reduction is vital in securing a liveable environment for future generations. A reduction in the number and frequency of buses would also ease the morning traffic and lead to fewer instances of gridlock and the freer movement of traffic during peak travel times. A reduction in traffic congestion would, as well as lowering the amount of fuels used by buses and private vehicles, further reduce fuel emissions. There is no reason that children should not be allowed to walk or cycle to school safely. The benefits of the initiatives speak for themselves. I support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I support the motion and the amendment. As a number of Members said, the amendment deserves to be debated separately as a single-issue motion at a later date, and I am sure that the proposer of the amendment will agree to arrange that.

Encouraging children to walk or cycle to school brings huge benefits to children, parents, families and society. It is not only a question of improving physical health; it is also an opportunity to nourish a healthy mind and for families to build relationships.

Obviously, primary-school children would be supervised when walking to school. Given the high density of traffic in urban areas, and the lack of footpath provision and lighting in rural areas, it is essential that we provide adequate training and, where possible, adequate equipment such as high-visibility clothing.

It is widely recognised that rural areas in particular have inadequate road infrastructure with poor pedestrian provision. Existing schemes, promoted by various Departments, are in place, including the walking bus, which encourages more children to walk to school accompanied by adults and, in doing so, traffic congestion outside schools would be reduced. The Minister was involved in the promotion of that initiative.

Mr S Wilson: The Member has raised an important point about the difficulties that young people face in walking from school, or even from the bus to their homes, especially in rural areas. Does he accept the Western Education and Library Board's proposition that uniforms should incorporate visibility strips and that they should be manufactured with those strips, is a good idea, and that the Minister of Education should take that matter up with uniform manufacturers?

Mr W Clarke: Certainly, I agree with anything that promotes more safety for our young people.

Allowing children to make their own way to school would help to make them more confident and independent, which will be especially important in the transition from primary to secondary school. The school journey is an ideal opportunity for children to learn road-safety awareness and other life skills. For many children, cycling is simply more fun and is more sociable than going to school by car, and they love that feeling of freedom.

A more active lifestyle now, carried on into adulthood, will greatly improve a child's chance of living a long and healthy life. Physical inactivity is a far greater cause of heart disease than smoking, yet we take it much less seriously. Daily exercise has many immediate benefits, including improved bone strength, muscle tone and healthier joints.

The mode of travel chosen for a child's journey to school is widely recognised as having an impact not only on his or her safety, but on a child's health and personal development, and, of course, the environment. Schools must be empowered to develop school travel plans, and safer routes to school programmes are essential. Together, we can make a difference to the

journey that children make to and from school by making it safer, healthier, sustainable and more interesting.

Jim Wells stated earlier that Sustrans has been working with 18 schools in the North of Ireland as part of the new Safe Routes to Schools project, which aims to achieve a 10% reduction in car journeys in participating schools and to increase levels of walking and cycling. The project is worth £1.3 million, which was delivered mainly through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It has been widely recognised as a success, and we need, as the motion outlines, Executive buy-in to such initiatives and to extend them.

The Rural Safe Routes to Schools initiative is part of the regional transportation strategy, which aims to provide a safe, modern and sustainable transportation network for the North of Ireland. We must tackle the problems created by the school run by raising awareness of congestion, road safety, health and the environment, and we can achieve that by all Departments working closely together, as the matter crosses all Departments. It is achievable. I thank the Minister for Regional Development for attending today. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Robinson: The health benefits of walking or cycling to school for rural children may well be underrated. Although some people may argue that the congestion experienced around schools in the mornings and afternoons may make some parents reluctant to allow their children to walk or cycle to school, if more children walked or cycled to school, the congestion problems could be eased. I appreciate that, although supporting the motion, it is worthwhile remembering that the younger children especially will need to be supervised. None of us would advocate young children travelling to school unaccompanied, especially in rural areas. That, of course, is where parents may decide to benefit from walking or cycling to school — weather permitting.

I am sure that every Member would agree that children would benefit from walking or cycling to school. That exercise would help to keep children fit and healthy, although such activity seems to be becoming more unusual nowadays.

2.15 pm

Surely it is good for the Assembly to take the lead in promoting the advantages of young people being healthier. In the long term, there may well be a reduction in the numbers of people with respiratory and heart problems. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety may even find some relief in his budget in the years to come. Moreover, walking and cycling to school will help to teach our children about the importance of road safety. Ultimately, that could lead to the motoring public becoming more safety conscious

in years to come, although I am in no way suggesting that that should be the sole approach to road safety.

There would also be environmental benefits because pollution levels would fall. If fewer cars take part in the school run, the air will be more pleasant to breathe. In addition, ever more children and parents would experience the benefits of walking or cycling. We cannot underestimate the importance of leading by example for older pupils and peer groups — although the bad examples are usually discussed more often than the positive ones.

Although I support the motion, as amended, I am also aware that there will be a cost attached to promoting those schemes. The value-for-money criteria must be applied to schemes supported by the Assembly to ensure maximum impact and results. I am therefore pleased to support the motion, as amended, and I hope that it will receive the support of all Members.

Mr McCallister: I am at an age when I can clearly remember my school days. It was much more hazardous for me to walk to school than it was for the likes of Mr Lunn, because the car had been invented by the time I was at school.

Serious points have been raised in a useful debate that focused not only on health and well-being, but on the polluting effects of the school run. During his opening remarks, my colleague Mr Beggs clearly demonstrated the impact that the school run has had on our roads network and our CO2 emissions targets — given that some 25% of journeys are less than 3 km, or 2 miles approximately. Those journeys have a serious impact on the roads network. Members will be aware of the difference between the journey to Stormont during the school term and the journey during the summer, when the schools are on holiday. The effects of the pollution are quite evident.

I will focus on the impact that initiatives that promote walking and cycling to school have on people's health. Many health debates have been held in the Chamber, and we cannot overemphasise the contribution that such initiatives can make to people's health and well-being. It is alarming to look at the figures that show the rise in obesity and the state of people's health. It is particularly alarming to note that obesity affects children at an increasingly young age.

How do we address that problem, and what are the consequences if we do not? One obvious consequence is that people will develop conditions such as diabetes, which have a huge personal cost for the sufferer. Diabetes UK Northern Ireland says that people with diabetes are more likely to have heart attacks and strokes and to develop kidney failure, gangrene and foot ulcers, which can lead to amputation. The cost of addressing those problems amounts to 10% of the

health budget, or around £400 million a year. Thus, the cost to the individual and the economy is huge.

Some of my colleagues have spoken about the impact of the Safer Routes to School programme, and how it encourages people to get out of their cars and walk to schools. It encourages family involvement and promotes social inclusion by getting people to start walking. Once that activity is built into a family's routine, it becomes part of their exercise regime. The family does not have to set time aside for exercise — and, as we know, people often complain that they do not have time to exercise. Those are the types of policies that we should develop.

Although the Minister for Regional Development has responsibility for this matter, I accept that a cross-departmental strategy is needed, and a joined-up approach will be needed to deliver on it. Footpaths and lighting must be provided, and roads must be made safe for pedestrians. Parents must feel secure in the knowledge that their kids can get to school safely when they are old enough to walk to school unaccompanied.

It is important that such a strategy is implemented. In his opening remarks, Mr Beggs mentioned the commendable Sustrans scheme that was piloted in certain schools.

Footpaths and lighting are very important factors. As someone who drives and walks regularly, I believe that we must also do much more to promote high-visibility jackets. Although he was not speaking in his ministerial capacity, Mr Sammy Wilson made a valid point about making adjustments to school uniforms. High-visibility clothing is super, but not enough children and young people want to wear it. By their very nature, school uniforms tend to be dark in colour, which is the worst of all worlds for young people out walking at night. The suggestion to incorporate high-visibility clothing into school uniforms is sensible.

I appreciate the support that the motion has received from all sides of the House. I support the motion and the SDLP amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Members who tabled the motion, which I support with the amendment.

There is a fundamental question of priority at the heart of this discussion — will we continue to develop as though the car is king, or will we put people and communities first? Standing at the roadside in the morning, it seems utter madness that eight out of every 10 cars contain only their driver. Although in many cases people have legitimate reasons for travelling like that, in many others the reasons are about comfort rather than necessity. Given the concerns about global warming, the long-term supply of fuel, congestion, pollution and road safety, using a ton of metal, powered by fossil fuels, to move one human being

from one point to another does not seem sensible. Better alternatives should be encouraged.

There is no doubt that cars can damage communities. Anyone who has walked children to school along a busy main road will know that the experience can be dangerous and unpleasant. Although 30 mph or 40 mph does not feel fast to someone in an air-conditioned car, it does to the parents of children who are just a couple of feet away on the footpath. Parents know that a loss of concentration for just a second is all that it takes for a child to fall or step off the kerb and for tragedy to occur.

As parents, what do we do to combat that? We put our children in our cars and drive them to school, because it is safer, more pleasant and more comfortable. Therefore, we become part of the problem. With the Executive, Members must take a number of actions to become part of the solution so that parents and children are allowed the reasonable, safe and healthy choice of walking or cycling to school.

We must ensure that routes to schools are safe. It is insane that footpaths are always built beside roads — why is that? Why are footpaths not routed away from the danger, noise and pollution of our roads? In many cities in Britain, networks of footpaths and cycle paths are built away from main roads. We should ensure that our towns and cities are developed in that way.

We must reduce speed, generally. From experience elsewhere, we know that a reduction in speed limits dramatically reduces the frequency and impact of accidents. That is why the SDLP has been asking the Minister for Regional Development to reduce speed limits in housing estates to 20 mph. The Minister will acknowledge that I have raised that issue with him on several occasions during Question Time. If residents in estates were asked for their opinion on speed limits, I am confident that a clear majority would support a reduction in speed limits. Scientific evidence could probably be used to show that such a reduction would not impact on journey times, because driving in residential areas is stop-start anyway. We know that traffic calming is cost effective compared to the cost of an accident.

People in residential areas have a right to expect discipline from drivers. I ask the Minister, as I have done before, to pilot reduced speed limits in estates across Northern Ireland. Estates that adopt a lower speed limit will take a great step towards making those areas better places in which children and families can live and play safely.

There is no practical reason why traffic should not be slowed at specific times outside school gates to allow children to arrive and leave safely. Such areas traditionally have high levels of congestion, and that is a chicken-and-egg situation: the greater the danger from traffic, the greater the number of people who will

drive their children to school because of that danger. If more people were able to walk or cycle to school with their children, the easier traffic would flow in the vicinity of schools.

We need to encourage the use of public transport generally in order to remove traffic from our roads. If we expect children to walk or cycle to school, why do we not expect the same of workers? That means that public transport, carpooling, and better access by foot and cycle must be made a higher priority. Public transport must be cheaper, faster and more comfortable than using a private car, otherwise people will continue to use their own cars. The encouragement of public transport, cycling and walking is not just an issue for schoolchildren; it should be an issue for us all. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr S Wilson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I appreciate that you have found a place in the debate for my contribution.

At this stage in the debate, there is danger of repetition because Members have raised a whole range of issues. However, I would like to dwell, for a moment or two, on some issues that have not been fully explored.

I agree with all the points that Members have made about the benefits that would accrue from greater numbers of children walking and cycling to school, including: greater road awareness; health benefits; a decrease in road congestion; a reduction in car traffic on roads at peak times; and a saving in transport expenditure — as a lot of new road-building would be rendered unnecessary.

Mr P Ramsey: Carbon emissions?

Mr S Wilson: The Member reminds me that a reduction in carbon emissions would also result. That is true, and I leave him to judge the impact of that.

The first factor that I want to consider is the impact on planning policy. Difficulty arises where there is an existing infrastructure and where changes to it can only be marginal or minimal. Sometimes, opportunities arise: the Sustrans Safe Routes to Schools concept has shown that changes can be made to road layouts on routes to school that will encourage people to walk and cycle.

Over the next few years, huge opportunities will arise as planning policies allow for new housing developments, the infrastructure within them and the schools that will be provided as a part of that. When we plan communities, we must try to integrate all those aspects.

Mr Ramsey mentioned moving footpaths away from the edges of roads. However, that brings plusses and minuses — there are no easy answers. Sometimes, because a footpath is beside a road, there is greater surveillance, and people consider it safer for

youngsters to walk along such a footpath than along a secluded one. Therefore, in planning, we must look carefully at the best ways of providing safe routes that people can use.

Another factor is that there will be a massive increase in the building of new schools. Members should point out to the Department of Education that, when formulating the handbook on school design, it should include automatic provision for the stacking and securing of bikes. Youngsters should also have lockers, so that they can change if they get wet while cycling to school, rather than stay in a wet school uniform for the rest of the day — an experience that can put youngsters off walking or cycling.

As we change school infrastructures and build new schools, there is an opportunity to include such provisions. Surprisingly, a lot of the new schools do not automatically have that provision — head teachers very often have to fight for that particular aspect.

2.30 pm

The second issue is the training of children. The Road Safety Council and its committees have been mentioned. One of the areas being pushed in schools is cycling proficiency, and the use of road safety officers to deliver that training. I would like to see far greater use of on-road training for cycling proficiency tests, although I accept that there is some parental opposition to that. Although one can train youngsters in the safety of a playground, making them face the hazards of a real road can help them to understand the dangers. I have observed many schemes in which children are trained to that standard, and it has a huge impact.

Ultimately, we have to change parental views. Increasingly, and especially with primary-school youngsters, there is a greater desire among parents to bring their children to school in cars. As a result, children do not have road awareness and do not get into the habit of being road aware. Perhaps we need to start with the young, and give parents the confidence to send their children to school on foot or by bike.

Ms Purvis: No doubt, as has been said, the debate has inspired some Members to reflect on their own childhood and to reminisce about walking barefoot 10 miles uphill to school and back in the snow. We may look back on our own youth with nostalgia — the meandering walks with friends to and from school and bike rides, for those who had bikes.

Walking and bike-riding seem to be natural things for children to do; so why do we need a Government initiative to promote them? Many Members have outlined the reasons why — in particular, because there are more cars on the road. That means more traffic, more congestion and more carbon emissions. For the benefit of the Minister of the Environment, those carbon emissions are coming from cars, not from the sun.

More cars also mean that children who go to school by bike and on foot face more dangerous situations.

Mr Ramsey mentioned the vicious cycle that is created when parents feel that their children are not safe when out walking and, therefore, take them to school in cars. Children from deprived areas are five times more likely to be killed, as pedestrians, than those from well-off areas, despite the fact that they are more likely to come from areas where there are low levels of car ownership. That suggests that they have fewer cars to deal with as they walk through their own neighbourhoods. However, they often walk greater distances to school, and through areas with poorer infrastructure and narrower footpaths, which may be blocked by parked cars, forcing the children to walk on narrow roads.

It is paramount, therefore, that the initiative is taken to support more children to walk and cycle to school and to create the infrastructure that will allow them to do so in as safe a manner as is possible.

As regards safe, healthy and sustainable travel, I encourage the Minister for Regional Development to maintain the Comber Greenway in its current form. It provides a tranquil and safe route for commuters of all ages. I support the motion and the amendment.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment for the opportunity to speak on the topic. I assure Mr McCallister that I have no issue about being dragged in front of the Assembly to answer on these matters, I consider it to be part of my responsibility.

The issue cuts across a number of Departments, but I will attempt to answer the points raised. I will ask officials to study the Hansard report of the debate and to respond in writing to Members who have raised specific points that I do not address.

The motion focuses attention on the link between walking and cycling to school, and the impact that those activities can have on children's health and on traffic congestion. The benefits of walking and cycling to school, as outlined by many Members, are widely acknowledged. They include improving health and fitness, and making a contribution to reducing traffic congestion and harmful CO₂ emissions. I agree with Mr Wells that the view on emissions is perhaps not shared by everyone on that side of the House. Nonetheless, it is an important factor in the debate.

Improving the independence of young people when travelling to and from school is another important factor. I assure the House that all those issues are of concern to the Executive and to me. As the Minister with responsibility for promoting sustainable travel, I

am keen to address the issues at a strategic and operational level.

In 2001, my Department's regional development strategy recognised the importance of the need to change travel culture and to contribute to healthier lifestyles. In particular, it recognised the need to revive the healthy habit, among people of all ages, of walking and cycling on short journeys. Since then, the regional transportation strategy, and the subsequent transport plans that support it, have included measures to support and promote walking and cycling. In addition, as mentioned by the Minister of the Environment and by Pat Ramsey, all planning policy introduced after the adoption of the regional development strategy makes walking and cycling an integral part of the planning process for new development.

In 2004, Roads Service launched the Travelwise initiative to raise public awareness of sustainable travel options and to demonstrate to businesses, commuters and schools that they can play a part in meeting the challenge of improving lifestyles. Since 2004, the Travelwise Safer Routes to School team has been tackling the issue of the school run through promoting more walking and cycling, greater use of public transport, and car sharing. My Department has already made a significant difference through the Safer Routes to School initiative and since its introduction, we have worked with 151 schools, involving more than 45,000 pupils and their parents, and have committed more than £2.3 million to that initiative. Last year, during walk-to-school week, 200 schools registered for events, and more than 41,000 pupils and their parents took part. In 2007-08, we carried out a survey to evaluate the Safer Routes to School scheme in 2007-08, and 50% of the schools that took part said that they had observed more children walking to and from school.

As many Members said, road safety is a priority for Roads Service, and the Department has always been conscious of the need to manage traffic speed in the vicinity of schools. Roads Service continues to roll out a programme of signs and road lining, and in certain cases, reduced speed limits have been provided at schools to make motorists aware of the presence of children. As part of that programme, Roads Service has initiated a trial of part-time speed limits at two schools near Coleraine and Ballymoney. The 20 mph speed limit is only in force at the start and finish of the school day, which are the periods of highest risk to children walking or cycling to and from school. Early indications are that those pilot schemes have been successful in reducing speed, and there has been a broad welcome from the schools and communities involved.

The concept of 20 mph speed limits at schools forms part of a wider consultation document on the setting of speed limits generally, which was launched by my Department in January. I hope that Members

will take the time to study that comprehensive document and to submit their comments in order to help formulate the final policy. Pat Ramsey mentioned communication that he has had with me on that issue, and this is an opportunity for him, and other interested parties, to submit their views.

As Members said, improving children's health and reducing traffic congestion is relevant to the work of several Departments; it is essential, therefore, that there is a coherent interdepartmental approach to those issues. To tackle obesity, the Department of Health established the fit futures task force, whose final report in 2006 contained more than 70 recommendations to help stem the rise of obesity in children and young people. Last year, Minister McGimpsey established the obesity prevention steering group to drive forward those recommendations and to work with other Departments, including my own, to produce an obesity strategic framework that aims to take the necessary action to redress the rise in obesity figures, and put in place a coherent plan of action that applies not only to children but to everyone.

Any initiative, such as walking and cycling, that can increase children's opportunity to take part in physical activity and which, in turn, encourages parents, guardians and teachers to participate, is to be welcomed.

Another key partner in promoting walking and cycling in schools is the Department of the Environment, which ensures that road safety education is given priority attention. The main focus of its road safety education programme for children and young people is to establish responsible attitudes and behaviour among road users from an early age and to instill the right attitudes and behaviours in tomorrow's drivers. The guidelines adopted by the Department of the Environment recommend that road safety is best taught by teachers on a regular and structured basis with resources, teacher training, advice and support provided by road-safety education officers. Those officers deliver specific road-safety initiatives and provide interactive sessions with pupils where appropriate.

As the Minister said in his contribution, specific road-safety initiatives delivered by the DOE in primary schools include the cycling proficiency scheme and practical child-pedestrian safety training.

The cycling proficiency scheme is well established and has been operating successfully for over 30 years. The number of schools that are involved in the scheme has been growing, and just under 600 primary schools participate annually. Around 8,500 children are trained each year.

Through the school travel advisory group, my officials work in partnership with the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of the Environment,

Translink and Sustrans to co-ordinate our approach and to optimise our efforts to promote sustainable school travel. The Department of Education's contribution to improve facilities in the schools estate has been mentioned in the debate and is much valued as part of the overall Safer Routes to School initiative.

That multi-agency approach was exemplified by the recent two-year rural Safer Routes to School project, which attracted EU funding through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and saw statutory bodies work in partnership with Sustrans to deliver a highly successful programme at 18 rural schools across the North. Preliminary results show that around 3,500 children took part in the project and that the proportion of those children who were driven to school dropped from 64% to 49% between the beginning and the end of the project.

When I attended the Sustrans briefing, I spoke to Steven Patterson, who, I reassure Jim Wells, is very pleasant but is neither young nor a lady. I did not have the experience that Mr Wells mentioned. The Department is considering a proposal to continue with that initiative and will discuss that with Sustrans and other Departments that have an interest.

The amendment calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school, which is a matter for the Minister of Education. Members will be aware that the statutory walking distances are used to determine whether the education boards or the parent should bear the cost of home-to-school transport. That is not necessarily related to the topic of the motion, and the ingenuity of the Members whose amendment was accepted has been praised. That is a matter for the Speaker's Office.

The Department of Education has advised that it is for parents to determine the method that they consider most appropriate for delivering their children to and from school. I understand that parents can apply to the education boards to request that a road safety assessment be conducted if they consider a particular road to represent a safety hazard. The Department of Education has no plans at present to change the current distance criteria, but I am advised that a review of school transport will take place once the way forward for transfer arrangements and area-based planning has been finalised. That said, it is clear that any reduction in the distance criteria would have a significant impact on the transport budget of the education boards.

I also noted the concerns that Members expressed about the condition of rural roads across the North. Maintaining the surfaces and underlying structures of the roads and footways is essential for the social and economic well-being of the North and is a high priority for my Department's Roads Service.

All my Department's programmes are under-resourced, and there is no painless solution. Within its allocation for maintenance, Roads Service has consistently —

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that some areas in Northern Ireland are more affected by lack of investment than others? I draw the Minister's attention to the dreadful, abysmal state of the roads on the Ards Peninsula in the Strangford constituency. I cannot find a word strong enough to describe the roads. This morning, people informed me by telephone that a number of roads were impassable because of flooding. That is simply because not enough people are available to get the water off the roads. I refer to roads that are beside Strangford Lough, so it is not as if the water has nowhere to go.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that interventions should be short and that the topic that is being debated is cycling to school.

The Minister for Regional Development: I trust, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that you will give me about an extra five minutes at the end of my speech.

I accept that there is not enough money in the roads budget; I have always said that that is a matter of fact. There are certainly roads that are in poor condition across the North, but I have been to Ards, and I do not accept that it is substantially worse than other areas; I assure the Member that I have been to some places that have bad roads.

It strikes me that the Alliance Party supported a motion for the Budget to be reset, but the only areas in which additional allocations were requested were social development, training and upskilling. The effect of providing that additional investment would be to remove money from my Department's spending on roads and from the Department of Education's school transport programme. It is all very well to argue that not enough resources are available, but some Members have supported proposals that would lead to resources being taken away. We must be consistent in our approach, and I would gladly accept more —

2.45 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister accept that in the past 10 days, we have seen an indication of how wastefully resources are sometimes deployed? There was a lot of media hype about an imminent snowstorm, and how Roads Service was driven out —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the motion relates to cycling to school.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is absolutely what my intervention is about. Roads Service workers sprayed grit on our roads and prepared the country for a snow freeze that did not arrive until two days later. Yet, all those resources were used on roads that lead to schools

on which those resources cannot be spent. Was the Minister's Department pushed by the weather forecast and the media into taking that action?

The Minister for Regional Development:

Preparation for the winter schedule is determined by Met Office weather forecasts, which cannot be ignored; it must be accepted that those people are experts in their field. The Met Office advises when severe weather is approaching, and services react accordingly.

There is, and has been, an issue over the past number of days in relation to the winter gritting schedule and its effectiveness, including how many roads were covered; in particular, in rural areas and around rural schools. There is an enormous pressure in that. However, it again relates to the last point that I was making to Mr McCarthy. It is entirely inconsistent for Members to argue for more resources for those areas at the same time as calling for more resources to go to other Departments. It requires more, not less, resources to meet people's demands for more to be spent on road maintenance, on rural roads, and on winter gritting in order to provide more widespread coverage.

On the issue of roads, the funding that my Department has been allocated for the Budget period — even with the in-year monitoring top-ups — falls about £125 million short of the level recommended in the structural maintenance funding plan across the Budget period up to 2011.

In distributing the limited resources available for roads maintenance, allocations are made to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions use the indicators when apportioning costs across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds. Resurfacing work is generally undertaken on a priority basis that reflects both the structural condition of the relevant road and its traffic volumes.

It is always the case that the availability of more funding would enable more resurfacing work to be carried out. Members know that funding for structural maintenance has, historically, fallen well short of the levels recommended in the regional transportation strategy. However, it is important to see these things in the context of the correct management of the overall Budget, which involves assessing, and making decisions on, competing priorities from my own and other Departments.

Nevertheless, I reassure Members that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds as part of the in-year monitoring process. I also hope, given the views that have been expressed during the debate, that Members will support future bids by my Department for additional structural maintenance funds.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to address this motion, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I assure Members that the whole issue of walking and cycling to school, and of making the Safer Routes to School scheme available, is of keen interest to the Executive. In the past, it has received support from a range of Departments and from other agencies, including Sustrans, the good work of which was mentioned in the debate. My own Department is certainly very keen that those types of projects continue. We will do all that we can to ensure that walking and cycling to school are viable and safe options for children. We will also encourage, right across the age range, more sustainable travel modes for all our population. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off mobile phones. Someone is using one at the moment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar an leasú.

The benefits — including health, economic and environmental — reaped from walking and cycling to school initiatives have been well ventilated during the debate. The increased volumes of traffic on our roads, and the pothole-pockmarked state of many rural roads, mean that the halcyon days of the past, when pupils walked many miles to school, are long gone. Many Members from rural areas will recall the days when it was not unusual for pupils to walk long distances through the countryside to school.

When he proposed the amendment, John Dallat pointed out that that has diminished in many rural areas. He also mentioned the assisted transport scheme, which he described as being totally inflexible and throwing up numerous anomalies; such as when, for example, some children from a particular housing estate get free transport while others from the same estate do not, albeit they all attend the same school. Mr Dallat also said that children from rural areas do not have the same opportunities as other children to walk and cycle to school because of the dangers involved, and that, therefore, they are disadvantaged in that respect. He wondered whether there had been any rural proofing of schemes to encourage walking and cycling to school.

Mr Dallat also said that given that half-empty buses are passing children on the roadside, the current school transport system and policy require revision. He described it as a waste of resources that would, ultimately, lead to more, rather than less, vehicular traffic.

Jim Wells, who along with the Environment Minister is the other DUP expert on climate change, underlined the importance of the amendment and expressed his wish for the Assembly to debate the assisted transport scheme in its own right. He

emphasised the reduction in vehicular traffic that would result in a change to the two- or three-mile rule. He described as nonsense the situation in which buses pass children who are standing in the rain and called for serious review of the school-transport issue. He supports the motion and, obviously, the amendment.

Cathal Boylan expressed his party's support for the motion and the amendment, even though, initially, he had difficulty with the amendment. Obviously, Mr Dallat's erudition helped Mr Boylan's understanding.

Trevor Lunn cited support for road-safety measures by the Children's Commissioner. He also mentioned the good work of the Road Safety Council. He said that he has a vague recollection of cycling from Finaghy to Belfast Royal Academy. He gave Members a virtual tour of his bike journey through Belfast, guided by his personal satnav.

Willie Clarke agreed with his South Down colleague Jim Wells that the amendment is worthy and deserves another dedicated airing in the Chamber.

Sammy Wilson made an intervention and pointed out that the Western Education and Library Board had incorporated a reflective element into school uniforms. He asked that the Minister of Education takes cognisance of that development.

John McCallister mentioned the importance of incorporating walking and cycling to school into families' daily routines. Pat Ramsey underlined the need for footpaths that are further away from roads. Sammy Wilson agreed that walking and cycling to school will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions. He said that new planning approaches will help to encourage walking and cycling to school.

In his contribution, the Minister acknowledged the benefits of walking and cycling to school. He also said that they had been integrated into planning policy through the regional development strategy. He explained the advantages of the Travelwise initiative and said that Safer Routes to School has certainly encouraged many more children to walk to school. He said that the pilot scheme for a 20 mph limit near schools has worked well and that he hoped that Members would contribute to consultation on the matter. He said that several Departments were involved and that there must be a cross-cutting approach.

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

Mr D Bradley: Obviously, I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I confess that at first sight of the UUP motion on the Order Paper, I wondered whether the Assembly should be debating this sort of matter, given the huge constitutional affairs, life-and-death concerns, and so forth, with which it must contend. I

am not sure whether other Members had the same thought, but the fact that people have that initial thought shows how much work needs to be done on the issue.

I am grateful to my colleague Mr Beggs for outlining some of the real issues that we must confront. We can all agree on the advantages of people doing more cycling and walking.

There was some mirth and merriment in the midst of Members' admirable and useful contributions, which is, perhaps, as it should be. I was delighted to hear Mr McCarthy saying that although there are very few roads in Strangford, the phones work; so, he is not totally out of communication. I was interested by Ian Paisley Jnr's reference to something called a "snow freeze", which the Minister was apparently expected to anticipate, even though we do not know what it is.

We have talked about the importance of walking, but I suspect that most of us park our cars as close to the door of the Building as possible. Perhaps we should lead by example and walk a little further. Indeed, that relates to why the motion is so important. People's expectations of political representatives are changing. It is no longer satisfactory for us to point and counterpoint across the Chamber. Rather, we have to lead by example on matters that are important to people.

It may come as a surprise to some folks that the real challenges facing our society are not constitutional issues. The real challenges are the three big killers in our society, namely alcohol — particularly underage drinking, allied with drugs — tobacco and obesity. Regardless of how many new hospitals are built, we will not be able to continue to look after people if obesity levels continue to rise. We must explain to people that cycling and walking can help to counter the problem of obesity.

I am disappointed that I missed Trevor Lunn's account of his cycling escapades. I remember the cycling shed at Belfast Royal Academy as the den of all iniquity.

Mrs M Bradley: Were you involved in that?

Mr B McCrea: I really wanted to find out what went on there, but I must confess that I was unlucky to be one of the people who was never invited down. Perhaps I would have been if I had had a bicycle — maybe that is the point.

Parental attitude is relevant to this discussion, just as it is relevant to so many of the issues that we try to address. Children are mollycoddled, and it is not always to their advantage. I am disappointed that Mr Sammy Wilson is not here, because he always adds lightness to a debate, but things said in jest can be wholly true. As my colleague Mr McCallister said, we must make parents understand that exercise taken together can create family bonds. It provides an

opportunity for discussion and learning. When I go cycling, I am always amazed by the fact that the pace of travel allows so much time for observation of the surroundings.

I concur with Pat Ramsey's comments about speed limits. Mr Ramsey also said that footpaths should be further away from roads. In some places in my constituency, people would be walking in the shuegh if the footpaths were any further away from the road. Seriously though, the network of footpaths must be got right if we are serious about this issue.

Dawn Purvis mentioned that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to suffer an accident. I understand that that relates to accidents in the home, and so on, as well as to road accidents. We must address the financial costs to society, and the personal costs to individuals, that result from accidents.

The Minister pointed out that although he was the Minister responding to the debate, this is a cross-cutting issue. I have sympathy with his position, and the list of issues that could pertain to this topic is evidence of its cross-cutting nature.

For example, OFMDFM is responsible for children and young people's issues and the Programme for Government; the Department of Education is responsible for education and sustainable development and the Healthy Schools scheme; DHSSPS is responsible for the Fit Futures scheme; DSD is responsible for neighbourhood renewal; DCAL is responsible for the promotion of physical recreation; and DRD is responsible for the regional development strategy. Then again, there is the revised curriculum. That all demonstrates the need for us to provide leadership.

3.00 pm

Mr Wells mentioned the reduction in CO₂ emissions, and Cathal Boylan mentioned the impact of catalytic converters that do not kick in. There are fuel-efficiency issues, but the real issue is health and well-being and teaching our children to behave responsibly in the big wide world.

I know that the motion has all-party support, and, therefore, I do not intend to detain the House. I note the Department of Education's comments to the effect that parents should determine how their children get to school — but not, apparently, which school they go to. Therefore, parental choice is an issue. Parents are at the forefront of our thinking, and the Government should not take the role of parenting away. Our job is to encourage parents, families and future citizens to do what is right for them and what will, ultimately, be right for society.

I thank all Members. I am not sure whether I mentioned everyone who contributed to the debate. I am grateful to Members on my left — Mr Bresland

and Mr George Robinson — for not barracking me, as they sometimes do. That shows that there is a coming together on this issue. *[Interruption.]*

I must mention that I was available for interventions at any time.

I thank Members for their support. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment, and we want everyone to support the motion. We hope that this is not the end of the matter but an opportunity for us to start to show the people of Northern Ireland that, collectively, we can provide proper leadership for the good of everyone.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to invest further in walking and cycling to school initiatives to improve children's health and reduce traffic congestion and in the interim, given the current state of our roads, especially in rural areas, further calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Western Health and Social Care Trust

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that as a result of the Review of Public Administration, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million; expresses concern about the impact of this debt on jobs and key services throughout the Trust area; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to deal with this matter.

A motion on health earlier today led to a detailed discussion, and I do not intend to spend time rehashing those issues. Indeed, as I entered the Chamber, Basil McCrea was highlighting health issues such as obesity and alcohol and drug addiction. For a minute, I thought that the earlier debate had continued in my absence.

This motion relates to the Western Health and Social Care Trust, and it is a unique issue that has not arisen in any other trusts. It did not arise at the time of amalgamation, and, as far as I am aware, it has not arisen since.

The motion that I ask Members to support calls for a resolution to an ongoing funding issue with the Western Health and Social Care Trust. That problem arose because of a £3.36 million deficit, which is a legacy of debt that was inherited in 2007. I appreciate the Minister and his staff taking time to be present for the debate.

The motion does not call for the money to meet that deficit to be taken from the budget of any other trusts — let us be clear on that. It calls on the Department of Health and the Executive to intervene in what are unique circumstances.

We are all aware of the pressures, and how they are further compounded across all the trusts because of the comprehensive spending review (CSR). There is considerable public annoyance over that, as we well know. That is reflected in the west in the number of public meetings that take place every week because of alarm and worry about ongoing issues, and indeed emerging issues. The same issues arise time after time. They have been mentioned this morning about the care issue and about job cuts, not only for professional workers in the Health Service, but in administration.

The Western Trust has an annual budget of approximately £430 million. It serves a population of close to 300,000. I think that it employs approximately 12,500 staff and, as Members will know, it covers a

vast area, from Derry through different council areas, including Limavady, Strabane, Omagh and Fermanagh. I mentioned the larger towns, but there are also dispersed rural populations, and some of the people there live in very isolated areas. The trust also has responsibility for a number of hospitals — I do not think that I will offend anyone by saying that the most important of those are Tyrone County Hospital, Altnagelvin Area Hospital and Erne Hospital, in no particular order.

The new trusts were formed in 2007, when their number was reduced by the amalgamations of smaller trusts. In the case of the Western Trust area, three trusts were amalgamated. One of those trusts had a legacy of debt. As I understand it, the Department of Health at that time directed that the debt had to be inherited by the new body. The trust was further directed that it had to carry that burden of debt, while, at the same time, staying within its budget for 2007-08 and 2008-09. The Department further gave the impression that, when that point was reached — that is, the end of the financial year 2008-09, which is now close — the position would be reviewed, and that the Department would consider waiving the requirement to recover approximately £3.5 million.

During the financial years 2007-09, the trust, as it was asked to do, did not overspend, neither did it underspend, because we all know from the debate this morning that trusts everywhere face more demands on their money than they can meet. It appears that the trust has managed its finances in a strong and robust fashion, and the review, which appeared to be confirmed by the Department in December 2007, is now weeks away.

The repayment of that inherited debt will have an impact on basic essential services such as cancer care or help for people who have suffered from strokes or mental illness, and on vulnerable people throughout the Western Trust area. That is why I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion, and thank Mr Gallagher for securing the debate. As he said, the Western Health and Social Care Trust inherited a deficit of £3.3 million when it superseded the old Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust, unlike the other four trusts, which came into operation with a clean sheet. Added to that are the 3% efficiency savings — amounting to just over £36 million — that the trust has to meet within the next three years. All trusts have to meet that target, and that matter was discussed earlier today in a separate debate.

For years, public representatives in the west of the Province have had to lobby extremely hard for job creation in the trust area, for the experts and the professionals that were required, and for the delivery

of equality of services to meet the needs of the people in our area. We did that simply to ensure that people had the same service provision as those who live in the rest of the Province — something which, in today's terms, is called equality.

As I consider the situation in the west of the Province, I begin to question the whole issue of equality. When the new trust took over last year, rather than starting off from a level playing field, it was immediately handicapped by the £3.3 million deficit that it had to clear in order to balance its books. The Western Trust, in an area that was deprived for years of proper Health Service provision, is now being further discriminated against by having to pick up another body's debt.

The irony of the matter is that after 12 months or more, the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have failed to pick up that debt and leave the Western Trust on the same footing as all the other health and social care trusts. There is no doubt that if this matter is not addressed by the Minister and his Department, it will have a seriously detrimental effect on Health Service jobs and on key service provision in the Western Trust area in the future.

I can see the impact that that debt is now having on the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and on the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The sad reality is that it appears that no one from the Department is listening to the pleas of the people or to the Western Trust management, who have to try to meet the debt that was handed down to them. I know that the Minister will probably talk about the capital investment of £276 million in the new hospital in Enniskillen and £190 million in the new hospital in Omagh. We welcome and fully support his commitment to those investments. However, we are gravely concerned about the level of service provision that those new hospitals will be able to provide if the matter of the debt is not dealt with urgently.

We have already witnessed the removal of services from Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and have read the proposals to close maternity beds in, and to remove other services from, the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The telemedicine provision in Tyrone County Hospital was not replaced when the consultant retired. All those issues are causing grave concern in the west of the Province. People are forced to travel long distances on rural roads in order to obtain access to proper healthcare provision. I plead with the Minister to take this matter on board and clear the deficit so that the Western Trust is put on a level playing field, is not disadvantaged and can have the same opportunities as the other trust areas, as it strives to provide proper, state-of-the-art healthcare for people in the south-west quarter of Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

Addressing the Western Health and Social Care Trust's debt is not too big a task to ask of the Minister. I plead with him to take the matter on board and deal with it immediately; it must not be allowed to drag on any longer. Any uncertainties must be taken out of the equation, so that the trust will be on a level playing field with the other trusts that commenced at the same time.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I apologise to Members for being late; I was appearing on 'Stormont Live'. I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to it. The motion — in particular, its reference to the impact of the review of public administration (RPA) on the Western Health and Social Care Trust — is very timely. Today, PricewaterhouseCoopers released a new report, 'Job Creation in the Western Economic Corridor', which warns that the new RPA councils that will be formed by amalgamating Derry City Council with Strabane District Council and Fermanagh District Council with Omagh District Council will continue to suffer economically and socially unless there is a radical change in approach. On top of that, there is the comprehensive spending review, which is at the heart of the cuts that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Western Health and Social Care Trust will implement.

I recognise that the British Treasury has imposed the CSR on the Executive. The faceless men of Whitehall — unelected by the people of Ireland — are forcing those cuts on the people whom we represent. Once again, that exposes the folly of the parties in this Chamber —

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member not consider her speech to be somewhat inconsistent with the remarks that she made last week in the House. Ms Anderson said that she could not wait for the day when we are cut from Westminster, and yet, today, she is criticising Westminster for pouring money into the Health Service.

Ms Anderson: I am criticising Westminster for taking a policy decision that will introduce cuts. Of course, I would rather that we worked on an all-Ireland basis, particularly with regard to cancer facilities in the north-west. People in the north-west, and elsewhere, who are suffering because of the impact of partition, will agree with what I said. Obviously, Mr McCarthy does not agree.

Once again, that exposes the folly of the parties in this Chamber — and we have just heard from one of them — that refuse to support the transfer of fiscal sovereignty in the North. Until we take control of our own destiny, we will continue to be at the mercy of the British bureaucrats who could not care less about the plight of our people.

Ordinary people are suffering — people such as the residents of Foyleville Residential Home, in Derry,

which is earmarked for closure as part of the Western Trust's efficiency plans. From listening to Mr McCarthy comments, I am sure that he does not care too much about that.

I am aware that trust officials are due to meet the families of Foyleville residents on Thursday. Those families deserve to hear directly, and hopefully today, from the Minister about what the future holds for their loved ones. They are being told that care in the community packages will be put in place for their loved ones. However, at the same time, care in the community services are being cut. As a carer for my mother, I know only too well about the difficulties that people face when trying to access a suitable domiciliary-care package.

Some of the Foyleville residents are more than 93 years old and require a great deal of care, which is no less than they deserve. Therefore, I ask the Minister to state clearly what arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the residents of Foyleville Residential Home continue to get the best standards of care to which they are rightly entitled.

Unfortunately, the closure of that residential care home is only one example of the impact that those proposals will have. It is an impact that will be most devastatingly felt by the most vulnerable people in our society. In order to meet the efficiency savings targets of £36 million, the trust has developed 48 separate proposals. When one examines the areas in which some of the biggest cuts are planned, the impact becomes clear. Acute services face cuts of £8.7 million; services for adult mental health and learning disabilities face cuts of £3.1 million; older people's services face cuts of £6.9 million; and women's and children's services face cuts of £4.4 million.

Despite the very clear impact that those cuts are likely to have on some of the most vulnerable groups, only four of the 48 proposals have been deemed to require equality impact assessments. The adverse impact that those cuts will have on section 75 groups screams out from the pages of the proposals, so why have only four been subject to a full equality impact assessment? Are the trust and the Minister unaware of the legal duty to promote equality of opportunity? All programmes and policies should be tailored to ensure that they do good — it is not just about avoiding doing bad.

I am sure that all of us understand that the Health Department and the trust are under pressure to make efficiency savings. However, all Departments face the same pressures. The fat should be trimmed from the system and the fat cats, not from front line care. We live on a small island, but we run two separate and distinct health services that often duplicate services in cities and townlands that are sometimes just yards

apart. That is the very definition of ineffective and wasteful Government.

What is the Minister doing to increase North/South co-operation so that experiences, resources and services can be pooled in order to achieve efficiencies without impacting on care? Despite repeated protestations that front line services will not be affected, the evidence on the ground in places like Foyleville and elsewhere tells a different story. Therefore, I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: Every MLA has the right to speak up for their area, and that is completely understandable. However, I must admit that I was surprised that this motion did not take the form of an Adjournment debate. In many ways, the topic is more appropriate for an Adjournment debate because it involves the special interests of a defined geographical area of this Province.

Nevertheless, I will make a few points in relation to the motion. To be fair, the Minister of Health has been generous in his treatment of the west. As recently as 10 December 2008, he announced a £58 million funding boost for the Western Health and Social Care Trust. That funding represents only part of the total planned investment of £570 million for health and service care in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area over the next 10 years. That is no minor investment.

As well as the major hospital projects announced for Omagh and Enniskillen, Lisnaskea will receive a new healthcare centre. Further developments and improvements are planned at the Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry, including a new radiography unit. On 5 August last year, the Minister invested over £3 million in emergency services in Fermanagh and Tyrone. The Minister also announced that emergency services in the area will be improved to include additional ambulance cover in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas; 24/7 ambulance service cover for the Castleberg area; and a rolling out of paramedic-led thrombosis care, which could save the lives of people who suffer heart attacks.

On 16 April 2008, a new satellite radiotherapy centre was announced for Altnagelvin Hospital. That will provide the additional radiography capacity that is needed to meet the anticipated increase in cancer cases in Northern Ireland. All of that is in addition to the two new hospital facilities in Enniskillen and Omagh. People in the west cannot say that the Minister has neglected them — it is very much the opposite.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: I do not generally give way. It has been my tradition not to — even to my party colleagues.

I understand the concerns about the issue of funding, but the Health Minister has to make decisions that reflect balanced and publicly defensible views of the needs of the entire population.

The west of the Province suffers as a result of having a relatively small population, which is scattered over a large geographical area. The combined population of Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry is 436,000, which accounts for 24% of Northern Ireland's total population. At the same time, those three western counties cover an area of 2,671 sq miles, which accounts for approximately 50% of Northern Ireland's geographic area.

That relatively low population density inevitably prevents efficiencies of scale, leading to higher costs, and the small population, combined with its scattered nature, makes the Minister's task difficult. Nevertheless, he has made a genuine attempt to take account of those problems, and he has treated the west fairly and generously. Moreover, I have every confidence that Minister McGimpsey will continue to do the same for that area as he would for any other part of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I have listened to some depressing speeches from Members who represent constituencies that the Western Health and Social Care Trust covers. In fact, most of what has been said could be repeated in speeches about every trust area.

The £3.3 million debt that the Western Health and Social Care Trust must carry forward is an added burden. Of course, we all support making efficiencies in every sphere of administration, including the Health Service. However, I cannot support, and other Members should not accept, efficiencies when they result in cuts to front line services.

As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I totally repudiate staff reductions when it is obvious that front line services will be drastically curtailed. This morning, all hell broke loose on the radio at the mention of reducing nursing staff numbers by approximately 700, and rightly so. However, that is not new information. Everyone was aware of the situation when, at the start of this Administration's mandate, the Minister of Health was instructed to find 3% efficiency savings.

Consultations are ongoing in every trust area, and almost every sphere of front line services is under attack, with the possible closure of residential homes; a reduction in hospital admissions; stretched community care budgets; and other threats to front line service. All those proposed cuts leave people in our communities extremely worried that they will not be able to access health provision when they require it.

Earlier this afternoon, I had the pleasure of hosting a gathering in the Long Gallery of people who are concerned about the non-provision of services for patients with muscular dystrophy throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, Muscular Dystrophy Campaign launched its Building on the Foundations campaign

there today. Many Members attended, for which the body is grateful. I hope that support will be forthcoming for a motion on that subject.

Among the many matters discussed in the Long Gallery was the lack of a paediatric consultant specialising in muscular dystrophy. Apparently, that position was filled some time ago, but, possibly as a result of so-called efficiency savings, the post is now vacant, and there does not appear to be any effort being made to fill it. I appeal to the Minister, who, I am glad to say, is present, to investigate that situation. It seems wrong that there should not be a specialist muscular-dystrophy consultant, who would cover all Northern Ireland trusts, including the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

The Alliance Party and the United Community group opposed the Budget on three grounds. First, it failed to take account of the divisions in our society; whereby massive savings could be made. Secondly, it left no room for the economic downturn, which, unfortunately, we are now witnessing. Thirdly, it demanded universal efficiency savings, without taking into account how efficient Departments already were.

All trusts — not only the Western Trust — are worried and concerned that the so-called 3% efficiency savings will mean that massive cuts will be made and that the provision of health services to all our communities will be reduced drastically. That must be avoided at all costs. I support the motion.

3.30 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. However, I would like clarification on the debt that is mentioned in the motion. Does that still exist? I ask that because, on 8 December, Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister whether the Western Trust was the only one that had a legacy of debt. I am not sure whether the Minister said that it was. I would like to know for my own information.

I am also keen to know whether the figure of £3.3 million is correct. I looked through my papers for the relevant figures; the trust provided us with a range of figures up to £20 million, but that may be a different kind of debt. I would like clarity on that issue.

Mr Buchanan mentioned the need for a level playing field. Therefore, it is important that the Minister looks at the Western Trust's debt, if it remains, because it is unfair that one trust inherited a debt simply because two trusts were joined in a programme of rationalisation.

Mr Gardiner talked about how generous the Minister was in his treatment of the west. I will not comment on that, but I remember when the campaign to retain acute services at the Tyrone County Hospital was at its height. The hospital in Omagh was losing its

acute services, but I remember comments that were made by the late David Ervine in the context of a discussion about acute services and the golden six hospitals. He said that when he got up in the morning, he could see three acute hospitals. Mr Buchanan is correct: we do not see any in the west now.

The services that have been available, or not available, in the west previously are not down to Mr McGimpsey. However, there are inequalities, and the people in the west have suffered.

It is important to establish the situation with regard to the £3.3 million that is mentioned in the motion. I support the motion, and I want the Minister to examine the situation and see whether the £3.3 million — if that is the correct amount — can be wiped out. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Lord Morrow: I shall also begin by asking the Minister questions, and I hope that he will answer them in his response to the debate. Did the other trusts have any debt? What happened when the changeover occurred? The Western Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million, but I understand that other trusts had debts but were given a clean sheet. I hope that the Minister will answer my next question: if three trusts can be treated in that way, why should the Western Trust be treated any differently?

I was fascinated by what some Members had to say, particularly Mr Gardiner. I am sure that he did not mean his comments to sound as they did, but it seemed that he was saying that a rural dweller, or someone who lives in a sparsely populated area, may not be entitled to the same healthcare and health provision as someone who lives in a city or urban settlement.

For too long, people in the west have had difficulty keeping up and being treated as equals. Mr Gardiner rightly said that some good things are happening in places such as Lisnaskea, but he did not go on to say that, for instance, the South Tyrone Hospital has lost its acute services in recent years, and that we do not have that provision any more; nor did he say that the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh has lost its acute-services provision, yet those are significant factors when it comes to health care.

It should also be said that the west is a very sparse and rural area. The result is that, for example, an area such as Clogher Valley finds itself caught between the services provided by three different places; Enniskillen, Omagh and Craigavon. The Minister must look very closely at such areas and ask himself whether the distribution of finance and resources to rural communities is fair. People should not be penalised by virtue of their being rural dwellers.

The last Member who spoke for Sinn Féin did infinitely better than Ms Anderson, who sought to make a political point about it being time that we had

control in local hands. I must confess, I thought that Minister McGimpsey was a local Minister; I believe that he resides in the Belfast area. Therefore, I cannot for the life of me understand what she was talking about. Ms Anderson should get up to speed and realise that she has signed up to this.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes; I will give way in a moment or two.

In fairness to Ms Anderson's party colleague, Mrs McGill, she realised that fact and she tried to address the issues raised by the motion.

Mr A Maskey: I ask the Member to accept that Ms Anderson was not saying that the Minister for Health, Social Services or Public Safety — or any of the local Ministers — cannot do, or are not doing, very good work within their remits; her point was that we could do so much more if we had greater financial sovereignty.

Lord Morrow: Mr Maskey has made the point much better than his colleague did — I hear now what he is saying, but that is not how it came across when his colleague was speaking.

Those of us who live in the west intend to ensure that it gets its fair share. We feel that that has not happened at times and that, as a result, we are sometimes being penalised. I remind Members of the ten ministerial priority areas for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the period 2008-2011, which are all laudable and acceptable. Those priorities are: improving health and well-being; ensuring safer, better quality services; improving acute services; ensuring fully integrated care and support in the community; improving children's services; improving mental-health services; improving services for people with a disability; ensuring effective financial control and improved efficiency; improving productivity; and modernising the infrastructure.

Those priorities are very laudable, provided that we have a level playing field. However, as my colleague Mr Buchanan made quite clear, the one thing lacking in our healthcare provision is a level playing field. It is imperative that that is achieved and that those of us who come from the west — whether it is the far west or the near west — do not feel that we are at a distinct disadvantage because of our rurality.

I implore the Minister to take that point on board and ensure that there is equal treatment across Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing him deal with the point about the £3.3 million debt that was inherited by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and why that trust was treated differently from the other trusts — I ask the Minister to deal with that matter, please.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Tommy and Mary for tabling the motion. It is regrettable that Sam Gardiner felt that such an important issue, which affects rural people and major areas of population, was more suitable for an Adjournment debate, and dismissed it as such. He should realise that the issue is much more fundamental than that, and I suggest that he recheck the population figures that he cited.

In relation to some of the other points about the regional investments that have been made by the Minister, those investments were made because the north-west needed them — it was a matter of equality.

I must remind a number of Members that the motion concerns a legacy of debt that was inherited from a previous trust and that no other trust has been asked to inherit a debt of that nature. The motion is not concerned with the comprehensive spending review or the 3% efficiency savings; if the trust does not receive assistance with the overspend, further efficiency savings will be required in the north-west.

Health Service managers have to strike a fine balance to provide the best possible service, to which people have a right. They must stay within budget but neither overspend nor underspend. To strike that balance, every trust must solve difficult problems. The Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust had a range of problems that were particular to that rural area and that were exacerbated by: ageing hospital buildings that were becoming increasingly unfit for purpose; the difficulty in recruiting key personnel; and the fact that locum cover was expensive.

However, resolving those problems was not just a matter for that trust; strategic departmental decision-making was required, including major investments in Delivering Better Services. That programme includes redesigning Health Service delivery pathways, two new hospitals and incorporating the changes that resulted from the review of public administration.

Given that the overspend occurred largely because the system and infrastructure were no longer fit for purpose and required departmental intervention for their rebuilding, it is hardly fair to expect people in the west to suffer the consequences of repaying £3.36 million. Claire McGill was right in saying that the Minister must be clear about whether any other trust has inherited such debt. Tommy Gallagher asked a question to that effect, to which the clear answer was that only one such case exists.

I understand that the Foyle Health and Social Services Trust wrote to the Department requesting that the debt, which had been incurred by a trust that no longer exists, be written off. The Department said that, if certain stringent budgetary conditions were met, it would look at the case sympathetically. Those conditions have been, and continue to be, met.

Therefore, I ask the Minister to commit to honouring the agreement that his Department made with the trust.

Given the other efficiency savings that are being made — and, as other Members said, those are often made in the face of opposition — the meeting of the conditions was no mean feat for the trust. My party colleagues and I have opposed some of the cuts that were introduced because they were unfair, and we continue to oppose them. To be fair to the trust, it has proposed, and continues to try to facilitate, alternative solutions where appropriate, and, in other cases, it has implemented the cuts as planned.

In partnership with elected representatives, user groups, staff and the community at large, the trust has done its bit. Given all that good work, the continued imposition of the repayment of the debt would go down very badly in the Western Trust area, because it would mean making further cuts. People there now expect the Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to write off the debt.

I am sure that people in the area did not benefit from the overspend, and, if the trust is forced to pay back the debt, they will suffer. That would be grossly unfair on people who are measurably disadvantaged by the level of service they receive compared with people living in areas east of the Bann.

On behalf of the people in the Western Trust area, I ask the Minister and the Executive to make good on the implied commitment of the Department by writing off the debt.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): First, I will try to clarify the inherited position on the Western Trust. It was the only trust to acquire an original, underlying deficit. It inherited that deficit from its legacy trust, Sperrin Lakeland Trust, which incurred a deficit in 2006-07 and passed that on to the Western Trust. The reason for that deficit was that the Sperrin Lakeland Trust overspent. In fact, it spent £3.6 million more than it should have, and that is why the problem arose.

3.45 pm

I am totally committed to doing all in my power to ensure that the Western Trust operates on an even footing with the other trusts, and to the principle of ensuring fair and equal access to health and social care services and to developments. As far as I am concerned, all citizens, wherever they come from in Northern Ireland — be that Belfast or Belcoo — are equally deserving, and they should get the best health and social care provision within the resources available to me.

I will try to recount the detailed background to the debt of £3.3 million that the Western Trust faced when it was established in 2007. Sperrin Lakeland Trust was one of three former trusts, including the Foyle Trust

and the Altnagelvin Trust. Those trusts merged to form the Western Health and Social Care Trust in 2007 and, in April 2007, the Sperrin Lakeland Trust declared the deficit of £3.3 million. However, that deficit had not been forecast at any point prior to that.

As soon as the deficit came to light, the senior management team in the newly formed Western Trust moved quickly to appoint a former director of finance from an external trust to conduct an immediate review. That review urgently identified the weaknesses in financial management, financial controls and reporting. On foot of that, the Western Trust developed a plan to implement the review's recommendations, overseen by the audit committee, and it has since been following that through.

In the meantime, fortunately, my Department was able to manage the £3.3 million deficit within the overall Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety budget for 2006-07. As a result, my Department still lived within its budget in that year. I do not take the matter lightly. My Department's normal policy is that any trust's deficit must be addressed and losses paid back to the Department. That is a fundamental principle, as it ensures that all health and social care organisations contain their spending within their allocated resources. It also means that the population of one trust area does not suffer because of overspending in other trusts. I do not tolerate deficits.

However, in this case, I acknowledged the unusual circumstances in which the deficit occurred. I also recognised the unique circumstances and challenges of the formation of a new organisation. Therefore, in November 2007, I decided that if the Western Trust was able to demonstrate sound financial management by breaking even in both 2007-08 and 2008-09, my Department would not seek to recover the deficit. So far, so good.

To the credit of the trust, it broke even in 2006-07, and there is considerable optimism that it will do likewise this year, but that remains to be seen. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the trust is making every effort. However, if the trust fails to break even in 2008-09, I remain determined that the £3.3 million will still have to be recovered. The trust still has some work to do, which is only fair, and the sum will be become available for reinvestment elsewhere in health and social care over the next few years. Should that be necessary, I make it absolutely clear that the trust will be required to achieve that without any adverse impact on patient services. In the event, I now have reasonable grounds to believe that that recovery of funds will not prove necessary.

During all that, there has been no adverse impact on staff jobs or on services provided to the population of the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust or the Western

Health and Social Care Trust area. My Department funded the deficit in 2006-07, and the Western Trust has not, so far, been required to reduce its spending by £3.3 million. Quite the contrary; the population of the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust area has benefited from increased spending on services amounting to £3.3 million in excess of the funds properly allocated to that trust. As I explained already, that will now need to be recovered only in the event of the trust failing to break even in the current year.

I remind Members of the substantial investment in new health and care facilities in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. During the next three years, over £58 million capital investment is committed for that trust.

That funding will assist in the delivery of two major hospital schemes in Enniskillen and Omagh. It will also address investment at Altnagelvin Area Hospital and be put towards a new health and care centre for Lisnaskea and a new residential respite unit in the Omagh area. That investment is part of a larger planned investment of £570 million in the Western Trust area over the next 10 years. All that will take place in the context of a very constrained capital expenditure environment. Over the 10-year period from 2008-09 to 2017-18, my Department has been allocated a total capital spend of almost £3.3 billion, against an identified need of some £7.8 billion.

In addition, I have invested £3 million in emergency services in Fermanagh and Tyrone, which includes additional ambulance cover in Omagh and Enniskillen, 24/7 ambulance service cover in the Castleterragh area and the roll-out of the paramedic-led thrombolysis, which can be life-saving for people suffering heart attacks.

Finally, I want to return briefly to the current efficiencies agenda, which was debated earlier today — as far as I could tell, Kieran McCarthy talked about nothing else. In case there is any doubt, the deficit under discussion is not about efficiency savings; rather, it is about the basic principle of living within one's budget. I know that all Members will agree on the importance of living within one's resources, and I expect and require all health bodies to do so. To spend more than one's budget only deprives others of their rightful due, and that cannot be tolerated. That is the simple principle that has guided my approach.

Given the unique circumstances in which the Western Trust found itself, I created a strong incentive for the trust to fix rapidly the problems that it inherited. I will reach a final view, based on the trust's financial performance, before the summer of 2009. I commend the trust on its success to date, which I expect it to sustain.

Mrs M Bradley: I welcome the Minister's comments. The pressure of debt should not be allowed

to inhibit health provision for people in the west. I hope that people there will get the same quality of healthcare as people elsewhere and that the debt that the trust has inherited does not stand in the way of that. I urge the Minister to continue to work to relieve the trust from the pressure that it is under as a result of the debt that it has had to take on.

In opening the debate, Tommy Gallagher called for a resolution to the problem as soon as possible. He said that he did not want the money that is needed to be taken from another budget, and he mentioned that there could be job cuts from Derry to Fermanagh. He said that it was totally unfair that the Western Trust had to carry a debt that was not of its own making.

Mr Buchanan said that, unlike other trusts, the Western Trust had to take on and clear debt, despite the fact that it operates in a deprived area. He said that the impact of the debt was already being felt, and he voiced his grave concerns for the future if it cannot be cleared. He pleaded with the Minister that the area be given the same opportunities as anywhere else.

Martina Anderson said that the motion was timely and that radical change was needed. She criticised the Westminster Government for making the cuts, although that comment is not really appropriate to the issue under discussion. She mentioned the closure of the Foyleville residential nursing home in Derry and asked the Minister what arrangements he would put in place for its residents. She said that there would be meetings with residents' families this week.

Mr Gardiner felt that the west has been given many services. That is correct, but we needed them, and we would not have been given them if we were not in real need. I thank the Minister for those services. However, I think that Mr Gardiner was on a bit of a different wavelength.

Mr McCarthy mentioned reductions in staff numbers and said that every trust area is having consultations on budgets, which I am sure is true. He mentioned muscular dystrophy and the extensive help that sufferers will need, and he urged the Minister to provide that help. He also said that he supported the motion.

Claire McGill rightly asked for clarification of the level of the trust's debt. She felt that it was important to deal with the remaining debt and that the west should not suffer as a result of it.

Lord Morrow asked whether any of the other trusts had inherited debt and, if so, how it was dealt with. He asked whether other trusts had started with a clean sheet. He said that the west is a rural area, and he asked the Minister to help rural areas. He added that those who live in the west often feel disadvantaged.

In response to Sam Gardiner's statement, Pat Ramsey said that the Minister's investments in the

north-west were made because that area needed them. He also said that the people of the west should not be expected to repay the debt, because the Department's conditions have been met. He said that the new trust has not gone over its budget and that the people of the west will suffer if the debt is not cleared.

I hope that the Minister acts as soon as possible to give the trust peace of mind so that it can work on the cuts that it already has to make, without having to think about what will happen in two years time. God knows what will happen to the people in the west if the debt is not cleared.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that as a result of the Review of Public Administration, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million; expresses concern about the impact of this debt on jobs and key services throughout the Trust area; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to deal with this matter.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Public-Sector Jobs in North Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you for the opportunity to raise an important issue for my constituency, which is also relevant to the priority setting of the Assembly and the Executive.

Growing the economy was the key priority of the Executive, and it remains so. In growing the economy, we must carefully balance and manage existing and new private enterprise with the public sector. The public sector remains one of our largest single employers and brings with it many opportunities. At a time of economic uncertainty due to the credit crunch, many people are delighted that there is such a strong public-sector economy in Northern Ireland, because it has created a sense of stability that is lacking in other parts of the country, other parts of the Kingdom and other parts of Europe.

Early last year, Sir George Bain was tasked with producing an independent review of policy on the location of public-sector jobs. He identified six parts of Northern Ireland that should be targeted for public-sector work. He did not make his proposals in an amateurish way by recommending that jobs be moved from Belfast, Bangor and Newtownards to Omagh, Londonderry and Ballymena. Instead, he made much more impressive suggestions and proposals, which took account of the entire public-sector workforce, the potential for growth in the public sector and the potential for new agencies. From that, he devised a scheme, which held that public-sector jobs be directed at new targeted areas.

One of those areas was in my North Antrim constituency — Ballymena and the surrounding area. The neighbouring constituency of East Londonderry, which you represent Mr Deputy Speaker, was also mentioned. That northern corner of Ulster was identified as a key area for employment opportunities. Bain stated that the key areas should benefit from:

“opportunities presented by the Review of Public Administration (i.e. the location of the new regional headquarter bodies);”

and that they should be located in key towns.

I remind Members that those key towns were Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen were identified as areas that should also be given consideration in the longer term.

Bain made other key recommendations that I shall touch on briefly. He stated:

“The following bodies should be candidates for relocation, providing a pool from which initial pilot projects should be identified”

and went on to outline 13 new opportunities; for example, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, with which a number of jobs will be associated; the Charity Commission; the Regional Health and Social Care Board; the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being; the Regional Business Services Organisation; and the Northern Ireland Civil Service shared services.

Furthermore, he identified a host of public and semi-public utility groups, such as the headquarters of Northern Ireland Water and the Environment Agency, which should be relocated. He identified, within those bodies, at least 3,000, and potentially 4,000, new employment opportunities that should be spread across those six key towns.

Bain also proposed:

“An Executive sub-committee should be established to lead the relocation initiative, and ministers and accounting officers should provide visible leadership and be held accountable for relocation activities within their departments.”

The Minister for Employment and Learning is present to answer on behalf of the Executive, and I welcome that. My party colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, is unable to be here as he has another engagement, and I appreciate Sir Reg Empey’s stepping into the debate on the Executive’s behalf. It would be appropriate if Members could hear progress reports on some of the key issues that have been identified. If it is not possible today to bring the Assembly up to speed, the Executive should, in the weeks ahead, bring the country up to speed as to how those recommendations and the Executive subcommittee are progressing and taking forward these important and serious proposals.

Sir George Bain went on to recommend:

“Staff rights, terms and conditions, and interests should be given due consideration in the relocation decision making process, and there should be early and sustained engagement with the trade unions.”

Many people across Northern Ireland, and particularly in my constituency, would be delighted to hear what progress is made on that vital report. When a report like this, identifying a key area for employment opportunities, is published, a great deal of local interest is stirred up about how it will be taken forward and how the prospect that it offers will be turned into profit.

There are almost 250,000 public-sector workers in Northern Ireland, of which 6,400 are engaged in Ballymena, with a further 2,000 in the rest of the constituency. That makes about 8,000 people employed in the public sector in North Antrim — not a lot of jobs, when you consider that there are 222,000 available. That is why I think it important that we target some of the 4,000 new jobs that will come on-stream as a result of the changes in government, and have them established in my constituency. Like other Members, I want my constituency to be identified as a key area, and to get a fair share.

What provoked me to establish this debate was not the publication of Sir George Bain’s important report; that took place a few months ago, and the report has since been under consideration. Rather, it was the rush to take from my constituency a number of the existing public-sector jobs. It amazes me that, though we are promised more public-sector jobs, Government — both this devolved Administration and the national one at Westminster — appear hell-bent on taking public-sector jobs from us and making opportunities even harder to obtain.

That is done against the backdrop of Northern Ireland’s facing one of the worst economic crises in its history.

The ‘Financial Times’ has carried out an in-depth analysis of employment and unemployment in Northern Ireland, and reported in its edition of Wednesday 21 2009, that dole queues on the south coast of England and in Ulster have doubled in the past six months. When compared with some of the newspapers in our own country that claim to carry out investigative journalism, that is a piece of real investigative journalism. Our newspapers would never uncover issues such as that.

The ‘Financial Times’ has examined the issue in depth, and has identified that Ulster and the south coast of England are facing one of the worst economic downturns in their history. Ballymoney, in my constituency, is identified as having a 99.3% increase in claimant cases to the Social Security Agency as a result of redundancies.

A large section of my constituency is starting to endure the ravages of unemployment. That will be made worse, not by any change in the housing market but as a result of decisions that the Executive and the Westminster Administration — our own Government — take to remove certain public-sector workers from their jobs.

Three important areas will suffer as a result of relocation issues. The first is the Health Service, in which a number of changes has already been identified. I received this week a letter from a constituent of mine Mr Chambers, who told me that Northern Ireland’s health and social services board will, as Members are aware, cease to exist in April 2009. After the publication

of the Bain Report, my constituent felt sure that some commissioning and support services would remain at local level and that there would, therefore, be continued employment of staff at local level. He has now heard that that may not be the case, with services being centralised in Belfast. That is a worrying matter for my constituent, because to travel to Belfast is not feasible for him.

That is only the detail of one of around 300 similar letters that I received on the Health Service-reform element of the review of public administration alone. People are extremely worried. Some people travel from as far away as Ballycastle to the County Hall in Ballymena to work in that service. People who travel from Ballymoney and parts of rural Ballymena to get to the County Hall for work are being told that under the review, jobs will be moved to Belfast, so they will have to travel to there. In many instances, that would double people's travel time to work, thus making their retaining their jobs unfeasible. I know that it is impossible for some people who are currently employed at County Hall to fulfil that criterion. I will return to that point in a moment.

Another area in which jobs are under threat and attack is in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) office in Ballymena. Our Westminster Government control those jobs. There are 84 people employed there at Kilpatrick House, all of whom have been told that because of a review into which they were brought very late in the day, that office will close. Those jobs will move to Ballymena, Newry and Londonderry, and employees will have to travel if they want to keep their jobs.

I said I would return to a point: 45 people currently employed in Kilpatrick House are women, most of them part-time workers. Most of them have reasons for wanting to work locally in Ballymena, the principal one being because they are also raising a family and, therefore, need to be able to collect their children from school. That is the reason why those women wanted part-time jobs. If those part-time jobs go, they cannot travel to Belfast to take up jobs that are simply being relocated — jobs that should never have been reviewed and moved from Ballymena.

If one looks at the Deputy Speaker's constituency of East Londonderry, one sees that Coleraine has two offices for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Likewise, Newry has two offices, yet Ballymena's one, centralised office is to be closed. That is a scandal, and one to which the Government at Westminster ought not to have put their hands. I hope that progress can be made. I know that there is little that the Executive can do about it, other than to complain to Westminster. That should, nonetheless, be done, because that proposed relocation is an unfair act.

I sit on the Finance Committee, and we are regularly told that the most discriminated section of the Northern Ireland workforce is Protestant males between the ages of 16 and 25. Opportunities for Protestant males between those ages should be greatest in areas such as Ballymena and North Antrim, where they make up a large section of the population. Yet the jobs — the opportunities — in the public sector and the Civil Service are being removed from the constituency, and that is completely ironic.

Public-sector jobs are under attack following the Social Security Agency's strategic business review case. In my constituency, that agency employs 42 people in the Ballymena office, and 12 in the Ballymoney one. Staff in those offices have been told that a review is under way and that, under devolution, those jobs are going. Those jobs are not being lost, however, just centralised to Belfast, and, to me, that is incredible. Once again — against the backdrop of the Bain Report, which said that more public-sector jobs are required in North Antrim and in Ballymena — we are being told that the rug is to be pulled out from underneath our feet as regards public-sector jobs in that area.

We must get to grips with that. A message has to go out to Margaret Ritchie, the Minister with responsibility for social security, to the Health Minister, and from the Executive to Westminster, stating very clearly that those jobs must be retained, built on and sustained. At a time when the economy is in crisis, we must ensure that public-sector jobs can be depended upon; they cannot possibly be brought to an end in the way that has been identified by the proposals.

I, therefore, look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I hope that he is able to give us some crumbs of comfort by way of a progress report on the Bain review. I hope that we very soon reach the point at which we start to see more public-sector opportunities develop as a result of the years of hard work that have brought us to this point.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for proposing this topic for debate. During the past three or four months — and I am sure that it is the same for other Members from the constituency — a day has hardly gone by in which I have not received letters concerning the loss of jobs in the public sector. The Member referred to a number of areas where that was the case, and it is not only the public sector in which jobs are at threat or being relocated to more urbanised areas outside our constituency. Obviously, a lot of jobs in the construction sector are at threat or have already been lost. Those statistics are reflected in the dole queues in Ballymoney.

Public-sector jobs are key to sustaining rural areas such as North Antrim. The Bain Report into public-sector jobs recognised that fact and concluded that at least 5,000 jobs should be moved away from Belfast, with North Antrim, and in particular Ballymena, getting its fair share. Ballymena already has many public-sector jobs in the health trust, the health and social services board, and the education and library board. Failure to retain or replace those public-sector jobs would be a disaster for the area. As the Member outlined, public-sector jobs are vital in times of economic difficulty.

The big losses that the area is facing include HMRC, where over 80 jobs are at risk; that would be a massive blow to the economy in the Ballymena area. The Northern Health and Social Services Board is one of the biggest employers in Ballymena, and workers there face great uncertainty. Last night, I met a constituent from Glenravel, who outlined the uncertainty that she and her family face. She works part time — she job-shares with a colleague — and it is unrealistic to expect her to travel to Belfast, day in, day out, for a job of that degree.

4.15 pm

The Social Security Agency's strategic business review is under way, but it no longer makes sense for jobs to be relocated out of North Antrim when jobs are being cut in Ballymena and Ballymoney. Dole queues have doubled in parts of the constituency; the Minister for Social Development must take cognisance of that and shelve those plans. This morning, I read in the 'Ballymena Guardian' that my colleague the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan is writing to the Social Security Agency about those proposals. He needs to speak to his party colleague who is a member of the Executive to ensure that those plans are shelved immediately, because they will cause massive stress in our constituency.

The onus is on the Executive to ensure that, especially in the present economic environment, the issue of public-sector jobs in North Antrim is dealt with delicately. There have been enough job losses in the area already. North Antrim is a large rural constituency, and it is unrealistic to expect someone from Waterfoot or Carry to travel to a part-time job in Belfast that has been relocated from Ballymena. The Executive must take into account the recommendations of the Bain Report and ensure that public-sector jobs are retained, built upon and not cut or relocated to Belfast and other areas. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for securing the Adjournment debate and for his excellent review of the situation. The Bain Report says that only one Northern Ireland Department's headquarters — the

Department of the Environment — should be relocated out of Belfast, and I understand that many other Members would want that to be located in their constituency. However, Ballymena has lost its hospital, which took away many jobs, and its military base, which took away much of the finance. Now it is to lose a lot of the other jobs in the immediate area.

The previous two Members who spoke in the debate have made it clear that it is not only people who live in Ballymena who will be affected, but people who live in the furthest ends of the constituency. Many people from places such as Moyle and Ballymoney come to work in Ballymena, and if those jobs are lost, where will those people go? Therefore, the economy of the area will be affected.

When an area loses public-sector jobs, it is only reasonable to expect that public-sector jobs should be relocated to that area at the earliest opportunity in order to undo any damage that has been done to the local economy. Members have already heard the statistics that show that there have been tremendous job losses in Ballymoney and Moyle. The knock-on effect for the shops and the area will be horrendous. If work is taken away from Ballymena, which is the core of where work is located in North Antrim, the knock-on effect will be devastating.

My other concern is that we have been told that the Government should consider the relocation of jobs out of Belfast because of the traffic situation. Those of us who have to travel through Sandyknowes every day know exactly the difficulties that will be faced. Will that situation be exacerbated by adding to the numbers of people who travel into that bottleneck and further down into Belfast? We need to be realistic and not add to the traffic congestion. Although it is the same distance, it is easier to travel from Belfast to Ballymena than it is to travel into Belfast from Ballymena.

I am sure that Mr Deputy Speaker — who is nodding his head — experiences that every day, as do I. We know the problems; will we add to them by taking jobs from Ballymena? I hope not.

People's concerns were mentioned in the debate, and people are concerned. I, like other Members, have had a tremendous number of requests by letter, phone and through individual contacts. Those people are concerned about their jobs, about young families, about the problem of the extra time involved in travelling to jobs in Belfast, and the lack of family time that will be available. In this day and generation, when we know that the family is so important, that is an issue that must be considered.

I have another concern about taking jobs out of Ballymena: Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, and their surrounding villages would become dormitories without a heart because there would be no places of

occupation. For that reason alone, we must take a very serious look at the entire public-sector jobs situation.

Mr O’Loan: I congratulate Mr Paisley Jnr for obtaining the Adjournment debate on a very important issue for our constituency. The contribution that public-sector jobs make to local economies, particularly in the more dispersed and rural parts of Northern Ireland, is very important, and the Government have a responsibility and a duty to behave equitably.

It may already have been quoted — I apologise for missing the start of the debate — that the Ballymena travel-to-work area has a low volume of public-sector jobs. Ballymena is an important regional hub; it is so defined in the regional development strategy and in the Bain Report, to which I will return later. Public-sector jobs are dispersed across North Antrim, but Ballymena is particularly important and will remain so.

Members know that the decision has been taken to close the HM Revenue and Customs office, with the loss of more than 70 jobs. Fears have been expressed about the effect of changes under the RPA to the Northern Health and Social Services Board, which employs 200; to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which has a similar level of employment; and the latest concern is around the strategic business review of the Social Security Agency. Therefore, there are major fears that even standing still will prove difficult.

The Minister’s decisions on health last week leave significant questions unanswered. He said that most staff who do not obtain work in the new headquarters of the various organisations involved will remain in their current locations, and that Ballymena is one of those. However, we do not know exactly to what proportion of the current staff that will apply, or the logistics involved, which leaves considerable room for concern.

I note that the Regional Health and Social Care Board headquarters will be based in Belfast, as will the headquarters of the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being, and the Regional Business Services Organisation. I see that the Patient and Client Council headquarters will be in Antrim. I have nothing against Antrim, but, above all else, we must have a strategic view of that decision, and that strategic view was provided by Bain. Any deviation from the Bain recommendations should worry us greatly.

One of Bain’s key statements is that when opportunities are taken to set up new organisations or to disperse or restructure existing ones — which, in effect, creates new organisations — there should be a presumption against housing those bodies in Belfast.

Health decisions — and they are decisions, not proposals — state explicitly that Bain’s recommendations have not been taken into

consideration because no Bain proposals have been brought to the Executive. Those decisions are unfortunate; I will say more on them later. Much that is, at yet, unknown about the statement that a significant number of jobs will remain local must become known.

As Members are aware, education and library boards are to be subsumed into the new education and skills authority. That poses a major question mark over many jobs at the North Eastern Education and Library Board.

Mr McKay mentioned, quite rightly, the fact that I have made a submission to the Social Security Agency about its strategic business review. I have major concerns about the content of that review, including its lack of a place for Ballymena. To reduce the town to a mere footnote in a major strategic document, which raises a question mark over what will be there, is strange and quite unsatisfactory.

Part-time staff whose jobs might be relocated, many of whom have caring responsibilities, have been told that their new jobs could be 20 or 30 miles away; that is far from satisfactory. However, I am aware that the process is consultative and that the Minister has made it clear that no decisions have been taken. I have absolute confidence that the Minister in that case will be one who listens.

I want to comment further on the Bain Report, in which I have a great deal of interest; I am hugely supportive of what Sir George Bain has done. He was commissioned to write the report by the previous Finance Minister, Peter Robinson, who is now the First Minister, and I believe that Mr Robinson was highly committed to that project. Bain says that his proposals are modest, realistic and capable of achievement. He maintains that 3,500 jobs, which are only about 3% of the public-sector establishment, could be relocated during a five-year period. That should not be undoable.

I was surprised and shocked by the attitude of the present Finance Minister, Mr Dodds, during the Assembly debate on the Bain Report; he was distinctly cool about its outcome. He foresees that it will give rise to many financial and value-for-money problems rather than seeing it as an opportunity to achieve equity. Significant ongoing restructuring provides opportunities to take action that may not have existed in the past and perhaps not in the future.

An Executive subgroup and a secretariat to service it were to be established to drive that process. That has not happened. Indeed, as yet, no report on adopting or implementing the Bain Report has come to the Executive.

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

Mr O’Loan: I was disappointed that almost as soon as its creation had been announced, the Victims’

Commission was set up in Belfast — against the standard, which should apply, that there should be a presumption against the establishment of new bodies there.

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

Mr O'Loan: I will leave the matter there, Mr Deputy Speaker. If Members want to take decisive action, I urge them — and in particular, the Member who introduced the debate and his colleagues — to speak seriously to the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the thorough implementation of the Bain Report.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The debate demonstrates that all parties in North Antrim are in unison, which, I suppose, should be celebrated. That, of course, is a matter of what flag one wants to fly.

Every Member here tonight wants to fly the one flag and say that, as far as possible, it is the responsibility of both the Executive and the British authorities to maintain people's jobs at this hour of crisis.

4.30 pm

It should be clearly underscored, as other Members have done, that the matter affects not only residents of Ballymena. We are dealing with people from as far away as the Moyle, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, the villages of that part of mid-Antrim, and those who travel from the other direction. However, most of the people whom I know who work in the affected offices come from the upper part of the county.

Those people are being told that they will have to travel as far as Belfast if they want to retain their jobs. I am sure that we can all imagine the effect that that would have on families. People already have an early enough start to get their children out to school and to their schoolhouse, and to get to their own place of employment in Ballymena.

Officials have suggested to me that the jobs are not being done away with and that they are all still there. They are not still there, because the workers concerned may as well have been told that they will not be able to maintain their job unless they can shift their home nearer to Belfast. Those jobs cannot be maintained by people who live in North Antrim. We must face up to that in defence.

I have talked to the highest authorities on the other side of the water — I will not name them — about an issue that I will also raise here today. When those matters came under consideration, one Department that has offices in Ballymena was told that its operation would not change. However, after a few days, and after discussions had taken place with other offices, my sources informed me that that Ballymena office was to be closed.

It had not been brought into the negotiations, and its voice had not been heard. Indeed, the voice that that office had listened to had provided reassurance that it was not on the list of proposed closures. That office has now been given the same message as the others. That is not right; everyone who has a stake in those jobs should have been treated equally. Why was everyone not treated equally? Why was each person not given the same opportunity to fight for the job that is his or her lifeblood?

Everyone in Northern Ireland is particularly interested in job security at this time, and many have never been unemployed before. Some people face a frightening horizon that is causing much heart-searching. God alone knows the pressures on families, who fear that they may have no employment and lose what they enjoyed before. We must face up to that terrible and serious threat.

I welcome the fact that all parties are united on the issue, and I trust that the Executive will hear and heed our representations. However, we must particularly put as much pressure as possible on the United Kingdom Government at Westminster, who know the consequences of the report that Mr O'Loan has mentioned. They know what was supposed to happen, but that matter was not taken care of, and it seems that the road that they intended to take is blocked and that substantial barriers have been put in the way of ever removing that blockage.

I trust that the authorities will heed the debate and that people employed in public-sector jobs in North Antrim will be able to contribute to the needs of the Province, as they have so ably done in the past.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I apologise on behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is unable to attend today. He has asked me to respond on behalf of his Department, and I am happy to do so.

I welcome this Adjournment debate. I thank the Member who tabled the debate and all Members who contributed. It is the second time in the past few months that the Assembly has had the opportunity to discuss public-sector jobs. I recall that a similar motion was debated on 21 October 2008, soon after Professor George Bain published his detailed report on the independent review of policy on the location of public-sector jobs.

Unsurprisingly, during both debates, Members discussed the complexity of the location of jobs. Those complexities are reinforced by the genuine interests of Members and their constituents. As an elected representative, I have the same responsibility as the Member for North Antrim Ian Paisley Jnr — to do the best for my constituents, the local economy and employment levels, particularly during these difficult

times. Similarly, given the difficult financial circumstances, we must be conscious of value for money when debating the size and location of the public sector.

Given the current economic climate, the importance of the retention of employment and the creation of jobs has probably never been more keenly felt in Northern Ireland. Professor Bain's report — which was published in early autumn — emphasised the need for better regional economic balance and recommended the establishment of public-sector jobs in six locations, including Ballymena and Coleraine. Therefore, Mr Paisley Jnr has the comfort of knowing that those areas might benefit in the event of any future movement of public-sector jobs or Civil Service jobs.

However, Professor Bain acknowledged the difficulties of relocation and recommended that, given the varying degrees of success and failure of other relocation projects and the absence of evidence in the rest of the UK or in the Republic of Ireland to prove the case, the concept should be piloted. He suggested the introduction of several pilot projects, the findings of which should determine long-term policy on location. Furthermore, he was keen to pursue the concept of flexible working in order to address issues such as efficiency, work/life balance and sustainability.

During the previous debate on public-sector jobs, it is fair to say that the House broadly accepted Professor Bain's principle of relocation. Moreover, his report was acknowledged as a useful framework to help the Executive reach decisions on location. Those decisions have still not been taken. However, the debate emphasised the divergence of views between those who want to pursue a policy of relocation proactively and those who prefer to progress more cautiously. Subsequently, a motion was passed that called upon the Finance Minister to report to the Executive and to the Assembly on how to address the matter of location, taking account of the various consequences, not least value for money and affordability.

As the Finance Minister said at the time; difficult times require difficult choices, and it does not get much more difficult than the financial and economic situation in which we currently find ourselves.

As I understand it, Minister Dodds is well advanced in preparing a paper for discussion by the Executive, having considered the views expressed by Members, other Ministers, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Representations have also been made by a number of local councils, including those in Ards, Armagh, Banbridge, Down, Dungannon, Limavady, Lisburn and North Down, all of which are keen to encourage employment in their areas and are concerned that they have been excluded by Professor

Bain. I look forward to seeing the Minister's proposals on how he intends to move the debate on.

I will now return to the specific issue of North Antrim; in particular, the Ballymena travel-to-work area. I understand that the number of public-sector jobs there is 14 per 100 people in the working-age population, a figure that is similar, interestingly, to the ratio in the Coleraine travel-to-work area, which covers part of the North Antrim constituency. That means that Ballymena and Coleraine are faring better than, for example, mid-Ulster, Newry, and Enniskillen, but are lagging behind Craigavon, Londonderry and Omagh, where there is a higher incidence per head of the working-age population.

Ballymena also hosts the main offices of a number of public-sector bodies, including health and education bodies; therefore, until final decisions are taken on the composition and location of, for example, review of public administration-related organisations, it is inevitable that public-sector staff there, as in other parts of Northern Ireland, will be concerned about their future. It is therefore important that those concerns are understood, and managed appropriately.

I will now deal with a number of the points that Members made during the debate. As stated by the proposer of the motion, Professor Bain did not recommend moving jobs from one area to another. He recommended that the headquarters of new public-sector bodies should be located in those areas. As I have said, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has a paper at an advanced stage of preparation, which he intends to bring to the Executive shortly.

A number of Members, including Mr O'Loan, made the point that, because there is no firm Executive policy, there is nothing for organisations to take into account when considering locations, other than their own particular reasoning and rationale. No Executive-wide policy on the issue has been determined. Until we receive that paper from the Finance Minister, have a debate in the Executive, and reach a conclusion, we are left with that situation. However, I assure Members that that is not far distant.

Mr O'Loan also described the Minister as being cool about the report. I think that that is unfair to him, because he is bringing forward a paper, and we will only be able to measure that when we see what is actually proposed, and what the downstream consequences are for each individual area.

Reverend Coulter made the point that when people talk about jobs in Ballymena, that does not mean that the jobs are filled by people from Ballymena. A number of Members, including Dr Paisley and others, made the point that North Antrim is a large constituency, geographically, and has a dispersed rural community. People travel significant distances,

perhaps from far north of Ballymena, to work there. Consequently, moving to other locations will have a significant impact.

A number of Members referred to the Social Security Agency's proposals. I will certainly bring this debate to the attention of the Minister for Social Development, because I know that the issue affects people throughout the community in a number of offices. I can say that the officials from my Department who operate in those offices will all be staying in their current locations. Sadly, we are actually experiencing a growth in those jobs, because of current circumstances. Things will not be changing with respect to the Department for Employment and Learning on that front.

4.45 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter also talked about the area becoming full of dormitory towns. That is a phenomenon of the developed world, in which the working heart of an area is suddenly transformed by housing estates from which people travel in and out. That takes the heart and soul out of an area, and we have seen that happen in towns in the Province.

On the health side, a commissioning group will remain in Ballymena. The headquartering of bodies is one thing, but there will not be an evacuation of health-related jobs from the Ballymena area. The precise details have still to be determined, but it is my understanding that a commissioning group will be retained and will operate in that area.

The proposer of the Adjournment topic mentioned several bodies, but until such times as an Executive-wide policy is in place, those bodies, if they are taking decisions on their location, will do so without a reference or compass to guide them in any particular area. People are expressing concern. We have had a flood of correspondence from other district councils claiming that they have been left out. Sir George Bain identified six areas that should be the recipients of 3,000 to 4,000 new jobs, although I suspect that there will be intense pressure to cap or stop public-sector growth in the coming months. However, Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine were named as the areas that would benefit from such a policy if it were to be introduced. Therefore some areas will feel that they could lose out. However, the purpose of Sir George Bain's report is not simply to strip jobs out of one place and send them to another.

Some Members referred to the Revenue and Customs jobs in Ballymena. That situation is controlled by the Treasury at Westminster, but I have little doubt that the Department of Finance and Personnel will draw that matter and this debate to the Treasury's attention. The loss of 70 or 80 jobs is substantial, but not all those people will lose their jobs; some may be able to travel.

There is a limit to the economic viability of travelling to work; that applies to the Social Security Agency's proposals as well. Civil Service guidelines outline the terms and conditions under which people would be asked to move. It is ironic that even as we encourage green environmental policies, there are proposals to increase commuting. That is something of a contradiction.

As Dr Paisley said, there is no doubt that all parties are united and are reflecting their constituents' concerns on this matter. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will receive a full report on this debate so that he can take Members' views into account when completing the paper that he will bring to the Executive shortly.

We must direct our attention to obtaining a modest and phased process that will ensure balance. There will be no knee-jerk reactions; the attempts at significant movements that were made in the Irish Republic did not work terribly well and, indeed, have almost ground to a halt.

The Scottish Parliament have succeeded in moving approximately 2,500 jobs, but half of those jobs were moved from Edinburgh to Glasgow. Obviously, that is not the type of provision that Members had in mind.

We must be realistic; this will be a slow process. If I understand Members correctly, they want a fair share and some equity in all of this. We all know that policies develop over a long period of years; bodies start here and end there. Under the review of public administration, we face a major period of change, and there will be knock-on effects from that. Many decisions remain to be taken. It is a mistake to assume that they will necessarily be bad for North Antrim; I do not believe that that will be the case.

I thank Members for their participation, and I assure them that I will make the Minister of Finance and Personnel fully aware of their concerns. I wait, with interest, for the Minister's paper to be presented to the Executive and the discussions that we will have on that.

Adjourned at 4.52 pm.

Committee Stages

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

27 January 2009

DISEASES OF ANIMALS BILL (NIA 22/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr William Irwin
Mr Francie Molloy

Witnesses:

Ms Colette Connor	}	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Colette McMaster		
Mr Pat Millen	}	Departmental Solicitor's Office

The Chairperson (Dr W McCrea): We return to the Committee's consideration of the Diseases of Animals Bill. Clause 1 relates to the extension of the power to slaughter. The Committee advised the Department that, in so far as the principles of the Bill include enhancing powers to deal with disease outbreaks, it is within the scope of the Bill to amend Article 16 or Schedule 2 of the 1981 Order, so that it will become mandatory for the Department to act in relation to specified diseases.

The Department has noted the Committee's intention to hold an inquiry into the eradication of bovine TB and has offered its full support for that. Department officials intend to participate in the inquiry and discuss its outcomes. The Department has asked that, because the issue is cross-cutting, the inquiry's terms of reference be sufficiently broad to allow for the inclusion of all views from interested stakeholders and Departments.

I advise Department officials that the inquiry will allow for all relevant views to be presented to the

Committee and, as it may lead to the Committee introducing primary legislation, the inquiry will be open and transparent. That is normal for this Committee — we are known for being open and transparent and we hope that that approach will be carried into all other quarters relating to this issue.

The net result of the Committee's decision to hold an inquiry is that clause 1 will go forward unamended at this stage.

Ms Colette McMaster (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): The Department welcomes the fact that the inquiry will be open and transparent. Given that the Committee's recommendation might result in a mandatory requirement on the Department, we must draw the Committee's attention to the fact that it is very important that the inquiry can demonstrate that any measures that emerge will be cost effective. We look forward to participating in the inquiry and we will provide evidence and witnesses as required.

The Chairperson: We will also look to the Department to explain how it is cost effective to allow the spread of a disease to continue and to simply pay compensation all the time — to the tune of millions upon millions of pounds, year after year. We will be looking to the Department to justify the money that, in some members' opinions, has been wasted over the years. Perhaps we will hold an inquiry into that as well.

Ms McMaster: I agree that we must look at the whole picture and at the medium and long-term costs.

The Chairperson: We will move on to clause 4, which deals with powers of entry. The Department has agreed to amend the clause to include a code of practice. However, rather than make amendments to the code of practice by means of subordinate legislation, the Department proposes to include a statutory obligation in the Bill that will require the Department to consult with the Committee and such persons and organisations as is necessary. Although that is not exactly what the Committee requested, I believe that it meets with our overall wish.

Ms Colette Connor (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Going down the subordinate legislation route — that is, drafting secondary legislation — can be a fairly lengthy and protracted process. However, with the statutory obligation that we have proposed, if we need to make an amendment to the code quickly we will simply engage with the Committee and the key stakeholders and then present an amendment to the code, rather than having to create subordinate legislation. The code is not secondary legislation, so it is difficult to amend it using that mechanism.

Mr Elliott: We have had a long, laborious debate on that aspect of clause 4. Although we are not getting all

that we want, we must recognise that the Department has, at least, moved on the matter to a small degree. Perhaps the Department has not gone as far as I would have liked, but that is how it goes.

The Chairperson: Clerk, did the Committee raise any other matters in relation to clause 4 that we should consider?

The Committee Clerk: The Committee suggested three or four different safeguards. The code of practice was one of the main issues, but members also raised the issue of the search liaison officer. Originally, that person was going to be an appointee of the Department, but the Department has agreed that that person should be totally independent.

The Ulster Farmers Union and the Young Farmers Clubs of Ulster called for third-party oversight, and the Department has conceded to the Committee in respect of that. That will be encompassed within the code of practice that is to be developed.

Finally, in order that occupiers are made aware of the range of powers available to those conducting the searches and of the requirement that searches be conducted under warrant, the Department is undertaking to provide occupiers with a document outlining those powers at the time of search. That document will also be published on the Internet.

Mr Doherty: The Department has conceded the right to have a third person present, but is it still insisting on allowing an exception to that requirement if a health and safety concern exists?

Ms Connor: Originally, the arrangement was that a third party would be present unless our central enforcement team was concerned about health and safety or about the possibly of the investigation being compromised. I can reassure Mr Doherty that the Minister has decided to remove those grounds from the draft code of practice that will be brought to the Committee in due course. Earlier, the Chairperson mentioned openness and transparency and, in line with those principles, the Minister has asked for that provision to be removed.

Mr Doherty: I was concerned that that provision could be abused.

The Chairperson: To be fair, it is true that the Department has made a considerable number of concessions in order to address the Committee's concerns.

Mr Molloy: On the issue of the code of practice, the Department is saying that it cannot be written into the Bill, but it will be referred to. It is very important that farmers are notified of that code of practice at an early stage, and not just when someone arrives at the gate. It would then be too late, because no one will sit and read it at that stage.

It is important that that code of practice be published for farmers now. I have found in various circumstances that the communication between the Department and farmers on an ongoing basis does not seem to be particularly good, and that a lot of farmers are not made aware of important issues such as testing, and qualifications and requirements that may be needed. It is therefore very important that the code of practice is in the hands of farmers as soon as the legislation is in place.

The Chairperson: The Department has agreed that the code of practice will be published immediately when the legislation is enacted, and that the occupier will be issued with a copy of that code at the time of any search. It will certainly be in the hands of farmers long before that. The farmers' unions should be advised to ensure that their members are aware that it is on the Internet, so that everyone is clear about its contents.

Mr Molloy: Would it not be possible for the Department to publish that code as a document, and to provide every herd holder with a paper copy? Not everybody has access to the Internet, whereas everyone could have access to a paper copy.

The Chairperson: The certainly could be done. There is no doubt that it could be included with some other communication rather than as an extra communication.

Ms Connor: It will be included in the next letter that goes out to herd keepers, once the legislation is finally approved.

The Chairperson: That is good. We will move on to clause 6, which deals with fixed penalties. The Department has stated that it will not accept the Committee's request for an appeals system, and now intends withdrawing the clause totally from the Bill. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Clause 8 deals with biosecurity guidance. The Committee sought the agreement of the Department to amend the clause to remove the link to the withholding, either in whole or in part, of compensation in respect to an animal slaughtered under the 1981 Order where, in the judgement of DARD, the owner or person in charge of the animal failed to act in accordance with published biosecurity guidance. The Department has agreed to that amendment, but reserves the right to return to the Committee at a later stage if admissibility in court does not prove to be an effective deterrent. I would expect that if it was not a proper deterrent, the Committee would have to look at that afresh. We want to ensure that there are deterrents, and that everything is available in the armoury of the Department to act in an appropriate way. Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I ask the departmental officials to return for the formal scrutiny and agreement of all the clauses. That will require the Department to draft the proposed amendments and forward them to members for consideration. Is that possible?

Ms Connor: Yes. Obviously, the drafting of the clauses will have to be done in conjunction with the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which will liaise directly with the draftsmen. The Department's legal advisor will have a role in that as well.

Mr T Clarke: Is it the case that the legislation will not be in place until the code of practice is also in place?

Ms Connor: The code of practice is separate from the legislation; it is mentioned in the Bill, but it will not appear in the actual legislation.

The Chairperson: The Bill will refer to it, however.

Ms Connor: It will refer to it, but the draft code of practice will come before the Committee for scrutiny as a separate document. It will be four or five pages long, and our colleagues in the central enforcement team are currently drafting that to take account of some of the amendments that have been outlined. Members will see it separately from the legislation.

Mr T Clarke: Will that be ready to run at the same time as the legislation is in place?

Ms Connor: It should most definitely be, yes. It has been worked on since last week.

The Chairperson: It would be difficult to enact a Bill without a code of practice in place. The Bill will refer to the code of practice; therefore, a code of practice must be in place. The Committee has agreed that with the Department. Everything must be tied down; nothing can be left to chance.

Is there anything else you would like to add, Colette?

Ms Connor: On clause 11, the Committee has raised points about the need for tougher sentences in cases involving deliberate infection. The Department has raised that issue with the Northern Ireland Office, and is awaiting its response.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that. I thank the witnesses for their presence and for their forbearance with the Committee while it has gone through the Bill. Members have been open and transparent in their thoughts and remarks. Thank you for listening and for taking our concerns back to your Department and Minister. The Committee is deeply appreciative.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

28 January 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr Gavin Boyd	}	Chief Executive Officer Designate of the Education and Skills Authority
Dr Mark Browne		Education and Skills Authority Implementation Team
Ms Catherine Daly Mr John McGrath	}	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): I welcome the chief executive officer designate of the education and skills authority (ESA), Gavin Boyd; John McGrath from the Department of Education; and Mark Browne, who is the programme director of the education and skills authority implementation team (ESAIT). The two issues for discussion today are designing modern education services; and the outline business case.

Mr Gavin Boyd (Chief executive officer designate of the education and skills authority): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Committee. The first part of the presentation is to update you on what we have been doing on the design of the education and skills authority.

Members will be aware that this is the first major reorganisation of the administration of education in 35 years. Over that period, significant change has taken place. For example, political change has taken place, so the new structures of corporate governance need to reflect the political reality of devolution, as opposed to that which was set up, to some extent, to offset the perceived democratic deficit of the 1970s. On the other hand, local understanding and insight are important in informing decisions; that was one of the great strengths of the system.

There has been huge technological change, and there is an opportunity to reflect the impact of technology in the design of the new organisation and in designing services. The existing system is over-engineered; there is significant duplication of effort, particularly in management. As we create the new organisation, we will move quickly to deal with that. As I will touch on later, the outline business case indicates that initial savings of £20 million a year will be generated. We are happy to work through the latest thinking on those savings.

However, apart from the issue of modernisation, and the review of public administration (RPA) was a primary plank in modernisation, simplification and generating savings, it has become clear that the performance of the system from an educational perspective is very variable. I do not have to rehearse the issues. Quite simply, too many young people do not achieve the educational outcomes or have the personal development opportunities that they should. That is a personal tragedy for the individual, but it is also a disaster for our economy and our society.

This is a huge change programme. To be successful, we must have a thorough process that takes into account international best practice and the detailed knowledge of those involved in the system. We have designed a process that is inclusive, involving hundreds of staff and trades union representatives. It is open and methodical, and we report regularly to the widest possible group through the use of our website, which gets a great many hits.

We hold ourselves open to account and to good ideas; this side of the table does not have a monopoly on good ideas. We are wary of jumping to quick solutions that have not been fully thought through. We make no apology for taking a methodical approach as we work our way through such a huge change process.

I will hand over to Mark Browne, who will take you through the detail of what we have been doing for the past six months or so.

Dr Mark Browne (Education and skills authority implementation team): As Gavin said, this is a massive change programme. In working with the Department, the implementation team has been keen to

set out for the staff in the organisations, and others with an interest in the change, how it can be managed successfully. To assist with that, we have developed a model of change, which we have called transfer, transform and innovate. For all the various services that will be coming into the new authority, that model of change sets out the risks associated with change, the benefits associated with the change and the pace at which change might be delivered.

We have identified 20 key services that will be delivered by the ESA and classified them into those three areas. The first area involves those services that have direct contact with users and are vital in ensuring that there is continuity from day one; for example, transport and school meals. In the early stages, the bulk of those services will transfer largely as they stand, with delivery at local level remaining much the same. However, there will be change to ensure that we bring the five or six different management structures into one regional structure.

The second category involves those services that need to transform. Those are typically back-office services, which are critical to the success of the organisation but which are largely unseen by those who use them. In those areas, there is real opportunity to eliminate the duplication that Gavin referred to. For example, the six financial systems will be brought into one system, and, in doing so, we will improve the quality and the timeliness of information and we will release resources to be used in other parts of the education system closer to the front line.

The third area involves those services where innovation is required, which include the parts of the education service that parents and children, and others involved in the education system, look at to see improvement: educational quality; school improvement; services to help children and young people to overcome barriers to learning; and the education estate, which includes the quality of the schools, their size and location.

Those are the key areas in which educational benefits will flow in the chain from the ESA and key areas in which innovation is needed. That is the broad model that we have set out for staff so that they can see how we will manage the change and the risk at the same time.

To drill down into a little more detail, we must look at each of the 20 service areas to decide what we want to achieve and how best we can design the organisation to accomplish that. We set out a four-stage process, beginning with a clarification of what we are trying to achieve, and the vision aims and objectives of the area, and we moved into the service-delivery model required to deliver that. We then moved into the number of people and the skills and resources that they require,

the organisational structure and location. That is based on the form-follows-function approach.

We have done that through an extensive programme of engagement with staff in the sector. It began with a launch in April 2008, where we had several hundred managers together in one room. We were told that that was the first time that managers from all organisations had come together to discuss such educational issues.

We took that forward through a series of workshops last May and June, when we looked at stage 1 about the visions, aims and objectives for each area. We have moved into stage 2, where we have drawn out the detail of how services are operated, and we made proposals on how we think they should operate under the ESA. We finished that process just before Christmas, when we engaged with 450 senior- and middle-management staff and trades unions, which were represented at all the workshops, to look at all those service areas and to consider and test our proposals.

We want to refine those proposals and move into stages 3 and 4: sizing the functions, identifying the skills, and moving into the organisational design and location aspect. The key to those service-delivery models is looking at a regional/local approach. We need to look at what services are best delivered regionally to bring consistency to ensure that standards are met, to ensure that there are efficiencies and to release resources; and what is best delivered locally.

In each of the service-delivery models we have set out regional and local functions and have tested that with the staff who are delivering the services. What came out of the workshops, along with a great deal of detailed comment, was a strong endorsement that a regional/local approach made sense and could work. That is what we are working on to develop in more detail.

A key feature is the local area teams. We want to have multi-disciplinary, integrated teams that will be delivering key services close to schools and providing the support that schools need. That would include school-improvement practitioners, behavioural support, educational psychologists, youth co-ordinators and early-years co-ordinators; all will be in local teams close to the schools, youth-work settings and early-years settings, providing the support that they need. They would be headed up by a local team leader, who would represent them and be the point of contact for those who have questions or queries about the service delivery and the services available in an area. We are working through a bit more of the detail on that.

We are finishing the second stage of a four-stage process. We are moving from the future service-delivery models into sizing the functions and looking at the skills and resources. We will then move into the detailed organisational structure below the top level to

consider where those functions should best be located and organised. That is the process to date.

It has been an extensive process of engagement, which has been welcomed by the staff who have been engaged in it. One interesting point was that the first round of workshops attracted some 350 staff; in the second, that increased to 450. We had to work hard to contain the numbers so that we could manage. There is interest in the organisations and a willingness to engage, and we have been heartened by the expertise that we have been able to draw on. We will continue to draw on that throughout the process.

Mr Boyd: We will stop at this stage and let members take over.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Do we now have any sense of the draft cost of the organisational structure showing the local and regional staff allocations?

Mr Boyd: I will answer that from a slightly different angle. As we have worked through the exercise to date, we have affirmed the work that was done in the outline business case. We will talk more about that later on. It has made us very confident in the figures that were originally generated by the business case, which is, by definition, an outline.

Now that we have entered into more detailed work, we are more confident. We have not yet sought to cost, in detail, the split between local and regional services; we simply have not got to that part of the exercise.

Take, for example, the payroll function. There is no argument against changing the 30-odd payrolls to two payrolls; that is a sensible approach. The most important payroll issue for staff is that they are paid the correct amount of money on time. That process can be completed quickly. Some 240 people are involved in paying staff; it is a large and complex exercise that is spread across many areas. We have made some modest assumptions about how moving to a single function will affect those numbers. That exercise has yet to be completely scythed and, as Mark said, it is the next stage of our work. That is one example of a regional service that will, in time, operate from a single location.

As Mark said, on the other side of the coin, we have been considering which services should be delivered locally. We have been discussing our views on school support, educational psychologists, behavioural welfare and the Youth Service with the Department; the music service alone involves 450 staff. We need to plan carefully. We have not yet completed the detail exercise, but we will work through it during the next few months.

The Chairperson: You tested approximately 20 draft future service-delivery models through 11 workshops in November and December. Have you

agreed the regional/local functional split in services? What feedback have you received?

Mr Boyd: For each of the workshops we produced our view of what the regional/local split should be, and in every case it was affirmed. During the past year, we learned that although it is clear that everyone accepts the logic behind a single finance department, a strong case was made that local support must be immediately available to schools to allow them to manage their own budgets. That work is being carried out by the local management of schools (LMS) officers in the boards. The model that we have developed allows for a single finance function and allows finance personnel to be dispersed to ensure that they are immediately and readily available to schools. They will be included in local teams.

During the past year, we have received feedback from governors' conferences and school principals to the effect that they need locally and immediately available human resources advice. Schools that were experiencing problems wanted to talk to an expert rather than a faceless person whom they did not know; they wanted somebody to come to the school and discuss the matter. That finding is built into our plans for local areas.

We have built and tested a model from talking to people. In fact, some groups have been ahead of us. Those involved in the cleaning service presented a plan of how to organise a regional cleaning service. That is an example of people who are responsible for existing services grabbing the bouncing ball and solving that problem on our behalf. Several other services have replicated that approach.

The Chairperson: It is one thing for such groups to present ideas on how to progress, and I appreciate that you cannot give a blank cheque on those issues. However, one concern and criticism of the process has been that you could outline a proposed model, but because there is a predetermined plan for the regional or subregional functions, proposals will not receive the courtesy and consideration that they ought.

Mr Boyd: From our perspective, that is not the case. In my opening remarks, I said that people on this side of the table do not have a monopoly on good ideas. However, we measure all proposals against examples of best practice. For example, between 50 and 60 staff are involved in the procurement of goods and services.

We measured the procurement budget of £130 million and the size of our staff against the number typically involved in the procurement of goods and services according to international best practice. We found that the number is considerably less than 60. We must therefore match our best thoughts with what we can aspire to on the basis of international best practice.

Mr D Bradley: The Chairperson asked one of my questions, but sure.

The Chairperson: How sad. I apologise.

Mr D Bradley: How local is local? How many local area teams will there be?

Mr Boyd: There is still discussion about that. From our perspective, the principle is that services should be delivered at the closest possible point to schools and pupils.

Even in our existing services we have some sub-regional teams. We want educational psychologists located and working with small clusters of schools so that they are immediately available. We foresee circumstances in which educational psychologists are based in local communities of high need. That does not mean that that local team will operate on its own: it might be a subgroup of a slightly bigger team, but it should be determined by need and the importance of providing immediate access to services to make a difference to children.

Mr D Bradley: That does not really answer my question. How can you produce a credible business plan if you do not know how many local area teams there will be?

Mr Boyd: There are two aspects to that. First, how we group services for management purposes is different from how we plan to deliver them.

Mr D Bradley: Generally, management will be grouped, as far as possible, regionally. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Boyd: No. The strategy should be regional and should be followed consistently across the region.

We have some 150 educational psychologists in the service, and we must ensure that they are as close as they can be to the need of the community. Over the next few months, we will decide how to cluster those psychologists for management purposes, taking into account not just the management of the organisation, but the need to interface with communities. That is something that the Department will want to examine. I am sure that it will be the subject of further discussions.

Mr D Bradley: When will we know the extent of the local area teams?

Mr Boyd: We will work hard on that over the next few months. We will pass it to the Department, which will want to consider and discuss it with various parties.

Mr D Bradley: Surely, that is one of the most pressing matters for schools. Schools will ask whether the ESA is like an elephant somewhere in the distance or will it be near hand and accessible when schools need it?

Mr Boyd: The model is designed to ensure that services that need to be close to the school and the pupil will be accessible. We are absolutely committed to that.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): We touched on that several weeks ago when we discussed the new organisation's structure. We made it clear, in line with what Gavin said, that the Minister's view is that services should be available as locally as possible. The Department's view is that the number of local area teams should be grouped, perhaps, in six areas; however the service — human resources, finance, educational welfare officers or educational psychologists — should be as close to the school as is managerially possible. We have rehearsed this issue before. It will depend on circumstances, but the general theme of our work is subsidiarity. As much as possible will be available locally, and if back-office services can be centralised, they will be.

The Chairperson: Can I tease that out a little? What consideration has been given by the implementation team and the Department to the pressures that schools are experiencing with regard to educational psychologists?

As Gavin said, there are some 150 educational psychologists in the system. However, demand and need are huge, with many people on waiting lists. Will those 150 educational psychologists merely be spread out and instructed to work with the schools to which they are closest?

In your workshops you are bound to have been told about the structures and the associated problems. What cognisance is being taken of the problems involved in developing the delivery of the system? We could end up with a far worse situation than the present one.

Mr Boyd: I will comment from the point of view of the implementation team, and John will give the Department's perspective. Some months ago, I spent several hours talking to the east Belfast primary principals' group; our conversation was dominated almost entirely by access to special support for children. Those principals asked me: what is the point of providing psychology services three years after a need has been identified? The child will have left the school and there is nothing more that the school can do.

The principals became quite emotional; they are doing their best for their kids, but the services are not available. From a planning perspective, my first question is whether we have the right number of educational psychologists. How do we know whether 150 is the right number? The answer is not available to me in the system.

Mr D Bradley: If they cannot deliver the service needed, surely that is a good indication that there are not enough educational psychologists.

Mr Boyd: That is one possibility. Another possibility, however, is that we have not organised services or allocated priorities correctly. Most of us around the table went through the education system at a time when there were very few educational psychologists. Some people in the system argue that we now ask someone to come in to help with issues that used to be dealt with by primary school teachers in class. That is the sort of issue that the Department is considering from a policy perspective.

We are setting out to check various issues. Is the number of educational psychologists right? Is the organisation of the service right, or do educational psychologists spend too much time writing reports and having meetings rather than dealing with children? That issue has had a huge impact on me personally, and it is something that we have to consider. If more educational psychologists were required, funding would have to come from savings made elsewhere in the system. I could talk about this for the rest of the morning, Chairperson, but you would not want me to do that. I will hand over to John to provide the Department's perspective.

Mr McGrath: I will make the same points in reverse. There are two strands to the issue. The first is: how many educational psychologists are needed? Perhaps more are needed, but the resources need to be found, and that is a priority issue. The second strand is developing the best managerial and professional way of deploying skilled and specialised staff such as educational psychologists; Gavin has rehearsed that point.

There is a coincidence of two issues. Gavin's job is to create an organisation that makes the best use of the available resources and, as far as possible, frees up resources from support services that can be directed to front-line services such as educational psychologists. Ultimately, it will be up to the Department and the Minister, through the budgetary process, to maximise the amount of resources going to education. Gavin cannot come up with an optimum level of staffing that exceeds the amount of resources that are available to him, but he will seek to come up with the most effective deployment of those resources.

Mr Lunn: You will deserve an award if you successfully convert 30 IT systems into one or two. It seems that every other Department or organisation that has attempted to make such a change has either experienced major teething problems or made a complete Horlicks of it. Will that be in the Hansard report? *[Laughter.]* Millions of pounds have been spent, but systems have not been in place.

The Child Support Agency comes to mind, but there are many others. In the Public Accounts Committee, we have heard about so many disasters. How confident

are you that, from day one, your systems will be robust enough to do the job?

Mr Boyd: I thought that that was an IT term.

Let me make an observation, since I have had the opportunity to examine existing systems in some detail. I used to work for a private-sector company that invested heavily in IT systems to do the drudgery of everyday work, which I call the "heavy lifting". The organisation also invested heavily in IT because it allowed the company to operate at what I considered a reasonable level.

My observation is that, educational technologies aside, investment in ordinary IT services to support human resources and finance has simply not been adequate. As a result, we have found that people are working incredibly hard under very stressful conditions to do jobs that in many other organisations are done by technology.

There is a huge frustration that human-resources systems cannot provide sufficient details about staff, such as where they live, to plan for the future. Therefore, we simply must invest significantly in IT to develop a modern organisation. That will drive some of the savings. I am aware of the track record in public investment in the technology to which you referred, and I am also aware that Hansard is recording this session. There are ways in which those issues can be delivered on.

I am conscious of the fact that there are people in this room who know more about technology than I do, but it is not difficult, in the twenty-first century, to have a single payroll system. It is not difficult to have a human-resources record system. Those are the challenges that we must face.

Mr Lunn: As regards other organisations, the problem seems to have been that the specification was not set out properly at the start. No matter whose fault it is, it is the commissioning body, which you represent, that must pay for and mop up the extra costs, even though, in some cases, an outside agency provided the systems that spelt out the specifications. Are you totally confident about this system?

Mr Boyd: You identified the vital importance of being what we call "the intelligent customer". A company cannot subcontract to another company the job of telling the first company what it needs. A company must be able to define its needs and to hold the supplier to account if it fails to make payments.

Mr Lunn: If people do not get paid in a year's time, we will talk again. I am glad that you are confident.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for your presentation. I know that the issue of educational psychologists was used by way of example only, but surely that is, or should be,

part of an ongoing review by the Department. I am surprised that there may be such a discrepancy now.

You spoke about wanting to reduce duplication, and I do not think that anyone would disagree with that. My concern is that when issues such as this have arisen before they have been addressed the wrong way round; front line services, which are desperately needed, have not been retained and improved. Front-line services such as teachers, teachers' support services and transport have been reduced at a local level, whereas administration has been built up, despite there being no cost savings in it. Therefore I remain to be convinced on that matter.

Being from the west of the Province, when I hear that something is being centralised I assume that it will be based in Belfast, while the rest of us lose out. I am keen to hear your comments on that.

Mr Boyd: The goal has been set: a greater proportion of the budget must be allocated to the classroom and to those who support children and young people directly. I cannot tell the Department how to do its job, but I expect it to make clear what percentage has been allocated to the classroom this year, next year, and the year after — as crudely as that. I expect such measures to be put in place.

Part of that has already happened. You have heard this before, but the savings projected for the first three years of the ESA have already been built into the Department's financial plans for the future. That money has already been taken out of administration and is planned for allocation to the front line. Missing the targets is not an option; we simply must meet them to balance the books.

I will deal with the point about psychologists quickly. Such issues should be kept under constant review. I do not know, and no one has been able to tell me, what the appropriate caseload is for a psychologist. I do not know whether 150 psychologists is enough, too many, or too few, and I have no way of measuring it. It is not an insurmountable challenge, because it is done elsewhere in the world. That is the sort of thing that we will have to deal with.

It has been made clear in papers that we have submitted to the Department, on our website and in a presentation to the Committee that the centralisation model that we have been working towards and which we have presented to the Department respects the footprint of existing jobs. In other words, there are jobs in the west, and we anticipate that under the new model there will continue to be jobs in the west; not the same jobs, but there will be jobs. The different functions, such as finance and human resources, will be centralised, but not all in the one place. Those, of course, are ultimately decisions for the Department, but that is the model that we have been developing.

Mr McGrath: The Minister's view is that as many resources as possible should be reallocated from back office to front office — into the classroom; that should be the objective. Equally, it is clear that in this budgetary period the Department is facing 3% per annum cuts or efficiency savings. Judging by the tenor of the Finance Minister's statement on the strategic stocktake, it is clear that the Department will face at least that level of cuts during the next budgetary period. We must therefore consider the support services as they quarry to achieve those savings so that we do not have to take money out of front-line services. That will be our direction. I suspect that the Department will be looking keenly at Gavin to identify how he can sweat savings out of back-office services through rationalisation and centralisation to allow us to invest in front line services and, equally, not to disinvest in those services.

The education and skills authority implementation team has outlined its thinking on how it would centralise functions and where it would do so. The Minister will wish to look sensitively at the location of public-sector jobs, but I think that I can speak for her when I say that she is sensitive of the need to avoid being Belfast-centric. The education service is a local service in so far as schools are concerned. The administrative arrangements involving five local boards and the other bodies are not Belfast-centric, and it is the Minister's ambition to make those less Belfast-centric, not more. That will be a ministerial judgement rather than an administrative judgement by ESAIT.

Mr D Bradley: We examined the strategic stocktake with John and his colleagues last week. The Department is bidding for £60 million in 2009-2010 and £140 million plus in the following year. Will those savings not be consumed by deficiencies in the Department's budget and never see front-line services?

Mr McGrath: As I said last week, the Department drew attention to pressures in the strategic stocktake. That is important. Now that we know that resources are not available to meet those pressures, the Minister will have to make a judgement about which of those pressures can be met from the outset next year, which can be deferred until next year's end-year monitoring rounds, and whether some will have to be accommodated at the expense of other areas. That is still in flux.

All the arrangements for the administration of the ESA are designed to provide a tighter ship that will manage what will be a very constrained resource position. We can control the supply of resources. In many cases, particularly in the past year, we have no levers on the demand of those resources in the shape of inflation and other pressures. The administrative arrangements will undoubtedly be very constrained over the next two or three years; that much is clear from the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement.

There will be efficiency savings in the future; perhaps many of the savings that we will be looking for, above and beyond those cited in the outline business case, will be what we will have to lever out in order to meet efficiency savings targets, as opposed to being channelled into front line services. We may not have the luxury of huge further investments unless the Budget decrees that. Things will be very difficult in the time ahead; if we did not have the Education Bill or a change in administrative arrangements, things would be even tighter.

The Chairperson: We will return to that matter, but I want to move on. I do not want to be sidetracked on the Budget; we will try to stay on issues concerning the education and skills authority.

Mr McCausland: I wish to make a couple of points, followed by one or two questions. No one questions for a moment the need for modernisation and simplification as an argument for change. However, Mr Boyd over-egged the pudding when he talked about educational performance; I thought that the real cause of educational underachievement was selection. That was the reason given for going against selection; now the blame is being directed at educational organisation. That cannot be used as the argument for everything; it does not stack up. Mr Boyd should refine that argument if he is to have any credibility.

How many workshops have been held, what was the participants' level of satisfaction, and how much information from those workshops is available? I have to admit that I only found the website recently, but having found it, I will pursue it relentlessly.

Mr Elliott: Were you responsible for all those hits? *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCausland: Unless someone was very sad like me, they would not have bothered; there is nothing much on it.

Mr Boyd: In the most recent series of engagements, we held 11 workshops, three of which were what we called quality-assurance workshops. The first three workshops involved the most senior managers in each of the organisations that were responsible for a cluster of services. We called them quality-assurance workshops because we trialled all our thoughts and our presentations in front of the most senior managers to see if we had missed something obvious. The other eight workshops dealt with the 20 broad service areas that we had identified; they are set out in the members' information pack.

We gathered a huge amount of information; we could have filled a couple of lever-arch files with the feedback from the workshops. We decided not to bring that information to the Committee on this occasion, but we are happy to make it available.

Mr McCausland: What was the level of satisfaction?

Mr Boyd: Judging by the feedback, it was very high.

Dr M Browne: The feedback from the workshops about the model was very positive. We have since received e-mails from the various organisations; I have one here that emphasises how valuable the staff found the workshops. We have had feedback meetings at which the organisations told us that staff had responded positively to the engagement.

Mr McCausland: I spoke to someone who attended a workshop, someone in whose assessment I have confidence, and who has experience of one of the sectors. That person was surprised that the workshop did not present a more developed and well-thought out view of the way forward. I know that the aim of consultation is to obtain feedback.

Mr Boyd: There is always a tension, Nelson, between providing a fait accompli and encouraging people to express their thoughts.

Mr McCausland: I understand that. However, I am talking more about people's assessment of the quality of what was presented to them. People are always reluctant to say anything nasty or difficult because, ultimately, the Department is their paymaster. I will leave that aside for a moment.

How will the procurement of services such as transport and services to schools, who cuts the grass and paints the school, be managed?

Mr Boyd: There is a great deal of detail in that question. Many services are made available by the boards to schools, which have the right to opt in or out of those services, and there is no plan to change those rights. In fact, one principle that underpins the ESA is the desire to increase the autonomy of schools and to increase the budget that they have to exercise that autonomy.

The intention is to set up a centralised contract-procurement unit for the general procurement of services. That will mean that high-level draw-down contracts and procurement contracts are organised centrally.

Mr McCausland: I am concerned that you do not end up with a system that discriminates against small businesses. Belfast City Council ran into that difficulty over minibus provision, and I have other examples.

Mr Boyd: Are you talking about the purchase of minibuses or the buying-in of transport?

Mr McCausland: I was using that as an example. Belfast City Council had difficulty with that; I was not referring to schools.

If contracts are awarded — and we are in uncharted waters — will there be an assurance that it will not be

one big contract on the grounds of efficiency, which means that only big service providers can apply and that small, local businesses will lose out?

Mr Boyd: We touched on that issue before. I may appear to be arguing against myself, but I have seen enough examples of centralised procurement not working to be fully aware of the potential pitfalls. On the other hand, the only sensible way of managing large procurement contracts is centrally.

For example, there is no intention to have a centralised contract for paper clips or pencils. However, there is a clear requirement for a centralised negotiation with Translink on the £37 million per year that it is paid for school transport. In honesty, the full detail of that has not yet been worked out.

Mr McCausland: My final point relates to local delivery. I understand that what is delivered locally will be influenced by an advisory committee at local level. I am concerned about the decisions or recommendations of such a local committee being ignored. For instance, if it were planned to open a music school in the north-east, will the decision on whether it is placed in Aghadowey or Dervock be made by the ESA board — and most people will not have a clue where Dervock is in relation to Aghadowey — or will more authority be granted to the local advisory committee to make that decision? The same question might be posed in relation to Belfast; do you put the school in south Belfast or in north Belfast, for example?

Mr McGrath: We talked about that several weeks ago.

Mr McCausland: The problem is that I cannot get an answer.

Mr McGrath: We are talking about a reasonable organisation with clear policies that govern all its units and local teams that will have the flexibility to respond to local service needs and circumstances. Decisions and investments will be determined through the use of agreed delegations between the centre and the local teams.

If the case in point involves the provision of a music school, there may be issues concerning the scale of capital investment that is required for a particular location. That, and the running costs, may have to be considered by the central ESA board or, indeed, by the Department.

The decision about whether it should be built in Aghadowey may be taken locally, but the sign-off on the investment package must go —

Mr McCausland: Excuse me, but I must stop you there. You said that the final decision would be taken locally, but would that decision be taken by a local official or by a local advisory committee?

Mr McGrath: As we discussed several weeks ago, we have not worked out the detail of the role of local committees. They will be ESA committees, and their primary role will be advisory rather than to take executive decisions; otherwise we would create mini boards, and that would dilute the central body's authority. Therefore we must give, and we are giving, further consideration to that matter.

Mr McCausland: I am concerned that decisions will be taken by people who know nothing about local geography.

Mr McGrath: Several regional organisations here, such as the Housing Executive and Invest NI, could act as models that balance locally sensitive units with centralised policies issued by a centralised board. It is not beyond the wit of man to square that circle. The matter for consideration is the scale of investment, which will be determined by how much responsibility is delegated to local teams, and the Committee will have an input into that decision.

Mr McCausland: Consider, for example, housing. Ultimately, housing decisions are made by local-level Housing Executive officials, under the authority of centralised officials. Every council has a housing-liaison committee, which tells people what to do and ignores what they say, and that brings us back to the observations about the Department (DPP). It is important that we deal with questions about the structure for delivery; however, we must also consider the structure for decision making, and I am concerned about local input. One model might incorporate a central ESA, but it could also include localised decision making in that centralised framework. Decisions made in that way are often better. For example, a decision about where to locate a youth club would be better made locally.

Mr McGrath: I do not disagree; however, at the heart of such arrangements is the question of who takes such local decisions. No one would argue that decisions about the pattern of local service provision should be taken locally. However, if investments are involved, decisions may have to be referred up the line in order to consider investment priorities. The question is: who should take such decisions?

Mr McCausland: In the Housing Executive, district managers ask to do things, and their bosses overrule them. I cannot see any way round the problem of authorising local people, who are accountable and understand the community, to take decisions.

Mr McGrath: The regional organisation that we are discussing will be governed by the ESA, and the members appointed to it will be accountable to the Department and to the Minister. A model that advocated splintered authority would not be a good one, and, given the amount of funding that the ESA

will have, I suspect that the Committee would not consider such a model to be good at any time. We must strike a balance. The committees will be ESA committees, not local ESA boards.

Mr McCausland: I accept that point entirely. However, you must find a model that allows decisions of that nature to be taken by local people who know the area well and who have some affinity with it rather than by an employee of the system. An appropriate model must be produced, because there is a lack of clarity about where we are going. Local influence in decision making, not just local delivery, is vital.

Mr Boyd: Considering that from a slightly different angle, the peripatetic music service is an interesting case in point, because different philosophies underpin various regional music services. In Belfast, there is an emphasis on excellence, resulting in organisations such as the City of Belfast Youth Orchestra and the City of Belfast Youth Concert Band. In Belfast, although inclusion is important and there is a great deal of activity, there is a clear focus on excellence. Other areas have their own approaches. Therefore, music provision demands a clear policy and a strategy that can be applied across the board.

After that, we will work out precisely how we will provide schools with support for the music service. Some of that service will, inevitably, be provided at the weekend or in the evening at a location that makes it available to all children, thereby not excluding some children because of where they live. I anticipate that some of the thinking behind that will refer to the area-planning process, which aims at considering the need for an educational service in an area and how it can be met.

We consider the provision of youth services in the same way: we examine the existing services and the demand for youth services in an area, and the community also has a major input into such decisions. Decisions on investment must, as always, be signed off by the Minister. I will take your points on board and will return to the Committee with more detail as the work progresses.

Mrs M Bradley: Gavin, you talked about transport and you also mentioned the change in the provision of school meals to a regional service. What consideration was given to that change? Given that the existing service is excellent and that we cannot afford to let the quality deteriorate, can school meals be improved? I would like to hear more of the thinking that led to that change.

Mr Boyd: First, Mary, there is not a single school meals service at present; there are at least five. Until recently, pupils paid a different amount of money for a school meal depending on where they live, and the content of the school meals was different, although

that situation is being addressed. I make no comment about that, other than that there were differences and, therefore, not everyone was getting it right.

The proposition is to have a single regional school meals service and, therefore, a strategy: a single price; a single approach to the nutritional value of school meals; and decisions on what should and should not be provided. That strategic approach should be applied across the board. However, we recognise that most people who provide meals and who provide a wonderful service work in schools, and we will continue to support them in doing so. The supervision of their work will be organised locally.

As far as the school meals service is concerned, phase 1 simply involves the reorganisation of its management. We will streamline the management of the service, but we recognise that the service will continue to be delivered as it is at present for the time being. We should not lose sight of the fact that the total turnover of the service is £65 million, and, through one means or another, it is subsidised by approximately £35 million.

We have not considered, in any way, shape or form, efficiencies or better ways of delivering a service that is worth £65 million; our only consideration is its management. However, I would be very surprised if we do not learn lessons down the line. A great deal of money is tied up in the service, and thousands of great people provide those meals.

Mr B McCrea: I remain concerned that you changed the frame of reference and that you are now concentrating more on educational outcomes than on savings and efficiencies. My biggest concern is the number of redundancies that you estimate will result, as my guess is that they will account for most of the savings. How confident are you that you will achieve those savings through redundancies?

Mr Boyd: Lest there be any doubt, I am absolutely confident.

Mr B McCrea: You say that you are sure about that, but your outline business case states that somewhere between £24 million and £45 million can be saved through redundancies. Which of those figures is correct?

Mr Boyd: The cost depends on exactly who takes a voluntary severance package, because the model must be based on some assumptions. It is, therefore, based on an individual in his or her mid-50s with approximately 30 years' service. The higher figure is based on someone whose removal from the system would be relatively expensive.

The lower figure can be based on a different set of assumptions. The final figure will not be known until we get to the date that each individual leaves the

system and we become aware of their length of service and salary, among other things.

Mr B McCrea: Therefore you cannot tell me whether there will be savings of £25 million or £45 million in a £50 million cost budget.

Mr Boyd: That is not right.

Mr B McCrea: When I asked the question —

The Chairperson: That relates to the business case, so we will return to that issue when we are discussing the business case. I want to keep to the question of modernisation.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate that, Chairman. However, we are talking about letting people go. We have talked about our experiences in other organisations. As a member of the Policing Board, I know that there are not enough detectives in the PSNI, for instance. Part of the reason is that people who were doing important work were let go, and that problem might arise in this case.

I share Mr Lunn's concern about IT; I have never known an IT system to come in on budget, and that is due to emergent requirements. I assume that you are going to tell me that savings will be made because all the people who are doing manual work will not be required as the computer can do it.

Mr Boyd: No; that is not what I am going to tell you.

Mr B McCrea: What do those people do?

Mr Boyd: That will take us to the outline business case.

The Chairperson: I want to stay on the issue of modernisation, but I am happy to let Mr Boyd answer those questions if he wishes.

Mr Boyd: I always find it helpful if members answer their questions as well as ask them. We are absolutely clear on the projected £20 million savings; that is in the outline business case. I have made it clear that as we worked through the last year we became more confident about the figures. The savings figure is clear.

We provided a range on the cost of achieving those savings. I cannot remember the figures that we provided for range in costs to achieving the savings, but it was between £22 million and £45 million. Savings are clear, but the costs depend on the individuals who leave at any given time.

The outline business case states that 463 positions are to go, and, in the paper that we provided for the outline business case, we set out the analysis of what posts are to go at different levels. Members will see that there is a disproportionate percentage of posts at higher levels, because the first phase is about reorganising management and the supervision of staff. It makes no big assumptions about losing large

numbers of staff further down the organisation; it is about management.

We also recognise that a significant proportion of the target group is over 55; in fact, they are over 60. I am not making a point about ages, but there is a recognition of that fact. All the feedback that we receive states that a significant number of people will see this as an opportunity to leave the service and to move on to the next phase of their lives.

Mr B McCrea: I am glad that you found my attempt at giving you an answer helpful, because experience tells us that when we ask questions we do not always get an answer.

I do not think that you will hit your targets within your cost budgets. As the deputy permanent secretary said, we are entering a difficult financial period. The problem with such projects is that they start off with lofty ideals, which everyone thinks are great, but massive cost overruns appear. I want to ask whether we can be sure that the costs come in, but I am sure that we will talk about that in future.

The summary of the outline business case says:

“The group most affected by this change will be senior management ... where 44% of posts will go.”

However, data in the outline business case shows that senior management accounts for only £1.8 million of the annual savings, whereas middle-management professions account for £10 million and supervisory management comprises £6 million. Therefore, the totals are £16 million compared with £1.8 million. The real cuts will be to middle and supervisory management, who are the real workhorses, heroes and Trojans. If you cannot make your systems work better, I am concerned that no people will be left to run the organisation and chaos could ensue.

Mr Boyd: I accept Mr McCrea's comments and genuine concerns. In percentage terms, senior management will receive the biggest hit. When we move from six finance departments to a single finance department and from 34 or 35 payrolls to two payrolls, the need for supervision and middle management will disappear.

Mr B McCrea: I do not want to labour the point, as the Chairperson has been indulging me, but you are trying to make changes in two to three years, yet determining how to amalgamate those systems properly is a heroic challenge. If you do not get it right, Mr McGrath will have problems with his budgets.

Mr McGrath: The outline business case is a robust piece of work. Basil mentioned implementation and change, and we discussed IT. Examples have shown that assumptions do not necessarily guarantee delivery. That is the test. In my experience, there is more investment in the front end of this case than during

other organisational changes. The rigour of the outline business case will be applied, and elements of it operate on a worst-possible-cost scenario rather than one of best possible costs. Therefore, some of figures on top-end costs are based on the assumption that everyone who leaves will be in the most highly paid category, which would generate the required level of net savings. We can tackle that issue during discussion of the outline business case.

Mr Poots: Unlike my colleague Mr McCrea, I do not think that the proposals go far enough, and I support greater rationalisation. Children are, ultimately, most important to education, and it is teachers and classroom assistants who have the most contact with children. Teachers constantly tell me that the implementation of changes and new initiatives is absorbing more and more time and that they spend too much time writing reports for administrators to check. When will teachers be allowed to concentrate on teaching children? The initiatives make changes that do not necessarily significantly and demonstrably improve teaching. Change is well and good, but it must be change for the better. We are not against change. When will teachers be allowed to stay in the classrooms and educate children? If that were the case, significantly less administration would, perhaps, be required.

Mr McGrath: Nelson raised the issue of underachievement. The Department believes that the key to tackling that issue is improving the quality of teaching and, therefore, investing in the teaching workforce. Teachers should spend more time teaching; we do not disagree on that. As Gavin said, the model for the future will give schools more freedom on issues of professional development and will enable them to decide what sources to use to invest in their workforce. Again, we agree on that point. However, we undoubtedly expect future efficiency savings from the £2 billion education budget, which is a significant amount of money.

Ideally, that should come out of the non-school element. However, that means taking a fair chunk of savings out of £600 million or £700 million rather than £2 billion. That will be the challenge. We made the point that we start with the outline business case. We see the ESA as a vehicle to get the rationalisation of support services and to generate efficiencies, either to meet efficiency savings requirements in the centre, as agreed by the Executive, or, ideally, to go into the front line. That is the agenda. Twenty million pounds a year is there for the taking, it is almost in the bank. Mr Poots's points are well made with us.

Mr Poots: To take the matter a little further, many of those who are employed have to justify the work that they do and that is where much of this change comes from. Teachers are not opposed to many of the proposals and ideas, but they get swamped with the

numbers that come forward at the same time. Ten years ago, teachers had nothing like this to contend with. Now, however, they are being dragged out of the classrooms, the children are not getting the best out of their teachers and principals, and, ultimately, we are paying for that as it requires more administration. That is why I feel that further cuts are needed.

Mr Boyd: That is exactly the sort of feedback that we have received from teachers, school principals and teachers' unions. The underlying premise is that school improvement can be achieved only in the classroom; that can be done only if there is reliance on the expertise of the classroom teacher and the principal of the school. That leads to the inevitable conclusion that we must free up their time to allow them to get on with teaching.

I will give another reflection on how we have managed to introduce some technology into the classroom. The Committee will be aware of the integrated and administration control system (IACS) technology that we are using for literacy and numeracy. One of the attractions of the technology is that records become available automatically. The teacher does not have to mark or write up on the work: the records are held and we can measure a child's performance year on year. We managed to get some 20,000 children through that assessment in the autumn. It was a huge technical achievement, and we will have 50,000 children going through the assessment next year. The use of such technology can greatly ease the burden on teachers. Quite apart from the administrative and initiative issues that have been highlighted, that is an area where we can ease the burden on teachers.

The Chairperson: Can we move on to the outline business case? I appreciate members' indulgence. We have done reasonably well over the past few weeks in managing presentations.

Mr D Bradley: May I ask a question about the previous topic? The message that we were given at the beginning was that the ESA would provide savings that would be an added bonus to the education system. However, from what Mr McGrath said earlier, ESA savings will end up subsidising shortfalls in the budget. Therefore we will not see much benefit at all.

Mr McGrath: There is no such thing as a snapshot that gives us the fixed pressures and the fixed budget, and that if one gets savings out of the budget, which would be ideal, they can be invested in front line services.

If inflation rises faster than the provision made in the Budget, if pay awards are given that are higher than expected, if there are job evaluations, those have to be dealt with from the quantum of money that is made available to us by the Executive. That can mean that the ideal of where you would like to invest your

savings is overtaken by the urgency of where you have to put them.

Many of the pressures that we flag up with the Committee in our discussions on monitoring rounds are beyond our control; few of them are generated by the Department. However, they must be dealt with; people have to be paid, inflation has to be met, job evaluations and health-and-safety issues have to be dealt with. That may mean that the “must” issues consume resources rather than the “desirable” issues.

Those issues enhance the need to introduce a more efficient administrative system that can squeeze savings out in the overall management structure from day one, and will provide a vehicle to challenge the support services over time to generate more savings. Everything that the Finance Minister said the other day suggests that efficiency savings of at least 3% — the First Minister recently mentioned a level of 3·5% — are here to stay. The education budget is the second largest chunk of the Northern Ireland block. Although it is desirable that it should be excused some level of efficiency savings, it is unlikely.

Therefore we need mechanisms to meet most of that 3% or 3·5% over time by way of genuine back-office support service efficiencies; we should not make efficiencies from front line services. The fact that the resource position is becoming more challenging strengthens the case for administrative reform and efficiencies.

The Chairperson: I would like to move on to the outline business case.

Mr McGrath: The outline business case was submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel late last year and was duly approved by it in December. It was made available when the Minister introduced the Education Bill, and it has been available on the Department’s website.

It is a robust piece of work that validates the case for the ESA as an organisation and which provides a vehicle to improve schools and to reduce the gap in attainment levels. It also provides a benchmark against which the work that Gavin and the Department will be doing can be measured. That will be to the particular benefit of the Committee and the wider community in future.

The outline business case evidences that from the outset there are significant savings of approximately £20 million a year to be garnered against an investment of up to £45 million. It would therefore pay for itself in three years, possibly sooner, depending on the initial costs. One of the advantages of having a prolonged period before the ESA is established is that more preparatory work has been done on organisational changes and how they could be achieved. That should

avoid some of the other organisational mistakes to which Basil referred.

We will use the outline business case as a benchmark against which we will measure Gavin’s performance in the early years of the ESA. It is likely that the Department will look for further savings in senior staffing structures above those set out in the outline business case as the organisation beds down.

The Chairperson: This is an outline business case. When is the full business case likely to be finalised? The outline business case was finalised in April 2008, so it did not reflect the regional/local functional split. Could the outcomes of your work on that split radically change the number and level of staff projected in the outline business case as possible reductions?

Mr McGrath: First, we want the full business case to be available by the summer. It will underpin and validate the level of savings that are predicated in the outline business case, although some fine-tuning is necessary to develop the precise organisational structure. However, the overall envelope of senior posts around which this was based can accommodate the types of structures that we spoke of putting in place at local level and the degree of senior staffing associated with that. We do not believe that such thinking will undermine the fundamentals of the outline business case.

Mr Boyd: I cannot add to that. I simply reinforce the point that all our work to date has been within the envelope of the outline business case. Since April, nothing that we have done or turned up has made us reconsider whether we can achieve the targets set out in the outline business case.

I recognise that additional pressures might arise down the line, and I am conscious of Edwin’s comments about such possibilities. However, nothing that we have done in the intervening period has undermined any aspect of the outline business case.

The Chairperson: Earlier, we heard about the three levels of the transfer services. You said that transfer services will be subject to a medium-term review and that the innovative service will be subject to radical change. In giving evidence to the Committee, representatives and chief executives of the education and library boards said that the transform services are already subject to a three-board or five-board shared delivery and, in some of those service arrangements, a lead board. Where will the savings come from in the outline business case?

Mr Boyd: The number of shared services is relatively small; one example is the board of legal service, which is a single service housed in one board. Most of the big services, such as finance, human resources, and other support services, are on each

board. Therefore savings will be driven out of that. The big savings will come from back-office services such as finance and human resources and other big services.

The Chairperson: That is outside the in-scope costs. The Department has identified approximately £1.3 billion that is out of scope of the RPA. Therefore we are talking about —

Mr Boyd: We are talking about £135 million, which relates specifically to costs involving 4,150 staff. We focused our efficiency modelling on a fairly narrow sliver.

Mr McCausland: Reducing the number of initiatives is a key area in which savings in the educational sector can be made. Rationalisation and the further mainstreaming of services would benefit schools and remove a huge amount of administration. Major savings can be made in that area. A key element of the outline business case is saving money.

What would be the difference in the savings made through the rationalisation of administration and those made through the rationalisation of educational initiatives? Have you done any work to see how those differences would stack up against each other?

Mr McGrath: You are quite right, as was Edwin when he made the point about teachers and new initiatives. Initiatives, even if money is granted, still distract from the core task. The key issue is the standard of teaching: we must let teachers teach. To a certain extent, we must keep it simple and not distract teachers with a plethora of initiatives, although many of them are important.

We are examining the number of earmarked budgets that we have. There are two issues. First, do we need so many initiatives? Initiatives complicate the position throughout the system and complicate the situation with teachers.

Earmarked budgets also add to the Department's administration costs. We are also asking whether some of the earmarked budgets are past their sell-by date. We are questioning whether we need an earmarked budget for certain things or whether the money could be redeployed into the common funding formula. We will come back to the Committee on that.

We have not quite been able to do the de-sizing that you talked about, although we regard the savings as one slice of that. It is an interesting debate. On the one hand, there is a view that further savings may be gained beyond those outlined in the business case, and that may happen over time. There is another, equally merited, view that asks how we know that we will get those savings, other exercises have not demonstrated such savings in the past.

We are taking a robust but measured approach. Over the two or three years at the start of the ESA, that level

of saving can be taken out of the £135 million. That is the starting point for savings; it is not where we are ending.

Mr Boyd: I have made the point before that bureaucracies breed bureaucracy. Bureaucrats, like me, think of more and more things to do. That is why we must refocus on the model every so often. In this case, the model is about schools, teachers, children and school principals.

There is an argument that once the focus is kept on the model, it challenges an organisation to consider — every day, every week and every year — why any money at all is being spent at the centre and whether it absolutely must be spent. That is not a criticism of what has gone before; it is a challenge that, in my experience, an organisation must set itself every year to make sure that it does not just grow and grow. It is important to keep thinking of the next good idea.

Mr McCausland: Is there a point when you will get a figure for the potential saving that can be made by rationalising all those initiatives?

Mr McGrath: The Department will consider that, simply because we face severe resource constraints to allow it to do what it needs to do in the future. The combination of reducing some earmarked budgets at the same time as we move into the ESA might make it difficult to determine cause and effect from savings.

Mr Boyd: The Department has developed the Every School a Good School policy, which sets out what is expected from schools, and everything follows from that. It makes schools' objectives and focus clearer and, in itself, will lead to a rationalisation of initiatives.

Mr McCausland: I was really asking whether you know how many people are employed in administering all those initiatives and how much teacher time they involve. That should be fairly easy to work out, for example, there may be 49 secretaries and administrators working on them.

Mr McGrath: I do not know that because there are not many people in the Department whose sole job is to work on such initiatives; nor am I clear how many people work on them in the education boards. I agree that we should consider simplifying initiatives, redirecting funding into mainstream funding and taking out as many savings from that as we can. That will lead to a simpler world, which we are already reaching, in which the agenda is to raise standards and reduce the gap in attainment. To reach that, we must invest in the wider education workforce, improve the infrastructure and streamline the management of the education service.

Mr Boyd: We got the detailed analysis of the current situation. Between the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services, C2K, the curriculum part of the

Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, the Regional Training Unit, and the advisory part of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, we have 750 staff at the centre. That is 750 people who you might otherwise call professional staff, which is a significant number in anybody's book.

Mr Poots: I note the £20 million savings and the £700 million budget. That coincides with the 3% administration saving that we are supposed to be making. However, a 3% efficiency saving is required from all Departments. Therefore if the £20 million equals the 3% saving from the £700 million, a 3% saving must still be made on the remaining £1.3 million.

I do not accept John's views that that is the beginning of savings, because ultimately £60 million of efficiency savings must be made from the Department of Education's budget. If only £20 million is being saved from administration, the other £40 million has to be saved from front-line services. That is unacceptable. We have to sharpen the knife and return to consider cuts in administration. Rather than make the savings in five or 10 years' time, those efficiency savings must be made over the next two or three years. It is fair enough as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough.

Mr McGrath: I think that we agree on that. The point was made earlier that the ESA is seen as a vehicle to further challenge the basic infrastructure in order to make the savings that the centre will expect from us and, as far as possible, to protect front line services. If that is not done, some of the efficiency-savings targets will affect the front line because of the sheer scale of the budget. That is the challenge.

The point was made last week that the current level of efficiency savings has meant that some money had to be taken from the schools' budget, because there was nowhere else to take it from. We need a vehicle that will allow us, over time, in the next three to five or 10 years to challenge the system and to squeeze it further and further. If savings are not made from the support structure, they will have to be made from front-line services. That will mean that difficult issues may arise down the line, involving how services are to be provided, the balance between central and local contracts, the centralisation of back-office functions, and perhaps even outsourcing. To take Edwin's point, we must test every option in order to protect funding for the front line.

Mr Poots: If I was in the witnesses' position, I would ask: where do we start from? I do not think that they would be starting from the present position; they would scale even further back. Where would the Department start from if it had a clean sheet? That is where it could make significant savings. It is not good enough that for every £1 of the £2 billion budget spent in the classroom, £1 is spent on administrative support.

Mr Boyd: At a previous meeting with the Committee I got into a little bit of bother by identifying some systems that we have considered elsewhere in the world, where 80% of the budget is allocated to the school or the classroom. For the avoidance of doubt, I am not saying that we can do that overnight, but we have looked at systems where that has been achieved. The counterbalance is that there is a fairly healthy scepticism around the table about whether we can deliver the savings that we are talking about. I recognise that.

Mr Poots: That is just Basil; do not worry.

Mr Boyd: I have to be careful not to over-commit, either to the Committee, to the Minister or to the Department, because this is an important issue. I have to manage in the context that we find ourselves in. The education system is part of the public sector, and we operate within the existing contracts of employment. I understand precisely your points and am keen to hear directions from the Committee on the general line that should be taken; however, I must balance that with what I believe is possible in the short term. We are only talking about the first three years.

Mr McGrath: It is important that £1.3 billion of the £2 billion budget goes directly to schools. The balance includes the capital budget, which is another £200 million to £300 million, and there is also funding for the youth services and special education. However, the balance between spending on the front line and spending on administration is not 2:1.

Mr Poots: The entire budget for a school is not all for teaching; it also covers administration.

Mr McGrath: I am aware of that. On the other hand, some of the earmarked budgets are not part of that budget, but they go to schools. It might be useful, if, in a financial discussion at the Committee, we were to try to get a clearer picture about how much of the budget goes to the front line, directly or indirectly, and how much goes to administration. I do not think that the ratio is 2:1, which would mean that a third of the budget is spent on administration. However, it could be that the ratio is 80:20; it is important to analyse that and pin it down.

Mr Boyd: To give a simple example, the Department spends £85 million a year on transport; our kids travel 1.5 million miles a day going to school. That figure is reached as the result of various policy decisions. In addition, the Department is locked into allocating between £37 million and £38 million to Translink, on which there is very little negotiation — Translink has to make a return. With a different policy perspective different outcomes might be possible, but those are big issues that require serious consideration, as serious amounts of money are involved.

The Chairperson: John, when you are back next week, we may talk about financial matters. I wonder how many pupils use their Translink bus pass every day in comparison with the cost to the Department of covering it. There is no way of monitoring use of bus passes for a set period. For example, my daughter does not use her bus pass every day because she sometimes has other ways of getting to school. Such issues are practical realities, and money can be saved in that area. A huge amount of money is spent on travelling to school.

Mr Boyd: The Department has targeted £135 million from which to save £20 million. There are several big issues — you have just mentioned one — that we have not considered seriously because we have not had the opportunity to do so. I imagine that you will encourage us to do that quickly.

Mr McCausland: If children are to be bussed in future in order to get the socio-economic mix that the Minister wants in the secondary sector, the bill for buses will go through the roof. I mention that now by saying that it will not happen.

Mr Lunn: Before he left, Basil talked about the severance costs and the rules for early retirement. Will the ESA take over responsibility for the operation of all pension schemes, ideally on 1 April 2009?

Mr Boyd: The single employing authority will take responsibility for all staff. The vast majority of staff are members of the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Scheme (NILGOS); a small number will be members of the Civil Service scheme and other schemes. The ESA will not take over the operation of the scheme, but it will take over the responsibilities.

Mr Lunn: Who will decide whether to continue to apply the early retirement factors, for instance? I note that three dates are set out for the reduction in the enhanced pension arrangements. Will that be the ESA's responsibility?

Mr Boyd: That is a matter of policy. First, the pension scheme rules decide people's entitlement. Secondly, the reference to that in the outline business case reflected the fact that the scheme's rules had been changed to take account of the age-related discrimination legislation. Previously, people in the scheme who were over 50 were treated differently from people under 50. The scheme had to be changed, and it was to be wound out over a period of three years. That is now a matter for the Department of Education to clear with the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Mr McGrath: I can provide an update on that in the context of the wider RPA changes. The trades unions agreed a principle in the area of health.

The terms available to people who leave at the end of the process will be the same terms available to those who leave at the start; it should not change the package

over a two- or three-year period. That principle should apply no less in the education sector, and colleagues in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and in the Northern Ireland Library Authority are pursuing the same changes there. We are dealing with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to ensure that the drop-down highlighted in the outline business case is drawn out longer and that it does not happen against that timescale in order to allow the review of public administration changes in education. Therefore, people who leave at the end of the process will be eligible to the same terms as those who leave earlier. Again, because of the robustness of the business case, it does not make any difference to the costs because we have assumed the highest level of cost anyway.

Mr Lunn: Have you noticed any disillusionment in the profession? Has there been an increase in requests for voluntary severance under what would appear to be slightly more advantageous terms at the moment than what they will get in a few months' time?

Mr Boyd: No; we have not noticed an increase. I am not aware of any data on that, but the pension scheme has noticed a significant increase in the number of people inquiring about what their pension entitlements would be.

Furthermore, we have made it clear that any voluntary severance scheme would be targeted; in other words, it would depend on whether there was a continuing need for the job to be done. There is a need for educational psychologists and, if anything, that need is not being fully met. Therefore it is highly unlikely in those circumstances that a voluntary severance scheme would be available for educational psychologists. That is different from people who are working in positions that are at risk, so it will be a targeted scheme.

Mr Lunn: Will there be any difference in the treatment of those who are made compulsorily redundant and those who volunteer for redundancy?

Mr Boyd: It is a significant priority for us to avoid any element of compulsory redundancy. There is no requirement for compulsory redundancy, but the terms in the voluntary scheme are contractually binding; therefore they would also apply in a compulsory redundancy.

Mr O'Dowd: I have a comment rather than a question. I am concerned that Edwin is advocating that hundreds, if not thousands, of administrative posts should be dismissed from the education system. For various reasons, the economy cannot afford to lose hundreds or thousands of public-sector jobs.

Mr McCausland: Rubbish.

Mr O'Dowd: The economy cannot afford to lose them. The private sector is on its knees, and if we start dismantling the public sector, the economy will collapse.

Mr Poots: The money would be better spent in the classroom.

Mr O'Dowd: I will come to that point.

A £2 billion budget needs to be administered, no matter how it is done. If we divert a significant percentage of money into schools, it must be administered, which means that our principals and vice-principals will turn into accountants.

Mrs M Bradley: They have already turned into accountants.

Mr O'Dowd: They will need an administrative team around them. Therefore the money will not go directly into the classrooms; you are only fooling yourself by saying that. All you are doing is sacking thousands of workers to achieve a goal.

All services need to be examined closely. Thirty-five million pounds is spent on transport. I cannot let your comment go, Nelson, about the Minister looking to bus pupils to create a social mix. Every day, 4,000 pupils are bussed from north Down to various grammar schools. If those children attended local schools rather than being bussed from north Down, how much money would we save?

Mr McCausland: The Minister has no power to stop that.

Mr O'Dowd: As the days and weeks evolve we will see what happens, but I will not get into that argument now.

There is a £63 million budget for school meals. Perhaps that service could be provided more efficiently. We need to look at each area of our education system to consider whether the service is being delivered efficiently before sacking thousands of people simply because it looks good on a spreadsheet.

Mr D Bradley: Several costs are excluded, including the huge cost of rationalising the schools estate; five other cost areas are also excluded. Do those exclusions not invalidate the business case to some extent?

Mr Boyd: I go back to the point that I made earlier: we focused on what could and should be done quickly and on what was logical to do quickly. That process led us to the cost figure of between £135 million and £140 million and to the 4,100 staff that we anticipate reducing to about 3,600.

Other huge change programmes need to run in parallel with the business case, but this exercise did not consider those.

Mr D Bradley: Is this just a snapshot?

Mr Boyd: It studied a very specific area of activity that we believe can be influenced very quickly, covering a three-year period.

Mr D Bradley: How can you ensure that the model is dependable?

Mr Boyd: I will address the issue from a slightly different perspective. John McGrath recently told the Committee that the change-management process is huge and will go on for many years. We must manage that process from an organisational perspective.

I fully expect the Department to drive change from a policy perspective and from a perspective of controlling the budget. The Department will continue to drive us and pressurise the organisation to deliver the flip-round in the budget, in a planned way, that we are trying to achieve.

Mr McGrath: We are trying to create an ESA that will provide leadership, raise standards and close the gap; it will also deliver efficiencies. The outline business case demonstrates that the organisation has an unfulfilled potential to demonstrate efficiencies. During the initial years, the preparatory work demonstrates that £20 million of savings is already in the bank. Further savings will be made as the organisation beds in.

Not every public-sector organisational change has guaranteed savings from the very start, they are mostly aspirational, but the £20 million is guaranteed in a robust review. It can identify posts that could be removed without affecting the quality of service delivery. As time passes and the organisation beds down, it will tighten up and meet the challenges in relation to the support and back-office functions, which will generate the level of efficiency savings that may be needed simply to meet budgetary pressures. If those savings go to the front line, so much the better, but Gavin highlighted that money is tied up in various professional development areas. Those funds could be loosened up and made more available for school principals so that they can meet what they regard as the development needs of their teachers.

Some efficiency savings go to the front line, but they do so in a very prescribed model. However, school principals should have a greater say in identifying the funds that they need to drive forward professional development in their schools. The role of the ESA is to help to support that. All our conversations with school principals have produced very positive responses to that model.

Mr D Bradley: Are those six areas covered in the full business case?

Mr McGrath: This cannot be a business case for the level of efficiency savings in the education sector for the next five years. It is a business case to justify the move from the present organisational model to the single organisation, and demonstrating that in so doing £20 million has already been saved and that a vehicle has been created to drive out further efficiencies.

Mr D Bradley: There are other areas in which you do not yet know the costs or the possible benefits. Surely you should take those into account.

Mr McGrath: There is a limit to which we can forecast the future. As we said, many pressures arose in the education budget of which we were not aware 12 or 15 months ago. We need a more efficient, tighter management-focus vehicle to cope with those challenges.

Mr D Bradley: This document states that more detailed work needs to be done.

Mr Boyd: We identify a major change programme and we identify a major price tag to go along with it; we then make a business case that sets out the benefits against the price tag. It is for the Minister to make a judgement against that.

If there is a significant price tag when we move into other change programmes, departmental approval will be required; a business case will be required and it will have to go through DFP. That will be delivered when we get round to doing it. That is probably not a very satisfactory response, but it is the best that I can give you at this time.

Mr Lunn: I hope that I get away with this question, Chairman: is the cost of the top management board of the ESA included?

Mr Boyd: We are confident that the figures include everything that is associated with running the board.

Mr Lunn: In an ideal world, if you were putting the board together, would you like to see the majority made up of local councillors?

Mr McCausland: Perhaps you would prefer experts.

Mr McGrath: As Gavin does not have that responsibility, it is invidious to ask him.

The Chairperson: Page 41 of the business case concerns middle management and professions; however, we need a breakdown. The status quo is 762 staff, but option 4 is 579 staff; what is the breakdown in reductions between what we deem to be middle management and professionals?

Mr Boyd: Typically, we use salary grades to identify staff; however, I cannot remember the particular classification of salaries. There are groups of professionals who, because of their professional qualifications and status, are paid at the equivalent level of middle management, which might be responsible for significant numbers of staff. I can get you more detail, but I do not have that information to hand.

Mr McGrath: Do you mean how are the predicated reductions split between those two groups of staff?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Boyd: I can get you that information.

Mr McCausland: I think that John O'Dowd is being somewhat disingenuous, I use the word "disingenuous" because I am not allowed to use language any stronger than that. It is inappropriate and disingenuous to suggest that savings can be made in education without reducing the number of people employed. Salaries are the biggest cost. If we want to put the maximum amount of money into front line services, that is where cuts have to be made. That may not go down well with some of John O'Dowd's friends in the trades unions; however, that is the reality, and any attempt to evade that is window dressing to save face.

Could we ask the Department to produce an assessment of how much money is spent — it may only be a guesstimate — on the administering, monitoring and servicing of all funding initiatives. We need to get some idea of the cost, not just for the Department but for schools. How much principals' time is spent on that? A rough estimate would be helpful, as that is a major saving that could be made. I am keen to see that done. A guesstimate would give us some idea as to whether we should be putting more pressure on the Department to move in that regard.

Over the years, the funding system has not been right. However, instead of fundamentally reviewing it, extra bits have been stuck on to deal with this and that, and we have ended up with a mishmash. An assessment is needed to establish how much the Department should be prioritising that. Principals want to see that, and that is how to get more money to them.

The Chairperson: I realise now that you are referring to John O'Dowd; I thought, at first, that you meant John McGrath.

Mr O'Dowd: Nelson is right; I am not saying that there should be no job losses in the education system. The ESA is about the delivery of an efficient education system, and that will involve job losses. My concern is his colleague's comment: "We have to sharpen the knife and return to consider cuts in administration". That should not always be the first port of call.

Let us ensure that the £2 billion budget is spent efficiently. I have no doubt that, in future, Nelson will stand with the trades union movement, campaigning on their behalf against the Education Minister as he has in the past.

The Chairperson: Both sides have aired their views on that.

Mr D Bradley: Can we have some information additional to that on page 48 of the outline business case, which relates to the six areas that have been excluded? I want to know more about the indications of costs and benefits that might accrue from those areas.

Mr Boyd: We will send you that.

Mr McCausland: Please send us a guesstimate for the costs of initiatives.

Mr McGrath: I am cautious. The member is asking us to trawl 1,250 schools and ask each principal to calculate the time that he spends dealing with certain initiatives, having to specify which initiative. That would add to the administrative burden on schools. I seriously doubt whether, when we add up the responses, we will obtain a meaningful figure.

Mr McCausland: I admire John's simplified view. As a civil servant, he can always find reasons why we should not do something; it must be a part of their training. One does not need to trouble 1,250 schools, as he well knows. We are asking for a guesstimate; we are not asking for a figure to the precise penny. How many people in his Department are administering initiatives?

Mr McGrath: The Department is separate; I am nearly sure that the member said "each school". If you want to take three or four typical schools in each sector, we can do that.

The Chairperson: The example that was brought to the PAC was the £40 million that was spent on numeracy and literacy. Teachers told us consistently that if the money that had been allocated for numeracy and literacy had been put into front line services — teachers — there would have been a better outcome and the report that went to the PAC would not have been so critical. That is the kind of issue that Edwin and Nelson were driving at.

We set aside a huge amount of money on a project that we hope will change the world. However, to achieve that we may use 80% of the money on administration but not change the outcome. Forty million pounds was spent on improving numeracy and literacy, but there was no change. Will we spend £12 million only to see no change?

Mr McGrath: In future, as far as possible, we want to give unlabelled funding to schools and specify the standards that outcomes must meet. The more small pockets we have, and we have discussed this before, the more time is spent monitoring them than is spent on monitoring the vast bulk of the money. That is not conducive to positive outcomes. We want to take that direction in future. However, as I told the Committee previously, if we were to stop some of those earmarked budgets, there would be some interests arguing that we need a special fund for X or for Y. The largest chunk in the earmarked budget is the C2K budget, which we regard as important. Were we to do that, the Committee would have to recognise that certain narrow initiatives would be abandoned that some interests regard as important. Whereas a strategic approach that put all the money in, asked schools to deliver, and monitored them against outcomes would reduce the number of special initiatives.

That is an approach that I would support; however, it is swings and roundabouts.

Mrs M Bradley: Principals may be accountants, but they are also teachers, particularly in the primary sector. That must be taken into account.

Mr D Bradley: My question is addressed to John and Catherine. What is the position of teachers who have applied for redundancy?

Mr McGrath: The issue of teacher redundancies is difficult. Changes mean that the cost cannot fall on the scheme itself but must be met by employers. We flagged it up in the strategic stocktake: it was almost the biggest bid. However, that bid was linked with whether we wanted to pursue the rationalisation of schools through teacher redundancies. It is almost a question of investing to save.

One of the major challenges that emerged from last week's stocktake statement is that a lack of provision for premature retirement and redundancies next year may create significant problems. The question is how to strike a balance. We may return to the Committee before too long to tell it that the Minister proposes to carve out some money for redundancies and early retirements. It may be argued that that is not the most important or front-line need. Rationalisation is an important and a difficult issue.

Ms Catherine Daly (Department of Education): John has covered the points well. The key issue is value for money, which is fundamental to any public expenditure decision. Early redundancy decisions must be taken in the context of value for money in individual cases, and that would be in the wider context of rationalisation or how redundancies benefit the system as a whole.

Mr D Bradley: Is there a time frame for those plans?

Mr McGrath: We want the resource proposals for next year; that is one of the proposals in the strategic stocktake. There is no funding available for it now, and it is one of the issues that we will discuss with the Minister.

Mr D Bradley: What is the position of those who applied before the deadline in November 2008?

Mr McGrath: I am not sure of their technical position. There may be issues if their applications fall into next year.

Ms Daly: I do not know the exact timing of cases that are in train, Dominic; may we come back to the Committee on that?

Mr D Bradley: Will you provide the Committee with a detailed update on the situation?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

The Chairperson: John and Catherine, thank you very much. That concludes the evidence session on the Education Bill.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

28 January 2009

CIVIL REGISTRATION BILL (NIA 20/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry
Mr Fra McCann
Mr David McNarry
Mr Adrian McQuillan
Mr Declan O'Loan
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Dr Norman Caven } Northern Ireland Statistics
Mrs Annette Gilkeson } and Research Agency

The Chairperson (Mr McLaughlin): During our clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Civil Registration Bill, we will be assisted by Dr Norman Caven and Mrs Annette Gilkeson of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. I welcome both of you. Norman, I hope that you did not mind the fact that we were talking about you while you were sitting in the Public Gallery.

I remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery that the session is being reported by Hansard. All mobile phones must be switched off, because they interfere with the recording equipment.

I refer members to the briefing paper that we have received from the secretariat, which includes the Department's responses to the matters raised by the Committee during its meeting last week. I ask the Committee Clerk to take us through that paper?

The Committee Clerk: The paper has been prepared to assist the Committee during its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill, which is necessary in order to enable the Committee to prepare its report.

I shall quickly highlight some matters that the Committee might wish to consider during the clause-by-clause scrutiny. A range of matters relating to the

Bill are not material to particular clauses but they will be reflected in the Committee's report. This session is concerned primarily with matters relating to each clause. Based on the evidence to date, there are only two clauses that might be considered for amendment.

Both of the genealogical organisations that gave evidence proposed an amendment to the title of clause 13, and the related clause 22, with regard to marriages, and the Department has provided a response.

The Chairperson: I suggest that it might be easier if I ask the Committee Clerk to comment as we are going through the Bill. We shall begin the clause-by-clause scrutiny. If members require further information, they can refer to Norman and Annette. Clauses about which there are no issues have been grouped together.

Clauses 1 to 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Registration of deaths)

The Chairperson: Members can see the commentary on the matters relating to clause 8. If there are no comments, we shall proceed.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clauses 9 to 12 agreed to.

Clause 13 (Access to information relating to births and deaths)

The Chairperson: The Committee Clerk has already flagged up an issue concerning clause 13.

The Committee Clerk: The two genealogical organisations that gave evidence to the Committee opposed the provision that gives the General Register Office power to extend the relevant periods, which are currently: 100 years in respect of births, 75 years in respect of marriages and 50 years in respect of deaths. The genealogists argued that those relevant periods are in line with international standards.

The Department has provided an explanation for the need for flexibility in the future, and the Committee raised the issue of whether the Assembly's ability to alter those periods could be strengthened by passing future regulations under the affirmative resolution procedure, which would require a vote in plenary session. Therefore, it is for members to consider whether they wish to pursue that proposal, and, if so, the officials might wish to clarify how that could be put into effect. Pursuing the proposal would have consequences for subsequent clauses, and those consequences are highlighted in the paper.

The Chairperson: Do members wish to comment on the option to amend clause 13 and on whether it should be subject to affirmative resolution?

Mr Hamilton: Is there any particular difficulty in doing that? Although nothing particularly depends on the outcome; equally, that is not a reason not to do it. Would any difficulties be encountered by not seeking to have the clause subject to positive resolution, and is the Bill subject to negative resolution just because that is the way such matters have always been dealt with?

Dr Norman Caven (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency): Historically, regulations relating to births, deaths and marriages have been subject to the negative resolution process. Members are correct: it is legislatively possible to decide that clause 13 should be subject to affirmative resolution. However, when we discussed the matter last week we thought that it might be prudent to retain the flexibility. The genealogists had some concerns about that, but it is important to retain a balance between personal privacy and public interest in the records.

From our perspective, we wanted to consolidate the existing regulations in the new regulations that we bring before you. It is neater to have all the regulations in one place, not only for officials but for members of the public who may wish to consult them.

There is a facility within the negative resolution procedure to ensure that nothing goes through which the Committee is unhappy with. On several of those issues, we would approach the Committee before the Minister decides on the final wording of the regulations to ensure that the Committee is content, although sometimes that is not strictly a part of the negative resolution procedure.

In a related matter, if this clause is to be subject to affirmative resolution, are not some of the other clauses equally deserving of affirmative resolution also: for example, the provision relating to remote registration?

Mr Hamilton: Norman has raised some fair points. I agree that there is a need for flexibility: that is not a problem. The point made last week about access to hundred-year-old birth records may not be an issue at present. However, as people continue to live longer, we may need the flexibility to change the period. It is also fair to say that within the negative resolution process, the Committee will see the subordinate legislation, and that provides a further opportunity to take matters to the House if required. I accept the argument that using two ways to pass the legislation would not be as neat.

Mr O'Loan: I am content to go along with that, rather than make this clause an exception. It is not as though something will be sprung on us in the future: there will be forewarning.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 13 agreed to.

Clause 14 (Correction of errors in registers)

The Committee Clerk: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office was concerned as to whether the provisions in this clause would apply to its registers. The Department has offered to include a definition of the term "register" in order to clarify that point should the Committee consider it necessary.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the Committee being satisfied with the wording of the Department's proposed amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clauses 15 to 24 agreed to.

Clause 25 (Access to information in the Gender Recognition Register)

The Chairperson: The issue of the relevant period comes up again in this clause; however, we have agreed that the Committee is content with the general approach taken by the Department.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 25 agreed to.

Clauses 26 to 31 agreed to.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

The Chairperson: We now move on to the other outstanding issues.

The Committee Clerk: At the previous meeting, the Committee asked the Department to provide some information on the approach to the website that was taken in Scotland. That information is provided in members' papers.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the Department's proposed approach regarding access and charging?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the Department's proposed approach regarding the Northern Ireland data protection review?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: The next step involves the draft report being prepared for the Committee's consideration at an upcoming meeting. In addition to reflecting the outcome of the clause-by-clause consideration, the draft report will include commentary on the various issues that arose. The Committee is required to report to the Assembly by 20 March at the latest, in accordance with the extended timetable for the Committee Stage.

I thank Dr Caven and Mrs Gilkeson very much for the support and advice that they have provided throughout the process. The Committee may need their advice again when the draft report is prepared.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

3 February 2009

DISEASES OF ANIMALS BILL (NIA 22/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr William Irwin
Mr George Savage

Witnesses:

Ms Colette Connor	}	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Sandra Dunbar		
Mr Mike Steel		
Mr Pat Millen	}	Departmental Solicitor's Office

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I welcome officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Clause 1 (Slaughter to prevent spread of disease)

The Deputy Chairperson: Clause 1 relates to the extension of the power to slaughter.

The Committee Clerk: As Committee members know, there was concern that clause 1 did not go far enough in respect of an eradication programme for bovine tuberculosis. At its previous meeting, the Committee decided to pursue that issue as part of a Committee inquiry.

The Committee must identify whether it is content with the clause in so far as it relates to the power to slaughter animals. Members will be aware from evidence provided by the Department that that would apply to outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease, for example. Therefore, members may wish to express that they are content with the clause in so far as it relates to the slaughter of animals and poultry. However, the Committee can also express that it is not content

with the policy approach of the clause, as it does not adequately take account of an eradication programme. Therefore, we can make a recommendation that the Committee undertake an inquiry, with a view to coming up with a defined compulsory eradication programme for TB in respect of susceptible animals.

The Deputy Chairperson: Do members have any comments?

Mr W Clarke: Are we saying that we support the Bill?

The Committee Clerk: The approach would be that the Committee supports the clause, with the proviso that the Committee will take action in respect of the TB eradication programme.

Ms Colette Connor (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): We have agreed that the clause stands as drafted, and the inquiry will follow.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause in so far as it extends to the Department's powers to slaughter animals and poultry with a view to preventing the spread of disease, *put and agreed to.*

Question, That the Committee is not content with the policy approach in respect of clause 1, as it is not sufficiently proactive in respect of the eradication of bovine tuberculosis; and, therefore, it recommends that it undertakes a formal Committee inquiry into amending the Diseases of Animals Order 1981, in order to introduce a defined compulsory bovine tuberculosis eradication programme, *put and agreed to.*

The Deputy Chairperson: Will everyone please turn off their mobile phones? If another mobile phone rings, I will stop the meeting.

Clauses 2 and 3 agreed to.

Clause 4 (Powers of entry)

The Deputy Chairperson: Clause 4 has always presented a difficulty.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee sought consideration of amendments in respect of clause 4. As of last week, the Committee's understanding was that the search liaison officer would be included in a new code of practice, which would be drawn up in conjunction with key stakeholders. The search liaison officer would be contained in that code of practice and the occupier and/or farmer would have the right to a third-party oversight. Furthermore, the code of practice would be widely advertised, and it would be handed to the occupier and/or farmer at the time of the search.

The Department sent a letter to the Committee on 26 January indicating that it would want to include a statutory obligation in the Bill to require the Department to consult with the Committee on such persons and organisations as necessary on the code of practice and any subsequent amendments to it.

The proposed amendment, which is contained in members' packs, does not go as far as to refer to the Committee. The Department sought legal advice on the matter, and it indicated that it is unable to refer to the Committee, but it suggested that the Committee takes legal advice in respect of the matter. I have had initial discussions with our legal adviser, whose view is that it is possible to refer to the relevant Statutory Committees, and to persons and organisations, under Standing Orders.

Paragraph 7 of the proposed amended clause indicates that if the Department thinks that it is necessary to revise the code urgently, it may publish a revised code without proceeding to the provisions of paragraph 3. In other words, paragraph 3 states that the Department will invite representations, but paragraph 7 gives the Department the right — in certain circumstances — to ignore those representations. Basically, it is an escape clause.

Subject to our legal advice, the Committee Office recommended that members may wish to propose their own amendment in respect of that clause. An amendment to paragraph 3(a) could run along the lines of:

“shall publish a draft in such a manner as it thinks appropriate”.

It could also allow for representations from the relevant Statutory Committee, people and organisations.

Subject to our legal advice, the second recommendation is that paragraph 7 be removed totally. It is difficult to foresee circumstances in which a search warrant would be adjusted during a disease outbreak. The code must be agreed in advance, so any concerns that the Department may have about the code could be incorporated at that stage, rather than in legislation.

The Deputy Chairperson: Two suggestions have been made.

Ms Connor: I will comment on both. In relation to the first suggestion, the Committee Clerk entered into correspondence with us this week about an amendment to the effect that the Committee be included as of statutory right on the face of the Bill. We took advice from the Office of the Legislative Counsel. In his correspondence, the Committee Clerk suggested that we could refer to the Committee in the same way that the PSNI and the Department of Environment (DOE) are included in primary legislation.

The Office of the Legislative Counsel advised that those bodies are different because they are already specifically mentioned in primary legislation. Therefore, they are already provided for. That is why it is possible to refer to the DOE on the face of legislation. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development currently exists as a Statutory Committee that is governed by Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is a creature of a Standing Order that is akin to subordinate

legislation — not primary legislation — so it must be referred to in that way.

However, the Office of the Legislative Counsel said that that is not clear. If we included the phrase “relevant Statutory Committee” on the face of the Bill, nobody would know what that meant. It is a matter of fact that the Committee would be consulted on the code in the same way that I have spent this last week discussing the draft code with the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA) and the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU). We are not trying to cut corners.

Currently, we do not believe that we can legally include that on the face of the Bill. If the Committee's legal advisers suggest a different approach, we will go back to the Office of the Legislative Counsel. However, we hoped that we could include an amendment in the code of practice, because that is mentioned in the face of the Bill, so it is akin to primary legislation. We hope to include an addendum to the code of practice that takes the form of a list — in one of the annexes — of all of the statutory bodies; including the Committee and any other body that we deem appropriate to comment.

The second point is that we said, last week, that we would consider a revision to the powers of entry code of practice. We have included a new subsection in paragraph 7, but we do not regard that as a back door or escape clause — we believe that it strikes a balance that is needed. If an emergency situation arises, the Department must be ready and prepared for us to be able to amend the code. That would be subject to exceptional circumstances.

We are bound by the words “necessary” and “urgently” in paragraph 7, which are legal terms. That paragraph would have to stand up to scrutiny in a court of law. If we acted outside the meaning of those two words, we could be accused of maladministration and could be referred to the Ombudsman, but we would not do that. The Minister would never agree to that, and no legal adviser would give us permission to go ahead and act outside the code of practice. However, we need to have some sort of catch-all mechanism to deal with an emergency situation, such as an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. We need to have a built-in mechanism that would enable the code to be amended quickly.

Mr Savage: I raised the matter of farmers not being shown respect a long time ago, and I am glad that the Department have at least been listening. I have no axe to grind with the Department as long as its officials show respect to the owners of any farm that they go onto.

Only this week, officials arrived at a farm, pushed everyone to one side and said that they were going to this and do that. Those officials went away with their tails between their legs when the appropriate

documents were produced, but the incident caused an unbelievable amount of embarrassment and stress to the family involved. Although that was not a farming matter, it was closely related, and I would not like the Department of Agriculture to be involved in such an incident.

I have received legal advice from a top barrister, and I am quite at liberty to raise the issue if I think that it is the right thing to do. Let me tell you, I will not cover up for anyone who is trying to undermine the standards of the Department of Agriculture. I would not stand for that, but I want landowners and farmers to be shown respect. The farm modernisation scheme includes CCTV cameras being introduced on many farms, and that is a good thing. However, and I will choose my words carefully, the last thing that I want is for an accident to happen due to someone wandering about a farm, thinking that they can do as they please. I will be quite happy as long as respect for landowners and farmers is covered in your code of conduct.

Mr W Clarke: Obviously, we will have to seek legal advice, because we could talk about this matter all day. Last week, Mr Molloy made a point about all herdkeepers being furnished with the code of conduct; can you clarify that that will happen?

Ms Connor: Yes; that will happen. We hope to send the code of conduct to the 26,000 herdkeepers when we are mailing them about something else, such as the single farm payment. It will not be a one-off exercise. We will put a public notice in the local papers and farming press. In addition to every herdkeeper receiving a copy of the code of conduct, they will be made aware that it is available from their local divisional veterinary office and directly from DARD. The code of conduct will also be published on the Department's website. Those measures will ensure that each herdkeeper in Northern Ireland receives a copy of the code of practice.

Mr T Clarke: I cannot live with paragraph 7 because of the fact that it supersedes paragraph 3. Surely, if we had got paragraph 3 right to start with, there would have been no need for paragraph 7.

Ms Connor: We hope to get the code of practice right at the first attempt. Paragraph 7 is essentially designed to deal with any emergency or unknown situation that arises.

As I said, it will be subject to exceptional circumstances. What we are saying is that it may not be possible to consult the Committee formally, but I am sure that we can still advise you of what we are going to do. We would still be in discussion with the Committee, but we could not go through a 12-week consultation process.

Mr T Clarke: Paragraph 7 does not indicate when the need would arise to use those powers. Rather, it

states that the Department may publish a revised code when it is necessary to revise the code urgently.

The Deputy Chairperson: It does not specifically cite "exceptional circumstances".

Ms Connor: No, it uses the legal terms "necessary" and "urgently".

Mr T Clarke: What would be deemed as "necessary" and "urgently"?

Ms Connor: We do not know in what circumstances we will have to amend the code without coming back to the Committee. As I said, this is a catch-all provision in case we have to use those provisions. I used the words "exceptional circumstances"; however, I cannot quantify that or give you a specific example at this time. That provision needs to be in place in case we have to amend the code. That is similar to making emergency legislation for foot-and-mouth disease or avian flu, in that we would consult the Committee, perhaps not in the formal way, but nevertheless, you would be advised. Certainly, the code would not be amended without a phone call to our stakeholders as well.

The Deputy Chairperson: Personally, I appreciate that emergency circumstances beyond the norm can come up, and I accept that in some instances emergency action is needed. However, I am concerned that those powers may be abused. I note that there are no exceptional circumstances specifically provided for.

One option may be to remove paragraph 7 and include something in the code of practice that allows for that. In the event of an extreme case, I do not want to inhibit the Department if there is a chance of dealing with somebody who — let us be clear about it — is deliberately abusing the system. I want to ensure that all angles are covered. Perhaps there is a way around this. In paragraph 7, can we include something that covers Trevor's concerns; my concerns; the Department's, if necessary, but that does not allow the Department to abuse those powers? Perhaps those provisions could be within that clause, or perhaps we need to remove that paragraph and put something into the code of practice. The Committee will seek legal advice on that and we may have to revisit it next week. Do you have any other suggestions?

Mr Pat Millen (Departmental Solicitor's Office): I do not think that that would be possible, for the simple reason that that is a statutory code dealt with, to the best ability, on the face of the legislation. The manner in which that is to be revised is set out on the face of the clause. If paragraph 7 were removed, the only way in which the code can be revised is if a draft is published, representations are provided, and it is amended accordingly. You cannot get around that by putting something in the code which states that it could be amended by other means.

The Deputy Chairperson: I do not see why there could not be a point within the code of practice that covers that.

Mr Millen: The manner in which the code is dealt with is on the face of the legislation — that deals with how it is created and how it is revised. I do not think that staying silent on the face of the clause, then dealing with it in a code of practice, is a good way to go about things. In other words, if the manner in which it is to be revised is to be dealt with, it has to be dealt with on the face of the clause. You cannot reserve the power to do something through the code.

The Deputy Chairperson: We are trying to be helpful; however, it appears that that is not being reciprocated.

Mr Millen: I hope that I am not being difficult.

The Deputy Speaker: It may be better that we take our own legal advice and revisit this matter if that is reasonable.

The other issue within clause 3(a) concerns making specific reference to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, or the relevant Statutory Committee. The Committee has to revisit the clause, and, therefore, it is best that we take legal advice. The Clerk will be in contact in due course. Do members agree?

Members indicated assent.

Clause 4 referred for further consideration.

Clause 5 agreed to.

Clause 6 (Fixed penalties for certain offences)

The Deputy Chairperson: Clause 6 is to be removed.

The Committee Clerk: The Minister intends to give notice of her intention to oppose clause 6. That will, effectively, remove it from the Bill. The Committee office recommends that members express discontent with the clause.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, *put and negatived.*

Clause 6 disagreed to.

Clause 7 agreed to.

Clause 8 (Biosecurity guidance)

The Committee Clerk: Members were concerned about the link to the reduction, either in whole or in part, of compensation. The Department has amended the clause to remove that link by omitting lines 1 to 7 on page 9.

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to an amendment to be agreed by the Committee and the Department, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 8 agreed to.

Clauses 9 and 10 agreed to.

Clause 11 (Deliberate infection)

The Committee Clerk: An amendment to the clause extends words in The Diseases of Animals (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 to search control or possession of animals. The Committee made a recommendation, and the Department has agreed to seek to levy custodial sentences for second offences and repeat offenders in the area of deliberate infection. Sentencing is a reserved matter, and, therefore, the Department has written — through the Northern Ireland Office — to the Minister of State. The Department is awaiting a response and, until we receive that, we will not put the question on clause 11. We hope to receive that response fairly soon.

Ms Connor: The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development wrote to Paul Goggins, and the Department is awaiting a response.

The Deputy Chairperson: We shall return to that clause in due course. I hope that we receive that response by next week.

Clause 11 referred for further consideration.

Clause 12 (Seizure and destruction of things liable to spread disease)

The Committee Clerk: The Committee did not comment on clause 12, but the Department wishes to make a couple of points.

Mr Millen: Clause 12(c) will be deleted. We reconsidered the words: “and shall be calculated as if it was not affected with disease at that time”

One could, technically, argue that if one calculates something as if it is not affected with disease, the value one must come to is zero. We wanted to avoid that situation.

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development recommends that clause 12 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agrees to the text of the amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clauses 13 to 20 agreed to.

Clause 21 (Procedure for orders)

The Committee Clerk: Again, the Committee has not offered any opinion in respect of clause 21, but the Department may want to comment on it.

The Deputy Chairperson: I believe that some changes were made to clause 21 by the Department. Is that the case?

Ms Connor: Yes, some consequential amendments were introduced in a tidying-up exercise — schedule 3 had to reflect the Department’s revision of clause 12, which required a consequential amendment.

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development recommends that clause 21 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department, and the Committee agrees to the text of the amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clauses 22 to 24 agreed to.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Repeals)

The Deputy Chairperson: Does the Department wish to comment on schedule 3?

Ms Connor: That is subject to another consequential amendment to reflect the change in compensation, and refers to clause 12(c).

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development recommends that schedule 3 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agrees to the text of the amendment, *put and agreed to.*

The Deputy Chairperson: We will leave the issue of the long title of the Bill until a future meeting. That leaves only clauses 4 and 11 to be resolved.

Ms Connor: Yes, and the Department and the Committee must take legal advice on clause 4. I hope that some agreement will be reached. If paragraph 7 of the proposed amendment must be removed, I believe that the Department itself will want to do that.

The draft amendment that the Department submitted yesterday was an attempt to address the Committee's concerns. We have worked together on agreeing all of the clauses up until this issue arose. Therefore, given some movement on both sides, and if it is acceptable to the Committee, the Department would like clause 4 to remain with it for amendment through the Office of the Legislative Counsel.

The Deputy Chairperson: I suggest that the Committee's legal advice be relayed to the Department through the Chairperson or the Committee Clerk.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee must seek legal advice on that from its legal representative.

The Deputy Chairperson: Indeed. I was referring to the outcome of that consultation. In that way, we can try to resolve the issue before next week's meeting.

Ms Connor: Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

4 February 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Nelson McCausland
Mr Basil McCrea
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Michelle O'Neill

Witnesses:

Mr John McGrath
Mr Chris Stewart

} Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): I welcome again honorary members of the Committee for Education, John McGrath and Chris Stewart. Their presentation will be on the controlled estate.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): Good morning, Chairperson and members. We are glad to be back. I am sure that the privilege of honorary membership does not extend to voting, so we will content ourselves with making presentations.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): We are here for the tea and scones.

The Chairperson: You are welcome to them.

Mr Stewart: I am trying to give them up, so I will forego that pleasure. My presentation, which will be relatively brief, follows on from the previous session in which members discussed the proposals for representation and advocacy for the controlled sector.

Today we propose to deal with the related issue of the ownership of the controlled estate. Members will be familiar with the underlying drivers and the rationale for the proposal in paper 20. It stems from concerns that were expressed by some members of the Committee and by other stakeholders about a

perceived conflict of interest if the education and skills authority (ESA) were to own a group of schools.

The paper sets out proposals for a separate body to take ownership of what are known as controlled schools. Members may ask in response to that proposal why there is a need for two bodies; why not simply combine the representative body and the ownership body in a single organisation? The answer lies in the policy decisions and requirements under which we must work. It is the Department's view that ownership of the controlled estate must be on a statutory basis. It involves the stewardship of public assets worth some £2.3 billion; therefore we feel that the appropriate solution is for a statutory body to take ownership.

However, the Department's policy is also that all the representative bodies must be non-statutory and have no statutory functions in order to ensure equality for all sectors and all types of school. Thus the Department's policy is that statutory and non-statutory functions cannot be combined in a single body and that there is a need for two organisations.

However, as signalled in the paper, the Department recognises the need for close links between the representational body and the ownership body in the controlled sector; perhaps through joint chairmanship or some overlap of membership or perhaps through a statutory duty on the ownership body to consult the representative body about the discharge of its functions.

Central to the role and functions of the ownership body is the ownership and stewardship of the assets in the controlled sector. The paper contains several potential additional functions that may be added to that body. Owners of schools tend to have a role in appointing governors, so it may be appropriate to consider whether the ownership body should have some role in appointing or suggesting some governors for controlled schools. However, I assure the Committee that that is quite separate from the ongoing role of the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) in appointing governors and would not be at the expense of that role.

The ownership body may also have a role in making development proposals, particularly in what I have termed a safety-net capacity. If there is an identified need for a school development in an area but for some reason there are no proposals to meet that need, the ownership body might be charged with making a proposal to plug the gap. That would be a last resort or safety-net function.

The paper also sets out a possible longer-term vision for the controlled sector. That stems from the policy on accountable autonomy for schools. In future, some boards of governors of controlled schools may be able to take ownership of the physical assets of the school

and thus achieve greater autonomy and provide a closer link between the school and the community that it serves. It should be stressed that that is a long-term vision, and no board of governors would be compelled to take on that role. Part of the role of the controlled schools ownership body might be to work with and support boards of governors to prepare them for taking on that responsibility if they wished to do so.

The paper sets out options for the nature of the body and its accountability arrangements and identifies the Department's preferred option: a statutory public authority. As I say, the Department's view is that that is the only option that provides sufficient accountability and safeguards for this vital public asset base.

The paper also deals with other important technical matters, mainly financial, notably the potential treatment of value added tax (VAT), stamp duty and land registry fees. I assure the Committee that we are talking to our colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury to minimise the potential effect of the transfer of assets on the Department's budget and on the public purse.

Ideally, if the first and second review of public administration Bills could be implemented at the same time, there could be a single transfer of assets from the education and library boards to the new controlled schools ownership body rather than two transfers of assets. However, that would involve extremely challenging timescales and could in no way be guaranteed.

In previous sessions members asked us to return to the subject of the disposal of assets and the potential for inequality between sectors stemming from the rules on those disposals. Those rules are determined, and occasionally changed, by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and are based on the central principle that resources — the proceeds of the disposal of assets — are returned to the centre for reallocation according to assessed need and determined priority. The minor exception to that at present is that education and library boards are permitted to retain a small proportion in order to encourage them to dispose of surplus assets. Most proceeds are returned for reallocation. It is through that principle that equality will be ensured because resources will be reallocated according to objectively assessed need. The same will apply to other sectors for which there are clawback arrangements that are applied when assets that are funded by capital grants are disposed of.

From time to time, members have suggested that the proceeds of asset disposal ought to be hypothecated or ring-fenced to the sectors or areas where the disposal occurred. However, that would be extremely problematic. It must be borne in mind that the proceeds of an asset disposal do not in any way constitute

extra moneys for the Department of Education; they are netted off its capital allocation. Therefore hypothecation or ring-fencing would lock a significant proportion of the Department's resources into historical patterns of provision when the assessment of need may in fact suggest the need for a different pattern of resource allocation. Ring-fencing might thus make it more difficult to achieve equality.

The Department is particularly concerned that ring-fencing could seriously distort the area-planning process. Area planning will be based on the objective assessment of need and determination of priorities and the allocation of resources accordingly. In the current financial climate, that will inevitably involve making difficult choices between competing demands. It is difficult to see how that process could operate fairly and effectively if it were to be constrained by historical patterns of distribution of resources. For those reasons, we do not propose the ring-fencing of the disposal of assets.

That is a brief summary of what is quite a technical section of the paper. We welcome the views of the Committee because the paper is out for consultation. We will, of course, bring it back to the Committee when the consultation finishes, and we will be happy to answer members' questions.

The Chairperson: Several issues arise from the paper and its reference to the controlled estate. You referred to one of them — the Committee has had a concern for a considerable time about the equity in how assets are disposed of and the money distributed. Legislation on capital grants was enacted in 1974 or 1977. My understanding was that a non-controlled or maintained school that applied for capital works raised the money, did the work, and then applied for a capital grant, which was paid back to the trustees. State money is given to a privately owned organisation.

If, due to having become surplus to requirements or demographic decline, that estate is sold, not all the money returns to the Department. In fact, only a small percentage goes to the Department; most goes to the owners and trustees. How is that fair and equitable?

The capital grant covers all the costs, yet the money recouped from the disposal of a controlled-sector asset goes to the board. You said earlier that money is distributed on an analysis of need in any sector, but there is no equality in how that is done. The Minister claims to want to ensure equality, so how will we address that glaring inequality?

I read nothing in the paper that deals with that problem; indeed, I see that no work has been done to establish the group. January 2010 is still talked about as the date for the establishment of that group, but not everything is in place for that to be possible.

I am also concerned by the paper's reference to the ESA initially having ownership of the estate in 2010. That is unacceptable. Chris, you have said many times that the ESA cannot be the body that owns the estate. Nevertheless, this paper states that if the body is not established, the ESA will own the controlled-schools estate for a time.

Mr Stewart: I will deal with your first concern and then return to your point about the timescale.

The arrangements are as you describe with one important exception, which contains the reassurance that you seek. Clawback arrangements are included in the grant agreement for an asset funded by a capital grant. A proportion of the resources come back to the Department, and that proportion of resources would not be small, as you fear. The Department will get back what it put in, and that is why it is not flagged up significantly in the paper.

We are satisfied that the continuation of the existing arrangements will ensure the equality that you seek. The Department would receive a significant proportion of the grant. The clawback arrangements for 100% publicly funded assets mean that the Department recoups what it puts in.

The Chairperson: I want to tease out some further information. Does the Department have an analysis of how the disposal of assets in the maintained and controlled sectors has worked in practice in recent years? Is that the desired aim of the new arrangements or is that how it has been since the change to the capital-grants system?

Mr Stewart: Both. There are some longstanding grant agreements, and, if we delve deep enough, I am sure that differences could be found in the precise clawback arrangements over time. Practices and the requirements of DFP have developed over the years; a grant agreement that is drawn up now may not be exactly the same as a grant agreement that was drawn up in 1974. Our clawback arrangements will be applied to all grants at present, whatever DFP's requirements may be.

Mr McGrath: In a sense, the proposals for the body do not affect the funding arrangements; they are separate. However, there is a view that the ESA should not own any of the estate because it would be the determinate of area planning. Eugene Rooney will be here later, and he can provide further insight into the operation of the capital grant and clawback arrangements that apply to voluntary grammars. In essence, however, we get back pro rata what we put in.

The policy on disposals is governed from the centre, and, in the past couple of years, the CART report brought added impetus to that. As Chris said, the centre counts in expected receipts, which are included in our baseline figures. However, this year, we thought

that we would get £30 million of receipts; our budget settlement envisaged that £15 million of that would go back to the centre, and we would keep £15 million. Our capital plans included the expectation that £15 million of disposals would come in and we would recycle them. As Chris said, disposals are not extra, they are built from at the beginning. The drop in the market over the past 24 months has had a significant effect on capital resources.

If you begin to hypothecate, you might maintain investment only to the level of disposals, which would not be a fair way of meeting need. Eugene Rooney will expand on the capital grant and clawback arrangements later. If necessary, we can provide a paper on that specific arrangement, which is unaffected by the body for the controlled estate.

The Chairperson: That would be useful. Will you speak about the timetable?

Mr Stewart: Ideally, we would all like the controlled schools ownership body to be established by 1 January 2010, as it would mean a single transfer of assets rather than two. However, the review of public administration (RPA) programme is based on the need for two Bills and the recognition that the timescale is extremely challenging for us. As we indicated in our policy memorandum papers, the target for the implementation of the second Bill is 1 January 2010, or 1 April 2010 if we need a fallback position. It may be 1 April, perhaps even later, before we can bring the controlled schools ownership body into being. However, we would like that period to be as short as possible.

The ESA would be the owner of a group of schools. We recognise the difficulty and the concern in that, so it is in everyone's interest to ensure that that period is as short as possible. However, we cannot guarantee the Committee that we could reduce it to zero.

The Chairperson: Do we not run the risk of having the same concerns as the voluntary grammars in relation to the single employing authority? Do we not run the risk of the controlled sector saying exactly the same? If the estate is under the control and ownership of the ESA, the ESA will have the power to appoint boards of governors, and the functions that you outlined in the paper would be part of the body, which would be responsible for the controlled sector and under the control of the ESA. Therefore all the concerns that people have about the ESA will be realised in two sectors, that is, the voluntary grammar and the controlled sector, and that makes it even more difficult.

Mr Stewart: There are two separate points. First, the ESA will appoint the bulk of governors in controlled schools because the community governors would be the largest category by far. Therefore, I do not think that that issue would change, no matter how things turn out.

On the more fundamental concern, the issue is one of a perceived conflict of interests; we recognise and accept that. The issue is about the most robust and effective measure that we can take to reduce or manage that risk. If we can minimise the period in which the ESA owns those schools to a matter of months, the risk becomes extremely small.

It still exists, and stakeholders may continue to have a negative perception of it. However, I am not certain that it is practicable for us to go any further than that.

Mr McGrath: The critical issue will be the perception that the ESA might somehow be more partial in determining decisions on capital expenditure.

The Chairperson: From others?

Mr McGrath: Yes. The period of ownership would be as limited as possible. First, there will be a spotlight on the ESA to demonstrate that it was doing nothing that might reflect partiality. Secondly, it is unlikely that significant capital decisions would be taken in that period unless they were already in the pipeline. In those circumstances, the scope for something going awry in that limited period is very limited.

Mr O'Dowd: Can you clarify DFP's involvement or guidelines on the matter? Who will own the voluntary grammar school sector estate? If it is owned by a group of trustees or individual schools, what mechanism will ensure that public money is secured for capital expenditure?

Mr Stewart: The second question is perhaps more easily answered than the first. With the exception of controlled schools, nothing in the RPA will change the ownership of schools of any type. In the voluntary-grammar sector, schools will continue to be owned by the trustees or, in some cases, by the boards of governors. In every case in which a school is funded through a capital grant, there is a formal grant agreement that is signed by the Department and by the owners of the school. That includes the clawback arrangements that ensure that in the event of the asset being disposed of if it is no longer required, the Department gets back what it put in.

Perhaps the most important point about the DFP rules is that not all the proceeds of asset disposal come to the Department of Education; some are retained at the centre by DFP for allocation to Departments according to a central assessment of priorities. Those rules change from time to time, but the core principle remains the same: assets are returned to the centre and reallocated on the basis of objective and assessed need.

Mr B McCrea: Following on from that point, there is concern among voluntary grammar schools and others that the ESA will take control of their estate in some way.

Mr McGrath: As Chris said, there is nothing in the proposals that affects voluntary grammar schools' ownership of their estate.

Mr B McCrea: That is OK; I just wanted to hear you say it twice. However, the nub of the concern is the failure to recognise the blatant inequality — the inequity — that, some time ago, the transferors gave up their schools for the public good and now feel that they are being disadvantaged. The issue appears similar to land that was vested for public use and which is no longer required; therefore, under vesting regulations, it was offered to the people who originally owned it. I think that you are going headlong down the path of centralised ownership, which means that the voluntary grammar sector and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) have a perceived advantage over the controlled sector. I do not think that that has been tackled.

Mr McGrath: There is an important difference between the transferors handing over their assets for what, at the time, they regarded as good reasons and a vesting process whereby the state decides, for the greater good, to take ownership of a property, notwithstanding the owner's views. Therefore it is appropriate that if that public need ceases, the previous owners should, in certain cases, have first refusal on getting the property back. There are differences between the two cases.

Mr Stewart: There is another important technical consideration. The rules come from the Crichton Down case: where there has been compulsory acquisition of an asset that is subsequently disposed of, that asset is offered to the original owners for sale. I am not certain that the Churches have expressed an interest in buying back the schools that they handed over to the state.

Mr B McCrea: I am not suggesting that they have; it is I who am suggesting it. It is a basic inequality that some sectors are perceived as retaining estate control. Your paper states that there are advantages and disadvantages. However, a significant sector has, I have been told, been raped and pillaged over the years. I do not suppose that there is much point in going on about it other than to impress upon you that I do not think that your paper or your proposals address that perceived hurt and inequality. You have not made the necessary inroads. After the Committee's last meeting, I spoke to representatives of the TRC, who said that they are still not happy.

Mr McGrath: In a guarded way, may I ask for a definition of rape and pillage?

Mr B McCrea: There was a perception that the controlled sector took the brunt of school closures because that was easier. I do not know whether that is right or not, but it is a perception. One of the reasons for building up a representative sectoral body is to

address that issue. There is a perception that the controlled sector is the poor relation.

Mr McGrath: There is that perception, which is outwith the ownership of schools. There are issues of achievement in some areas. There is an equal perception that CCMS has done more to drive forward closure and rationalisation than the controlled sector has. In other areas, there may be a perception that the controlled sector has not driven forward rationalisation linked to quality, and indeed has resisted that. However, those perceptions are important and must be dealt with.

This body has been set up because there is a perception that it would be inappropriate for the ESA to own the estate. That does not solve the issue of how one would demonstrate that future investment and rationalisation proposals are dealt with equitably. It may be a necessity, but it is not a sufficiency. The ESA will still face the issue that we have now. There are perceptions that one sector does better than another, that investment is not fairly targeted, and that disposals are not recycled properly. Those issues will simply not disappear, which is why we need a process built round area-based planning to take a proper, more deterministic way to meet need and to channel investment. Those are building blocks, but they do not deal with the core issue. The issues of whether there is a controlled estate body, whether the ESA owns it, where future investment goes, and what the pattern of schools will be, still need to be determined. That is why we are looking to area-based planning as the keystone to deal with those issues. There are perceptions, Basil, but they work both ways.

Mr B McCrea: In my attempt to be helpful and to show you where my representations come from, I must state that there is a hierarchy of needs. The process and the mechanism for deciding how to manage capital, for example, is two or three levels down; whereas the need to be treated fairly and equally — and the perception that one is being treated fairly — is at the highest level. If those levels are not right, all else fails. It does not matter how good the rules and processes are, if people think that they are working agin them, we have a problem.

I am sorry if I am being unhelpful, but your paper does not address the perceived inequality and sense of hurt of the TRC and others about how their estate is being handled compared to other estates. It is a serious issue. I am sorry to be the harbinger of bad news.

Mr Stewart: It is not at all unhelpful. We continue to talk to the TRC and others, and we register their concern. We want to continue to engage with them, and we are happy to consider suggestions or ideas. This is a paper for consultation to which they may wish to contribute in order to attempt to address those issues.

We are conscious of the various perceptions and we take them seriously. Common to them all is that we

have had an adversarial and competitive approach to the planning and delivery of the educational estate. In the case of winners or losers, or perceived winners or losers, the pattern of perception varies from time to time. The core of our policy is that we absolutely must move away from that. No sector or group of schools must perceive itself to be part of anything other than a fair, open and transparent process that is based on need. That is why we continue to place area-based planning at the centre.

Mr McGrath: To reflect on previous discussions, we recognise that many controlled schools, perhaps controlled grammar schools, feel that the current arrangements have them operating in a command-and-control system when compared to their peers in other sectors. The arrangement that we propose is precisely to enable them to be more liberated and to have greater control of their destiny.

We spoke previously about the aspirations of Ballyclare grammar or any other school — we must find another example, because it is unfair to keep singling out Ballyclare.

The Chairperson: I am sure that you will have no difficulty there.

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. You have referred to the aspirations of schools to move to greater autonomy, and Chris talked about the long-term vision. We want to create the capacity in these provisions for some of those controlled schools to migrate along a path where they might eventually own their own estate akin to the status of voluntary grammar schools. It would be a move towards greater autonomy. We recognise that, and Basil's points are well made. We can deal with facts, but dealing with perceptions is more complex. That is one of the issues that we have to deal with.

Mr B McCrea: There may be some mileage in fleshing out a route map for how the long-term vision might happen.

Mr McGrath: Part of our thinking about autonomy was how schools could take ownership of their assets.

Mr B McCrea: That is worth exploring.

Mr Stewart: We may have undersold that notion in the paper and tried to sound cautious about it. I hope that we did not give the impression that we are reluctant to go down that path; it was simply an attempt to reflect the fact that, particularly in the controlled sector, one size does not fit all. Many schools in the controlled sector would be glad to go down that route as quickly as possible; others are unwilling to do that, as they quite happy with the present arrangements. Both positions are legitimate, and we want to allow space for both approaches in the policy that we develop.

The Chairperson: We may return to that. Do you have a question, Michelle?

Miss McIlveen: Oh, thank you. I did not think that I was going to be called so quickly.

The Chairperson: Pay attention, please. Thank you. *[Laughter.]*

Miss McIlveen: A couple of weeks ago, you discussed appointments to the working group. However, I do not remember your outlining the education and library boards' role of nominating members.

Mr McGrath: Are you referring to appointments to the working group that will conduct some initial work on the controlled sector support group?

Miss McIlveen: Yes.

Mr McGrath: The Department is seeking a group of interested individuals. That does not necessarily exclude board members of education and library boards or officials, given that many people may be making a career move and may not be interested in membership of that group. It is not a representation, because it will not be a statutory body; we are seeking volunteerism as opposed to statutory representation.

Miss McIlveen: If you are appointing, nominating or, in this instance, shoulder-tapping to appoint members, I am concerned that when that body is established, its membership will decide who is on the board. Furthermore, there is a possibility of appointing joint chairpersons to the ownership board.

Point 26 states:

“DE should have the right to appoint the members of the ownership organisation in accordance with OCPANI principles;”

Can you expand on that?

Mr Stewart: In the interest of creating a coherent approach for the controlled sector, it is desirable at least to explore the scope for linking a few bodies. We will have to explore the extent to which the law and guidelines from the Commissioner for Public Appointments allow us to link those bodies. The ownership body must be a statutory non-departmental public body whose membership is appointed according to Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (OCPANI) rules with uppermost regard to the principle of merit.

By contrast, the representative body will be a non-statutory body that will essentially determine its own governance and appointment arrangements, although the Department will have to agree to those arrangements. At the moment, I cannot explain in detail to what extent we can legitimately ensure an overlap or commonality of membership; however, the concept is worth exploring and would be beneficial. However, we will be constrained by the law.

Miss McIlveen: I am concerned that the Department might use a heavy hand. We will have to consider that matter.

Mr Stewart: The Department's hand will be supporting.

Miss McIlveen: That remains to be seen. Point 29 refers to VAT exemptions. When will you have that information? There is a huge cost of up to £700,000 a year to a school that has been built under PPP arrangements over the 25-year life of the contract.

Mr Stewart: I will check that and come back to you. My colleague in the finance directorate Catherine Daly is actively pursuing that matter with the Department of Finance and Personnel. I do not know when we will receive an answer. We recognise the urgency of getting a response, and the outcome will be significant. We know the answer that we want, and we are emphasising to our colleagues the need to give us that answer.

Miss McIlveen: We need that information. If we are conducting a spend-to-save for the ESA, there is another cost of which we have not been made aware.

The Chairperson: Does DFP have the power to authorise VAT exemptions?

Mr Stewart: No; DFP will take that issue up with the Treasury.

The Chairperson: It is a Treasury issue. What if the Treasury says no? We have had difficulties in the past with VAT, and the controlled sector now faces an additional cost of £700,000 a year; that would be huge. Is that matter being pursued?

Mr Stewart: Yes. If it became a reality, its effect would be profound. However, at this stage, our assessment of the likelihood of the risk is low. We hope to convince our colleagues in the Treasury — through DFP — that it constitutes, essentially, a technical transfer of assets among public authorities. That should not attract VAT or significant land registry fees; it would not be a sensible approach.

The Chairperson: Has a business case been prepared?

Mr Stewart: I am sure that that issue will be included in the development of the full business case for the RPA.

Mr McGrath: The Treasury or, specifically, HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) will rule on that matter. As the paper states, we sought confirmation that the ESA will have VAT exemption in the same way that education and library boards do.

The test is pointing out to HMRC that it classifies those bodies according to a GB model. We have to point out that whereas local authorities run education in GB, the ESA and the education and library boards are the Northern Ireland equivalents and should be treated in the same way. The process is one of articulation and explanation. It is not necessarily swift, but we hope that it will be resolved satisfactorily; if not, significant issues will arise: we will have to

ask whether the benefits of the body are sufficient to justify the significant cost that will fall on the education budget. I do not think that that cost would penalise controlled schools; the education budget would have to bear it on a broad back, and that is unpalatable. When we get the numbers sorted out and some progress made, we will inform the Committee. The issue will have a bearing on whether we want to follow this through to a conclusion.

The Chairperson: Do we know whether DFP accepts the merits of the case? Has the Department of Education to convince DFP or draw up a business case for an exemption; or is the Department seeking VAT exemption for the ESA? Has the Department asked DFP for exemption, putting the onus on DFP to put the case in conjunction with it? DFP would then negotiate with HMRC and explain to it why the VAT exemption is necessary.

Mr McGrath: That is the process. When such issues arise, and they often do, DFP tends to support the Department. The decisions are not in DFP's gift; it is the conduit.

Catherine will be here shortly, and she will give the Committee an update.

Mr D Bradley: The situation that you outline in the paper is one where a school's ownership body may be little more than a repository of the deeds; at other end of the scale, new voluntary schools could emerge. Point 20 reads:

"A possible long-term vision for the sector is one where the capacity of the staff and the governors of the majority of schools is developed to the point where the Board of Governors in each school is able and willing to become the legal owner of the school, thereby increasing the vested interest in the school."

You said that that would lead to truly locally owned schools. Is that not a recipe for the break-up or fragmentation of the controlled sector? Would it not become more difficult to area-plan for that sector? Does that not defeat the point of having a unified organisation?

Mr McGrath: The controlled sector is very diverse; in a sense, the only common theme that links those schools is that they are controlled; they include inner-city, rural, grammar and non-grammar schools. Previously in the Committee, we discussed the different aspirations of schools in the sector. I am not sure that trying to maintain rigidity about the sector formerly known as controlled is an objective.

We want to promote as much autonomy as possible among schools in future. Some schools might see greater autonomy as a migration route towards control over their own affairs and ownership of their own estate. That would be a critical test, not just something that we would hand over willy-nilly. However, we would not regard it as inimical. Area-based planning

will still be about determining the educational needs of an area and planning to meet them. Sector support groups will have an input to that, but they will not have a monopoly of wisdom or input to the process.

The ESA will therefore be set up largely to deal with an element of the perceptions that exist. Neither my Minister nor I would regard it as a problem if the controlled sector shrank over time. If some schools took ownership of their own estate, it would gradually become redundant — rather like the "Carlsberg complaints department." I would regard that as a positive rather than a negative.

I am not sure that preserving the controlled sector in aspic is a positive aspiration. Instead, we should encourage the various sectors to migrate to different places in future so that boundaries break down. Over time, the mix of sector-support groups may need to be redefined because schools have repositioned themselves.

Mr D Bradley: I was going to make that point. If that sector becomes so fragmented, it will be very difficult for a sector-support body to represent the sector's interests.

Mr McGrath: That is a fair point, Dominic.

Mr D Bradley: One could go one step further and question the point of the ESA.

Mr McGrath: We have to work from where we are. We are talking about long-term migration — it may take some time for schools to move. We need a sector-support group because of the others that are in place. Not having a group will add to the sense of prejudice and inequality that Basil articulated.

Over time, the sector could break down into different sub-sectors, such as an inner-city sector, a rural sector or even a geographical span. We would not have a fundamental issue with that; neither, however, would we want over-fragmentation. In addition, we would not want to take any more money from the front line for sector support.

Mr Stewart: As John said, Dominic correctly identified the risk; at the same time, however, if the only thing that links or binds those schools is shared details of their ownership, I am not certain that it would be a terribly coherent sector anyway. As Dominic rightly said, the real challenge is for the controlled schools' representative body because it will play a significant role in the area-planning process; not the ownership body, which will have little or no role.

Interestingly, one of the early responses that we received to the consultation on the paper was from a principal of a controlled integrated school, which has a very close association with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE). The principal asked whether the school will belong to the

controlled sector or the integrated sector in future. Our response is that that school can belong to the sector of its choice, to both sectors or to neither.

Mr D Bradley: OK.

Mr McCausland: Equality is a key issue; we want to ensure that there is equality across the sectors and equality for all children. I am sure that nobody would want to enshrine or embed anything inequitable in the new proposal.

Will you confirm that the proposals will ensure full equality among all the sectoral bodies, including the ownership body and the support body? In other words, will the ownership body have the same rights, role and authority as the trustees of Catholic schools?

Mr Stewart: That is our aim. However, the phrasing of your question leads me to believe that you are about to point to some aspect that you think is sub-optimal.

Mr McCausland: I just want to put this matter on the record. Are you assuring us that there is equality of role, status and powers?

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Mr McCausland: OK. That is reassuring.

Returning to an issue that Michelle McIlveen raised, point 26 states:

“DE should have the right to appoint the members of the ownership organisation in accordance with OCPANI principles;”

Do those principles apply to the membership of the trustees’ body?

Mr McGrath: No; they do not.

Mr McCausland: Therefore there is not equality.

Mr McGrath: Those assets are owned by the state, and the ownership organisation will be a statutory body.

Mr McCausland: I know that. However, there are two sectors; in one, the Church appoints the trustees; in the other, the Department appoints the trustees. Is that correct?

Mr McGrath: Yes. Voluntary grammar schools will have their own arrangements for appointing the members of their boards of governors.

Mr McCausland: I might address voluntary grammar schools later, but I am more concerned about controlled schools at the moment. The OCPANI principles generally apply to public bodies that cater for the entire community in Northern Ireland.

Mr Stewart: As do all public bodies.

Mr McCausland: Yes, but that body will deal with schools that cater for nearly the entire unionist community and small numbers from other communities; it does not cater for all of Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath: The body will own the estate of a number of schools that cater for the community that you described.

Mr McCausland: Yes, it will deal with a sector that caters for those communities.

Mr McGrath: It will own the estate.

Mr McCausland: Yes, I know that. Therefore in one case the Catholic Church appoints trustees; in the other, there is a system of appointment to create an ownership body that could not be representative or reflective of the community that those schools serve.

Mr McGrath: There is a difference in ownership status: controlled schools are owned by the state, so even as we speak —

Mr McCausland: I know that there is inequality, but we want to get away from that.

Mr McGrath: There is a difference in ownership; assets in public ownership are subject to certain standards of governance and accountability that do not necessarily apply to the assets of other bodies that, despite operating in the public sphere, are essentially private organisations. The Committee would not expect us to dilute those principles. We are saying that we will create an ownership body that will own substantive public assets.

Mr McCausland: How will you get a body whose membership represents or reflects the community that is educated in those schools?

Mr McGrath: That is a fair point. We have work to do to define the criteria for membership of the body. Some of those criteria will have to include technical skills, because the body will own a great deal of property. Criteria will have to be drawn up so that the membership of the body understands the ethos and background of the controlled sector and the communities that the controlled sector serves. Those criteria will have to be built in.

The way to get an overlap of membership is for people to apply. Despite Michelle McIlveen’s remarks, people have to apply for public appointments; we do not just tap people on the shoulder. The criteria for membership of the body will have to have guidelines woven in that cater for the point that you make.

Mr McCausland: The document is going out for consultation without such criteria.

Mr McGrath: That is a fair point.

Mr McCausland: That is unfortunate, because it is a fundamental issue. Will the powers and authorities of the new body be the same as those of the trustees in the Catholic-maintained sector?

Mr McGrath: Yes.

Mr McCausland: I am also interested in pathways for the future; it is a pity that the issue was not dealt with more fully in the document. Before we go too far down that road, I can think of areas in which there are schools that might want the establishment of a smaller trust.

For instance, some schools might want to be part of a smaller system for reasons of ethos or religion; I would like to see much more about that, because I am concerned about the situation. As I said before, a controlled school can transform itself into an integrated school, but an integrated school cannot transform itself into a controlled school. Those issues are of significant concern to the unionist community, and they must be tied down before any Bills come before the Assembly and before decisions are made.

Mr McGrath: That is a good idea. It is a fair point, and I will come back to it. This paper covers a great deal, and perhaps we should have delved more into the process of appointing members of the body. We might come back to that. However, I accept that it might have been useful to make some reference to it in the public consultation.

The pathways are an emergent policy. There is a view that there should be accountable autonomy: schools should have as much autonomy as possible to determine how they will meet improving standards of outcomes for children. They may wish to do different things with regard to employing staff, and previously we talked about giving schools more scope over securing professional development. Another strand that is highlighted is that, over time, we should create the potential for a pathway for some schools in the controlled sector that might aspire to owning their own estate eventually.

That would be a long-term plan, because a school's board of governors would have to be of a sufficient calibre to take that step. There are issues about the calibre of boards of governors across the board; it is an evolution. We want to explain how we see that emerging and happening over time, and we must ensure that the provisions that we put in place will create the potential for those developments as opposed to closing off potential. We think that those issues will materialise in the next five to 10 years rather than in the next two or three. It is evolution rather than revolution.

Mr McCausland: The legislation relating to the Equality Commission or the Human Rights Commission, or both, states that their membership must be reflective or representative of the community that they serve.

Mr Stewart: It is the Human Rights Commission. It is an extremely problematic piece of legislation.

Mr McCausland: That may be so, but there is a precedent.

Mr Stewart: There is a precedent, but one must remember that it is Westminster legislation.

Mr McCausland: It is good practice for a public body to reflect the community that it serves. In the case of the Human Rights Commission, it reflects the whole of Northern Ireland. In the case that I have identified, the community that the school is serving should be reflected in the membership.

Mr Stewart: It is an issue that could be explored. My reference to its being Westminster legislation was to draw your attention to section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which determines the legislative competence of the Assembly. We would have to make sure that any formulation of words was capable of getting through that.

Careful thought needs to be given to the extent to which we would want such a body to reflect the composition of the community served by schools or reflect the composition of the community of Northern Ireland that will, potentially, be served by all those schools. Do we want to reinforce or underpin the existing composition of the controlled-schools sector or not? I offer that as a question.

John said that that is not the only, or most important, factor, to be considered in arriving at the criteria for the membership of the ESA. Its role will be different from that of the representative body; its role, as Dominic said, is narrow and technical and centres on the stewardship of public assets that are worth £2.3 billion. The skills and competencies required for the stewardship of public assets worth £2.3 billion will be high on the list of criteria.

Mr McCausland: I entirely agree with you regarding the competencies. However, on your previous question about a or b, I know which one I expect; that is an equality issue that you simply cannot avoid.

Mr McGrath: It is an important point and, as Chris said, we must explore the extent to which certain things should be specified. It would also be appropriate to look for people who have an understanding of issues concerning the controlled sector, such as perception, which Basil mentioned. Those people do not necessarily have to be from a particular religious group; they could simply have the required knowledge and experience.

It may be someone who has a good understanding that the controlled sector's perceptions are real; however, it should not be a question of representation over understanding, experience and talent. Merit is central to all public appointments, and those appointed must be capable of doing the job that they are charged to do.

Mr McCausland: My point, which I will not labour any further, is simply that people with skills of the highest calibre who can do the job should be appointed. It would be madness to give an insufficiently skilled body ownership of a stock of such high-value buildings. I have no doubt that there will be plenty of people with the necessary skills to choose from.

However, in order to gain the confidence of the broad unionist community, and other communities whose children attend controlled schools, it is important that membership of the body is reflective and representative; and I emphasise those words. I may be able to understand many of the relevant issues, but it would be extremely impertinent for me to say that I could be representative.

Mr Stewart: Nelson and other members expressed an interest in hearing more about the potential pathway for development. We have touched on several aspects in recent weeks that come under the broad umbrella of accountable autonomy. If the Committee would find it helpful, we will produce a paper to draw together some of those strands, including ownership, governance, our role in employment arrangements, and where we see the potential for greater autonomy.

The Chairperson: The problem is that a paper has gone out for public consultation that alludes to but which does not address the issues that the Committee flagged up to the Department in January. It is not perceived inequality; it is inequality. I appreciate why someone in your position will say that it is perceived inequality, but it is inequality, and there will be serious implications if it is not addressed. The paper you suggest providing for the Committee, and the paper before us now, will be useful in teasing that out.

Mrs O'Neill: The question that I was going to ask has, in effect, been answered. There needs to be a balance between stakeholders' legitimate concerns and the associated costs. There seems to be a grey area concerning VAT, stamp duty and land-registry fees. At a time when budgets are stretched, we need know where we are going on this issue; I hope that we can get that information as soon as possible.

The two-step transfer process is a massive upheaval for staff, who will have to move from education and library boards to the ESA and then to a new body.

Mr McGrath: A small number of staff will be affected; it will not be huge.

Mr Stewart: The VAT issue is important. There is a further important point to make in order that we do not inadvertently mislead the Committee. The issue of VAT exemption first arose when the intention to establish the ESA was announced. The Treasury and HMRC will decide whether the VAT exemption that applies to the education and library boards will be

carried forward to the ESA. It is inconceivable that its decision on any new body that takes ownership of controlled schools would differ from its decision on the ESA. In that sense, therefore, that part of the policy decision will not be affected. The decision of the Treasury and HMRC on VAT exemption will be good or bad, regardless of whether controlled schools are under separate ownership or under the ownership of the ESA.

The land registry fees are a different matter that could, of course, be affected by the number of transfers that will have to take place.

Mrs O'Neill: What about stamp duty?

Mr Stewart: The same applies to stamp duty.

The Chairperson: I would like clarification on the use of the word "pluralist" in paragraph 8:

"It is recognised that the education sector here remains pluralist."

Are you referring to the controlled sector or to education in general as pluralist? Exactly what is meant by that?

Mr Stewart: In the context of the sentence, pluralist refers to education generally and the fact that we continue to have sectors and schools of differing ethos and character. It is also true, although it is not implied in the sentence, that the controlled sector is perhaps more pluralist than the other sectors.

The Chairperson: It is interesting to compare how the outlined purpose of the ESA stacks up with the Bill, which defines the general duties of the ESA in clause 2(2)(a):

"to contribute towards the spiritual, moral, cultural, social, intellectual and physical development"

If every sector is pluralist, how can that be done?

Mr Stewart: I am not sure that I understand the tension between the two.

The Chairperson: Perhaps there is no tension; we will come back to that at another stage. I think that there is a contradiction between the two.

Mr Stewart: You will have to assist me, Chairperson; I am afraid that I cannot see any contradiction.

The Chairperson: I will return to that issue.

Mr McCausland: It is unfortunate that the consultation process is under way without there being any clarity on those issues. In a sense, you are asking questions of people who do not have the necessary information to be able to answer them. That devalues the consultation, and it perhaps suggests to some people that the Department has not picked up on the public's basic concerns. The issues that we are articulating today mirror the concerns of many in our community.

Mr Stewart: I take your point. The consultation process is similar to dipping a toe in the water, and it is important to do that. A tension always exists between early consultation to ascertain the views of stakeholders and a later consultation when the proposals have been progressed to such an extent that the opportunity to influence them may have gone.

The current consultation is not a question of take it or leave it; the Department wants to hear, reflect on and respond to stakeholders' views. After reflection and drawing conclusions from the points that are raised during consultation, that response may be in the form of a more definitive policy proposal. I assure the Committee that the concerns raised during the consultation process will not be overlooked.

The Chairperson: What is the next stage of the process? Will there be further consultation on finalised or emerging proposals?

Mr Stewart: We will reflect on that in light of the available timescales. I am conscious of the fact that, from a pragmatic perspective, the Committee wants to see detailed proposals as quickly as possible. We will certainly bring back to the Committee and make available to stakeholders an analysis of the consultation responses received and what we propose to do with them.

Miss McIlveen: Does that mean that none of those working groups will be set up until after the consultation has been completed?

Mr McGrath: No; we want to proceed apace with that.

Miss McIlveen: It says so in the consultation paper.

Mr McGrath: No; this is a consultation with the ownership body — the sector support. There is an urgent need to make progress on that, and we want to get on with it.

Mr Stewart: We are consulting on the paper. However, given the urgency, there are steps that we can take now without prejudicing the outcome of the consultation. We can gather ideas and suggestions as to which shoulders we might tap for the initial group without constraining what that group might do. However, that might change as a result of what comes back from the consultation.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, John and Chris.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

10 February 2009

DISEASES OF ANIMALS BILL (NIA 22/07)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr P J Bradley
Mr Thomas Burns
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Willie Clarke
Mr William Irwin
Mr Edwin Poots
Mr George Savage

Witnesses:

Ms Colette Connor	}	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
Ms Jennifer Corkey		
Mr Pat Millen	}	Departmental Solicitor's Office

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Elliott): I welcome the officials to this afternoon's Committee session. I begin by extending my sympathy to Jennifer Corkey on the recent death of her mother.

Ms Jennifer Corkey (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): Thank you, Deputy Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson: Our sympathy is also extended to George Savage, whose sister-in-law passed away at the weekend.

The Committee Clerk will inform us of the state of play with regard to the Diseases of Animals Bill. We have been at this for a while, so anyone who has missed a week can catch up now.

The Committee Clerk: Members will be aware, from last week's meeting, that there are two outstanding issues relating to clause 4, 'Powers of entry', and clause 11, 'Deliberate infection'.

Clause 4 (Powers of entry)

The Committee Clerk: Last week, the Committee agreed that it would seek legal advice on whether reference to the Committee could be made with respect to clause 4. The advice that we have received from our director of legal services coincides with that which the Department received from its legal advisors. The advice is that, although it is not impossible to have the Committee referred to in the Bill, it would be inappropriate to do so, because of administrative and technical difficulties that may arise. For instance, the Department's name might change.

The Committee was also concerned about the proposed amendment to clause 4(7). The Committee believed that it provided the Department with a "back door" through which to amend the guidance in respect of disease outbreaks, without reference to the Committee or the stakeholders. Considering the advice that has been sought and received, it is recommended that we revert to a hybrid of the amendment that was submitted last week. Therefore, after preparing a draft of the code, the Department shall publish the draft in such a manner as it thinks appropriate and invite representations regarding the draft. My understanding is that the Committee and Department will agree to that amendment.

The second amendment is that the Department removes paragraph 7, which gives the Department the right to amend in urgent circumstances. The Department is content that that amendment be accepted. The legal advice with which we have been provided confirms that there is a statutory relationship between the Committee and the Department under section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Department has endorsed that view in correspondence that it provided to the Committee and which is introduced now as evidence under formal scrutiny.

Mr T Clarke: Was paragraph 3(a) our suggestion?

The Committee Clerk: It was drafted by the Department, but the Committee objected to it because it did not include reference to the Committee. Our legal advice is that it would be inappropriate to refer to the Committee in the Bill.

Mr T Clarke: Paragraph 3(a) almost covers the same ground as paragraph 7 from last week. It states: "shall publish the draft in such manner as it thinks appropriate."

The Committee Clerk: Due to the statutory relationship under section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and that relationship has been confirmed by our legal advisers, the Department will be obliged to refer to the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson: Paragraph 7 went further than that.

Mr T Clarke: It is still saying the same thing, because it states “as it thinks appropriate”.

The Committee Clerk: The key issue is that the Department will invite representations. Under section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the Department is obliged, statutorily, to seek representation from the Committee. That has been confirmed by our legal advice, and it has been reinforced in the correspondence that has been entered into evidence today.

Ms Colette Connor (Department of Agriculture and Rural Development): I want to confirm the Clerk’s comments, and I reassure Mr Clarke that, as a statutory body, the Committee is the first group of stakeholders with whom the Department consults. Last week, the Committee was concerned about a “back door” policy. The Committee was concerned that the Department would amend the code in urgent circumstances, without any recourse to the Committee.

However, we have removed paragraph 7. We have come back to the Committee to express the view that you will be consulted on the code. The problem was whether we could prescribe the Committee by name on the face of the Bill, and your legal advice confirms ours: we cannot.

We had agreed that we would consult the Committee. We have already had informal discussions with the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers’ Association (NIAPA) and the Ulster Farmers’ Union (UFU) on the draft code; the next step will be for us to bring a working draft before the Committee when it is ready.

Mr T Clarke: I am not happy with the term “as it thinks appropriate”.

Ms Connor: That is a legal term. The Committee will be consulted as a matter of right, but there may be some stakeholders with whom it is not appropriate to consult on powers of entry. We consult over 620 bodies on legislation. It may not be necessary to consult with all of them on this particular code of practice, but certainly the Committee would be consulted as of right.

Ms Corkey: On the interpretation of paragraph 3(a), the term “as it thinks appropriate” relates only to how the draft code is published. In other words, it relates to how we make the draft available to the organisations that we are going to consult. Those words relate only to the publication of the draft.

We are under a statutory obligation under paragraph 3(a) to invite representations on the draft. We have no discretion in that. If we invited representations without including the Committee, we would not have carried out an adequate consultation under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It is important to clarify the meaning of paragraph 3(a), and where the discretion lies.

Mr Poots: Can it be clarified whether the Department has a statutory responsibility to consult the Committee if it means to change the draft in any way?

The Deputy Chairperson: I believe that the Clerk has outlined that.

The Committee Clerk: Yes, the Department now works under paragraph 6, which states that paragraph 2 to paragraph 4 apply to a revision of the code as applied to its preparation: in other words, if a revision is needed, the statutory obligation is to come back to the Committee.

Mr T Clarke: Are paragraphs 3 and 4 not repetitious?

The Committee Clerk: No; paragraph 3 relates to the publication of the code of practice.

Mr T Clarke: Paragraph 3 states that the Department:

“shall publish the draft in such manner as it thinks appropriate.”

Paragraph 4 states that the Department:

“shall publish the code in such manner as it thinks appropriate.”

Ms Corkey: Paragraph 4 refers to the final code, after we have considered the representations. Paragraph 3 deals only with the draft that we draw up for consultation, but paragraph 4 deals with the publication of the final code. We have previously indicated to the Committee that our intention is to issue the final code at an appropriate opportunity with a mail shot to all farmers, so that they will all have a copy. That is what paragraph 4 relates to.

The Committee Clerk: Essentially, the steps provide for the publication, the preparation, and then the revision. It caters for the entire process in relation to the code.

Question, That the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development recommends to the Assembly that clause 4 be amended as agreed between the Committee and the Department and that the Committee agrees to the text of the amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Clause 11 (Deliberate Infection)

The Committee Clerk: There are two issues in respect of this clause, the first being the disqualification from keeping or dealing with animals, following a second offence. The Northern Ireland Office is content with that, on the strict understanding that it is subject to the Minister’s agreement that that be included in the Bill.

The second issue relates to mandatory custodial sentences. The Department is awaiting confirmation on both matters, but the Department’s impression, and my understanding, is that the Minister of State for Northern Ireland is unlikely to agree to that. He feels that it is the judiciary’s responsibility to decide what penalties should be applied.

The Deputy Chairperson: We were asking for tougher regulation and authority.

The Committee Clerk: The Committee's recommendation, subject to the Minister of State's confirmation, is that we agree to the amended clause in respect of the mandatory disqualification from keeping animals. The Committee awaits the Minister of State's potential response in respect of the mandatory custodial sentence.

Question, That, subject to confirmation from the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development recommends to the Assembly that clause 11 be amended, as agreed between the Committee and the Department, and that the Committee agrees to the text of the amendment, *put and agreed to.*

Long title agreed to.

The Committee Clerk: That concludes the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. The next step is to conclude the report on the Bill. The Committee sought an extension of the Committee Stage until 17 February. The report must be laid in the Committee office before that date.

We have tabled a draft of the report that includes the two amendments that have just been passed. Members must consider and approve the draft report. Any comments that members want to make in relation to the draft report must be passed to me by lunchtime on Thursday 12 February. That will enable the report to be laid within the statutory period, with any amendments having been made. I would appreciate it if members respond to the tabled report by noon on Thursday.

The Deputy Chairperson: The draft report has been tabled, and any comments thereon must be made to the Clerk by noon on Thursday. That concludes the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Diseases of Animals Bill. I thank Colette and the other officials for their patience and persistence throughout this process. We have eventually reached a resolution.

Are members agreed that we provide a copy of the final report to the Department and the Minister?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Connor: On behalf of the Department, I thank the Chairperson, the Committee, the Committee Clerk and his staff for the support, advice and, sometimes, very useful comments that we received during the preparation of the Bill. We very much appreciate the time and effort that the Committee has put in, and we look forward to moving to the Consideration Stage of the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson: Thank you very much.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

11 February 2009

EDUCATION BILL (NIA 3/08)

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr John O'Dowd
Mr Edwin Poots

Witnesses:

Mr Tom Flynn
Mr John McGrath
Mr Eugene Rooney
Mr Chris Stewart

} Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Storey): I welcome John McGrath, Chris Stewart, Eugene Rooney and Tom Flynn. Good morning, gentlemen. I remind members that this session is being covered by Hansard because it forms part of the scrutiny of the Education Bill.

Today we will consider area-based planning, on which I am sure that members will have concerns and questions. I will ask John to speak to the Committee first.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education): Thank you, Chairman. We are grateful for the opportunity to be here on a Wednesday morning yet again to discuss area-based planning and to deal with the Committee's queries. We have distributed papers to the Committee on the recent public consultation exercise on the draft policy paper on area-based planning; the paper identifies issues that were raised in the consultation. We have also distributed responses to the issues that Committee members raised on the draft policy as set out in the letter from the Committee Clerk dated 16 January. I propose to outline the key points in the papers before we take any questions.

The rationale for area-based planning is set out in the policy paper. Fundamentally, it is about introducing a much more strategic planning process into the education service to ensure that children and young people can access and benefit from provision that best meets their needs and which makes the best use of resources. The objective is to bring better cohesion, consistency and co-ordination into planning in order to address the weaknesses that are increasingly evident in the current bottom-up system. The aim is to have much better alignment of provision to overall integrated needs.

The policy paper went out to consultation last year. We received 34 written submissions, and colleagues met key stakeholders in the education sector.

The list of respondents is included in the paper that was made available to the Committee. The consultation responses were broadly positive towards our approach, particularly the education and skills authority's (ESA) having the lead responsibility for producing area plans, and also for the concept that area plans should, over time, cover a wide range of provision, including preschool, primary, post-primary and youth provision.

Some of the issues that were raised during the consultation are identified in the Committee's briefing, and some relate to matters that the Committee raised previously. I will briefly deal with those in the order that is set out in appendix 3 of the briefing. The comments will be considered by the Minister, and our intention is that a revised draft policy paper that reflects her views will subsequently be issued to the Committee.

A recurring theme in the responses was the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, and the Committee raised that issue in previous discussions. The consultation responses mainly concerned the respective roles of the ESA and the various sectoral interests of the schools. Some of the sectoral interests argued that they should have a more elevated role, while others sought further clarification on the policy statement. In addition, some felt that there should be no erosion of the envisaged role of the ESA, and others simply sought clarification of their involvement in the process.

In consideration with the Minister, we aim to clarify roles in the review when we update and revise the policy paper. The review will stick to the core principle that the ESA will have the lead and the statutory role in producing draft area plans, including how the various interests can bring their influence to bear on the ESA in the production of those plans so that the process is as inclusive as possible.

As well as setting policy and overall budgets, the Department will have a challenge-and-approve role in the area-planning process, including area plans and

strategic investment plans. Under the review of public administration (RPA) changes, the ESA will have the statutory duty to produce area plans, and, as far as possible, it should seek agreement from stakeholders about the proposals in the plans. When the ESA cannot achieve such consensus, it should detail those issues in its submission to the Department. A lack of overall consensus is not necessarily a veto on the planning process.

The Committee and some of the respondents raised the issue of community planning and its links with area-based planning. The Minister is keen that area-based planning links in with community planning as it develops under the RPA and local government; that will be reflected in the revised policy paper. That will clarify that the processes should link in with the proposed community planning model for the 11 new councils and that the ESA will have a duty to participate in the community planning process. Indeed, the Bain Report recommended that education planning should be related to planning in other areas; the advent of community planning is a mechanism to ensure that that happens.

The Committee raised concerns about school sectoral consultations and development proposals in the period before area plans will be in place. As I said, under the RPA changes the ESA will have the statutory responsibility for putting in place area plans. In the interim, sector bodies may continue to undertake planning and consultation exercises within their own remits, but those will be superseded by the area plans. The existence of such proposals or plans in individual sectors will not be allowed to hamper the overall area-based planning process.

Under existing legislation, the Department cannot prevent bodies and groups submitting development proposals. However, in advising on proposals, it takes into account the consistency of the proposal with the anticipated need for provision in an area. When area plans are in place, the draft policy paper points out that only those proposals that are consistent with the plan will be taken forward, and that there will be opportunities for sectors and groups to raise their proposals with the ESA as area plans are developed and reviewed.

The Committee also raised the issue of club bank and area-based planning. When area plans are in place throughout the region, club-bank style arrangements should not be required because all schemes that have been approved as part of the planning process should have been appropriately funded from the outset. Some legacy schemes may still be operating at the beginning of the process, but the need for loans should diminish and become redundant as each of those schemes is completed.

The Committee asked for an update on the post-primary exercise, concentrating on the entitlement framework. The framework is detailed in the briefing paper, and the exercise has a dedicated website, so I shall only select some of the highlights.

The exercise sought submissions from interested parties, and 76 submissions, which are now being considered by the area groups, were received by the closing date at the end of last month. The central group has met on four occasions; it is due to meet again on 19 February 2009. Each area group has met several times, and all the groups meet in a forum.

On 27 October 2008, the central group submitted an interim report to the Minister that highlighted all instances of positive engagement by sectors. A progress report from the central group is due to be with the Minister at the end of this month, and the group's initial regional review report is due in May.

Those are the substantive issues with respect to the current position. The next step will be to complete responses to all the matters that were raised during the consultation process and, in consultation with the Minister, to complete the revised policy paper. At that stage, we will bring the revised policy paper to the Committee.

Although the drafting of the second Bill will be based on that agreed policy, we are keen to hear the Committee's opinions and answer questions about the present state of work. Therefore, we stand ready to deal with any queries that members might wish to raise.

The Chairperson: Thank you, John. The timescale of events concerning this matter and the way in which announcements were made are bewildering. In March and December 2008 the Minister made statements in the House setting out the work of the central group; we then had to wait to get the terms of reference. Eventually, the central group and the subgroups were up and running. How does that series of events fit in with implementing a final, full area plan, and, given that the entitlement framework is supposed to come together in 2013, is the Department planning to introduce any interim arrangements from 2010?

I worry to hear you talk about a report coming out in May, as the central group has sent work back to the Department. What is the present situation, and, in light of the new statistics that have been gathered, how does the work on the area plan sit with the development proposals, about which we have been haranguing Eugene for weeks and months? We want to see progress on new builds; we want to see schools in place. What work is being done to bring all those factors together so that we do not end up in the same position as we did in the past on other matters? The process has been like a patchwork quilt with no joined-up approach.

Mr McGrath: I was afraid that you would begin with such a complex question.

The Chairperson: I am glad to fulfil your expectations.

Mr McGrath: I said that I was afraid. *[Laughter:]* There are several strands involved. The post-primary entitlement framework is, in a sense, being taken forward as a non-statutory exercise, reflecting several matters that must be dealt with. Furthermore, that work will prepare the ground in the education service for the various sectors, informing them about the types of approach, behaviours and expectations that area-based planning will involve. Consequently, the work has taken longer than expected to reach this stage.

This is the first time that such work has been undertaken in the education sector, and during the process significant lessons have been learned about what the various sectors can expect and about whether and on what basis they will participate. It has taken some time to get the process to where it is now, but much has been learned that will be relevant for the future. Any process can be technocratic and mechanistic; however, the behaviour and motives of the players in the process are equally important.

It is a valuable introduction to the discipline and behaviour that a more strategic approach to planning will bring to the education sector; whereas, to date, there has been a locally based, bottom-up micro-system with no overview. That work is continuing and will provide a valuable back-drop.

However, it is not a statutory basis for area-based planning; that will be in the second Bill, and the ESA will have the responsibility of putting in place a series of area-based plans that should, over time, cover the entire region. However, it will, undoubtedly, take time for a full set of area plans, covering not only school services but early-years and youth services, because we are moving from one spectrum to another. There will be a migration from where we are now, and we will have to work carefully to fine-tune the process of moving to the implementation of area-based plans.

The determination of which plans should be initiated in the early days, as opposed to later, depends on various factors. Judgements will have to be made on whether there is stability of provision and whether there is consensus on that provision and whether there is a balance between provision and need. If the answer is yes, the judgement may be that a full area-based plan would not be needed until later.

In some areas, and I am sure that we can think of some, there may be pressing issues about the state of investment or the imbalance between provision and need, or perhaps several proposals or issues about rationalisation need to be dealt with. The ESA should immediately identify those areas that require early

work on area-based plans. The process of migration means that it will be some time after 2010 before the full pattern of area-based plans is complete.

The Chairperson: The difficulty, John, is that the patchwork quilt will grow over coming years because if we allow sectors and organisations to continue to do what they have always done, which is to work within the parameters of their own legally defined silos, will we ever reach the point of completion?

Some of us may question the need for the ESA. The probable rationale of the Department is that the ESA is required precisely because, to date, everyone has worked within their own legislative frameworks. Those frameworks have defined what they have been able to do, and that has not always reflected what is happening in other sectors. Realistically, however, that behaviour will continue for several years to come.

Mr McGrath: It is recognised that a much more strategic approach to planning is required in the education sector. Even if the ESA were not to provide that, the consensus is that discipline must be introduced. Given that we are moving from a localised, bottom-up approach, which, in many cases, is based on provision rather than need and in which the providers are the drivers, it will be a long migration.

However, we do not want a free for all to apply until there is almost a complete set of area plans; we want to prioritise where area plans should be put in place at an early date. That would put a stop to the diverse range of thoughts and proposals and provide a context in which to bring all of them together in one framework.

We have an idea of the direction that we want to take in the various areas. There will, therefore, be a much heightened scrutiny of any proposals, and they will be set against the overall strategic context. At present, we cannot stop development proposals being made, and they must be considered and approved — or not; however, there is no automatic assumption that a development proposal must be agreed. Eugene may wish to add a few words because, to date, he has more scars on his back from development proposals than I have.

We will want to look at that in context in order to address the perception that various interests may try to bring forward proposals in order to get them over the line before area-based planning is introduced. We must be very careful about that, because those plans will trigger decisions about capital investment for the next 25 to 30 years. Strategic decisions must be made in the right context; we cannot be bounced into making misguided decisions after a bit of strategic reflection.

Mr Eugene Rooney (Department of Education): John has covered the points that are central to the ESA's role in planning. The ESA will be taking over completed and partly completed work; it will be aware of investment proposals; it will take forward

investment projects; it will have information, not least from the central planning group, whose work on how areas might be configured is due to be completed this year; and it will provide advice and analysis on development proposals. It will be two to three years before the ESA starts to make a significant contribution to putting all that together and in challenging plans that do not fit. From day one, areas that need to be looked at, proposals, and the existing investment programme that it will inherit, will be a priority for the ESA.

The central planning group is unique in bringing together the different sectors to look at issues on an area level, and the five area groups are doing that at the moment. Valuable information will come out of those groups that can inform the process that the ESA is required to take up and deliver on. That material will be used to help to ensure that the planning process is as effective as it can be. It focuses primarily on post-primary schools, although, as John outlined, area planning covers primary, pre-primary and post-primary schools. That exercise will have an important input; however, the ESA will be expected to do much more.

The Chairperson: John, you explained the issues that arose from the consultation. The Department anticipates that the revised policy paper will be available from the second week in March; it would be valuable for the Committee to see that. We would appreciate if you could come back then; this is an important area that must be resolved.

Mr McGrath: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: The Committee wants to understand exactly where the thinking is as we develop the details of the second Bill. On 4 March 2008, in her statement to the House about the timescale of post-primary area-based planning, the Minister of Education said that:

“This will be used to identify the structural change required for the delivery to every young person of election at 14 and the entitlement framework from 2013.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 28, p186, col 1]*.

Will area-based planning focus only on a young person's election at 14; or, as many people would prefer, will it look at transfer at age 11 through to 19? It is not specific, and the concern is that area-based planning may be used for reasons other than considering the provision of need; the worry is that it may be used to change the debate around the transfer issue.

Mr McGrath: The primary focus is on the entitlement framework. Some people think that area-based planning concerns only the physical estate, but the physical estate must reflect how the curriculum entitlement framework will be delivered. Area-based planning is not just about buildings, and that has been reflected in our language.

The buildings flow from the pattern of services and the issues of critical mass and quality, not just bricks and mortar. We are likely to reflect that broader dimension to area-based planning in the revisions to the policy paper.

Mr Tom Flynn (Department of Education): The exercise focuses on the 14 to 19 entitlement framework. Given the timescale, it also focuses on provision in the existing and planned estate; that is to say the projects that you have had details of from the investment delivery plan. We are talking about a short time.

The post-primary exercise is submissions-based in that it elicits submissions from organisations and individuals. In that respect, it is not as broad or as pro-active an exercise as we would expect under full area-based planning with the ESA.

The Chairperson: Is there any indication as to what the key elements in the Department's revised policy paper would be following the consultation? Do you have any idea, at this stage, what would be put in place that would be different from the policy paper?

Mr McGrath: First, we identified the issues that people raised; some people asked for clarification, so perhaps the paper is not entirely clear. One issue that we will emphasise is the relative roles of the ESA in area planning, and the various sectoral interests and sectoral support bodies. The latter represent their sector and provide their input, but the statutory responsibility, the responsibility for taking forward area planning, will rest with the ESA.

The stakeholders, as in any public consultation exercise, will be the public at large, including, but not exclusively, sectoral interests. There are various issues that we want to clarify. Issues arise from area-based planning's being about meeting overall education needs, and, through that, what the investment needs are, although it is not just about investment.

There are issues about the mechanics of area planning groups in that we may have to examine who the key stakeholders are. At official level, we want to ensure that the advice that we submit reflects where we are now and some of the discussions that we have had with the Committee about how area-based planning fits with the role of sector groups.

We spoke last week of the controlled estate body. There may be issues over whether it should have a role in the development proposals in future if no one else brings such proposals forward. There is an updating of thinking, but primarily it will concern the issues raised in the consultation paper. However, the discussion that we have started today is about where we will be on 1 January 2010 if we roll out area plans. The Committee will be interested in that. That may not be so much of an issue in the policy paper, but there is a query over how we move to the implementation of policy. I hope

that when we come back to the Committee in March 2009, we will be able to fill in some of the gaps.

Mr D Bradley: Good morning. Area-based planning will be an ongoing process because communities' needs will evolve and change.

A key element in that will be the sustainable schools policy. At the moment, there are six criteria by which the viability of schools is judged, and since no weighting is given any individual criterion, to all intents and purposes they are of equal value. How can you ensure that one area group does not value one criterion more highly than the rest, while another area group will value a different criterion more highly? How can you ensure even application of the policy across all areas?

At the moment, we face an unregulated system. There will still be open enrolment at post-primary level, but we will not follow the policy envisaged by the Minister whereby most pupils will travel to their nearest local school. In order to area-plan, you must be able to contain pupils in an area; however, that will not be possible in an unregulated system. How can area-based planning operate in an unregulated system?

We have already discussed my next point. The enrolment statistics of schools in Northern Ireland show that a huge number of small rural primary schools fail to meet the sustainability criterion of 105 pupils, some are well below it. Is that not a challenge? Should it not be included in your revised policy paper?

A further point that I want to raise is related to the amalgamation of schools, although that may be Eugene Rooney's area of expertise. Are there guidelines for amalgamation? Must amalgamating schools be of roughly similar size, give or take, say, 50 or 80 pupils? Will the sustainable schools policy be incorporated into your revised policy paper?

Mr McGrath: The sustainable schools policy has been published. In area-based planning, we expect it to set some of the parameters. It does not need to be reflected; it is part of the context.

Mr D Bradley: Will it take into consideration my point about how the six criteria can be interpreted differently by each area?

Mr McGrath: I was coming to that. In future, under the changes envisaged, the ESA will have a statutory role in area-based planning. It will have guidance from the Department and will be expected to adopt a common approach, guided by the entitlement framework, school improvement and the sustainable schools policy.

Mr D Bradley: Does that mean that the ESA will give a certain weighting to each of the six criteria?

Mr McGrath: We expect each area plan to take account of the various policy parameters, of which the sustainable schools policy is one. Each area will be expected to make judgements on the relative importance of the sustainable schools criteria and explain why, for example, the judgement in one case showed a greater bias towards size or quality than the judgement in another.

Area-based planning will not be so mechanistic as to allow one to stick the numbers in at one end and collect an answer at the other. Judgements will have to be made about the size of schools. You mentioned small schools and the different criteria but, at the end of the day, the quality of the learning experience for children will be very high. The enrolment of a school may be below the figure set for a sustainable school, but the test of a school's worth will be whether it can address the challenges, either through amalgamation or federation, that were raised about the quality of the learning experience.

If it can meet the challenges, an ESA plan could envisage that a school could function below the threshold; if a school cannot, it might not be allowed to do so. Judgements will have to be made in different places. There will be a common policy approach, and when proposing an area plan, the ESA will be expected to explain the judgements that it makes in different circumstances. That is no different from any other major strategic-planning exercise.

Mr D Bradley: Will that not be rather confusing for the public? A school with a low enrolment might remain open while one with a higher enrolment might close.

Mr McGrath: Those things happen. Hypothetically, a school with a smaller enrolment could work in collaboration with nearby schools to deliver the entitlement framework and quality of learning; equally, a school with a higher enrolment might be geographically isolated or unwilling to work in collaboration and have poor results.

My experience in the Health Service, in which there are always issues about viability and facilities, taught me that different solutions apply to different places because circumstances are different. Geography means that there are differences in what happens in Downpatrick, Omagh and Coleraine because one can factor in different solutions. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; however, issues of critical mass and quality must be examined.

Mr D Bradley: I thought that one of the points of the ESA was to stop the irregularity of application of policy across the board.

Mr McGrath: It is about how policy is applied. It is certainly not envisaged that we will have an almost entirely mechanistic system. The exact primary and post-primary configuration around Omagh will not be

the same as that in Coleraine or Downpatrick. However, it is consistency of approach and rigour, and about explaining how the issues balance.

Mr D Bradley: Do you not agree that the sustainable schools policy is such a key element in area-based planning that there should be at least some reference to it in your revised policy paper?

Mr McGrath: It is a clear policy. We may set out in the guidance that area-based planning should include sustainable schools among the key policy parameters of which it must take account. Do not read this as a dilution of the proposal. Issues of critical mass in education — as in other sectors — will become sharper as time progresses. Therefore many messages about the sustainable schools policy will bite much more sharply in future than they do now.

Schools may find solutions through collaboration between sectors; they should at least be given the opportunity to do so.

Mr Rooney: Sustainable schools will be central to area-based planning. Before sustainable schools existed, sectors planned according to their own factors and criteria; there was no common approach. The sustainable-schools policy has set out six criteria that everyone can consider.

They must be interpreted by considering local circumstances. There cannot be a mechanistic approach that states that every school in a rural area must be reviewed if its enrolment falls below the threshold of 105. The policy clarifies that the key objective is to ensure that the educational experience of children is paramount when considering the provision of the estate in an area and how the facilities that are provided meet the educational needs of children. That is a key element of the policy, and it will be a key element of area-based planning to ensure that children's education is of the right standard and that they have access to the broad curriculum to which they are entitled.

The individual criteria were not weighted. We considered that, but the Minister decided that the criteria should be applied with regard to local circumstances. One criterion was not put above another, they had to be considered together. The indicators are intended to help the education sector to identify where action is needed in areas to address issues that might arise in schools.

The ESA will have a key role in ensuring consistency of application across the region, because it will draw up the draft area plans and consider issues of sustainability across the schools estate. That is a key element of the ESA's work on area-based planning.

The key issue with amalgamations is that when the options of how best to ensure an area's educational

needs are considered, it requires two or more schools to amalgamate to provide a viable solution. As a broad guide, we expect that the schools involved in an amalgamation would be broadly equal in size; that would be one of the initial factors to consider. That is not necessarily an absolute requirement for an amalgamation; there can be many different types of amalgamation.

We consider whether an amalgamation will deliver an effective solution in an area, whether it will provide a sustainable solution and whether the educational needs of children will be met. There is no hard-and-fast rule on when an amalgamation should or should not apply, but we will consider whether it is viable.

Mr D Bradley: My other question was whether area-based planning can operate in an unregulated system, given that children can leave their own area to attend schools in other areas.

Mr McGrath: When running a sector such as education, which has a pivotal role and a large budget, it is a no-brainer that a strategic-planning discipline is needed. I do not wish to get into the detail of transfer to post-primary school, because that is not my forte; however, the taxpayer would expect a system of strategic planning no matter what arrangements are in place. Strategic planning is not in place, and not having it creates more challenges.

At its heart, area-based planning is not based around particular policy considerations; it is designed to take a strategic look at the education estate in the light of the policies of the day. Some may make it more complicated; some may make it easier. What is needed is a strategic planning process that better shapes the nature and delivery of the service, reflects investment needs and gives confidence that the right investments are being made in the right places. It is a puzzle to me how the education sector has gone for so long without it.

Mr D Bradley: I agree that area-based planning is needed, but it will be difficult —

Mr McGrath: It will be challenging, and it is early days. It will take some time for area-based planning to bed in completely.

Mr D Bradley: I question whether that is where the process should start. My other question was about small schools. Do you not agree that such a challenging issue should be incorporated into your revised policy paper with specific guidance?

Mr McGrath: The policy paper is for area-based planning, which will govern the legislation; it will not get down to the detail of individual or perhaps local guidance, depending on the circumstance. For example, it may be more relevant to rural than to urban areas, although not exclusively so. It is an important

issue, but it may be further down the implementation path when it features in guidance.

Mr Flynn: There are two sides to the issue. In a sense, area-based planning is about identifying a need and the solutions to it; that is where the solution of sustainable schools comes in on the supply side. If the issues are considered from an area basis rather than from a facility basis, some of the risk of local enrolment is being pooled. If an area is large enough, more of the movements will be internalised and more of the flows of pupils will be captured.

Area-based planning is about delivering policies, a key one of which is sustainable schools. There is a balancing act, as planning challenges are thrown up by some of the policies. It is not meant to be a centralised, autocratic system of supply provision; it must allow policies to interact. My preference is to avoid singling out an individual strand in the policy paper for area-based planning, because it is about the delivery of a range of policies.

The issue of thresholds and enrolments is a subset of one criterion of sustainable schools, but it is something that people pick up on; however, as John said, it was never intended to apply the policy mechanistically. The fact that it is about the range of policies as well as sustainable schools means that there must be flexibility in application at the facility level. The key point of area-based planning is its focus on determining need at an area level.

I do not know whether that answers your questions, but it is an attempt to do so.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you.

Mr Elliott: My point relates to a question that Dominic asked about smaller schools. It concerns me that area-based planning will be forced by capital spend and capital budget, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland, without having a more designed plan. Ultimately, pupil numbers will drive that process. I think that Eugene said that the sustainable schools policy is central to area-based planning. I see that tied in to a policy that is driven more by those two aspects than being a feasible plan, particularly in rural areas.

Mr McGrath: Small rural schools will face challenges in the future, and we must take those challenges into account when formulating a plan for them. In a sense, that confirms the point made by Dominic, and it will be an issue to address. Finding solutions in certain cases through greater co-operation or collaboration will be a challenge. With or without area-based planning, some small schools will face challenges; how those challenges are dealt with is the issue.

Mr Rooney: When looking at small schools in an area-based planning context, one can plan so that they

are viable and supported to deliver the education that is needed in an area; that will ensure that they are needed in the future. That is because the area-planning process should allow a complete view of how best to address the needs of an area, which may include a review of some schools and a decision that they are required in the long term and should be supported to maintain delivery.

The present process is different, pupil numbers often dwindle, which increases pressure on schools, but there is no plan for whether the school is needed in the long term. As pupil numbers fall year on year, the school gets smaller, the pressures on teachers grow, but no proactive action is taken. That is what the area-planning process must change. It should identify all an area's schools, its projected needs, and how those needs can best be addressed in the prevailing circumstances.

It is a process of planning and management rather than of reacting to situations in which small schools face the challenges that they always have and always will. The question is how best to address those challenges once the circumstances of an area involved have been fully assessed.

Mr Elliott: How will smaller schools be protected if their plans are not accepted by the ESA or the Department? That will cause friction. You may argue that smaller schools face challenges; however, the challenge for the Department of Education and the ESA is to work with them, and to date, the Department has, in many instances, not met that challenge. I would like the Department to adopt a much more open approach, which is a challenge that also faces the ESA.

Mr McGrath: Tom makes some good points. Usually, events dictate what happens: small schools dwindle and may close, and the resulting pattern is dictated by happenstance. We always talk about particular primary schools, but, in area planning the approach is based on how to meet the needs of primary-school children in a specific area for the next 25 years. Tom is right that the Department must come up with a plan that is more strategic and proactive than simply waiting to see what happens and devil take the hindmost, or, as may happen in many cases, only the strongest will survive. That will present a challenge to the ESA, but all those involved must acknowledge that since the present pattern will not survive, a new one must be determined — as opposed to the winner being the last one standing. The ESA's challenge is to ensure that it meets, rather than ducks out of meeting, educational need.

Mr Elliott: To return to Dominic's point, I know that the Department cannot permit too many inconsistencies, but one size does not fit all in the Province. I am keen to receive an assurance that

guidance will be provided to ensure that that will not happen and that there will be flexibility.

Mr McGrath: There will be local flexibility. The challenges will be to deliver choice and equality of learning. A solution that works in Fermanagh may not work elsewhere, but there must be scope for devising a local solution. If there is a diversity of approach, the test for the ESA will be to explain why something that worked in place X would not work in place Y; local communities deserve to know why that should be the case. Collaboration and the sharing of resources may result in a local solution being successful in one area. However, it may not work elsewhere because such arrangements were not possible, people were not willing to collaborate or the distances between schools were too great. One solution does not fit all, particularly for very localised issues.

The Chairperson: John, at this stage, the devil is in the detail. To follow on from the points made by Tom and Dominic, several factors will determine the decision that is ultimately taken on a school. First, there is an issue about the trustees and ownership, and there is a long way to go on that in the controlled sector. The trustees have no statutory responsibility for development proposals.

Take into account all that you and Eugene said about flexibility and consider the longstanding viability of a particular school. What happens if, in an area context, the ESA makes a determination and submits a development proposal stating that it can provide for the needs in the area by closing that school? As everything is set in the context of sustainable schools and, particularly in the case of post-primary schools, the entitlement framework, ultimately the ESA would have the power to close that school. Neither the school's board of governors nor the trustees could do anything about it.

That differs slightly from the present situation. Members know of schools that have amalgamated and are still not viable but which continue to existence; yet the Department cannot get some sectors to acknowledge that, ultimately, a particular school should close.

Is that the key difference between where we are and where we will be?

Mr McGrath: I hesitate to link that to a specific sector.

The Chairperson: I did not name the sector, so you cannot accuse me of doing so. I did not cite a school or sector; I spoke in generic terms, so you can use the same protection.

Mr McGrath: I defer to your wisdom. You will want the education and skills authority to have a role; it will consult on and debate an area plan before bringing its proposals to the Department. If those

proposals are approved, the ESA envisages our investment proposals being guided by a decision to change the pattern for a particular provision, such as the primary-school sector, for example.

As you said, rationalisation is not unknown in certain sectors at different paces in different places; the issue is about the quality of learning and the viability of critical mass. The Department or the ESA will not invent those: they already exist. We will want the force of a plan that has statutory effect to provide more of a catalyst to make changes.

The Chairperson: Will an unregulated system be open to litigation? We hear various assertions about what could happen in the post-11-plus era. Is the argument the same for area plans? Could a school's trustees legally challenge an area plan or development proposal if they did not agree with the closure of their school?

Mr McGrath: Anyone has a right to go to court on any matter. Ultimately, schools rely on taxpayers' money. If a rational piece of work suggests that a school should not have a future and should not be provided for, we would expect that to bite.

Mr Chris Stewart (Department of Education): As John said, area-based planning will work best if it works on consensus. I reassure you that differences in ownership will not be an impediment. As the legislation stands, any grant-aided school can be closed by means of a development proposal, and the owners of that school cannot block it.

The Chairperson: I appreciate that clarification.

Mr O'Dowd: Who speaks on behalf of the nursery-school sector in the area-based planning groups? I am thinking specifically of standalone units.

Mr McGrath: The current work relates only to post-primary schools.

Mr O'Dowd: The review of public administration says that area plans should relate to areas covering the provision of, among others, nursery schools.

Mr Flynn: That will be the case. Representation will need to be found for the nursery and preschool sector in the area groups for area planning.

The Chairperson: Therefore the focus is on post-primary schools at present.

Mr McGrath: The non-statutory exercise is focused on the post-primary sector at present. In future, we want area planning to cover the spectrum of the services for which we are responsible.

The Chairperson: Will that include youth services?

Mr McGrath: Yes; we want area planning to cover everything from the early-years sector to youth services. In the early-years sector, there is a mix of

nursery and preschool provision and a mix of statutory and voluntary and community provision. That presents its challenges, as it is a much more diverse sector than the normal education sector. We will need the means to allow people to be represented. In that sector, there are issues about the differences in quality between preschool provision and nursery provision, which the chief inspector highlighted in his recent report. An inclusive approach will be needed.

In youth services there is also a mix of statutory and voluntary and community provision, and the number of providers is much broader and more diverse.

The Chairperson: There are 11 organisations on the central group: the education and library boards; Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS); the Irish-language lobby; the Governing Bodies Association (GBA); the Council for Integrated Education; trades unions; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI); Department for Employment and Learning (DEL); the Association of Northern Ireland Colleges; a representative from the Republic; and a representative from the ESA. One of the criticisms was that the make-up of groups, not just the central group, but the five subgroups too, was biased against the controlled sector, and I notice that that was picked up on in some of the other issues that arose from the consultation. Will that issue be addressed in the Department's revised paper?

Mr McGrath: The current exercise is non-statutory; the groups that are doing the work are made up of the providers of education. Under the RPA changes, the ESA will take the lead and do the work in consultation with the education providers; however, the ESA will be the executive body. The nature of area planning groups will be different from the present ones, and we will have to make sure that we get the right diversity. There must be a community input as distinct from the input of the education providers; it is important that the views of those who receive education are not lost. That is an issue that we will look at throughout our work, and to which we will return in light of the Minister's views.

Mr Poots: Paragraph 2 of the central group's terms of reference states that: "While the issues around transfer at 11 are not within the remit of this exercise, it will be important that the group's proposals are consistent with any resolution reached."

I am not sure whether a resolution has been reached. However, at least we are being realistic, as the Minister has recognised, in deeds if not in words, that academic selection will continue to be used by some schools and that there is nothing she can do about it. In that context, I assume that the work of the central group will be based on reality and not the Minister's hopes?

Mr McGrath: Those are the terms of reference for the groups and within them it is up to the groups to

decide what they will do and how they will come back to us; there is no diktat on them.

Mr Poots: The Minister has made many suggestions about what will happen and what she would like to see happen. There has been much talk about election at 14, but that has not been elaborated on. It appears to me that transfer at age 11 will continue; the only difference will be the privatisation of the test. Will the groups be guided by reality or by what the Minister wants?

Mr McGrath: I cannot speak for the groups; they have their terms of reference, and they are made up of bodies that may have differing views on the issue. It is up to them how they address that, what they come back to the Minister with, and, as you say, whether or not that is deemed a resolution.

Mr Poots: What advice are they getting, for example, on transferring to an alternative school at age 14? At present, that is not on the radar; there is little debate about pupils not in the Dickson Plan transferring again at age 14.

Mr Flynn: The post-primary exercise is submissions-based; it elicits submissions from groups and individuals. The exercise will collate those submissions. We are not close to this exercise, because the central group will report to the Minister when it has brought all the submissions together. I cannot give detail on what it is doing at present; we have not seen it.

Mr Poots: Is that linked to the estate?

Mr Flynn: Their terms of reference focus on the delivery of the curriculum in the estate or on planned developments in the estate — those that have already been announced — given the time frame for the delivery of the entitlement framework.

Mr Poots: If we move to election at 14, a huge rationalisation of the estate, and huge changes, will be required. If that is a reality, as opposed to a hope, the context in which the group operates will change. However, why should the group go down this route if it is only a hope? How would you operate now if you were a member of that group?

Mr Flynn: I cannot speak for the sectors represented on the group; I will wait to see what they come up with.

Mr Poots: These are confusing times.

The Chairperson: We have been there before; no doubt, we will be there again. People are concerned that area-based planning will be used to get to a different point from where we are at present. We will be paying close attention to that. We will see whether it is used to drive through a policy on which there is not consensus. For instance, I see the arrangement regarding schools setting their own transfer tests as an interim measure, as, ultimately, everyone will have to

agree on a proper transfer system into which everyone can buy. We are where we are until that is achieved.

However, we must be careful that other measures of area planning are not used as a mechanism to try to get to the same destination.

Miss McIlveen: Perhaps my question follows on from what Edwin said, but it relates to something that Mr McGrath said in his opening presentation. I got the impression that there might have been reluctance on the part of some sectors at the beginning of the process or that some people had difficulties with it. Have all sectors engaged fully? Were difficulties identified from the outset? If so, have they been resolved?

Mr McGrath: As the current exercise is new, some sectors or interests required more clarification on what the opportunities were, and they wanted information on areas that they might have seen as threats before they signed up. It took some time before all participants came on board. Why, however, they felt like that is up to them, Michelle.

Miss McIlveen: I will leave it at that.

The Chairperson: The Committee raised concerns about club banks. Your paper states:

“Therefore, the need for Club bank loans should diminish and become redundant in time as existing schemes are completed.”

What progress has been made in getting to the stage where club banks become redundant?

Mr McGrath: Previously, club-bank arrangements related to schools that had received approval but into which public capital investment could not be injected until they reached viability. Some schools bridged the interim period by club-bank arrangements. In future, greater rigour should be applied to ensure that schools are viable following an area plan; therefore public investment should be assured from the start. That is why I do not see a need for ad hoc arrangements in future. Some schools may be linked to such arrangements at present, but we do not envisage any further schools requiring recourse to the club-bank arrangements once the present ones have ended.

Miss McIlveen: Does that mean that certain sectors will be unable to set up a Portakabin, put a sign outside it and call it a school? Will they have to go through a different process?

Mr McGrath: At present, a school may be approved and receive revenue funding; however, no capital will be put in until it reaches certain viability thresholds. They have recourse to arrangements such as a club bank to expand the number of Portakabins and achieve those viability criteria. In future, planning arrangements will be more robust, and the Department will approve a school when it forms a judgement, on the basis of an ESA plan, that the school will meet those viability criteria. In those cases, we will inject public funds from the start,

which could, in the early years, be used for Portakabins until a school achieves enough critical mass.

Mr Rooney: That is the planned approach, and it does not prevent someone from setting up a Portakabin and creating a school that is not funded by the Department; a parents' group can establish an independent school in a Portakabin. The role of the club bank is where a school has been approved and, in the early years, until it demonstrates long-term viability, recurrent funding is provided but not capital. The sector uses the club bank to provide capital for accommodation until a school has demonstrated long-term viability.

How does the ESA link with the area-planning process? If a proposal for a new school has been analysed and approved at local level, the ESA will, in the early stages, be involved in accommodation matters. As John said, temporary accommodation could be provided until a school proves its viability. However, if an assessment is approved at the outset that a school is needed, it will be supported to ensure that a sector does not need to use a bank loan to obtain the capital for a school that has been approved. The ESA will work with the sector to provide the accommodation that is required in such a school's early years. That approach applies to all sectors.

Mr Lunn: Will that make it easier or more difficult for integrated and Irish-medium schools to establish themselves?

Mr McGrath: A bit of both. In future, it will be more of a challenge to demonstrate the need for a school, and the test will be more difficult to pass; more will be involved than submitting an aspirational proposal. If a proposal is approved, public funding should be available from the start, and providing capital from hand to mouth would cease. In future, we need clearer and more robust planning to replace the “set-off-and-see” approach that sometimes occurs. Although that approach has worked in many cases, it has caused problems in others.

The Chairperson: That affects development proposals. The Committee raised the issue that development proposals that are submitted before the establishment of area planning could lead to school blighting. In the past, a few individuals have been able to submit a development proposal that has ultimately changed a school's nature or designation. I will not start a debate on the merits of integrated education, and I am sure that Trevor will be delighted to hear that, but there is sense of hurt in some areas when schools have been forced to take a road that has not been based on the merits of a case. Schools have been forced down that road because they are afraid of losing pupils, it has been a numbers exercise. How can we stop that happening in future?

Every sector has a right to exist, but we need fairness if we want to achieve equity or, to employ a well-used phrase, to see a level playing field. I would love to see that: I do not think that it exists; I do not think that even Wembley Stadium is a level playing field. I hope that the playing field is level for Northern Ireland's game tonight.

People argue that there has not been fairness to date because of issues such as club banking that provides an advantage, or the ability to present a development proposal. That forces a sector or school to go down a road for reasons not based on merit.

Mr McGrath: There will be challenges before area plans are in place. Area plans are about getting an overall assessment of need and responding to it. Neither the Department nor the ESA would be happy with proposals being brought forward in isolation, as in some of the circumstances that the Chairperson described.

First, because a development proposal is made does not mean that it must be accepted. There is no assumption one way or the other: it must be considered on its merits. The likely strategic needs of an area would have to be taken into account, as would any relevant issues, and how far off an area planning exercise is likely to be. We would look at those issues through a much more critical lens.

The Department and the ESA would also dialogue locally with all the sectors to tell them that we need to change. Simply submitting proposals to get them in before the tighter disciplines are in place is not the way to apply.

Mr Rooney: Proposals for transformations have been turned down because they were perceived not to be about long-term viability but about falling roll numbers. Proposals can be turned down once all the factors have been taken into account. The Minister has done that on several occasions. The area-planning disciplines will consider those issues and other factors in an area and what is right in an individual case. Suggestions, ideas and comments on plans from various stakeholders are taken into account. However, it must ultimately be asked whether that is the right solution in that area, given the educational needs that must be addressed.

The Chairperson: The subgroup of the central group is working on the basis of the five education and library boards. There was reference in the Minister's statement, as well as in some of the papers, to working on the new model for 11 local councils for area planning. Is that still the basis on which the work is predicated? Is there any other thinking on whether it should be an amalgamation of the 11 areas? Do you know the group's thinking?

Mr McGrath: The exercise should be concluded before the ESA comes into being. Organisationally, the statutory role of the ESA will be based around six local area offices, covering two of the new local government boundaries and one based in Belfast. The areas for area-based planning are likely to be much smaller and reflect travel-to-school-areas. They could incorporate Coleraine and its surrounding area or an area in Fermanagh. It would depend on the travel-to-school patterns, for example. Some would be bigger and some smaller, we will have to take account of local circumstances. We do not propose a one-size-fits-all definition for area-based planning, as that would not be sensitive to local circumstances.

The Chairperson: Thank you, John, Tom, Eugene and Chris. I will soon know your names off by heart without having to consult my papers.

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 (Hansard) reporting process or changed.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 30 January 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Programme for Government

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration each Department has to take of the priority given to the economy in the Programme for Government, when implementing its policies. (AQW 4136/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Peter Robinson and Mr Martin McGuinness): The Programme for Government sets out the Executive's policy and spending priorities for 2008-2011. Growing a dynamic innovative economy is our top priority. However, the five priority areas set out in the Programme are interconnected and we recognise that we cannot grow the economy in isolation from determined efforts to transform our society and enhance our environment.

Under each of the priority areas the Programme for Government sets out a range of key goals and commitments for the Executive collectively to deliver. These are, in turn, supported by a detailed framework of 23 cross-cutting Public Service Agreements (PSAs) which confirm the key actions and targets departments will take forward over the next three years in support of the Executive's priorities and in line with budget allocations. Departments have also worked together to develop detailed delivery agreements for each PSA. These set out in more detail how departments intend to ensure delivery of the targets and actions set out in the PSA framework and provide the basis upon which the Executive will monitor and report on progress at departmental level.

Much has changed since the Executive's Programme for Government was launched on 28 January 2008. As a result of developments in the global economy, we find ourselves in a more difficult and uncertain environment than any of us could have anticipated. However, the priorities we set out in the Programme for Government and, in particular, our decision to make the economy our top priority remain valid.

Current economic conditions and developments in the financial markets clearly present us with significant challenges. However, this makes it more important than ever that the Executive collectively and individual departments remain focused on delivering on the commitments in our Programme for Government.

Poverty Levels

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the work it is carrying out, in conjunction with the UK Government, to alleviate the effects on poverty levels in the current economic downturn. (AQO 1861/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Despite the difficulties associated with the current economic downturn, the Executive remains committed to its Programme for Government commitment to proactively change existing patterns of social disadvantage by using increased prosperity and economic growth to tackle ongoing poverty here.

This commitment has recently been re-stated in the Executive's decision to adopt the broad 'architecture' and principles of 'Lifetime Opportunities' as the basis of our strategy to tackle Poverty, Social Inclusion and patterns of deprivation, based on social need.

The Executive has agreed to establish an Executive Sub-Committee on poverty and social inclusion, which will be chaired by OFMDFM Ministers. This Committee will identify and agree a number of key actions which would contribute most to achieving the goals set out in Lifetime Opportunities and which would be at the 'core' of the Executive Strategy.

It is generally accepted that these goals can only be achieved through a combination of both devolved and reserved policies.

To this end, our officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in administrations across these islands.

The economic downturn was discussed at the plenary session of the North South Ministerial Council last Friday, and it is a matter that we will want to raise at the upcoming meeting of the British Irish Council. In addition, we have written to Gordon Brown seeking an urgent meeting to press the case that local depositors in the Presbyterian Mutual Society are protected from the consequences of the Society's current financial difficulties.

We also plan to meet the Business Secretary, Peter Mandelson, in coming weeks to ensure that local businesses receive every assistance possible to weather this economic storm.

These contacts ensure that policy developments and good practice are shared and will help ensure that the British Government's commitment to work towards the elimination of child poverty by 2020, which we have adopted, can be met.

We are sure that there will be much interest in other jurisdictions in our legislative approach to tackling poverty, reflected in the Financial Assistance Bill.

The Executive is equally conscious of its need to adapt to changing priorities. We recognise that economic conditions have changed remarkably since our Programme for Government was first introduced and in light of this we will continue to review our targets to ensure they remain relevant and focused on addressing the key challenges we face in the medium to longer term.

Child Poverty

Mrs M Bradley asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the number of children who have been lifted out of poverty and to confirm if it will meet its target on this issue.

(AQO 1864/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The number of children living in relative income poverty has fallen by 39,000 since 1998/99. In 1998/99 it was estimated to be 135,000 (29% of all children). The most recent estimate for 2006/07 was 96,000 (22% of all children).

The number of children living in absolute income poverty has fallen by 82,000 since 1998/99. Then it was estimated to be 135,000, with the most recent estimate for 2006/07 being 52,600 (12% of all children).

The number of children living in material deprivation and relative income poverty combined has fallen by 12,600 since 2004/05. In 2004/05 it was estimated to be 89,100 (21% of all children). The most recent estimate for 2006/07 was 76,500 (18% of all children).

Whilst these figures reflect that progress is being made we believe that even one child living in poverty is one too many. We recognise that the targets we have set ourselves, in respect of eliminating child poverty here, are extremely challenging, particularly in light of the current economic downturn.

The Executive, however, remains totally committed to meeting this challenge by working together across government to ensure long-term sustainable progress.

This commitment has recently been re-stated in our decision to adopt the broad 'architecture' and principles of 'Lifetime Opportunities' as the basis of our strategy to tackle Poverty and also in our introduction of a Financial Assistance Bill to address situations where existing arrangements are unsatisfactory.

The comprehensive Child Poverty Inquiry report and recommendations produced by the OFMDFM Committee will also provide a useful platform for further work and the Junior Ministers will discuss the recommendations with the Committee later this week. The establishment of a cross departmental sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People will ensure a comprehensive and cohesive focus on the issue of Child Poverty here.

Measures to Address the Economic Downturn

Mr T Lunn asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures the Executive is taking to assist people in light of the global economic downturn. (AQO 1866/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We announced a package of measures to address the economic downturn in the Assembly on 15th December 2008. We debated comprehensively the main measures in place to address problems of energy and fuel poverty; debt and unemployment; the rising cost of living for households; support for the housing and construction sectors; and support for business.

Uniquely, we are bringing forward a Financial Assistance Bill to allow us to react quickly to emerging problems and difficulties. Initially this will be used to allow us to address the most pressing problems of fuel poverty.

We also announced a funding package of almost £45m. This provided £15m – for Fuel Credit payments; £20m – for Farm Nutrient Management schemes; £4m – for Schools Maintenance; £2.5m – for Roads Structural Maintenance; £1.8m – for Public Transport Capital Works; £0.5m – for Agriculture Flooding Hardship payments; and £0.7m – for Assistance to the Fishing Industry.

We are acutely aware that this is a difficult time for local people and businesses. The Executive is monitoring the developing economic crisis and we aim to do all that we can to protect local interests from the worst effects of this economic turmoil.

Maze Site

Mr O'Loan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline its decision on the Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration project. (AQO 1867/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: A decision on the Maze/Long Kesh Regeneration project has not yet been made as proposals for the redevelopment of the site are still under consideration.

Maze Site

Mr P Ramsey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will make a decision on the Maze site. (AQO 1868/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Proposals for the regeneration of Maze/Long Kesh are still under consideration and we will make a decision on this issue as soon as possible.

Reducing Size of Department

Mr Gardiner asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has made in reducing the size of its Department. (AQO 1869/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The size of the Department has gradually reduced from 420 staff in post towards the end of 2002 to under 400 in January 2009.

Staffing levels in the Department are regularly reviewed to ensure the work of the Department is delivered in the most efficient and effective way.

It is important to recognise that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister covers a wide range of functions, many of them conferred on it by statute and that much of our work facilitates the business of other Ministers and their departments. The cross-cutting nature of our work is very much in evidence through the work of the Office of the Legislative Counsel, the Executive Information Service, our offices in Brussels and Washington, and our support function is clearly demonstrated by the provision of administrative support to the Executive, including the North South Ministerial Council and the British Irish Council.

The Department also provides administrative support to a number of external bodies including the Planning and Water Appeals Commissions, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, and the Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland.

Crumlin Road Gaol

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to regenerate Crumlin Road Gaol and Girdwood Park to combat social deprivation and poverty in North Belfast.

(AQO 1870/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Crumlin Road Gaol is owned by OFMDFM while Girdwood Park is owned by DSD. The Minister for Social Development is responsible for the regeneration of both the sites. A draft Masterplan has been produced containing proposals to bring maximum economic, social and environmental benefits to address issues of deprivation and to provide a resource to benefit all the communities in North Belfast and throughout the region. Proposals for consideration include initiatives for employment opportunities, training and skills development, housing, health, education, leisure, youth activities and a major tourist and visitor centre, as well as shops and restaurants. The draft proposals for the site are currently the subject of an Equality Impact Assessment. The public consultation on the draft Equality Impact Assessment ended on 20 January. The outcomes of the EQIA will inform the final content of the Masterplan which the Minister for Social Development wishes to discuss with us and will be published later this year.

Ethnic Minority Groups

Ms Anderson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the support it will offer to ethnic minority groups.

(AQO 1871/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are fully committed to building a cohesive, shared and integrated society. As part of the ongoing work we recognise and value the vital role played by minority ethnic groups on the ground. In following through on this recognition we have just announced a further tranche of funding to support the minority ethnic sector in the financial year 2009/10.

To demonstrate our continued support for the sector we recently opened the application process for the minority ethnic development fund for the incoming financial year. The application process is due to close on the 2nd of February and we expect to be able to announce successful applicants by the beginning of March.

We are pleased to say the £1 million we have allocated this year represents a substantial increase on the previous annual spend prior to the restoration of devolution.

The aims of the fund align with our Programme for Government commitments by supporting work, which contributes to the promotion of good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, the building of community cohesion, and facilitation of integration.

Meeting with Banks

Mr Burnside asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what specific commitments it sought from the Banks and what guarantees the Banks gave at the meeting on 16 December 2008.

(AQO 1872/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We had a very informative meeting with the banks on 16 December. We discussed liquidity, lending, interest rates, housing and mortgages.

We urged banks to pass on interest rate cuts and we discussed measures to improve the flow of credit to business.

Banking is, of course, a reserved matter and banks operate as publicly listed companies. In this context “guarantees” could not be sought nor given. However, we will maintain the dialogue we have started with the local banks and we will use our influence to protect and support business and households.

We remain keen to see the benefits of lower base rates feeding through to lower mortgage payments, lower financing and borrowing costs, and increased credit for local business and people.

Barroso Task Force Report

Mr A Maginness asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will publish the details of the Barroso Task Force Report. (AQO 1873/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The European Commission published its 'Report on the Northern Ireland Task Force' on 7 April 2008. The report has stimulated a considerable work programme and exchanges between government departments and the European Commission's services. The Executive's response, which will take the form of an action plan, is well under way and we hope to deliver its publication in the near future.

Home Rule Crisis: Centenary Commemoration

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions the Executive has had in relation to commemorating the centenary of the Home Rule Crisis. (AQO 1874/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Shared Future Triennial Action Plan 2006-09

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it has reviewed the Shared Future Triennial Action Plan 2006-2009 and, if so, what lessons have been learnt. (AQO 1875/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Improving relationships between, and within, communities here remains a long-term goal for Government. The need to monitor the impact of policy and strategic direction of good relations over the long-term is an important part of achieving that goal.

The Department has developed a comprehensive set of Good Relations Indicators to inform the monitoring and evaluation process and has published updates on its website against baseline data established in 2007.

Programme for Government: Construction Sector Job Losses

Mr McNarry asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action it has taken to reprioritise the Programme for Government to better respond to the current economic downturn and address the loss of jobs in the construction sector. (AQO 1876/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The welfare of local people is our primary concern. The Executive is committed to doing all that it can to protect and support local people and businesses from the worst effects of the current economic crisis and increases in the cost of living. In this respect we have already acted. On 15 December we announced a package of measures to help ordinary people and businesses cope with the difficult economic times in which we find ourselves.

We announced a number of measures specifically aimed at supporting the construction sector. Departments are fully focused on delivering the Investment Strategy. Substantial progress is being made with expenditure this year expected at around £1.5bn, up from £1.4bn in 2007-08, itself a record. Some £33m of additional construction-related expenditure was made available by the Executive as part of its credit crunch package announced in December.

We have made the economic downturn a standing item of Executive business, and have also put in place a Financial Assistance Bill, to enable us to monitor and react quickly to emerging problems. The Executive is committed to the ongoing review of the Programme for Government to take account of changing circumstances and ensure we are clearly focused on addressing the key challenges we face. Indeed the measures we have taken to date are very much part of that ongoing review of our priorities and targets.

We recognise that current economic conditions and developments in the financial markets present us with significant challenges. However, the priorities we set out in the Programme for Government and in particular our decision to make the economy our top priority remain valid. It will now be much more challenging for the Executive to deliver on what were always ambitious targets. However, during these difficult times it is more

important than ever that we provide clear leadership and work together to deliver on the commitments in our Programme for Government.

Post-Primary Transfer

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if the Executive has set time aside in the next month to discuss proposals on post primary transfer. (AQO 1877/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: It is not our practice to disclose details of Executive business. The content of Executive papers and all aspects of Executive business are confidential.

Participation Network: Consultation with Children and Young People

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans it has to ensure meaningful engagement and consultation with children and young people after March 2009, given the resounding success of participation network. (AQO 1878/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Participation Network was set up initially as a two-year pilot scheme to support statutory agencies, local government and government departments to effectively engage with children and young people in public decision-making.

A recently completed independent evaluation recommended funding for a further year. This will allow consideration of the outcome of the Network for Youth consultation, by the Department of Education, on options to strengthen the direct voice of children and young people in all relevant aspects of government provision and how the Network would fit within the recommendations.

Play and Leisure Provision: 13-17 Years

Mrs O'Neill asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if its policy for play and leisure provision caters for the particular needs of 13-17 years old. (AQO 1879/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: OFMDFM led the development of a cross-departmental play and leisure policy for all children aged 0-18 years. This was produced in co-operation with a number of key stakeholders in the field of play. It will be implemented in two concurrent phases: one for 0-11 years and one for 12-18 years.

The policy is set within the context of the 10-year strategy for children and young people and will contribute to the delivery of many of our strategic aims, particularly those which relate to improved health and achievement outcomes.

It received Executive approval at the end of 2008 and we are now in the process of establishing an implementation group of around 20 members which will be tasked with drawing up implementation plans for children in the 0-11 years and 12-18 years groups.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Less-Favoured Areas Allowance

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the exchange rate used for the calculation of the Less-favoured Areas Allowance under the Rural Development Programme. (AQW 3897/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Michelle Gildernew): No exchange rate was used. The rates of the LFACA payment are set out in the annual implementing Regulations in sterling at £40 per hectare Severely Disadvantaged Area and £20 per hectare Disadvantaged Area/Common Land respectively.

Fishing Fleet

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development did she gain support from DEFRA officials to assist the NI Fishing Fleet for the EU Fisheries Meeting at Brussels; and if so, what assistance was given. (AQW 3967/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As I said in my statement to the Assembly on 12 January 2009 the approach to Council is a team effort between us and other administrations. Prior to Council, that team developed and agreed negotiating priorities and consulted with industry on these. A top priority was to resist the Commission's proposed cuts in the Nephrops TACs. That was clearly important for us given the local industry's dependence on that species. I pressed the Commission hard during negotiations and I am grateful for the strong support received from Huw Irranca-Davies, Richard Lochhead and their officials throughout the Council process.

Financial Assistance for Farmers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial assistance was available to farmers to help them diversify in 2005; 2006; and 2007. (AQW 3968/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under the 2001-2006 programme which continued to fund projects through 2007 there was no specific 'Farm Diversification' measure. However substantial support was lent to farm diversification projects and to various relevant training measures under the Leader+ Programme and the Programme for Sustainable Prosperity. It is not possible however to identify the specific elements of these Programmes which funded diversification. However, the Peace II Programme for farmers did invest some £6,725,409 in diversification of agricultural activities and activities close to agriculture to provide multiple activities or alternative incomes – and obtaining alternative employment. Under measure 5.6b of the same programme a further €3,175,193 was invested in agriculture and rural development co-operation - cross-border diversification.

It is notable that under axis 3 of the new Rural Development Programme the ring fenced support for farm diversification at £20m will be almost equal to the £21m budget for the whole of the previous leader+ programme.

Contaminated Animal Feed

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development given the belief that the dioxins found in the feed that led to the crisis in the pig and beef industries were sourced in Northern Ireland, will she offer adequate compensation immediately to affected farmers. (AQW 3977/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The source of any dioxin contaminated material is being investigated by the Garda Síochána and the PSNI. Until this investigation is concluded it would be premature of me to consider actions based on any presumption of its findings.

On 15 January the Executive announced that it had decided to continue to press strongly for the Irish Government to accept that producers and processors from the north should have access to the south's compensation scheme. Every effort will be made to achieve this and to seek to recover the full costs incurred by producers and processors here as a consequence of the dioxin-contaminated feed incident. Work to ascertain the full costs is ongoing in conjunction with stakeholders.

The Executive also announced a cull and disposal scheme to remove and dispose of animals in restricted herds which cannot enter the food chain. This approach will protect the reputation of the industry and help deal with the welfare and management problems which the owners of the animals are facing. As the scheme will only meet the costs of slaughter and rendering, all those affected are still being encouraged to pursue all appropriate sources of recompense including insurance, the submission of applications to the DAFF scheme and the consideration of legal action against providers of contaminated animals, product or feed.

The introduction of Private Storage Aid for pigmeat, for which I successfully lobbied and which has a potential value of £6m, will help to provide market support to the pig sector over the next six months.

Less Favoured Areas Allowance

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what exchange rate was used for less favoured area payments, in each of the last four years. (AQW 3993/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: For claims made in the years 2005 to 2008, an exchange rate was not used to determine payment rates. The rates of the LFACA payment are set out in the annual implementing Regulations at £40 per hectare of Severely Disadvantaged Area and £20 per hectare of Disadvantaged Area/Common Land .

Less Favoured Areas Allowance

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what exchange rate between euro and sterling was used to calculate the most recent less favoured area payments issued to farmers; and what would these payments have been if the exchange rate of 31 December 2008, had been used. (AQW 3994/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: No exchange rate was used. The rates of the LFACA payment are set out in the annual implementing Regulations in sterling at £40 per hectare Severely Disadvantaged Area and £20 per hectare Disadvantaged Area/Common Land respectively. If an exchange rate at 31 December 2008 were appropriate these rates would have been £57.15 SDA and £28.58 DA/CL. However, that rate does not apply to claims made in 2008.

Countryside Management Scheme: Grant Levels

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the farmers in the current Countryside Management Scheme will have their level of grants increased to the level under the new Northern Ireland Countryside Management Scheme, (AQW 4122/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Participants in the existing Countryside Management Scheme will continue to receive the same payment rates in return for managing their land under the terms stated in the agreements that they signed.

However, these participants can apply to the new Countryside Management Scheme. I anticipate that it will reopen in Summer 2009. If an applicant is successful, they will, upon signing, receive the new rates of payment in return for managing their land according to the terms of their new agreement.

Disposal of Chicken Litter

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of new 'quickwash' technology for the disposal of chicken litter; and to give her assessment of the viability of this technology as a solution to the problems facing farmers regarding their future commitments under the EU Nitrates Directive. (AQW 4129/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department is aware of the new 'quickwash' technology for the disposal of chicken litter.

The technology is currently very much at an early development stage in the United States. The proposed process appears quite challenging to operate with a number of steps requiring the use of both acid and lime to extract and recover the phosphorus.

My officials will continue to monitor the development of this technology and others as a viable alternative to the landspreading of poultry litter.

Alternative technologies brought forward by industry are welcomed and will be considered by my Department.

Single Farm Payment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why farmers in the Strangford constituency are still waiting for their Single Farm payment. (AQW 4304/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: At the end of December 2008, 83.6% of farmers in the north had received their Single Farm Payment. In Strangford, and other constituencies, some will not yet have received payments for a variety of reasons, including queries on the claim, need to complete processing of an on-farm inspection report, challenges by others of the right to claim land, the need to await probate or because the farmer has not provided bank account details to allow payment to be made by electronic transfer. The Department has improved its payment performance and will continue to make payments as quickly as possible.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Reduction in Paperwork

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to significantly reduce the amount of paperwork he sends to constituency offices and other organisations throughout 2009.

(AQW 3734/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Gregory Campbell): Throughout 2009 and in accordance with my Department's Waste Management Strategy, my Private Office, in line with other DCAL business areas, will continue to issue internal and external communication electronically where this is possible.

I should add, however, that Guidance on the distribution of departmental publications and consultation documents, published in November 2008, states that there is a requirement to provide hard copies of documents to certain recipients including political representatives, parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries. The Guidance does, however, point out that organisations can, if they wish, choose not to receive hard copies of publications.

Departmental Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what legislation will his Department bring forward to the Assembly in 2009.

(AQW 3811/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department has identified its potential legislative requirements for the remainder of this session of the Assembly. However, these proposals are subject to consideration by the Executive and it would therefore not be appropriate or possible to pre-empt this consideration by providing the information you request.

Funds for Cultural Events and Projects

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions have taken place between the EU office and his Department about sourcing funds for cultural events and projects.

(AQW 3817/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My officials have attended an inter-departmental meeting and held exploratory meetings with colleagues in EU Division, DFP, around EU Transnational and Interregional Cooperation Programmes, as potential sources of EU funding. Discussions on this matter are ongoing.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money (i) is available under Safety at Sports Grounds; and (ii) is required to ensure that the safety of spectators is not compromised at any ground.

(AQW 3923/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. The amount of money available for safety at sports grounds will be considered by SNI in the context of capital allocations for 2009/10 and 2010/11 which have not yet been confirmed.

Responsibility for determining how much money is required to ensure that the safety of spectators is not compromised at any ground rests with the owners and operators of the grounds. However, a strategic business case completed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) in 2002 estimated that it would cost in the region of £30m net present cost to bring larger Soccer, Rugby and Gaelic Grounds in Northern Ireland up to modern standards of spectator safety.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline (i) the process and criteria that led to the appointments of the Safety at Sports Grounds Overseeing Body; (ii) the names of those appointed; (iii) the skills or qualifications they hold; and (iv) how he defines their independent role. (AQW 3926/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The appointments to the safe sports grounds Overseeing Body were made by Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) through a range of processes, namely internal restructuring and redeployment, and external recruitment. Under these processes, SNI established three posts for the Overseeing Body, a Technical Manager post, a Technical Officer post and a Development Assistant post.

The essential short listing criteria that led to the appointments of the Technical Manager and Technical Officer posts were as follows:

- A degree or equivalent 3rd level qualification which relates to one or more of the following subject areas: health and safety law and practice, risk assessment, architecture, structural engineering, building control, fire safety or law
- or
- In exceptional circumstances SNI may consider 4 years experience which can be proven relevant to the post. For example health and safety, architecture, structural engineering, building control etc
- In the case of the Technical Manager a minimum of 5 years and in the case of the Technical Officer a minimum of 2 years full time (or equivalent) employment experience in a position with responsibilities which can be proved relevant to the post. For example health and safety, architecture, structural engineering, building control etc
- Demonstrable experience in the assessment of technical matters particularly related to construction and/or renovation of large structures
- Access to a form of transport to meet the requirements of the post and the ability to work flexible hours including frequent evening and week end duties.

The essential short listing criteria that led to the appointment of the Development Assistant post was as follows:

- 3 GCSE passes or equivalent which must include English Language and Maths and 2 A-level passes or equivalent
- 2 years full-time employment experience (or equivalent) in a position with responsibility for administration including experience of implementing monitoring procedures and file management
- Access to a form of transport that will permit the post holder to meet the requirements of the post in full

The names of those appointed are Paul Scott, Laura Strong and Patrick O'Toole. The qualifications or skills of those appointed meet these criteria.

In discharging its functions the Overseeing Body will be expected to act independently at all times, ie independently of district councils, sports ground owners, sports ground managers and event organisers.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the (i) terms of reference; (ii) role; and (iii) function of the Overseeing Body established to regulate the Safety at Sports Grounds. (AQW 3927/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The (i) terms of reference; (ii) role; and (iii) function of the Safe Sports Grounds Overseeing Body is to provide advice and guidance to all interested parties on sports grounds safety matters in Northern Ireland and to monitor the implementation of the planned Northern Ireland safety certification scheme on behalf of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, to state the (i) terms of reference; (ii) role; and (iii) function of the local authorities in the certification process to regulate the Safety at Sports Grounds; and will he outline how his Department intends to ensure that a consistent and strict approach is legislated. (AQW 3928/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The (i) terms of reference; (ii) role; and (iii) function of local authorities will be to administer and enforce the planned safety at sports grounds certification scheme. This includes determining the number of spectators that owners and managers of sports grounds, or event organisers, shall be allowed to admit into a designated ground or stand and the issuing of safety certificates. DCAL has already taken steps to ensure that a consistent and strict approach to safety certification is legislated. The Safety of Sports Grounds (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 enables the Department, by Order, to designate any sports ground in Northern Ireland, with accommodation for more than 5,000 spectators, as a ground requiring a safety certificate. The Order also makes provision for the certification of stands at sports ground which provide accommodation for 500 or more spectators. The Order further imposes an obligation on all district councils to act in accordance with such guidance as the Department may give them to assist in their administration and enforcement of the certification scheme.

Ulster-Scots Project

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he would consider implementing an Ulster Scots or similar project to the Gaeltacht project in Belfast. (AQW 3969/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Gaeltacht Quarter project arose out of a recommendation from the West Belfast Greater Shankill Task Force report 2003. I would consider any proposals supported by appropriate business cases for similar projects relating to Ulster-Scots.

Support for Local Authors and Film-Makers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) what are the financial and other incentives available to local authors to publish their works in book form; and (ii) what help is there to promote making films based on highly acclaimed publications. (AQW 4028/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: DCAL does not provide funding to individual authors or film-makers directly. DCAL funding for arts is disbursed by the Arts Council, and funding for film is disbursed by the Northern Ireland Screen Commission.

Authors may also apply to the Ulster-Scots Agency for funding and support through the Financial Assistance Scheme. The Agency also funds the Ulster-Scots Language Society to assist with the publication of Ulster-Scots books.

- (i) The Arts Council supports writers directly with sums of up to £5,000 through the Support for the Individual Artist Programme. This is intended to assist with loss of income for full-time writing, travel, equipment (such as laptops) and general living expenses while writing is being done.

The Arts Council's aim is to support artistic excellence, and therefore it does not fund individual writers to print their own work. Instead, the Arts Council encourages writers to submit their work for consideration by publishing houses in Northern Ireland. The Council assists those publishers to publish works of literary merit.

The Council seeks to promote the status of the individual writer in society, to help increase the skills of emerging writers and to assist good writers to become better, and frequently this is achieved at an appropriate stage in their career through publication by a recognised and reputable publishing firm.

- (ii) The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (NI Screen) offers funding for the development and production of film, television and digital content projects in Northern Ireland.

Although there is no specific funding line directed at projects based on books, applicants may obtain funding from NI Screen's general funding programmes which include the Product Development Fund and the Northern Ireland Screen Fund. Projects supported include the recent high-profile production of "City of Ember", based on the novel by Jeanne Duprau; "Puffball", a feature film based on the novel by Fay Weldon; and "Breakfast on Pluto", based on the novel of the same name by Patrick McCabe.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when he will forward a paper on the proposed multi-sports stadium to the Executive. (AQW 4099/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As I indicated to the House during Oral Questions on 12 January, I have reviewed all the material available to me in relation to this issue and have come to my own conclusion. I intend to present my conclusion to the Executive in the very near future.

Thundersport Motorcycling

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has had any discussions with Thundersport motorcycling in Great Britain; and would he consider meeting local enthusiasts to promote this sport. (AQW 4137/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have had no discussions to date with Thundersport motorcycling, however, I would be content for my officials together with Sport Northern Ireland to meet with local enthusiasts to consider the promotion of this sport.

Orange Community Network

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has had any meetings with the Orange Community Network about funding opportunities to help with its sustainability. (AQW 4226/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: To date I have not had any meetings with the Orange Community Network as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding opportunities to help with its sustainability.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

School Maintenance

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Education how much was spent on maintenance as a result of vandalism to schools, broken down by (i) total allocation; and (ii) Education and Library Board. (AQW 4033/09)

Minister of Education (Ms Caitríona Ruane): Thug na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an t-eolas seo a leanas faoi chaiteachas ar chothabháil mar gheall ar loitiméireacht a rinneadh ar scoileanna le trí bliana anuas.

The Education and Library Boards have provided the following information on maintenance as a result of vandalism to schools in the last three years.

Board Area	2005/06 £000s	2006/07 £000s	2007/08 £000s
Belfast	182	85	117
Western	52	49	60
North Eastern	121	198	142
SEELB	109	112	72
Southern	158	138	60
Total	622	582	451

Information is not readily available on costs of vandalism at voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated schools.

Gender Breakdown of Teachers

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education what is the gender breakdown of teachers in primary schools. (AQW 4130/09)

Minister of Education: Sa bhliain 2007-2008, seo a leanas líon agus cóimheas na múinteoirí fir agus na múinteoirí mná i mbunscoileanna i dtuaisceart na hÉireann:

In 2007-2008, the number and proportion of male and female teachers in primary schools in the North of Ireland was as follows:

Total number of primary school ¹ teachers	Number and proportion of female primary school teachers	Number and proportion of male primary school teachers
8,586	7,249 (84%)	1,337 (16%)

¹ This includes teachers in preparatory departments of grammar schools.

Autism NI

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to meet with Autism NI. (AQW 4140/09)

Minister of Education: Bhuail mé le Autism NI roimhe seo ar 16 Bealtaine 2008 agus tá mé le bualadh leo arís ar 5 Feabhra 2009.

I have previously met with Autism NI on 16 May 2008 and I am scheduled to meet with them again on 5 February 2009.

Priory Integrated College, Holywood

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2514/09, what account has been taken of an existing and successful sixth form in Priory Integrated College, Holywood. (AQW 4145/09)

Minister of Education: Tá rollú 427 dalta idir bliain 8 agus bliain 12 agus rollú 23 dalta sa 6ú bliain ag Priory Intergrated College faoi láthair.

Priory Integrated College has currently an enrolment of 427 in years 8-12 and 23 pupils in its sixth form. It was agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the approved project for a replacement school should be for a projected enrolment of 400 for years 8-12 which takes account of trends in pupil numbers, and that the small sixth form should not be retained. The planned capacity is based on what is projected to be required and sustainable for the future. There is not a shortage of post-primary places in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which encompasses North Down.

Priory Integrated College, Holywood

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2514/09, to provide the reasons for building a new school with a smaller capacity than the current enrolment. (AQW 4146/09)

Minister of Education: Tá rollú 427 dalta idir bliain 8 agus bliain 12 agus rollú 23 dalta sa 6ú bliain ag Priory Intergrated College faoi láthair.

Priory Integrated College has currently an enrolment of 427 in years 8-12 and 23 pupils in its sixth form. It was agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the approved project for a replacement school should be for a projected enrolment of 400 for years 8-12 which takes account of trends in pupil numbers, and that the small sixth form should not be retained. The planned capacity is based on what is projected to be required and sustainable for the future. There is not a shortage of post-primary places in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which encompasses North Down.

Priory Integrated College, Holywood

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2514/09, what consideration has been given to the current levels of over-subscription of all post-primary schools in the North Down constituency, in setting the capacity of the new building. (AQW 4147/09)

Minister of Education: Tá rollú 427 dalta idir bliain 8 agus bliain 12 agus rollú 23 dalta sa 6ú bliain ag Priory Intergrated College faoi láthair.

Priory Integrated College has currently an enrolment of 427 in years 8-12 and 23 pupils in its sixth form. It was agreed with the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the approved project for a replacement school should be for a projected enrolment of 400 for years 8-12 which takes account of trends in pupil numbers, and that the small sixth form should not be retained. The planned capacity is based on what is projected to be required and sustainable for the future. There is not a shortage of post-primary places in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area which encompasses North Down.

Integrated Schools

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of the viability criteria for integrated schools. (AQW 4148/09)

Minister of Education: I am considering with officials the terms of the review to which I have committed the Department of Education.

Tá sé ar intinn agam go gcuirfear an t-athbhreithniú i gcrích i mbliana mar a tugadh le fios i mo fhreagra ar AQO 1786/09.

As indicated in my response to AQO 1786/09 it is my intention to complete the review this year.

Schools Initiative: Portadown College

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education why Portadown College did not give its full co-operation to the electoral office's 'Schools Initiative'. (AQW 4192/09)

Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Deiscirt dom gur thug Portadown College lánchúnamh maidir leis an "Tionscnamh Scoileanna" a shocraigh an Príomhoifigeach Toghchánach agus mar sin de tá a ndualgais dhlíthiúla comhlíonta acu.

The Chief Executive of the Southern Education and Library Board has advised me that Portadown College has cooperated fully with the Chief Electoral Officer's 'Schools Initiative' and has therefore met its legal obligations. The College provided the Chief Electoral Officer with the pupil data he requested and facilitated a visit by Electoral Office staff to meet pupils in the College.

Lagan College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action is being taken by her Department to (i) replace mobile classrooms; and (ii) provide canteen facilities, for Lagan College. (AQW 4196/09)

Minister of Education: My Department agreed in September 2008 that a survey should be undertaken to assess the overall condition of mobile classrooms currently on site. The report will identify any remedial works necessary as well as estimate the remaining lifespan for each of the units. It is expected to be completed in February.

Improvements to school meals accommodation will be provided through the building project planned for the school.

There are some issues to be resolved before a preferred bidder can be appointed, a contract signed and construction commenced. The Department is working closely with those involved to allow the procurement process to move ahead.

Once a preferred bidder for the project has been appointed a Full Business Case will be prepared and submitted to the Department for approval. Providing that the business case indicates the project is affordable and provides a value for money solution to the school's accommodation needs then the necessary funding for the project will be provided.

Lagan College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education when her Department intends to give approval for the replacement build project at Lagan College to proceed. (AQW 4206/09)

Minister of Education: My Department agreed in September 2008 that a survey should be undertaken to assess the overall condition of mobile classrooms currently on site. The report will identify any remedial works necessary as well as estimate the remaining lifespan for each of the units. It is expected to be completed in February.

Improvements to school meals accommodation will be provided through the building project planned for the school.

There are some issues to be resolved before a preferred bidder can be appointed, a contract signed and construction commenced. The Department is working closely with those involved to allow the procurement process to move ahead.

Once a preferred bidder for the project has been appointed a Full Business Case will be prepared and submitted to the Department for approval. Providing that the business case indicates the project is affordable and provides a value for money solution to the school's accommodation needs then the necessary funding for the project will be provided.

Children Awaiting Assessment by an Educational Psychologist

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many children in the North Down constituency are awaiting assessment by an educational psychologist. (AQW 4207/09)

Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheisceirt dom go bhfuil 90 páiste ag fanacht ar mheasúnú ó shíceolaí oideachais i dtoghcheantar Dhún Thuaidh.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board that the number of children currently awaiting assessment by an educational psychologist in the North Down constituency is 90. This figure includes both statutory and non-statutory assessments and also includes children attending special schools outside North Down but who live within the constituency.

Lagan College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether she intends to make up any shortfall in funding for the new build at Lagan College that was caused by the delay in starting the project. (AQW 4208/09)

Minister of Education: My Department agreed in September 2008 that a survey should be undertaken to assess the overall condition of mobile classrooms currently on site. The report will identify any remedial works necessary as well as estimate the remaining lifespan for each of the units. It is expected to be completed in February.

Improvements to school meals accommodation will be provided through the building project planned for the school.

There are some issues to be resolved before a preferred bidder can be appointed, a contract signed and construction commenced. The Department is working closely with those involved to allow the procurement process to move ahead.

Once a preferred bidder for the project has been appointed a Full Business Case will be prepared and submitted to the Department for approval. Providing that the business case indicates the project is affordable

and provides a value for money solution to the school's accommodation needs then the necessary funding for the project will be provided.

Lagan College

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what is the capital funding available to Lagan College. (AQW 4308/09)

Minister of Education: Meastar costas caipitiúil athchóiriú agus síneadh Lagan College bheith thart ar £21 milliún faoi láthair.

The capital cost for the refurbishment and extension of Lagan College is currently estimated at around £21 million.

School Buildings Handbook

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education (i) what progress has been made in updating the School Buildings Handbook; (ii) why the new handbook was not issued in Autumn 2008; (iii) when she anticipates the new handbook will be issued; and (iv) for an assessment of the impact its delay will have on the tranche of new build schools that are in the design stage. (AQW 4336/09)

Minister of Education: Thug an Roinn faoi ghníomh anuraidh le hathbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar an lámhleabhar um thógáil bunscoileanna.

The department undertook an exercise last year to review the primary school building handbook. The update was not issued in the autumn because the work had not been completed. I expect the exercise will be concluded shortly. It is not anticipated that this change in timetable will have a detrimental effect on those primary schools currently in the design process.

Builders' Framework: Impact of High Court Decision

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education if the recent High Court decision rejecting her intention to establish a framework of builders will have an equal impact on all education sectors. (AQW 4349/09)

Minister of Education: Bhí sé i gceist go mbainfí úsáid as an ggreatlach i gcomhair tionscadal móroibreacha sna hearnálacha oideachais ar fad.

It had been intended that the framework would be used for major works projects in all education sectors. In order to minimise the impact, my Department is preparing an alternative procurement approach outside the framework so that we avoid prolonged delays in delivering projects which are ready to enter the procurement stage. Projects will move forward through individual procurement exercises.

Builders' Framework: Impact of High Court Decision

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Education if a decision has been made to appeal the recent High Court ruling that rejected her proposal to establish a framework of builders; and to outline the time delay this will have on the planned new schools' programme. (AQW 4351/09)

Minister of Education: Tá mé ag déanamh breithniú faoi láthair ar an seasamh maidir le hachomharc.

I am currently considering the position on an appeal. My Department is preparing an alternative procurement approach outside the framework so that we avoid prolonged delays in delivering projects which are ready to enter the procurement stage. Projects will move forward through individual procurement exercises.

Pupils with English as an Additional Language in East Antrim

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many pupils in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools in East Antrim do not have English as their first language. (AQW 4456/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh cuimsithe sna táblaí seo thíos.

The information requested is contained in the tables below.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – PUPILS WHO HAVE ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE – 2007/08

School Name	Total Enrolment of EAL Pupils
St James' PS, Newtownabbey	52
Whiteabbey PS	12
St Nicholas' PS, Carrickfergus	7
Victoria PS, Carrickfergus	6
Greenisland PS	*
Moyle PS	*
Whitehead PS	*
Woodlawn PS	*
Carrickfergus Model PS	*
Silverstream PS	*
St Anthony's PS, Larne	*
St Macnissi's PS, Larne	*
Larne And Inver PS	*
Kilcoan PS	*
Carnalbanagh PS	0
Olderfleet PS	0
Woodburn PS	0
Mullaghdubh PS	0
Eden PS	0
Glynn PS	0
Ballycarry PS	0
Carrickfergus Central PS	0
Upper Ballyboley PS	0
Sunnylands PS	0
King's PaRk PS	0
Linn PS	0
Toreagh PS	0
Hollybank PS	0
Oakfield PS	0
Cairncastle PS	0
Seaview PS	0
St John's PS, Carnlough	0

School Name	Total Enrolment of EAL Pupils
Lourdes PS	0
Carnlough Controlled Integrated PS	0
Corran Integrated PS	0
Acorn Integrated PS	0
Total	104

POST PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE EAST ANTRIM CONSTITUENCY – PUPILS WHO HAVE ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE – 2007/08

School Name	Total Enrolment of EAL Pupils
Belfast High School	11
Carrickfergus College	8
Monkstown Community School	6
Ulidia Intergrated College	*
Carrickfergus GS	*
Larne High School	*
Downshire School	*
Larne GS	*
St Comgall's High School	0
St Macnissi's College	0
Total	32

Source: Annual school census.

“*” denotes fewer than 5 pupils

Note:

1. A child with English as an additional language is defined as one for whom English is not their first language and who has significant difficulty with the English language and requires assistance.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Family Learning and Literacy

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what actions his Department is taking to support family learning and literacy; and to outline how funding on this was spent in the last financial year.

(AQW 4138/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department's Essential Skills for Living Strategy recognises the importance of Family Learning as a vehicle for engaging parents in learning and, in so doing, improving achievement rates for essential skills qualifications.

DEL works closely with Further Education Colleges and other organisations to encourage parents to support and participate in their children's learning, while at the same time improving their own literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, the Department co-operates with the Department of Education's Extended Schools Initiative, is represented on the Department of Education's Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce, and engages with the Department for Social Development's Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.

To date, my Department's support for family learning and literacy has proceeded without the need for an earmarked allocation of funding from within the overall budget for Essential Skills.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) how many posts his Department will fund for neighbourhood renewal; and (ii) when a decision will be made regarding these posts. (AQW 4153/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: As I stated in my answer of 30 September, my Department does not core fund posts. It does, however, deliver a range of programmes related to employment and skills which aim to address disadvantage and are targeted at the needs of individuals, many of whom live in Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

I remain determined to tackle disadvantage and am committed to Neighbourhood Renewal. DEL predominantly awards contracts for services following a process of public procurement, and any organisation that has the relevant expertise and experience is able to compete for these. For example, contracts are already in place with organisations for the delivery of a range of DEL programmes which will target disadvantage and individual need, such as organisations based in North Belfast for the delivery of ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success, the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) and the new Steps to Work provision.

Through the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme local FE Colleges have recently awarded a number of contracts to 3rd Party organisations to deliver learner support. For example, Upper Springvale Development Company, which comprises Ashton Community Trust, GEMS NI, Workforce training Services, Impact Training and Oasis Caring in Action has been contracted by Belfast Metropolitan College for the delivery of learner support for the greater Belfast area.

Workforce at Spanboard

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what provision will be made for the workforce at Spanboard given the recent announcement of job losses. (AQW 4159/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department through the Coleraine Jobs & Benefits office, in collaboration with partner organisations will provide individually tailored help to the unemployed, those who have suffered as a result of recent job losses and those under notice of redundancy in the area.

With regard to Spanboard, my Officials and other key stakeholders including Invest Northern Ireland, Coleraine Enterprise Agency and North East Institute are working with the Coleraine Borough Council, to implement a collective strategic approach to assist those people that may be made redundant.

Stranmillis College

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what are the costs and problems associated with bringing Stranmillis College up to standard. (AQW 4174/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The College estimates that the total cost of bringing its estate up to standard is £5m excluding VAT and fees. To this must be added a further £3m in respect of the Henry Garrett Building which is currently vacant as it is not fit for use.

In addition Stranmillis House is a listed building and any proposed work may be subject to challenge. The College Hall is of a temporary construction and requires special consideration.

Job Losses at FG Wilson

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department has taken to help workers who have lost their jobs in the FG Wilson factories in Larne and Monkstown. (AQW 4237/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Staff in the Jobs and Benefits Office are working with FG Wilson and other employers in the East Antrim area to provide assistance to workers facing redundancy. They have established multi-agency partnerships with the Borough Councils to ensure that the maximum help and support is

available. A tailored response is being put in place to meet the individual needs of the company and those facing redundancy, with an event planned for 26 February in Larne Education Centre.

Review of Tuition Fees

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in relation to the review of tuition fees, (i) has the full panel been appointed; (ii) has it met; and (iii) when it will report to him. (AQW 4241/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The review of variable tuition fees and student finance arrangements in Northern Ireland is currently underway. A stakeholder steering group has been established comprising representation from: Queen's University Belfast; University of Ulster; Saint Mary's University College; Stranmillis University College; Association of Northern Ireland Colleges (ANIC); the Open University, the National Union of Students/Union of Students in Ireland, the National Association of Student Money Advisors (NASMA) and the Education and Library Boards. The group, which is chaired by Joanne Stuart independent chairperson of the review, had its initial meeting on 19th January 2009 and was attended by all members. I anticipate an interim report for consideration in May 2009.

Apprentices

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices made redundant in the past 12 months have been able to take advantage of alternative arrangements that would enable them to utilise their full vocational qualifications. (AQW 4243/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: You will be aware that contingency arrangements were introduced from 1st December 2008, for apprentices who had been made redundant from the construction, engineering, and motor vehicle sectors, and that these arrangements apply to any apprentices who have been redundant from 1st September 2008.

Management Information collected by the Department in relation to apprentices who have left training provision is included in a broader "early leaver" destination category. Consequently, the Department cannot say categorically whether these apprentices have left due to redundancy. Nevertheless, from 1st April 2008, the following numbers of apprentices have been recorded as being "early leavers" in these three sectors:

Construction – 266

Automotive – 54

Engineering – 97

I would emphasise that the Department's work in this area is ongoing, and that contingency arrangements were only introduced in December 2008. These arrangements allow for a 3 week period in which the apprentice can look for an alternative employer, before transferring onto the Steps for Work initiative, or continuing training under Training for Success. This 3 week period, coupled with the Christmas holidays, means that a clearer picture on the uptake of contingency arrangements will emerge over the next few weeks.

The Department is currently carrying out a full monitoring exercise, in conjunction with Training Providers, on apprentices who have been made redundant and their current training positions. I will, of course, be happy to share this information with you once this exercise has been completed in the next couple of weeks.

Apprentices

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what are his plans for ensuring that 16-18 year olds who have lost their jobs may complete their training courses at colleges of further education. (AQW 4310/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Contingency arrangements were introduced from 1st December 2008, for apprentices who had been made redundant from the construction, engineering, and motor vehicle sectors, and these arrangements apply to any apprentices who have been redundant from 1st September 2008. Under these arrangements, apprentices who are aged 16-17, and who have been made redundant, can return to the Pre-Apprenticeship component of Training for Success. This alternative pathway will allow the apprentice to complete the Technical Certificate and Essential Skills elements of the Apprenticeship Framework.

The Department is currently considering the option to also allow completion of the NVQ element of an Apprenticeship Framework under this training component.

Apprentices who have been made redundant and are aged 18 or over, can continue with training under the Department's Steps to Work initiative.

If they wish, apprentices who have lost their employment can also continue training by entering mainstream Further Education provision. This would be on the same basis as any other Further Education student, in that they can work for up to a maximum of 15 hours per week, without this affecting any benefits.

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

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queens University, Belfast. (AQW 4333/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The business case to which I referred in my reply of 7 May 2008 has now been submitted by Stranmillis University College and is currently being considered by my Department's Economists. Subject to them being satisfied that it meets HM Treasury Green Book standards it will be examined by my Department's Finance Division before being submitted to the Permanent Secretary for approval.

If my officials are satisfied with the business case, it will then be forwarded to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for scrutiny. If DFP approval is granted, I will at that time give the business case my full consideration.

Apprentices

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many apprentices have been made redundant in the last 12 months. (AQW 4334/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Management Information collected by the Department in relation to apprentices who have left training provision is included in a broader "early leaver" destination category. Consequently, the Department cannot say categorically whether these apprentices have left due to redundancy. Nevertheless, from 1st January 2008 until 21st January 2009, the following numbers of apprentices have been recorded as being "early leavers" in the following sectors:

Childcare	177
Agriculture	9
Engineering	187
Manufacturing Technologies	16
Transport Operations and Maintenance	68
Building and Construction	374
ICT Practitioners	4
ICT for Users	5
Retailing and Wholesaling	138
Service Enterprise	50
Hospitality and Catering	162
Sport Leisure Recreation	18
Publishing/Information Science	6
Administration	51
Business Management	7
Total	1,265

I would emphasise that not all of these apprentices will have left apprenticeship provision due to redundancy, as people leave both training and employment for a wide variety of reasons. This is especially true in sectors with an historically transient workforce such Hospitality and Catering or Retail.

Furthermore, many of the apprentices listed above will have found alternative employment, or will have returned to an alternative training provision or mainstream Further Education course. The Department is currently carrying out a full monitoring exercise, in conjunction with Training Providers, on apprentices who have been made redundant and their current training positions. I will, of course, be happy to share this information with you once this exercise has been completed in the next couple of weeks.

Stranmillis College: Board of Governors

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people are allowed to sit on the Board of Governors of Stranmillis College. (AQW 4378/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Instrument of Government for the Stranmillis University College under Article 5(1) of The Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 specifies that the Governing Body of the College shall consist of not more than fourteen persons.

Stranmillis College: Board of Governors

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many people currently sit on the Board of Governors of Stranmillis College. (AQW 4379/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department issued an Instrument of Government for the Stranmillis University College under Article 5(1) of The Colleges of Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. The Instrument of Government specifies that the Governing Body of the College shall consist of not more than fourteen persons.

At the present time there are twelve persons on the Governing Body.

Stranmillis College: Board of Governors

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what criteria are used for interviewing candidates for the Board of Governors at Stranmillis College. (AQW 4380/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Potential applicants are advised that members of the Governing Body of Stranmillis College are appointed to act in a personal rather than a representative capacity, that they should have high standards of probity and integrity and should meet all of the following selection criteria :

- Have an understanding of current issues relevant to teacher education, early childhood education or health and leisure studies;
- Have experience commensurate with the responsibilities of a member of a governing body of the College, in a profession, business, industry or comparable organisation;
- Have the ability to bring a community perspective to the work of the College and
- Demonstrate the ability to be effective as a committee member.

All Department for Employment and Learning nominated appointments to the Governing Body are made in accordance with the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland's (OCPA NI) Code of Practice.

Apprentices

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance or support has his Department given to apprentices who have been made redundant over the past 12 months. (AQW 4381/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: contingency arrangements were introduced from 1st December 2008, for apprentices who had been made redundant from the construction, engineering, and motor vehicle

sectors, and these arrangements apply to any apprentices who have been redundant from 1st September 2008. The Department has also engaged with Sector Skills Councils, Workforce Development Forums, and Training Suppliers to try and identify alternative employers who would be prepared to employ those apprentices who have been made redundant.

Under the Department's contingency arrangements, apprentices who are aged 16-17, and who have been made redundant, can return to the Pre-Apprenticeship component of Training for Success. This alternative pathway will allow the apprentice to complete the Technical Certificate and Essential Skills elements of the Apprenticeship Framework. Apprentices who continue training under this contingency pathway will be entitled to receive a Training Educational Maintenance Allowance, as well as other allowances, if applicable.

Apprentices who have been made redundant, and are aged 18 or over, can continue with training under the Department's Steps to Work initiative. If undertaking this training pathway, apprentices are entitled to receive Jobseeker's Allowance, as well as an additional benefit-based training allowance.

Extension of Incentive Scheme to Businesses in Northern Ireland

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if the scheme recently announced by the UK government to give a financial incentive to businesses that provide jobs to people who have been unemployed for 6 months or more, applies to businesses in Northern Ireland. (AQW 4412/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: This scheme does not apply in Northern Ireland. We already provide an employer subsidy to encourage employers to recruit and train those who are unemployed for 13 weeks or more. We are ahead of GB in terms of the flexibility of our programmes – Steps to Work includes some of the features which the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is now considering.

There is already significant assistance available including an employer subsidy to encourage employers to recruit and train those who are unemployed.

Also available are a range of employment and training options including where appropriate work placements in the private and public voluntary sectors, and help to set-up a business for a period of 26 weeks 'test trading'.

We will continue to examine the DWP proposals and consider what, if any, revisions need to be put in place.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Independent Review of Electricity Prices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she expects the independent review of electricity prices to be concluded; and how this pricing compares with the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 3944/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs A Foster): The independent review of electricity prices, commissioned by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation (the Utility Regulator), and carried out by Mr Douglas McIlDoon, has now been completed, with the Utility Regulator having received Mr McIlDoon's report in December 2008.

Mr McIlDoon concluded that the tariff setting process which was followed by the Utility Regulator was similar to the process which had been followed successfully in the past. Mr McIlDoon stated that he found no anomalies or shortcomings within the process by which the October 2008 price increase was managed. He concluded that the process was no less rigorous than previous years, and in the context of rising fuel prices, the 33.3 % price increase was both inevitable and justified.

In addition to reviewing the price setting process, Mr McIlDoon also commented on wider issues on the structure and development of the electricity supply industry in Northern Ireland, and whether or not there are improvements which could help benefit consumers in the future. My senior officials have met with Mr McIlDoon to discuss his findings and the wider issues which were recorded in his review will be taken into consideration as part of my Department's review of the Strategic Energy Framework.

The 10.8% electricity tariff reduction implemented by NIE Energy from 08 January 2009 places Northern Ireland tariffs at an estimated 17.7% lower than electricity prices in the Republic of Ireland, and approximately 5% more expensive than comparator regions in Great Britain.

Biofuels

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what is her Department's target for the use of biofuels; (ii) what steps are her Department taking to deliver on biofuel targets; and (iii) what is her assessment of using Renewable Obligations Certificates for encouraging biofuel production. (AQW 3966/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation (RTFO) requires the major oil companies to ensure that a proportion of the road transport fuel supplied in the UK comprises renewable fuels such as biofuels. There is no regional breakdown of the current UK wide target of 5% by 2010-11.

A recent study, commissioned by my Department on behalf of the Bioenergy Inter Departmental Group, indicated that biofuel production in Northern Ireland was likely to remain small scale and marginal in economic terms and that the focus of the forthcoming Cross Departmental Bioenergy Action Plan should be on biomass for heat and electricity. Invest NI does, however, offer technical and legislative advice to companies on the production of biofuels using current technology and will provide further advisory support to producers, in particular, to develop and export second generation technology fuels. In addition, my Department recently announced support for a major Interreg research project, along with Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, into the production of marine biofuels from seaweeds and marine algae in the shared seas.

Biofuels can be used to produce electricity but this is not considered to be the most efficient use of this feedstock and sustainability concerns remain in relation to current biofuel technology. The Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM) issues Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) in respect of the generation of electricity from "eligible renewable sources". Substances that are derived directly or indirectly from fossil fuel are not supported under the Renewables Obligation mechanism. Some biofuels use fossil fuels in their production and therefore would not be considered by OFGEM to be eligible for ROCs. Those using methanol derived from natural gas (a fossil fuel) are ineligible whereas those produced using alcohols (including methanol) from non-fossil fuels are eligible for ROCs. Biofuels produced from vegetable oil, used cooking oil and tallow would be eligible for ROCs.

Seagate Ltd: Level of Grant Aid

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the level of grant aid paid by Invest NI to Seagate, Ltd. for the company's Limavady plant; and what efforts her Department has made to recoup the funding following the closure of this plant. (AQW 3978/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Since its original establishment, Seagate Technology Media (Ireland) Ltd was offered support totalling £44 million of which £35 million was drawn down. The support offered was in the form of selective financial assistance, training support and Research & Development (R&D) support.

Of the £35 million received by Seagate for the Limavady operations, almost £24 million (68%) of was paid against costs incurred by the company at the time of the initial investment more than 10 years ago. Two subsequent expansions of the Limavady operations, in 2001 and 2006, plus R&D and training activities during this period, received a further £11 million of Invest NI grant.

Under the terms of the legal agreements, default was not technically triggered until production ceased at the Limavady plant on 25th September 2008. My Department, through Invest NI, and in consultation with legal advisors, has been reviewing the terms of the relevant agreements in order to determine the level of grant that may be recouped from Seagate. Invest NI is in regular contact with senior management at Seagate on this issue and will seek full repayment of the determined amount from Seagate at the earliest opportunity.

Seagate Ltd: Level of Great Aid

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the level of grant aid given by Invest NI to Seagate Ltd. for its plant at Springtown. (AQW 3979/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI and its predecessor agencies have offered support totalling £111 million to Seagate's Springtown operation since the company was established in 1993. This support has been in the form of selective financial assistance, Research & Development (R&D) support and training support. A total of £109 million has been drawn down to date.

Approximately £40 million was paid against the cost of establishing the operations in 1993 and conducting initial training and R&D activities. A further £69 million was paid against three subsequent expansion projects in 1997, 2003 and 2006, plus training and R&D activities in the same period.

Bioscience Technology Institute: Inspection Report

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if her Department's inspection report on the Bioscience Technology Institute will be made public. (AQW 4110/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The inspection report on the Bioscience Technology Institute Limited has not yet been finalised. The Public Accounts Committee has received periodic updates on the progress of this investigation.

I have not yet made a decision on whether to publish the final report. It is not the Department's policy to publish inspectors' reports into private companies.

Start a Business Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for the reason for the removal of the grant for the Start a Business Programme, on 7 April 2008. (AQW 4117/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The decision to remove the £400 grant from the Start a Business Programme (SABp) was taken following an independent evaluation which highlighted serious concerns surrounding its additionality and value for money. This reported that 75% of SABp participants would have started their business even if the grant had not been offered, indicating that it was not a good use of public funds.

Within the revised Go for It programme due to launch in April 2009, the grant resources have been re-deployed to enhance the training and mentoring available to local businesses starting up and growing.

Start a Business Programme

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will reinstate the grant for the Start a Business Programme. (AQW 4118/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The decision to remove the £400 grant from the Start a Business Programme was taken as a result of recommendations emerging from an independent evaluation which highlighted serious concerns around its additionality and value for money.

As a result, the grant was withdrawn for new entrants from April 2008 and activity levels have subsequently been monitored closely. While the numbers progressing through the programme are down slightly, it is difficult to determine whether this is due to the grant removal or the wider economic conditions. An independent review is currently being carried out by KPMG and Oxford Economics in an attempt to determine the specific grant impact on the level of business start-ups. This exercise will be completed within the next few weeks and will help inform my decision on whether the grant should indeed be reinstated as you request.

CORGI Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans her Department will put in place when the CORGI scheme finishes at the end of this financial year. (AQW 4161/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland is currently conducting a consultation exercise to seek the views of stakeholders, particularly consumer groups and installers themselves, on the future provision of a gas installers' registration scheme for Northern Ireland from April 2010 onwards.

In the meantime, the current scheme, which is operated by the CORGI organisation, will continue in Northern Ireland in the next financial year.

Disadvantaged Areas

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what Council areas are designated as Disadvantaged Areas by her Department; and what are the policy considerations that apply to those areas.

(AQW 4185/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Based on data from the income and employment domains of the 2005 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, DETI's current Disadvantaged Area map identifies Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown, Newry and Mourne, Dungannon and Derry Council areas, together with pockets of Belfast, as the focus for Departmental policies and programmes which can contribute towards tackling disadvantage.

DETI and its NDPBs aim to pay particular attention to Disadvantaged Areas through the delivery of key policies and programmes. In particular, there are two PSA targets relating to the targeting of Disadvantaged Areas:

- PSA 1, Objective 2 includes the Invest NI target "70% of new FDI (foreign direct investment) projects secured to locate within 10 miles of an area of economic disadvantage"; and
- PSA 3, Objective 3 similarly contains an Invest NI target "75% of land acquisition (acres) in areas of economic disadvantage".

Broadband Availability

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures have been taken by her Department, in conjunction with the telecommunications industry, to make effective broadband available in the Ardboe area of County Tyrone and in the wider rural areas.

(AQW 4234/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Broadband access with speeds of no less than 512 kilo bits per second have been available to all of Northern Ireland since December 2005 through a five year contract my Department has with BT. This includes every village and rural area of County Tyrone (including Ardboe) and is delivered either through telephone lines, wireless or satellite services. Often consumers can choose from more than one provider.

The contract with BT expires at the end of March 2009 and my Department has recently put in place a new three year contract with Avanti Communications Group ensuring the continued availability of broadband services across all of Northern Ireland.

I am keenly aware that broadband availability is particularly important for those living and working in rural areas and in August last year I launched a Broadband Fund, with the explicit aim of encouraging Northern Ireland companies to develop new and innovative methods of delivering broadband services, particularly in rural areas. Currently, two projects are being funded under this initiative, one trialling mobile technology and the other wireless technology. The wireless trial, which is being undertaken by North West Electronics, will deliver speeds of up to 100mbps to most of County Tyrone, including Ardboe, and to southern parts of County Londonderry which will bring more choice and competition to these rural areas, and particularly for our rural based SMEs.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress she has made to ensure that the UK government's savings protection scheme is extended to include savings accounts in the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

(AQW 4272/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At its meeting on 15th January 2009, the Executive considered the Presbyterian Mutual Society issue and it was agreed that the First Minister and deputy First Minister would seek to raise with the Prime Minister the issue of help to the members of the Society and to impress upon him the need for the UK Government to provide support to them in terms of depositor protection.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have since written on 26 January 2009 to the Prime Minister requesting a meeting and a response is awaited.

Enterprise Finance Guarantee

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what indications she has received from the four local main banks that they are availing of the recently announced Enterprise Finance Guarantee. (AQW 4413/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Enterprise Finance Guarantee (EFG) replaces the Small Firms Loan Guarantee (SFLG) and is operated by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR). All lenders approved for SFLG were alerted to the new scheme by BERR at the same time and invited to participate.

The Northern Bank was named by BERR in the first tranche of lenders announced on 14 January 2009 and I understand that the Bank of Ireland, Ulster Bank and First Trust Bank are at various stages of the approvals process. It is my intention to meet with the four local banks in the near future to discuss, among other issues, progress in making the Enterprise Finance Guarantee available to local businesses.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Road Safety Council

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment to acknowledge the excellent work carried out by the Road Safety Council and its contribution to the improvement in road accident statistics. (AQW 3765/09)

Minister of the Environment (Mr Sammy Wilson): Following a critical review of its performance, I wrote to the Road Safety Council (RSC) on 9 December 2008 to inform it of my decision to channel funding not into central administration but direct to local committees. My decision, which was made with considerable reluctance, was not a financial one and was based on the evidence before me. Three successive reviews over the last eleven years, which between them amount to a damning indictment of the Council's activities and performance, left me with no realistic alternative but to re-direct funding away from central administration and into front line activities carried out by local committees.

In my letter I acknowledged the Council's long and honourable history, and thanked members both of the Council and of local committees for the contribution they had made to improving road safety in Northern Ireland throughout that period. I am pleased to have the opportunity to reiterate those comments here.

Of course, the relevant issue is not whether the RSC has contributed to the encouraging improvements that we have seen in the numbers of people killed or seriously injured on our roads - the Council has played its part, along with many others - but whether this is the best way of utilising the resources available.

It is a question of priorities, and the latest review of the performance of the RSC, on top of two similar reviews previously, indicated to me that the money could be better spent.

It should be noted that it is my intention that the front-line road safety activity of the Council should continue, and that is why I have asked officials to put in place a new funding model for the period from 1 April 2009.

Impounded Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department has disposed of impounded unlicensed vehicles that were not reclaimed by their owners and were not categorised as being 'of very poor quality'.

(AQW 3780/09)

Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an Excepted Matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport, but it is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) under an agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport (DfT). Under DfT policy, the value of unclaimed vehicles sent for auction has been reduced recently from £5,000 to £3,000. DVA have not had any vehicles in the last 5 years assessed as having sufficient value to warrant auctioning.

Impounded Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment how many impounded unlicensed vehicles were disposed of by crushing, broken down by vehicle age in the last year for which figures are available.

(AQW 3781/09)

Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an Excepted Matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport, but it is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) under an agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport. In 2008, 974 unclaimed vehicles were destroyed. The break down of these vehicles, by year of manufacture, is set out in the table below.

Year of Manufacture	Number of Vehicles
Unknown (mainly not registered in NI)	93
1997	1
1984	1
1988	1
1989	1
1990	5
1991	8
1992	16
1993	43
1994	85
1995	123
1996	169
1997	136
1998	131
1999	77
2000	39
2001	18
2002	14
2003	4
2004	4
2005	4
2006	1

Impounded Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment how many impounded unlicensed vehicles were disposed of at auction during the last five years, and what was the value of the vehicles sold, broken down by vehicle age. (AQW 3782/09)

Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an Excepted Matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport, but it is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) under an agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport. No unclaimed vehicles have been sold at auction in the last 5 years.

Impounded Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment what is the average cost per car for disposing of impounded, unlicensed or unclaimed vehicles by crushing. (AQW 3783/09)

Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an Excepted Matter which is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport, but it is administered in Northern Ireland by the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) under an agreement between my Department and the Department for Transport. The breaking up of unclaimed, impounded vehicles forms part of the contracted services provided by NCP Services to DVA under the provisions of a UK-wide contract awarded by DfT. There is no identifiable cost within the contract for this part of the service provided.

Water Pollution Offences

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1374/09, to provide a list of the names of all the organisations with repeat water pollution offences in South Antrim. (AQW 3883/09)

Minister of the Environment: The names of the five organisations who have caused water pollution on more than one occasion in the past 5 years in the South Antrim area have already been provided to Mr Burns by Dave Foster, Northern Ireland Environment Agency in his letter dated 24 November 2008.

Waste Batteries and Electrical Equipment: End-of-Life Disposal

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if stores that sell dry batteries and potentially noxious electric lamps are obligated to provide a collection point for their end of life disposal; and, if not, if he intends to require the introduction of such a measure. (AQW 3937/09)

Minister of the Environment: A consultation on transposition of the Batteries Directive was published by my Department in December 2008. It proposes in-store collection of waste batteries, except in very small outlets. This legislation is due to be made before the summer.

Under the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations retailers paid into a fund to upgrade civic amenity sites to allow collection of lamps and other electrical goods. The Department has no plans to introduce a requirement for in-store collection of waste lamps.

Disposal of Neon Light Tubes

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to outline the regulations regarding the disposal of neon light tubes (ii) to clarify if all local government authorities operate a standardised means of collection and disposal; and (iii) if there is a regular Departmental oversight of local authorities for implementing the regulations, and, if so, to outline his Department's inspection procedures. (AQW 3938/09)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) The legislation which impacts on the disposal of neon light tubes is the Controlled Waste (Duty of Care) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002, the Waste Management Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003, the Hazardous Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 and the Waste Electrical and Electronic

Equipment Regulations 2006. The provisions in this legislation ensure that storage, transport and treatment of such waste are undertaken without endangering human health or the environment.

- (ii) District Councils operate to certain standards in order to ensure the requirements of the above legislation are met. There is no prescribed standardised means of collection and disposal in the legislation.
- (iii) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency inspects council sites on a quarterly basis.

Disposal of Light Bulbs

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment if (i) he intends to implement any changes in the procedure for disposing of new light bulbs in order to minimise pollution; (ii) he has had any consultation with local authorities; and (iii) he will make public, procedures that he considers proper and adequate in relation to this matter. (AQW 3940/09)

Minister of the Environment: (i) I have no imminent plans to implement any changes in the procedure for disposal of new light bulbs. (ii) Councils will be consulted on disposal of light bulbs as part of the transposition process of the forthcoming revised Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive. (iii) Current procedures for disposal of light bulbs may be found on the Departments webpage for Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment.

Expenditure of Councils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what was the total expenditure of each of the 26 councils, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3988/09)

Minister of the Environment: The total gross expenditure for each district council has been extracted from councils' certified accounts, for each of the last five years. The figures are summarised in the table below.

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	11,708,695	12,939,613	15,067,916	16,796,015	18,803,071
Ards	17,437,239	19,487,194	20,853,712	21,302,660	21,234,455
Armagh	13,878,196	14,738,611	17,020,106	16,597,603	18,185,607
Ballymena	15,906,888	17,173,195	18,906,030	19,160,123	20,395,149
Ballymoney	7,008,080	6,883,763	7,521,824	7,715,802	11,015,276
Banbridge	10,430,855	11,011,094	11,630,118	12,510,380	13,247,070
Belfast	103,597,105	112,270,044	131,122,974	141,623,325	154,352,244
Carrickfergus	10,331,253	11,097,559	11,546,080	11,520,089	11,852,837
Castlereagh	14,960,973	15,700,620	17,579,553	17,304,868	18,035,817
Coleraine	17,045,260	19,426,927	21,387,165	21,664,304	23,609,225
Cookstown	7,895,927	9,723,241	11,071,814	11,137,416	12,156,653
Craigavon	22,662,649	25,067,829	32,687,217	25,800,410	28,858,343
Derry	33,575,840	36,500,345	35,863,481	39,084,923	42,054,523
Down	21,282,432	21,036,959	21,224,496	18,609,003	20,441,661
Dungannon and South Tyrone	9,745,289	10,904,511	12,984,312	13,125,867	14,217,727
Fermanagh	11,449,703	12,993,733	12,854,303	15,937,855	16,270,421
Larne	9,084,108	8,485,604	12,009,691	10,209,297	11,194,330
Limavady	9,480,498	8,693,497	9,094,607	9,326,823	10,707,058

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Lisburn	27,580,155	27,515,946	28,838,064	27,892,759	29,642,401
Magherafelt	9,396,555	10,004,631	10,664,303	9,952,036	10,868,508
Moyle	6,328,146	6,522,886	6,901,378	7,259,968	7,891,648
Newry and Mourne	21,360,516	22,303,268	23,184,203	24,736,855	26,867,847
Newtownabbey	22,513,277	23,781,089	24,253,159	24,940,933	27,406,710
North Down	19,324,175	19,442,753	26,432,746	22,987,272	24,146,458
Omagh	12,681,822	15,155,882	15,690,744	15,126,001	15,962,475
Strabane	8,421,058	9,187,144	10,388,465	10,345,166	11,839,449
Total	475,086,694	508,047,938	566,778,461	572,667,753	621,256,963

Expenditure of Councils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much money was spent by each of the 26 local government councils on tourism, in each of the last five years. (AQW 3989/09)

Minister of the Environment: The gross expenditure on tourism incurred by each district council has been extracted from councils' certified accounts, for each of the last five years. The figures are summarised in the table below.

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Antrim	137,714	411,749	517,832	538,516	843,883
Ards	1,817,694	2,104,034	2,273,140	2,047,924	1,973,761
Armagh	1,902,161	2,211,959	2,542,590	1,923,504	1,783,782
Ballymena	1,732,448	1,810,093	1,803,645	1,310,585	1,375,705
Ballymoney	353,688	376,845	371,857	338,372	372,080
Banbridge	332,385	472,643	537,586	445,865	521,282
Belfast	2,527,971	3,681,576	3,202,345	4,025,626	4,626,978
Carrickfergus	903,315	782,510	832,309	780,825	789,389
Castlereagh	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine	3,120,466	3,378,541	3,599,326	3,141,704	3,391,669
Cookstown	352,157	394,590	472,113	485,499	514,590
Craigavon	449,741	428,193	679,062	714,919	677,602
Derry	915,610	894,999	1,022,248	1,003,516	1,198,630
Down	1,455,992	1,454,435	1,615,751	1,540,441	1,589,384
Dungannon and South Tyrone	282,394	299,654	383,893	314,855	364,434
Fermanagh	1,429,463	1,317,456	1,460,349	1,384,188	1,325,973
Larne	795,748	836,148	881,055	601,372	580,937
Limavady	755,216	798,045	804,502	707,070	638,564
Lisburn	1,216,928	908,373	964,080	941,322	921,054
Magherafelt	558,763	588,910	564,789	599,094	724,871

District Council	2003/2004 £	2004/2005 £	2005/2006 £	2006/2007 £	2007/2008 £
Moyle	995,817	996,058	1,105,145	1,047,562	1,172,518
Newry and Mourne	1,165,854	1,261,517	1,326,734	1,249,209	1,429,713
Newtownabbey	219,278	220,482	211,015	225,098	257,571
North Down	1,674,530	1,690,619	1,651,044	1,531,440	1,620,379
Omagh	753,353	693,620	631,656	370,419	294,453
Strabane	293,553	323,483	309,041	257,853	242,043
Total	26,142,239	28,336,532	29,763,107	27,526,778	29,231,245

Water Pollution Offences

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1374/09, for the names of all organisations with repeat water pollution offences. (AQW 4007/09)

Minister of the Environment: Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), records details of all pollution incidents on a database. However, there is not a specific field on the database to categorise whether an individual, company or organisation has been cited as responsible for any previous incident(s).

This latest question requires a significant amount of work to compile a list of the names of those who are recorded as, allegedly, responsible for more than one pollution incident over the 5 year period 2003 – 2007.

NIEA officials will write to you directly as soon as the information has been compiled.

Waste Communication Strategy

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made with the Waste Communication Strategy. (AQW 4021/09)

Minister of the Environment: I am keen to move forward as soon as possible with a waste communications strategy to ensure that key messages on waste are effectively communicated to people to bring about the behavioural changes necessary to reduce waste and improve environmental quality.

My Department has reconvened the Learning & Communications Forum to consider the way forward on a waste communications strategy. The Forum is a focussed stakeholder group to assist the delivery of consistent and appropriate key messages to business, communities, the public, households and the public sector. My Department has also secured the services of a specialist team from Morrow Communications to provide expert communications and PR support and a waste communications action plan over the next three months.

One initial action over the coming months, for example, will be to revise the “Wake up to Waste” website to cover more up to date and relevant key messages to encourage behavioural change. I also recognise that much good work is already taking place within District Councils and through organisations such as Bryson House to encourage behavioural change to reduce waste going to landfill.

I am pleased to be able to report that my Department is now taking action to deliver effective waste communications, though a lot of work will be required over the coming years to build on the good work already taking place and to bring about a fundamental change in our attitude and behaviour towards waste, how we can prevent it, recycle it and dispose of it in ways that are environmentally responsible and economically sensible.

Planning Service: Invalid Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how many invalid planning applications were returned to applicants by Planning Service in 2008; and were applicants informed before the notices were sent out and given an opportunity to provide further information before money was spent on posting the rejection notices. (AQW 4025/09)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) From 1 April 2008 until 31 December 2008 a total of 5739 invalid applications were returned.
- (ii) Applicants are not informed before applications are returned as per the invalid procedures.
- (iii) The cost of returned applications cannot be identified as no separate postal costs are kept for invalid applications.
- (iv) An application will be sent back if incomplete and it clearly states on the application form (P1) that seven signed copies are required. A judgement will be made by Planning staff, where possible, to contact an applicant/agent to request the additional information required to make an application complete, prior to the application being returned. However, help and advice on what is required to provide a complete planning application is readily available in advance to all customers.
- (v) As indicated above, we have no means of identifying the cost separately from the general postage costs.

Planning Service: Invalid Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment what is the average postal cost to Planning Service for informing applicants of an invalid application. (AQW 4026/09)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) From 1 April 2008 until 31 December 2008 a total of 5739 invalid applications were returned.
- (ii) Applicants are not informed before applications are returned as per the invalid procedures.
- (iii) The cost of returned applications cannot be identified as no separate postal costs are kept for invalid applications.
- (iv) An application will be sent back if incomplete and it clearly states on the application form (P1) that seven signed copies are required. A judgement will be made by Planning staff, where possible, to contact an applicant/agent to request the additional information required to make an application complete, prior to the application being returned. However, help and advice on what is required to provide a complete planning application is readily available in advance to all customers.
- (v) As indicated above, we have no means of identifying the cost separately from the general postage costs.

Planning Service: Invalid Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment if an architect or applicant sends Planning Service three copies of site location plans instead of six; (i) why are all the plans sent back by post instead of contacting the applicant directly; and (ii) how much does the postal cost. (AQW 4027/09)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) From 1 April 2008 until 31 December 2008 a total of 5739 invalid applications were returned.
- (ii) Applicants are not informed before applications are returned as per the invalid procedures.
- (iii) The cost of returned applications cannot be identified as no separate postal costs are kept for invalid applications.
- (iv) An application will be sent back if incomplete and it clearly states on the application form (P1) that seven signed copies are required. A judgement will be made by Planning staff, where possible, to contact an applicant/agent to request the additional information required to make an application complete, prior to the application being returned. However, help and advice on what is required to provide a complete planning application is readily available in advance to all customers.
- (v) As indicated above, we have no means of identifying the cost separately from the general postage costs.

Planning Approval

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to (i) ensure that developers are only granted planning approval when the proposal represents a contribution to a balanced community; (ii) encourage the provision of badly needed hotels; and (iii) discourage the construction of apartment blocks that are increasingly unsold and unoccupied. (AQW 4031/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department when dealing with applications assesses development proposals against all relevant planning policies and other material considerations including the appropriate development plan to arrive at a balanced decision. The development plan for an area ensures that there is sufficient land supply to meet a variety of housing needs.

Applications for hotels are currently assessed under Policy TOU3 Tourist Accommodation of the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland which gives favourable consideration to proposals for Hotels in existing settlements and appropriate rural locations. The exceptional tourist need within former Greenbelt and Countryside Policy Areas, no longer applies under Draft PPS21. However, my Department is currently working on a new PPS for Tourist Development which will be available for consultation in due course.

Finally, in exercise of its responsibility for planning control it is not the role of my Department to discourage development of apartments on the basis of difficulty in selling. All planning applications for apartment development are required to be assessed on planning grounds only against relevant policy and guidance including PPS 7 Quality Residential Environments, PPS 12 Housing in Settlements, Planning Circular 03/07 Assessing Planning Applications for Residential Development in Urban Areas, Villages and other Small Settlements and DCAN 8 : Housing in Existing Urban Areas.

Historic Walls of Derry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment how much money the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has set aside in its (i) 2008/9; (ii) 2009/10; (iii) 2010/11; and (iv) 2011/12 budget for (i) conservation; (ii) management; and (iii) development for the Historic Walls of Derry. (AQW 4100/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) manages the conservation of the historic fabric of Derry's Walls as a State Care Monument, and conducts this work under the provisions of the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995. NIEA conducts much of the day-to-day management of the walls in partnership with local groups and stakeholders, and continues to develop the long-term management of this internationally important monument.

(i) Conservation

NIEA has a team of specialist craftsmen who maintain the walls on an ongoing basis. Work completed in the current financial year comprises conservation works to the sections of city walls at Stable Lane and Hawkin Street. Conservation works are currently underway to the section of wall at Foyle Street, in advance of a hotel development planned for that area.

2009/10

The budget for Derry city walls for 2009/10 has not yet been allocated. However, planned conservation works will continue on Foyle Street in 2009/10 at an estimated cost of £4000.

2010/2011 and 2011/12

The budget for the conservation of Derry city walls for 2010/2011 and 2011/12 has not yet been allocated. Plans for future conservation by NIEA at any historic monument are informed by the conservation needs of the monument at the time, followed by workforce availability and/or budget. A degree of flexibility is necessary since, for example, a winter storm or episode of flood damage may mean that another monument is in more urgent need of conservation works.

(ii) Management 2008/9

Derry City Walls Conservation Plan was published in September 2007. NIEA aims to publish an accompanying Management Plan later this year and to establish a management working group. In the interim, NIEA has been working with the Western Perspective City Walls Working Group.

Resources expended for the management of the City Walls include the staff time of archaeologists, architects and our specialist conservation workforce who routinely inspect the monument, advise, and conduct its conservation. In addition professional staff also spent time processing planning applications and queries associated with the walls plus other features of historical, architectural or archaeological interest within the city. This is a routine task, conducted as part of a larger workload, and assisted from time to time with additional staff and contract resources.

NIEA has agreed, in principle, to undertake archaeological works prior to works for realigning paths for the Western Perspective Public Realm project. These works will take place in the grassed area immediately adjacent to the walls overlooking the Bogside and accessed via Fahan Street and Nailors Row. The budget for these works is still to be finalised and will depend on the scale of works proposed for the project. These works may take place in late 2008/9 or 2009/10.

2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/12

NIEA budgets for the management of Derry city walls in 2009/10 and future financial years will be informed by recommendations set out in the forthcoming Derry City Walls Management Plan.

NIEA will continue to meet its commitments to the better management of Derry city walls through attendance at meetings of the Western Perspective City Walls Working Group and future meetings arising from the publication of the Management Plan.

(iii) Development 2008/9

As a matter of routine, planning applications are passed from Planning Service to NIEA for advice regarding the impact of development on the walls themselves; their setting; buried archaeological remains, and; other historic buildings in the area.

The Management Group, led by NIEA, will also be involved in considering issues regarding the longer term development of the walls. NIEA has been involved for a number of years with the city council, NITB and other key agencies in promoting the importance of the walls as a key part of the Signature Development Project.

2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/12

It is anticipated that resources will continue to be engaged, in terms of NIEA staff time in - continuing the successful conservation and public enjoyment of Derry's Walls; to ensure the appropriate consideration of all planning applications within the core of this historic city, and; to enable NIEA to continue to attend and contribute to all relevant meetings relating to the management of the city walls.

Historic Walls of Derry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment what archeological excavations or surveys does the Northern Ireland Environment Agency plan to undertake in and adjacent to the Historic Walls of Derry in (i) 2008/9; (ii) 2009/10; (iii) 2010/11; and (iv) 2011/12. (AQW 4101/09)

Minister of the Environment: In the last two years, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and its predecessor licensed four archaeological excavations within the Historic City and, wholly funded one of these. In 2008/09, NIEA has undertaken two archaeological surveys within and adjacent to the historic walls.

The Agency has also agreed, in principle, to undertake, and fund, archaeological works in advance of the realignment of paths for the Western Perspective Public Realm Project. These works are proposed to take place in the grassed area immediately adjacent to the City walls overlooking the Bogside and accessed via Fahan Street and Nailors Row. The budget for these works is still to be agreed, and will depend on the scale of works proposed by the Western Perspective City Walls Working Group and agreed with NIEA. These archaeological works may take place in 2008/9 or 2009/10. NIEA currently has no other timetabled excavation or survey projects in or adjacent to the Historic City Walls for years 2010/11 and 2011/12. In that time some archaeological investigation may become necessary, but this would need to be assessed and costed as the need arises, and undertaken within the existing constraints of resourcing.

Community Planning Laws

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what his Department's plans are to develop community planning laws designed to protect coastal regions and discourage unsustainable development in holiday apartments. (AQW 4107/09)

Minister of the Environment: I have no plans to develop community planning laws on this matter.

Commercial Centres in Coastal Towns

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what his plans are for ensuring developers do not kill off commercial centres in coastal towns by obtaining approval for holiday apartments. (AQW 4109/09)

Minister of the Environment: In the draft Northern Area Plan [DNAP] published in May 2005, there is no specific policy provision to protect the town centres of coastal towns from the development of holiday apartments. In the case of Ballycastle town centre and in a small portion of Portstewart town centre however there is a presumption against apartment development as a result of the application of an Apartments Development Policy within the Plan [Policy HOU 3].

This policy was included in the plan in an attempt to control the number and location of apartments being built and Areas of Opportunity for Apartments [AOAs] were designated in 5 of the 8 coastal towns - Ballycastle, Castlerock, Portballintrae, Portrush and Portstewart. In terms of commercial centres however its impact is only likely to be of significance in Ballycastle town centre.

The Apartments Development Policy in DNAP and its associated designations have attracted a considerable number of objections and some expressions of support from the public. Since DNAP was published, the Policy has been a material consideration in the determination of relevant planning applications and the Planning Appeals Commission has supported the refusal of planning permission for proposed apartments outside the designated AOAs in at least two of the five settlements.

Within all other commercial centres planning applications for apartment development will be determined on their individual merits within the context set by regional planning policies such as PPS1, PPS7 and PPS12 and the policies contained within DNAP including Policy HOU 3 where appropriate.

The Independent Examination into DNAP would facilitate a debate on the merits or otherwise of DNAP Policy HOU 3 and its associated proposed designated Areas of Opportunity for Apartments including the issue of apartments in commercial centres. In light of the ongoing legal proceedings in relation to DNAP however my Department does not consider it appropriate, at this point in time, to engage with the Planning Appeals Commission in order to progress the Independent Examination.

Tree Protection

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to protect trees by removing attached ivy, on land owned by (i) government Departments; and (ii) private landlords. (AQW 4141/09)

Minister of the Environment:

- (i) The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) recognises the importance of ivy – a native evergreen climbing perennial – for wildlife, providing nectar for insects and shelter for birds in winter and berries for birds in spring, when other sources of berries have been exhausted. Ivy is not routinely removed from trees on lands managed by NIEA except where affected trees might pose a significant threat to visitors, for example close to paths and open spaces. My Department has no remit to remove ivy from trees on lands owned by other Government Departments.
- (ii) My Department has no remit to remove ivy from trees on lands in private ownership.

Red Grouse Project

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 1385/09, how the interests of shooting sports will be included in the Red Grouse Project. (AQW 4142/09)

Minister of the Environment: During the public consultation phase of the Red Grouse Action Plan all interests were invited to comment on the text and the Plan targets. Responses from sporting interests were considered alongside responses from other interests and together these helped shape the final plan.

The Action Plan for Red Grouse is primarily focused on conserving Red Grouse populations and their habitats. I am aware that there is much experience of grouse and moorland management within the sporting sector and can confirm that the cross-sectoral group attending the Seminar relating to Red Grouse conservation on 18th March 2009 will include sporting interests. Indeed the Seminar is to be chaired by the Northern Ireland Director of the British Association of Shooting and Conservation.

Local Government Councils: Employees' Rights

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment if a local government council has given a fixed term contract to an employee that runs beyond the existence of that council, does the newly formed council have an obligation to continue employing that person. (AQW 4166/09)

Minister of the Environment: Where a local government council has given a fixed-term contract to an employee that runs beyond the existence of that council, the newly formed council will have an obligation to employ that employee where transfer rights under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 are established.

Local Government Councils: Employees' Rights

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what limitations there are on the length of time for which a fixed term contract can be offered to an employee by local government councils. (AQW 4167/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Fixed-term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 give fixed-term employees the right, in principle, not to be treated less favourably than permanent employees of the same employer doing similar work. The Regulations contain no particular limitation on the length of time for which a fixed-term contract can be offered, which is of relevance to this question.

Stranmillis College

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if anyone from the Department for Employment and Learning has approached his Department about the designation of land around Stranmillis College. (AQW 4171/09)

Minister of the Environment: No-one from Queen's University, Stranmillis College or the Department for Employment and Learning has approached my Department about the designation of land around Stranmillis College

Stranmillis College

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if anyone from Queen's University or Stranmillis College approached his Department about the designation of land around Stranmillis College. (AQW 4172/09)

Minister of the Environment: No-one from Queen's University, Stranmillis College or the Department for Employment and Learning has approached my Department about the designation of land around Stranmillis College

Independent Working Group on Entitlement of Non-farming Rural Dwellers

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment to update the work of the Independent Working Group that is looking at the entitlement of non-farming rural dwellers under PPS21. (AQW 4184/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Independent Working Group will commence work on 3 February 2009.

Signposting for Rural Businesses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment how many rural businesses have been the subject of enforcement procedures for planning offences in relation to signposting of businesses, broken down by Planning Service division. (AQW 4190/09)

Minister of the Environment: The current system of electronic retrieval does not record applications in sufficient detail to provide the information requested so to provide accurate figures for the periods in question could only be done by a manual search of all our existing files which would incur disproportionate costs.

Signposting for Rural Businesses

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to review the regulations in relation to signposting for rural businesses. (AQW 4191/09)

Minister of the Environment: The planning legislation relevant to signposting for rural businesses is the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992.

My Department has no plans to review the operation of these Regulations with respect to signposting for rural businesses.

Green-Belt Holdings

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment why (i) his Department requested Green-belt Holdings to become involved in managing maintenance of open space in new developments; and (ii) local authorities were not considered to carry out the maintenance. (AQW 4220/09)

Minister of the Environment: The management and maintenance of open space in new residential developments is a requirement of Policy OS2 of Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation. Where Green-belt Holdings are involved in such management and maintenance, it has not been at the express request of my Department although PPS8 does recognise that such an arrangement is an acceptable mechanism for doing so. Their involvement is a matter for the developer who is responsible for agreeing the arrangements for maintaining open space. Local authorities are also an acceptable mechanism for carrying out such management and maintenance but their involvement depends on the developer and council agreeing appropriate arrangements. Councils are involved in a number of schemes.

Green-Belt Holdings

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment in how many new developments have Green-belt Holdings taken over the maintenance and management responsibilities of open spaces. (AQW 4221/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not record this level of detail on the current system of electronic data retrieval – 20/20. To provide accurate figures for the information requested can only be done by a manual search of all our existing files. This information would not be available in the time specified and would incur disproportionate costs.

Green-Belt Holdings

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment when a majority of residents of developments that have Green-belt Holdings as their property management company wish to seek alternative management arrangements, will they be able to do so. (AQW 4222/09)

Minister of the Environment: When residents of a housing development wish to seek alternative arrangements for the management and maintenance of open space, this is a matter in the first instance between the residents and Green-belt Holdings. However, alternative management arrangements would have to be acceptable to my Department in that they will continue to be required to meet the policy requirements of PPS8

in terms of being managed and maintained in perpetuity and comply with relevant conditions of the particular planning permission.

Green-Belt Holdings

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment if his Planning Department regulates the maintenance work carried out by Green-belt Holdings. (AQW 4223/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not routinely regulate the maintenance work carried out by Green-belt Holdings, but where appropriate can investigate alleged breaches of planning control linked to the management and maintenance of open space within housing developments.

Enforcement Action Notices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2104/09, what steps he is taking to improve the clearance of enforcement actions, particularly those that remain over 24 months without clearance. (AQW 4231/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Downpatrick Divisional Planning Office has been reviewing the methods of work within the enforcement section, taking a more focused approach with regard to how its resources are utilised in each of the four Council areas. In the last eight months, this approach has seen the enforcement team halt the rise in the overall number of cases currently live.

Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3825/09 and 3826/09, how the difference in costs and the subsistence fees will be recovered. (AQW 4244/09)

Minister of the Environment: The charging scheme under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (NI) 2003 sets fees for each regulatory activity. For part A installations, like Ulster Farm By Products, these fees are charged per component prescribed in the scheme. The scheme does not allow for recovery of actual costs installation by installation, but it is reviewed regularly with the aim of achieving full cost recovery overall.

Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answers to AQW 3825/09, 3826/09, and 3828/09, to outline how the time and cost of monitoring Ulster Farm By-Products compares with the other organisations prescribed for control under the PPC Regulations; and to state if there are any other organisations which require greater expenditure in terms of time and cost to monitor, and to state the names of any such organisations. (AQW 4260/09)

Minister of the Environment: Pursuant to my answer to AQW3828/09, NIEA is unable to calculate regulatory costs at each individual installation. NIEA can confirm that there is significant time spent in regulation of all rendering plants within Northern Ireland.

Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answers to AQW 3825/09 and 3826/09, to detail how the difference in costs and subsistence fees will be recovered. (AQW 4261/09)

Minister of the Environment: The charging scheme under the Pollution Prevention and Control Regulations (NI) 2003 sets fees for each regulatory activity. For part A installations, like Ulster Farm By Products, these fees are charged per component prescribed in the scheme. The scheme does not allow for recovery of actual costs installation by installation, but it is reviewed regularly with the aim of achieving full cost recovery overall.

Titanic Quarter: Affordable housing

Ms Purvis asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans and the engagements he has had to ensure that the new development in the Titanic Quarter will include at least 15% social and affordable housing. (AQO 1886/09)

Minister of the Environment: Outline planning permission for Phase 2 of the Titanic Quarter development was granted in June 2008. The permission was granted subject to a planning condition which requires that a minimum of 15% of the residential accommodation will be allocated for affordable housing. I have asked my officials to ensure that details relating to the number and location of affordable units be recorded at the reserved matters planning stage and that their provision be monitored thereafter to ensure full compliance with the planning condition.

Road Safety Council

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of the Environment why he will withdraw funding from the Road Safety Council from 1 April 2009. (AQO 1887/09)

Minister of the Environment: I would like first of all to take this opportunity to clarify that I did not make any decision to abolish the Road Safety Council: the Council exists independently of the Department, and any decision to abolish it would not be for me to make.

I wrote to the Road Safety Council in December 2008, following a highly critical independent review of its performance, confirming that funding will be directed away from central administration and into the front line road safety activities of local committees.

The review, by PA Consulting Group, was the most comprehensive evaluation to date. The report highlighted a lack of strategic leadership and control within the Council, and demonstrated that it had failed to deliver value for money.

The Department regularly reviews the activities of the Road Safety Council and its committees. Previous reviews, by the British Institute of Traffic Education Research (BITER) in 1997 and 2002, had also concluded that the Council's activities as a whole did not significantly enhance the Department's road safety efforts or represent good value for money.

In the circumstances I concluded that the only reasonable course open to me was to withdraw funding from the core of the Road Safety Council as of 1 April 2009. Not to do so would have left the Department open to criticism.

I have asked officials to develop a new funding model and to engage with the Council with a view to establishing a direct working relationship with local committees in preparation for the start of the new financial year.

The Department will continue to fund activities carried out by local committees and will continue to seek to harness the energy, imagination and creativity of volunteers at local level.

Given the more direct relationship envisaged between the Department and the committees, it is possible that the overall level of funding to front-line road safety activity could be increased under the new model rather than reduced.

The Road Safety Council has written to me requesting that I meet with its Executive Council in order to explore the possibility of deferring the decision to withdraw core funding, on a short term basis; in order to give it a further opportunity to reorganise and restructure, and I have asked my diary secretary to arrange a suitable date for such a meeting.

Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit: Review of Planning Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made by his Department on the Performance and Efficiency Delivery Unit (PEDU) report on the planning system. (AQO 1889/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Performance Efficiency and Delivery Unit (PEDU) review of the Planning Service, which focused specifically on the processing of applications with the aim of helping achieve the Agency's PSA key targets in relation to processing times for applications, was completed in November 2008.

The review, which is being taken forward as part of the wider planning reform programme, highlighted 5 areas for action: improving agent performance; improving consultee performance; staff and management issues; improving divisional performance; and better use of performance management.

The PEDU review is timely because, as you know, reform of the planning system is one of my key objectives. It is particularly pleasing that the key areas for improvement and action identified by the review are also those which Planning Service has already been focusing on and which fit with the thrust of the overall reforms.

Officials are now taking forward the actions needed to address the recommendations of the review and this should be completed by the end of March 2009.

Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems that have been built by his Department. (AQO 1890/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department does not build Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems. However my Department's Northern Ireland Environment Agency chairs a working party looking at the promotion of the introduction of Sustainable Drainage Systems in future developments. I will be issuing a document for consultation within the next few weeks.

Road Safety Council

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment if he has met with the Road Safety Council since announcing his decision to abolish it. (AQO 1891/09)

Minister of the Environment: I would like first of all to take this opportunity to clarify that I did not make any decision to abolish the Road Safety Council: the Council exists independently of the Department, and any decision to abolish it would not be for me to make.

I wrote to the Road Safety Council in December 2008, following a highly critical independent review of its performance, confirming that funding will be directed away from central administration and into the front line road safety activities of local committees.

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The Department will continue to fund activities carried out by local committees and will continue to seek to harness the energy, imagination and creativity of volunteers at local level.

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The Road Safety Council has written to me requesting that I meet with its Executive Council in order to explore the possibility of deferring the decision to withdraw core funding, on a short term basis; in order to give it a further opportunity to reorganise and restructure, and I have asked my diary secretary to arrange a suitable date for such a meeting.

Minor Planning Applications in Craigavon

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of the Environment what is his Department's estimate of the percentage of minor planning applications in Craigavon that will be included in the new streamlining process. (AQO 1892/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Department will be including all minor planning applications (100%) which are to be approved and where no objections are received in the new streamlining process.

Road Safety Council

Mr J Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans for the future of the Road Safety Council. (AQO 1893/09)

Minister of the Environment: I would like first of all to take this opportunity to clarify that I did not make any decision to abolish the Road Safety Council: the Council exists independently of the Department, and any decision to abolish it would not be for me to make.

I wrote to the Road Safety Council in December 2008, following a highly critical independent review of its performance, confirming that funding will be directed away from central administration and into the front line road safety activities of local committees.

The review, by PA Consulting Group, was the most comprehensive evaluation to date. The report highlighted a lack of strategic leadership and control within the Council, and demonstrated that it had failed to deliver value for money.

The Department regularly reviews the activities of the Road Safety Council and its committees. Previous reviews, by the British Institute of Traffic Education Research (BITER) in 1997 and 2002, had also concluded that the Council's activities as a whole did not significantly enhance the Department's road safety efforts or represent good value for money.

In the circumstances I concluded that the only reasonable course open to me was to withdraw funding from the core of the Road Safety Council as of 1 April 2009. Not to do so would have left the Department open to criticism.

I have asked officials to develop a new funding model and to engage with the Council with a view to establishing a direct working relationship with local committees in preparation for the start of the new financial year.

The Department will continue to fund activities carried out by local committees and will continue to seek to harness the energy, imagination and creativity of volunteers at local level.

Given the more direct relationship envisaged between the Department and the committees, it is possible that the overall level of funding to front-line road safety activity could be increased under the new model rather than reduced.

The Road Safety Council has written to me requesting that I meet with its Executive Council in order to explore the possibility of deferring the decision to withdraw core funding, on a short term basis; in order to give it a further opportunity to reorganise and restructure, and I have asked my diary secretary to arrange a suitable date for such a meeting.

Repatriation of Illegal Waste

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the progress of the repatriation of illegal waste which originated in the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 1894/09)

Minister of the Environment: Dublin City Council, as the competent authority for these matters in the Republic of Ireland, are committed to letting a contract for the removal of waste from the two sites in question and its disposal in a suitable facility in the Republic of Ireland. In parallel, officials from my Department have been involved in discussions with officials from the Department for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government over the last few months aimed at resolving the remaining issues surrounding the scope of the work, the methodology to be employed and the apportionment of costs.

I hope that the remaining issues can be resolved within the next month which will allow the contract procurement to proceed. The procurement is required to be carried under the EU Open Tendering process. It is therefore anticipated that it will be some 4-5 months before work on site commences.

Unlicensed Vehicles

Mr Brady asked the Minister of the Environment how many cars were clamped and impounded in the crackdown on unlicensed vehicles at the start of January 2009. (AQO 1895/09)

Minister of the Environment: From the start of the operation against unlicensed vehicles, "Operation Evader" on 5 January 2009 up to 15 January 2009, 328 unlicensed vehicles were clamped. Of these, 32 were removed to a vehicle pound.

Road Deaths

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to outline any new proposals to ensure the trend in the reduction of road deaths continues. (AQO 1896/09)

Minister of the Environment: Progress over the six years since the introduction of the road safety strategy has been significant. I recently announced the lowest annual road death total since records began in 1931. Provisional figures for 2008 show that 106 people were killed on our roads. But this is still far too many and I will continue to seek ways of further reducing the appalling human and economic costs involved.

To maintain momentum, I intend to bring forward a new road safety strategy for introduction in 2010, two years in advance of the original timescale for conclusion of the current strategy.

Of course, this does not prevent us from moving ahead with new initiatives that can make a difference now, and I announced in November my intention to consult on the drink drive limit and random breath testing and that will begin shortly.

In December 2008, I announced the introduction of a new motorcycle manoeuvres test and now anyone wishing to obtain a full motorcycle licence has to demonstrate their competence to a more demanding standard by completing this assessment as well as the theory and on-road tests.

A new qualification for people wishing to become professional bus and coach drivers was introduced in September 2008. Anyone wishing to become a professional bus or coach driver must now secure a driver certificate of professional competence. From September 2009 this qualification will also be required by lorry and heavy goods vehicle drivers. This requirement will also include coach and truck drivers coming to Northern Ireland, as equivalent arrangements are introduced across Europe.

I hope to have the mutual recognition of driving disqualifications between the UK and Ireland operational by April 2009. This will mean that drivers resident in Ireland or in GB, disqualified from driving for an offence committed here, will also be disqualified when they return home - and vice versa.

Compulsory basic training for learner motorcycle riders will require learners to undertake basic training before riding a motorcycle on the public road and will introduce an approved motorcycle instructor register. The Driver & Vehicle Agency will be working on this initiative during 2009 and when work has sufficiently progressed I will announce when it will be introduced.

I plan to consult on graduated penalties that reflect the level of traffic or roadworthiness offences, collecting deposits from offenders who do not have a UK address for future proceedings and empowering DVA to issue fixed penalty notices in respect of many of the offences they are charged with enforcing.

Road safety promotional and information campaigns will continue throughout 2009 using traditional methods such as television, radio, cinema and posters. I will also explore increasing our use of newer technologies such as online games environments and social networking sites.

Transition Committees

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the difficulties in establishing the composition of transition committees, what action he intends to take to ensure this problem is resolved prior to the committees being given statutory authority. (AQO 1897/09)

Minister of the Environment: I have asked the Policy Development Panel that is developing proposals on the governance arrangements for the councils post 2011 to bring forward proposals in relation to governance arrangements for the statutory transition committees. I have also asked the Panel to let me have their views on whether the representation on statutory transition committees should reflect the relative size of the constituent councils rather than the current arrangement whereby they have equal representation.

Energy Efficiency Rating of Buildings

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the energy efficiency rating of buildings that are under the control of his Department. (AQO 1898/09)

Minister of the Environment: Some 20 buildings, under the control of my Department, fall within scope of the Display Energy Certificate (DEC) Scheme. The summary breakdown is:

Dec Rating	Number of Buildings
C	1
D	2
E	1
F	1
G	15

I would be happy to provide the member with a full list of the buildings involved and of their individual DEC rating.

Planning Reform

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on planning reform. (AQO 1899/09)

Minister of the Environment: Subject to securing agreement from the Executive later this month, I hope to publish a detailed public consultation paper outlining my proposals for reform of the planning system in early February. The wide-ranging reforms aim to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system and to ensure that it provides transparency in decision-making and gives confidence to its users.

If the public consultation process indicates broad support for the proposals then significant change will be required for all stakeholders in the planning system. For those reforms requiring legislative change, our PSA commitment is to bring forward the relevant legislation by March 2011. However, we will of course continue to make non-legislative process improvements wherever possible in advance of 2011, such as the very successful streamlined council consultation arrangements, with the aim of having a more immediate impact on improving operational performance. Action is also underway to address the recommendations of the recent Performance Efficiency and Delivery Unit (PEDU) review of the Planning Service, which focused specifically on the processing of applications.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service: IT Projects

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of new IT projects being developed across the Civil Service; (ii) the purpose of each project; and (iii) the anticipated cost of each project. (AQW 3478/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) is currently developing 65 IT projects. This does not include projects currently underway within NDPB'S, notably health and education.

A list of these projects in Departmental order, together with their purpose and anticipated cost, has been placed in the Library.

Quasi Non-Governmental Organisations

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people were employed by quasi non-governmental organisations in the third quarter of 2008 compared to the third quarter of 2007. (AQW 3700/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: For the purpose of this question, all public bodies sponsored by Northern Ireland departments, which are listed in the annual public bodies report are included. These reports can be accessed at www.dfpni.gov.uk/index/delivery-and-innovation/did-publications.htm.

The information is as follows:

Number of staff employed at 31 December 2007 - 105,493

Number of staff employed at 31 December 2008 - 107,361

Unemployment Estimates

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment has been made of the estimate by the Construction Employers Federation that 20,000 jobs will be lost in 2009. (AQW 3772/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The unemployment figures, published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), confirm that the claimant count for the construction sector has increased from 4,775 in December 2007 to 9,115 in December 2008, an increase of 4,340 (90.89%) over the period. The most significant increase occurred during the months of November and December 2008 when the claimant count increased by 2,025. The claimant figures published on the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) website on the 5 December 2008 are consistent with the official DETI statistics through to October 2008 with the CEF estimate for December 2008 at 8,000 being lower than the DETI figure of 9,115.

The CEF bulletin of the 5 December 2008 forecasts that the claimant count in the construction sector will rise to 10,000 by the summer of 2009. CEF has estimated that, taking particular characteristics of the construction workforce into account, the total number of jobs lost could rise to 20,000 by the end of 2009. These characteristics include reduced hours of working resulting from lower workloads, the extent of self employment, migrant workers returning home, local workers choosing to work overseas and those opting for employment in other relatively low skilled sectors.

However, DETI has advised that the economic forecasts, produced by Oxford Economics for DETI and the Economic Development Forum in November 2008, which indicated that overall employment in Northern Ireland could fall by 12,000 in 2009 are currently being updated to take account of recent economic developments. The updated economic forecast from Oxford Economics will be available in early March 2009.

The importance of the construction industry to the NI economy cannot be understated and I share the industry's concerns regarding the downturn. The impact of job losses and the credit crunch touches us all in some way. During the latter part of last year I met the CEF and other key stakeholders to hear at first hand the difficulties facing the construction industry.

Whilst the public sector in Northern Ireland is already a major investor in construction making a contribution in excess of 40% of the total spend, it is even more important in these difficult times that the public sector maximises the funds available for investment in our infrastructure.

Further to my statement to the Assembly on the 15 December 2008, Departments have indicated that over 60 projects, with an aggregated value in excess of £400 million, are either to be advertised before the end of this financial year or are already at various stages in the procurement process. In addition, Public Sector investment in infrastructure is set to continue to increase over the remaining years of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) and will be in the order of £5 billion for the initial three year period of the Strategy, 2008 – 2011.

I am confident that the continued investment I have outlined will help to alleviate some of the employment difficulties currently facing the construction industry.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the implementation of Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers scheme for NICS employees, to outline (i) the cause for further delay in the implementation of the scheme; (ii) what has been communicated to staff on this matter; and (iii) when he considers the scheme will be implemented. (AQW 3908/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

Although non-industrial payroll went live in November, it was not possible to launch the childcare voucher scheme at the same time until further work had been done to assess the implications of new guidance issued by HM Revenue and Customs. This now classifies childcare vouchers as non-cash benefits and as such they must continue to be paid during periods of un-paid maternity and paternity leave.

Staff were given details of how the scheme would operate in September to enable them to consider if the scheme would be suitable for them.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers scheme for NICS employees, (i) what is the cause of the further delay in its implementation; (ii) to state what has been communicated to his staff; and (iii) to state when he considers the scheme will be implemented. (AQW 3965/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

Although non-industrial payroll went live in November, it was not possible to launch the childcare voucher scheme at the same time until further work had been done to assess the implications of new guidance issued by HM Revenue and Customs. This now classifies childcare vouchers as non-cash benefits and as such they must continue to be paid during periods of un-paid maternity and paternity leave.

Staff were given details of how the scheme would operate in September to enable them to consider if the scheme would be suitable for them.

Civil Service: Retirement Age Limit

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what the impact will be of his decision to remove the retirement age limit of 65 for civil servants. (AQW 3975/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The removal of the default age of retirement of 65 is considered to have already provided significant benefits to the NICS by giving staff a wider choice of when to retire to suit their own personal circumstances and allowing management to avail of the opportunity to retain experienced staff. It also demonstrates the commitment of the NICS to encourage and promote age diversity in its workforce and reflects the value placed by the NICS on the skills, experience and potential of all staff, regardless of age.

At 1 October 2008, there were 40 staff aged 65 and over employed across the eleven NI Departments and their Agencies, 0.16% of staff in post. This compares with a figure of 16 staff, at 1 October 2007, which was 0.06% of NICS staff in post at that date. Civil servants had been able to work past the age of 65 since 1 October 2006, under interim arrangements requiring management approval.

It is anticipated that numbers of staff choosing to work beyond age 65 will continue to be relatively low as a percentage of the overall workforce.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers scheme for NICS employees, (i) what is the cause of the further delay in its implementation; (ii) to state what has been communicated to staff; and (iii) to state when he considers the scheme will be implemented. (AQW 4003/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

Although non-industrial payroll went live in November, it was not possible to launch the childcare voucher scheme at the same time until further work had been done to assess the implications of new guidance issued by HM Revenue and Customs. This now classifies childcare vouchers as non-cash benefits and as such they must continue to be paid during periods of un-paid maternity and paternity leave.

Staff were given details of how the scheme would operate in September to enable them to consider if the scheme would be suitable for them.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in getting the NICS to implement the Childcare Salary Sacrifice Scheme; and when is it anticipated that staff in all Departments will be able to avail of it. (AQW 4035/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. Staff were informed by e-mail and detailed information and applications forms are available on the HRConnect portal. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

It is not possible to accurately predict the number of staff who will use the scheme as staff were not surveyed about their intentions. However, the voucher provider company who is operating the scheme for the NICS estimates that up to 10% of staff will have joined the scheme by the end of its first year of operation. This is based on their experiences with other employers and equates to around 3,000 staff in the NICS.

Salary Sacrifice Childcare Vouchers Scheme

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken by his Department to ensure that NICS staff are able to access the Childcare Salary Sacrifice Scheme. (AQW 4036/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. Staff were informed by e-mail and detailed information and applications forms are available on the HRConnect portal. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

It is not possible to accurately predict the number of staff who will use the scheme as staff were not surveyed about their intentions. However, the voucher provider company who is operating the scheme for the NICS estimates that up to 10% of staff will have joined the scheme by the end of its first year of operation. This is based on their experiences with other employers and equates to around 3,000 staff in the NICS.

Childcare Salary Sacrifice Scheme

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his estimate of the number of NICS staff who would want to avail of the Childcare Salary Sacrifice Scheme and cannot at present. (AQW 4037/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The scheme was launched on Monday 19 January and those staff who are eligible and wish to do so may now avail of it. Staff were informed by e-mail and detailed information and applications forms are available on the HRConnect portal. The first vouchers will be available along with the February pay.

It is not possible to accurately predict the number of staff who will use the scheme as staff were not surveyed about their intentions. However, the voucher provider company who is operating the scheme for the NICS estimates that up to 10% of staff will have joined the scheme by the end of its first year of operation. This is based on their experiences with other employers and equates to around 3,000 staff in the NICS.

Civil Service: Long-Term Sick Leave

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what method the Civil Service uses to monitor and control long term sick leave. (AQW 4086/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Long term sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service is defined as 20 consecutive working days or more. Such absences are closely monitored by individual Departments. Information including trend data, costs and performance against departmental and corporate targets are reported on a regular basis to Departmental and Agency Boards, Ministers and the relevant Assembly Committees.

The control of long term absence is built around a number of interventions such as the Occupational Health Service and involvement of welfare services, provision of an Employee Assistance Programme as well as provision for dismissal under the Inefficiency procedures or for Early Retirement on Medical Grounds.

Civil Service: Dismissals

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service have been dismissed due to poor performance, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4119/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The information requested is provided in the table below. The data sourced is for each of the last five financial years. Figures presented include both industrial and non-industrial permanent staff in the eleven Ministerial Departments and their respective Executive Agencies.

2007/08	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
3	3	0	2	3

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many deaths have there been due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4229/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: In Northern Ireland in the years 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively, there were two, one and four deaths due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome^{1, 2} registered in Northern Ireland.

Mortality data for the 2007 registration year is the latest data available. Data for 2008 is currently being finalised and will be available in March 2009.

¹ International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision code R95.

² Only infants aged less than one year old are included.

Elderly Population

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the projected increase of the elderly population in the North Down area. (AQW 4345/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The table below shows the mid-year population estimate for persons of current pensionable age for North Down Local Government District for 2006 and the 2006-based population projections for the years 2011, 2016 and 2021 along with the projected increase since 2006.

Year	Pensionable Aged Population ¹	Projected increase since 2006
2006 (Estimated)	15,800	
2011 (Projected)	17,900	13.4%
2016 (Projected)	19,800	25.3%
2021 (Projected)	21,800	38.1%

¹ The mid-year population estimates and population projections are generally quoted in rounded form, this is because population counts from the census and subsequent updates involving births, deaths and migration cannot be precise. In general the precision of the population estimates could be considered to be no better than to the nearest 100.

Civil Servants: Transfer

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to accommodate the transfer of civil servants between the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the equivalent services in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 4369/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Northern Ireland civil servants who wish to 'transfer' to the Home Civil Service can do so by applying to individual UK Departments or Agencies. It is up to the relevant Department to determine if the application can be accommodated.

Under the NI Civil Service Commissioners' Recruitment Code, as an exception to the merit principle, persons can be transferred to the NICS from another Civil Service of the Crown on exceptional grounds. This exception should be used rarely and Departments must justify why it is not reasonably practicable to make the appointment in question in accordance with the merit principle. Such applications from Home Civil Servants are considered, in the first instance, by my officials in Central Personnel Group.

There are no arrangements in place for the transfer of staff between the the NICS and the civil service in the Republic of Ireland.

Civil Service: Recruitment

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the full extent of exceptions to the Merit Principle that may be available under Section A11 of the recruitment code of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQW 4370/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Regulation 3 of the General Regulations 2005 permits appointments to be made other than in accordance with the Merit Principle in the following circumstances:

- (a) Appointment on secondment;
- (b) Transfers of persons into the NICS where the person holds a situation in another Civil Service of the Crown;
- (c) Transfers of persons into the NICS where the person is employed on functions being transferred to the Crown;
- (d) Where the person to be appointed is of proven distinction and there are exceptional reasons, justified by the needs of the NICS;
- (e) Appointments made under Government initiatives/programmes; and
- (f) Where the person has previously held a situation in the Civil Service and resigned his/her post in order to compete for and undertake an elected office.

Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many awards have been made under the lone pensioner allowance scheme in the last year, broken down by Council area. (AQW 4394/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land & Property Services has made 17,204 awards under the Lone Pensioner Allowance Scheme since 1 April 2008. A break-down of the number of awards made in each district council area is set out in the attached table.

Awards of LPA for ratepayers in the social and private rented sectors are made by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and are not included in the figures.

Council Area	Number of Awards made
Antrim	401
Ards	876
Armagh	501
Ballymena	681
Ballymoney	235
Banbridge	328
Belfast	3,198
Carrickfergus	457
Castlereagh	1,216
Coleraine	723
Cookstown	187
Craigavon	639
Derry	561
Down	624
Dungannon & South Tyrone	313
Fermanagh	522
Larne	399
Limavady	176
Lisburn	1,160
Magherafelt	204
Moyle	170
Newry & Mourne	579
Newtownabbey	1,018
North Down	1,503
Omagh	339
Strabane	194
Total	17,204

Additional Rates

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number and total value of additional rates demanded from properties that have been listed in error as being vacant but were identified as being occupied as a result of monitoring by local government during 2008/2009, broken down by council area. (AQW 4400/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The inspection of property recorded as vacant but identified as occupied during the recent inspection exercise had, at 23 January 2009, resulted in the following rate bills being issued:

Council Area	Bills Issued	Total (£)
Antrim	110	268,735
Ards	137	215,373
Armagh	256	290,212
Ballymena	151	361,776
Ballymoney	0	0
Banbridge	141	141,283
Belfast	566	1,439,750
Carrickfergus	134	139,620
Castlereagh	154	182,232
Coleraine	47	75,773
Cookstown	111	272,484
Craigavon	29	23,709
Down	199	323,369
Dungannon	4	8,825
Fermanagh	374	602,866
Larne	2	2,023
Limavady	0	0
Lisburn	398	464,530
Derry	207	481,433
Magherafelt	0	0
Moyle	70	57,446
Newry	22	18,200
Newtownabbey	268	834,164
North Down	189	190,894
Omagh	164	256,400
Strabane	176	193,434
Total	3,909	6,836,646

Magherafelt District Council chose not to participate in the inspection exercise; Land & Property Services is currently making arrangements to complete vacancy inspections in this area. The 25 councils which are participating have returned forms in batches, with some returns only having been recently received by Land & Property Services. This has resulted in the processing of some council areas being more advanced than others.

Almost all forms which contain all information required for billing have been actioned by Land & Property Services. Processing of forms is continuing, with a significant number of Land & Property Services staff involved in accessing the additional information required for billing. The continuing exercise will result in further bills being issued.

Procurement System

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of recent successful court actions by businesses in relation to major government procurement projects in construction, what action he is taking to ensure that the procurement system is fit for purpose. (AQO 1901/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The EU procurement regime, described by the Directives and Regulations, is not static. It is subject to change, driven by evolving European and domestic case law, European Commission communications, new and revised Directives and amendments to the existing UK Regulations.

In order to ensure that the procurement system is fit for purpose, the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) continuously reviews and updates its procedures in line with Office of Government Commerce guidance and the developing field of public procurement law.

Through the Construction Industry Forum for NI - Procurement Task Group, officials are working with key representatives of the Construction Industry Group to examine how modern methods of construction procurement can be taken forward in Northern Ireland in a way that mitigates the potential for litigation.

Capital Building and Infrastructure Programmes

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what capital building and infrastructure programmes have been postponed from this financial year to the next financial year. (AQO 1906/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A programme typically represents a group of related projects. I have been advised that no capital building and infrastructure programmes have been postponed.

However, 22 individual capital building and infrastructure projects have been postponed from this financial year to the next financial year: These include:

- Department of Education – 5 projects
- Department for Regional Development – 9 projects
- Department for Social Development – 4 projects
- Department of Finance and Personnel – 1 project
- Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure – 1 projects
- Department of Agriculture and Rural Development – 2 projects

The project spend postponed, totaling £43.7m, represents a very small proportion of the total capital investment of £1.5bn expected this financial year.

A further seven projects, which were to be postponed, are now scheduled to commence the procurement process this financial year. They include five schools at over £27m.

Large construction projects have lengthy lead-in times involving careful planning, procurement and management. Postponement or delay may be caused by various factors including the need for revisions to project requirements, business cases, planning applications and/or challenges to the procurement process.

Capital Investment

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans he has to bring forward the permitted capital of £9.4 million into the 2008/09 financial year. (AQO 1907/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I can confirm to the Member that as part of the recent December Monitoring Round the Executive agreed to avail of the opportunity from the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Pre-Budget Report to accelerate £9.4 million of capital investment from 2010-11 into the 2008-09 financial year.

This additional funding for 2008-09 was included in the overall amount of funding available for allocation as part of December monitoring which incorporated the Executive's response to the downturn in economic conditions.

However, Members will be aware that as this capital investment was accelerated, the equivalent amount will be deducted from our Block Grant for 2010-11.

Social Housing Sector

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the current economic downturn, what plans he has to revise the priorities set out in the Budget and to redirect expenditure towards social housing to help offset the collapse in private sector house building. (AQO 1908/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The expenditure plans for Northern Ireland departments over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 were developed on the basis of the priorities set out in the Programme for Government which was agreed by the Executive in January 2008.

The Programme for Government highlights growing the economy as the Executive's top priority which is even more appropriate in the context of the current global economic downturn.

The Executive is committed to reviewing the Programme for Government on an ongoing basis as the underlying economic and social circumstances change.

However the priorities set out in the current Programme for Government remain valid in the current economic context.

Economic Downturn

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what contact he has had or intends to have with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer in relation to the current economic downturn. (AQO 1909/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have, over recent months, had several engagements with the Prime Minister and Chancellor on a range of financial and economic issues affecting Northern Ireland. I have also met with the Northern Ireland Minister of State to discuss the state of the local economy. This meeting was initiated to allow our local economic concerns to be fed directly into the National Economic Council, which is chaired by the Prime Minister.

My officials also continue to liaise with their HM Treasury and BERR colleagues on the local impact of UK-wide measures to assist the economy. This means that the Executive's policy measures will complement the national financial and economic policy initiatives.

Barnett Consequentials

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the level of Barnett consequentials that have come to the Executive as a result of additional spending by the UK Government to combat the economic downturn. (AQO 1910/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Although the Government's response to the economic downturn was one of the main features of the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report last November it is not possible to identify separately the resultant Barnett consequentials which were as a result of additional spending by the UK Government to combat the economic downturn.

However, I can report that the Northern Ireland Executive did receive £23.6 million in additional current expenditure Barnett consequentials and £3.3 million in respect of capital investment as a consequence of the announcements in the Pre-Budget Report.

In addition, the Executive was also provided with the option of accelerating £86.2 million of capital investment from 2010-11 into 2008-09 and 2009-10.

Regional Economic Strategy

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the status of the Regional Economic Strategy. (AQO 1911/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have decided that work on an economic strategy for Northern Ireland needs to fully reflect key policy reviews currently underway within the Executive. The recent announcement by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment commissioning a fundamental review of economic development policy is a material issue that any economic strategy will need to embrace.

The revised strategy will also have to reflect the review of the Programme for Government goals relating to economic growth.

An inter-departmental steering group has been established to take forward work on this strategy, reflecting these key policy assessments and updates.

Public Sector: Invoice Payment

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made by the public sector in meeting the target of paying invoices within ten days. (AQO 1912/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I think it is very important, in these difficult times that we take whatever steps we can to assist businesses in Northern Ireland. That is why I announced on 28 November 2008 a target of ensuring that all valid invoices are paid within 10 days.

It is too early to provide meaningful statistics but all departments have confirmed that they are taking steps to ensure that payments are made more promptly. Account NI, the new financial shared service centre which already includes 6 departments, has changed its normal application of payment terms. Payments which are ready for issue will be paid immediately, rather than waiting for normal terms.

Economic Downturn

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made of the Executive's response to the economic downturn compared to other neighbouring jurisdictions. (AQO 1913/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The economic challenges confronting Northern Ireland are no different to those that exist in neighbouring economies. Indeed, Northern Ireland may be in a more favourable position than some of those economies because of factors such as the retail stimulus from increased cross border shopping as well as the relative size of our public sector.

However, the Executive has announced a range of additional measures to assist local businesses and consumers through the economic downturn. These measures complement the UK-wide initiatives announced by the Chancellor in his Pre-Budget Report and recently by the Business Secretary Lord Mandelson.

I am confident that the actions taken by the Executive, in combination with those by the UK Government, will help the local economy through this difficult time.

Procurement Task Group

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in relation to the Procurement Task Group. (AQO 1914/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I announced the establishment of the Construction Industry Forum - Procurement Task Group in my statement to the Assembly on the 15 December 2008.

The Procurement Task Group held its inaugural meeting on the 17 December 2008 and met again on the 7 and 21 January 2009. It will continue to meet at two weekly intervals until the end of March 2009. The Task Group will report to the next meeting of the Construction Industry Forum in April and to the Procurement Board, of which I am the Chair, in May 2009.

The Procurement Task Group is Chaired by the Director of the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD).

The Construction Industry is represented by nominees of the various colleges of the Construction Industry Group for Northern Ireland (CIGNI) which includes contractors, specialist sub-contractors, construction professionals and suppliers.

The public sector is represented by senior officials from various Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) involved in construction procurement.

In order that the construction industry can plan for the deal flow, Departments have, through the Procurement Task Group, provided the Construction Industry Group with a comprehensive list of all projects that are to be advertised before the end of this financial year or are already at various stages in the procurement process.

The Task Group has made good progress on ensuring that those projects that are scheduled to move forward to the market place before the end of this financial year are progressing.

Through a partnership approach, the Task Group aims to develop practical procurement solutions that comply with NI Procurement Policy and, in so far as is practicable, meet the needs of the construction industry and the NI economy.

Business Insurance Providers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has met with providers of business insurance to local businesses. (AQO 1915/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not held any meetings with providers of business insurance to local companies since my appointment in June 2008.

Social Housing Sector

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he will ensure that people renting from the social housing sector who meet the criteria for a green rates rebates will be eligible for this rebate. (AQO 1916/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the member will be aware I recently announced my intention to introduce two new schemes in April 2010 aimed at prompting householders to act in a more environmentally sustainable way. Under the energy efficiency scheme, a rates rebate will be available to owner occupiers who install cavity wall or loft insulation in their homes. The other scheme will allow the first residents of zero carbon homes to enjoy a rates exemption for up to five years and additionally, in response to the outcomes of the consultation carried out last year, the first residents of low carbon homes to enjoy a rates exemption for up to two years.

I understand that the Committee for Finance and Personnel were briefed on these new schemes, and other new rating policies to be included in the forthcoming Rates Amendment Bill, on 7 January this year. During that session, some members reiterated concerns about the decision not to extend the energy efficiency rates rebate scheme to tenants in the social rented sector. I also understand that information on the outcomes of further consultation that was conducted with key stakeholders on this issue following an earlier Committee session was requested and subsequently provided by my officials. This reflected the significant practical difficulties highlighted by organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Housing Association, the Energy Savings Trust and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, if the scheme were to be extended to the social sector.

Mindful of these difficulties and the different circumstances applying to the social rented sector, I have concluded that the energy efficiency rates rebate scheme should align with other similar schemes available in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, all of which do not include social sector tenants within their rebate. This is also consistent with the fact that the Housing Executive and housing associations already have policies in place to ensure that their properties are insulated to a high standard which is reflected in the much lower numbers of properties in those sectors without cavity wall or loft insulation compared with the owner-occupied sector.

That said, should circumstances change, for example should other similar schemes be extended in the future, I want to ensure that the legislation bringing in this new scheme is sufficiently flexible to allow us to follow suit if this is considered appropriate at the time. The Committee will have the opportunity to scrutinise this legislation later this year.

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made on the Civil Service equal pay claim. (AQO 1917/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Engagement with Trade Union Side is ongoing with a view to reaching a negotiated settlement on the equal pay issue as soon as possible.

Whilst mindful of the need to ensure a fair deal for the civil servants affected, the impact on public expenditure must be minimised. Due to the complexities involved, achieving a negotiated resolution of any equal pay claims may take some time.

Civil Service: Travel Expenditure

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures he is introducing to reduce the amount of money spent by civil servants on travel. (AQO 1918/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not within my Department's remit to police how all public servants travel, however, there are plans to review the travel and subsistence policies in the coming year. The review will look for cost effective solutions that not only reduce costs, but also maintain employee productivity across all Northern Ireland Civil Service departments. Pending the review, all staff have been reminded of the travel policies' requirement to ensure that the most cost effective method of travel is used.

Economic Downturn

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of the current economic downturn, what plans he has to revise the priorities set out in the Budget. (AQO 1919/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The expenditure plans for Northern Ireland departments over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11 were developed on the basis of the priorities set out in the Programme for Government which was agreed by the Executive in January 2008.

The Programme for Government highlights growing the economy as the Executive's top priority which is even more appropriate in the context of the current global economic downturn.

The Executive is committed to reviewing the Programme for Government on an ongoing basis as the underlying economic and social circumstances change.

However the priorities set out in the current Programme for Government remain valid in the current economic context.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire and Rescue Service

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) to detail the Fire and Rescue Service cover that is proposed to be removed in each parliamentary constituency; (ii) how the proposed cuts were decided; and (iii) what consultation there was with those affected by the cuts. (AQW 2195/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Michael McGimpsey): The deployment of fire and rescue resources is a matter for the Chief Fire Officer and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board. Like all public bodies in Northern Ireland, the Fire and Rescue Service is committed to meeting the Executive's required efficiency target of 3% per annum between 2008/09 and 2010/11. These efficiencies will not affect the quality or effectiveness of fire and rescue services to the public.

A review of Second Pumping Appliances at 12 Fire Stations was included in a public consultation which resulted in a recommendation to remove the second pumping appliance from Portstewart Fire Station. A further public consultation on that recommendation is under way.

The Service has also consulted publicly on proposals to review the locations of fire stations and resources in the Belfast area, taking into account stations on the periphery of Belfast and emergency response standards. Work continues on that review and any further proposals on emergency response cover in the Belfast area will be subject to further public consultation as appropriate. In the interim, cover for the Dunmurry area between the hours of 11.00am and 11.00pm has been enhanced. Emergency cover has also been enhanced in a number of areas outside Belfast through the introduction of variable wholetime crewing. In addition, I recently announced an investment of £168 million over the next ten years to enhance services right across the Province.

Pain Clinics

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the waiting lists for referrals to pain clinics are increasing; and what proposals his Department will bring forward to reduce the waiting lists. (AQW 2198/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Pain management services are provided either as an inpatient or an outpatient service depending on clinical need. Challenging targets have been set in both areas and performance is monitored under the normal elective care access targets. The maximum waiting time from April 2008, for a first outpatient appointment is 13 weeks and for inpatient/daycase treatment is 21 weeks. These waiting times will be further reduced to 9 weeks and 13 weeks respectively by March 2009.

I am not aware of any recent breaches of these current maximum waiting time targets in this area.

Donemana Health Centre

Mr Bresland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in the establishment of the Donemana Health Centre. (AQW 3893/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The GP practice in Donemana is currently in the process of purchasing the site for the new Health Centre.

They have already secured planning permission for the new premises and the bids from contractors to undertake the building work are currently being evaluated.

Services for the Elderly

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the proposed closures of homes for the elderly by the Health and Social Care Trusts, what are the overall targets (i) set by his Department for saving services for the elderly; and (ii) for the number of closures of Homes for the elderly. (AQW 3920/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Efficiency Targets were set relative to the turnover of the Trusts. No specific central target was set for any patient group, type of institution or programme of care.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the cost of postage for each Health and Social Care Trust in the last financial year. (AQW 3930/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW 3530/09.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the energy costs for each Health and Social Care Trust in the last financial year. (AQW 3931/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW 3211/09.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any bonuses paid by any Health and Social Care Trusts in the last financial year. (AQW 3932/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW 2987/09.

Ravara House Residential Home

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what savings would be made by the proposed closure of the Ravara House residential home by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3933/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW 3333/09

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what buildings or land sales are the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust planning to make. (AQW 3934/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust plans to sell the following buildings and land, which will contribute towards my Department's sales target of £95m in the current budget period:

- Appletree House, 100 Bridge St, Downpatrick
- The Banks Elderly People's Home, Groomspoint, Bangor (Bayview)
- Downe Hospital site, 3 Pound Lane, Downpatrick
- Land at the Downshire Hospital.

However, given the downturn in the NI property market, the sales target of £95m is no longer considered achievable, and my Department is working with all Trusts to determine if additional lands or buildings can be identified as surplus to increase potential sales income.

Nursing Posts

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the reduction of the number of nursing posts by 700, as reported in the Irish News on Friday 10 October 2008. (AQW 3945/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trust consultation exercises are underway in relation to the key proposals for the planned efficiency savings. Until this period of consultation is complete and final decisions have been taken, I am not in a position to make assessments on any reductions in the number of posts required.

Availability of Wheelchairs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many wheelchairs are available to the Health and Social Care Trust for use in the Ards area; and how many are in use. (AQW 3971/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested.

Children Registered with Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children are registered with speech, language and communication difficulties, in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 3972/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Lisgarel Care Home in Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he became aware that there were proposals to close Lisgarel Care Home in Larne.

(AQW 3980/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I became aware of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust proposals for the future of a number of residential care homes, including Lisgarel House in Larne, with the launch of the Trust's public consultation on 8 January 2009.

Care in the Community in Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much funding has been given for care in the community in the Larne area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3981/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Services Board has advised that figures are not available in the format requested prior to 2007/8. The table below outlines investment in community care in Larne for 2007/8 and 2008/9.

Year	Funding
2007/08	£17,063,000
2008/09	£17,674,000

Flu Inoculation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many pensioners have received the flu inoculation, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 3986/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of people aged 65 and over who have received the flu vaccination in each of the last three years is as follows:

Year	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009
Number of 65+	178,242	166,068	185,395*
Uptake	75.1%	75.7%	74%*

* Interim figures (received at the end of December 2008)

St John's Ambulance

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if it is common practice to use St John's Ambulance instead of an emergency ambulance when transferring patients receiving cardiac treatment from one hospital to another.

(AQW 3992/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The type of vehicle required to transfer a patient requiring cardiac treatment between hospitals is a matter for the clinician who will take into account the individual patient's condition and the reason for the transfer. An emergency ambulance will not be required in

every case. Where it was considered necessary to use an emergency ambulance to perform a patient transfer between hospitals, a St John Ambulance vehicle would not be used.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many senior management positions there are in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3997/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In April 2007, Down Lisburn HSS Trust and Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust merged to form the new South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. At this time, the new Trust covered a population of some 336,185 individuals (Mid-year civilian population estimate 2007 – Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency).

As at March 2007, there were 66 (65.64 Whole-Time Equivalent) Senior Managers employed within the Trusts which amalgamated to form the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

As at January 2009, there are 41 (40.98 Whole-Time Equivalent) Senior Managers employed within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Senior Managers are defined as Managers who were third level management and above in this answer. Figures were supplied directly from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many senior management positions there were before the creation of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 3998/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In April 2007, Down Lisburn HSS Trust and Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust merged to form the new South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. At this time, the new Trust covered a population of some 336,185 individuals (Mid-year civilian population estimate 2007 – Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency).

As at March 2007, there were 66 (65.64 Whole-Time Equivalent) Senior Managers employed within the Trusts which amalgamated to form the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

As at January 2009, there are 41 (40.98 Whole-Time Equivalent) Senior Managers employed within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Senior Managers are defined as Managers who were third level management and above in this answer. Figures were supplied directly from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

Residential Care

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many residents would be affected by all proposed Health and Social Care Trusts closures of residential care homes. (AQW 3999/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: While the HSC is currently consulting on the future of a number of homes, no final decision on the future of those homes will be taken until full and proper consideration has been given to the views put forward in current ongoing public consultations. It is not possible to say, therefore, how many residents will be affected until such times as those final decisions are taken.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much was paid for overtime by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, for the last three years. (AQW 4000/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not held centrally. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust would have to undertake a lengthy manual exercise to collate this information and this would lead to a disproportionate cost.

Maintenance in Hospitals and Health Centres

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any outstanding maintenance to be carried out in hospitals and health centres, highlighting work that has health and safety implications. (AQW 4005/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is not held centrally.

Flu Inoculation

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the flu inoculation was available to all Health Service staff; and how many staff members received it. (AQW 4008/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Influenza immunisation is offered to all Health and Social Care Workers.

Trust	Total Number of HCW who have received flu vaccination
Belfast	1903
Northern	1200
South Eastern	623
Southern	1186
Western	761
Total	5673

Residential Care Homes

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much is being spent on supporting the elderly in residential care homes. (AQW 4010/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Care for the Elderly

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money is being spent on the care for the elderly in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; and on how many residential care homes. (AQW 4011/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Residential Care

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what has been the growth of expenditure on residential care homes in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 4012/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The table below gives information on the growth of expenditure in residential care homes in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust from 2002-03 to 2006-07.

Information is not available for the years prior to 2002-03 and information for 2007-08 is not currently available.

EXPENDITURE ON RESIDENTIAL CARE HOMES IN THE SOUTHERN HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST

Year	£000s	Growth £000
2002/03	14,876	
2003/04	15,683	807
2004/05	17,100	1,417
2005/06	18,413	1,313
2006/07	20,058	1,645

Expenditure on residential care homes in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust increased by 35% between 2002-03 and 2006-07.

Agenda for Change

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when reviews of Agenda for Change bandings will be completed in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4044/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With the exception of the Western HSC Trust all other HSC Trusts expect to have Agenda for Change reviews heard by June 2009. In the case of the Western Trust the process may take longer.

Roles of Secretaries

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the respective roles of (i) a personal secretary; and (ii) medical secretary, and to highlight any aspects of their roles that distinguish them from each other. (AQW 4045/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is a matter for the Health and Social Care employer to decide on the role and function of any member of staff employed by them. The role of a personal secretary and medical secretary may differ across HSC Trusts as individuals employed in this capacity do not necessarily work to identical job descriptions. However, in general terms the role of (i) a personal secretary is to provide secretarial services to non-medical staff, to maintain records and liaise with other departments. Whereas the role of (ii) a medical secretary is to provide secretarial support to the Medical Consultant and junior medical staff, to assist in the organisation of the Medical Consultant's workload and to communicate appointment and admission related information to patients/carers.

Residential Care

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings would be achieved by the Northern Health and Social Services Board for proposed residential home closures. (AQW 4053/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is difficult to make a reliable estimate of such a figure at this stage given that such proposals are subject to the outcome of consultation.

Residential Care

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings would be achieved by the Southern Health and Social Services Board for proposed residential home closures. (AQW 4054/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is difficult to make an accurate estimate at the present time, given that these proposals are currently subject to consultation.

Residential Care

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings would be achieved by the Western Health and Social Services Board for proposed residential home closures. (AQW 4055/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is difficult to make a reliable estimate of such a figure at this stage given that such proposals are subject to the outcome of consultation. The Trust has provided estimates that the potential savings from the closure of elderly homes are in the region of £1.58m.

Residential Care

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what efficiency savings would be achieved by the Belfast Health and Social Services Board for proposed residential home closures. (AQW 4056/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Health and Social Services Trust is not consulting on the closure of specific residential homes.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Salary Bands

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans has he to have uniform salary bands across the five Health and Social Care Trusts. (AQW 4057/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have already introduced uniform pay bands across all Health and Social Care employers from October 2004 with the implementation of the Agenda for Change arrangements. It is a matter for individual HSC employers, in partnership with local staff representative groups, to decide which pay band is appropriate for a particular job.

Patient Deaths

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patient deaths were attributed to staff error, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 4064/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected either by my Department or by Health and Social Care organisations.

Loch Cuan House, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if Equality and Diversity Impact Assessments of the future of Loch Cuan House at the Westwinds in Newtownards have been completed; and (ii) what consideration was taken that the age of residents is 85 and above. (AQW 4070/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Trust is currently consulting on the reform and modernisation of statutory residential care. An Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out on the proposals which affect Loch Cuan, Ravara House in Bangor and Grove House in Ballynahinch. Consideration has been given to the impact on residents of all ages including those over 85 years of age who are the majority of residents in Loch Cuan. Trust staff will continue to meet with residents and their families/carers to arrange suitable care arrangements with a view to reducing any potential impact on residents.

Loch Cuan House, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he would consider maintaining Loch Cuan House and increasing the number of residents until the supported housing scheme is completed. (AQW 4071/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Given that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is currently consulting on the future of Loch Cuan House, it would be inappropriate of me to discuss alternative proposals at this time. No final decision on the future of Loch Cuan will be taken until such times as the Trust has given full and proper consideration to the outcome of its consultation.

Abortion Research

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has with his counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom on research that shows that a large percentage of women who have abortions turn to drugs and alcohol. (AQW 4072/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In Northern Ireland, the only grounds for a termination of pregnancy are where the continuance of the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, or would adversely affect her physical or mental health. The adverse effect on her physical or mental health must be 'real and serious', and must also be 'permanent or long term'.

I have not held any discussions with my counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom on research that shows that a large percentage of women who have abortions turn to drugs and alcohol.

Abortion Research

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has undertaken any research on the claim from research in Great Britain that people who have had abortions have an increased chance of suffering from mental illness. (AQW 4074/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has sought expert advice from the Royal College of Psychiatrists. They have advised that the current research evidence base is inconclusive. Some studies indicate no evidence of harm, whilst other, more recent studies, have indicated that termination of pregnancy could cause a range of mental disorders. They also indicated that mental disorders can occur for some women both during pregnancy and after birth.

In Northern Ireland, the only grounds for a termination of pregnancy are where the continuance of the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother, or would adversely affect her physical or mental health. The adverse effect on her physical or mental health must be 'real and serious', and must also be 'permanent or long term'.

Health Service: Sick Leave

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what method the Health Service uses to monitor and control sick leave for staff. (AQW 4084/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Boards, Trusts and Agencies have a range of absence management policies in place which include such elements as accurate recording of absence, provision of Occupational Health and counselling support services, linking sick absence to the disciplinary procedure where appropriate and focus on rehabilitative practices.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the organisational structure of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4093/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Organisational structures for each of the Health and Social Care Trusts are available on the respective Trust's internet site.

- Belfast HSC Trust www.belfasttrust.hscni.net;
- Northern HSC Trust www.northerntrust.hscni.net;
- Southern HSC Trust www.southerntrust.hscni.net;
- South Eastern HSC Trust www.southeasternttrust.hscni.net;

- Western HSC Trust www.westeritrust.hscni.net .

Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the organisational structure of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4094/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Organisational structures for each of the Health and Social Care Trusts are available on the respective Trust's internet site.

- Belfast HSC Trust www.belfasttrust.hscni.net;
- Northern HSC Trust www.northerntrust.hscni.net;
- Southern HSC Trust www.southerntrust.hscni.net;
- South Eastern HSC Trust www.southeasterntrust.hscni.net;
- Western HSC Trust www.westeritrust.hscni.net .

Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the organisational structure of the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4095/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Organisational structures for each of the Health and Social Care Trusts are available on the respective Trust's internet site.

- Belfast HSC Trust www.belfasttrust.hscni.net;
- Northern HSC Trust www.northerntrust.hscni.net;
- Southern HSC Trust www.southerntrust.hscni.net;
- South Eastern HSC Trust www.southeasterntrust.hscni.net;
- Western HSC Trust www.westeritrust.hscni.net .

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the organisational structure of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4097/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Organisational structures for each of the Health and Social Care Trusts are available on the respective Trust's internet site.

- Belfast HSC Trust www.belfasttrust.hscni.net;
- Northern HSC Trust www.northerntrust.hscni.net;
- Southern HSC Trust www.southerntrust.hscni.net;
- South Eastern HSC Trust www.southeasterntrust.hscni.net;
- Western HSC Trust www.westeritrust.hscni.net .

Midwives

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average number of babies delivered by a midwife, in each of the last five years; and the recommended average determined by the Royal College of Midwives. (AQW 4104/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information is not available centrally to distinguish between babies delivered by a midwife and babies delivered by doctors; however a midwife will be present at every birth.

The Royal College of Midwives have endorsed the “birth-rate plus” workforce planning tool, which recommends an average of 29.5 births per whole time equivalent (WTE) midwife for hospital births, including all aspects of midwifery care in hospital and community.

Based on that calculation the average number of births per WTE midwife in Northern Ireland for the last five years is as follows:

Year	Births (Live and Still)	Average number of births per WTE midwife
2003/04	22,492	22.3
2004/05	23,025	22.9
2005/06	23,062	22.5
2006/07	24,266	24.3
2007/08	25,564	26.3

Residential Care

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many older people have been placed in residential care, in each of the last three years by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, broken down by (i) statutory homes; and (ii) private/voluntary homes. (AQW 4105/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The number of older people placed in residential care, in each of the last three years by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) is as follows:

2006/2007	
Statutory Sector	91 permanent admissions
	1,201 short term admissions
Private Sector	147 permanent admissions
2007/2008	
Statutory Sector	72 permanent admissions
	1,252 short term admissions
Private Sector	141 permanent admissions
2008/2009	
Statutory Sector	56 permanent admissions
	1,207 short term admissions
Private Sector	100 permanent admissions

1 Please note short term admissions include admissions for Step Down from hospital for rehabilitation, assessment and convalescence, Step Up from Community to avoid hospital admission and respite admissions to relieve carers.

Residential Care

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money was spent by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust providing residential care in (i) statutory homes; and (ii) private residential homes, in each of the last three years; and the average cost of each placement. (AQW 4106/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The tables below gives information on how much money was spent by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust providing residential care in (i) statutory homes; and (ii) private residential homes, and the average annual cost of each placement for 2005-06 and 2006-07. Information for 2007-08 is not currently available.

TABLE 1: ACTUAL EXPENDITURE ON INDEPENDENT AND STATUTORY RESIDENTIAL CARE, 2005-06 TO 2006-07

Sector	2005-06 Expenditure £'000	2006-07 Expenditure £'000
Independent Residential Homes	15,937	16,141
Statutory Residential Homes	17,183	17,187

TABLE 2: ESTIMATED ANNUAL COST OF PLACEMENT IN INDEPENDENT AND STATUTORY RESIDENTIAL CARE HOMES 2005-06 TO 2006-07

Sector	2005-06 Estimated annual cost (£)	2006-07 Estimated annual cost (£)
Independent Residential Homes	5,300	5,600
Statutory Residential Homes	8,600	8,900

Table 2 shows the gross annual cost to the Trust of providing the residential care; however some residents make payments towards this care in the form of Client Contributions

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many posts his Department will fund for neighbourhood renewal; and (ii) when a decision will be made regarding these posts. (AQW 4155/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to indicate how many posts this Department will fund for Neighbourhood Renewal. Consideration of health actions arising from Neighbourhood Renewal Plans is ongoing. This process includes detailed consideration of the substantial investment already being made by Health and Social Care organisations in many areas, and involves extensive dialogue with Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships and DSD offices to identify gaps and ways to meet those gaps. This consideration will also identify where there is potential for better connections and improved co-ordination across services, as well as the potential for additional investment and how that might be addressed.

For example, in relation to Belfast Neighbourhood Renewal Areas further meetings are to be held during February 2009 between Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships and representatives of Health and Social Care organisations to consider the range of resources going into these areas for health – related projects and take a more strategic view on priorities for funding for health initiatives. DHSSPS and the HSC is working closely with DSD on this issue.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Chief Executives

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what medical experience did each of the Chief Executives of the five Health and Social Care Trust possess prior to taking up their posts; and what training is available for them. (AQW 4160/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Trust Chief Executives are required to undertake demanding strategic leadership roles. The knowledge, skills and experience requirements for appointment has to be focused on leadership competences. Medical experience was not one of the essential experience criteria required for these appointments however, experience of leadership in a health or social care setting was included as a desirable criterion for short listing purposes.

Following appointment Trust Chief Executives have access to a range of leadership and development programmes designed to strengthen and maintain these leadership skills.

Urgent Care and Treatment Centres

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Urgent Care and Treatment Centres are in operation in the five Health and Social Care Trusts; and how many are operating without medical back up support. (AQW 4162/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The only Urgent Care and Treatment Centre in operation at present is located in the Tyrone County Hospital. This is a doctor-led service under the leadership of medical personnel who are responsible for the planning, management and governance of the service.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the capital budget of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4164/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust was formed on 1 April 2007 in line with the Review of Public Administration, following the amalgamation of the former Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust and Down Lisburn Trust.

The table below disaggregates budget allocations prior to 2007/08 by former trust name. Cumulative totals are also shown.

Year	2004/05 (£m)	2005/06 (£m)	2006/07 (£m)	2007/08 (£m)	2008/09 (£m)
South Eastern HSC Trust	N/A	N/A	N/A	50.485	54.131
Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust	15.808	23.587	25.287	N/A	N/A
Down Lisburn Trust	6.925	8.391	14.765	N/A	N/A
Totals	22.733	31.978	40.052	50.485	54.131

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional money is to be given to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, over the next three years; and what advice has been given by his Department on how the money can be spent. (AQW 4165/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The allocation of resources to the four Area Boards is made on a capitation basis and subject to my approval. These resources are then used to commission services from Trusts. My Department does not allocate resources directly to Trusts.

The allocations are made within the context of the Ministerial commitments and targets set out in the final Executive Budget and the Executive's Priorities for Government 2008-2011. Resources are allocated to the Boards with my Department's Priorities for Action which clearly sets out the Department's overall aims, objectives and key targets which these resources are intended to deliver. Allocations will continue to be refined over the next three years as plans are further developed and services implemented in the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust.

Ambulances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3982/09, how much of the £100m capital funding is earmarked for the ambulance station at Knockbracken Healthcare Park, South Belfast. (AQW 4177/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The additional capital investment which I announced on 1 October 2008 to modernise the ambulance service fleet, estate, equipment and IT infrastructure is subject to the normal public sector business case process. I expect the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) to

submit detailed business case proposals to my Department in due course; at this stage NIAS cannot be precise about how much will be spent on any individual station.

Ambulances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3984/09, what is the estimated time it would take for an ambulance leaving Comber to reach Ballygowan. (AQW 4179/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW 3984/09.

Ambulances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any proposals to reduce the number of ambulance teams operating from Knockbracken Healthcare Park, South Belfast. (AQW 4180/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no plans to reduce the number of ambulance resources operating from Knockbracken Healthcare Park.

Ambulances

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3984/09, to state the locations of deployment points for ambulances in Carryduff and Comber. (AQW 4181/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The ambulance deployment point in Carryduff is at Carryduff Fire Station, Comber Road, Carryduff. The deployment point in Comber is at Comber Fire Station, Glen Link, Comber.

Eating Disorders

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many people have been referred by his Department to private clinics; (ii) to breakdown the total cost of treatment; and (iii) what is the approximate cost per patient, for the treatment of eating disorders, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4194/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Treatment programmes are specific to each case and will vary widely in duration and involvement of specialist staff. There is not, therefore, an approximate cost per patient and so average costs per patient have been provided.

Year	No's referred	Treatment Cost	Ave Cost /Patient
2004/05	6	£371,412	£61,902
2005/06	12	£579,082	£48,2257
2006/07	10	£513,451	£51,345
2007/08	17	£1,358,418	£79,907
2008/09 (to date)	18	£2,149,562	£119,420
Total	83	£6,781,830	£81,709

A Regional Eating Disorders Service, based in Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, deals with the management of complex cases and specialised medical and dietetics support for all four Health Boards.

The most complex cases, requiring intensive refeeding and support, are referred to specialist inpatient units in England.

Royal Victoria Hospital

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money he has allocated to the maternity hospital at the Royal Victoria Hospital, over the last five years. (AQW 4202/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Trust advises that from 2002/03 to 2007/08 £2.656m of capital funding was spent on the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital. In addition a further £4.2m has been approved for interim works across both the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital (RJMh) and the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children (RBHSC) sites of which £2.155m has already been spent up to the end of March 2008.

Financial returns indicate that the total annual running cost of services at the Jubilee site per annum was as follows for the years 2003/04 to 2006/07:

ROYAL MATERNITY

Patient Type/Service	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
Obstetrics	18,079,552	15,990,243	15,056,091	13,052,003
Gynaecology	5,294,387	5,667,919	5,993,748	4,371,705
Neonatal Intensive Care	5,879,404	5,416,613	5,323,499	4,345,373
Community Midwifery Services	1,452,645	1,333,565	1,403,497	1,301,757
Total	30,705,988	28,408,340	27,776,835	23,070,838

Note 2007/08 costs are not currently available as they are currently being quality assured. Community midwifery teams are based at the site, but provide a service in the community.

Source: Trust Annual Costing Returns.

Midwives

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times have midwives not followed the guidance given to them by the Royal College of Midwives for the delivery of babies, due to a lack of resources, including staffing levels. (AQW 4203/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Midwives and their managers are aware of the guidelines and standards expected of them in relation to patient care and safety. HSC Trusts need to be satisfied that the care provided by staff does not compromise patient safety. These operational issues are therefore the responsibility of the HSC Trusts. The Trusts have internal governance arrangements to fulfil this responsibility to the public and the Department. All midwives have access to a supervisor of midwives who provides support to them in ensuring a safe environment for the practice of midwifery.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many complaints were received by each Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) how many were satisfactorily resolved, broken down by (a) year; and (b) Health and Social Trust Care area, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4263/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) The following is the number of complaints received by each Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last three years:

HSC Trust	No of complaints received		
	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Belfast Trust	1762	2118	1793
South Eastern Trust	729	944	743
Northern Trust	1106	1895	1087

HSC Trust	No of complaints received		
	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
Southern Trust	623	625	494
Western Trust	546	660	636
NI Ambulance Service	178	129	107
Total	4944	6371	4860

Source: Hospital Information Branch

(ii) The information is not available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Ambulances

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average ambulance response time is to (i) Magherafelt; (ii) Cookstown; and (iii) Pomeroy, from Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 4270/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) does not have an ambulance station on the Antrim Area Hospital site. NIAS will dispatch the nearest available vehicle in response to emergency calls; ambulance stations are located in both Magherafelt and Cookstown.

NIAS does not employ average response times as a performance indicator. Ambulance performance is assessed against the current performance target to respond to 70% of category A (life-threatening) emergency calls within 8 minutes with performance in individual Health and Social Services Board areas being improved to at least 62.5% by March 2009.

Civil Service: Fixed Term Employment Contracts

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many civil servants at all grades in his Department, have been on a fixed term (temporary) contract for a period of over four years.

(AQW 4367/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no civil servants in my Department who have been on a fixed term (temporary) contract for a period of over four years.

Civil Service: Fixed Term Employment Contracts

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is aware of staff in his Department who have been on fixed term employment contracts for up to 17 years; and if he regards this as a breach of the Fixed-Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002.

(AQW 4368/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of any staff in my Department who have been on fixed term employment contracts for up to 17 years.

Mullinure Hospital in Armagh

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times patients at Mullinure Hospital in Armagh were held up for (i) one day; (ii) two days; (iii) three days; and (iv) four days, due to the unavailability of an ambulance to transport them to Armagh Community Hospital for diagnostic procedures.

(AQW 4422/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust have advised that in the last 3 month period there was one occasion where a patient had to wait for an ambulance to transport them to Armagh Community Hospital.

The patient required a non-urgent diagnostic procedure, although for clinical reasons an ambulance with a stretcher was required to transport the patient. There was a delay of four days before the transfer took place during which time the patient was kept fully informed. As the diagnostic procedure required was not urgent, the patient's care was not compromised by this delay however I very much regret the time taken to transfer this patient.

Cigarette Displays

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to implement the UK Government decision ordering retail outlets in England and Wales to remove cigarette displays.

(AQW 4437/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I recently sought and obtained agreement from the Northern Ireland Executive to the extension of certain provisions within the Westminster Health Bill 2009 to Northern Ireland. These included provisions relating to a ban on the display of tobacco products at point of sale.

My next step will be to seek the agreement of the Assembly through means of a Legislative Consent Motion in early Spring 2009.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Express Commuter Trains

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any plans to introduce express commuter trains from Coleraine to Belfast after the track upgrade between Coleraine and Ballymena is complete.

(AQW 3974/09)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Conor Murphy): At this time no non-stop Coleraine to Belfast services are envisaged, as the single line nature of the majority of this track leaves it difficult to mix express services with normal services. However it is expected that the planned service will take just over one hour.

Extending Footway at the North End of Cargan

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service will consider extending the footway at the north end of Cargan to the 30mph boundary and the final property in the village. (AQW 4076/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I understand that the 30 mph boundary, at the northern end of Cargan, is some distance from the last house, therefore, providing a footway to this extent would serve little purpose. It will be possible to extend the footway somewhat towards the last house at the northern end of the village, however, the extent of this work will be limited, due to the availability of land.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that a scheme to introduce traffic calming measures in Cargan has commenced, and that, as part of these works, the footway will be extended to the limit of the land available. This should prove to be of some benefit to pedestrians in this area.

20mph Speed Limits Outside Primary Schools

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the effectiveness of 20mph speed limits being introduced outside primary schools. (AQW 4077/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Two primary schools were selected for trials of 20mph variable speed limits. These were:

- Kilmoyle Primary School, Benvardin Road, Ballymoney; and
- Hazlett Primary School, Downhill Road, Articlave, Castlerock.

The schemes became operative on Monday 1 September 2008, and will be assessed by the PSNI and my Department's Roads Service over the full school year. However, initial observations indicate a reduction in speed of traffic on the approaches to, and through, the speed limit zones.

I understand the Principal, Governors and Parents of both schools have praised the trial schemes and commented on the significant speed reduction during the times of operation. The PSNI who fully supported the schemes, have also reported reductions in speed and have detected one speeding offence.

The results of the traffic monitoring assessment for both sites, for the first school term, will not be available until the end of January 2009. I have asked Roads Service to provide me with an assessment of the effectiveness of the trial schemes in reducing traffic speeds and other dangers at the subject schools.

Speed Reactive Signage

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to list where speed reactive signage has been introduced; and what other sites are planned for it. (AQW 4078/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Vehicle Activated Signs are used, in addition to conventional signage, to encourage reductions in speed and thereby assist in promoting overall safety. The locations of such signs, along with current proposed sites, are as follows:

VEHICLE ACTIVATED SIGNS - CURRENT LOCATIONS

- A2 Bangor Road at Devils Elbow;
- A2 Bangor Road at Coach Hill Bend;
- A20 Upper Newtownards Road at Stormont;
- A24 Saintfield Road at Brackenvale;
- A55 Malone Road at House of Sport;
- A2 Culmore Road, Londonderry;
- B52/B18 Kilknock Crossroads, Toome;
- A2 Castlerock Road at Hazlett Primary School;
- B67 Ballybogey Road at Kilmoyale Primary School;
- A4 Woodlough Road, Dungannon;
- A29 Moy Road, Dungannon;
- A509 Derrylin Road, Enniskillen;
- A29 Carland Road, Dungannon;
- A27 Auglish Road, Scarva; and
- A20 Kempestones Road, Newtownards.

VEHICLE ACTIVATED SIGNS - PROPOSED LOCATIONS

- A501 Falls Road at Rossa Club;
- A501 Falls Road at Beechmount Leisure Centre;
- A2 Clooney Road, Londonderry; and
- C27 Templepatrick Lylehill Road at Templepatrick Primary School.

Bus Shelters

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the total number of bus shelters and their locations in Antrim town, and if there are plans to locate any in the Rathenraw Estate. (AQW 4087/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service is aware of three bus shelters in Antrim town that have been provided by the advertising company, Adshel. These shelters are located at High Street, outside numbers 16 and 19-21, and at Castle Way, outside the primary school.

Roads Service has advised that Translink and Antrim Borough Council discussed the provision of bus shelters in the Rathenraw Estate at a meeting with local residents, during the recent consultation for proposed traffic

calming schemes in the Stiles and Rathenraw estates. The residents identified locations for bus shelters in each estate and Antrim Borough Council are taking these proposals forward.

Pollution

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water have been reprimanded for (i) water pollution; (ii) land pollution; and (iii) any other kind of pollution, by the Department of the Environment, in each of the last five years; and what sanctions were imposed upon them. (AQW 4088/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The Department of the Environment's Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has responsibility for the investigation of pollution related issues.

NIEA has advised that it has not taken any action against my Department's Roads Service for any pollution related incident in the last five years.

The table below sets out the actions taken by NIEA in relation to water pollution incidents caused by Northern Ireland Water (NIW), or previously by Water Service, in each of the last five years. From 1 April 2007 NIW ceased to have Crown Immunity and have since been liable to the full NIEA environmental enforcement regime in respect to any pollution caused.

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Number of actions taken	1	1	0	24	27
Sanctions imposed	Warning/ Enforcement Letter issued	Warning/ Enforcement Letter issued	N/A	16 Warning/ Enforcement Letters issued; 8 cases to PPS (4 Fines imposed and 4 cases pending)	15 Warning/ Enforcement Letters issued; 1 case to PPS; 2 cases pending prosecution; 9 cases being considered for prosecution by NIEA

No other type of pollution has been attributed to NIW or its predecessor, Water Service.

Disabled Badge Vehicle Drivers

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration is given to disabled badge vehicle drivers to ensure that they can access their destinations in towns and cities. (AQW 4143/09)

Minister for Regional Development: To assist those with mobility difficulties, my Department's Roads Service operates the Blue Badge Scheme, which allows holders of a valid badge, who display it properly, to park on-street, close to the facilities and services they need. The scheme aims to improve blue badge holders' lifestyle, independence and freedom of choice when parking in our towns and cities.

By using the Blue Badge Scheme, holders can:

- park in parking bays specifically marked for use by people with disabilities, which are generally provided next to the main shopping areas;
- park free of charge and without time limit on-street, where parking is charged for, unless a time limit indicates otherwise; and
- park on single or double yellow lines for up to three hours, except where there is a ban on loading and unloading, within the limits of a ticketed (pay and display) parking area or within 15 metres of a junction.

The legislation covering the Blue Badge Scheme does not extend to Roads Service's off-street car parking. However, badge holders can park in the bays specifically marked for use by people with disabilities in such car parks. These bays are provided in all Roads Service car parks and are generally located at the main pedestrian exit and entrance points.

In addition, Roads Service provides enforcement of parking restrictions, through traffic attendants employed by NCP Services Ltd. All traffic attendants are trained in the concessions available to blue badge holders.

Provided a valid blue badge is displayed, traffic attendants will permit a vehicle to park in locations where concessions apply. If a valid blue badge is not displayed on a vehicle parked in these locations, for example in a bay marked for disabled drivers, then traffic attendants will issue a penalty charge notice to the vehicle. In addition, two traffic attendants are employed by NCP to specifically identify vehicles whose drivers are abusing or mis-using the Blue Badge Scheme, and they will issue penalty charge notices, when this is shown to be the case.

Traffic Flow

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 2648/09, what the traffic flow was between Lurgan and Moira in each of the last three years. (AQW 4254/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In reply to the Member's previous question on this issue, I explained that my Department's Roads Service has one automatic traffic counting site located on the A3 between Lurgan and Moira at Magheralin. The Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) volumes recorded at this site over the last three years are as follows:

YEAR	AADT
2008	13,778
2007	13,583
2006	14,756

Use of the Term 'Central Government'

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2738/09 and AQW 2739/09, does his use of the term 'Central Government' refer to the Executive or to Westminster. (AQW 4288/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that all revenue generated by the payment of Penalty Charge Notices, along with the income from car-parking and other charges, is used to supplement the overall financing of Roads Service by the Executive.

Water Supply Pipes

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what testing his Department carries out in homes to establish if the water supply pipes are fully coated. (AQW 4313/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the purpose of the phosphate treatment process is to coat the lead pipe and thereby prevent lead dissolving into the water supply. It would not be feasible to inspect the inside of pipes in individual properties and the success of the treatment is measured by collecting samples for lead analysis at customer's taps at a frequency agreed with the Drinking Water Inspector.

Parking Fines

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking fines have been issued to Republic of Ireland registered vehicles since the start of the NCP contract. (AQW 4359/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, from commencement of the current parking enforcement contract at the end of October 2006, up to 11 January 2009, the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued to vehicles registered in the south is 23,235.

20mph Speed Limits Outside Primary Schools

Mrs Long asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the pilot 20mph speed limit outside schools and when he anticipates when it will be implemented in all schools. (AQW 4467/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Two primary schools were selected for trials of 20mph variable speed limits. These were:

- Kilmoyle Primary School, Benvardin Road, Ballymoney; and
- Hazlett Primary School, Downhill Road, Articlave, Castlerock.

The schemes became operative on Monday 1 September 2008, and will be assessed by the PSNI and my Department's Roads Service over the full school year. However, initial observations indicate a reduction in speed of traffic on the approaches to, and through, the speed limit zones.

I understand the Principal, Governors and parents of both schools have praised the trial schemes and commented on the significant speed reduction during the times of operation. The PSNI, who fully supported the schemes, have also reported reductions in speed and have detected one speeding offence.

Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess these trial schemes over the full school year, to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds and other dangers, at the subject schools, before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Applicants

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail on average, the percentage of people who are on the Housing Executive Housing Stress list, in each District Council area. (AQW 3669/09)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The total number of housing applicants on the social housing waiting list is 39,780, at 30 September 2008. The table below details those applicants who are in housing stress within each District Council area, expressed as a percentage of the total number of housing applicants across Northern Ireland.

District Council	As % of total Waiting List *
Antrim	1
Ards	2
Armagh	1
Ballymena	2
Ballymoney	1
Banbridge	1
Belfast	15
Carrickfergus	1
Castlereagh	2
Coleraine	2
Cookstown	0
Craigavon	2
Derry	4
Down	2
Dungannon	1

District Council	As % of total Waiting List *
Fermanagh	1
Larne	0
Limavady	1
Lisburn	4
Magherafelt	1
Moyle	0
Newry & Mourne	3
Newtownabbey	2
North Down	3
Omagh	1
Strabane	1

* Figures rounded to whole number

Housing Applicants

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail on average, the percentage of people who are on the Housing Executive waiting list, in each District Council area. (AQW 3670/09)

Minister for Social Development: The total number of housing applicants on the social housing waiting list is 39,780, at 30 September 2008. The table below details the applicants on the social housing waiting list by District Council area, expressed as a percentage of the total number of housing applicants across Northern Ireland.

District Council	As % of total Waiting List *
Antrim	3
Ards	4
Armagh	2
Ballymena	4
Ballymoney	1
Banbridge	2
Belfast	25
Carrickfergus	3
Castlereagh	3
Coleraine	3
Cookstown	1
Craigavon	5
Derry	6
Down	3
Dungannon	2
Fermanagh	2
Larne	1
Limavady	1
Lisburn	7

District Council	As % of total Waiting List *
Magherafelt	1
Moyle	1
Newry & Mourne	5
Newtownabbey	5
North Down	5
Omagh	2
Strabane	1

* Figures rounded to the nearest whole number

£150 Fuel Credit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people receive (i) pension credit; and (ii) income support, are entitled to the £150 fuel credit, broken down by (a) constituency; and (b) council area. (AQW 3853/09)

Minister for Social Development: It is not possible to provide all of this information. At the end of November 2008 there were 94,469 Income Support claimants and 96,315 Pension Credit claimants. The £150 fuel credit will be aimed at households rather than individuals. Work is on-going to determine how many people may receive support as part of the fuel poverty package

Housing Executive

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what the adaptation budget is for the Housing Executive, in the North Down constituency. (AQW 3911/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not hold this information by parliamentary constituency. Adaptations are classed into two categories: Housing Executive properties and Private Sector grants adaptations. For Housing Executive properties, the anticipated budget for adaptations in the North Down District Council area for 2008/2009 is £399,000. For Private Sector grants adaptations, the Housing Executive's Dundonald Grants Office has a budget allocation in 2008/2009 for Disabled Facilities Grants of approximately £1.7m. This covers the District Council areas of North Down, part of Ards and Castlereagh.

Environmental Schemes

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to breakdown by constituency, the number of environmental schemes that have commenced and are fully or partially completed since she has taken up her post. (AQW 3924/09)

Minister for Social Development: The number of environmental schemes that have been fully or partially completed since I became Minister for Social Development in May 2007 are detailed in the table below, broken down by constituency.

Constituency	Environmental schemes fully or partially completed since May 2007
Belfast North	9
Belfast South	6
Belfast East	0
Belfast West	14
East Antrim	2
East Derry	4

Constituency	Environmental schemes fully or partially completed since May 2007
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2
Foyle	7
Lagan Valley	3
Mid Ulster	3
Newry & Armagh	13
North Antrim	8
North Down	1
South Antrim	2
South Down	3
Strangford	2
Upper Bann	11
West Tyrone	6

Housing Executive

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development what is the cost for oil clean ups at Housing Executive properties as a result of leaks from heating oil storage tanks, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3941/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's spend on remediation work to clean up oil spills was £15,093 in 2006/07, £39,409 in 2007/08, and £35,218 from April to December 2008. Prior to 2006/07 the information was not recorded.

Housing Executive

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to summarise the findings from the external reports of the Egan contract that is used by the Housing Executive; and to place a copy in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 3948/09)

Minister for Social Development: Neither the Housing Executive nor the Department for Social Development are aware of any reports being carried out on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Egan contract.

Continuous Tenants Omnibus Survey

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development how many respondents to the Continuous Tenants Omnibus Survey in 2007 were from (i) District Four; (ii) District Six; and (iii) the Seven Towers in District Four.

(AQW 3953/09)

Minister for Social Development: 100 tenants from District Four, 100 tenants from District Six and 6 from the Seven Towers in District Four responded to the Continuous Tenants Omnibus Survey in 2007.

Waiting times for Housing Allocations

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to detail all the Housing Districts that have the greatest religious differential in waiting times for housing allocations in 2000 and 2008.

(AQW 3955/09)

Minister for Social Development: To provide a complete picture, the tables below detail the average waiting times in all Housing districts, broken down by religion, for the Social Housing waiting list for 2007/2008 and 2003/2004 - which is the first year that the information is available for.

AVERAGE WAITING TIMES ON SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST FOR 2003/2004

	Catholic Average Months	Other Average Months	Protestant Average Months	Undisclosed Average Months
Antrim	7.2	5.4	6.2	19.8
Armagh	6.8	6.7	8.0	7.2
Ballycastle	8.9	4.7	8.8	8.7
Ballymena	10.0	7.2	9.4	10.7
Ballymoney	15.2	6.7	7.9	3.5
Banbridge	14.7	4.3	6.6	5.4
Bangor	7.3	6.0	11.6	10.5
West Belfast	23.8	3.0	8.7	23.0
East Belfast	26.8	23.9	14.7	42.6
North Belfast	18.5	10.8	6.9	30.1
Shankill	35.0	12.7	7.4	15.4
South Belfast	20.5	13.2	14.2	44.2
Carrickfergus	5.9	5.1	13.2	20.0
Castlereagh	5.7	12.0	11.7	29.4
Coleraine	11.8	10.9	9.7	13.4
Cookstown	7.3	6.1	8.0	1.5
Downpatrick	13.4	9.5	14.8	11.9
Dungannon	8.5	6.8	11.1	5.7
Fermanagh	10.4	19.7	10.8	4.8
Larne	10.2	5.3	8.0	6.2
Limavady	7.6	5.9	7.6	9.4
Lisburn Antrim St	12.8	11.5	15.2	11.6
Lisburn Dairy Farm	19.0	5.5	4.5	26.4
Derry 1	12.1	13.0	4.1	4.1
Derry 2	6.0	6.3	4.3	14.8
Derry 3	9.7	26.5	9.0	12.2
Lurgan	8.7	5.3	8.6	6.6
Magherafelt	10.7	2.8	6.7	18.0
Newry	10.3	4.8	8.0	15.6
Newtownabbey 1	13.9	9.9	10.9	29.5
Newtownabbey 2	8.6	16.0	11.7	45.6
Newtownards	16.6	11.8	11.1	24.4
Omagh	6.2	4.7	7.1	7.8
Portadown	6.2	3.3	5.2	16.8
Strabane	8.2	4.0	10.6	7.8

AVERAGE WAITING TIMES ON SOCIAL HOUSING WAITING LIST FOR 2007/2008

	Catholic Average Months	Other Average Months	Protestant Average Months	Undisclosed Average Months
Antrim	21.2	19.8	17.7	20.1
Armagh	13.7	14.7	9.7	29.0
Ballycastle	22.4	8.5	15.1	16.5
Ballymena	20.4	16.4	16.7	18.1
Ballymoney	14.6	8.3	12.4	18.1
Banbridge	12.5	10.8	12.1	10.8
Bangor	19.5	13.0	21.5	33.8
West Belfast	25.3	11.3	8.3	51.1
East Belfast	15.0	11.6	16.5	9.0
North Belfast	25.8	12.7	12.9	16.3
Shankill	3.5	27.0	11.8	25.0
South Belfast	24.4	18.2	17.1	27.0
Carrickfergus	25.1	13.5	18.8	10.8
Castlereagh	21.0	18.3	16.2	12.9
Coleraine	11.0	7.0	12.1	8.8
Cookstown	14.4	8.3	12.3	11.0
Downpatrick	20.7	15.5	21.0	11.2
Dungannon	10.5	14.6	11.8	14.6
Fermanagh	17.6	12.8	15.4	14.5
Larne	14.2	11.5	9.2	7.1
Limavady	9.8	11.5	10.5	7.8
Lisburn Antrim St	20.4	16.5	16.5	30.1
Lisburn Dairy Farm	15.4	4.0	-	28.8
Derry 1	20.4	3.4	3.4	12.6
Derry 2	11.0	10.5	8.2	8.9
Derry 3	12.1	11.3	-	20.2
Lurgan	12.7	16.7	11.0	17.1
Magherafelt	10.4	16.5	11.2	38.8
Newry	17.5	12.4	11.3	20.4
Newtownabbey 1	15.9	6.7	16.2	10.0
Newtownabbey 2	82.5	15.4	14.8	14.2
Newtownards	18.0	25.5	17.0	26.8
Omagh	8.7	6.9	10.3	11.3
Portadown	11.3	3.6	6.7	8.0
Strabane	10.9	3.3	7.7	3.8

Housing Executive

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the policy for putting names of partners, who own their own properties, on rent books along with residents living in Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 3996/09)

Minister for Social Development: In order for a Joint Tenancy to be granted, the applicant(s) have to comply with Rule 78 and 79 of the Housing Selection Scheme, which sets out the condition for the creation of a joint tenancy. Once a tenancy has been granted the tenant(s) must comply with the General Conditions of Tenancy (1989) which includes occupying their home as their only or main dwelling of the tenant(s).

Strategic Business Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development why in the Strategic Business Review regarding social security offices, the North Down constituency has only been allocated 9 jobs out of a possible 1,500.

(AQW 4048/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Agency is not structured on a District Council or Parliamentary Constituency basis but on a basis of 6 geographical District areas. Bangor office is part of its East Down district which also includes offices in Newtownards, Holywood Road, Knockbreda, Downpatrick, Newcastle, Kilkeel and Ballynahinch. The Strategic Business Review proposals have been developed on current District structures. Proposed locations within Districts have been determined following a detailed analysis of staff availability, office capacity and staff skills.

All of the proposals are still the subject to the ongoing public consultation exercise and no final decisions on any of the proposed changes, including the number and location of benefit processing centres, will be made until consultation has been completed in April 2009.

Strategic Business Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what review her Department will make regarding the Strategic Business Review of social security provision, considering the expected increased pressures on offices caused by the economic downturn.

(AQW 4050/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Strategic Business Review proposals are currently subject to ongoing public consultation which will run until late April 2009. Final decisions on the proposals, including any relocation of functions or staff, will not be made until consultation has been completed and responses considered. I will make my assessment of the impacts of the Review once the consultation responses have been considered.

Strategic Business Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development why in the Strategic Business Review the social security offices, the North Down constituency has only been allocated 9 jobs, while South Down has been allocated 63 jobs and four offices.

(AQW 4051/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Agency is not structured on a District Council or Parliamentary Constituency basis but on a basis of 6 geographical District areas. Bangor office is part of its East Down district which also includes offices in Newtownards, Holywood Road, Knockbreda, Downpatrick, Newcastle, Kilkeel and Ballynahinch. The Strategic Business Review proposals have been developed on current District structures. Proposed locations within Districts have been determined following a detailed analysis of staff availability, office capacity and staff skills.

All of the proposals are still the subject to the ongoing public consultation exercise and no final decisions on any of the proposed changes, including the number and location of benefit processing centres, will be made until consultation has been completed in April 2009.

Strategic Business Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Strategic Business Review regarding social security offices, why North Down and East Antrim are the only constituencies not allocated a main office. (AQW 4052/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Agency is not structured on a District Council basis or on a Parliamentary Constituency basis but on the basis of 6 geographical Districts across Northern Ireland. The proposed location changes have been brought forward based on current Agency structures across the whole of Northern Ireland.

All key frontline services will still be available locally meaning no reductions in the quality of services currently provided to customers.

The proposals are the subject to a public consultation which will run until late April 2009. Final decisions on the proposals will not be made until consultation exercise has been completed and the responses considered.

Winter Fuel Costs

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Social Development when she expects to make the proposed payments of £150 to low income households to assist with winter fuel costs under the Financial Assistance Bill. (AQW 4065/09)

Minister for Social Development: I expect the Financial Assistance Bill to come into effect by the end of January. OFMdFM will then designate a department to deliver a fuel credit/payment. I am unable to confirm when a credit/payment will be made as there are still a number of key decisions to be made in terms of who will get the payment and whether it will be a credit or a payment. These decisions will not be made until OFMdFM have designated a department to deliver the credit/payment.

Iona House in Strabane

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has received a request for capital funding from the Western Health and Social Care Trust to replace Iona House in Strabane. (AQW 4069/09)

Minister for Social Development: I have not received any requests from the Western Health and Social Care Trust to replace Iona House. However, North and West Housing Association has submitted a bid to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to include a scheme in the new five year Social Housing Development Programme 2009/10 - 2013/14 to replace Iona House, Strabane, in two phases. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive will decide on the need for a replacement when it is formulating the new Social Housing Development Programme for publication in February 2009.

Loch Cuan House, Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development at what stage is the application for supported housing at Loch Cuan House at Westwinds, Newtownards. (AQW 4073/09)

Minister for Social Development: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has discussed with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive a proposal to replace their Loch Cuan House residential care home with a supported housing scheme. In December 2008 the Trust indicated that it intended to table the proposal at the February 2009 Eastern Area Supporting People Partnership (EASPP). The South Eastern Trust has proposed the replacement for Loch Cuan in 2010/11. The current position is that the project has been identified by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for inclusion on the capital development programme as a scheme planned to start in 2010/11.

Inclusion on the capital development programme does not mean confirmation that funding from either the Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme or New Build Programme has been agreed or secured.

Housing Grants

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) Housing Repair Grants; (ii) Renovation Grants; and (iii) Replacement Grants, have been put on hold in the West Tyrone constituency, as a result of the shortfall in the Housing Executive budget. (AQW 4113/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. This would allow a significant amount of work to be undertaken this year that would otherwise not be possible including support for the grants system including Disabled Facilities Grants and the Home Repair Assistance Grants. It is too early in the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in funding; however, the Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes in its programmes as soon as possible.

Social Housing Newbuild Programme

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development how the social housing new build programme will be delivered for the remainder of the current financial year. (AQW 4132/09)

Minister for Social Development: On 14 January 2009 the Housing Executive announced a shortfall of £35million in its budget for this current financial year due to reduced receipts emanating from falling land and property values. The impact of this on the Social Housing Development Programme is that only 1100 homes will now be started this year instead of the 1500 originally envisaged.

I am however pleased that the 400 homes not started this year will be able to start as soon as the new financial year begins in April.

Housing Executive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact of the Housing Executive's budget shortfall of £25m on the (i) East Antrim; and (ii) South Antrim constituencies. (AQW 4151/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. This would allow a significant amount of work to be undertaken this year that would otherwise not be possible. It is too early in the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in funding, however, the Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes in its programmes as soon as possible.

Social Security Offices

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development, given the recent increases in unemployment, if she would reassess her proposals for relocating staff from Social Security Offices in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 4152/09)

Minister for Social Development: Public consultation on the Strategic Business Review proposals was launched on the 27 November 2008 and is planned to run in two phases until late April 2009. Final decisions on the proposals, including the potential relocation of staff, will not be made until consultation has been completed. I will make my assessment of the impacts involving the current economic downturn, once the consultation responses have been considered.

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many posts her Department will fund for neighbourhood renewal; and (ii) when a decision will be made regarding these posts. (AQW 4156/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy is not about funding posts but providing services which most effectively address the causes of deprivation. My Department has committed some £60 million between 2008/09 – 2010/11 to provide services to Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

My Department is currently seeking to reach agreement with other Departments on longer-term funding for those Neighbourhood Renewal services that fall under their functional responsibility. These discussions will be completed before the end of March 2009.

Housing Executive

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) housing repair grants; (ii) renovation grants; and (iii) replacement grants, have been suspended in the Mid-Ulster constituency, due to the shortfall in the Housing Executive budget. (AQW 4158/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. This would allow a significant amount of work to be undertaken this year that would otherwise not be possible. It is too early in the review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's programmes to state the specific locations that might be affected by the shortfall in funding; however, the Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes in its programmes as soon as possible.

Mullaghmore Environment Improvement Scheme

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a timeline for the completion of the Mullaghmore Environment Improvement Scheme in Killyclogher, Omagh. (AQW 4195/09)

Minister for Social Development: Tenders for the Mullaghmore Environmental Improvement Scheme in Omagh are due to be returned by 27 January 2009; the anticipated contract period is 72 weeks. The scheme was programmed to commence in March 2009, however the Housing Executive has deferred the starting date for the remainder of this year's Programme to the end of the financial year. The Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes in its programmes at the earliest opportunity.

Prefabricated Housing

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her plans to bring the prefabricated housing that is part of her housing stock to a modern day standard. (AQW 4200/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive currently has 439 prefabricated aluminium bungalows which were constructed between 1948 and 1951. During the 1980's a comprehensive programme of upgrading of the properties was completed to improve fire safety, energy insulation and air leakage of the bungalows. Further improvement works are now being considered by the Housing Executive on a site specific basis and will be delivered after receipt of appropriate approvals and is dependent on the availability of finance.

Social Security Agency

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how many claimants were in receipt of (i) Income Support; and (ii) Job Seekers Allowance, in each Social Security Agency office, in each of the last 12 months. (AQW 4210/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the tables below. The numbers shown reflect the number of claims for Income Support and Jobseekers Allowance where an amount of benefit was in payment. The information is taken from scans produced bi-monthly and reflects the number of claims from the first scan of each month up to 3 January 2009.

TABLE 1: INCOME SUPPORT

Office	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09
Antrim	2426	2409	2409	2385	2383	2391	2397	2428	2424	2432	2433	2438
Armagh	2176	2154	2139	2125	2126	2117	2132	2114	2098	2088	2074	2069
Ballymena	2496	2480	2473	2518	2526	2532	2527	2528	2508	2514	2513	2515
Ballymoney	2075	2076	2056	2068	2081	2079	2077	2078	2069	2104	2108	2100
Ballynahinch	766	763	768	778	778	789	796	818	804	798	811	811
Banbridge	1626	1636	1644	1620	1617	1617	1631	1653	1662	1665	1672	1671
Bangor	2211	2194	2189	2193	2181	2196	2204	2204	2197	2210	2187	2189
Coleraine	2617	2609	2618	2609	2603	2626	2631	2660	2681	2714	2707	2701
Cookstown	1456	1455	1461	1461	1455	1457	1455	1461	1478	1478	1467	1458
Downpatrick	1559	1555	1561	1548	1546	1552	1559	1567	1574	1591	1584	1586
Dungannon	2757	2746	2744	2722	2733	2731	2727	2753	2743	2741	2741	2734
Enniskillen	2785	2770	2770	2768	2765	2777	2770	2762	2782	2801	2795	2785
Larne	2627	2646	2634	2626	2632	2627	2638	2641	2661	2673	2663	2658
Limavady	1628	1623	1617	1608	1632	1653	1642	1652	1655	1670	1665	1658
Lisburn	2519	2504	2505	2507	2518	2534	2543	2554	2540	2544	2548	2545
Foyle	7470	7446	7442	7457	7425	7448	7434	7436	7419	7437	7373	7345
Lurgan	2993	2972	2991	2998	3008	3021	3012	3020	3039	3044	3042	3027
Magherafelt	1721	1716	1710	1714	1716	1722	1718	1725	1746	1755	1760	1763
Newcastle	1089	1116	1102	1102	1110	1105	1113	1116	1115	1112	1117	1113
Newry	4870	4853	4838	4810	4790	4797	4810	4803	4792	4818	4812	4798
Newtownards	1921	1946	1929	1915	1917	1925	1938	1960	1967	1969	1970	1986
Omagh	2880	2896	2874	2901	2911	2909	2941	2932	2919	2941	2927	2923
Portadown	1932	1937	1950	1946	1935	1944	1949	1962	1967	1965	1966	1957
Strabane	2968	2986	2985	2983	2993	2995	2995	3011	2997	3007	2983	2978
Kilkeel	680	693	694	691	694	701	706	710	709	715	711	710
Shaftsbury Square	2849	2849	2869	2867	2875	2867	2895	2903	2899	2905	2899	2895
Corporation Street	6714	6715	6720	6698	6691	6726	6724	6760	6786	6809	6812	6792
Shankill Road	2521	2549	2558	2569	2573	2565	2558	2565	2564	2583	2548	2520
Knockbreda	2796	2775	2751	2725	2725	2728	2739	2764	2753	2754	2730	2737
Falls Road	5369	5361	5397	5411	5410	5415	5436	5438	5441	5436	5410	5369
Hollywood Road	3869	3826	3826	3821	3806	3846	3855	3851	3862	3860	3846	3833
Newtownabbey	2630	2624	2631	2611	2630	2634	2654	2664	2661	2674	2681	2664
Andersonstown	5395	5392	5373	5352	5357	5352	5367	5355	5355	5388	5368	5367
Lisnagelvin	3159	3150	3159	3143	3141	3157	3156	3150	3121	3138	3161	3148
Unattributed *	22	24	20	20	13	20	21	29	22	34	26	22
Total	95572	95446	95407	95270	95296	95555	95750	96027	96010	96367	96110	95865

Note: These cases cannot be assigned to a specific office due to invalid office code.

TABLE 2: JOBSSEEKERS ALLOWANCE

Office	Feb 08	Mar 08	Apr 08	May 08	Jun 08	Jul 08	Aug 08	Sep 08	Oct 08	Nov 08	Dec 08	Jan 09
Antrim	530	561	532	527	523	552	583	594	615	692	781	859
Armagh	455	472	474	466	453	512	504	543	535	571	623	757
Ballymena	638	655	654	650	654	705	766	804	823	843	939	1011
Ballymoney	598	583	603	595	576	617	667	680	691	739	842	938
Ballynahinch	134	133	151	145	148	154	175	159	196	202	216	246
Banbridge	299	335	314	334	352	358	414	440	460	491	542	578
Bangor	676	710	718	687	653	683	704	724	765	790	849	948
Carrickfergus	363	385	383	402	395	420	410	468	491	540	588	629
Coleraine	841	879	839	829	800	763	834	860	899	939	1076	1190
Cookstown	235	284	271	274	279	291	356	365	346	417	498	524
Downpatrick	450	444	423	448	469	501	528	530	572	580	645	671
Dungannon	354	390	435	434	435	470	510	515	529	581	722	848
Enniskillen	757	778	770	777	742	782	814	789	884	936	994	1038
Larne	306	309	307	317	291	291	306	297	346	384	434	458
Limavady	501	540	566	577	588	600	662	692	722	836	924	1012
Lisburn	526	577	579	599	619	617	625	632	701	765	905	983
Foyle	2095	2079	2056	2137	2193	2233	2259	2468	2397	2459	2515	2609
Lurgan	514	552	570	598	617	689	701	678	730	715	859	893
Magherafelt	270	279	300	313	295	352	403	447	448	540	627	739
Newcastle	269	256	254	247	249	234	270	289	304	312	341	388
Newry	986	1000	987	973	994	1046	1150	1241	1172	1227	1278	1402
Newtownards	650	648	647	653	659	700	734	783	794	866	928	962
Omagh	596	568	566	547	554	603	684	741	705	768	843	937
Portadown	474	534	523	532	537	544	566	570	562	592	693	727
Strabane	988	1006	1007	1001	976	1045	1057	1128	1119	1161	1178	1254
Kilkeel	96	91	91	84	92	110	105	155	144	164	194	213
Shaftsbury Square	906	903	895	997	973	1010	1064	1121	1108	1183	1170	1201
Corporation Street	1310	1319	1323	1412	1398	1378	1442	1464	1476	1505	1522	1576
Shankill Road	824	859	841	835	817	821	828	830	842	853	918	953
Knockbreda	530	524	518	532	532	568	586	654	671	703	709	748
Falls Road	1202	1235	1249	1282	1300	1290	1309	1325	1343	1384	1426	1491
Hollywood Road	696	709	665	712	706	732	739	714	704	764	854	952
Newtownabbey	695	765	730	727	710	731	749	847	821	890	945	998
Andersonstown	1445	1482	1500	1549	1556	1550	1561	1702	1712	1764	1856	1925
Lisnagelvin	694	749	740	776	788	811	840	871	908	951	1044	1110
Unattributed *	0	3	2	2	2	4	6	5	11	9	13	18
Total	22903	23596	23483	23970	23925	24767	25911	27125	27546	29116	31491	33786

Note: These cases cannot be assigned to a specific office due to invalid office code.

Social Security Agency

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how many new claims were made for (i) income support; and (ii) job seekers allowance, in each Social Security Agency office, in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 4211/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the Tables below.

TABLE1: INCOME SUPPORT CLAIMS RECEIVED

Office	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Andersonstown	84	79	78	95	100	81	99	83	102	151	97	56	1105
Antrim	90	67	61	70	80	86	67	69	97	94	70	53	904
Armagh	70	69	55	78	74	82	79	66	88	96	53	43	853
Ballymena	83	85	60	99	90	84	64	69	97	85	60	39	915
Ballymoney	60	73	43	73	76	56	58	52	70	100	62	31	754
Ballynahinch**	30	35	26	30	33	37	42	24	35	20	43	7	362
Banbridge	84	59	49	61	50	64	62	72	68	77	52	43	741
Bangor	82	65	42	84	69	84	79	61	81	93	53	39	832
Carrickfergus*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Coleraine	60	84	68	78	61	77	86	98	91	120	76	48	947
Cookstown	42	40	38	38	42	49	44	26	75	56	33	25	508
Corporation St	215	180	149	186	131	167	180	164	171	219	112	87	1961
Downpatrick	53	37	47	47	35	58	52	43	62	53	57	16	560
Dungannon	67	73	58	82	63	68	53	82	79	109	61	33	828
Enniskillen	86	93	58	121	96	81	75	80	118	100	89	34	1031
Falls Rd	104	112	120	119	110	95	124	107	121	113	64	56	1245
Foyle	119	132	110	147	112	148	111	123	150	132	84	59	1427
Hollywood Rd	87	81	70	97	97	99	96	84	107	112	91	45	1066
Kilkeel	24	24	23	28	25	28	24	23	23	39	25	18	304
Knockbreda	85	82	88	75	83	79	96	86	90	95	79	43	981
Larne	108	99	73	111	86	104	77	61	174	80	65	58	1096
Limavady	44	48	39	50	64	53	41	51	53	76	37	26	582
Lisburn	70	77	62	93	88	97	78	94	90	76	74	49	948
Lisnagelvin	75	91	69	64	84	99	90	74	87	86	62	30	911
Lurgan	97	100	62	87	79	96	72	122	77	103	74	44	1013
Magherafelt	61	53	40	76	59	68	51	57	72	60	62	32	691
Newcastle***	38	43	14	32	36	26	42	29	34	41	31	20	386
Newry	86	129	83	121	110	103	162	91	126	135	104	56	1306
Newtownabbey	77	65	64	83	58	108	79	58	92	108	67	50	909
Newtownards	68	83	52	66	56	57	88	52	69	52	48	49	740
Omagh	84	81	47	64	57	79	114	70	95	92	47	33	863
Portadown	60	74	56	75	62	78	54	55	80	69	61	39	763
Shaftesbury Sq	78	88	68	86	71	63	96	80	80	79	43	45	877

Office	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Shankill	57	64	41	76	49	60	54	65	72	83	44	31	696
Strabane	65	84	58	85	51	85	82	76	86	89	46	34	841
Totals	2593	2649	2071	2777	2437	2699	2671	2447	3012	3093	2126	1371	29946

Notes:

** Income Support claims for Ballynahinch are administered by Downpatrick (accounted in Ballynahinch)

* Income Support claims for Carrickfergus are administered and accounted by Larne

*** Income Support claims for Newcastle are administered by Killeel (accounted in Newcastle)

TABLE 2: JOBSEEKERS ALLOWANCE CLAIMS RECEIVED

Office	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Andersonstown	213	190	211	280	195	233	194	298	289	292	294	269	2958
Antrim	146	152	91	167	144	167	200	136	220	212	263	196	2094
Armagh	148	137	123	121	105	199	186	184	171	207	210	268	2059
Ballymena	165	170	139	184	152	176	254	198	250	240	236	231	2395
Ballymoney	169	126	121	154	126	176	182	166	213	209	253	196	2091
Ballynahinch	50	46	42	63	43	61	79	51	82	88	83	85	773
Banbridge	111	128	93	119	122	137	189	164	211	188	193	189	1844
Bangor	179	217	150	179	152	209	188	222	268	275	274	231	2544
Carrickfergus	126	103	85	141	123	139	146	164	192	223	213	168	1823
Coleraine	219	253	176	228	175	186	274	221	270	303	333	319	2957
Cookstown	52	90	42	85	67	88	146	91	159	146	199	130	1295
Corporation St	234	224	186	299	272	250	319	271	384	321	274	279	3313
Downpatrick*	77	86	58	119	106	154	151	80	165	196	188	134	1514
Dungannon	129	157	146	176	136	200	183	186	199	241	316	347	2416
Enniskillen	160	140	148	214	141	221	221	215	352	313	277	267	2669
Falls Rd	194	215	175	230	198	183	192	207	240	246	207	219	2506
Foyle	268	240	197	358	360	430	362	524	446	452	441	333	4411
Hollywood Rd	170	175	126	219	212	201	209	184	253	278	286	283	2596
Killeel**	61	30	33	65	41	55	94	70	83	79	102	63	776
Knockbreda	146	144	146	174	147	193	203	226	258	243	216	186	2282
Larne	90	86	71	99	79	112	108	92	145	154	164	113	1313
Limavady	113	142	100	154	110	118	187	145	176	209	343	256	2053
Lisburn	223	240	186	215	208	231	222	248	333	347	421	296	3170
Lisnagelvin	181	180	155	212	183	208	243	216	296	251	322	262	2709
Lurgan	185	195	174	217	187	260	241	219	270	327	366	278	2919
Magherafelt	88	96	80	138	94	149	171	155	193	259	224	277	1924
Newcastle	65	52	36	71	52	72	104	86	112	114	127	107	998
Newry	265	256	166	238	188	321	344	318	321	304	357	318	3396
Newtownabbey	186	199	149	228	190	238	223	279	316	306	331	220	2865

Office	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Newtownards	163	149	139	183	171	201	199	211	240	307	246	203	2412
Omagh	145	114	74	139	132	187	255	214	206	260	280	254	2260
Portadown	146	184	161	196	166	181	196	231	279	272	341	244	2597
Shaftesbury Sq	289	256	222	373	234	344	377	372	385	446	345	338	3981
Shankill	191	194	107	174	156	173	168	185	201	195	207	167	2118
Strabane	131	147	134	168	137	192	151	190	202	241	200	207	2100
Totals	5478	5513	4442	6380	5304	6645	7161	7019	8380	8744	9132	7933	82131

Note:

* Jobseekers Allowance claims for Downpatrick are administered by Ballynahinch (accounted in Downpatrick)

** Jobseekers Allowance claims for Kilkeel are administered by Newcastle (accounted in Kilkeel)

Social Security Agency

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications were there for (i) Social Fund budgeting loans; (ii) Community Care grants and; (iii) Crisis Loans, in each Social Security Agency office, in each of the last 12 months.

(AQW 4212/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not recorded in the form requested as Social Fund is administered by the Social Security Agency on a District basis. Applications received by District are outlined in the Tables below.

TABLE 1: BUDGETING LOAN APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Belfast North & East Antrim	1232	1417	1478	1853	1268	1813	1324	1429	1506	2593	3049	1995	20957
Belfast West & Lisburn	1357	1751	1684	2069	1742	1927	1726	1581	1780	3035	4103	2485	25240
East Down	1180	1212	1153	1505	1220	1466	1132	1261	1371	2023	2658	1724	17905
North	1192	1363	1184	1547	1284	1504	1341	1185	1489	2078	2732	1589	18488
South	1111	1278	1208	1556	1395	1467	1478	1283	1500	2276	2904	1809	19265
West	1593	1873	1696	2293	1847	1964	2039	1720	1978	3355	4197	2280	26835
Totals	7665	8894	8403	10823	8756	10141	9040	8459	9624	15360	19643	11882	128690

TABLE 2: COMMUNITY CARE GRANT APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Belfast North & East Antrim	615	715	431	915	764	731	783	663	722	956	934	669	8898
Belfast West & Lisburn	531	714	560	787	675	754	598	582	784	1003	1165	855	9008
East Down	406	525	416	584	528	553	434	436	544	624	622	416	6088
North	450	532	398	608	525	552	512	425	648	656	700	478	6484
South	507	667	546	662	733	664	585	554	721	772	870	546	7827
West	719	877	714	1027	762	858	890	669	897	1051	1034	616	10114
Totals	3228	4030	3065	4583	3987	4112	3802	3329	4316	5062	5325	3580	48419

TABLE 3: CRISIS LOAN APPLICATIONS RECEIVED

	Jan 2008	Feb 2008	Mar 2008	Apr 2008	May 2008	Jun 2008	Jul 2008	Aug 2008	Sep 2008	Oct 2008	Nov 2008	Dec 2008	Totals
Belfast North & East Antrim	2404	2297	1991	2538	1924	2001	1979	1853	1998	2514	1984	2069	25552
Belfast West & Lisburn	1552	1310	1105	1420	1355	1330	1331	1357	1549	1635	1408	1620	16972
East Down	2118	1900	1650	1865	1720	1762	1793	1961	2216	2549	2196	2339	24069
North	1076	1042	933	1291	947	982	925	994	1159	1224	1098	1219	12890
South	1626	1678	1620	2069	1532	1528	1615	1779	1913	2200	2137	2464	22161
West	1547	1440	1253	1362	1468	1392	1443	1369	1573	1709	1463	1760	17779
Totals	10323	9667	8552	10545	8946	8995	9086	9313	10408	11831	10286	11471	119423

Environmental Improvement Scheme in Dunclug

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development when the Environmental Improvement Scheme that includes the refurbishment of houses, will commence in Dunclug. (AQW 4235/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive proposes completing an Environmental Improvement Scheme in three phases to remove blight, create private space, consolidate the area and protect the existing assets within the Dunclug area. Tenders for the first phase of this project, which includes the proposed improvements referred to, were approved by the Housing Executive on 20th October 2008. My Department is currently in discussions with the Housing Executive regarding the details of the Economic Appraisal for this phase of works. The completion of all proposed works is subject to appropriate approvals and the availability of finance.

Housing Executive

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the number of NIHE dwellings that have gas heating appliances; and (ii) the frequency that gas heating appliances are serviced by the NIHE. (AQW 4242/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive currently has 27,972 properties with gas heating systems, which are serviced annually.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Social Development which areas of Craigavon have benefited financially from neighbourhood renewal schemes in the last two years. (AQW 4252/09)

Minister for Social Development: There are three Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in the Craigavon Borough Council Area: North West Portadown which comprises the area around the housing estates along the Garvaghy Rd and Obin Street and part of the Edgarstown estate; Brownlow which comprises the Drumgor and Drumgask Wards; and Lurgan, comprising the Court Ward, the deprived output areas of the Church, Taghnevan, Woodville and Drumnamoe and a large section of the town centre. These areas have benefited financially from neighbourhood renewal schemes in the last two years.

Housing Executive

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development which firms based in North Antrim carry out housing repair and renovation work for the Housing Executive; and how much of this work has been suspended because of the shortfall in its budget. (AQW 4264/09)

Minister for Social Development: The only firm based in North Antrim carrying out housing repair and renovation work for the Housing Executive at the present time is Dixons Contractors, Dunloy. None of the work awarded to this contractor has been suspended.

NIHE Grant Work Contractors

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what measures are taken to ensure prompt payment to NIHE grant work contractors. (AQW 4291/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has established Standards of Service which it aims to meet in processing grants applications and payments and compliance with these Standards is systematically monitored.

The Housing Executive aims to inspect completed work, before payment of any grant, within two weeks of being requested to do so and aims to make a final payment, once the work is deemed to be satisfactorily completed, within four weeks of inspection, provided they have received all necessary documentation. This means they aim to make payments within 6 weeks.

In addition, on larger grant schemes, the Housing Executive assists contractors by facilitating stage payments rather than making payment only at the completion of the project. The Housing Executive may also make these payments directly to the contractor's bank account through a legal assignment process.

The Housing Executive's Grants Offices also gives clear advice on the necessary documents required to make a final payment to avoid delays. Contractors can therefore help to facilitate the timely processing of grant payments by ensuring that works are fully completed and all necessary documents are submitted at the earliest possible stage.

Conway Education Centre

Mr Adams asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what stage discussions are at between her Department and the Department of Education regarding the funding of Category 2 posts in Conway Education Centre, the progression of these discussions and a date for when they are set to conclude. (AQW 4293/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has been having discussions with other Departments on the issue of posts and services, including those in the Conway Education Centre, currently funded by DSD that are assessed as being within the policy responsibility of other statutory bodies. These discussions remain on-

going and should be concluded shortly at which time I will consider the way forward on Neighbourhood Renewal funding post March 2009.

Benefit Application Forms: Number Lost

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many benefit application forms have been deemed lost in each of the last five years; and to break these down by benefit type. (AQW 4360/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available. Each year the Social Security Agency receives over 200,000 benefit claims including those claims that are made by telephone. Given such volumes, there may be occasions when an item is mislaid or not received. When such instances are brought to the Agency's attention urgent steps are taken to locate the missing item, and if necessary, action is taken to obtain a replacement application form from the customer.

Cold Weather Payments

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development if eligible persons and families in the BT71 or other postcode areas will be given Cold Weather Payments following the cold snap in December 2008 and January 2009. (AQW 4408/09)

Minister for Social Development: A cold weather payment period was triggered between 29 December 2008 and 4 January 2009. The post code areas affected were BT45-48, BT70 and BT78-82 and only people living in these areas were eligible to receive a payment.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 6 February 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Reduction in Paperwork

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to significantly reduce the amount of paperwork it sends to constituency offices and other organisations throughout 2009. (AQW 3732/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Peter Robinson and Mr Martin McGuinness): OFMDFM adheres to the “Guidance on Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents” provided to all Departments here, which advises that there is a requirement to provide hard copies of documents to certain recipients including political representatives, Parliamentary contacts and Legal Deposit and other libraries. The guidance states that it is a matter of choice for the receiving organisation(s) as to their preferred method of receipt of Government publications, and the Department ensures that arrangements are in place to facilitate these preferences.

OFMDFM is cognisant of the value of using electronic documents where appropriate. OFMDFM’s sustainable development policy includes a commitment to use less paper more sustainably, to support electronic document management, and to continue to use the web for the majority of external publications. The Department has also adopted a good practice approach to publishing, which supports the production of printed documents only when a need has been identified and electronic publication is not a suitable medium for communication to the target audience. The aim therefore is to use electronic communications as first choice and only to provide printed documents where a need exists, for example where the recipient does not have access to IT facilities or the document’s size makes it unsuitable for electronic transfer by e-mail.

All OFMDFM staff have access to modern electronic IT equipment and facilities and the Department seeks to make best use of technology to reduce the amount of hard copy paper documents that are issued, by encouraging the use of electronic documents via e-mail or through the Department’s website where appropriate.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Elliott asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if it will request the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) to resume the supply of electronic data to Planning Online. (AQW 4274/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, its Chief Commissioner has been asked to provide a response directly to you, and we understand that she has written to you in the following terms:

“I have been asked to provide you with information requested in the above Assembly Question.

The Planning Appeals Commission provides information to the public in electronic format free of charge on all aspects of its workload on its website, www.pacni.gov.uk. This is updated daily. Accordingly the Commission will not supply electronic data to Planning Online.

If you, as a MLA, wish to discuss this matter further please contact my Personal Secretary, Mrs Selina Quinn, to arrange a meeting.”

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in what circumstances her Department can serve a rectification notice under the terms of Regulation II of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. (AQW 4278/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms M Gildernew): Under Regulation 11 of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (NI) 2000, if an authorised officer considers that a farm animal is being kept in a way which is likely to cause it unnecessary pain, suffering, injury or distress, or is being kept in any way in contravention of the legislation, he may serve a notice on the person in charge of the animals.

Notices served under Regulation 11 set out what actions the person in charge of an animal must take in order to ensure compliance with the Regulations. Failure to comply with such a notice is an offence under Section 2(1) of the Welfare of Animals Act (NI) 1972.

Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if a rectification notice can be served under the terms of Regulation II of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, to the owner of a puppy farm. (AQW 4279/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Under Regulation 11 of the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (NI) 2000, if an authorised officer considers that a farm animal is being kept in a way which is likely to cause it unnecessary pain, suffering, injury or distress, or is being kept in any way in contravention of the Regulations, he may serve a notice on the person in charge of the animals.

Under the legislation, farmed animals are defined as those bred or kept for the production of food, wool, skin or fur or for other farming purposes. This would therefore not apply to dog breeding establishments (puppy farms). Furthermore, such establishments are governed by the Dogs (NI) Order 1983, and DARD inspectors have no powers of access under that legislation.

However, as I stated in the Assembly on Monday 26 January 2009, I have been concerned about the lack of regulation for puppy farms for some time. It is a matter that I will want to deal with in any new legislation which would mirror that of Britain and would end the intensive farming of puppies here. I also plan to raise this matter with Ministers in Dublin, as it is my view that puppy farming is an all-Island problem.

Construction Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what construction projects and maintenance contracts are available for her to offer to the construction industry in the coming year. (AQW 4300/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table lists the construction projects and maintenance contracts available for my Department to offer to the construction industry during the 2009/2010 period.

Title of Construction Projects	Brief Description
Roll-out of DARD Direct Accommodation Project	Building works to upgrade existing and new office accommodation for DARD Direct 'one stop shops'.

Title of Construction Projects	Brief Description
No specific projects – a range of minor capital refurbishment projects will be carried out.	A programme of minor capital refurbishment works will be carried out in a number of properties throughout the departmental owned estate.
Belfast -Blackstaff Glen Road & Whiterock Drainage Scheme	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Coleraine –Lodge Burn Drainage Scheme	Upgrading drainage infrastructure to cater flood alleviation and development.
Belfast- Strathmore Park Stream	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Mallusk-Ballymartin Blackwater Rivers Drainage Scheme	Upgrading drainage infrastructure to cater for flood alleviation and development.
Belfast-Rochester Avenue Stream	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Belfast –Mount Vernon Stream	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Belfast- Ferndene Stream	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Whiteabbey-Threemilewater/Concrete Row drainage scheme	Upgrading drainage infrastructure to cater for flood alleviation and development.
Carrickfergus –Sullatober Water –Phase 1	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Omagh-Hunter Crescent flood wall scheme	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Omagh-Johnston Park Stream drainage scheme	Upgrading drainage infrastructure to cater for flood alleviation and development.
Omagh –Dromore Road Drainage Scheme 2	Upgrading drainage infrastructure to cater for flood alleviation and development.
Comber –Crescent Stream	Drainage infrastructure repair.
Coalisland –Mousetown Drain	Drainage infrastructure repair.

In addition proposals are at an advanced stage for the provision of additional student bedrooms, teaching rooms, recreational facilities and staff offices, plus an outdoor equine arena at CAFRE's Enniskillen Campus. The appraisal for this project is currently with DFP for approval.

Title of Maintenance Contract	Brief Description
DFP Properties Division Measured Term Contract	A programme of planned preventative maintenance (statutory and health and safety), emergency maintenance and minor modernisation work will be carried out in the departmental owned estate.
Routine watercourse maintenance programme	Maintenance of designated watercourses to ensure free flow.
	CCTV survey of culverts Culvert desilting.

Poultry Industry

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many jobs are dependent on poultry farming and processing; and what plans she has to strengthen that sector. (AQW 4328/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: It is estimated that approximately 5,290 jobs are dependent on poultry production and processing. To help strengthen this sector, among others within agriculture, my Department has a number of schemes under the Rural Development Programme that aim to help the economic performance of the agri-food sector.

A Processing and Marketing Scheme (PMG), which opened for applications in December 2007, will continue to provide capital support to micro, small, medium and intermediate sized enterprises involved in processing and marketing of agricultural, horticultural and forestry products.

A Market Development Grant Scheme will provide financial support for businesses to improve the marketing of produce. This scheme opened for application on 28 January 2009.

The Supply Chain Development Programme will facilitate co-operation and collaboration in supply chains between producers and processors. It is expected that this scheme will open for applications in the next two months.

In addition to these measures the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) offers education programmes in agriculture, food technology and food supply management producing people qualified at National Certificate, National Diploma, Foundation Degree and Honours Degree level for the farming and food processing industry, including the poultry sector.

There is also support from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) which assists DARD and the Poultry Industry by carrying out R&D studies and promoting innovation. It also works with DARD and the Industry in providing diagnostic, regulatory and surveillance testing.

Poultry Industry

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what representations she has made to the Environment Minister in relation to the protection of jobs in the poultry industry, given the EU waste directives on nitrates and phosphates. (AQW 4329/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My officials have been working with Department of Environment (DOE) officials and poultry farming representatives to consider the poultry sector's ongoing compliance with the EU Nitrates Directive.

The Nitrates Action Programme Regulations are joint DARD and DOE legislation which implements the EU Nitrates Directive here. The Action Programme includes measures which control when and where poultry litter can be spread on land and how it must be stored. My officials are currently in discussion with the European Commission about the measures for the storage and management of poultry litter.

My Officials have also provided input to Invest NI, the Department of Trade and Investment and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister about the impact of the Nitrates Directive on the poultry industry.

While the Nitrates Directive requires change to some farming practice, I believe the poultry industry can operate within its requirements. I can assure you that I and my Department are fully supportive of the poultry sector. I want to ensure that jobs are safeguarded in both primary production and poultry processing and that the industry has a sustainable future.

Larne Veterinary Office

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if the closure of the Larne Veterinary Office goes ahead as planned, to where the staff will be relocated. (AQW 4492/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In the eventuality of the need to relocate staff from any offices, decisions will be based primarily on business need. On confirmation of DARD Direct office locations, DARD business areas are being asked to indicate the staff requirements at each location.

DARD Personnel Management Branch will fully engage with all staff affected by any potential relocation and in addition to business requirements, will also take into account other issues including staff welfare, disability legislation requirements, transfer lists and redeployment opportunities.

However, this process has not commenced in relation to South and East Antrim as no decision has yet been taken on the location of the DARD Direct office to service South and East Antrim. At this stage it is not possible to definitively say where staff may be relocated.

Animal Welfare Legislation

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a timescale for the completion of her review of the consultation on animal welfare legislation. (AQW 4509/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In my Statement to the Assembly on 26 January 2009, I outlined the actions I had taken to date to review animal welfare legislation in the north.

In my Statement I outlined that my Department had consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006, but as this was carried out under Direct Rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider existing Animal Welfare legislation and the responses received to the consultation. I have completed an initial review, and have met a range of key stakeholders. These meetings have been exceptionally informative.

I believe that it is important that animal welfare legislation across the island of Ireland is broadly compatible. I may add that this is a view shared by some of the welfare groups I met. I welcome the fact that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South is continuing to meet stakeholders and will shortly be finalising its own legislative proposals on animal welfare.

My review of animal welfare legislation is nearing completion. I will shortly be examining all the evidence presented to me. I will then consider the scope for new legislation in the north, in line with the resources that are available.

DARD Office in Banbridge

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development the reasons for closing the part-time DARD office in Banbridge. (AQW 4573/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The aim of DARD Direct is to improve the accessibility of the full range of farmer focussed services to DARD's customers. The establishment of the DARD Direct service delivery model will mean that a wider range of DARD services will be offered from a smaller number of strategically located offices, which will open 5 days a week for customers.

In order to provide this enhanced service, DARD has already signalled that it will inevitably lead to the closure of a number of its smaller offices. These provide access to a limited range of services and are generally only open to customers on a part-time basis. This includes the Banbridge sub-office which is only open to the public for a half a day per week (Monday mornings) and provides access to a limited range of services.

Pork Producers and Processors

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if his Department has considered giving compensation to pork producers and processors who had to put their product in cold storage due to contamination concerns. (AQW 4729/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can advise that on 29 January the Executive agreed to fund financial hardship assistance of up to 25% of the direct verifiable costs incurred by those producers and processors affected by dioxin-contaminated feed. DARD and DETI officials are to consider the practical outworkings of these hardship payments for both the production and processing sectors, including the pork sector.

In addition, the introduction of Private Storage Aid for pigmeat which I was successful in having introduced here in mid-December and which has a potential value of around £6m, will provide market support to the pig sector over the next six months.

My officials will also continue to take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that all markets remain open to pigmeat from the North and will co-operate closely with the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest NI to re-establish lost ground.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

GAA in the Tyrone Area

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he intends to discuss with the governing body of the GAA, the naming of competitions and teams in the Tyrone area that commemorate controversial figures. (AQW 4233/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Gregory Campbell): The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the governing body of Gaelic sports. I have grave concerns in relation to the naming of competitions and naming

of sports grounds after controversial figures. I have already made representations to the GAA about the naming of competitions, grounds and events in the Tyrone area and recently wrote to the Association expressing my concerns on the matter. I have also continued to make clear my view that all sports in Northern Ireland should be run on as open and inclusive a basis as possible.

Elite Facilities Programme

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many applications for elite facilities were received by Sport NI before the deadline; and how many facilities are expected to be completed in time for the London 2012 Olympics. (AQW 4250/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Ten applications to the Elite Facilities Programme were received by Sport NI before the Stage Two (outline business case) deadline of 4pm precisely on 28 November 2008. These exclude the 50 Metre Swimming Pool project which had previously been granted approval to proceed to the full business case stage.

Based on an initial analysis by Sport NI and the Central Procurement Directorate of the proposed Outline Master Programmes, potentially seven elite facilities, covering eight sports, could be completed prior to the London 2012 Olympics, if they are successful through Stage Two of the competition. This includes the 50 Metre Swimming Pool project.

I consider the provision of elite facilities in time for the 2012 Olympics as an urgent priority and have asked Sport NI to reflect this in its plans for the sport capital programme. However, there are a wide range of factors including the planning process, business case approvals and budgetary considerations to be addressed before final approvals to proceed.

Northern Ireland Sports Strategy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the current position on the Northern Ireland Sports Strategy. (AQW 4499/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), in partnership with Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), has prepared a final version of the Northern Ireland Sports Strategy. This final version has been forwarded to the Northern Ireland Executive for consideration at a future meeting.

Language Literature for Schools

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what he is doing to ensure that the post-primary and primary school language literature prepared 12 months ago is given out to those schools. (AQW 4505/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I recognise the importance of the Ulster-Scots teaching materials produced by the Curriculum Development Unit in Stranmillis for the Ulster-Scots Agency in 2007.

My department is facilitating discussions between the relevant stakeholders in the Ulster-Scots community about the outstanding issues affecting publication and dissemination of the materials. This work is currently ongoing and I want to see this issue resolved as a matter of priority.

Proposed Merger of the Education and Library Boards

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many library posts will be lost as a direct result of the proposed merger of the Education and Library Boards. (AQW 4579/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As a result of the formation of a single library service, which will come into effect in April when responsibility transfers to the Library Authority, it is anticipated that around 13 posts at senior and middle management levels will no longer be required. Funding has been made available this year to allow a number of members of staff to leave the library service early. These redundancies are voluntary.

Stewards at Irish League Grounds

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what level of training is required before members of the public can act as a steward at Irish League grounds. (AQW 4581/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for determining the level of training required before members of the public can act as stewards at Irish League grounds rests with the owners and operators of the grounds and the governing body of soccer in Northern Ireland, the Irish Football Association (IFA) in the first instance. However, the Northern Ireland Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds, published by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in 2007, provides guidelines on stewarding at sports venues including the training of stewards.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI), which is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding, is also currently in discussion with a range of accrediting bodies, SkillsActive and further and higher education colleges about the possibility of offering owners and operators of sports grounds and sports governing bodies opportunities to participate in safety training courses for stewards. These discussions are on-going.

Maze Site

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all the companies involved with the sports stadium at the Maze site; and the payments they received, broken down by (i) client; (ii) design team; (iii) advisers; and (iv) tenderers, including the development team; contractors; and designers. (AQW 4594/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: A breakdown of the organisations my department contracted, the functions they undertook, and the payments they have received in relation to the multi-sports stadium at the Maze is as follows:

- PricewaterhouseCoopers
- Development of Business Plan and Outline Business Case £285,691
- Mott MacDonald/HOK Sports Partnership
 - Stadium Design
 - £3,139,530
- KPMG/Davis Langdon
 - Programme Management
 - £144,922
- Fire IMC
 - Advertising for Naming Rights Competition
 - £10,374
- Mott MacDonald
 - CEEQUAL(sustainability/environmental quality assessment)
 - £4,670
- Central Procurement Directorate
 - Procurement
 - £13,521

Dog Racing Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he will support proposals for dog racing facilities in the Ballymoney area. (AQW 4609/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Under the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, responsibility for the provision of adequate facilities for recreation, social, physical and cultural activities

rests with District Councils. Any request for support for dog racing facilities in the Ballymoney area should therefore be addressed, in the first instance, to Ballymoney Borough Council.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Classroom Assistants

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education for a comparison of pay between classroom assistants in Grant Maintained Integrated Schools and those in schools funded by Education and Library Boards. (AQW 3907/09)

Minister of Education (Ms Caitríona Ruane): Maidir le scálaí tuarastáil, thaispeáin Comhaontú ar Phostmheastóireacht sna Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, a socraíodh i mí na Samhna 2007, trí chineál cuntaí ranga agus ghlac formhór na gcúntóirí ranga atá fostaithe ag na Boird leis an comhaontú seo.

With regard to salary scales, the November 2007 Job Evaluation Agreement in the Education and Library Boards, which the vast majority of classroom assistants employed by the Boards have signed up to, resulted in 3 categories of classroom assistant:

- Classroom Assistant (General)
- Classroom Assistant (Special Needs)
- Classroom Assistant (Additional Special Needs)

The 2007 Agreement also included a one-off payment to buy out the historic terms and conditions of classroom assistants. This removed the special needs allowance and provided for a 36 hour salary divisor rather than the previous 32.5 hour divisor. The 2007/08 salary scales for each of the above grades are set out in the attached table at Appendix A. (The 2008/09 pay scales have not yet been implemented).

As Job Evaluation for the grant-maintained integrated and voluntary grammar sector, has to date not been implemented by schools in these sectors, the majority of classroom assistants employed in grant-maintained integrated schools are paid on a Protected Salary Scale which has the following 3 categories of classroom assistant:

- Classroom Assistant (Qualified)
- Classroom Assistant (Recognised)
- Classroom Assistant (Unqualified)

The 2007/08 salary scales for each of the above grades are set out in the attached table at Appendix B. (The 2008/09 pay scales have not yet been implemented).

I hope this clarifies the position.

Family Learning and Literacy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what actions her Department is taking to support family learning and literacy; and to outline how funding on this issue was spent in the last year. (AQW 4134/09)

Minister of Education: Mar Aire Oideachais, tugaim lántacaíocht d'fhoghlaim teaghlaigh, agus creidim go bhfuil dualgas ar thuismitheoirí tionchar dearfach bheith acu ag tabhairt tacaíochta don fhoghlaim.

As Minister for Education, I am fully supportive of family learning, and believe that parents have a responsibility to play a positive role in supporting learning.

One of my top priorities is reforming the current system of transfer to post-primary school. The current selective system of transfer is failing large numbers of our children: every year over 11,000 children leave school without achieving good GCSEs in English or Irish and Maths and this cannot continue. If we want to see improvements, in particular in literacy and numeracy, we must reform radically our current education system, removing the inequities that exist.

My Department is therefore seeking to support this through a range of policies and programmes being developed in this changing educational environment. These include the new school improvement policy, the revised literacy and numeracy strategy and the extended school policy, all of which recognise the centrality of family learning in improving educational outcomes.

As part of our school improvement policy and the revised literacy and numeracy strategy, we want to see a greater focus on engagement within schools – particularly with pupils – and between schools and the families and communities they serve. It is essential that parents play their part in supporting the work of the school, raising the aspirations and expectations of pupils and valuing education.

With the addition of Extended Schools funding, £10.8m in 2008/09, some 450 schools operating in the most deprived and disadvantaged areas have been able to offer a range of services and activities to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community through providing opportunities for lifelong learning and personal development. Extended Schools have been building partnerships with neighbouring schools, the further education sector and other statutory, voluntary, business and community organisations to develop and deliver better services for the community as a whole and for children and young people and their families in particular.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister of Education (i) how many posts her Department will fund for neighbourhood renewal; and (ii) when a decision will be made regarding these posts. (AQW 4154/09)

Minister of Education: Tá iarrtha ag oifigigh DSD ar mo chuid oifigeach féin athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na tionscail a maoiníonn an Belfast Regeneration Office faoin Chlár Athnuachana Comharsanachta le gur féidir le DSD teacht ar chinntí maidir le cé acu a maoiníodh siad iad i ndiaidh mhí an Mhárta 2009 agus maidir le cá mhéad a thabharfaidh siad.

My officials have been asked by DSD officials to review the projects currently funded via the Belfast Regeneration Office under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme to enable DSD to reach decisions on whether and to what extent it should continue to fund them after March 2009. I have not been asked to consider funding for specific projects or indeed for posts within those projects, rather I understand that projects that have the broad support of both DSD and the lead policy department will be considered by DSD for funding from its Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund.

I fully support the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy and through my focus on raising standards in education and particularly, on tackling underachievement, I am confident that education can and will make a real contribution to the success of that strategy.

The introduction of the revised curriculum with its emphasis on the core skills of literacy and numeracy and my proposed reform of post-primary transfer which seeks to create a more equal education system. So too is my establishment of the Taskforce on Traveller education whose recommendations will assist the Department in developing an action plan to ensure better educational access and outcomes for Irish Traveller and Roma children.

These interventions, along with programmes such as Extended Schools and the targeted interventions under Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry, are all fully in line with the objectives of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and will, I believe, make a real difference to the educational outcomes and life chances of young people in our most disadvantaged communities.

Conway Education Centre

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Education to detail what stage discussions are at between her Department and the Department of Social Development regarding the funding of Category 2 posts in Conway Education Centre, the progression of these discussions and a date for when they are set to conclude. (AQW 4292/09)

Minister of Education: Tá iarrtha ag oifigigh DSD ar mo chuid oifigeach féin athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar na tionscail a maoiníonn an Belfast Regeneration Office faoin Chlár Athnuachana Comharsanachta a d'fhéadfaí nasc a bheith acu leis an oideachas le gur féidir le DSD teacht ar chinntí maidir le cé acu a maoiníodh siad iad i ndiaidh mhí an Mhárta 2009 agus maidir le cá mhéad a thabharfaidh siad.

My officials have been asked by DSD officials to review the projects currently funded via the Belfast Regeneration Office under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme that may have a link to education to enable

DSD to reach decisions on whether and to what extent it should continue to fund them after March 2009. The list of projects includes the Conway Education Centre. I have not been asked to consider funding for specific projects, rather I understand that projects that have the broad support of both DSD and the lead policy department will be considered by DSD for funding from its Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund.

School Transport

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what steps she intends to take to ensure that school transport is equality proofed for rural families. (AQW 4309/09)

Minister of Education: The forthcoming changes to the post-primary transfer arrangements and area-based planning proposals are likely to have a major impact on the provision of home to school transport assistance. I have, therefore, decided to postpone any further work on the review of school transport policy until the way forward in relation to the transfer arrangements and area-based planning are known.

A luaithe atá daoine ar an eolas faoi thodhchaí an tsoláthair iarbhunoideachais cuirfear tús arís eile leis an athbhreithniú.

Once the future of post primary education provision is known the review will recommence. All Departments are now required to 'rural proof' new or reviewed policies and complete a full equality impact assessment to ensure equality of provision for all. We will be undertaking this process as part of the review.

Educational Psychologists

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many pupils in East Antrim are waiting to be assessed by an educational psychologist. (AQW 4330/09)

Minister of Education: Tá curtha in iúl ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt dom go bhfuil 174 páiste ag freastal ar scoileanna i dtoghcheantar Aontroim Thoir atá ag fanacht ar mheasúnú ó shíceolaí oideachais.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the North-Eastern Education and Library Board that the number of children attending schools in East Antrim who are waiting to be assessed by an educational psychologist is 174.

This figures includes Stage 3 assessments and reviews, Stage 4 assessments, Stage 5 reviews, special testing and examination arrangements and assessments of pre-school children who are attending a nursery school or class, as outlined in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs.

Educational Psychologists

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what is the average waiting time for pupils in East Antrim to be assessed by an educational psychologist. (AQW 4331/09)

Minister of Education: Bhí tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannach Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt gurb é seo a leanas an meán thréimhse feithimh i gcomhair mheasúnaithe le síceolaí oideachais do dhaltai in Aontroim Thoir.

I have been advised by the Chief Executive of the North Eastern Education and Library Board that the average waiting time for pupils in East Antrim to be assessed by an educational psychologist is as follows:-

Stage 3 non-statutory assessments – 141 days

Stage 5 statutory assessments – less than 6 weeks.

Composite Classes

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education what research, if any, has been undertaken by her Department to assess the impact of composite classes on (i) educational attainment; and (ii) school enrolment levels. (AQW 4337/09)

Minister of Education: Ní dhearna ná níor choimisiúnaigh an Roinn taighde le measúnú a dhéanamh ar thionchar ranganna cónasctha (i) ar ghnóthachtáil oideachais; agus (ii) ar leibhéil rollaithe scoile.

The Department has not undertaken nor commissioned research to assess the impact of composite classes on (i) educational attainment; and (ii) school enrolment levels. The pupil level data required to undertake such analysis are not currently held by the Department therefore no assessment of impact can be made.

Composite Classes

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the impact of composite classes on (i) educational attainment; and (ii) school enrolment levels. (AQW 4338/09)

Minister of Education: Ní dhearna ná níor choimisiúnaigh an Roinn taighde le measúnú a dhéanamh ar thionchar ranganna cónasctha (i) ar ghnóthachtáil oideachais; agus (ii) ar leibhéil rollaithe scoile.

The Department has not undertaken nor commissioned research to assess the impact of composite classes on (i) educational attainment; and (ii) school enrolment levels. The pupil level data required to undertake such analysis are not currently held by the Department therefore no assessment of impact can be made.

Newbuild Primary Schools

Mrs Long asked the Minister of Education what consideration is given to the percentage of children with special needs when determining the appropriate class sizes in the planning process for new build primary schools. (AQW 4339/09)

Minister of Education: I am committed to improving provision and outcomes for all children. My proposals relating to the Review of SEN and Inclusion are currently awaiting agreement from the Executive to issue for public consultation.

I am also currently considering a revised version of the Primary School Building Handbook. The current Building Handbook identifies that the size of general classrooms in new build primary schools are 60m² which is to cater for all children in the class. A shared resource area of 40m², is also provided which can be used by the school for a wide range of educational activities. In addition, a small group room is provided which can be used for special needs tuition.

Is féidir le húdarás scoile moltaí a thabhairt don roinn le go ndéanfaidh sí breithniú orthu, má chreideann an túdarás scoile go bhfuil imthosca ar leith ag an scoil nach mór a chur san áireamh.

A school authority can also raise proposals with the department for consideration if it believes it has particular circumstances which need to be taken into account.

From the 2008/09 school year I have made available substantial additional funding to support primary schools with the delivery of the Foundation Stage of the revised curriculum. This is providing all Year 1 and Year 2 pupils with access to classroom assistance for the first time and will help to give our youngest primary pupils the best start to their education.

Recruitment Agencies

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education how much public money was paid to recruitment agencies for teaching and non-teaching staff in each Education and Library Board, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4397/09)

Minister of Education: Seo mar a leanas suimeanna a íocadh le gníomhaireachtaí earcaíochta le haghaidh foirne múinteoireachta agus foirne neamhmhúinteoireachta i ngach Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne, i ngach bliain airgeadais le trí bliana anuas:

The amount paid to recruitment agencies for teaching and non teaching staff in each Education and Library Board, in each of the last three financial years, is as follows:

2005-06:

	Teaching Staff	Non Teaching Staff
BELB	£203,480	£320,061
NEELB	£114,725	£214,437
SEELB	£258,419	£447,598
SELB	£21,000	£78,000
WELB	£14,497	£77,953
Total	£612,121	£1,138,049

2006-07:

	Teaching Staff	Non Teaching Staff
BELB	£109,864	£331,212
NEELB	£76,822	£350,847
SEELB	£136,843	£430,436
SELB	£17,000	£79,000
WELB	£2,376	£92,579
Total	£342,905	£1,284,074

2007-08:

	Teaching Staff	Non Teaching Staff
BELB	£35,975	£566,461
NEELB	£63,694	£529,616
SEELB	£67,896	£443,402
SELB	£2,000	£116,000
WELB	£580	£261,629
Total	£170,145	£1,917,108

Educational Opportunities

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education what work she has carried out to foster and promote better educational opportunities. (AQW 4398/09)

Minister of Education: Tá díogbháilteacht i gcoilár mo chláir um leasú san oideachas a chinnteoidh go bhfuil an deis ag gach páiste a chumas nó a cumas iomlán a bhaint amach.

At the heart of my programme of reform in education lies a determination to ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve to her or his full potential.

One of my top priorities is reforming the current system of transfer to post-primary school. The current selective system of transfer does not, in my view, promote better educational opportunities and is failing large numbers of our children. If we want to see improvements, in particular in literacy and numeracy, we must reform radically our current education system, removing the inequities that exist.

Alongside this, my Department is implementing a revised curriculum designed to meet the needs and spark the interests of every child and is ensuring, through the Entitlement Framework and the new careers strategy, that young people have access to a much broader and more balanced range of pathways from the age of 14 and to the careers education, information, advice and guidance they need to make informed choices.

Literacy and numeracy, of course, remain at the heart of the revised curriculum and we are currently finalising a new school improvement policy and a revised literacy and numeracy strategy designed to ensure that, by the time they finish their compulsory education, young people have the literacy, numeracy and other skills they need to succeed and flourish.

We also recognise that young people need the support of their parents, families and the wider community if they are to succeed. Through programmes such as Extended Schools, some 450 schools operating in the most deprived and disadvantaged areas of the north are already building links with parents, communities and other schools to provide services that support young people in overcoming some of the barriers to learning that they face.

Through all this we aim to ensure that young people are better prepared for life and work in the 21st century.

Teaching English

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education how much was spent on teaching English to (i) primary; and (ii) post primary pupils who do not have English as their first language in each of the last three years broken down by (a) total; (b) Education and Library Board; and (iii) constituency. (AQW 4403/09)

Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn mo Roinn cistiú ar bhonn díreach don Seirbhís um Chuimsiú agus Ilchineálacht (IDS) a bhunaíodh ar 1 Aibreán 2007. Is seirbhís réigiúnach é a oibríonn thar an cúig Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) agus úsáidtear an cistiú a fhaigheann sí le tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaltaí nua a bhfuil Béarla acu mar theanga breise (EAL). Sular cuireadh an IDS ar bun, tugadh cistiú do gach ELB go díreach.

My Department provides funding directly to the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS) which was established on 1 April 2007. It is a regional service working across the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the funding it receives is used to support schools with newcomer pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL). Prior to the setting up of the IDS, funding was allocated directly to each of the ELBs.

The Common Funding Formula (CFF) provides funding directly to schools. The EAL factor, which is within the CFF, is a specific amount that a school can receive for each newcomer pupil with EAL who is recorded on the annual school census.

The following tables explain the funding that has been allocated through these two mechanisms.

Funding to Inclusion and Diversity Service / Education and Library Boards

Year	IDS (£)	BELB (£)	NEELB (£)	SELB (£)	SEELB (£)	WELB (£)	Total
2008/09	1,015,000	-	-	-	-	-	1,015,000
2007/08	888,000	-	-	-	-	-	888,000
2006/07	353,000*	160,000	96,000	177,000	96,000	52,000	934,000

* Costs for initial set up of Inclusion and Diversity Service.

COMMON FUNDING FORMULA – EAL FACTOR - 2008/09

Constituency	Primary	Post-Primary
Belfast East	140,569	117,960
Belfast North	167,110	51,116
Belfast South	355,846	211,345
Belfast West	94,368	40,303
East Antrim	102,232	31,456
East Derry	167,110	49,150
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	492,483	318,492
Foyle	138,603	33,422
Lagan Valley	198,566	74,708

Constituency	Primary	Post-Primary
Mid Ulster	231,988	91,419
Newry & Armagh	312,594	155,314
North Antrim	168,093	51,116
North Down	95,351	45,218
South Antrim	168,093	61,929
South Down	147,450	60,946
Strangford	119,926	40,303
Upper Bann	469,874	203,481
West Tyrone	173,991	47,184
TOTAL	3,744,247	1,684,862

COMMON FUNDING FORMULA – EAL FACTOR - 2007/08

Constituency	Primary	Post-Primary
Belfast East	98,072	66,010
Belfast North	113,160	40,549
Belfast South	249,895	143,336
Belfast West	66,010	22,632
East Antrim	80,155	15,088
East Derry	109,388	35,834
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	347,967	223,491
Foyle	93,357	19,803
Lagan Valley	146,165	49,979
Mid Ulster	146,165	58,466
Newry & Armagh	184,828	99,015
North Antrim	87,699	27,347
North Down	66,953	20,746
South Antrim	114,103	28,290
South Down	83,927	33,948
Strangford	82,984	23,575
Upper Bann	314,962	151,823
West Tyrone	94,300	22,632
TOTAL	2,480,090	1,082,564

COMMON FUNDING FORMULA – EAL FACTOR - 2006/07

Constituency	Primary	Post-Primary
Belfast East	94,848	47,424
Belfast North	62,016	18,240
Belfast South	223,440	190,608
Belfast West	64,752	22,800
East Antrim	75,696	18,240
East Derry	91,200	15,504
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	170,544	51,984

Constituency	Primary	Post-Primary
Foyle	67,488	4,560
Lagan Valley	102,144	20,064
Mid Ulster	92,112	31,920
Newry & Armagh	116,736	41,952
North Antrim	52,896	18,240
North Down	62,928	10,944
South Antrim	72,048	23,712
South Down	41,040	21,888
Strangford	91,200	12,768
Upper Bann	205,200	70,224
West Tyrone	48,336	20,064
TOTAL	1,734,624	641,136

School Entrance Examinations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the recent development in which schools in Ballymena and Magherafelt have announced their intention to set their own entrance examinations on a cross sector basis; and if guidance from her Department would have the power to prevent this action. (AQW 4405/09)

Minister of Education: My assessment is that, in order to deliver on their announcement, the schools in Ballymena and Magherafelt will, firstly, have to have regard to the guidance issued by my Department on 2 February 2009 and, in particular, to the recommendation not to continue academic selection on the grounds of equality and the risks of dysfunction.

Mar sin, beidh ar na scoileanna seo, má leanann siad leo, an mheicníocht láidir mheasúnaithe agus na gnásanna atá riachtanach do chritéir iontrála acadúla, a sholáthar dóibh féin.

Then these schools, if they persist, will have to provide for themselves the robust assessment mechanism and procedures that academic admissions criteria require.

Male Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education for each of the last five years, how many male teachers have been in a full time permanent post in a secondary school, broken down by (i) Education and Library Boards; (ii) The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; (iii) Integrated sector; and (iv) Irish Medium sector. (AQW 4432/09)

Minister of Education: Tugtar líonta na múinteoirí fear, ar múinteoirí lánaimseartha buana iad, atá i mbunscoileanna agus in iarbhunscoileanna i dtuaisceart na hÉireann sna táblaí thíos.

The numbers of full-time permanent male teachers in primary and post-primary schools in the north of Ireland are given in the tables below.

FULL-TIME PERMANENT MALE TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND, 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Education and Library Board schools ^{1,2}	540	543	520	494	482
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools ³	765	736	712	680	670
Integrated schools ²	48	50	53	49	51
Irish medium schools ³	17	18	19	17	18

- 1 includes teachers in preparatory departments of controlled grammar schools.
- 2 teachers in Controlled Integrated schools are included with Integrated schools rather than Education and Library Board schools.
- 3 one Irish medium school is Catholic Maintained. Teachers in this school are included with Irish medium schools rather than CCMS schools.

FULL-TIME PERMANENT MALE TEACHERS IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND, 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Education and Library Board schools ¹	1,265	1,235	1,180	1,119	1,063
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	1,143	1,121	1,077	1,014	955
Integrated schools ¹	232	231	229	224	243
Irish medium schools	16	17	17	17	14

- 1 teachers in Controlled Integrated schools are included with Integrated schools rather than Education and Library Board schools.

Male Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education for each of the last five years, how many male teachers have been in a full time permanent post in a primary school, broken down by (i) Education and Library Boards; (ii) The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; (iii) Integrated sector; and (iv) Irish Medium sector. (AQW 4434/09)

Minister of Education: Tugtar líonta na múinteoirí fear, ar múinteoirí lánaimseartha buana iad, atá i mbunscoileanna agus in iarbhunscoileanna i dtuaisceart na hÉireann sna táblaí thíos.

The numbers of full-time permanent male teachers in primary and post-primary schools in the north of Ireland are given in the tables below.

FULL-TIME PERMANENT MALE TEACHERS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND, 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
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- 1 includes teachers in preparatory departments of controlled grammar schools.
- 2 teachers in Controlled Integrated schools are included with Integrated schools rather than Education and Library Board schools.
- 3 one Irish medium school is Catholic Maintained. Teachers in this school are included with Irish medium schools rather than CCMS schools.

FULL-TIME PERMANENT MALE TEACHERS IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND, 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Education and Library Board schools ¹	1,265	1,235	1,180	1,119	1,063
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools	1,143	1,121	1,077	1,014	955
Integrated schools ¹	232	231	229	224	243
Irish medium schools	16	17	17	17	14

- 1 teachers in Controlled Integrated schools are included with Integrated schools rather than Education and Library Board schools.

Pupil Absence

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education if schools who record as absent, pupils unable to get to school due to the unavailability of transport as a result of inclement weather, are acting in accordance with her Department's policy or the policy of any other school authority. (AQW 4470/09)

Minister of Education: Soláthraíonn imlitreach na Roinne 2006/14 comhairle do scoileanna ar chóid asláithreachta ba chóir a usáid nuair nach bhfuil dalta i láthair ag clarú na maidine nó ag clarú iarnóna. Tá an imlitreach seo ar fáil ag www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance_absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf

The Department's Circular 2006/14, which is available at www.deni.gov.uk/revised_circular_2006_14_-_school_attendance_absence_recording_by_schools_-_6_october_2008.pdf, provides advice to schools on absence codes to be used by schools when a pupil is not present at morning or afternoon registration.

Registration Code O may be used to record an authorised absence in exceptional circumstances which were outside the control of the school or the pupil, such as unavailability of Education and Library Board transport or if a pupil is unable to travel due to heavy snow. The guidance also states that a school can keep the morning register open for a longer period than usual in circumstances such as bad weather or public transport difficulties, so that a pupil would not be marked 'late'.

School Enrolment Figures

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for the enrolment figures for each (i) primary; (ii) special; and (iii) post-primary school, broken down by Education and Library Board. (AQW 4471/09)

Minister of Education: Tá socraithe agam go gcuirfean an t-eolas a iarradh i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

I have arranged to have the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Capital Schemes

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what stage each approved capital scheme is currently at; and to provide an estimated start time. (AQW 4473/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh ar gach mórscéim fhaofa caipitil atá á pleanáil faoi láthair mionsonraithe sa tábla thíos.

The information requested for each approved major capital scheme currently in planning is detailed in the table below.

Projects Currently in Planning	Location	Current Planning Position (Note 1)	Estimated Start Date (Note 2)
Ballymoney HS - New replacement school	Ballymoney	Outline Business Case approved	2010/11
Glendhu Nursery School – New replacement school	Belfast	Pre-tender	2009/10
Glenwood P.S. / Edenderry N.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Initial Sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Greenwood Assessment Centre – New replacement school	Belfast	EA under review	2010/11
Holy Trinity College - New replacement school	Cookstown	Outline Business Case stage	2011/12
Lagan College - Extension & Refurbishment	Belfast	Bid Evaluation Completed	2009/10
Loreto Grammar - New replacement school	Omagh	Outline Business Case stage	2011/12
Mitchell House Special School – New replacement school	Belfast	EA under review	2010/11
Our Lady's & St Patrick's GS - New replacement school	Belfast	Full Business Case stage	2009/10
Rainey Endowed School - New replacement school	Magherafelt	Outline Business Case approved	2010/11
Ravenscroft Nursery School – New replacement school	Belfast	Pre-tender	2009/10

Projects Currently in Planning	Location	Current Planning Position (Note 1)	Estimated Start Date (Note 2)
Springhill P.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Revised initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Joseph's PS - New replacement school	Carryduff	Full Business Case stage	2009/10
St Mary's PS - New replacement school	Portglenone	Full Business Case stage	2009/10
St Patrick's GS - New replacement school	Downpatrick	Full Business Case stage	2009/10
Strand / Sydenham P.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Strandtown P.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Taughmonagh PS - New replacement school	Belfast	Initial sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
Tor Bank Special - New replacement school	Dundonald	Bid Evaluation Completed	2009/10
Artigarvan P.S. – New replacement school	Strabane	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Arvalee / Cranny Special School – New replacement school	Omagh	Initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
Ballykelly P.S. – New replacement school	Limavady	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Bangor G.S. – New replacement school	Bangor	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
Belmont Special School – New replacement school	Derry	Initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
Coranny & Cornagague P.S. – New replacement school	Roslea	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
Dean Maguire College – New replacement school	Carrickmore	EA under review	2010/11
Devenish College – New replacement school	Enniskillen	Initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
Dromore Central P.S. – New replacement school	Dromore	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
Ebrington P.S. – New replacement school	Derry	Initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Edendork P.S. – New replacement school	Dungannon	Revised initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Eglinton P.S. – New replacement school	Derry	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Enniskillen Model P.S. – New replacement school	Enniskillen	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Foyle & Londonderry College – New replacement school	Derry	Initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Glastry College – New replacement school	Ballyhalbert	Initial sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
Holy Family P.S. – New replacement school	Magherafelt	EA under review	2010/11
Hollywood P.S. – New replacement school	Hollywood	Initial sketch plans awaited	2011/12
Knockbreda H.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Knockevin Special School – New replacement school	Downpatrick	Revised initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Limegrove / Glasvey Special School – New replacement school	Limavady	Initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
Lisbellaw P.S. – New replacement school	Lisbellaw	Tender costs under consideration	2008/09
Lisnagelvin P.S. – New replacement school	Lisnagelvin	Tender costs under consideration	2008/09

Projects Currently in Planning	Location	Current Planning Position (Note 1)	Estimated Start Date (Note 2)
Little Flower Girls S.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Initial sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
Lurgan College - New replacement school	Lurgan	EA under review	2009/10
Magherafelt H.S – New replacement school.	Magherafelt	Tender stage	2009/10
Methodist College – Extension & Refurbishment	Belfast	Initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
New Buildings P.S. – New replacement school	Derry	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Omagh I.P.S. – New replacement school	Omagh	EA under review	2010/11
Parkhall College – New replacement school and Youth Provision	Antrim	Final sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
Portadown College – New replacement school	Portadown	EA under review	2009/10
Priory College – New replacement school	Holywood	Initial sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Bronagh's P.S. – New replacement school and Youth Provision	Rostrevor	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Columbanus College – New replacement school and Youth Provision	Bangor	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
St Columbkille's P.S. – New replacement school	Carrickmore	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
St Conor's P.S. – New replacement school	Omagh	Revised initial sketch plans awaited	2010/11
St Joseph's Convent P.S. – New replacement school	Newry	Revised initial sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
St Louis G.S. – New replacement school	Kilkeel	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Mary's P.S. – New replacement school	Banbridge	Final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Patrick's Academy – New replacement school	Dungannon	Revised final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
St Patrick's College, – New replacement school	Banbridge	Final sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
St Paul's P.S. – New replacement school	Irvinestown	Awaiting initial sketch plans	2010/11
Strathearn G.S. – New replacement school	Belfast	Pre-tender submission under consideration	2009/10
Tannaghmore P.S. – New replacement school	Lurgan	Final sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
The High School Ballynahinch – New replacement school	Ballynahinch	Awaiting initial sketch plans	2010/11
Carrick P.S. – New replacement school	Warrenpoint	Pre-tender submission under consideration	2009/10
Colaiste Feirste, – Extension & Refurbishment	Belfast	Revised final sketch plans under consideration	2009/10

Projects Currently in Planning	Location	Current Planning Position (Note 1)	Estimated Start Date (Note 2)
Dromintee P.S. Killeavey – New replacement school	Newry	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
Magherafelt P.S. – New replacement school	Magherafelt	Tender stage	2009/10
Scoil Na Fuisceoige, – New replacement school	Belfast	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
St Clare's Abbey P.S. – New replacement school	Newry	Pre-tender submission under consideration	2009/10
St Colman's P.S. Lambeg – New replacement school	Lisburn	Tender stage	2009/10
St Columba's P.S. Straw – New replacement school	Draperstown	Pre-tender submission under consideration	2009/10
St Joseph's P.S. Madden – New replacement school	Armagh	Tender stage	2009/10
St Mary's P.S. – New replacement school	Newcastle	Pre-tender submission under consideration	2009/10
St Oliver Plunkett P.S. – New replacement school	Forkhill	Pre-tender submission awaited	2009/10
St Patrick's G.S. – Extension & Refurbishment	Armagh	Initial sketch plans under consideration	2010/11
St Teresa's P.S. – New replacement school	Lurgan	Final sketch plans under consideration	2009/10
Victoria College – Extension & Refurbishment	Belfast	Revised final sketch plans awaited	2009/10
Whitehouse P.S – New replacement school	Newtownabbey	Tender stage	2009/10

Note 1:

Initial Sketch Plans - RIBA Stage C; Final Sketch Plans - RIBA Stage D; Pre-tender - RIBA Stages E, F, G

Note 2:

Estimated Dates are subject to planning stages being progressed and approved with the relevant school authorities within the estimated timeframes, all statutory approvals being achieved, and the availability of resources at that time.

Modern Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education how many pupils sat (i) GCSE; (ii) AS, and (iii) A2 examinations in modern languages, broken down by each modern language, over the last five years.

(AQW 4474/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an teolas a iarradh leagtha amach sna táblaí thíos:

The information requested is detailed in the tables below:

(I) GCSE LANGUAGE ENTRIES 2003/04 – 2007/08

Subject	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Irish	2,530	2,248	2,258	2,446	2,147
Dutch	0	0	0	0	*

Subject	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
French	12,436	11,239	10,658	10,415	9,008
German	1,266	1,315	1,264	1,203	1,204
Italian	151	137	114	79	38
Portuguese	0	*	*	13	10
Spanish	2,945	3,132	2,848	3,046	3,232
Chinese	19	19	14	15	21
Polish	0	0	2	14	37
Russian	10	7	10	17	12
Greek	*	*	*	6	5
Arabic	*	*	0	*	0
Turkish	0	*	0	0	0
Urdu	0	0	0	*	0
Persian	0	0	0	*	0
Latin	112	115	143	114	151

(ii) Due to the inconsistent recording of AS entries, the number of AS language entries is unavailable.

(III) A2 LEVEL LANGUAGE ENTRIES 2003/04 – 2007/08

Subject	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Irish	274	295	308	254	238
French	792	725	701	662	694
German	184	133	143	145	159
Italian	15	18	10	7	0
Portuguese	0	0	0	*	0
Spanish	432	402	406	458	415
Chinese	12	21	28	16	30
Russian	*	6	*	*	*
Urdu	0	0	0	*	0
Polish	0	0	0	0	*
Dutch	*	*	0	0	0
Greek	*	6	*	0	0
Turkish	0	*	0	0	0
Arabic	0	0	*	0	0
Latin	31	26	23	26	26

Notes:

1) All languages with entries in the years requested have been included.

2) * = Fewer than five cases.

Modern Languages

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to increase the number of languages offered in primary schools; and to detail the modern languages that will be offered. (AQW 4475/09)

Minister of Education: In 2007/08 I introduced the Primary Languages Programme to provide support for those primary schools which wished to make available modern languages. Currently, Spanish and Irish are available and the programme is expanding in the 2008/09 school year to include a newcomer language element, Polish.

I will continue to keep the programme under review and, in determining languages which can be provided through the programme, will take account of views provided through evaluations, which will include feedback from schools.

Tá mé iontach sásta leis an aiseolas dhearfach atá faighte agam go dtí seo ó scoileanna atá páirteach sa chlár agus tá súil agam go mbeidh deis ag níos mó daoine óga tairbhe a bhaint as dara teanga a fhoghlaim ó aois óg.

I am pleased with the positive feedback received to date from participating schools and look forward to more of our young people benefitting from learning a second language from an early age.

Suicide Awareness in Schools

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what efforts her Department has made to raise suicide awareness in schools. (AQW 4489/09)

Minister of Education: Leis an churaclam athbhreithnithe beidh daoine óga níos ullmhaithe le déileáil leis na dúshláin a bheidh rompu ina saol. Tá gné nua ar an churaclam athbhreithnithe mar atá, Forbairt Phearsanta & Comhthuiscint (PDMU) ag leibhéal na bunscoile agus Foghlaim don Saol agus don Obair (LLW) ag leibhéal na hiarbhunscoile.

The revised curriculum will better equip young people to deal with the challenges they face in life. It includes a new area of Personal Development & Mutual Understanding (PDMU) at primary level and Learning for Life and Work (LLW) at post-primary level. Both provide opportunities to promote positive mental and emotional health among young people and schools can include awareness raising around the issue of suicide and prevention through work to enhance self esteem and manage emotions.

The promotion of pupils' emotional health and wellbeing has been identified as a priority for action within education. The Department in partnership with representatives of the community and voluntary sector, statutory agencies and other interested parties is developing a Pupils Emotional Health and Well being Programme initially focussed on pupils in post primary schools. The Programme will be expected to address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis. The emphasis will be on positive prevention by building coping skills in children and young people and will complement the personal development strand of the curriculum.

While the initial focus is on post-primary schools, it is expected that the outcomes can be adapted through time for the primary and special sectors and that the resulting programme will have more general application in developing and supporting pastoral care systems in schools. An audit is currently underway of the counselling and other therapeutic interventions in primary and special schools to determine the nature and level of need in those sectors to determine appropriate and age specific interventions.

The Independent Schools Counselling Service is also available for young people in post-primary schools during difficult and vulnerable periods in their lives.

All post primary schools can access a minimum amount of counselling support which meets best practice standards in terms of counsellor qualifications and professional supervision. Young people are able to self refer to this service or may be referred by the school or a parent.

Primary School Enrolment Figures

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3625/09, to provide the same information for schools in the Foyle constituency. (AQW 4503/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an teolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos:

The information requested is contained in the table below.

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY – TOTAL ENROLMENT – 2003/04

School name	Total enrolment
ST PATRICKS PS, CARN HILL	917
ST JOHN'S PS, WESTLAND	675
ST ANNE'S PS, ROSEMOUNT	590
STEELSTOWN VOL MAINTAINED PS	569
LISNAGELVIN PS	540
HOLY FAMILY PS	513
ST EITHNE'S PS, CREVAGH	501
ST THERESA'S PS, LENAMORE	466
EBRINGTON CONTROLLED PS	459
OAKGROVE INTEGRATED PS	444
GOOD SHEPHERD PS NURSERY SCHOOL	435
TRENCH ROAD PS	426
LONGTOWER PS	378
NAZARETH HOUSE PS	351
ST BRIGID'S PS, CARN HILL	349
HOLLYBUSH PS	341
LONDONDERRY MODEL PS	335
ROSEMOUNT PS	318
HOLY CHILD PS	316
BROADBRIDGE PS	309
ST COLMCILLE'S PS, CLAUDY	299
ST EUGENE'S PS, STRAND	274
NEWBUILDINGS PS	273
GREENHAW PS	267
ST PAULS PS, SLIEVEMORE	263
DRUMAHOE PS	261
EGLINTON PS	235
BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE	189
ST OLIVER PLUNKETT PS, ENAGH	176
ST MARY'S PS, BANAGHER	167
GLENDERMOTT PS	158
CUMBER CLAUDY PS	138
CHAPEL ROAD PS	136
FOUNTAIN PS	120
ASHLEA PS	112
CRAIGBRACK PS	96
ST COLUMBA'S PS, HOLLY MOUNT	96
MULLABUOY PS	93

School name	Total enrolment
GAELSCOIL ÉADAIN MHÓIR	90
CULMORE PS	79
BALLOUGRY PS	60
GROARTY PS	46
LISTRESS PS	31

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY – TOTAL ENROLMENT – 2004/05

School name	Total enrolment
ST PATRICKS PS, CARN HILL	878
ST JOHN'S PS, WESTLAND	636
ST ANNE'S PS, ROSEMOUNT	570
ST EITHNE'S PS, CREVAGH	552
STEELSTOWN VOL MAINTAINED PS	543
LISNAGELVIN PS	524
HOLY FAMILY PS	465
ST THERESA'S PS, LENAMORE	456
OAKGROVE INTEGRATED PS	451
GOOD SHEPHERD PS NURSERY SCHOOL	442
EBRINGTON CONTROLLED PS	438
TRENCH ROAD PS	406
HOLLYBUSH PS	354
NAZARETH HOUSE PS	346
ST BRIGID'S PS, CARN HILL	338
BROADBRIDGE PS	337
LONGTOWER PS	332
LONDONDERRY MODEL PS	325
ST COLMCILLE'S PS	303
ROSEMOUNT PS	299
HOLY CHILD PS	297
GREENHAW PS	283
DRUMAHOE PS	270
ST EUGENE'S PS	256
NEWBUILDINGS PS	249
EGLINTON PS	241
ST PAULS PS, SLIEVEMORE	233
BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE	185
ST MARY'S PS, BANAGHER	179
ST OLIVER PLUNKETT PS, ENAGH	173
GLENDERMOTT PS	157
CHAPEL ROAD PS	156

School name	Total enrolment
CUMBER CLAUDY PS	135
FOUNTAIN PS	129
GAELSCOIL EADAIN MHOIR	111
ASHLEA PS	97
CRAIGBRACK PS	95
MULLABUOY PS	91
ST COLUMBA'S PS, HOLLY MOUNT	85
CULMORE PS	75
BALLOUGRY PS	68
GROARTY PS	47
LISTRESS PS	30

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY – TOTAL ENROLMENT – 2005/06

School name	Total enrolment
ST PATRICKS PS, CARN HILL	872
ST JOHN'S PS, WESTLAND	622
LISNAGELVIN PS	554
ST ANNE'S PS, ROSEMOUNT	546
STEELSTOWN VOL MAINTAINED PS	543
ST EITHNE'S PS, CREVAGH	529
HOLY FAMILY PS	446
OAKGROVE INTEGRATED PS	445
GOOD SHEPHERD PS AND NURSERY SCHOOL	443
ST THERESA'S PS, LENAMORE	438
EBRINGTON CONTROLLED PS	426
TRENCH ROAD PS	377
HOLLYBUSH PS	374
BROADBRIDGE PS	340
ST BRIGID'S PS, CARN HILL	335
NAZARETH HOUSE PS	330
LONDONDERRY MODEL PS	317
LONGTOWER PS	316
ST COLMCILLE'S PS, CLAUDY	307
HOLY CHILD PS	293
ROSEMOUNT PS	292
DRUMAHOE PS	273
GREENHAW PS	272
NEWBUILDINGS PS	246
ST EUGENE'S PS, STRAND	242
EGLINTON PS	237

School name	Total enrolment
ST PAULS PS, SLIEVEMORE	219
ST MARY'S PS, BANAGHER	190
BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE	173
ST OLIVER PLUNKETT PS, ENAGH	172
GLENDERMOTT PS	161
CHAPEL ROAD PS	157
CUMBER CLAUDY PS	125
GAELSCOIL EADAIN MHOIR	116
FOUNTAIN PS	111
ASHLEA PS	98
CRAIGBRACK PS	96
MULLABUOY PS	90
CULMORE PS	75
ST COLUMBA'S PS, HOLLY MOUNT	74
BALLOUGRY PS	66
GROARTY INTEGRATED PS	43
LISTRESS PS	28

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY – TOTAL ENROLMENT – 2006/07

School name	Total enrolment
ST PATRICKS PS, CARN HILL	880
ST JOHN'S PS, WESTLAND	588
LISNAGELVIN PS	553
ST ANNE'S PS, ROSEMOUNT	533
ST EITHNE'S PS, CREVAGH	516
STEELSTOWN VOL MAINTAINED PS	511
OAKGROVE INTEGRATED PS	467
GOOD SHEPHERD PS AND NURSERY SCHOOL	451
HOLY FAMILY PS	448
ST THERESA'S PS, LENAMORE	426
HOLLYBUSH PS	425
EBRINGTON CONTROLLED PS	422
BROADBRIDGE PS	350
ST BRIGID'S PS, CARN HILL	343
TRENCH ROAD PS	341
LONDONDERRY MODEL PS	333
NAZARETH HOUSE PS	331
ST COLMCILLE'S PS, CLAUDY	319
LONGTOWER PS	311
HOLY CHILD PS	287

School name	Total enrolment
ROSEMOUNT PS	284
GREENHAW PS	275
DRUMAHOE PS	264
NEWBUILDINGS PS	238
EGLINTON PS	232
ST EUGENE'S PS, STRAND	227
ST MARY'S PS, BANAGHER	198
ST PAULS PS, SLIEVEMORE	183
ST OLIVER PLUNKETT PS, ENAGH	167
BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE	163
GLENDERMOTT PS	160
CHAPEL ROAD PS	151
CUMBER CLAUDY PS	123
GAELSCOIL EADAIN MHOIR	116
FOUNTAIN PS	112
CRAIGBRACK PS	96
MULLABUOY PS	92
ASHLEA PS	91
CULMORE PS	72
BALLOUGRY PS	69
ST COLUMBA'S PS, HOLLY MOUNT	67
GROARTY INTEGRATED PS	39
LISTRESS PS	25

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY – TOTAL ENROLMENT – 2007/08

School name	Total enrolment
ST PATRICKS PS, CARN HILL	861
ST JOHN'S PS, WESTLAND	592
LISNAGELVIN PS	532
ST ANNE'S PS, ROSEMOUNT	515
ST EITHNE'S PS, CREVAGH	501
STEELSTOWN VOL MAINTAINED PS	477
OAKGROVE INTEGRATED PS	451
GOOD SHEPHERD PS AND NURSERY SCHOOL	445
HOLY FAMILY PS	433
HOLLYBUSH PS	427
EBRINGTON CONTROLLED PS	421
ST THERESA'S PS, LENAMORE	406
BROADBRIDGE PS	374
LONDONDERRY MODEL PS	343
ST BRIGID'S PS, CARN HILL	339

School name	Total enrolment
TRENCH ROAD PS	322
ST COLMCILLE'S PS, CLAUDY	315
NAZARETH HOUSE PS	309
LONGTOWER PS	296
GREENHAW PS	288
HOLY CHILD PS	285
ROSEMOUNT PS	271
DRUMAHOE PS	245
EGLINTON PS	230
NEWBUILDINGS PS	223
ST MARY'S PS, BANAGHER	207
ST EUGENE'S PS, STRAND	205
ST PAULS PS, SLIEVEMORE	178
GLENDERMOTT PS	169
CHAPEL ROAD PS	166
ST OLIVER PLUNKETT PS, ENAGH	163
BUNSCOIL CHOLMCILLE	159
GAELSCOIL EADAIN MHOIR	135
CUMBER CLAUDY PS	119
FOUNTAIN PS	92
MULLABUOY PS	92
ASHLEA PS	90
CRAIGBRACK PS	89
CULMORE PS	75
BALLOUGRY PS	71
ST COLUMBA'S PS, HOLLY MOUNT	58
GROARTY INTEGRATED PS	34
LISTRESS PS	23

Source: Annual school census

Note: Figures includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

Newly Qualified Teachers

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Education what percentage of primary school trainee student teachers who have graduated from universities in the past year have obtained permanent teaching positions. (AQW 4578/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos.

The information requested is detailed in the table below.

'Age Range' Trained To Teach	Graduates	Graduates Registered and in Employment	% of Graduates in Employment
Primary	354	33	9.32

Ballykelly Primary School

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education if she has considered, or has been asked to consider the former army barracks at Ballykelly as a potential replacement site for Ballykelly Primary School. (AQW 4689/09)

Minister of Education: Tuigim nár iarradh ar Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Iarthair, a bhfuil freagracht air as an scoil seo, breithniú a dhéanamh ar láthair fhéideartha ag seandún an airm.

I understand that the Western Education and Library Board which has responsibility for this school has not been asked to consider a potential site at the former army barracks. The Board is satisfied that the plan for a new building on the existing school site will provide pupils with the facilities they require.

The scheme is now advancing in planning with work scheduled to begin on the new school building early next year.

Guidelines Announced in the Assembly

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education from which bodies did she receive legal advice about the guidelines announced in the Assembly on 2 February 2009. (AQW 4735/09)

Minister of Education: Fuarthas comhairle ó Oifig Dlíodóra na Roinne

Advice was received from the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Student Fees

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning when his review into student fees will be completed. (AQW 4332/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): The review of variable tuition fees and student finance arrangements in Northern Ireland is currently underway. The purpose of the review is to provide an evidence base for an Assembly debate on fee levels which, under provisions in the Higher Education Order 2005, the Department can schedule any time after 1st January 2010. In light of this, I anticipate an interim report for consideration in May 2009 which I will bring before the DEL Committee with a view to issuing documents for public consultation and impact assessment in Autumn 2009.

Unemployed in Ballymoney

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he will take to assist the growing number of unemployed in Ballymoney given the significant job losses in the area. (AQW 4482/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department will continue to provide information and advice to individuals who are unemployed in Ballymoney to help them find employment or identify alternative opportunities through the Department's employment, training and further education programmes. Jobs & Benefits staff, in partnership with the Social Security Agency, have delivered on-site clinics directly to workers who had received notices of redundancy. Services include individual interviews, action planning and information advice and guidance on the range of measures to improve their job prospects.

Northern Ireland Office in Brussels

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what contact his Department has had with the Northern Ireland Office in Brussels, broken down by (i) issues discussed; and (ii) benefits to his Department that these issues might have. (AQW 4488/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning:**Issues Discussed**

The Office of the Northern Ireland Office in Brussels (ONIEB) has been an extremely useful point of contact for DEL officials wishing to gain insight into how the European institutions operate. Within the past year it has helped newly appointed staff in the Department's European Policy Unit gain understanding into how relevant European institutions operate. This included facilitation of a visit to Brussels and arrangement of meetings with members of the Commission and MEPs to discuss the broad sweep of European employment, social and educational measures and the workings of the European Community in general.

ONIEB staff also assisted DEL with the arrangements for a European Employment and Social Policy conference. A delegation of senior officials from the European Commission presented a series of workshops in Adelaide House, the purpose of which was to raise awareness of the work of the Commission in the areas of employment and social inclusion. ONIEB identified relevant speakers and assisted with initial contacts.

Benefits to the Department

ONIEB staff have therefore helped DEL staff gain a fuller understanding of relevant EU issues, thus enabling them to carry out their roles effectively. Useful contacts were established with key European counterparts.

The European seminar was a recognised outcome from the EU Taskforce on Northern Ireland and of benefit not just to the Department but a wider audience. In addition to providing an opportunity to hear, at first hand, the latest thinking from the EU Commission on employment and social policy issues, it also afforded those attending the opportunity to establish valuable ongoing contacts with key European officials.

Further Education Exchanges with the EU

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance he has given to Further Education Exchanges with the EU. (AQW 4557/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education Exchanges within the EU are facilitated through EU Lifelong Learning Programmes which are managed on a UK basis. My Department contributes to the local administration of those arrangements and participates in an Advisory Group which aims to promote the take-up of programmes in Northern Ireland.

Further Education Exchanges with the EU

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what requests for financial assistance have been made to his Department for Further Education Exchanges with the European Union. (AQW 4558/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has not received any requests for direct financial assistance for Further Education Exchanges within the European Union. Exchange arrangements are facilitated through EU Lifelong Learning programmes which are administered on a UK wide basis with my Department providing a local advisory input.

Programme for Government Targets

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what risk assessment he has carried out of the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4784/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Performance against the Programme for Government targets is currently monitored by DFP quarterly, via the Departmental Monitoring Rounds. It is clear that the current economic downturn may impact on the achievement of some of the targets for March 2011. It is, however, too early to be definitive on the impact on the long-term targets for skills and employment levels in 2015.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Review of Economic Development Policy

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration will be given to the impact of social divisions on labour market mobility and investment decisions, in the review of economic development policy. (AQW 4149/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Arlene Foster): The Terms of Reference for the Independent Review of Economic Development Policy were outlined to Members as part of the Minister's statement on 1 December 2008. They have also been placed on a dedicated website (www.irep.org.uk) that has been established as part of the Review.

The Terms of Reference are wide ranging and include the need to make recommendations on the policy options to stimulate economic growth and productivity, and to build a larger and more wealth-creating private sector. This will include identification and consideration of any inhibitors to economic and productivity growth.

Job Losses at FG Wilson

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what measures her Department has taken to assist FG Wilson in its efforts to prevent any further job losses in the Larne or Monkstown factories. (AQW 4238/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In these difficult times, Invest NI is maintaining regular contact with its client base and, in the case of FG Wilson specifically, senior management on both sides met very recently to discuss the current issues. Invest NI has expressed its willingness to explore with FG Wilson the potential to retain skilled labour by bringing forward R&D and training initiatives. Such initiatives may well be eligible for grant support, thereby helping the company manage costs, but more importantly will leave the company well placed to respond quickly and effectively, and thereby maximise the opportunities that undoubtedly will arise, as the economy begins to recover.

Mineral Oil Tax Relief Scheme

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to her answer to AQW 2216/08, if she will ask the Irish Republic government on behalf of local bio fuel producers, to allow them to access unused places on the Mineral Oil Tax Relief Scheme. (AQW 4239/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In their 2006 Budget, the Republic of Ireland Government announced a 5 year targeted package of excise relief on biofuels (the Mineral Oil Tax Relief Scheme II) to the end of December 2010. The Scheme was advertised as a competitive call for proposals open to anyone who could fulfil its criteria. A total of 102 applications were received and following an assessment process there were 16 successful applicants selected. Applicants were not awarded the full amount of excise relief sought in every instance.

The Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) reports that this Scheme is fully subscribed and there are no "unused places" available. DCENR notes that it is continuously monitoring progress being made and is in communication with project promoters on an ongoing basis. The Scheme allows for the roll over of volumes into the following year as appropriate.

There is no provision for further excise relief on biofuels beyond the life of this Scheme.

Unemployment Figures

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the unemployment figures, in each of the last twelve months. (AQW 4382/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The latest Labour Force Survey (LFS) estimate of unemployment in Northern Ireland, along with estimates for the previous twelve months, can be found in the table below.

NORTHERN IRELAND SEASONALLY ADJUSTED UNEMPLOYMENT ESTIMATES¹, 2007-2008

Period ²	Number Unemployed	Unemployment Rate
Sep-Nov 2007	35,000	4.3%
Oct-Dec 2007	34,000	4.2%
Nov-Jan 2008	36,000	4.4%
Dec-Feb 2008	34,000	4.2%
Jan-Mar 2008	38,000	4.6%
Feb-Apr 2008	33,000	4.0%
Mar-May 2008	34,000	4.1%
Apr-Jun 2008	34,000	4.2%
May-Jul 2008	36,000	4.4%
Jun-Aug 2008	35,000	4.3%
Jul-Sep 2008	33,000	4.1%
Aug-Oct 2008	36,000	4.3%
Sep-Nov 2008	34,000	4.2%

1 Estimates are based on a sample survey and are therefore subject to sampling error.

2 Only estimates from non-overlapping periods should be compared e.g. figures for Sep- Nov 2008 can not be compared with Aug-Oct 2008, as there are two common months (September and October) in each period.

Source: Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey

Invest NI

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much financial assistance was provided by Invest NI towards business start-up projects, in each council area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 4392/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the period 2003/04 to 2007/08 Invest NI offered assistance to 533 new locally-owned businesses that have the potential for significant growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

In addition, 16,153 offers were made to individuals intending to set up a business with a focus on the local market. Most of these were assisted indirectly through the Start A Business Programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland.

These 16,686 offers amounted to almost £28m of assistance during the 5 year period. Table 1 below shows the number of offers approved in each District Council Area and the corresponding amount of assistance offered in each year.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI OFFERS APPROVED TO INDIGENOUS BUSINESS STARTS BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA (2003/04 – 2007/08)

DCA	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06	
	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)
ANTRIM	51	54	83	133	73	57
ARDS	152	286	155	137	174	137
ARMAGH	112	292	129	263	128	104
BALLYMENA	59	121	99	223	72	40
BALLYMONEY	38	59	64	72	65	34
BANBRIDGE	81	124	105	260	109	48

DCA	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06	
	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)
BELFAST	319	854	426	1,280	379	1,223
CARRICKFERGUS	52	65	86	64	53	33
CASTLEREAGH	71	161	102	142	83	38
COLERAINE	71	173	124	116	104	83
COOKSTOWN	75	401	102	157	90	61
CRAIGAVON	136	663	196	1,237	174	100
DERRY	212	670	360	775	252	220
DOWN	157	183	233	191	198	96
DUNGANNON	116	307	150	151	135	62
FERMANAGH	148	313	227	303	203	101
LARNE	61	171	88	115	79	134
LIMAVADY	66	102	112	78	96	90
LISBURN	126	174	164	274	160	120
MAGHERAFELT	109	208	131	134	146	105
MOYLE	17	90	41	52	44	19
NEWRY & MOURNE	145	271	273	435	204	256
NEWTOWNABBEY	143	353	139	264	142	173
NORTH DOWN	127	211	137	285	114	387
OMAGH	75	240	104	199	118	98
STRABANE	62	146	84	266	77	62
TOTAL	2,781	6,691	3,914	7,607	3,472	3,880

Note: Table totals may not add due to rounding.

TABLE 1 (CONT)

DCA	2006/07		2007/08		TOTAL (2003-04 – 2007-08)	
	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)
ANTRIM	82	66	71	121	360	431
ARDS	101	39	91	57	673	656
ARMAGH	103	292	106	80	578	1,031
BALLYMENA	82	73	106	208	418	665
BALLYMONEY	76	36	70	68	313	269
BANBRIDGE	98	35	102	115	495	582
BELFAST	325	619	412	872	1,861	4,847
CARRICKFERGUS	49	59	37	53	277	273
CASTLEREAGH	94	168	100	41	450	551
COLERAINE	103	74	127	156	529	600

DCA	2006/07		2007/08		TOTAL (2003-04 – 2007-08)	
	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)	No of Offers	Assistance Offered (£000)
COOKSTOWN	94	91	108	86	469	796
CRAIGAVON	94	135	119	649	719	2,782
DERRY	232	321	282	245	1,338	2,232
DOWN	124	87	152	135	864	692
DUNGANNON	123	199	136	331	660	1,049
FERMANAGH	217	173	245	273	1,040	1,163
LARNE	88	40	95	69	411	529
LIMAVADY	80	73	114	47	468	390
LISBURN	146	971	151	233	747	1,772
MAGHERAFELT	103	47	136	273	625	767
MOYLE	54	56	74	27	230	244
NEWRY & MOURNE	159	332	212	339	993	1,633
NEWTOWNABBEY	98	79	101	143	623	1,013
NORTH DOWN	99	57	93	180	570	1,121
OMAGH	125	129	156	85	578	751
STRABANE	79	176	95	216	397	865
TOTAL	3,028	4,427	3,491	5,101	16,686	27,706

Note: Table totals may not add due to rounding.

Invest NI

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what was the total monetary value of applications to Invest NI for financial assistance for business start-ups in each Council area, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4393/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's client companies, including eligible business start-ups, do not apply for a pre-determined level of financial assistance in relation to investment projects. Invest NI requires clients to prepare comprehensive business plans in relation to such investment proposals which must meet the Agency's strict intervention criteria. Invest NI then negotiates and agrees bespoke financial assistance packages individually with the companies concerned with the aim of offering the minimum funding necessary to enable a project to proceed at a given location, within a pre-determined timeframe. The amount of funding awarded is determined principally by a project's eligible costs, the identified need for public funds and company size. All assistance offered by Invest NI is subject to the ceilings and other requirements determined by the European Commission's State Aid Regulations.

However, information and analysis on the number of offers made to indigenous business start-ups, and the related financial assistance offered, per District Council Area for the five year period 2003/04 to 2007/08, is available in the Invest NI Performance Report which was published at the end of January 2008 (<http://www.investni.com/performance-report0203-0607.pdf>).

Business Start Up Projects in East Antrim

Mr A Ross asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much financial assistance was given to business start up projects in the East Antrim constituency, for each of the last five years. (AQW 4457/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the period 2003/04 to 2007/08 Invest NI directly offered assistance to 24 new locally-owned businesses in the East Antrim Parliamentary Constituency Area. These businesses have the potential for significant growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

In addition, 826 offers were made to individuals intending to set up a business with a focus on the local market. Most of these were assisted indirectly through the Start A Business programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland.

These 850 offers amounted to £1.2 million of assistance during the 5 year period. Table 1 below shows the number of offers approved in the area and the corresponding amount of assistance offered in each year.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI OFFERS APPROVED TO INDIGENOUS BUSINESS STARTS IN EAST ANTRIM PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA (2003/04 – 2007/08)

Year Of Offer	No of Offers	Total Assistance (£)
2003/04	143	357,249
2004/05	213	316,450
2005/06	162	196,008
2006/07	174	157,036
2007/08	158	188,732
TOTAL	850	1,215,475

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her Department's contact with the Presbyterian Mutual Society in the last 12 months. (AQW 4511/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Along with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and our Departmental officials I met with a delegation from the Presbyterian Mutual Society at their request on Monday 10 November 2008 to discuss the financial difficulties facing the Society and the urgent action that might be taken to safeguard its funds and the interests of its members.

I acted swiftly to enact legislation that would provide the Society with options. The Insolvency (Company Arrangement or Administration Provisions for an Industrial and Provident Society) Order (Northern Ireland) 2008 was signed, sealed and laid at the Assembly on 14 November 2008 and made on the same day.

In addition, all registered societies are required under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act (Northern Ireland) 1969 to submit an annual return within seven months of its respective year-end. The most recent annual return in respect of the Presbyterian Mutual Society was received and filed with my Department's Registry of Companies Credit Unions and Industrial and Provident Societies on 8th July 2008.

Unemployment in Mid Ulster

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people were registered as unemployed in Mid Ulster in January 2008, broken down by (i) Magherafelt District Council; and (ii) Cookstown District Council, (AQW 4534/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At January 2008 there were 714 Claimant Count unemployed persons in Mid-Ulster Parliamentary Constituency Area, (488 males and 226 females), which corresponds to 1.2% of persons of working age in the constituency.

Mid-Ulster Parliamentary Constituency Area is made up of Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council areas and part of Dungannon District Council area.

Magherafelt District Council Area had 283 Claimant Count unemployed persons (201 males and 82 females), which corresponds to 1.0% of persons of working age at that time.

Cookstown District Council Area had 315 Claimant Count unemployed persons (212 males and 103 females), which corresponds to 1.4% of persons of working age at that time.

For information the equivalent Northern Ireland rate in January 2008 was 2.2%.

Unemployment in Mid Ulster

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many people are currently registered as unemployed in Mid Ulster, broken down by (i) Magherafelt District Council; and (ii) Cookstown District Council. (AQW 4535/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At December 2008 (the latest available figures) there were 1,772 Claimant Count unemployed persons in Mid-Ulster Parliamentary Constituency Area, (1,440 males and 332 females), which corresponds to 3.0% of persons of working age in the constituency.

Mid-Ulster Parliamentary Constituency Area is made up of Magherafelt and Cookstown District Council areas and part of Dungannon District Council area.

Magherafelt District Council Area had 731 Claimant Count unemployed persons (613 males and 118 females), which corresponds to 2.7% of persons of working age at that time.

Cookstown District Council Area had 706 Claimant Count unemployed persons (559 males and 147 females), which corresponds to 3.2% of persons of working age at that time.

For information the equivalent Northern Ireland rate in December 2008 was 3.3%.

Jobs Offered to Local Applicants

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if jobs created as a result of her Department's work should be offered to local applicants first and then to people from elsewhere in Europe, as proposed by the Environment Minister. (AQW 4540/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is committed to achieving a successful economy in Northern Ireland which will provide equal opportunities for all its citizens. In this respect, those businesses with which my Department and its NDPBs work, are required to conform to current Northern Ireland legislation in relation to Fair Employment practice.

Community Renewables and Micro Generation

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will increase spending on community renewables and micro generation. (AQW 4562/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There are no plans for my Department to increase spending on community renewables and microgeneration at present. To date my Department, through the Reconnect scheme, has supported in the region of 4,300 installations of household renewable energy systems at a cost of £10.8 million. A full evaluation of the Reconnect scheme is nearing completion and is due to report shortly. Any additional support going forward will need to take into account changing market conditions, value for money, energy efficiency and the effect on competitiveness.

My Department continues to provide funding for Action Renewables to provide free technical advice to householders and communities on renewable energy technologies and offer a signposting service to the Low Carbon Building Programme, which offers grant support until 2011 to domestic households in Northern Ireland for the installation of renewable energy technologies. Additionally there is a reduced rate of VAT at 5% for small scale renewable technologies and for those technologies generating electricity, Renewable Obligation Certificates are available.

My Department has also recently provided funding to extend the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) work on low carbon solutions for households and communities to Northern Ireland. This is a programme of research to determine how Government can deliver policy measures that will encourage uptake by householders and communities. Two seminars are planned for Northern Ireland in the next few months.

Invest NI

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many businesses have started (i) with Invest NI assistance; and (ii) without Invest NI assistance, each month in the last year. (AQW 4571/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) During the 2007/08 financial year Invest NI directly offered assistance to 80 new locally-owned businesses that have the potential for significant growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

In addition, 3,411 offers were made to individuals intending to set up a business with a focus on the local market. Most of these were assisted indirectly through the Start A Business programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland.

Table 1 below shows the number of offers approved in each month of the 2007/08 year.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI OFFERS APPROVED TO INDIGENOUS BUSINESS STARTS (2007/08)

Month	Number of Start Ups
April	149
May	229
June	311
July	203
August	258
September	234
October	307
November	303
December	253
January	246
February	398
March	600
TOTAL	3,491

- (ii) Invest NI is unable to answer this part of the question, as it does not collect and hold information on businesses that have started without its assistance.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the urgency of impending technical approval, to state whether she or any of her officials made any representation to Hibernia Atlantic regarding the decision to change the original proposed site of Derry/Londonderry, for the telehouse facility as part of the project Kelvin scheme, to Coleraine. (AQW 4699/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The contract for Project Kelvin has been awarded and there is no further technical approval required. The decision to site the telehouse facility in Coleraine was taken by Hibernia Atlantic and was included in its response to my Department's invitation to tender for the Project. Neither I nor my officials made any representation to Hibernia Atlantic in relation to this decision.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Road Safety Council

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment how much extra it will cost his Department when he takes over the administrative work from the Road Safety Council. (AQW 3766/09)

Minister of the Environment (Mr Sammy Wilson): I have asked officials to develop a new model for the funding of the work of the Road Safety Council for the period from 1 April 2009. Until that work has been completed, it will not be possible to say precisely what the balance of resourcing will be between local road safety committees and the Department. However, the proposal is that funding should be channelled directly to local road safety committees, not that the existing administrative work of the Council should be duplicated by the Department. It is envisaged that the costs involved will be minimal and not in excess of 50% of an officer's time. At approximately £15k this will be significantly less than the £62,240 allocated to the Road Safety Council for central administration in 2008/09.

Protected Trees

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the enforcement investigation that took place following the felling of protected trees on a site at 135 Shandon Park in July 2005. (AQW 3820/09)

Minister of the Environment: A possible breach of a TPO on protected trees on a site at 135 Shandon Park was reported to my Department on 10 July 2008. Following visits to the site, my Planning Officials have determined that the removal of four protected trees, as well as works to other trees protected by the Order does constitute a breach of the TPO. An enforcement investigation is therefore ongoing. A replanting scheme was agreed with the Department. The planting has been undertaken and is of a greater specification than was required.

In light of the extensive removal work which has taken place and the complex process involved in enforcement cases, the Department is examining the best way forward.

Speed Restrictors on Motor Vehicles

Mr Savage asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Departments plans to install speed restrictors on motor vehicles. (AQW 4013/09)

Minister of the Environment: Speed limiters are already required, under Construction and Use Regulations, to be fitted to certain buses, coaches and goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes, depending on date of first registration and maximum design speed.

I have no plans to extend these requirements to other motor vehicles.

Deer Poaching

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of the increase in deer poaching; and if so, what steps he is taking to work with landowners and the PSNI to reduce and eradicate poaching. (AQW 4230/09)

Minister of the Environment: I have been informed by my officials that there has been no increase in the number of reports to the PSNI of incidents of deer poaching. Deer poaching is a criminal offence and incidents of this nature are the responsibility of the PSNI and not a Departmental matter.

High Hedges

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment when he will (i) introduce; and (ii) issue a timescale for legislation on high hedges. (AQW 4232/09)

Minister of the Environment: As any scheme to deal with the issue of high hedges will be operated by local government I must be conscious of the impact on Councils of the Review of Public Administration and our

intention to implement the agreed local government reorganisation package by 2011. I also have to be mindful of the competing priorities and resource constraints I am facing. In these circumstances, I intend to undertake the engagement process with the eleven new Councils once they have been elected in May 2011.

Planning Service: e-Pic System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to Planning Service's electronic planning system, what was the (i) original projected costs; (ii) actual costs for completion of the project; (iii) original projected time-scale; and (iv) actual time-scale for the completion of the project. (AQW 4275/09)

Minister of the Environment: The original capital budget allocation for e-PIC was £5.5m. However as the complexity of the project became clearer, and following negotiations with the contractor, a revised business case and bid for additional funding was approved in 2006 which revised the capital budget to £9.3m.

In 2007, following the delivery by the contractor of a basic system which represents up to 80% of the e-PIC solution, further negotiations took place on a final funding package to complete and implement the full system. A revised business case and funding bid, which is currently with the Department of Finance and Personnel, will, if approved, finalise the capital budget at £12.8m.

The original timescale for implementation was 2006 and the revised implementation date is March 2010.

Planning Service: e-Pic System

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment in relation to Planning Service's electronic planning system, when will (i) the system be fully operational for use by Planning Service staff; and (ii) it become accessible to members of the public. (AQW 4276/09)

Minister of the Environment: The complete e-PIC system will be fully implemented across Planning Service by March 2010 and will be made available to the public from that date.

Given the delay in implementing the full e-PIC solution, Planning Service has bought forward a number of e-planning initiatives, to deliver tangible benefits to both internal staff and the public as partial implementation of e-PIC.

These include a new Intranet Portal and an electronic planning application Fee Calculator which have already been made available to Planning Service staff. Other initiatives which are planned for release to the public by March 2009 include: Pandarus - a planning advice system with a fee calculator, Planning Explorer to track the progress of planning applications being processed, a new Internet Portal and a Development Plan viewer.

Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment how much grant-aid was provided to the Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside, in each of the last ten financial years. (AQW 4277/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department has not provided any grant-aid to the Ulster Society for the Protection of the Countryside.

Applications for Enforcement Action

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for enforcement action are still outstanding in (i) the Ards Peninsula; (ii) Ards Town; (iii) Ards East; and (iv) Ards West. (AQW 4303/09)

Minister of the Environment: At present there are 381 live enforcement cases in the Ards Borough Council.

The current system of electronic data storage and retrieval – 20/20 - used by Planning Service does not provide information or analysis for areas smaller than district councils. To provide this information a manual analysis of all the existing files would need to be carried out and this would not be available in the time specified and would incur disproportionate costs.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an update on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. (AQO 1959/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) was published in November 2004. The Area Plan was the largest ever published in Northern Ireland and covered the Belfast, Lisburn, Castlereagh, North Down, Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus District Council areas.

Approximately 4,000 representations and objections were received during the consultation period. Following a period for counter objections, Planning Service asked the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) to convene a Public Inquiry to consider objections to the Draft Plan including Plan Amendment No.1 to the Draft Plan.

Following a series of Pre Inquiry meetings, the Public Inquiry commenced in April 2007 and concluded in May 2008.

The PAC is currently considering all the information before it prior to completing its report and making its recommendations to the Department. The PAC has indicated a preliminary timescale for delivery of the report to Planning Service as early summer 2010. However, the Commission would hope to be in a position to announce a firmer timescale later this year.

The PAC is an independent body and is not part of the Department of the Environment but appointed by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is possible that the any review of timescales undertaken by the PAC may advance the Report or elements of the Report. The Department would welcome such a move.

In October 2008, the Department wrote to the PAC and requested the early release of that part of the BMAP Report relating to strategic retail issues, including Sprucefield. The PAC took the view that this was a discrete issue and, as the public sessions of the Inquiry were complete, it could comply with the Department's request. The Commission issued the report to the Department on 21 January 2009. It is anticipated that this report will be made available to the public when the Minister has made a decision on the process to be followed in respect of Sprucefield.

Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments in Mallusk

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1451/09 and AQW 589/09 to provide a summary of the final outcome of the environmental risk assessment undertaken in Mallusk; and to outline any enforcement action his Department has taken, and against whom. (AQW 4357/09)

Minister of the Environment: Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) is still in the process of carrying out Pollution Prevention Risk Assessments at the Mallusk Industrial Estate. There are over 300 registered businesses in the area and, to date, 189 Risk Assessments have been carried out. All sites which are classed as high or medium risk, in terms of the risk of causing water pollution, have been assessed and it is anticipated that the remaining assessments will take approximately six months to complete.

Table A below sets out details of the risk assessments carried out to date.

TABLE A

Risk Assessment	High	Medium	Low
Number of sites	23	60	106

Table B below details the number of enforcement cases taken forward since 5 July 2008 at the Mallusk Industrial Estate.

TABLE B

Enforcement Action	Number
Water (NI) Order 1999 Warning Letter	59
Water (NI) Order 1999 Pre-Notices	19
Water (NI) Order 1999 Notices	5

Enforcement Action	Number
Successful Prosecution	1
Submitted to the Public Prosecution Service	2
Currently being processed by NIEA	5

A list of all those who have had enforcement action taken against them will take some time to produce and my officials will provide this to you directly by Friday 13 February 2009.

Clandeboyne Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment if Clandeboyne Estate, Bangor is protected as an area of full conservation. (AQW 4453/09)

Minister of the Environment: All of Clandeboyne Estate lies within the Green Belt as designated by the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) 2015. The estate is also covered by one or more of the following designations:

- Designation ND 07 - Clandeboyne Rural Landscape Wedge;
- Designation BR 17/02 - Clandeboyne Estate Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance;
- Designation ND 02/05 - Clandeboyne Avenue Site of Local Nature Conservation Importance;
- Designation BR 24 - Clandeboyne Local Landscape Policy Area; and
- Designation ND 01/01 - Clandeboyne Historic Park, Garden and Demesne.

In terms of Built Heritage, there are four Listed structures on the Clandeboyne Estate that are specially protected under the provisions of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 including Clandeboyne House, the Memorial, the Gasworks and Helen's Tower.

The designed landscape at Clandeboyne has also been included in the Register of Parks, Gardens and Demesnes of Special Historical Interest for Northern Ireland and has been designated as a Historic Park and Garden in BMAP.

Illegal Dumping at Ballyhornan Road

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has carried out an investigation into illegal dumping at Ballyhornan Road, Downpatrick; and if so, to detail the results of this investigation. (AQW 4487/09)

Minister of the Environment: An investigation into this site is currently ongoing. I have asked officials from NIEA's Environmental Crime team to write and advise you of the outcome of the investigation when it has been completed.

Departmental Staff

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) staff; and (ii) public appointees were appointed by his Department since he took up office; and how many of those people are citizens of other EU countries. (AQW 4536/09)

Minister of the Environment: (i) The number of staff appointed by the Department since 10 June 2008, the date on which I took up appointment, is 244.

Figures on nationality cannot be provided as it is not obligatory for applicants to declare their nationality when applying for NICS posts.

(ii) The table below sets out the numbers of public appointments in DOE since 10 June 2008. Figures on nationality cannot be provided as this information is not requested in the public appointment process.

Public Body	Public Appointees appointed since 10 June 2008	Total
Historic Monuments Council (HMC)	Chair + 14	15
Local Government Boundaries Commission	Local Government Boundaries Commissioner + 11 Assistant Local Government Boundaries Commissioners	12
Total		27

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of the Environment how much money his Department has made available to (i) the Ulster Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster Scots projects, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4543/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department has not made any money available to (i) the Ulster Scots Academy; or (ii) Ulster Scots projects, in each of the last two years.

Financial Incentive Recycling Scheme

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment to list the Councils that have come forward with an expression of interest to introduce a financial incentive recycling scheme. (AQW 4563/09)

Minister of the Environment: I am not aware of any substantive proposals by councils for financial incentive recycling schemes (waste charging). However the provision of such schemes would require legislative change. I have decided not to proceed with amending the necessary legislation at this time.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

BT and Ministry of Defence Properties

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assistance is given to local councils to combat their financial losses through revaluation of BT and Ministry of Defence properties. (AQW 4281/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr N Dodds): The overall value of the BT network has decreased. However, it is expected that Coleraine Borough and Newry and Mourne District Councils could benefit from a small increase in revenue, from the reassessment. All other councils will lose revenue, though one of the main reasons why the overall value of the BT network has decreased in value is because of increased competition in the telecommunications industry. These reductions are therefore indirectly offset by growth elsewhere.

Down District Council could benefit, in revenue terms, from the reassessment of MOD hereditaments. Nine district councils will not be affected given that there are no MOD properties in their area. Those councils likely to have reduced revenue, from the reassessment, are Antrim, Armagh City & District, Ballymena, Banbridge, Belfast City, Coleraine, Craigavon, Derry City, Dungannon & South Tyrone, Fermanagh, Limavady, Lisburn City, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane district councils. North Down, for whom figures are already finalised, will have reduced revenue.

The package of assistance for councils, which I announced on 19 January, includes help with any repayments associated with reductions in BT and MOD valuations, which would otherwise have been due and owing this year. Where councils are in a general repayment situation, I will allow them to offset this amount through staging the BT and MOD reductions over five years, a benefit reckoned to be worth up to £3.3m next year, intended to cushion the sudden and accumulated impact of these reductions. It is anticipated that 23 district councils could be able to fully stagger their BT and MOD repayments. The remaining three councils, Ballymena, Belfast and Cookstown, could be able to partially stagger their repayments, given that the sums associated with BT and MOD are likely to be greater than their overall repayment.

The figures in relation to the BT and MOD repayments are indicative at this stage and represent the estimated maximum possible assistance that could be provided to councils next year. They are expected to fluctuate because the benefit of the MOD and BT offset is dependent on the extent that individual councils would otherwise have been required to repay. Furthermore, the position of individual councils at finalization is particularly difficult to gauge during this unprecedented economic uncertainty.

Rates Reassessment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which Councils benefitted from rates reassessment of Ministry of Defence properties. (AQW 4282/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The overall value of the BT network has decreased. However, it is expected that Coleraine Borough and Newry and Mourne District Councils could benefit from a small increase in revenue, from the reassessment. All other councils will lose revenue, though one of the main reasons why the overall value of the BT network has decreased in value is because of increased competition in the telecommunications industry. These reductions are therefore indirectly offset by growth elsewhere.

Down District Council could benefit, in revenue terms, from the reassessment of MOD hereditaments. Nine district councils will not be affected given that there are no MOD properties in their area. Those councils likely to have reduced revenue, from the reassessment, are Antrim, Armagh City & District, Ballymena, Banbridge, Belfast City, Coleraine, Craigavon, Derry City, Dungannon & South Tyrone, Fermanagh, Limavady, Lisburn City, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane district councils. North Down, for whom figures are already finalised, will have reduced revenue.

The package of assistance for councils, which I announced on 19 January, includes help with any repayments associated with reductions in BT and MOD valuations, which would otherwise have been due and owing this year. Where councils are in a general repayment situation, I will allow them to offset this amount through staging the BT and MOD reductions over five years, a benefit reckoned to be worth up to £3.3m next year, intended to cushion the sudden and accumulated impact of these reductions. It is anticipated that 23 district councils could be able to fully stagger their BT and MOD repayments. The remaining three councils, Ballymena, Belfast and Cookstown, could be able to partially stagger their repayments, given that the sums associated with BT and MOD are likely to be greater than their overall repayment.

The figures in relation to the BT and MOD repayments are indicative at this stage and represent the estimated maximum possible assistance that could be provided to councils next year. They are expected to fluctuate because the benefit of the MOD and BT offset is dependent on the extent that individual councils would otherwise have been required to repay. Furthermore, the position of individual councils at finalization is particularly difficult to gauge during this unprecedented economic uncertainty.

Rates Assistance

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what rates assistance has been given to each of the local councils. (AQW 4283/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: As you will be aware I announced a package of assistance for councils on 19 January that could be worth up to £8m next year. This will allow councils, where they are in a general repayment situation, to offset this amount through staging any repayments arising from reductions in British Telecom (BT) and Ministry of Defence (MOD) valuations over five years, a benefit estimated to be worth up to £3.3m next year.

I will also provide for the removal of the 3% cost for councils attributable to housing benefit administration from 2008/09 and reduce the impact of the landlord allowance on councils, for NIHE properties, over 2008/09 and 2009/10, pending a review of the allowance prior to the introduction of the rating of empty homes. This change to the way councils' net revenues are calculated could provide a benefit of up to £4m next year. Finally, there will be a one of reduction in the cost of collection to ensure that some of the additional costs associated with the development of new IT systems are not passed on to councils. This will provide a one off benefit to councils of around £600,000.

The figures in relation to the BT and MOD repayments are indicative at this stage and represent the estimated maximum possible assistance that could be provided to councils next year. They are expected to

fluctuate because the benefit of the MOD and BT offset is dependent on the extent that individual councils would otherwise have been required to repay. Furthermore, the position of individual councils at finalisation is particularly difficult to gauge during this period of unprecedented economic uncertainty. For these reasons is not possible to provide a precise breakdown of the assistance to each council at this stage. However, once there is greater certainty I will ensure that the information is provided.

Rates Reassessment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which Councils have benefitted from rates reassessment on BT properties. (AQW 4285/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The overall value of the BT network has decreased. However, it is expected that Coleraine Borough and Newry and Mourne District Councils could benefit from a small increase in revenue, from the reassessment. All other councils will lose revenue, though one of the main reasons why the overall value of the BT network has decreased in value is because of increased competition in the telecommunications industry. These reductions are therefore indirectly offset by growth elsewhere.

Down District Council could benefit, in revenue terms, from the reassessment of MOD hereditaments. Nine district councils will not be affected given that there are no MOD properties in their area. Those councils likely to have reduced revenue, from the reassessment, are Antrim, Armagh City & District, Ballymena, Banbridge, Belfast City, Coleraine, Craigavon, Derry City, Dungannon & South Tyrone, Fermanagh, Limavady, Lisburn City, Newry and Mourne, Omagh and Strabane district councils. North Down, for whom figures are already finalised, will have reduced revenue.

The package of assistance for councils, which I announced on 19 January, includes help with any repayments associated with reductions in BT and MOD valuations, which would otherwise have been due and owing this year. Where councils are in a general repayment situation, I will allow them to offset this amount through staging the BT and MOD reductions over five years, a benefit reckoned to be worth up to £3.3m next year, intended to cushion the sudden and accumulated impact of these reductions. It is anticipated that 23 district councils could be able to fully stagger their BT and MOD repayments. The remaining three councils, Ballymena, Belfast and Cookstown, could be able to partially stagger their repayments, given that the sums associated with BT and MOD are likely to be greater than their overall repayment.

The figures in relation to the BT and MOD repayments are indicative at this stage and represent the estimated maximum possible assistance that could be provided to councils next year. They are expected to fluctuate because the benefit of the MOD and BT offset is dependent on the extent that individual councils would otherwise have been required to repay. Furthermore, the position of individual councils at finalization is particularly difficult to gauge during this unprecedented economic uncertainty.

Rating on Vacant Properties

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what are his plans to remove rating on vacant properties. (AQW 4386/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have no immediate plans to remove the rating of empty commercial properties. My Department, however, will shortly be undertaking a planned evaluation of the effectiveness and impact of the policy, now that it has been in place for 5 years. This will also afford the opportunity to consider its effect during this period of unprecedented economic uncertainty. England and Wales revised their vacant rating policy from 1 April 2008, moving to 100% rating and extending liability to factories.

In relation to domestic property, while it is intended to rate empty homes at 100% liability from 2010, I will review the introduction of this measure closer to the time, should market conditions not have improved by then. Under the council tax system in the rest of the UK, empty homes are charged. This is usually at 90% of full liability, depending on the charging policy of the local authority concerned.

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if civil servants who left the Civil Service during the six-year back pay period in the equal pay award, will receive the back pay; and how this payment will be made. (AQW 4417/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Work is still ongoing to determine the size and scope of the equal pay issue, those staff affected by it, and what options might exist to resolve it. Negotiations have commenced between Departmental officials and Trade Union Side and several meetings have already taken place with a view to addressing this issue as soon as possible. Until these negotiations are concluded I am not in a position to say what impact, if any, they will have on staff who have left or retired from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Under equal pay legislation however, staff who have left the NICS, or retired from it, have to make a claim with an Industrial Tribunal within six months of leaving.

Location of Public Sector Jobs

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to report on the formation of the Executive sub-committee to lead the relocation initiative and the central unit to provide direction, oversight and support, as specified in the report by Sir George Bain, on the Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs. (AQW 4418/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am currently preparing a paper for consideration by the Executive which I hope will provide an agreed response to Professor Bain's independent Review. It will be in line with the motion passed by the Assembly on 21 October which called for a timely report on how the matter may be addressed. I will be circulating a paper shortly to Ministerial colleagues ahead of an Executive discussion.

Location of Public Sector Jobs

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to confirm that he has referred the report by Sir George Bain on the Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs to the Executive for an early discussion, as indicated in his press statement of 30 September 2008; and, if so, to detail the outcome of these discussions. (AQW 4419/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: On 21 October 2008, during the Assembly debate on Professor Bain's report on the location of public sector jobs, I gave an assurance that I would report to the Executive and the Assembly in a timely manner, having carefully considered the various consequences, including value for money, with views on how this matter may be addressed. I wrote to Executive Ministers at the time asking for their initial views. I am now preparing a paper for the Executive which takes account of the responses from Executive ministers, together with the views of the Finance and Personnel Committee and the points raised during the Assembly debate.

The outcome of the discussion will be available in due course.

Peace III

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) for an update on the delivery of Peace III monies allocated for each priority and theme to organisations that will deliver on the aims and objectives of the programme; and (ii) what the reasons are for any delays in allocating programme funds. (AQW 4469/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The PEACE III Programme is now fully operational. To date 44% of the total funds have been allocated by Steering Committees. A total of 43 letters of offer have been issued under the following themes.

Project Priority & Theme	Funds Approved (£)	Funds Approved (€)
Priority 1 Theme 1 - Local	£29,239,892	€18,025,805
Priority 1 Theme 1 – Regional	£17,052,639	€2,999,099

Project Priority & Theme	Funds Approved (£)	Funds Approved (€)
Priority 1 Theme 2	£4,449,457.72	€1,955,281.43
Priority 2 Theme 1	£24,184,307	€10,855,451
TOTAL	£74,926,295.72	€33,835,636.43

Due to the strategic nature of the PEACE III Programme, Programme implementation arrangements took longer to put in place than originally envisaged. This was due mainly to:

Delays in the formation of local authority clusters because of the uncertainty surrounding the final configuration of RPA boundaries.

The time required to prepare and approve local authority action plans.

The need to put in place selection and approval procedures for large scale, strategic projects.

These difficulties were overcome through constructive cooperation between all interested parties. The Managing Authority is confident that they have been fully resolved and that the Programme will achieve all of its spending and performance targets.

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) how much it will cost in full to meet the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay claim; (ii) how much he has set aside to address this pay claim; and (iii) when this claim will be settled. (AQW 4478/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: No specific sum has been set aside to meet the costs of the equal pay claim. However, the Prime Minister has recently provided access to £100 million for either 2008-09 or 2009-2010 to help to address a range of spending pressures faced by the Executive. The enhanced access to funding is comprised of additional borrowing power and early access to the block grant but it needs to be clearly recognised that funding applied to settling the equal pay issue will not be available to the Executive for other spending proposals.

Officials continue to identify the equal pay vulnerabilities within the NICS and develop options for dealing with previous inequalities. Meanwhile negotiations with NIPSA are ongoing and a further meeting is planned for the end of January. Due to the complexities involved, achieving a negotiated resolution of any equal pay settlement may take some time.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail his Department's contact with the Presbyterian Mutual Society in the last 12 months. (AQW 4512/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: On the 10th November 2008 I, together with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, met with the Presbyterian Mutual Society's Board of Directors to discuss the deteriorating financial position of the organisation.

Following that meeting, the Executive assisted the Society in entering into administration protection.

I have also discussed with Treasury Ministers the ongoing review of such financial institutions in Northern Ireland as announced in the Chancellor's Pre-Budget Report. My officials are assisting HMT in undertaking this review.

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when his Department expects to pay the equal pay claim for Civil Service staff; and how these payments will be made. (AQW 4525/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Officials continue to identify the equal pay vulnerabilities within the NICS and develop options for dealing with previous inequalities. Meanwhile, negotiations with NIPSA are ongoing, with the most recent meeting taking place at the end of January. Due to the complexities involved,

achieving a negotiated resolution of any equal pay settlement may take some time. Until a resolution is achieved it is not possible to give specific details on how any settlement would be administered.

No specific sum has been set aside to meet the costs of the equal pay claim. However, the Prime Minister has recently provided access to £100 million for either 2008-09 or 2009-2010 to help to address a range of spending pressures faced by the Executive. The enhanced access to funding is comprised of additional borrowing power and early access to the block grant but it needs to be clearly recognised that funding applied to settling the equal pay issue will not be available to the Executive for other spending proposals.

Civil Service Reform

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what plans it has to outsource the work of Departments to arm's length agencies or private bodies under its civil service reform responsibility. (AQO 2000/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A number of programmes to facilitate Northern Ireland Civil Service reform have already been implemented. In these programmes there are no current plans to increase the level of outsourcing already undertaken by private sector partners, nor to allocate the work to arm's length agencies.

The procurement of Workplace 2010 is currently suspended.

Phase One of the NI Direct project is being taken forward through a strategic partnership with an external provider. If approval to implement Phase Two of NI Direct is secured in the future, it may be that this would also involve a partnership with an external provider.

Civil Service: Equal Pay Claim

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on efforts to resolve the Civil Service Equal Pay Claim. (AQW 4567/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Officials continue to identify the equal pay vulnerabilities within the NICS and develop options for dealing with previous inequalities. Meanwhile, negotiations with NIPSA are ongoing with the most recent meeting having been held at the end of January

Due to the complexity of the work, the legal issues it raises, and the sensitivity of negotiations at present, it is difficult to provide more specific details on any possible resolution. However, achieving a negotiated resolution of any equal pay settlement may take some time.

Housing Executive's 5 Year Housing Condition Surveys

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if his Department has carried out, or intends to carry out, an investigation into the Department for Social Development's handling of the questionnaire and awarding of the tender for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 5 year housing condition surveys. (AQW 4596/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have not carried out, nor intend to carry out, an investigation into the Department for Social Development's handling of the questionnaire and awarding of the tender for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's housing condition surveys.

This procurement was carried out by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, an accredited Centre of Procurement Expertise, and concerns regarding the procurement process should be addressed to that body.

Rate Arrears

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made to reduce the rate arrears. (AQW 4602/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: At 11 January 2009 the ratepayer debt of £124 million at 31 March 2008 had been reduced to £65 million.

Between 1 April 2008 and 31 December 2008, Land & Property Services has continued to pursue this debt, and also the in-year ratepayer arrears, and has issued –

- 114,000 final notices;
- 42,000 court processes, and
- 11,824 Notices of Intention to Enforce Debt.

Land & Property Services continues to pursue ratepayers for all outstanding debt, including in-year arrears, while at the same time seeking to agree payment arrangements with individuals who are encountering difficulties in making payments and ensuring that they have taken up any benefits and reliefs to which they are entitled.

Departmental Underspend

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if all Departments are not underspending and will not underspend in this financial year (AQW 4783/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information regarding the level of end-year underspend by Northern Ireland departments for 2008-09 will not be available until June 2009, as part of Provisional Outturn.

Cycle to Work Scheme

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel (i) if the ‘cycle to work’ scheme is available to civil servants; (ii) if he has any plans to introduce this scheme; and (iii) what is the eligibility criteria used to determine who can lease a bicycle under this scheme. (AQW 4816/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: A “cycle to work” scheme is not currently available to NICS staff. Central Personnel Group are considering introducing this scheme and our intention will be to allow all staff equal access to the scheme.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Stars Pre-School Playgroup

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to give his reasons for cutting funding to the Stars Pre School Playgroup by 29%, in 2009-10. (AQW 3589/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr M McGimpsey): The Children’s Fund came to an end in March 2008 when the centrally earmarked funding ceased. However I recognised fully the impact that this would have on important activities that were being delivered on the ground. For this reason, I identified within my Department’s budget funding to support projects that had a strong health and social care focus, and I was delighted recently to be able to tell Stars that I would be continuing to support it for a further two years, with grant assistance in the region of £43,000 in each year. The project has already indicated that this level of support will allow it to continue to provide its service, albeit at a reduced level.

I hope you will agree that this represents a considerable ongoing commitment on our part, given the budgetary climate in which we are working. As you know, my Department wasn’t given as much in its budget as I had bid for to run health and social care services, hence the need to prioritise our funding.

Stars Pre-School Playgroup

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the criteria for the 29% funding cut to the Stars Pre-School Playgroup in 2009/10. (AQW 3591/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Children’s Fund came to an end in March 2008 when the centrally earmarked funding ceased. However I recognised fully the impact that this would have on

important activities that were being delivered on the ground. For this reason, I identified within my Department's budget funding to support projects that had a strong health and social care focus, and I was delighted recently to be able to tell Stars that I would be continuing to support it for a further two years, with grant assistance in the region of £43,000 in each year. The project has already indicated that this level of support will allow it to continue to provide its service, albeit at a reduced level.

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Stars Pre-School Playgroup

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration was given to the caring aspect of the work done by Stars Pre-School Playgroup when setting its budget. (AQW 3592/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Children's Fund came to an end in March 2008 when the centrally earmarked funding ceased. However I recognised fully the impact that this would have on important activities that were being delivered on the ground. For this reason, I identified within my Department's budget funding to support projects that had a strong health and social care focus, and I was delighted recently to be able to tell Stars that I would be continuing to support it for a further two years, with grant assistance in the region of £43,000 in each year. The project has already indicated that this level of support will allow it to continue to provide its service, albeit at a reduced level.

I hope you will agree that this represents a considerable ongoing commitment on our part, given the budgetary climate in which we are working. As you know, my Department wasn't given as much in its budget as I had bid for to run health and social care services, hence the need to prioritise our funding.

Preschool Provision

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how will the hours removed from the pre-school provision recommended by Social Services in (i) Ballymena; (ii) Coleraine; and (iii) the Child Development Clinic in Ballymoney, be replaced for the children involved. (AQW 3593/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Board are not aware of any removal of pre-school hours from the pre-school provision recommended by Social Services in Ballymena, Coleraine and the Child Development Clinic in Ballymoney, other than those in respect of projects previously supported through the Children's Fund.

Details of the assessment of award regarding this are set out in my response to your questions regarding the Stars Pre-School Playgroup.

Stars Pre-School Playgroup

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will re-examine the 29% cut in funding to the Stars Pre-School Playgroup in 2009/10. (AQW 3594/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Children's Fund came to an end in March 2008 when the centrally earmarked funding ceased. However I recognised fully the impact that this would have on important activities that were being delivered on the ground. For this reason, I identified within my Department's budget funding to support projects that had a strong health and social care focus, and I was delighted recently to be able to tell Stars that I would be continuing to support it for a further two years, with grant assistance in the region of £43,000 in each year. The project has already indicated that this level of support will allow it to continue to provide its service, albeit at a reduced level.

I hope you will agree that this represents a considerable ongoing commitment on our part, given the budgetary climate in which we are working. As you know, my Department wasn't given as much in its budget as I had bid for to run health and social care services, hence the need to prioritise our funding.

Bangor Health Care Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the total projected capital cost of the proposed Bangor Health Care Centre. (AQW 3612/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you will no doubt be aware, the funding available to me over the next 10 years is insufficient to meet all the capital demands across the HSC estate. To ensure that I make optimum use of the capital resources available to me I commissioned a review of capital priorities earlier in the summer.

Under current plans it is anticipated that the proposed Bangor Health and Care Centre project will commence in 2016/17 with a completion date of 20/21, subject to business case approval.

The capital cost of this scheme is estimated to be £39 million subject to Business Case development and approval.

I am not yet in a position to confirm the location for the provision of the new Health and Care Centre in Bangor as the Business Case is still being developed by the South Eastern Trust.

Bangor Health Care Centre

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what location has been identified for the proposed Bangor Health Care Centre. (AQW 3614/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As you will no doubt be aware, the funding available to me over the next 10 years is insufficient to meet all the capital demands across the HSC estate. To ensure that I make optimum use of the capital resources available to me I commissioned a review of capital priorities earlier in the summer.

Under current plans it is anticipated that the proposed Bangor Health and Care Centre project will commence in 2016/17 with a completion date of 20/21, subject to business case approval.

The capital cost of this scheme is estimated to be £39 million subject to Business Case development and approval.

I am not yet in a position to confirm the location for the provision of the new Health and Care Centre in Bangor as the Business Case is still being developed by the South Eastern Trust.

Rathmore Residential Care Home

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will hold a consultation meeting on the proposed closure of Rathmore Residential Care Home in Ballycastle rather than Coleraine. (AQW 4121/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Responsibility for public meetings regarding Trust consultation proposals falls to each individual Trust. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust will be holding four public meetings across the Trust area and, in identifying the locations for these meetings, sought to have these in locations central to all ten district/borough council areas in the Trust. As the location of the forthcoming meeting in Coleraine has been widely publicised, the Trust does not feel that a change of venue at this stage would be appropriate.

Health and Social Care Trust Directors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many directors there are in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4123/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DIRECTORS EMPLOYED BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT JANUARY 2009.

Health & Social Care Trust	Directors	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	11	11.00
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern	8	8.00
Southern	8	8.00
Western	8	8.00

Source: NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

Notes:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stated that one of their Directors is retiring and the post will not be replaced.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently have one vacant post at Director level.

Figures exclude Chief Executives and Non-Executive Directors.

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Health and Social Care Trust Directors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many directors there are in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4124/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

Table 1: Number of Directors Employed by Health & Social Care Trust as at January 2009.

Health & Social Care Trust	Directors	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	11	11.00
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern	8	8.00
Southern	8	8.00
Western	8	8.00

Source: NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

Notes:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stated that one of their Directors is retiring and the post will not be replaced.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently have one vacant post at Director level.

Figures exclude Chief Executives and Non-Executive Directors.

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Health and Social Care Trust Directors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many directors there are in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4125/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DIRECTORS EMPLOYED BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT JANUARY 2009.

Health & Social Care Trust	Directors	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	11	11.00
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern	8	8.00
Southern	8	8.00
Western	8	8.00

Source: NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

Notes:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stated that one of their Directors is retiring and the post will not be replaced.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently have one vacant post at Director level.

Figures exclude Chief Executives and Non-Executive Directors.

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Health and Social Care Trust Directors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many directors there are in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4126/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DIRECTORS EMPLOYED BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT JANUARY 2009.

Health & Social Care Trust	Directors	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	11	11.00
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern	8	8.00
Southern	8	8.00
Western	8	8.00

Source: NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

Notes:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stated that one of their Directors is retiring and the post will not be replaced.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently have one vacant post at Director level.

Figures exclude Chief Executives and Non-Executive Directors.

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

Health and Social Care Trust Directors

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many directors there are in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4127/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is provided in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF DIRECTORS EMPLOYED BY HEALTH & SOCIAL CARE TRUST AS AT JANUARY 2009.

Health & Social Care Trust	Directors	
	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	11	11.00
Northern	7	7.00
South Eastern	8	8.00
Southern	8	8.00
Western	8	8.00

Source: NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

Notes:

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust stated that one of their Directors is retiring and the post will not be replaced.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust currently have one vacant post at Director level.

Figures exclude Chief Executives and Non-Executive Directors.

WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.

People Refused Wheelchairs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been refused wheelchairs in the Ards Area of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in the past six months.

(AQW 4139/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Processing Time for X-Rays

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the processing times for X-rays carried out at the radiology units in (i) Whiteabbey Hospital and (ii) Moyle Hospital; and how these compare with the radiology department in Antrim Area Hospital.

(AQW 4150/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the time taken to process the results of a diagnostic test, known as the diagnostic turn around time, is collected by time band. It is therefore not possible to calculate the average (arithmetic mean) processing time for x-rays carried out. It is however possible to identify the median or mid point processing time band, i.e. the time band that contains the median waiting time.

The table below shows the median diagnostic turn around time bands for x-rays carried out during 2008 at the radiology units in (i) Whiteabbey Hospital and (ii) Moyle Hospital; and how these compare with the radiology department in Antrim Area Hospital.

Hospital	Median Diagnostic Turn around Time band (in calendar days) for X-rays carried out at the radiology units in 2008
Whiteabbey Hospital	22-28 days
Moyle Hospital	28+ days
Antrim Area Hospital	8-14 days

Source: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Diagnostic turnaround time is measured from the date on which a diagnostic test is performed to the date on which a report is verified and dispatched to the referrer (in calendar days).

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if a child suffering from a severe asthma attack can be treated at the Tyrone County Hospital. (AQW 4163/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

Where an ambulance is called to the home of a child suffering a severe asthma attack the child will be transported directly to the nearest acute hospital.

I am advised that if a child suffering a severe asthmatic attack presents firstly to the Urgent Care and Treatment Centre at the Tyrone County Hospital, they will be immediately transferred to an acute hospital. Ambulance staff will provide appropriate treatment until the child is transferred to the care of staff in an acute hospital.

Children and Adults with Autism

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's assessment criteria for recommending housing adaptations to meet the requirements of those families who have children or adults with autism. (AQW 4182/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The DHSSPS does not have specific assessment criteria for the recommendation of housing adaptations for people with autism. Rather the needs of people with autism is tailored to the specific nature of their condition, its severity and relevant personal and social circumstances.

There are general criteria for the provision of adaptations in the homes of people with disabilities. These have been developed and utilised by Occupational Therapy Services to assist Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts fulfil their statutory responsibilities under the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978. These criteria reflect the clinical, social and technical aspects of care, standardised throughout Northern Ireland and endorsed for use by each of the four Health and Social Services Boards. Recent quality assurance of these criteria has been provided by the Equality Commission and Disability Action in 2003. A copy of the Criteria for the Provision of Adaptations in the Homes of People with Disabilities can be accessed by liaising with your local HSC Trust Community Head Occupational Therapist.

Rathmoyle Nursing Home in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with the appropriate trade unions about the proposed closure of Rathmoyle Nursing Home in Ballycastle. (AQW 4197/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have had high level discussions recently with the Northern and other HSC Trusts concerning the range of efficiency proposals on which they are currently consulting, including those proposals affecting residential care. Given the ongoing consultation process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on specific proposals.

While I have not had discussions with trade union officials regarding Rathmoyle House, officials from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust have met to consult trade union representatives about the proposals for Rathmoyle on January 8th and a further meeting is planned for January 28th 2009.

Rathmoyle Nursing Home in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions he has had with the Health and Social Care Trust about the proposed closure of Rathmoyle Nursing Home. (AQW 4198/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have had high level discussions recently with the Northern and other HSC Trusts concerning the range of efficiency proposals on which they are currently consulting, including those proposals affecting residential care. Given the ongoing consultation process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on specific proposals.

While I have not had discussions with trade union officials regarding Rathmoyle House, officials from the Northern Health and Social Care Trust have met to consult trade union representatives about the proposals for Rathmoyle on January 8th and a further meeting is planned for January 28th 2009.

Child Protection

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there are guidelines on either the average or maximum number of cases allocated to each social worker, working in child protection. (AQW 4213/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Whilst there are no specific guidelines detailing the average or maximum number of cases allocated to each social worker working in child protection, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have issued a Caseload Management Model as part of the reform of front line child protection services. This Model, which is operational in Child Protection and Family Intervention/Family Support Teams, allows social workers and managers to agree caseload numbers based on a points system. Weighting is given on the basis of three major elements that make up workers effort which are risk; complexity; and travel.

The Model gives examples of issues that need to be taken into account and covers child protection cases.

All referrals to the Health and Social Care Trusts are screened by a senior social worker to identify if any cases are of a child protection nature. Such cases are allocated to social work staff and dealt with as a matter of priority. A front-line Gateway Service has been established which includes experienced senior practitioners. A number of expert principal practitioner posts have also been created to support less experienced staff within Trusts.

Child Protection

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how child protection cases are allocated to social workers in recognition of the experience and grade of the social worker. (AQW 4214/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The structures within Health and Social Care Trust children's teams have been developed to acknowledge experience and to retain experienced staff within the childcare service. Senior Practitioners and Principal Practitioners are involved in the most complex cases and provide advice, guidance and support to less experienced social workers and Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) staff.

Newly qualified social workers have to undertake an assessed year in employment and have a protected caseload. The Caseload Management Model issued by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which is operational in Child Protection and Family Intervention/Family Support Teams, reflects this by indicating the average number of points for AYE staff. The Model allows social workers and managers to agree caseload numbers based on a points system. Weighting is given on the basis of three major elements that make up workers effort which are risk; complexity; and travel. The allocation process is underpinned by supervision of individual staff on a regular basis.

The Team Leader is required to consider the experience of staff when considering the complexity of individual cases as well as the capacity of the individual staff member to respond. In circumstances where an individual is working with a caseload above the recommended level for an extended period then the Team Leader is required to advise senior managers of the pressures on individual staff members with a view to addressing these.

Meals for Health and Social Care Trust Staff

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much is spent in each Health and Social Care Trust on subsidising meals for staff. (AQW 4215/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Patients' Medical Records

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the legal requirement is that determines the length of time for keeping patients medical records. (AQW 4216/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Disposal of Documents Order (NI) 1925 outlines the responsibilities for the preservation and disposal of all public records, including patient's medical records.

The length of time patients' medical records are kept is also governed by the legislation that covers the information contained within the record, for example, if the medical record contains information on Mentally Disordered Persons under the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986, the medical record would be kept for 20 years from the last entry.

Ards Hospital Site

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the Ards Hospital site is not used at present. (AQW 4217/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust advise that 14% of the Ards Hospital site is not used at present.

Health and Social Care Trusts Maintenance Work

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the cost was for maintenance in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts, for the last financial year. (AQW 4218/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much it cost for gardening maintenance for each Health and Social Care Trust, for the last financial year. (AQW 4219/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Rosedale Nursing Home

Mr Burnside asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to breakdown the operational cost for Rosedale Nursing Home by (i) staffing; (ii) maintenance; (iii) fuel; and (iv) any other investment such as renovation and refurbishment, for 2007/8; and how many people are on its waiting list. (AQW 4225/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust have provided the following breakdown of the operational cost of Rosedale residential home for 2007/08;

Staff	£ 597 000
Maintenance:	
Revenue	24,000
Capital	72,000
Heat/Light	49,000
Other Investment	68,000
Total Cost	810,000

The Trust has advised that there are currently 11 people on the waiting list for Rosedale.

Craigavon Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 229/09, (i) how many midwives have been recruited by Craigavon Hospital since 8 September 2008; and (ii) are maternity services now operating with a full complement of midwives. (AQW 4236/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust advises that a total of 12 midwives (11.67 whole time equivalent) have been recruited since 8th September 2008.

The Trust is still working towards filling the remaining vacant 88 hours. These hours have been offered to candidates on a waiting list.

Rathlin Island: Health Provision

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the work of his Department as part of the inter-departmental Regional Group in relation to health provision on Rathlin Island. (AQW 4245/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Inter-Departmental Regional Group was formed to develop a central government policy for Rathlin Island. The Group has held a series of meetings to consider a wide range of issues relating to Rathlin Island, including health provision on the island. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust, as the provider of healthcare services for the island, is represented on the Group. The Inter-Departmental Group has developed a draft policy document for the island which was issued to relevant Departments and islanders for consideration in January 2009.

In response to concerns raised by the islanders, during my recent visit to Rathlin Island, I gave a commitment to the provision of 24/7 nursing care on the island. My Department is currently liaising with the Northern HSC Trust to progress this. In addition, the Northern HSS Board has agreed the provision of chronic disease management and flu clinics on the island for the period up to 31 March 2009 as part of a pilot Local Enhanced Service programme. These services are provided by the GP practices in Ballycastle Health Centre with support from Trust nurses.

MRI Scans

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for (i) obtaining an MRI scan; and (ii) obtaining the results of an MRI scan, at each hospital that provides this procedure. (AQW 4258/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Waiting list information is collected by time band. It is therefore not possible to calculate the average (arithmetic mean) waiting time for obtaining an MRI scan and obtaining the results of an MRI scan. It is however possible to identify the median or mid point waiting time band, i.e. the timeband that contains the median waiting time.

The median waiting time band for patients waiting for (i) obtaining an MRI scan at 31st December 2008 and (ii) obtaining the results of an MRI scan during December 2008, for each hospital that provides this procedure, is shown in the table below.

Hospital	Median timeband (in weeks) for patients waiting for an MRI scan at 31st December 2008	Median timeband (in days) for obtaining the results of an MRI scan during December 2008.
Antrim	> 3 - 6 weeks	8 - 14 days
Ulster	> 3 - 6 weeks	3 - 7 days
Altnagelvin	> 3 - 6 weeks	3 - 7 days
Royal Victoria	> 3 - 6 weeks	0 - 2 days
Belfast City	> 3 - 6 weeks	0 - 2 days
Mater	> 3 - 6 weeks	15 - 21 days
Musgrave	> 3 - 6 weeks	3 - 7 days

Hospital	Median timeband (in weeks) for patients waiting for an MRI scan at 31st December 2008	Median timeband (in days) for obtaining the results of an MRI scan during December 2008.
Craigavon Area	0 – 3 weeks	8 – 14 days

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts.

Sexual Health

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the contribution of the work carried out by ‘Love for Life’ on matters of sexual health. (AQW 4259/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Love for Life has been extremely active in regard to matters of sexual health and I would in particular note its role and involvement in relation to the implementation of my Department’s Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood Strategy and Action Plan, and development of the recently published Sexual Health Promotion Strategy and Action Plan.

Liverpool Care Pathway

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in relation to the debate that followed the Ministerial Statement of 3 June 2008, what recommendations came out of the report into the ‘Liverpool pathway to death system’. (AQW 4269/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Liverpool Care Pathway (LCP) for the dying patient, which has been developed by the Marie Curie Hospice and the Specialist Palliative Care Team at the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust, is designed to transfer the hospice model of care into other care settings. It is a multiprofessional document which provides an evidence-based framework for end-of-life care.

The RQIA review of the outbreak of *Clostridium difficile* in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust did not make any recommendations in relation to the Liverpool Care Pathway.

Following the debate on 3 June I asked the Northern Trust to investigate the events raised in relation to the use of the LCP. The Trust completed that investigation in August. The Trust has been advised that for reasons associated with the Data Protection Act the report should not be published. However the Trust has advised me that they are implementing all the recommendations that arose from the investigation, and that they are doing so in cooperation with members of the family concerned.

Fairhill Residential Home in Cookstown

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any proposals to close the Fairhill Residential home in Cookstown or any other residential homes in the Mid-Ulster constituency. (AQW 4284/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that they own one residential care home for the elderly in the Mid Ulster area, Westlands Home in Cookstown. While the Trust is consulting on the future of a number of its homes, Westlands is not one of these. Fairfields residential home, on Fairhill in Cookstown, is an independently-owned establishment; its future, therefore, is a private matter for the homeowner.

Numbers of Smokers

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the latest figures his Department has on the number of people who smoke, over the past ten years. (AQW 4286/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Estimates of the prevalence of cigarette smoking are obtained through the Continuous Household Survey (CHS). Since 1990/91 the CHS has included a module on smoking biennially, until the introduction of the Smoking (Northern Ireland) Order 2006; since when the

smoking module has been included annually. The table below shows the estimates of the prevalence of cigarette smoking for persons aged 16 and over.

	1998/99	2000/01	2002/03	2004/05	2006/07	2007/08
All Adults aged 16 and over	29%	27%	26%	26%	25%	23%

Loughview Surgery

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Global Sun Calculation for the surgery at Shore Road Kircubbin has not had a reply for 12 months. (AQW 4301/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As outlined in my recent correspondence, officials in my Department have been working with the Central Services Agency and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board in order to determine the correct financial position with regard to Global Sum and Correction Factor payments for Loughview Surgery under the legislative framework of the Statement of Financial Entitlements, as well as its historic funding during the baseline period.

This particular case has been complex, with the potential to create a precedent that would affect the funding of all GP practices, and so has required careful and detailed consideration among the Central Services Agency, the Eastern Health Board and the Department. While it is regrettable for the practice that a final determination has not yet issued, it is envisaged that this will be issued to Loughview Surgery shortly.

Construction Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what construction projects and maintenance contracts could he offer to the construction industry in the coming year. (AQW 4302/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts are contractually committed in the next financial year to a wide range of construction projects with total projected spend in 2009/10 of more than £90million.

Expenditure cannot be incurred on any schemes until the respective business cases have been assessed and approved where necessary by DFP, and/or contracts awarded.

Parkinson's Disease

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are suffering from Parkinson's Disease in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4311/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the reply I gave to AQW 2665/09 on 4th December 2008.

Parkinson's Disease

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people suffer from Parkinson's Disease in Northern Ireland. (AQW 4312/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the reply I gave to AQW 2665/09 on 4th December 2008.

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will ensure that there will be a robust analysis of all additional posts approved for the Stroke Strategy. (AQW 4314/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

I have allocated an additional £14m over the next 3 years (with £9m recurrent from year 4) to implement the improvements set out in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. Trusts are required to use that additional funding to deliver the specific targets set out in that document and this will be monitored through existing Trust and Departmental monitoring arrangements.

I am advised that the Western Trust has nominated its Chief Executive as its representative on the Regional Stroke Implementation Group. I am also advised that, due to other critical issues within the Trust over the past few months neither she nor her deputy has been available to attend Implementation Group meetings. I am assured that the Trust is playing a full part in the sub groups established to take forward specific work streams.

The recommendations arising from the Stroke Strategy are to be delivered to benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live. Each Trust is required to implement all of the recommendations by the set target dates. This will ensure equity of access to stroke services across Northern Ireland.

In addition, a Regional Stroke Implementation Group (RSIG) has been established to take forward and to oversee all of the recommendations in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. This group includes membership from the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts, the Department and the voluntary sector and ensures a regional approach to implementing the recommendations. A number of sub groups have been established to ensure that implementation is taken forward as quickly and as effectively as possible and with representation from across the region.

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can guarantee all additional funds (£14m per annum from 2011/12) allocated for the Stroke Strategy will be used for improvement in stroke services and that existing funding will not be redirected for other use. (AQW 4315/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

I have allocated an additional £14m over the next 3 years (with £9m recurrent from year 4) to implement the improvements set out in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. Trusts are required to use that additional funding to deliver the specific targets set out in that document and this will be monitored through existing Trust and Departmental monitoring arrangements.

I am advised that the Western Trust has nominated its Chief Executive as its representative on the Regional Stroke Implementation Group. I am also advised that, due to other critical issues within the Trust over the past few months neither she nor her deputy has been available to attend Implementation Group meetings. I am assured that the Trust is playing a full part in the sub groups established to take forward specific work streams.

The recommendations arising from the Stroke Strategy are to be delivered to benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live. Each Trust is required to implement all of the recommendations by the set target dates. This will ensure equity of access to stroke services across Northern Ireland.

In addition, a Regional Stroke Implementation Group (RSIG) has been established to take forward and to oversee all of the recommendations in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. This group includes membership from the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts, the Department and the voluntary sector and ensures a regional approach to implementing the recommendations. A number of sub groups have been established to ensure that implementation is taken forward as quickly and as effectively as possible and with representation from across the region.

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what proportion of the costs for a second post consultant neurologist at Altnagelvin Hospital will be drawn from monies for the Stroke Strategy. (AQW 4316/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is primarily a matter for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

In this context, I am advised by the Western Trust that the appointment of the second consultant neurologist post at Altnagelvin Hospital will be funded from their allocation of the additional funding provided to support delivery of the Stroke Strategy "Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland".

I am also advised that the additional consultant neurologist, whilst located at Altnagelvin is a Trust appointment and will release other consultant time to drive an improvement stroke services across the Trust and in particular the preparatory work for out of hours thrombolysis.

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can confirm if the four meetings of the Regional Stroke Implementation Strategy Working Group have been attended by a representative from the Western Health and Social Care Services Trust. (AQW 4317/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

I have allocated an additional £14m over the next 3 years (with £9m recurrent from year 4) to implement the improvements set out in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. Trusts are required to use that additional funding to deliver the specific targets set out in that document and this will be monitored through existing Trust and Departmental monitoring arrangements.

I am advised that the Western Trust has nominated its Chief Executive as its representative on the Regional Stroke Implementation Group. I am also advised that, due to other critical issues within the Trust over the past few months neither she nor her deputy has been available to attend Implementation Group meetings. I am assured that the Trust is playing a full part in the sub groups established to take forward specific work streams.

The recommendations arising from the Stroke Strategy are to be delivered to benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live. Each Trust is required to implement all of the recommendations by the set target dates. This will ensure equity of access to stroke services across Northern Ireland.

In addition, a Regional Stroke Implementation Group (RSIG) has been established to take forward and to oversee all of the recommendations in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. This group includes membership from the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts, the Department and the voluntary sector and ensures a regional approach to implementing the recommendations. A number of sub groups have been established to ensure that implementation is taken forward as quickly and as effectively as possible and with representation from across the region.

Rapid Response Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety with which unions has he discussed the introduction of Rapid Response Vehicles; and what was the outcome of these meetings. (AQW 4318/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have not had direct discussions with trade unions about the introduction of Rapid Response Vehicles (RRVs). RRVs were introduced in 2003. Prior to their introduction the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) worked with the Staff Side representative (representing the four trade unions UNISON, GMB, NIPSA, and UNITE) to jointly develop and implement a

local agreement for the introduction of RRVs and an RRV despatch procedure. Since the introduction of RRVs NIAS management have continued to work with Staff Side to develop a lone worker policy to address potential health and safety issues for lone workers including RRV personnel. More recently, NIAS has consulted trade unions on its current Comprehensive Spending Review proposals which include increasing the number of RRVs and the hours of RRV emergency response cover.

Rapid Response Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department has considered the possibility that attacks on paramedics would increase with the introduction of Rapid Response Vehicles.

(AQW 4319/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised that there is no evidence to date that Rapid Response Vehicle personnel are at any greater risk of attack than other emergency response personnel.

Rapid Response Vehicles

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he agrees that the introduction of Rapid Response Vehicles in rural parts of Wales has led to many negative incidents and an increase in attacks on paramedics.

(AQW 4320/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not in a position to comment on issues relating to ambulance service provision in Wales.

Ambulances

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the longest turnaround time was for ambulances waiting to hand patients over to each hospital in (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008.

(AQW 4321/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is shown in the table below. It should be noted that to ensure the continuity of patient care, the ambulance may on occasion be required to wait at a hospital.

Hospital	2006 Hrs/mins/secs	2007 Hrs/mins/secs	2008 Hrs/mins/secs
Altnagelvin	4:02:31	3:00:26	2:54:15
Antrim Area	2:10:00	4:29:58	1:46:11
Belfast City	3:26:39	3:04:37	1:05:45
Causeway	3:32:29	1:49:00	2:50:25
Craigavon Area	3:01:58	8:36:18	4:54:08
Daisy Hill	2:16:49	2:14:57	2:46:07
Downe	3:07:10	1:39:47	4:30:00
Erne	2:31:05	3:27:04	0:56:32
Lagan Valley	3:17:30	2:15:27	1:33:57
Mater Infirmorum	2:30:34	6:05:47	4:16:47
Mid Ulster	1:55:45	1:40:31	2:47:00
Royal Victoria	4:42:30	3:56:53	3:33:00
Tyrone County	2:15:35	2:41:16	2:21:01

Hospital	2006 Hrs/mins/secs	2007 Hrs/mins/secs	2008 Hrs/mins/secs
Ulster	3:27:04	3:19:32	6:38:00
Whiteabbey	1:39:15	1:30:32	1:19:13

Ambulances

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the average turnaround time was for ambulances waiting to hand patients over to each hospital in (i) 2006; (ii) 2007; and (iii) 2008.

(AQW 4322/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Ambulance turnaround times at Northern Ireland hospitals with A&E departments are shown in the table below.

Hospital	2006 Mins:secs	2007 Mins:secs	2008 Mins:secs
Altnagelvin	17:49	17:37	16:43
Antrim Area	17:05	17:25	17:33
Belfast City	17:22	17:59	16:55
Causeway Hospital	14:51	14:47	14:19
Craigavon Area	15:41	16:27	16:11
Daisy Hill	16:18	15:15	15:27
Downe	14:56	14:47	15:03
Erne Hospital	17:48	16:32	15:07
Lagan Valley	14:39	13:49	13:23
Mater Infirmorum	15:59	16:48	16:53
Mid Ulster Magherafelt	15:51	15:22	15:03
Royal Victoria	18:21	18:38	19:44
Tyrone County	16:36	14:05	13:52
Ulster Hospital	19:07	19:48	19:58
Whiteabbey	12:16	11:50	12:26
Total	16:47	17:03	17:10

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the second consultant post in neurology at Altnagelvin Hospital will be funded solely from the additional stroke monies, and if the post will be exclusively dedicated to additional stroke services.

(AQW 4323/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is primarily a matter for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

In this context, I am advised by the Western Trust that the appointment of the second consultant neurologist post at Altnagelvin Hospital will be funded from their allocation of the additional funding provided to support delivery of the Stroke Strategy "Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland".

I am also advised that the additional consultant neurologist, whilst located at Altnagelvin is a Trust appointment and will release other consultant time to drive an improvement stroke services across the Trust and in particular the preparatory work for out of hours thrombolysis.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to breakdown the capital spend for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (i) in 2008/09; and (ii) projected for 2009/10. (AQW 4324/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Capital allocations totalling £54million have been made to the South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust in 2008/09 to address a wide range of projects in areas such as construction, equipment and ICT.

Capital allocations for 2009/10 have not yet been formally advised to Trusts; current planned allocations total more than £30 million.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what lands are owned by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4325/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand having sought clarification that the 'capital assets' referred to relate to land and buildings.

The land and buildings owned by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are listed below.

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Ards Training Resource Centre 205 South Street Newtownards	Kyle House 13 Ballyholme Rd Bangor
Ardview House 18 The Ward Ardglass	Lagan Valley Hospital 39 Hillsborough Road Lisburn
Balloo Training Centre 94 Newtownards Rd Bangor	Land at Stoney Rd on long term lease to Knock Golf Club Stoney Road Belfast
Ballymacoss Hostel 4 Mourneview Park Lisburn	Laurelhill House 1 Ballymacash Park Lisburn
Ballynahinch Community Services 45 Main Street Ballynahinch	Lindsay House 1 Laurel Way Dunmurry
Ballywalter Health Clinic 107 Main Street Ballywalter	Lisburn Assessment & Resource Centre (LARC) 58 Wallace Avenue Lisburn
Bangor Health Clinic 1 Newtownards Rd Bangor	Lisburn Health Centre 25 Linenhall Street Lisburn

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Bangor Hospital 73 Castle Street Bangor	Loch Cuan EPH Bridge Street Downpatrick
Bayview Resource Centre Ballyholme Rd Bangor	Loch Cuan EPH 2 Dakota Avenue Newtownards
Bayview site (former Bayview Resource Centre) 165 Groomsport Road Bangor	Marmion Childrens Home 126 Church Road Holywood
Beechfield Respite Unit 32 Beechfield Ave Conlig	Mount Alexander EPH 18 Castlelodge Pk Comber
Castlewellan Health Clinic 23 Newcastle Road Castlewellan	Mountview Training Centre 9 Flying Horse Road Downpatrick
Colin Family Centre 5 Pembroke Loop Road Poleglass	Newcastle Clinic 20 Park Avenue Newcastle
Comber Health Centre 5 Newtownards Road Comber	Newcroft Lodge 124 Church Road Holywood
Crossgar Health Clinic 2 John Street Crossgar	Newtownards Health Centre (Former) 17 Frederick Street Newtownards
Donaghadee Health Centre 1 Killaughey Road Donaghadee	Northfield EPH 3 Northfield Road Donaghadee
Downe Hospital 3 Pound Lane Downpatrick	Occupation Centre and HC James Street Newtownards
Downshire Hospital 10 Ardglass Road Downpatrick	81 Market Street Downpatrick
Drumlough House 3 Moira Road Lisburn	Portaferry Health Centre 27 Ann Street Portaferry
Dunmurry Health Clinic 19 Upper Dunmurry Lane Dunmurry	Portavogie Health Centre 54 New Harbour Rd Portavogie
Fountain St Day Centre 28 John Street Downpatrick	Ravara House EPH 13 Ravara Gardens Bangor

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Glenmore House 1 Glenmore Park Lisburn	Ravara Staff House 13 Ravara Gardens Bangor
Glenwood House 1 Glenwood Green Dunmurry	Ravara Training & Resource Centre 14 Ravara Gardens Bangor
Greyabbey Health Clinic 17 Main Street Greyabbey	Resource Centre 37 Knocknashinna Road Downpatrick
Grove House 6 Antrim Road Ballynahinch	Respite & Daycare Centre 70 Hillsborough Road Lisburn
Health Centre & Clinic 14 Pound Lane Downpatrick	Rowan Centre 56 Wallace Avenue Lisburn
Hillhall Hostel 11 Hillhall Gardens Lisburn	169 Rathgael Road Bangor
Hillsborough Health Centre 29 Ballynahinch Street Hillsborough	Saintfield Health Centre 16 Fairview Saintfield
Hollywood Health Clinic 16 High Street Holywood	Seymour House 1 Laurel Way Dunmurry

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what capital assets are owned by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4326/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I understand having sought clarification that the 'capital assets' referred to relate to land and buildings.

The land and buildings owned by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are listed below.

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Ards Training Resource Centre 205 South Street Newtownards	Kyle House 13 Ballyholme Rd Bangor
Ardview House 18 The Ward Ardglass	Lagan Valley Hospital 39 Hillsborough Road Lisburn

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Balloo Training Centre 94 Newtownards Rd Bangor	Land at Stoney Rd on long term lease to Knock Golf Club Stoney Road Belfast
Ballymacoss Hostel 4 Mourneview Park Lisburn	Laurelhill House 1 Ballymacash Park Lisburn
Ballynahinch Community Services 45 Main Street Ballynahinch	Lindsay House 1 Laurel Way Dunmurry
Ballywalter Health Clinic 107 Main Street Ballywalter	Lisburn Assessment & Resource Centre (LARC) 58 Wallace Avenue Lisburn
Bangor Health Clinic 1 Newtownards Rd Bangor	Lisburn Health Centre 25 Linenhall Street Lisburn
Bangor Hospital 73 Castle Street Bangor	Loch Cuan EPH Bridge Street Downpatrick
Bayview Resource Centre Ballyholme Rd Bangor	Loch Cuan EPH 2 Dakota Avenue Newtownards
Bayview site (former Bayview Resource Centre) 165 Groomsport Road Bangor	Marmion Childrens Home 126 Church Road Holywood
Beechfield Respite Unit 32 Beechfield Ave Conlig	Mount Alexander EPH 18 Castlelodge Pk Comber
Castlewellan Health Clinic 23 Newcastle Road Castlewellan	Mountview Training Centre 9 Flying Horse Road Downpatrick
Colin Family Centre 5 Pembroke Loop Road Poleglass	Newcastle Clinic 20 Park Avenue Newcastle
Comber Health Centre 5 Newtownards Road Comber	Newcroft Lodge 124 Church Road Holywood
Crossgar Health Clinic 2 John Street Crossgar	Newtownards Health Centre (Former) 17 Frederick Street Newtownards
Donaghadee Health Centre 1 Killaughey Road Donaghadee	Northfield EPH 3 Northfield Road Donaghadee

Ards Hospital 8 Church Street Newtownards	Kircubbin Clinic 9 Church Grove Kircubbin
Downe Hospital 3 Pound Lane Downpatrick	Occupation Centre and HC James Street Newtownards
Downshire Hospital 10 Ardglass Road Downpatrick	81 Market Street Downpatrick
Drumlough House 3 Moira Road Lisburn	Portaferry Health Centre 27 Ann Street Portaferry
Dunmurry Health Clinic 19 Upper Dunmurry Lane Dunmurry	Portavogie Health Centre 54 New Harbour Rd Portavogie
Fountain St Day Centre 28 John Street Downpatrick	Ravara House EPH 13 Ravara Gardens Bangor
Glenmore House 1 Glenmore Park Lisburn	Ravara Staff House 13 Ravara Gardens Bangor
Glenwood House 1 Glenwood Green Dunmurry	Ravara Training & Resource Centre 14 Ravara Gardens Bangor
Greyabbey Health Clinic 17 Main Street Greyabbey	Resource Centre 37 Knocknashinna Road Downpatrick
Grove House 6 Antrim Road Ballynahinch	Respite & Daycare Centre 70 Hillsborough Road Lisburn
Health Centre & Clinic 14 Pound Lane Downpatrick	Rowan Centre 56 Wallace Avenue Lisburn
Hillhall Hostel 11 Hillhall Gardens Lisburn	169 Rathgael Road Bangor
Hillsborough Health Centre 29 Ballynahinch Street Hillsborough	Saintfield Health Centre 16 Fairview Saintfield
Hollywood Health Clinic 16 High Street Hollywood	Seymour House 1 Laurel Way Dunmurry

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to breakdown the purposes and areas, such as capital and resources, on which the additional £43m allocated to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will be spent. (AQW 4327/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The additional £43m revenue allocated to the South Eastern Trust following negotiation with Commissioners is intended to deliver on commitments and targets as set out in the Executive's Programme for Government and my Priorities for Action. This represents the additional investment available by 2010/11.

	£'m
Demographic Pressures	6.3
Long Term Conditions - Chronic Disease	2.0
Children's Services	1.5
Mental Health Services	4.0
Learning Disability Services	2.9
Disability Services	1.2
Children with Complex Needs	0.8
Cancer	0.8
Cardiovascular	0.8
Elective Care Access	1.2
Hospital & Specialist Drugs	2.4
Stroke	1.7
Trauma & Orthopaedics	1.8
Plastics	1.2
Expand Renal Capacity	1.3
Other Acute Services	1.6
Quality and Safety	0.9
Integrated Medicines Mgmt Initiatives	0.2
Nurse Mentoring	0.4
Prison Healthcare	0.5
Revenue Consequences of Capital Investment	9.5
TOTAL	£43m

Independent Sector Providers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to break down by Health and Social Care Trust, the cost of using Independent Sector Providers, for the last financial year. (AQW 4342/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Agency Staff

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to break down by Health and Social Care Trust, the cost for the use of Agency staff, for the last financial year. (AQW 4343/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the use of Agency staff is published on a bi-annual basis on the departmental website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/hrd/wpu/wpu-monitoring.htm

Ravara House Residential Home

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the costing of refurbishment from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust for Ravara House Residential Home, Bangor, under their plans for its closure. (AQW 4344/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The South Eastern Trust has advised that the £550,000 cost of refurbishing Ravara House comprises: replacement of the roof (£214,000), window repairs (£15,000), DDA Works (£20,000), Electrical rewiring (£100,000), Fire Safety Escapes (£20,000), Fixed Plant and Equipment (£50,000), Plumbing and Sanitary Ware (£50,000), Remedial Works (£50,000) and Grounds hard surface maintenance (£30,000).

This level of investment would not, however, address the remaining issue of functional suitability with corridors and doorways being too narrow by contemporary standards, a lack of ensuite facilities and bedroom sizes being too small.

Acute Medical Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what implications the withdrawal of financial support by HSBC will have for the future development of the new Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. (AQW 4361/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not envisaged that the decision by HSBC to withdraw from all PFI related projects will have any implications for the future development of the new Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. Their decision was dealt with at the time by the Successful Tenderer for the Hospital, Northern Ireland Health Group. This matter remains commercially confidential and as such no further details can be disclosed at this time. The project remains on schedule for financial close this Spring.

Acute Medical Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what medical evidence he received to indicate that acute medical services could no longer be maintained at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 4362/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In recent months, a number of key medical staff in the Western Health and Social Care Trust have advised my Department of the necessity to consolidate acute inpatient medical services on the Erne and Altnagelvin hospital sites if we are to ensure safe services for the people of the south-west.

The evidence from local clinicians was also supported by my Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer.

Acute Medical Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many additional beds will be provided at the Erne and Altnagelvin Hospitals, after the acute medical service at Tyrone County Hospital closes at the beginning of March 2009. (AQW 4363/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Following an analysis of recent admissions to Tyrone County Hospital the Western Trust has estimated that, initially, an additional 12 beds will be required at each of the Erne and Altnagelvin hospitals.

The Western Trust has given an assurance that arrangements will be in place to deal effectively with the additional bed demand.

Health Service Vacancies

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what his Department is doing in conjunction with the Western Health and Social Care Trust to attract qualified consultants, doctors and nursing staff to fill the vacancies in that area. (AQW 4364/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Recruitment is a matter for Health and Social Care Trusts and the Western Trust has advised that they make every effort to ensure vacancies are filled.

There is a single on-line point of advertisement for all HSC jobs at www.hpssjobs.com and my Department, in conjunction with HSC Trusts, promotes health service careers generally through recruitment fairs and via the Departmental and Trust websites.

In addition, to help ensure that sufficient, suitably qualified staff are available to meet the needs of the service overall, my Department commissions training for healthcare professionals. The Department spends in the region of £150m per annum on training of healthcare staff.

Acute Medical Services

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain why the liaison group, set up by Omagh District Council at his request to shape the future for services at the new hospital planned for Omagh was not consulted prior to his decision to remove acute medical services from the Tyrone County Hospital; and to clarify the role of this liaison group. (AQW 4365/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I agreed with the party leaders within Omagh District Council that they would form a liaison group to improve communication with the Western Trust regarding the new £190m enhanced local hospital in Omagh.

To date, I am disappointed to note that this group has yet to meet and establish terms of reference. It was therefore not possible to consult with them prior to this decision

Stroke Strategy

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the approach taken by the five Health and Social Care Trusts in working with the Regional Implementation Group; and if the agreed strategy ensure that there is a synergistic approach rather than a postcode lottery in the future care of stroke survivors. (AQW 4366/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for Trusts to decide on the specific staffing required to deliver services to their populations. In creating new posts Trusts must apply strict value for money criteria to ensure that any new investment will provide an appropriate service improvement. Those same arrangements will apply to posts created to improve stroke services.

I have allocated an additional £14m over the next 3 years (with £9m recurrent from year 4) to implement the improvements set out in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. Trusts are required to use that additional funding to deliver the specific targets set out in that document and this will be monitored through existing Trust and Departmental monitoring arrangements.

I am advised that the Western Trust has nominated its Chief Executive as its representative on the Regional Stroke Implementation Group. I am also advised that, due to other critical issues within the Trust over the past few months neither she nor her deputy has been available to attend Implementation Group meetings. I am assured that the Trust is playing a full part in the sub groups established to take forward specific work streams.

The recommendations arising from the Stroke Strategy are to be delivered to benefit all of the people of Northern Ireland, regardless of where they live. Each Trust is required to implement all of the recommendations by the set target dates. This will ensure equity of access to stroke services across Northern Ireland.

In addition, a Regional Stroke Implementation Group (RSIG) has been established to take forward and to oversee all of the recommendations in Improving Stroke Services in Northern Ireland. This group includes membership from the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts, the Department and the voluntary sector and ensures a regional approach to implementing the recommendations. A number of sub groups have been established to ensure that implementation is taken forward as quickly and as effectively as possible and with representation from across the region.

Ambulances

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will extend the consultation period, on the Proposals for Efficiency Savings and CSR Investment 2008-11 for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, considering that the consultation period included the Christmas and New Year holidays and could adversely affect the response rate. (AQW 4495/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is a matter for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) to determine the length of time which the consultation period for its CSR efficiency and investment proposals will run. While guidance on public consultation indicates a minimum period of 8 weeks, the Ambulance Service has allowed a full 12 weeks for consultation on its CSR proposals.

Good Morning Projects

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Good Morning Projects. (AQW 4541/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

While Good Morning Projects are not specifically health – related, I recognise that they can make a positive contribution to the overall well-being of older people. However, my Department can only provide funding to projects which are of a regional nature and I am therefore unable to provide funding to a project which operates only in the Belfast area.

Good Morning Projects

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department is planning to fund the Good Morning Project in Belfast; and if so, when this funding will begin. (AQW 4542/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

While Good Morning Projects are not specifically health – related, I recognise that they can make a positive contribution to the overall well-being of older people. However, my Department can only provide funding to projects which are of a regional nature and I am therefore unable to provide funding to a project which operates only in the Belfast area.

NHS Dentists

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the number of salaried NHS dentists that have been recruited, by each Health and Social Services Board, since the initiative was announced in the Assembly in September 2007. (AQW 4568/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A total of four salaried dentists have been recruited, all in the Northern Board. A recruitment exercise by the Western Board failed to attract suitable candidates. As I advised the Assembly on 29th April and 30th September last year, my Department is taking steps to recruit 38 additional health service dentists in those areas of Northern Ireland where health service dental provision is problematic. I expect a contract for this work to be awarded by the Spring of this year.

Portstewart Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will intervene to stop the removal of the second fire appliance at the Portstewart Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service station. (AQW 4570/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently considering a range of efficiency proposals from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which include the removal of the second appliance from Portstewart fire station.

I have yet to come to a conclusion.

Portstewart Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact the removal of the second Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service appliance in Portstewart will have on the fire cover for (i) Coleraine; (ii) Portrush; (iii) Limavady; and (iv) Ballymoney, when reinforcement cover is required in the Coleraine operational area. (AQW 4574/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently considering a range of efficiency proposals from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which include the removal of the second appliance from Portstewart fire station.

I have yet to come to a conclusion.

Portstewart Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can give an assurance that the removal of the second Fire and Rescue appliance from Portstewart will not set a precedent for other fire stations. (AQW 4575/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board and its Chief Fire Officer have a clear statutory responsibility to continually examine, review and demonstrate that as a fire and rescue service, it has the right resources in the right place and at the right time to ensure the safety of the public and Firefighters. For that reason, the provision of emergency cover in all fire stations in Northern Ireland is kept under constant review.

Portstewart Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he can give a definitive assurance that the removal of the second Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service appliance from Portstewart station is not a prelude to the closure of the station. (AQW 4576/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no current plans to close Portstewart station. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Chief Fire Officer and the Board have a clear statutory responsibility to continually examine, review and demonstrate with strong evidence that as a fire and rescue service, it has the right resources in the right place and at the right time to ensure the safety of the public and Firefighters. The provision of emergency cover in all fire stations in Northern Ireland is therefore kept under constant review.

Portstewart Fire Station

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the impact on public safety in the North Coast area with the removal of the 2nd Fire and Rescue appliance from Portstewart fire station. (AQW 4577/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am currently considering a range of efficiency proposals from the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which include the removal of the second appliance from Portstewart fire station.

I have yet to come to a conclusion.

Mental-Health Nurses

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of mental-health nurses who graduated in 2008 have obtained permanent posts. (AQW 4582/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Queen's University, Belfast, have confirmed that of those Mental-Health nursing students who graduated in 2008 and returned destination survey questionnaires, 97% have obtained nursing posts. It is not known whether these are permanent posts as students are not requested to specify the length of the employment contract.

University of Ulster have reported that destination statistics for those students who successfully completed their Mental-Health programme in 2008 are not yet available.

Mental-Health Nurses

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many mental health-nursing posts are vacant in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4583/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of vacant posts for mental health nurses in Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts is given in the table below.

TABLE 1: NUMBER OF CURRENT VACANCIES AND STAFF IN POST FOR MENTAL HEALTH NURSES IN NORTHERN IRELAND HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE.

Trust	Current Vacancies at 30th January 2009		Staff in Post at 30th January 2009	
	Headcount	WTE	Headcount	WTE
Belfast	17	17.0	437	411.9
Northern	17	17.0	351	326.9
South Eastern	36	31.0	434	420.5
Southern	17	17.0	295	272.8
Western	2	2.0	214	203.3
Total	89	84.0	1731	1635.5

Source: NI Health & Social Care Trusts and Human Resource Management System

Notes:

1. WTE = Whole-Time Equivalent.
2. A current vacancy is an unoccupied post, which at 30th January 2009 was vacant and which the organisation was actively trying to fill.
3. These figures exclude Temporary Post vacancies.
4. South Eastern HSC Trust is currently recruiting for Mental-Health Nurses. They have 13 people short listed for 8 Band 5 posts and will hold interviews in the next fortnight.
5. Western HSC Trust operate a live waiting list and stated that their Band 5 Mental-Health Nurse vacancies will be allocated from their waiting list.
6. Staff in post figures exclude bank staff.

Children under 18 Years of Age Treated in Hospitals

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children under 18 years of age were treated in hospital, broken down by (i) age; (ii) gender; (iii) socio-economic background; and (iv) health care trust. (AQW 4587/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

- (i) The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland for children under 18 in 2006/07 broken down by age is shown below;

Age	Admissions
0	33,878
1	5,003
2	3,522
3	3,293
4	3,659
5	3,629
6	3,262
7	2,616
8	2,357
9	2,369
10	1,975
11	1,812
12	1,881
13	1,887
14	2,009
15	2,261
16	2,334
17	3,009

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

- (ii) The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland for children under 18 in 2006/07 broken down by gender is shown below;

Gender	Admissions
Male	43,324
Female	37,432

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

- (iii) The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland for children under 18 in 2006/07 broken down by socio-economic background is shown below;

Multiple Deprivation Measure	Admissions
Most Deprived	9,146
-	8,592
-	8,738
-	8,426
-	8,971
-	8,740
-	7,949
-	6,962
-	6,347

Multiple Deprivation Measure	Admissions
Least Deprived	5,613

Source: Hospital Inpatient System & NISRA Neighbourhood Statistics Unit

Note: The total number of admissions shown in the table above does not equate to the total number of admissions stated in parts (i), (ii) and (iv) of the answer, as the Multiple Deprivation Measure can only be calculated where a post code has been recorded for the patient.

(iv) The number of admissions to Health and Social Care Hospitals in Northern Ireland for children under 18 in 2006/07 broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is shown below;

Health and Social Care Trust	Admissions
Belfast HSC Trust	24,414
Northern HSC Trust	13,741
Southern HSC Trust	14,876
South Eastern HSC Trust	13,291
Western HSC Trust	14,434

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

In all the above tables deaths and discharges are used as an approximation of admissions. Therefore these figures do not equate to individuals as a person may be admitted to hospital more than once in a year.

Mental Health

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were diagnosed with mental-health conditions, in each year since 1998, broken down by constituency. (AQW 4588/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Private Nursing/Care Homes

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what legislation is in place to protect vulnerable adults residing in private nursing/care homes. (AQW 4606/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A range of legislative and procedural measures are in place to protect vulnerable adults, regardless of their physical and mental health or where they live. This includes the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults (NI) Order 2003; the Regional Adult Protection Policy and Procedural Guidelines; and the Joint Protocol for the Investigation of Alleged Incidents of Abuse. These arrangements apply across Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007 will introduce a new registration scheme in Northern Ireland for those individuals working with children or vulnerable adults. The Order will establish a new Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS), aimed at strengthening protection for children and vulnerable adults in workplace situations. A new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) will be central to the new Scheme. When the VBS is implemented in full, those seeking work with children and vulnerable adults will be required to register with the ISA and will be subject to a process of continuous monitoring, subsequent to registration.

Programme for Government

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what risk assessment he has carried out of the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4785/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The risks associated with my Department's Programme for Government targets are assessed on an ongoing basis to ensure that timely action is taken to address actual or potential performance difficulties.

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision exists in the Health Service for people with chronic fatigue syndrome who are resident outside Belfast. (AQO 1931/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A range of treatment and support options is available for people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. Decisions on the specific care of an individual patient will normally be taken in conjunction with their medical practitioner or hospital consultant. Their care will be tailored according to their condition and its severity.

Patient care, is for the most part provided by GPs, however patients may access other areas of the health service as necessary. All patients with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome may be referred to general clinics or neurology clinics for treatment.

Midwife-Led Maternity Unit in Omagh

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on proposals for a stand alone midwife-led maternity unit in Omagh. (AQO 1932/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The study carried out by the Western Board in relation to the provision of a Community Midwifery Unit in Omagh identified a number of complex issues including mother and baby safety, the impact on maternity services at other hospitals and the sustainability of such a service, including the availability of appropriately skilled staff. I want to give these issues my fullest consideration and to take the necessary professional advice before determining the best way forward.

Respite Care Needs of Parents and Children in Mid-Ulster

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the public consultation exercise carried out by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, what plans he has to protect the respite care needs of parents and children in the Mid-Ulster area. (AQO 1933/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Northern Trust is currently consulting on the equality implications of their proposals to reform and modernise respite services. Following the consultation the Trust will take account of responses in determining what respite services are most appropriate to meet the needs of children and adults requiring respite. You will understand that since the plans are not finalised and the public consultation process is still ongoing it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this stage. However a final decision on any changes to respite services will not be made before the end of the consultation period.

Comprehensive Spending Review Period

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the budget available to his Department over the Comprehensive Spending Review period. (AQO 1934/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department will receive an additional £837.4m by 2010/11 under CSR2007 of which £344m has to come from internally generated efficiencies. This investment will allow me to meet very substantial cost pressures and deliver significant service developments over the CSR period. However, I remain disappointed that additional resources have not been made available for Health and Social Services, following the recent Budget Stocktake exercise, to address the £600m funding gap that exists between Northern Ireland and England.

My Department submitted capital bids totalling more than £1.1billion for CSR period 2008-11 but received only £728m. Of this £95m was dependant on disposal of estate. The recent economic downturn has rendered this target unachievable and it has been cut to approximately £65m. This effectively reduces the available budget to just under £700m, which is sufficient only to meet existing contractual commitments and commence a limited number of new projects.

Screening for Sudden Cardiac Deaths

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on on screening for sudden cardiac deaths. (AQO 1935/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In 2008 the UK National Screening Committee reviewed the research evidence on screening for Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy, the main cause of sudden cardiac death. In December 2008 they advised the four UK Health Departments that screening should not be offered, and that pre-participation screening of athletes for Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy or other causes of sudden cardiac death should not be instituted at present.

Since the Assembly debate on Sudden Cardiac Death in September 2007 I instructed my Department to look at what more can be done to reduce Sudden Cardiac Death in Northern Ireland. Following a workshop on Sudden Cardiac Death in March 2008 the Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride, convened a working group of leading experts to take forward recommendations coming from the workshop.

Primacare Health Facility in Ballygawley

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has considered the proposal of the Primacare Health Facility in Ballygawley. (AQO 1936/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has had no discussions with Primacare and as such has given no direct consideration to the proposal for a Primacare health facility in Ballygawley.

New Acute Hospital in the South West

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the new acute hospital in the South West. (AQO 1937/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Full planning permission for the new acute hospital in the south west was approved in December 2008. Construction of this new £267 million hospital is expected to begin later this year, and with the appointment now of the successful tenderer, Northern Ireland Health Group, this means that the new hospital is on schedule for completion in 2012.

This major investment marks a very important milestone in the development of world-class health and social care services for the population of the South West. Once completed, this new state-of-the-art hospital will be one of the most modern facilities, not only in Northern Ireland, but across the UK.

It is a flagship project and I am delighted to see the delivery of such a facility in the Western Trust area.

Ardoyne Ambulance Station

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what changes have been made in the ambulance service provided from the Ardoyne ambulance station in North Belfast. (AQO 1938/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: No change has been made to the level of ambulance service provided from Ardoyne ambulance station during the current financial year (2008-09).

Maternity Unit at Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the effectiveness of the maternity unit at Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQO 1939/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Maternity services at Craigavon Area Hospital are of a very high standard, professionally delivered and safe.

It is recognised that increasing birth numbers have put the unit under some pressure in recent years and this is why I have announced an investment of £3.5m to strengthen maternity services at Craigavon and improve facilities.

Healthcare Provision

Mrs Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what healthcare provision is available to refugees and victims of human trafficking who have applied for asylum. (AQO 1940/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A person who has been accepted as a refugee in the United Kingdom, or who has made a formal application for leave to stay as a refugee in the United Kingdom, including a person recognised as a victim of human trafficking, is entitled to receive free health services in Northern Ireland on the same basis as those ordinarily resident in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, following a recent change to the relevant legislation and in accordance with the Council of Europe Convention on Human Trafficking, a victim of human trafficking is entitled to receive health services in Northern Ireland during the initial recovery and reflection period after that person has been identified as a victim, even should they not apply for refugee status during that time.

Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what contingency plans are in place at Antrim Area Hospital to cope with any further admissions of large numbers of patients suffering from influenza. (AQO 1941/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am advised that the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has a contingency escalation plan in place that ensures key staff are alerted to any peaks in emergency activity and increased admissions. A range of measures are then introduced to manage the situation and to ensure that all patients are treated appropriately.

It is essential that all our hospitals and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service work effectively together when there are sudden pressures such as those created by the recent upsurge in influenza. This is important to minimise the pressures faced by any one hospital and to provide the best overall service for patients.

Social Services

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many cases referred to social services for assessment remain unallocated. (AQO 1942/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information is only collected for children's social services. At the end of December 2008 there were 986 unallocated cases.

Health Inequalities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress his Department has made towards reducing inequalities in health outcomes. (AQO 1945/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health Inequalities are the product of social, economic and health related issues. A wide range of strategies, programmes and activities are underway to address this as part of the Investing for Health strategy. A review of the strategy will take place this year which will assess its impact and make recommendations. In addition the establishment in April 2009 of the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being will bring a much needed dedicated focus in order to seriously address health inequalities.

In respect of measuring progress the Department maintains and updates the Health and Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System which comprises a number of indicators that are monitored over time to assess area differences – inequalities between the 20% most deprived areas and Northern Ireland as a whole are measured.

One key indicator is life expectancy. While life expectancy generally in Northern Ireland is increasing across all areas, it still remains worse in the most deprived areas, and the gap between deprived areas and the NI average has remained fairly consistent over recent years. Improved mortality rates due to respiratory and circulatory diseases in the most deprived areas relative to Northern Ireland generally has narrowed both the male and female

deprived life expectancy gaps over recent years. However these improvements have been offset by a relative worsening of mortality due to other causes.

Life expectancy aside, there have been some relative improvements across a number of indicators (for example, teenage births, infant mortality, admission rates to hospital, cancer incidence and death rates), although in many of these areas, the health inequality gaps still remain large. The gaps for other monitored indicators have remained relatively consistent between deprived areas and the Northern Ireland average.

Further information on health inequalities monitoring has been published and is available on the Department's website on the following link -http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-equality.htm

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Reduction in Paperwork

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps he is taking to significantly reduce the amount of paperwork he sends to constituency offices and other organisations throughout 2009.

(AQW 3831/09)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Conor Murphy): My Department takes all reasonable steps to reduce the amount of paperwork issued. However, we also recognise that not everyone has access to, or wishes to use, electronic facilities.

My Department follows NICS Guidance on Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation Documents, published in November 2008. Sections 9 and 10 cover electronic publication and state, "It is a matter of choice for the organisation(s) as to their preferred method of receipt of Government publications ...". The Department's Equality Unit regularly seeks the views of consultees' regarding their preferred means of communication to ensure that paper issued is kept to a minimum.

My Department also pro-actively publishes information as required by the Freedom of Information Act (2000). This information is readily available on the Internet via my Department's website.

Departmental Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what legislation his Department will bring forward to the Assembly in 2009.

(AQW 3848/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I plan to introduce the Harbours Bill to the Assembly during the 2009 Session. The Bill seeks to provide enhanced commercial powers to Trust Ports, to introduce a number of marine safety provisions and to broaden and modernise powers to assist Ports in discharging their functions. However, the exact timing of introduction is dependent on the timing of confirmation from the Office of National Statistics that the proposed legislation will have the effect of removing the trust ports from their current status as public corporations for public expenditure purposes. This is awaited. The introduction of the Bill to the Assembly will also be dependent on prior Executive agreement to introduce.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development how many recorded incidents of violent or abusive behaviour by members of the public towards Translink staff there were, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 3857/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The table below sets out details provided by Translink of the number of recorded incidents of abusive behaviour against Translink staff in the last five financial years. These incidents range from abusive language to physical assault.

Year	Bus	Train	Total
2004/05	35	219	254
2005/06	31	208	239
2006/07	19	183	202
2007/08	30	123	153
2008/09(to date)	19	98	117
TOTAL	134	831	965

Roads Service

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans does Roads Service have to prevent regular flooding along Silverwood Drive in the Shankill estate in Lurgan. (AQW 4193/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, the gullies and connecting pipes at Silverwood Drive, Lurgan, were found to be functioning normally when last checked on 22 January 2009.

However, this system connects into a main storm drain which runs through gardens of adjacent properties. This storm drain, which is the responsibility of Northern Ireland Water (NIW), appears to have an obstruction. Roads Service subsequently reported this matter to NIW for their attention and remedial action.

NIW has advised that, as a result of information received from Roads Service, an investigation was carried out on 29 January 2009, and a partial blockage was found in a storm drain at Silverwood Drive, Lurgan. The blockage was immediately removed and the storm drain is now flowing freely.

Road Improvements, Antrim

Mr Burnside asked the Minister for Regional Development if he can confirm (i) when the road improvements for Dublin Road and Airport Road in Antrim will resume; and (ii) that there is a dual carriageway planned for this road. (AQW 4224/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, due to escalating costs, funding for the proposed improvements to the A57 Antrim Road (Dublin Road), towards Belfast International Airport, is currently not available. Therefore, it has not been possible to include this scheme in a works programme. I would further advise that any future scheme proposals brought forward, for this route, will have to compete for funding with other schemes.

I can also confirm that Roads Service has no proposals to upgrade this road to dual carriageway standard.

Households with Lead Pipes

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department keeps a record of the number of households in each District Council area that have lead pipes. (AQW 4294/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not maintain records of households with lead pipes and is therefore unable to provide the breakdown sought for each District Council area.

Some properties built before 1970 may be connected to the public water mains by a lead service pipe. The part of the service pipe from the customer's tap to the property boundary, which is known as the supply pipe, is the responsibility of the customer while responsibility for the part of the pipe from the property boundary to the water main, which is known as the communication pipe, rests with NIW. Under its current policy, NIW will, at the request of a customer, replace the communication pipe free of charge provided that the customer replaces the supply pipe.

Phosphoric Acid in Water Supply

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what comparisons he has made with other regions of the United Kingdom that add phosphoric acid to the water supply. (AQW 4295/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that no direct comparisons have been made with other water companies in Britain. However, the use of phosphoric acid in the treatment of drinking water has been approved by the Northern Ireland Drinking Water Inspectorate and the medical authorities. In the North and Britain, corrective treatment has been promoted, as opposed to the widespread replacement of lead pipes, as an appropriate first stage of achieving the new European standards for lead in drinking water.

Phosphoric Acid in Water Supply

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the effect phosphoric acid in the water supply can have on calcium in children's bones. (AQW 4296/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has not made any assessment of the effect that phosphoric acid in the water supply can have on calcium in children's bones. Orthophosphoric acid has been effective in reducing dissolved lead in water for over 20 years and its use in the treatment of drinking water has been approved by both the Drinking Water Inspector and the medical authorities.

Phosphoric Acid in Water Supply

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development if uranium or radionuclides is contained in the phosphoric acid present in the water supply. (AQW 4297/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the phosphoric acid used is an approved product by the Drinking Water Inspectorate for use in the drinking water industry. Radioactivity monitoring is a requirement of the Drinking Water Regulations. The water supply is tested for radionuclides, including uranium, following the addition of phosphoric acid. No samples have been found to be in excess of the regulatory limit.

Phosphoric Acid in Water Supply

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact studies have been carried out on the use of phosphoric acid in the water supply. (AQW 4298/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that, prior to the use of orthophosphoric acid, environmental impact assessments were carried out in specific locations to ensure that there would be no detrimental effect on the phosphate removal process at major wastewater treatment works. The assessments used read across implications of similar assessments completed across the water industry. No further environmental impact assessments have been carried out since the commencement of phosphate dosing.

Roads Service

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm the details of any permits that have been issued by Roads Service to builders in relation to the work they are completing at Scotch Quarter, Carrickfergus. (AQW 4335/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that a Consent was issued by my Department's Roads Service, under the provisions of Article 72 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, on 20 May 2008, to erect hoarding on an adjoining footway at 24 Scotch Quarter, Carrickfergus, to facilitate building work and protect pedestrians. As the works are not yet completed, Roads Service will be extending the duration of the Consent.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development if Translink has a significant budget deficit in this financial year; and to state the size of this deficit. (AQW 4353/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC) /Translink have advised that they do not have a significant budget deficit in the financial year to 31.03.09 and are on target to meet their key financial performance indicator (that is pro forma profit before tax based on pension contributions payable). This was reported as £2.8m for the year ending 2007/2008 and will be reported on in the 2008/2009 annual accounts later this year. The NITHC group accounts include all subsidiary companies including Metro, Ulsterbus and NI Railways.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3742/09, why the fuel costs incurred by Translink during the period September 2008 to December 2008 are so high; and why this has not decreased in line with the price of crude oil and the price of petrol and diesel at station forecourts. (AQW 4354/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink buy fuel in advance for fixed periods of time. This process is known as hedging and means that fares can more readily be set and held as the price of fuel fluctuates up and down. Fuel costs in the quarter to December 2008 are largely based on forward contracts taken out when fuel prices were higher. In the 6 months to September 2008 our fuel costs were below the market price.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 3742/09 and AQW 1288/09, if the policy of hedging to purchase fuel is resulting in Translink paying significantly above the market value for fuel; and, if so, how much above the market price of fuel it is paying. (AQW 4355/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Hedging is industry practice across the bus industry and Translink has operated such a policy for years. Inevitably the hedging price will be different from the market price and it is the case that currently Translink is paying above the market price. In 2009/10 Translink expect their fuel costs to increase by 11% over this year.

However, in the past the hedged price has been below market price in 48 months out of 69 months from April 2003 to December 2008 and this has been passed on to the public in stable ticket fares at times of escalating oil prices. It is also expected that the Translink hedging policy will mean that current market trends are reflected in future fuel prices albeit with a time lag.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answers to AQW 3742/09 and AQW 1288/09, the start and end dates for the current hedged fuel purchasing agreement. (AQW 4388/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that their fuel hedge policy covers periods 5 quarters in advance and up to 8 quarters if circumstances are judged favourable. My understanding is that the current rolling contract covers a period up to June 2010.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1288/09, how often this agreement is re-negotiated; and how many times it has been re-negotiated in each of the last five years. (AQW 4389/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Since March 2008, hedge contracts are reviewed and potentially re-negotiated every quarter with all financial institutions willing to provide credit facilities. There are separate

contracts for Gas Oil and the Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel (ULSD) fuel hedges. There have been 16 fuel hedge contracts (8 for Gas Oil and 8 for ULSD) between 1 April 2004 and 30 June 2009. Prior to March 2008 arrangements were reviewed on an ad hoc basis, mainly annually but sometimes every six months.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 1288/09, what percentage of fuel purchased by Translink is covered by the hedging agreement. (AQW 4390/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink's fuel hedging policy means that at all times a rolling minimum of at least 5 quarters forward fuel coverage is in place which normally covers between 85% and 90% of anticipated requirements.

Coleraine to Bushmills B17 Road

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to carry out road works on the Coleraine to Bushmills B17 Road. (AQW 4404/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has two future resurfacing schemes planned for the B17, Cloyfin Road, between Coleraine and Bushmills. One is at Boghill Road, near to the site of the former Bohill Hotel, and the other is at Killygreen, between the Creamery Road and Ballyversal Road junctions.

However, neither of these two schemes is currently included in Roads Service's three-year resurfacing programme, 2008 to 2011.

Sewerage and Water Improvement Scheme

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what compensation is to be paid to business owners in Ballykelly due to the disruption and loss of business during the recent sewerage and water improvement scheme. (AQW 4406/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the work in Ballykelly was undertaken to benefit the whole of the local community by improving the sewerage network in the area and reducing the risk of out-of-sewer flooding. Unfortunately, some inconvenience is unavoidable during construction work of this nature but I am assured that NIW and its contractor worked closely with the local business community to minimise disruption to trade/business and to complete the work as quickly as possible.

Compensation is not normally payable where there has been no physical damage to property or where there is no indication that NIW was in any way negligent or failed to carry out its statutory duties. However, NIW will make good, or pay compensation for, any damage to property caused by the carrying out of the work and, following completion of the work, all local businesses were advised of the address to which claims should be submitted if they believed they were entitled to compensation.

Roads Service

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what criteria Roads Service uses to determine which schemes and works proceed. (AQW 4451/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The criteria that Roads Service use to determine which major schemes and works proceed is based on national transportation principles embracing the Government's five key criteria of environment, safety, economy, accessibility and integration. My Department's Regional Strategic Transportation Plan 2015, which can be found on the DRD website at http://www.drdni.gov.uk/index/transport_planning/tp-transport_plans.htm expands on these principles at Section 5.1 and outlines the supporting analysis at Annex B.

The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland has enabled further schemes to be added to the Investment Delivery Plan for roads, based on similar principles and taking into account feedback from a consultation exercise carried out in 2006, which was supportive of those schemes being proposed by Roads Service.

More detailed and extensive guidance on highway project appraisal is available through the Department for Transport's "Transport Analysis Guidance" manual, which is available on internet website <http://www.dft.gov.uk/webtag>

Waste Water Treatment Works in Stewartstown

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development if Northern Ireland Water has any plans to upgrade the Waste Water Treatment Works in Stewartstown in the next 5 years. (AQW 4468/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it plans to commence the upgrading of Stewartstown Wastewater Treatment Works in 2009/10 to ensure future compliance with the standards set by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Translink

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what is the annual salary of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Translink; (ii) if her accommodation is paid by Translink; (iii) the location of her accommodation; (iv) what travel costs have been incurred by the Translink CEO, on a monthly basis, since her appointment; and (v) what additional costs have been incurred by the Translink CEO that have been paid out of the public purse. (AQW 4633/09)

Minister for Regional Development: (i) The annual salary of the NITHC Group Chief Executive (Mrs Catherine Mason) is £170,000. She is also entitled to a bonus of up to 25% of basic salary depending on achievement of key targets, she is a member of the NILGOSC pension scheme and receives other benefits namely health insurance and a car allowance.

- (ii) Mrs Mason's accommodation is not paid for by Translink and she did not receive relocation expenses.
- (iii) Mrs Mason is currently residing in Belfast;
- (iv) Since her appointment in March 2008, Mrs Mason's travel and related business costs have totalled £2,519.99 (equivalent to £252 per month). Mrs Mason is also, like all Translink employees, entitled to free public transport.
- (v) No other costs were incurred.

Road Traffic Signs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to give an assurance this his Department will not discriminate against any particular firm through the manipulation of the tender process in relation to the manufacture and erection of road traffic signs. (AQW 4642/09)

Minister for Regional Development: A tender competition is currently ongoing for the Supply and Delivery of Permanent and Temporary Road Traffic Signs. The contract does not include the erection of road traffic signs.

The tender competition is being undertaken by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate, on behalf of my Department. The competition is regulated under the Public Contracts Regulations 2006, a specific aim of which is to ensure openness, transparency and equality of opportunity.

Road Traffic Signs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total value of the new tender for the manufacture and erection of road traffic signs; and (ii) the minimum turnover figure demanded of prospective companies as part of the tender process. (AQW 4643/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the contract notice gave the estimated value as between £1.5 and £2.5 million, with the contract duration being either one or two years. The required turnover figure of £400,000 per annum was also published in the tender documents.

Road Traffic Signs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development why a new criterion has been included in the tender process for the manufacture and erection of road traffic signs about the turnover of companies wishing to make a bid. (AQW 4644/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service have been advised by Central Procurement Directorate that, following a judgement in Europe from an EU challenge on another contract, not related to Roads Service, that the scoring of "experience" should now be handled on a pass/fail basis relating to a minimum standard. In this respect the threshold figure was considered as a reasonable measure of tenderers' experience and capability, taking into account the possible overall value of the contract.

Road Traffic Signs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the current contract for the manufacture and erection of road traffic signs, how much produce did PWS Ireland fail to deliver on time. (AQW 4645/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that information relating to the amount of produce PWS Ireland failed to deliver on time needs to be collated. I have asked Roads Service officials to forward this information to you as soon as it is available.

Road Traffic Signs

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the measures which his Department was obliged to take in the last five years to monitor the performance of companies who supply and erect road traffic signs; and (ii) the measures that were actually used for monitoring in the last five years. (AQW 4646/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I would again point out that the erection of signs was not included in the contract being referred to. Improved procedures for managing the contract for the supply of traffic signs were instigated in March 2003, in accordance with recommendations made by our Internal Auditors. These improved procedures have been in place for the current contract awarded in 2005.

Ballymoney Bus Depot

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has for the retention of Ballymoney bus depot. (AQO 1952/09)

Minister for Regional Development: This is an operational matter for Translink. However, I understand that Ballymoney bus depot continues to be a key operational centre in providing a network of bus services to the North Antrim area and that Translink has no plans to discontinue its use.

Translink

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Regional Development for the number of hybrid buses currently operated by Translink; and what future plans he has for the introduction of these vehicles. (AQO 1953/09)

Minister for Regional Development: In October 2007 the Department gave approval to Translink to purchase two Hybrid or Environmentally Enhanced Vehicles (EEVs) on a trial basis and at a cost of £431,000. These vehicles, which are currently being tendered by Translink, will be used on the Giant's Causeway to Coleraine service.

In addition Translink have also submitted to the Department an economic appraisal for the purchase of a further five Hybrid Buses and it is intended that these will be used on short distance Park & Ride schemes in the Greater Belfast area.

My intention is to await the outcome of the pilots before finalising future plans.

Bus-Based Rapid Transit in Belfast

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's plans to introduce bus-based rapid transit in Belfast. (AQO 1954/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Following Executive approval on 27 November 2008, bus-based Rapid Transit for Belfast was launched on 1 December 2008, when I delivered the keynote address at the 4th annual BRT-UK Conference in Belfast. Rapid Transit will initially operate along three pilot routes from the City Centre into East Belfast, West Belfast and Titanic Quarter.

A new Rapid Transit Division has now been established within my Department which has responsibility for taking the proposals for Rapid Transit forward to implementation. This will include the design of the network. As part of this process the required statutory assessments will be undertaken, including consultation with the public. This will provide opportunities for people to make their views known and influence how the Rapid Transit project is implemented.

My Department is also in the process of negotiating land purchase for the scheme and investigating the legal basis under which the system will be implemented.

Planned Expenditure in Upper Bann

Mr Simpson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's total planned expenditure in Upper Bann for the financial year 2009/10. (AQO 1955/09)

Minister for Regional Development: With regard to the roads expenditure, the overall budget allocation for my Department's Roads Service in 2009-10 is £395.4 million. However, Roads Service does not budget on a parliamentary constituency basis, as budget allocations are based on need rather than parliamentary boundaries.

Roads Service finalises allocations to their divisions by May each year and set out details of planned works in their Spring Reports to each District Council. Roads Service will be consulting with each District Council in the Upper Bann constituency area early in the 2009/10 financial year.

I can also advise that my Department's Ports and Public Transport Division plans to invest almost £1.4 million on improvements in the Upper Bann constituency during the 2009/10 financial year.

Northern Ireland Water has advised that during the 2009/10 financial year it plans to invest almost £21 million on improvements to the water and wastewater infrastructure in the Upper Bann constituency.

Construction Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many construction projects and maintenance works his Department has provided to the construction industry in the last year; and how many of these works will be made available this year. (AQO 1956/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service had thirteen major road schemes, under construction during 2007/2008. During this financial year, 2008/2009, nine major road schemes have been under construction at a combined cost of approximately £450 million. One additional scheme, costing £11.5 million, is expected to be awarded in March 2009.

With regard to the number of minor works and maintenance works provided to the construction industry, Roads Service can only provide overall spend figures because of the micro nature of some of the works, for example, pothole repairs, traffic sign repairs, etc. I can advise that Roads Service spent some £20 million on its minor works programme in 2007/2008 and intends to spend some £25 million in 2008/2009. This includes works such as minor improvements, collision remedial schemes, traffic calming, pedestrian and bus measures, etc. The spend on minor bridge strengthening in 2007/2008 was £4 million and the estimated spend in 2008/2009 is £6.2 million.

Roads Service's expenditure on maintenance activities (including in-house contractor costs) was some £128.5 million in 2007/2008. The estimated spend in 2008/2009 is £112.9 million. This includes works such as resurfacing, reconstruction, surface dressing, patching, as well as other routine maintenance activity, eg, winter service, grass cutting, gully emptying, etc.

During the three year period to March 2010 an estimated £670 million will be invested by Northern Ireland Water on some 1,200 projects.

The construction elements of Northern Ireland Water's two major Public Private Partnership (Private Finance) schemes under construction during 2008, have a total combined investment of £232 million.

This year, Translink awarded 20 contracts within this category with a total contract value of £17,933,412. This mainly relates to the railway infrastructure budget of £37.7m for the year. In total, over the remaining budget period some £100.4m in capital grant is committed to enhance services on the railways. A significant proportion of this will be spent on construction projects. In 2009/10 up to 30 contracts are planned to be awarded.

Heavy Goods Vehicles

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will treat heavy goods vehicles as more than one unit when measuring vehicles per day travelling on rural roads. (AQO 1957/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that heavy goods vehicles are counted as one unit when measuring vehicles per day on all roads. However, heavy goods vehicles are classified separately, to allow Roads Service to determine the percentage of heavy goods vehicles travelling per day on the subject road.

NI Water

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Regional Development when he expects NI Water to have collated reliable data to ensure the issuing of accurate water bills and to assist in key decision-making. (AQO 1958/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I am advised by Northern Ireland Water that it continues to build on the significant progress made during the past two years with its extensive programme to improve data quality, income forecasting and financial monitoring. This programme, which spans data requirements across the whole organisation (including customer and billing data), is prioritised according to key business risks. Work on the top priority activity will be substantially complete by the end of March 2009 with testing and further development continuing into 2009/10. Some of the ongoing areas of focus include customer data and development of specific consumption reports to provide robust trend and customer category analysis for the future. I note that the Chair/Acting Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Water recently informed the Regional Development Committee that work on the broad range of data requirements across the whole organisation could take 3-5 years.

Independent Broadway Underpass Flooding Report

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made in the assessment of the hydraulic efficiency of the drainage system on the Westlink as outlined in the Independent Broadway underpass flooding report. (AQO 1960/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the independent report into the flooding event at Broadway on 16 August 2008, completed by Amey Consultants, recommended that an assessment of the hydraulic efficiency of the drainage system be carried out using a physical hydraulic model.

In partnership with Rivers Agency and the Design Build Finance & Operate contractor, Highway Management Construction, Roads Service has instigated work to procure the appointment of a specialist hydraulic investigation team. Tenders for the physical hydraulic model were returned on 19 January 2009. Following assessment of the tenders, Roads Service hopes to make a suitable appointment by early February 2009.

It is anticipated that the results of the modelling exercise will be completed by June 2009.

EU Charter on Minority Languages

Mr Brolly asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's compliance with the EU charter on minority languages. (AQO 1961/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department has implemented a number of initiatives to fulfil commitments in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. These include:

- The translation of all Ministerial forewords to Plans, Reports and Consultation documents into Irish;
- The translation of all new or revised information leaflets into Irish;
- The launch, on 29 September 2008, of a multi-lingual website for the Department;
- The publication of significant departmental announcements in an appropriate Irish language newspaper;
- The use of bilingual headings in the advertising of all departmental public notices;
- The identification of Irish speakers in DRD to help handle telephone calls in Irish ; The issue of revised Codes of Courtesy on Irish and Ulster Scots to all staff; and
- The preparation of a draft policy for the introduction of a range of bilingual road signs.

The Department is also continuing to liaise closely with the Irish language sector to improve and develop the Irish language section of the multi lingual website and identify training opportunities for staff.

In addition, Translink has also launched a range of new Irish language passenger materials. This includes:

- Bus-shelter timetable and route information;
- Bus Rules for Safety leaflet and poster targeting school children;
- ‘See Belfast by Metro’ Guide to the city’s main landmarks and attractions; and
- Travelling with Translink guide to using public transport in the North including bus and railway route maps.

NITHCo/Translink, the Port of Belfast, Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners, Warrenpoint Harbour Authority, and Northern Ireland Water all fulfil their requirements under the Charter. They allow users of regional or minority languages to submit a request in these languages, provide translation or interpretation as may be required, and allow the use or adoption of family names in the regional or minority languages at the request of those concerned.

Northern Ireland Water continues to offer a number of leaflets in six different languages including Irish, such as information on non domestic charging.

Regional Development Strategy

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress is being made on taking forward the fundamental review of the Regional Development Strategy. (AQO 1962/09)

Minister for Regional Development: During November and early December last year my officials held a series of stakeholder events on the basis of the proposed new Council areas. The purpose of these was to hear local views on challenges and issues facing their areas. My officials also met with the Regional Development Committee on 14 January to update them on progress on the review.

I also met with Ministerial colleagues in an Executive Sub Group on 29 January.

Work continues on the preparation of the draft Regional Development Strategy document. My intention is to present a draft document to Ministers by May this year.

Risk to Public Safety in Belfast City Centre

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development what his Department is doing to help reduce the risk to public safety in Belfast City Centre following the tragic death of Ciara Park last November. (AQO 1963/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department’s Roads Service has been working closely with the Department for Social Development to develop an overall traffic management plan for Belfast city centre. This plan will take into account the many competing demands, within the city centre, and road safety issues will be considered at every stage of the process.

Following my earlier meeting with the Lord Mayor of Belfast, Mr Tom Hartley, I met with Minister Wilson and Minister Ritchie, on 19 January, to discuss road safety in the city centre. At this meeting we agreed to set up a high level review of the emerging proposals for the city centre, to ensure that these proposals recognise the

importance of traffic safety, while meeting the needs of the essential user groups, including pedestrians, traders and public transport.

I expect that this review will be completed by the end of May 2009.

Translink

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister for Regional Development if the reduction in oil prices will have an impact on the cost of public transport. (AQO 1964/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The current fluctuations in oil prices will not have an immediate impact on the cost of public transport. This is because Translink buys fuel in advance for fixed periods of time.

The process is known as hedging and means that fares can more readily be set and held as the price of fuel fluctuates up and down. Fuel hedging is normal practice across the bus industry because of the need for planning certainty.

Decisions around fuel hedging are an operational matter for Translink. Whilst the level of fares charged are commercial decisions for Translink, these are discussed with my department in the context of Translink's corporate and financial plans.

Residents Only Parking Schemes

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the implementation of the Residents Only Parking Schemes in Belfast. (AQO 1965/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The Member will be aware that the initial attempts by the Department for Regional Development Roads Service to introduce five residents' parking schemes in Belfast, was met with considerable local opposition, particularly in relation to the need to implement a charge for the permit as proposed by my direct rule predecessor.

On taking Office, as Minister for Regional Development, I took on board the views of the residents after further consultations and, on 21 October 2008, I announced that residents' parking schemes will be free for residents in the five areas selected for the initial scheme. I feel that this decision, is justified, given the unique position these residents find themselves in, compared to other areas of the North and considering the demand to resolve the matter over many years.

By removing all-day commuter parking, I hope to deliver a scheme, which is reflective of local needs, and will be an improvement the local residents can expect, in their day-to-day lives. I have therefore asked Roads Service to renew its work on developing schemes, for the initial five areas in Belfast, and to resume the local consultation process with residents.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Strategic Business Review

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development why population base was not considered when assessing the location changes of social security main offices as part of the Strategic Business Review. (AQW 4049/09)

Minister for Social Development (Ms Margaret Ritchie): The Social Security Agency is structured on the basis of 6 geographical Districts across Northern Ireland. The population base was not considered primarily because customers will continue to be served locally by their current Social Security/Jobs & Benefits office within these Districts.

The proposals are subject to a public consultation which will run until late April 2009. Final decisions on the proposals will not be made until the consultation exercise has been completed and the responses considered.

Review of Social Security Agency Provision

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development why she will not suspend the review of the Social Security Agency provision that could result in job losses in her Department. (AQW 4144/09)

Minister for Social Development: These proposals are out for consultation at this time. I believe it would be wrong to deny people the opportunity to have their say.

I also refer the member to my previous response to AQW 3082/09; and would re-emphasise, there is no risk of a reduction in service, staff working in benefit offices losing their employment, or of any public offices closing.

Pension Credit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the number of pensioners who are not claiming the pension credit to which they are entitled. (AQW 4168/09)

Minister for Social Development: Determining levels of unclaimed benefit is a very complex process. The most recent research shows between 17,000 and 86,000 older people may be eligible for, but not claiming State Pension Credit. However this is based on information collated from the Family Resources Survey which is an annual survey of approximately 2,000 households in Northern Ireland. The survey was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2002-03 to facilitate a detailed assessment of all sources of income received by household. However, not all respondents accurately report the level of income, including benefit income that they receive. In addition, when the data is extrapolated to a Northern Ireland level the sample size is such that the precise level of take-up cannot be estimated with any degree of statistical confidence. Indeed, while certain data produced from the survey is robust, estimates of benefit take-up are characterised by exceptionally large confidence intervals. It is therefore difficult to say where the exact figure lies for any benefit, but especially State Pension Credit.

The most recent information in relation to benefit take-up was gathered over a period of 2 years from April 2004 - March 2006 and is expressed as an average uptake level over this period. It should be noted that considerable change has occurred since then, much of which will not have been included in the estimate.

Benefit Uptake is one of 5 key priorities for the Social Security Agency and State Pension Credit has been included in the Agency's Benefit Uptake Programmes since 2005. The number of customers who may be eligible and have not previously been contacted is diminishing each year. Whilst efforts continue to increase awareness of State Pension Credit there will always be an element who may be eligible but do not wish to claim the benefit.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made in reducing fuel poverty. (AQW 4205/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2006 reported that 34% of households in Northern Ireland were in fuel poverty. With the increases in energy costs the level of fuel poverty today is likely to be higher. My department's primary tool in tackling fuel poverty is the Warm Homes Scheme which provides a range of heating and insulation measures to eligible owner occupiers of those in private rented sector. The budget for the Warm Homes Scheme for the current financial year is all committed and I am pleased to report that my department is on track to meet its Public Service Agreement target which to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures. In addition the Housing Executive administers the Heating Replacement Scheme for those people in social housing. By the end of the current financial year my department will have spent over £35 million in tackling fuel poverty.

In response to rising fuel prices I established the Fuel Poverty Task Force in May 2008. The Task Force produced a number of recommendations which could be taken forward to help those in greatest need this winter. The main recommendation was to make a one off payment to assist vulnerable households with fuel bills. This recommendation is being taken forward and Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister through the Financial Assistance Bill which will provide the legislative framework to allow a fuel payment scheme to be delivered.

Travellers' Sites

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her Department's policy on the provision of travellers' sites. (AQW 4257/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is responsible for providing suitable accommodation for Travellers. The planning of any programmes or schemes is based on the scale of need within the geographical areas of choice of Traveller families and is informed by a comprehensive strategic needs assessment of current and projected accommodation requirements of all Travellers in consultation with Traveller organisations, members of the Traveller communities and District Councils.

The latest Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment was launched in December 2008 and will be used to facilitate decision making in relation to future accommodation schemes for the Traveller Community and should help to alleviate problems associated with the inadequate living condition of many Travellers.

Business Community in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what work her Department has completed for the business community in Ballycastle town centre since she took office. (AQW 4265/09)

Minister for Social Development: A town centre promotions and marketing scheme for Ballycastle, which was supported with a grant of £20,000, was completed in March 2008. This funding was used, amongst other things, to develop a brand image for Ballycastle and produce a guide to town centre businesses. In addition, my Department has provided £94,752 to fund the production of a Development Plan for Ballycastle which will, amongst other things, make recommendations on how the growth of town centre businesses might be facilitated. This work will be completed before the end of March 2009.

Housing Executive Maintenance Programmes

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what Housing Executive maintenance programmes she has instructed to cease; (ii) what areas this will affect; and (iii) how she will spend the money received in her budget for repairs and maintenance. (AQW 4267/09)

Minister for Social Development: No instruction has been given to the Housing Executive to cease any maintenance programmes. The Housing Executive carried out a review of its Programmes following a £35 million shortfall in their budget caused by the collapse of the housing market. The Housing Executive intends to undertake its full schedule of work which includes improvement schemes, projects and maintenance work. Their Programme is made up of a combination of new build, improvements and repairs schemes and their aim is to complete all schemes in their programmes at the earliest opportunity.

Waiting Times for Housing

Ms Ní Chuilín asked the Minister for Social Development to breakdown by religion, waiting times for housing in (i) North Belfast; (ii) West Belfast; and (iii) Derry/Londonderry City. (AQW 4268/09)

Minister for Social Development: The average waiting times, broken down by religion, for housing in (i) North Belfast, (ii) West Belfast and (iii) Derry/Londonderry City are detailed in the table below:-

Average waiting times on Social Housing Waiting list for 2007/2008

	Catholic Average Months	Other Average Months	Protestant Average Months	Undisclosed Average Months
North Belfast	25.8	12.7	12.9	16.3
West Belfast	25.3	11.3	8.3	51.1
Derry 1	20.4	3.4	3.4	12.6
Derry 2	11.0	10.5	8.2	8.9

	Catholic Average Months	Other Average Months	Protestant Average Months	Undisclosed Average Months
Derry 3	12.1	11.3	-	20.2

Carers Allowance

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development for the reasons for not providing Carers Allowance to pensioners. (AQW 4289/09)

Minister for Social Development: Carer's allowance is available to all carers aged 16 or over who meet the entitlement criteria. Entitlement is not withdrawn when a carer reaches pension age. However, it is a basic principle of the social security system that only one benefit at a time can be paid for the same purpose. Even though the circumstances which give rise to entitlement to carer's allowance and state pension are different, they are both designed to provide a degree of replacement for lost or foregone income. Carer's allowance replaces income where the carer has given up the chance of working full-time in order to look after a severely disabled person, while state pension replaces income in retirement. Entitlement to both benefits means that carer's allowance is not payable, or not payable in full, in addition to state pension. Where carer's allowance cannot be paid for this reason, the person will keep underlying entitlement to carer's allowance which gives access to the carer premium in the income-related benefits such as housing benefit, or the similar additional amount for carers through pension credit.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties in the Limavady Borough Council area are unoccupied, broken down by each housing estate; and the length of time for which these properties have been unoccupied. (AQW 4305/09)

Minister for Social Development: The number of Housing Executive properties in the Limavady Borough Council area currently unoccupied, broken down by each housing estate, and the length of time for which these properties have been unoccupied, is detailed in the table below.

Location	Length of time unoccupied	Dwellings
Hospital Lane	< 1 month	1
	2mths-1 year	4
	1-2 years	2
	2-3 years	1
	>3 years	5
Drumachose Park	< 1 month	1
	<1 yr	1
Edenmore Park	<1 yr	1
Glens Estate	< 1 month	1

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development how many unoccupied Housing Executive properties in the Limavady Borough Council area are awaiting repairs before they can be reallocated. (AQW 4306/09)

Minister for Social Development: There are currently seventeen unoccupied properties in the Limavady Borough Council area awaiting repairs before they can be reallocated.

Housing Executive Maintenance Budget

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development what contingency is in place given the shortfall in the Housing Executive's maintenance budget. (AQW 4358/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made. This is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring.

Income Support and Job Seekers Allowance

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how many people in East Antrim are in receipt of (i) income support; and (ii) job seekers allowance, broken down by month, in each of the past three years. (AQW 4383/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the Tables below and is based on the East Antrim Parliamentary constituency area.

TABLE 1

BENEFIT CLAIMANTS IN RECEIPT OF INCOME SUPPORT

	2006	2007	2008
January	3279	3180	*
February	3265	3178	3144
March	3211	3186	3160
April	3209	3131	3146
May	3234	3177	3132
June	3215	3174	3144
July	3206	3184	3135
August	3207	3184	3158
September	3225	3166	3154
October	3197	3142	3181
November	3198	3133	3202
December	3189	*	3179

Note: * information not available due to a national embargo on movement of data from the Department for Work and Pensions

TABLE 2

BENEFIT CLAIMANTS IN RECEIPT OF JOBSEEKERS ALLOWANCE

	2006	2007	2008
January	955	923	776
February	984	923	774
March	960	895	791
April	946	880	779
May	922	786	796
June	897	759	760
July	865	734	791

	2006	2007	2008
August	953	775	817
September	982	760	881
October	930	729	948
November	901	747	1062
December	883	731	1171

Cold Weather Payments

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria is used to define which areas are considered for Cold Weather Payments. (AQW 4407/09)

Minister for Social Development: For the purposes of Cold Weather Payments, temperature measurements are made by five meteorological stations located at Aldergrove, Ballykelly, Castlederg, Katesbridge and Enniskillen.

Information on average temperatures is provided by the Meteorological Office in relation to weather stations which are linked to postcodes. The allocation of weather stations to postcode areas is decided by the Department after thorough consultation with the Meteorological Office to ensure that weather stations are as representative as possible of the conditions in the areas they cover.

The Cold Weather Payments Scheme's performance is monitored each year and the Department will make changes if appropriate. Expert advice from the Meteorological Office is always taken into account.

Social Security System

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many people were caught defrauding the social security system; and (ii) how much was defrauded, broken down by (a) each constituency; and (b) each of the local government districts. (AQW 4409/09)

Minister for Social Development: The tables below show the number of 'people caught defrauding the social security system'; and (ii) how much was defrauded, broken down by (a) each constituency; and (b) each of the local government districts.

For the purposes of this reply 'people caught defrauding the social security system' are those cases where individuals have been convicted in court, or have accepted either a formal caution or an administrative penalty.

Local Government District	Number of Incidents	Value of overpayment
Antrim	10	£38,521
Ards	14	£55,565
Armagh	25	£145,516
Ballymena	15	£62,783
Ballymoney#		£3,827
Banbridge	8	£15,412
Belfast	310	£1,168,872
Carrickfergus	8	£25,591
Castlereagh	16	£78,909
Coleraine	8	£44,864
Cookstown	9	£20,645
Craigavon	38	£64,432

Local Government District	Number of Incidents	Value of overpayment
Derry	89	£250,133
Down	18	£41,381
Dungannon	17	£38,314
Fermanagh	24	£168,036
Larne#		£7,208
Limavady#		£66,085
Lisburn	37	£111,473
Magherafelt	7	£29,618
Moyle#		£2,769
Newry&Mourne	33	£107,409
Newtownabbey	35	£144,381
North Down	8	£50,828
Omagh	16	£46,155
Strabane	15	£40,371
Not known*	5	£1,801
Totals	765	£2,830,898
SUPPRESSED CELLS#	10	

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to an electoral ward on the basis of their postcode. The ward counts are then aggregated for each Parliamentary Constituency and Local Government District. Not all records can be correctly allocated to an electoral ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

It is Departmental Policy to suppress those cells containing between one and four incidents to minimise the possibility of publishing potentially disclosive information.

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Incidents	Value of overpayment
Belfast East	40	£137,649
Belfast North	123	£463,469
Belfast South	52	£126,936
Belfast West	137	£586,546
East Antrim	22	£77,406
East Londonderry	11	£110,950
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	37	£194,318
Foyle	89	£250,133
Lagan Valley	24	£80,473
Mid Ulster	20	£62,295
Newry & Armagh	51	£225,553
North Antrim	18	£69,378
North Down	11	£68,186
South Antrim	20	£73,948
South Down	26	£70,290
Strangford	16	£79,128

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Incidents	Value of overpayment
Upper Bann	42	£65,914
West Tyrone	31	£86,526
Not known*	5	£1,801
Totals	775	£2,830,898

* In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to an electoral ward on the basis of their postcode. The ward counts are then aggregated for each Parliamentary Constituency and Local Government District. Not all records can be correctly allocated to an electoral ward using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Good Morning Projects

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department is planning to fund the Good Morning Project in Belfast, and if so, when this funding will start. (AQW 4438/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Departmental officials have been working with Belfast City Council officers who are leading on the development of a city wide Good Morning Project for Belfast. The proposed project requires a number of statutory bodies to contribute to the overall funding package. The funding package is expected to be finalised in the next few weeks.

Maintenance Scheme for Pensioner Bungalows

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development if she has made any decision on the maintenance scheme for pensioner bungalows in Bloomfield Estate, Bangor. (AQW 4449/09)

Minister for Social Development: No decision on the maintenance scheme for pensioner bungalows in Bloomfield Estate has been made. However, the current shortfall in Housing Executive funding means that the bulk of schemes within the remainder of this year's programme are being held back at this stage. The Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes within its programmes at the earliest opportunity.

St Lucia Barracks in Omagh

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps it is taking to retain an account of the significant army role at St Lucia Barracks in Omagh with the proposed Education Project. (AQW 4459/09)

Minister for Social Development: St Lucia Barracks are still in the ownership and under the control of the Ministry of Defence. The Department for Social Development is committed to supporting the development of the St Lucia site for a range of uses compatible with, and complementary to, Omagh Town Centre. It is proposed that the shared Educational Campus would be located on the Lisanelly Barracks site. However, if the sites are not gifted to the Northern Ireland Executive, it is by no means certain that the projects will be able to proceed as affordability remains a serious obstacle.

Should the St Lucia site be acquired, my Department's intention would be to ensure the retention and preservation of the Listed Barracks buildings. To this end, my Department is currently preparing a Masterplanning exercise to determine the most suitable future uses for these buildings.

Home Sales and Access to Mortgages

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to encourage home sales and access to mortgages. (AQW 4460/09)

Minister for Social Development: On 6 January 2009 I announced a major change to the House Sales Scheme. Social housing tenants who wish to buy their home, but who cannot afford to do so outright, are now able to purchase an equity share in it from as little as 25 per cent. New homeowners may then increase their equity share in steps of as little as 5 per cent. Tenants will be able to receive 70 per cent of their available

discount, when they purchase just half of their home. In addition to this, I have been proactive in promoting new and creative approaches to support first time buyers with the launch of the Own-A-Home project in Portadown. This was the first of its type in the United Kingdom and provides the potential for low cost entry to home ownership.

I have also met the Council of Mortgage Lenders on a number of occasions and have pressed them to make mortgages more accessible.

Lifetime Awards for DLA

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many lifetime awards for DLA which are currently valid in the Strangford constituency were made in each of the last three years. (AQW 4506/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 removed the term “for life” in respect of awards of Disability Living Allowance and amended it to state awards “for an indefinite period”. The table below details the number of indefinite awards of Disability Living Allowance currently valid at the date of extract 30 November 2008 and made in each of the last three years in the Strangford constituency.

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	Indefinite Awards Made and Still Valid
2005/06	329
2006/07	318
2007/08	443

Lifetime Awards for DLA

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development how many lifetime awards for DLA in the Strangford constituency were reviewed in each of the last three years. (AQW 4507/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 removed the term “for life” in respect of awards of Disability Living Allowance and amended it to state awards “for an indefinite period”. The table below details the number of indefinite awards of Disability Living Allowance which were reviewed in each of the last three years in the Strangford constituency under my Department’s Programme Protection strategy.

Year	Number of indefinite DLA awards reviewed in the Strangford constituency
2005/06	124
2006/07	161
2007/08	208

Housing Executive

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) planned maintenance; (ii) kitchen replacements; (iii) heating replacements; (iv) multi-element replacement schemes; and (v) new starts, have been held back this year in the Upper Bann constituency due to the £25m shortfall in the Housing Executive’s budget. (AQW 4514/09)

Minister for Social Development: Approximately 85 Planned Maintenance, Kitchen Replacement, Heating Replacement and Multi Element Improvement schemes in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s Programme have been held back this year and there are now only funds to allow 16 of these to proceed. There will also be a delay in up to 400 new starts. It is too early in the review of the Housing Executive’s programmes to state the specific

locations that might be affected by the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget. However, the Housing Executive aims to undertake its full schedule of work and to commence all schemes in its programmes as soon as possible.

Development of a Volunteering Strategy

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the development of a volunteering strategy. (AQW 4526/09)

Minister for Social Development: We have a vibrant voluntary sector and a strong and active volunteer base. Volunteers are the lifeblood of our communities and the binding force in our community life. For the first time Northern Ireland will have a Volunteering Strategy to support the hundreds of thousands of people who freely give their time to help others. I hope it succeeds in encouraging more people to become volunteers, enriching their own lives as well as the lives of those they are helping

The Strategy will focus on making it easier for everyone to become involved and have a more rewarding volunteering experience. It will recognise the value and the benefits of volunteering for individuals and society. It will support and strengthen the infrastructure that supports volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

I will be taking a consultation document to the Social Development Committee on 26 February and then on to the Executive. I hope the Executive will endorse the consultation document for what is a very important strategy which has the potential to have a very positive impact on the volunteers and people of Northern Ireland. I hope to publish the consultation document in May. There will be a full public consultation and a series of consultation events across the country.

Employment and Support Allowance Agency

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development the number of occasions on which a duplicate sick line has been requested by the Employment and Support Allowance Agency. (AQW 4566/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available. Since 27 October 2008 the Employment and Support Allowance Centre has received more than 7,300 medical certificates. In view of the large volumes being received, certificates may on occasion be mislaid. The Employment and Support Allowance Centre has recently introduced new measures to monitor all medical certificates received which will minimise the risk of any certificates being misplaced and customers being asked to provide a duplicate.

Strategic Business Review

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development what impact the economic downturn is having on the Strategic Business Review. (AQW 4572/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Strategic Business Review proposals are currently subject to ongoing public consultation which will run until late April 2009. Final decisions on the proposals, which will include an assessment of the impact of the current economic downturn, will not be made until consultation has been completed and responses considered.

Full-Time Carers

Lord Browne asked the Minister for Social Development what compensation is available to full-time carers who have given up full time employment. (AQW 4584/09)

Minister for Social Development: Carer's allowance, as the main benefit available to carers, provides a measure of financial support for people who have given up the opportunity of full-time work to care for a severely disabled person. It is available to people aged 16 and over who provide care of at least 35 hours per week to a severely disabled person who is in receipt of either the highest or middle rate of disability living allowance care component or attendance allowance. It is not intended to be a payment for the services of caring nor is it envisaged that it would be able to make up for earnings that the carer had become used to. It provides a carer with some independent income that recognises some of the sacrifices that have to be made in taking on the

responsibility of caring for a severely disabled person. Carers may also be entitled to financial support through other social security benefits, for example, income support. Indeed additional premiums are available through income support and housing benefit for those entitled to carer's allowance. Carers' needs are not always financial and they have access to a wide range of support services from their local Health and Social Care Trusts. Such services provide practical support to carers to help them in their caring role.

Teleclaim Phone Lines

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are manning the teleclaim phone lines. (AQW 4589/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency offers customers the facility to claim a range of benefits by telephone. A total of 69 staff are dedicated to providing these services. A breakdown of the number of staff taking teleclaims for these benefits is provided in the table below.

NUMBER OF STAFF PROVIDING TELECLAIMS SERVICE BY BENEFIT TYPE

Benefit	No. of Staff
Attendance Allowance, Carers Allowance & Disability Living Allowance	5
Employment & Support Allowance	18
Social Fund Crisis Loans	8
State Pension Credit	20
State Retirement Pension	18
Total Staff	69

Housing Executive 5 Year Housing Condition Surveys

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development who wrote the questionnaire for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 5 year housing condition surveys. (AQW 4597/09)

Minister for Social Development: The questionnaire is prepared by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive with the support of a steering group containing key stakeholders from across government and the social housing sector. The questionnaire is broadly the same as the English House Condition Survey questionnaire in order to allow comparisons of key government measures. The current questionnaire has not changed greatly since 1991 and any changes reflect government policy over time.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if she would consider a scheme to bulk-buy oil and coal which can then be purchased at lower costs by tenants of Housing Executive properties. (AQW 4601/09)

Minister for Social Development: A feasibility study is currently being carried out in relation to the Housing Executive acting as a broker to secure discounted energy, including electricity, gas and potentially oil, for their tenants. It is important however to differentiate between brokering and bulk buying. The Housing Executive would not be bulk buying under this proposal but rather acting as a broker to secure appropriate discounts on behalf of their tenants.

Social Housing

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development if she will apply the same approach to addressing the social housing crisis in Limavady, as that undertaken at Pond Park, Lisburn, by buying up the former MOD houses located at the Shackleton Barracks site. (AQW 4634/09)

Minister for Social Development: I have made it clear that I will leave no stone unturned in my desire to meet housing need, irrespective of where that need exists or how it could be met.

My Department has already explored the potential to meet housing need in a range of former MOD sites and this will be kept under review.

Former Army Site at Ballykelly

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she has taken to investigate the possibility of acquiring homes on the former army site at Ballykelly and turning them into social and affordable housing.

(AQW 4692/09)

Minister for Social Development: I have made it clear that I will leave no stone unturned in my desire to meet housing need, irrespective of where that need exists or how it could be met.

My Department has already explored the potential to meet housing need in a range of former MOD sites, including Ballykelly with a view to identifying homes which can be used for social and affordable housing. In light of the recent petition from those expressing an interest in living on the former MOD site, I have asked my Department to review our position in respect of the housing needs assessment for Ballykelly and I will report back to the Member when that work has been completed.

Employment Support Allowance

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development to confirm whether claimants to the new Employment Support Allowance are having to use a premium rate telephone number to access information about their claims; and if so, why this is the case and how much it costs the claimant to call per minute. (AQW 4723/09)

Minister for Social Development: Claimants to the New Employment and Support Allowance do not have to use a premium rate telephone number to access information about their claims. There are two BT telephone numbers in use:

- An 0800 number for customers who wish to make a claim to benefit and
- An 0845 number for customers who have an enquiry about an existing claim or wish to report a change in circumstances.

BT does not charge customers for 0800 numbers. Calls to 0845 numbers are now free to BT customers depending on their Calling Plan.

Customers ringing from a non BT landline or mobile may be charged by their network provider for the connection onto the BT number. However, in these circumstances, customers can request a call-back at the outset of the call.

Housing Needs Assessment

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how the housing needs assessment is calculated, including what a sensitivity analysis is and how it is carried out. (AQO 1972/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Local Housing Need Assessment methodology involves two stages. Firstly, waiting list information such as numbers in housing stress, allocations and voids, is analysed to establish the projected social housing need in an area for a five year period. Secondly, a localised analysis is applied to check for accuracy and refine the result.

I am not sure from Mr Brady's question if he is actually asking in general what a sensitivity analysis is – but in case he is, it is a methodology for testing the responsiveness of a proposition or conclusion to a range of variables impacting upon it.

The sensitivity analysis in the context of housing needs assessment takes account of specific local issues such as existing housing mix, regeneration initiatives and latent demand. The results of the sensitivity analysis normally have only a minor impact on the initial calculation, where, unsurprisingly, levels of housing stress are influential.

Social Security Offices in Ballymoney

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Social Development what impact the Strategic Business Review of the Social Security Agency will have on jobs in Social Security Offices in Ballymoney. (AQO 1973/09)

Minister for Social Development: The proposals set out in the Strategic Business Review of the Social Security Agency are currently subject to ongoing public consultation. I have made it clear that I will study carefully all responses to the consultation before deciding the way forward. I want to emphasise that no decisions have been taken at this stage.

Without pre-empting the outcome of the consultation, I have already highlighted on a number of occasions, most recently the adjournment debate on this topic last week, that I am concerned about any proposals that would result in large numbers of staff travelling long distances to work. Especially part-time or low paid staff or those with childcare responsibilities.

I am also concerned about too much upheaval at a time when demands on the Agency services are rising sharply.

At the same time, no organisation can stand still. While I can assure Members there will be no redundancies and no offices will close, I will always be interested in improving the service for those who rely on it.

As regards Ballymoney, all I can say is that no office will close and no one will lose their employment.

I also want to say that those who have been scare-mongering about job losses, including some in this House, should acquaint themselves with the facts.

Departmental Underspend

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how she is addressing the continuing levels of underspend in her Department. (AQO 1975/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department continually strives for maximum resource utilisation. In the 2007/08 year the Department as a whole had a net overspend of 0.3% (£2.1million) against its £690.3 million budget. My Department is not forecasting any overall material underspend for this year 2008/09. During the year my officials have made every effort to ensure that no underspend occurs. My Department has followed Department of Finance and Personnel guidance to take proactive management action to reallocate budgets for key Housing priorities. For example, in the December 2008 Monitoring Round, over £36 million was identified and proposed for reallocation. However, the £36million proposed reallocation was taken back to the Northern Ireland Block with £9million being subsequently allocated. This type of action to reprioritise and reallocate budget will again be evident in the February Monitoring Round.

Housing Executive

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development if there has been an increase in enquiries by Housing Executive tenants seeking to purchase their homes, in light of the new scheme. (AQO 1976/09)

Minister for Social Development: I announced the amendment to the House Sales Scheme on 6 January 2009. The amendment will enable social housing tenants, who cannot afford to buy their home outright, to buy an equity share in it. The amended scheme will be fully operational by 31 January 2009.

In respect of the main House Sales Scheme, I can report that the Housing Executive received 26 applications during December 2008, with the same number also being received during the first 21 days of January. 41 sales have been completed in the current financial year.

Economic Downturn

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development what proposals she has brought forward to the Executive to help counter the effects of the economic downturn. (AQO 1977/09)

Minister for Social Development: On 27 November 2008 I submitted a paper to my Executive Colleagues entitled 'Social Housing – An effective Way to address the Downturn in the NI Economy.'

In this paper I outlined how an increased investment in social housing could have a profoundly beneficial effect on the economy in a relatively short period of time.

In addition to the economic benefits of increased investment in social housing, delivery against important social policy objectives, particularly those identified in the Programme for Government could be more quickly achieved with this investment.

My paper contained specific and costed proposals for increases in the Social Housing Development Programme, social housing maintenance and repairs; and the Warm Homes Scheme. Unfortunately the Executive was not able to support my proposals at that time. However, I remain convinced that the current market conditions are more suited now than ever before to increase our investment in social housing to stimulate the economy, protect jobs and help those in housing stress. I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support of my proposals.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact of the economic downturn on the sale of Housing Executive properties. (AQO 1978/09)

Minister for Social Development: Two years ago the Housing Executive sold 2,021 homes through its House Sales Scheme, generating an income of more than £100 million. During 2008/09 (to date) the Housing Executive has received 650 applications through its House Sales Scheme, with 41 house sales completed during this period (an 87% drop out rate).

Housing Executive

Mr McElduff asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that all necessary kitchen works are carried out by the Housing Executive without delay. (AQO 1979/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive carried out a review of all its Programmes because of the £35m shortfall in its budget, which was a consequence of the collapse of the housing market, combined with the credit crunch. The Housing Executive has been working alongside my Department to minimise the impact of the shortfall. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. This would allow a significant amount of work to be undertaken this year that would otherwise not be possible, including support for kitchen replacement works, and the Housing Executive aims to undertake a full schedule of work and to advance all schemes in its programmes as soon as possible.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the programme of the revised Warm Homes Scheme. (AQO 1980/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has just completed a public consultation on proposed changes to the Warm Homes Scheme following a report by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing. The tendering process to procure new Scheme managers is well under way and I expect the new Scheme to be operational in the spring. The budget available for the current Warm Homes Scheme has been fully committed for the financial year 2008/09 and the Department is on track to meet its Public Service Agreement target to alleviate fuel poverty in 9,000 households through implementing energy efficiency measures.

Housing Executive

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development how many new build Housing Executive schemes have been deferred until April 2009. (AQO 1981/09)

Minister for Social Development: On the 18 December 2008, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive announced a review of all their programmes following a £35 million shortfall in their budget caused by the collapse of the housing market and effects of the Credit Crunch.

The review of the 2008/09 Social Housing Development Programme has now been completed. The number of new homes expected to start by 31 March this year will now be approximately 1100. The remaining 400 homes that had been planned to start across 28 different schemes have now been deferred until 2009. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development what research her Department has carried out to determine the impact of its campaigns to reduce benefit fraud. (AQO 1982/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Agency's efforts to tackle benefit fraud have led to a steady reduction in estimated levels of fraud from £60m in 2001 to £12.7m in 2007. This represents a reduction of almost 80%, with the level of fraud now down to 0.3% of the Agency's annual benefit expenditure of around £3.6 billion.

As part of this approach, the Agency commissioned a specific publicity campaign in 2005 to raise the profile and to emphasise the seriousness of benefit fraud. MORI poll surveys carried out before and after the campaign showed an increase in those who felt well informed about benefit fraud and viewed benefit fraud as serious. As a direct result of the campaign, 5875 allegations of benefit fraud were reported which resulted in 44 sanctions and £1.8 m of benefit adjustments.

Community Workers

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what plans she has to guarantee the funding provided by her Department for community workers. (AQO 1983/09)

Minister for Social Development: I am unable to guarantee funding to any project beyond that which is detailed in a Contract for Funding. However, departmental budgets permitting, my officials and I will endeavour, where the need is identified, where the service provides value for money and where there is an evaluation which supports the case for further funding, to continue to support that project and service.

Social Housebuilding

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the scope for stimulating the economy through an accelerated programme of social housebuilding. (AQO 1984/09)

Minister for Social Development: On 27 November 2008 I submitted a paper to my Executive Colleagues entitled 'Social Housing – An effective Way to address the Downturn in the NI Economy.'

In this paper I outlined how an increased investment in social housing could have a profoundly beneficial effect on the economy in a relatively short period of time.

In addition to the economic benefits of increased investment in social housing, delivery against important social policy objectives, particularly those identified in the Programme for Government could be more quickly achieved with this investment.

My paper contained specific and costed proposals for increases in the Social Housing Development Programme, social housing maintenance and repairs; and the Warm Homes Scheme. Unfortunately the Executive was not able to support my proposals at that time. However, I remain convinced that the current market conditions are more suited now than ever before to increase our investment in social housing to stimulate the economy, protect jobs and help those in housing stress. I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support of my proposals.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 13 February 2009

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Remembrance Day Commemorations

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what role it played in promoting better community relations in relation to this year's 90th anniversary Remembrance Day commemorations. (AQW 4253/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Peter Robinson and Mr Martin McGuinness): OFMDFM has a general responsibility for the promotion of good relations between the communities with the overarching aim of building a shared and better future for all. OFMDFM provides funding directly and through the CRC to promote greater understanding.

We also monitor good relations via the Good Relations indicators.

We are currently working on our Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy which will aim to encourage tolerance, understanding and respect in the building of better relations and increased integration.

Loyal Order Parades

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work it has completed to promote better community relations surrounding Loyal Order parades. (AQW 4255/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Although our Department has not completed any specific work to promote better community relations surrounding Loyal Order parades, the work on the promotion of good community and good relations, led by this Department, has the overarching aim of building a shared and better future for all our people and we endeavour, through the community relations funding streams and our sponsored bodies, to support such work on a consistent, sustained and meaningful basis.

Orange Halls

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what assessment it has carried out of the community relations benefits of the new insurance regulations for Orange Halls. (AQW 4256/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: There are plans to change the Statutory Compensation arrangements – a scheme offering compensation for attacks on community halls – including Orange halls. However, this is a reserved matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Catholic Maintained Schools

Mr Simpson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it will take to amend the provisions of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 to ensure the removal of the requirement to hold a Catholic certificate to teach in Catholic maintained schools. (AQW 4399/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 provides that the Order does not apply to the recruitment of teachers in schools.

There are no current proposals to change this position. We will keep this situation under review.

Devolution of Policing and Justice

Mr Spratt asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions have taken place with the UK Government about funding for the devolution of policing and justice. (AQW 4433/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We met with the Secretary of State on 18 November 2008 to discuss a process for engaging on budget issues in relation to the devolution of policing and justice matters. We also met with the Secretary of State and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in London on 17 December 2008 and met the Secretary of State again on 4 February.

NSMC Meeting

Mr McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister the cost was holding the recent NSMC meeting in Derry/Londonderry broken down by (i) accommodation; (ii) travel; (iii) staff time preparing papers and making arrangements for the meeting; (iv) public relations; and (v) any other costs. (AQW 4443/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The costs of holding the NSMC Plenary on 23rd January 2009 in Derry/Londonderry are yet to be finalised but estimated costs are included in the table below:

Category	Estimated Costs
Accommodation	£1182
Travel	£1496
Public Relations	£1270
Other Costs	£7412
Total	£11,360

With regards to staff time preparing papers and making arrangements for the meeting, since this is part of officials' normal duties it cannot be quantified.

Review of the Civic Forum

Mr Boylan asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister if has studied the model and remit of the European Economic Social Committee in terms of informing best practice for any new civic forum. (AQW 4498/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The terms of reference for the Review of the Civic Forum included drawing on experience elsewhere in determining the most appropriate mechanism for engaging with civic society. The Review Team has conducted research into relevant experience elsewhere in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Europe and the United States. In looking at examples of developed social partnership structures in Europe, the Review Team examined the remit and structure of the European Economic and Social Committee. Written consultation responses included a submission from John Simpson, a former member and vice-president of the European Economic and Social Committee. His contribution, along with the others received, has been carefully considered.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail its contact with the Presbyterian Mutual Society over the last 12 months. (AQW 4510/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Responsibility for this matter lies with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and we understand that the DETI Minister has had numerous meetings on this issue. However, we have received correspondence in recent weeks from worried members and remain deeply concerned about their situation. Following discussion at the Executive meeting on 29 January, it was agreed that we should request an urgent meeting with the Prime Minister to discuss the issue. This meeting is expected to take place presently.

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr Butler asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much money its Department has made available to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4546/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Funding of such bodies is primarily a matter for DCAL. OFMDFM has not made any money available to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in either of the last two years.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions it has had with the Planning Appeals Commission about its reasons for not accepting documentation in digital format, including electronic means; and what action it will take to address this issue. (AQW 4611/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Planning Appeals Commission is a tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body, which exercises its functions independently of the Department. The Chief Commissioner is responsible for the operation of the Commission, and so consideration of the use of electronic documentation falls to the Chief Commissioner.

OFMDFM is aware, however, from discussions with the Chief Commissioner, that whilst her priority is to clear the backlog of planning appeals, she plans to explore the feasibility of electronic document exchange in the course of this year and has advised Planning Service of this.

Discrimination Cases

Mr Shannon asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much the £1m compensation payments made in 2007-2008 to claimants in discrimination cases was public money. (AQW 4773/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In total £1,090,808.99 was paid to claimants whose claims of discrimination had been assisted by the Equality Commission and whose case concluded in the year 2007/08. The amount of £460,545.23 was paid by organisations in the public sector.

PEACE II Funds

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide detail of the legal challenge to the distribution of PEACE II funds as referred to by the Junior Minister on the 3 February, during the debate on Women's Organisations. (AQW 4833/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: Firstly, to clarify, we are not aware of any legal challenge to the distribution of PEACE II funding. In the debate on the 3rd February the Minister referred to PEACE III. There are currently no formal legal challenges to the distribution of PEACE III funding. The Minister would like to clarify that the remarks referred to the necessary time taken to ensure that the correct process was followed in order to protect against possible legal challenge.

Gender Equality Panel

Mrs D Kelly asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when the gender equality panel last met; (ii) what action plan was agreed at the meeting; and (iii) when the panel will meet again.

(AQW 4834/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Gender Advisory Panel last met on 13 January 2009.

A number of follow-up actions were agreed at the meeting, which considered and advised on a draft report on the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy and key actions under the nine strategic objectives.

The Panel will meet again week commencing 27 April.

Oral Questions in the Assembly

Mr Kennedy asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the reasons behind its request to the Assembly's Committee on Procedures to reduce the number of times it will answer oral questions in the Assembly.

(AQO 1991/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: In response to the Committee on Procedures' Inquiry into Assembly Questions, we made a written submission reflecting the Executive's views on the current procedures for all Assembly Questions to Ministers.

Given that all procedures should be reviewed to evaluate their effectiveness in securing their aims, the Executive welcomed the opportunity to put proposals to the Committee drawing on their experience of Assembly questions since April 2007.

One of the proposals made in that response related to the frequency of oral questions to OFMDFM. As the Assembly will be aware, this proposal was made public, even before the Committee on Procedures had received it, in a deliberate attempt to generate controversy, and to question our commitment to the exercise of accountability to this Assembly. This is far from the truth.

We fully acknowledge the importance of Assembly Questions as one of the ways, together with evidence to Committees, private Members' motions and adjournment debates, in which Ministers are held accountable to the Assembly for their policies and actions.

However, the original rationale for the scheduling of questions fortnightly to OFMDFM appears to have been a belief that we address issues arising from their role as joint Chairs of the Executive and that they would therefore also be in a position to address issues beyond their strict departmental remit.

What these issues might be remain undefined. But it would in any case be inappropriate for us to answer questions relating to the responsibilities of other Ministers. Also, in practice, questions have usually focused on OFMDFM departmental business and on a fairly limited range of topics.

This is not a criticism of Members – simply a statement of fact that a department such as OFMDFM with a limited range of responsibilities – important though these are – does not yield a wide and constantly changing range of issues as potential subject matter for questions.

We, as much as Members, want to make oral questions as useful, informative and interesting as possible.

It was on this basis that we proposed to the Committee that the rationale for fortnightly questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should be examined. That, after all, is the purpose of inquiries.

We look forward to the Report of the Committee's inquiry. It would be inappropriate to anticipate its conclusions but we would wish to assure you and Members that we will co-operate fully in implementing whatever arrangements the Assembly determines following its consideration of the Report.

Economic Downturn

Mr Neeson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures the Executive is taking to assist people in light of the global economic downturn.

(AQO 1997/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We announced a package of measures to address the economic downturn in the Assembly on 15th December 2008. On the same date the Assembly comprehensively

debated the main measures in place to address problems of energy and fuel poverty; debt and unemployment; the rising cost of living for households; support for the housing and construction sectors; and support for business.

Uniquely, we have brought forward a Financial Assistance Bill to allow us to react quickly to emerging problems and difficulties. Initially this will be used to allow us to address the most pressing problems of fuel poverty.

We also announced a funding package of almost £45m. This provided £15m – for Fuel Credit payments; £20m – for Farm Nutrient Management schemes; £4m – for Schools Maintenance; £2.5m – for Roads Structural Maintenance; £1.8m – for Public Transport Capital Works; £0.5m – for Agriculture Flooding Hardship payments; and £0.7m – for Assistance to the Fishing Industry.

We are acutely aware that this is a difficult time for local people and businesses. The Executive is monitoring the developing economic crisis and we aim to do all that we can to protect local interests from the worst effects of this economic turmoil.

Senior Civil Servants

Mr Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many senior civil servants it employs. (AQO 1998/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: At 1 January 2009 there were 26 Senior Civil Service staff employed in the Department.

Civic Forum

Mr Storey asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the review of the Civic Forum will conclude. (AQO 1999/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The consultation phase of the review of the Civic Forum which began in May last year has been completed. Analysis of the information assembled, including consultation responses, has been undertaken. The review is expected to report to us in the near future.

Civic Forum

Mr Moutray asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times the Civic Forum has met since May 2007. (AQO 2001/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Civic Forum has not met during the period May 2007 to date. The Civic Forum was first convened in 2000 and operated until suspension of devolution in October 2002. After the restoration of devolution in 2007, with the agreement of the Executive, we decided to commission a fresh fundamental review of the Forum and the mechanisms for civic society to promote its views. The review is expected to report to us in the near future.

Absenteeism Targets

Mr McCausland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it is performing against its absenteeism targets. (AQO 2002/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: During 2005 targets were agreed within the Northern Ireland Civil Service for an overall reduction in sickness absence to 9.5 days per staff year by end of March 2010. Targets were strategically based with the main focus on reducing the frequency and duration of long-term absence and the frequency of short-term absence. To achieve this, individual targets were calculated and assigned to each Department.

OFMDFM has a relatively low level of absence compared to the average for the rest of the NICS. Taking this into account, challenging targets for overall absence have been set for the Department. In 2005/2006 the Department met the overall absence target but failed to achieve targets in each of the two following years.

Information provided by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in the table below sets out the annual absence targets for the NICS and for the Department along with the actual absence rates achieved. Information for 2008/2009 is not yet available.

TABLE: OVERALL ABSENCE TARGETS FOR NICS AND FOR OFMDFM.

Year	NICS target	NICS achieved	OFMDFM target	OFMDFM achieved
2005/2006	13.8	13.4	11.3	8.6
2006/2007	12.4	13.7	10.2	10.7
2007/2008	11.2	12.9	9.2	9.7
2008/2009	10.2	Not yet available	8.5	Not yet available
2009/2010	9.5	--	8.5	--

More detailed analysis of the Department's sickness absence for last year is available in the NISRA report "Analysis of Sickness Absence in OFMDFM 2007/2008" a copy of which has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Financial Assistance Act

Mr Bresland asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it expects to make its first determination under the Financial Assistance Act. (AQO 2003/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 received Royal Assent on 4 February 2009 and the provisions of the Act came into operation the following day. We are currently seeking Executive agreement to make a determination and designation under section 1 of the Act. The determination and designation will be made as soon as Executive agreement is obtained.

Civic Forum

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the achievements of the Civic Forum. (AQO 2004/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Civic Forum met in plenary 12 times between October 2000 and October 2002. In addition to plenary sessions, the Forum established a number of standing committees and working groups to take forward distinct aspects of its work programme. During the period of its operation the Civic Forum inputted to draft Programmes for Government. The Forum engaged in a number of research projects into long-term issues affecting society, and by the time of suspension, had published reports on educational disadvantage in the context of lifelong learning, and a regional strategy for social inclusion.

The Forum made submissions to Departments on Investing for Health, the Review of Post Primary Education, Priorities for Social Inclusion and the role of the Commissioner for Children. It also commented on an OFMDFM review of Community Relations policy.

Interim Commissioner for Older People

Mr Brady asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work programme of the Interim Commissioner for Older People. (AQO 2005/09)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The Executive's Programme for Government includes a commitment under PSA 7 (2) "Making People's Lives Better" to deliver a strong independent voice for older people and we are currently working towards the establishment of an Older People's Commissioner.

To ensure momentum towards creating a Commissioner for Older People is maintained, Ministers asked OFMDFM officials to appoint an Interim Advocate for Older People.

On 3rd November 2008 Junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Jeffrey Donaldson announced the appointment of Dame Joan Harbison as the Older People's Advocate and Dame Joan took up her position on 1st December 2008.

As Older People's Advocate, Dame Joan will help to identify current problems faced by all older people and provide Ministers with independent advice on a range of issues that impact on all older people in Northern Ireland, including how these might be addressed.

Dame Joan will also co-chair an older people's advisory panel with a senior OFMDFM official and thereby assist with the monitoring and review of the older people's strategy "Ageing in an Inclusive Society".

OFMDFM officials are currently assisting the Older People's Advocate with the recruitment of support staff and the preparation of a work programme which should be finalised in the near future.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sustrans Project

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many schools in the Upper Bann constituency benefit from funding from her Department for the Sustrans Project. (AQW 4387/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Michelle Gildernew): One school benefited from funding from Sustrans project in the Upper Bann constituency.

Single Farm Payments

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many Single Farm Payments are outstanding in the South Down constituency; and what is the anticipated timescale for the remainder of payments to be completed. (AQW 4435/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Department's Single Farm Payment Branch does not hold Single Farm Payment details on a constituency basis. The data is currently held by county/postcode.

At the end of January 2009, 90.1% of farmers in the North had received their 2008 Single Farm Payment. In South Down, and other constituencies, some farm businesses will not have received payments for a variety of reasons, including queries on the claim, the need to complete processing of an on-farm inspection report, challenges by others of the right to claim land, the need to await probate or because the farmer has not provided bank account details to allow payment to be made by electronic transfer.

It is not possible to specify when individual cases will be cleared for payment. My Department has improved its payment performance and will continue to make payments as quickly as possible. The targets are to complete 92.5% for receipt by the end of February and 95% by the end of March 2009.

Larne Veterinary Office

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the geographical location of farmers in Islandmagee was not taken into consideration when deciding to close the Larne Veterinary Office. (AQW 4493/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: While I have announced my decisions on the location of 11 of the 12 DARD Direct offices, I have yet to decide on the location of the final location providing services in South and East Antrim. My Department is looking at a number of location options to ensure good accessibility to a DARD Direct office providing the full range of DARD's farmer focussed services for the optimum number of farmers. This process will take into account the needs of customers across the entire area, including Islandmagee.

Rivers Agency

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the Rivers Agency does not let the users of the Lower River Bann know before opening flood control gates between Coleraine and Lough Neagh. (AQW 4494/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rivers Agency maintains an arrangement whereby anyone can ring the Rivers Agency Coleraine Area Office for information on that day's gate openings and Lough levels. This arrangement is further enhanced by access to this information at weekends by contacting the Engineer responsible on his mobile phone. These arrangements have been in existence for some years and are regularly availed of by many river users. Gate openings are essential to maintain Lough levels within the statutory range. Rivers Agency is currently completing a £1m refurbishment project to motorize the Lower Bann River Sluice Gates at Toome, Portna and The Cutts, Coleraine. This work has been done to improve efficiency and health & safety arrangements. Installation of new systems now allows Gates to be operated electrically rather than by manual means. This work has included installation of audible and visual alarm facilities to warn river users, who are within close proximity of the gates, of impending movement of the Sluice Gates.

Fisheries Organisations

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has held had any discussions with Fisheries organisations and especially in respect of the under 10 metres boats, to improve their chances with quotas. (AQW 4504/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I have not received any representations from the industry on this issue but my officials would be happy to meet with the under ten sector to discuss the matter in more detail.

Dioxin Scare

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many animals have or are due to be culled as a direct result of the dioxin scare in the East Antrim constituency. (AQW 4553/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There are no animals in East Antrim that have been culled or due to be culled as a direct result of the dioxin scare.

Fish Numbers on the River Roe

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken over the last three years to protect fish numbers on the River Roe. (AQW 4635/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Loughs Agency, who provided the following information, have responsibility for the conservation, protection, management and development of the salmon and inland fisheries in the Foyle and Carlingford Areas.

In the last three years Loughs Agency staff have continually evaluated and managed the status of the River Roe as a Salmonid fishery. This work has involved over three thousand man hours per year in each of the last three years, these man hours have been spent in active fishery development, protection and enforcement, including dealing with issues of illegal angling and water pollution. This has led to criminal prosecution cases being referred to the Loughs Agency solicitors and one ongoing civil case for damages to the fishery caused by a fish kill.

In addition Agency staff have a rolling programme of gathering management data, "audit points," for the Agency's salmon management strategy. The Audit points for the River Roe include:

- Over 450 electro fishing sites to evaluate juvenile salmon and trout abundance in the Foyle catchment; with 82 fished in the Roe in 2006 and 75 in 2007 and 2008.
- Evaluation of declared rod catches (444 in 2006 and 500 in 2007)
- Updated habitat surveys for the whole river system with a total of 115km of watercourses surveyed.
- River chemistry sampling and analysis.
- River Biology sampling and analysis.

- Maintenance and data collation from the Loughs Agency fish counter on the river Roe.

The Agency's fish counters show a healthy improvement in the salmon numbers in the Roe system as detailed below;

	2005	2006	2007	2008
River Roe	2917	1478	5375	4927

The River Roe has also benefited from the wider management policies implemented by the Loughs Agency including carcass tagging and the cessation of the interceptory salmon fishery seaward of Lough Foyle.

Loughs Agency staff continue to work closely with the Roe Angling Association and have regular meetings with the anglers in relation to fisheries protection and development issues, including training their Private River Watchers. The Loughs Agency also undertook enhancement works to improve salmonid productivity on the Woodburn tributary in 2006 which included the provision of stock proof fencing and the improvement of nursery and spawning habitat. Similar work was undertaken on the Boveagh Burn, including the installation of flow deflectors, rubble mats and boulders to improve nursery habitat. In 2008 the Agency offered grant aid and assistance to the club in the provision of the installation of 10 spawning units and nursery in the Wood Burn to the value of £5000 at a level of 75% funding from the Agency's Sustainable Development Fund. The inclement weather in 2008 meant the club could not complete these works but they have been granted an extension to their Letter of Offer until the 31st of May 2009.

Finally, the River Roe and Tributaries Catchment Status Report 2007, a complete management review of the River Roe, is available from the Loughs Agency website.

Creation of Artificial Reefs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is available through the Rural Development Programme for the creation of artificial reefs on the coastline to develop (i) fisheries management; (ii) coastal protection; and (iii) marine recreation. (AQW 4753/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: There is no support under the Rural Development Programme for artificial reefs, however Article 38(1) of the European Fisheries Fund Regulation 1198/2006 allows the Department to provide support for measures of common interest intended to protect and develop aquatic fauna and flora while enhancing the aquatic environment. This can include the construction and installation of artificial reefs intended to protect and develop aquatic fauna and flora. Support may cover work preliminary to installation, including studies, components, signalling, transport and the assembly of the facilities and scientific monitoring.

It is recognised that such artificial reefs may make it easier to catch fish, thus resulting in increased fishing mortality. The European Commission has indicated in its guidance on the EFF that these structures should only be used in situations where fishing mortality is regulated i.e. by suspension of fishing or technical measures.

Price of Fertilisers

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current price of fertilisers; and if she will carry out a review on the effect that the prices are having on the viability of farms. (AQW 4780/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The average price of artificial fertilisers for 2008 was £291 per tonne, which was an increase of 81% over the previous year. The total cost to the industry for the calendar year of 2008 was £83 million, an increase of 72% on 2007 levels. Artificial fertilisers accounted for 7.9% of the total input costs of the agricultural industry in 2008 compared with 5.4% in 2007.

Price of Compound Feed

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the current price of compound feed; and if she will carry out a review on the effect that the prices are having on the viability of farms. (AQW 4781/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The average price of animal feedstuffs purchased in 2008 was £236 per tonne, which was an increase of 19% over the previous year. The total cost to the industry for the calendar year of 2008 was £525 million, an increase of 20% on 2007 levels. The total cost of animal feedstuffs accounted for 50% of the total input costs to the agricultural industry in 2008 compared with 49% in 2007.

Correspondence Received from MEPs

Mr P J Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of the dates and subject matter of all correspondence received from each of the three MEPs during the period 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008. (AQW 4796/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

MEP:	Date Received:	Subject Matter:
Mr Allister	8/01/2008	Single Farm Payment
Mr Allister	16/01/2008	Environmental Impact Regulations
Mr Nicholson	14/02/2008	Farm Woodland Premium Scheme
Mr Nicholson	4/03/2008	Animal Slaughter Payments
Mr Allister	6/03/2008	Hedge Cutting
Mr Nicholson	12/03/2008	Funding opportunities for Horse Breeders
Mr Nicholson	12/03/2008	Food labelling
Mr Allister	28/04/2008	Inheritance Tax Liability
Mr Nicholson	13/05/2008	Export of cattle to Scotland (30 day residency requirements)
Mr Nicholson	28/05/2008	Countryside Management Scheme Payments.
Mr Nicholson	4/06/2008	Nitrates Directive
Mr Nicholson	23/06/2008	Problems facing Bee Keepers
Mr Nicholson	24/06/2008	Local Action Groups
Mr Nicholson	4/07/2008	Nitrates Directive
Mr Allister	14/10/2008	Genetically Modified Crops
Mr Allister	15/10/2008	Slurry spreading
Mr Allister	15/10/2008	Wind energy for Rural Businesses Scheme
Mr Allister	21/10/2008	Constituent Query – Outcome of a Court Hearing
Mr Allister	22/10/2008	Single Farm Payment appeal
Mr Allister	23/10/2008	Farm Nutrient Management Scheme
Mr Allister	23/10/2008	Farm Nutrient Management Scheme Applications
Mr Allister	30/10/2008	Fishing Processing & weighing and 100km Rule
Mr Allister	31/10/2008	EU Audit disallowance
Mr Allister	11/11/2008	Rural Development Programme Funding
Mr Allister	13/11/2008	Tourism
Mr Allister	17/11/2008	Flooding

MEP:	Date Received:	Subject Matter:
Mr Allister	20/11/2008	Fermanagh Leader Action Group Application
Mr Allister	26/11/2008	Single Farm Payment
Mr Allister	26/11/2008	Duplicate fields issue
Mr Allister	4/12/2008	National Reserve Award
Mr Allister	4/12/2008	TB Outbreaks
Mr Allister	9/12/2008	Single Farm Payment
Mr Allister	18/12/2008	Dioxin in animal feeding stuffs issue
Mr Allister	22/12/2008	Countryside Management Scheme
Mr Nicholson	23/12/2008	Export refunds on Dairy Products
Mr Allister	23/12/2008	Single Farm Payment claim
Mr Nicholson	20/03/2008	Request for a meeting with representatives of Premier Woodlands
Mr Nicholson	1/04/2008	Request for a meeting to discuss various agricultural issues
Mr Nicholson	6/05/2008	Request for a meeting regarding the equine industry

Note: All letters from Mr James Allister QC MEP were addressed to the DARD Permanent Secretary, Malcolm McKibbin. These letters were passed to my Private Office for reply.

Programme for Government

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what risk assessment she has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4825/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets within the Programme for Government are underpinned by Delivery Agreements which are published on the DARD website. There is a separate Delivery Agreement for each of the three DARD PSA targets and these detail the risk management strategy adopted in each case. The Delivery Agreements identify the risks and detail the controls in place. The documents are updated on a regular basis to take account of new and emerging risks.

The website address at which the Department's PSA Delivery Agreements can be found is as follows:

<http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/strategies-reports-accounts/strategic-corporate-info-what-we-spend/psa-delivery-agreement.htm>

Progress towards the achievement of PSA targets is reviewed by the Departmental Board on a monthly basis.

Interferon Gamma Tests

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many interferon gamma tests were carried out in each of the last ten years. (AQW 4831/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The following table details Interferon Gamma (IFNG) tests conducted in the past decade as per the question.

Year	Number of herds IFNG tested	Number of animals IFNG tested
1998 *	27	2035
1999 *	11	547
2000 *	6	331
2001	0	0
2002	0	0
2003*	28	1915

Year	Number of herds IFNG tested	Number of animals IFNG tested
2004	59	3762
2005	198	16824
2006	136	13303
2007	91	8513
2008	165	13956

* IFNG testing in these years was not Field diagnostic testing but was for research and development purposes only. Veterinary Service co-ordinated IFNG testing with offer of purchase of IFNG positive non intra-dermal reactors did not commence until July 2004.

Flooding Near the Six Mile Water River at Raceview

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action his Department has taken to address flooding near the Sixmilewater River at Raceview, Muckamore, Antrim since flooding occurred in August 2008 and over the weekend of 31 January - 1 February 2009. (AQW 4839/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Having witnessed at first hand the effects of flooding throughout the province, I fully understand your concerns and can assure you that my department is doing all it can to reduce the risk of flooding at this location. To this end general maintenance, including repairs to a culvert, have already been undertaken. In addition my staff are continuing to provide flood emergency response and were able to reassure resident's concerns over the weekend of 31st January to 1st February 2009.

An evaluation of the performance of the existing flood defences is underway, including a review of the operation of drainage systems behind the river defences. This investigation will report and any minor works identified that would reduce flood risk will be given high priority.

Looking to the longer term, a study has been instigated to assess what can be done to reduce flood risk to what is a complex problem.

Civil Service Staff

Mr A Attwood asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of civil service staff employed by her Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4854/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Details of the information available at present are set out in the attached table. The Department, along with other NICS Departments is currently in the process of introducing a new HR system known as HR Connect. At this time the management reporting facility, which also holds historical data, is not fully functional and therefore the information requested had to be drawn from manual records. While every effort has been made to provide accurate information, it has not been possible to undertake a full validation or to provide the level of details requested for January 2009.

Administrative & Equivalent Grades	Staffing May 2007			Staffing 2009
	Core	Rivers Agency	Forestry Service	Total Department
Administrative Assistant	334	17	4	294
Administrative Officer	453	13	25	435
Executive Officer 11	416	35	10	437
Executive Officer 1	415	32	34	437
Staff Officer	462	33	16	492
Deputy Principal	197	25	12	239
Grade 7	233	9	3	210
Grade 6	8	2	1	15

Administrative & Equivalent Grades	Staffing May 2007			Staffing 2009
	Core	Rivers Agency	Forestry Service	Total Department
Senior Civil Servants	15	3	1	18
Industrial	67	254	163	435
Total	2,600	423	269	3,012

Capital Projects

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if there are any major capital projects in her Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 4997/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: To date there have been no major capital projects in my Department that have been subject to delay under the above criteria.

Animal Welfare Consultation

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide a timetable for the delivery of the 2006 animal welfare consultation. (AQO 2016/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: In my Statement to the Assembly on 26 January 2009, I outlined the actions I had taken to date to review animal welfare legislation in the North.

My Department consulted on proposals for new animal welfare legislation in late 2006. However, as this was carried out under Direct Rule, I wanted to take time to fully consider existing Animal Welfare legislation and the responses received to the consultation. I have completed an initial review, and have met a range of key stakeholders to hear their concerns at first hand. These meetings have been exceptionally informative.

As I have already advised the Assembly, I believe that it is important that animal welfare legislation across the Island of Ireland is broadly compatible. I may add that this is a view shared by some of the welfare groups I met. I welcome the fact that the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in the South is continuing to meet stakeholders and will shortly be finalising their legislative proposals.

My review of animal welfare legislation is nearing completion. I will shortly be examining all the evidence presented to me. I will then consider the scope for new legislation in the North, and the timetable for bringing it forward in line with the resources that are available. At that stage, I will make a summary of the responses to the 2006 consultation exercise publicly available.

Farm Modernisation Scheme

Mrs O'Neill asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how farmers with health or mobility problems will be able to access the Farm Modernisation Scheme. (AQO 2017/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Farmers with health or mobility problems can obtain the Farm Modernisation Programme information pack by downloading it from the DARD website or if they telephone one of the 8 DARD offices which are facilitating the Programme my officials will post the information pack to the farmer. These offices are located in Armagh, Ballymena, Coleraine, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Newry and Omagh.

Farmers with health or mobility problems can submit their Farm Modernisation Programme application between 17 February and 31 March by posting it to the address advised in the information pack or by hand delivering to one of the 8 DARD Offices. Each of these 8 DARD offices has disabled access. Alternatively they may wish to arrange for someone to hand deliver it on their behalf.

Farming Industry

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with her European counterparts to safeguard the farming industry. (AQO 2018/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Safeguarding the farming industry as the backbone of the rural communities of the North will always be a priority with me. To this end, I will do whatever it takes to deliver for the farmers on the ground.

I have personally lobbied the European Commission on a wide range of issues which have a direct bearing on the livelihoods of many local people. The Commissioners in Brussels that deal with my policy areas are the Commissioner for Agriculture, Mariann Fisher Boel, the Commissioner for Fisheries Joe Borg and the Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, Androulla Vassiliou.

In addition to correspondence and telephone contact, I have represented the views of the North during 9 separate occasions in Brussels and once in Luxembourg. This has included 2 personal meetings with the Agriculture Commissioner, 3 with the Fisheries Commissioner and a meeting with the Health and Consumer protection Commissioner. My colleague Conor Murphy has also met with Commissioner Borg once acting on my behalf. Commissioners are not always available so to press my points home; I have also met twice with the Agriculture Commissioner's senior officials and once with senior fisheries officials.

A meeting is planned tomorrow with the Agriculture Commissioner to discuss the dioxin crisis.

Rural White Paper

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's progress in producing a 'rural white paper'. (AQO 2019/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am pleased to have obtained Executive approval to the development of the North's first Rural White Paper which will provide a unique opportunity to address the challenges facing our rural communities now and in the future.

I have established a Stakeholder Advisory Group to assist me in developing the White Paper and to ensure that the views of stakeholders are fully considered. This group met for the first time in December and I am pleased that they have agreed to work collectively and to be actively involved in the development of the Rural White Paper. The group will meet again later this month to discuss the themes and issues to be addressed in the White Paper and their work on developing these themes will intensify over the coming months.

I have also established, and chair, a new Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy which contains the senior policy officials from all Departments. This Committee is the main vehicle within government for development and agreement of the Rural White Paper.

With the help of these two groups, my Department is currently drafting proposals for the Rural White Paper with a view to submitting them to the Executive for approval in April 2009. Work on the full development of the Rural White Paper will continue during 2009 with consultation taking place in 2010.

Bee Health Contingency Plan

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the Bee Health Contingency Plan. (AQO 2020/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The Department's Bee Health Contingency Plan for Northern Ireland is now in the final stages of drafting.

Comments on this draft are currently being sought from relevant staff within my Department and scientific experts in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute.

It is envisaged that my officials will be in a position to circulate this Contingency Plan to the two Bee Organisations in early March for their consideration and comments prior to it being finalised.

Dangerous Dogs

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what strategies have been employed by her Department to ensure that individuals are fully aware of the breeds of dog that are dangerous and should not be kept. (AQO 2021/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The control of dogs, including dangerous dogs, is regulated under the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983, as amended by the Dangerous Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. The Order designates certain types of dogs which it is an offence to possess. The prohibited dogs are the Pit Bull Terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino and Fila Brasileiro.

When the Dangerous Dogs legislation came into force in 1991, the Department issued a number of Press Releases outlining the effect of this legislation. Details of the prohibited types are also available on the Department's website.

However, local Councils are responsible for enforcing all aspects of the Dogs Order, and it is therefore their responsibility to ensure that the public are aware of the dogs that are proscribed. I understand some Councils have published advice on this matter on their websites.

Dangerous Dogs

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development following her discussions with key stakeholders, what format her Dangerous Dogs Bill will take. (AQO 2022/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: My Review of Dogs legislation is drawing to a close. I will shortly be examining all the evidence presented to me and will then consider how existing legislation and practices might be improved.

The specific provisions of any new legislation that may be needed will depend on detailed consideration of this evidence. I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of my considerations.

DARD Direct Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if consideration will be given to the expansion of the DARD Direct Scheme to include the Ballynahinch area. (AQO 2023/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: As you are likely to be aware, I have decided that the successful DARD Direct one stop shop approach will be rolled out to 12 locations across the North. I am confident that 12 offices will meet the needs of the vast majority of farmers and represents best value for money. I have confirmed 11 of these locations (Omagh, Dungannon, Armagh, Newry, Downpatrick, Newtownards, Ballymena, Coleraine, Claudy, Magherafelt and Enniskillen) but, I have yet to decide on the location of the final office which will provide services in South and East Antrim. Once the DARD Direct model has been rolled out, farmers from the Ballynahinch area can visit the office most convenient for them, which is likely to be Downpatrick.

Funds from Europe

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how funds from Europe are drawn down by her Department; and how fluctuations in currency levels impact on money that is received. (AQO 2024/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Funding from Europe falls into two categories:-

- (i) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Schemes
The department does not draw funding directly from Europe for these schemes but is funded through the Rural Payments Agency which acts as the UK Funding Body. As a result of these arrangements there is no impact on the Department from currency fluctuations.
- (ii) EU Structural Funds Programme 2000-2006
The Department draws funding directly from Europe via expenditure declarations which are made in euro.

This will result in either a gain or loss to the department depending on the fluctuation in the exchange rate between the declaration being made by the Department and the re-imbusement being issued by the Commission.

This also applies to expenditure incurred by the Department on projects funded out of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which is drawn from Europe by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Rural White Paper

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the development of a Rural White Paper. (AQO 2025/09)

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am pleased to have obtained Executive approval to the development of the North's first Rural White Paper which will provide a unique opportunity to address the challenges facing our rural communities now and in the future.

I have established a Stakeholder Advisory Group to assist me in developing the White Paper and to ensure that the views of stakeholders are fully considered. This group met for the first time in December and I am pleased that they have agreed to work collectively and to be actively involved in the development of the Rural White Paper. The group will meet again later this month to discuss the themes and issues to be addressed in the White Paper and their work on developing these themes will intensify over the coming months.

I have also established, and chair, a new Interdepartmental Committee on Rural Policy which contains the senior policy officials from all Departments. This Committee is the main vehicle within government for development and agreement of the Rural White Paper.

With the help of these two groups, my Department is currently drafting proposals for the Rural White Paper with a view to submitting them to the Executive for approval in April 2009. Work on the full development of the Rural White Paper will continue during 2009 with consultation taking place in 2010.

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Multi Sports Stadium

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many construction jobs would be created during the course of building a multi-sports stadium. (AQW 4204/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Gregory Campbell): No estimates have been made of the number of construction jobs that would be created during the course of building a multi-sports stadium. It is however important to note that allowing for the completion of planning and procurement procedures it could take between 18-24 months before any workers would be employed on site.

Sportsmatch Scheme

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has plans to introduce 'Sportsmatch', the supportive government scheme available in England, Scotland and Wales. (AQW 4209/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. I have, however, asked my officials to liaise with SNI over the possibility of introducing a Sportsmatch scheme into Northern Ireland.

Films Made in Northern Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many films have been made in Northern Ireland, in the last three years (AQW 4227/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There have been 19 feature films made in Northern Ireland in the last 3 calendar years, 18 of which were produced with assistance from Northern Ireland Screen. Of the total of 19, 7 were made in 2006, 5 in 2007 and 7 in 2008.

Over the three year period there have been 23 short films produced in Northern Ireland with assistance from Northern Ireland Screen. There were also a small number made which did not receive support from Northern Ireland Screen,

Films Made in Northern Ireland

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many films are scheduled to be made in Northern Ireland in the next two years. (AQW 4228/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is difficult to predict with any degree certainty the number of films going into production in Northern Ireland over the next 2 years,

However, Northern Ireland Screen, the lead body for the promotion of film production here, advises that the level of production should remain similar to that of recent years, with, as a reasonable estimate, 6 films being made in 2009.

Music Performing Rights Society

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what consideration he has given to the development of a Northern Ireland Music Performing Rights Society; and what assessment his Department has made of the current arrangements, and potential improvements in the collection and distribution that could occur if a local organisation was set up to distribute royalties. (AQW 4240/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Whilst the Performing Rights Society is a UK wide royalty collection and distribution agency, there is no organisation providing these services solely for clients in Northern Ireland.

However, I am aware of the recently established Northern Ireland Music Rights Society and its wish to act as a royalty collection agency here. I can confirm that Edwin Poots my predecessor advised those involved in that organisation to prepare a feasibility study which would inform if and how this matter should be taken forward.

To date this has not been received by my Department and consequently we have not been able to make an informed assessment of the current arrangements and the potential impact of a local royalty collection agency.

When the feasibility study is received by my Department it will be given careful consideration.

Multi Sports Stadium

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how he intends to distribute the £70m that has been allocated between 2008/9 and 2010/11 for the proposed Multi-Sports Stadium. (AQW 4271/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I declared an underspend of £10m allocated in 2008-09 to Stadia Development. I would propose to defer major stadia expenditure until after 2010-11 to allow for further consultation with sports' Governing Bodies and to seek to use some of the resources targeted for stadia development to bring forward capital expenditure on other priority sports projects.

Films Made in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many films have been completed in the Strangford constituency, in the last three years. (AQW 4347/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: No feature film has been shot or completed exclusively in the Strangford constituency in the last three years.

However, a comedy film entitled Buy Borrow Steal was shot extensively at Ballywalter House in 2007.

Films Made in Northern Ireland

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has he been contacted by any film companies outside Northern Ireland who are considering making their films here. (AQW 4348/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have not been contacted by any film companies from outside Northern Ireland that are considering making films here.

Northern Ireland Screen is the lead body for the promotion of film production in Northern Ireland and its staff are in regular contact with film producers from within and outside Northern Ireland regarding potential projects. These discussions are of a commercially sensitive nature and as such remain confidential until a production is confirmed as proceeding.

As Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I will continue to support the local film industry and to promote Northern Ireland as an excellent location for film production.

Film Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what input the film industry contributed to the local economy, in each of the last three years. (AQW 4350/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is very little statistical information readily available on the input of the film industry to the local economy.

However, Northern Ireland Screen estimates that film and television drama production, which are supported through the same funding package, generated the following expenditure to the Northern Ireland economy in each of the last three years:

Year	Amount
2006/07	£6,164,046
2007/08	£14,204,526
2008/09	£10,000,000*

* The 2008/09 figure is projected expenditure and will be revised in due course.

Creative Industries Initiative

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps he is taking to involve the Creative Industries Initiative with local councils. (AQW 4352/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I launched the Creative Industries Innovation Fund (CIIF) on 17 October 2008 and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland is administering the Fund on behalf of DCAL.

The Arts Council will be holding a series of roadshows across Northern Ireland to raise awareness of the CIIF and encourage applications.

The CIIF staff have delivered 10 presentations on the Fund across Northern Ireland over the past few weeks and all 32 Local Enterprise Agencies have been provided with copies of the presentation.

Belfast City Council also promotes the CIIF by providing links on it's website to the appropriate pages on the Arts Council website.

Francis McPeake School of Music

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much funding the Francis McPeake School of Music has received from the Arts Council in each of the last five years; and why funding for next year was refused. (AQW 4356/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Francis McPeake School of Music received funding from the Arts Council for the period 2004/05 to 2008/09 from two funding streams, Annual Support for Organisations Programmes (ASOP) and Lottery funding as set out in the table below:

Year	Exchequer Funding	Lottery Funding
2004/05	25,000	-
2005/06	50,000	10,000
2006/07	50,000	45,000
2007/08	50,000	-
2008/09	-	-

The Arts Council is responsible for decisions on funding and has advised that the School's applications for support under ASOP and Lottery for 2008/09 were unsuccessful because the School did not provide the information required to meet the funding criteria.

The School should contact the Arts Council directly to discuss this decision and the potential for future funding.

RUC George Cross Museum

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in the event of the devolution of Policing and Justice to the Assembly, if the provision of the promised RUC George Cross Museum will become the responsibility of his Department and, if so, what action needs to be taken to complete this process. (AQW 4429/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the event of the devolution of policing and criminal justice to the Assembly we expect that responsibility for the RUC George Cross Foundation, currently an Executive NDPB of the NIO will transfer to the proposed Department of Justice. It would then be a matter for that Department to consider any business proposals put forward by the RUC George Cross Foundation.

NIO have informed me that the Foundation is seeking funding for a museum and this is currently under consideration.

Safety at Sports Grounds

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money is available in the CSR for Safety at Sports Grounds. (AQW 4500/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: £96m is available over the period 2008/2011 for all sports capital projects.

Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport including the distribution of funding. The amount of money available for safety at sports grounds is being considered by SNI in the context of the total capital allocation for sport and competing priorities.

Elite Facilities

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money is available for the Elite Facilities in preparation for the London 2012 Olympics. (AQW 4501/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Elite Facilities Capital Programme is a competition being managed by Sport Northern Ireland on behalf of my Department.

A competition is currently underway and the number of potential projects cannot be identified until the Outline Business Cases have been assessed.

£96m is available over the period 2008/2011 for all sports capital projects. The amount that will be available for the Elite Facilities Capital Programme will be determined once the Outline Business Cases have been assessed, the number of priority projects have been identified and the consequential spending profile considered.

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr P Butler asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money his Department has made available to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in each of the last two years.

(AQW 4547/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has made funding available as follows in the last two financial years:

(i) Ulster-Scots Academy:

2006-2007

£392,412

2007-2008

£405,189

(ii) Ulster-Scots projects

Through Arts Council Northern Ireland's programmes and grants, (Ulster-Scots Arts - Annual Support for Organisations Programme, Lottery, Awards for All, NW Challenge Fund, Arts Development fund and support for individual artists) funding has been made available as follows:

2006-2007

£267,967

2007-2008

£1,050,164

In addition, the Ulster-Scots Agency has received a budgetary allocation of £2.557m for the calendar year 2007 and £3.315m for the calendar year 2008. In accordance with its statutory remit the Agency supports funding through its Financial Assistance Scheme to organisations and groups involved in projects, festivals and events relating to Ulster-Scots culture, heritage and language.

Cairncastle Ulster-Scots Event

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if funding will be available for the Cairncastle Ulster-Scots event this summer.

(AQW 4554/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Funding for community events, such as the Cairncastle Ulster-Scots event, is distributed through the Ulster-Scots Agency. The Department does not fund community groups directly.

The Ulster-Scots Agency has received an application for the Cairncastle event. The application will be considered by the Agency's Board at a meeting at the end February 2009.

Celebration of Homecoming Scotland

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there are any events planned for the year long celebration of Homecoming Scotland that includes the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns. (AQW 4556/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: As you will be aware Homecoming Scotland 2009 is a national celebration of the contribution Scotland has made. My Department, although not directly involved in Homecoming Scotland celebrations, has already, and will continue to mark the anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns.

Indeed the Ulster-Scots Agency is involved with supporting Burns Night celebrations, and the Ulster-Scots Community Network, funded by the Ulster-Scots Agency, has produced a booklet on Robert Burns and organised a Burns festival which has just finished in Belfast.

Furthermore events were held in a number of libraries over the week 19 - 26 January 2009 to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, and the Ulster Scots Tradition and further events are planned for throughout the year.

2012 London Olympics

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for his assessment of concerns that £50m has been lost to projects in Northern Ireland and diverted to the 2012 London Olympics. (AQW 4561/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: National Lottery Policy and Legislation is a reserved matter. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport has overall responsibility for the Lottery within Government.

The Lottery will be required to contribute around £2.2 billion to the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and in Northern Ireland this means a direct loss to the non-Olympic good causes of around £40 million over the period 2009-2012.

Despite this being a reserved matter, Northern Ireland together with the other devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales did make representation to DCMS to ensure that the contribution from Lottery was kept as low as possible. Assurances were also sought that should Olympic costs increase, no further funds will be diverted from the National Lottery and this has since been received from DCMS.

I can also confirm that an agreement has been reached with the Mayor of London under which DCMS should be able to refund some £675m to the Lottery distributors throughout the UK. It is hoped that this will come from the proceeds of Olympic Park land sales post-2012.

Proposed Sports Stadium at the Maze site

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what feasibility studies, equality impact assessment and other criteria have been used to allow the redirection of funding from the proposed sports stadium at the Maze site to Linfield Football Club.[R] (AQW 4569/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has not redirected Sports Stadium Development funding to Linfield Football Club. Consequently, no feasibility studies, equality impact assessment etc are available or have been carried out. However, a business case to identify options both to enable, on a short term basis, international soccer to continue to take place at Windsor Park, which is owned by Linfield FC, and address pressing public safety needs at the ground has been commissioned by Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) at the request of the Department and with the agreement of the IFA and Linfield FC.

Crowd Control at Irish League Grounds

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what arrangements are in place between the PSNI and the owners of Irish League grounds for crowd control in the grounds. (AQW 4585/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Policing arrangements in Northern Ireland are a reserved matter under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In addition, crowd control in Irish League grounds is the responsibility of the owners and operators of the grounds in the first instance. However, the Northern Ireland Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds, published by the Department in 2007, provides owners and operators of sports grounds, including Irish League grounds, with guidelines for arranging policing at venues. The Guide also provides guidelines on safety arrangements for spectators which includes crowd control in the grounds.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money, public and other, has been spent in preparing for the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQW 4590/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My department has spent a total of £3,598,708 to date in relation to the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze.

Multi-Sports Stadium

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the companies involved in the development of the sports stadium at the Maze site, and any compensation due to them as a result of the termination of their contracts. (AQW 4595/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department has had contractual arrangements with the following organisations in relation to the multi-sports stadium:

- PricewaterhouseCoopers
- Mott MacDonald/HOK Sports Partnership
- KPMG/Davis Langdon
- Fire IMC
- Mott MacDonald
- Central Procurement Directorate

All contracts have been completed therefore the issue of compensation does not arise.

Sailing Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding has he made available for sailing sports and events in the Strangford area. (AQW 4600/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. SNI has advised that exchequer investment into sailing is made on a Northern Ireland wide basis to the governing body, the Royal Yachting Association NI, and not directly into one specific geographical area.

In the period 2006-2009, SNI has provided £248,173 of exchequer funding to the Royal Yachting Association NI. This would have indirectly impacted on the Strangford area through work with sailing clubs and junior squad sessions held in that area.

Promotion of Hurling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has attended a hurling match in his official capacity; and, if not, what plans he has to attend such an event. (AQW 4675/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have not attended a hurling match and there are currently no plans to attend a match.

Promotion of Hurling

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action he has taken to promote and sponsor hurling. (AQW 4676/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Responsibility for the promotion of hurling rests, in the first instance, with the governing body for the sport, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). The Ulster Council GAA has published a strategic plan for the period 2006-2010 which sets out its proposals for the promotion of Gaelic Games, including hurling. Over the last three financial years, Sport Northern Ireland, which is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding, has provided a total of £6,257,597 of Exchequer funding to the Ulster Council GAA to help them take forward their strategic plan.

Gaelic Athletic Association

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what major capital projects his Department has sponsored for the Gaelic Athletic Association since taking up office. (AQW 4678/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Sport Northern Ireland (SNI) is responsible for the development of sport in Northern Ireland including the distribution of funding. Since I took up office, SNI has made the following award offers to the GAA for capital projects:

Club	Project Description	Award Amount
St Canice's GFC	construction of a full size pitch, fencing & floodlighting	245,000
Owen Roe GAC	Pavilion with 4 changing rooms, referees room, committee room and a store room.	245,000
St Colmcille's GAC	Development of 2.5 acres of land adjacent to the existing facilities which the club has already purchased in 2006. Development into a training pitch and associated facilities	210,000
St Mary's GAC Slaughtmanus	Gaelic football training/playing pitch with floodlighting.	210,000
Dromara GFC	2nd natural grass pitch & floodlighting	254,000
Derry GAA County Board	Provision of 4300 seated stand, crowd control point & spectator facilities for disabled at Celtic Park	800,000
All Saints GAC	Construction of full size grass pitch	248,195
Lavey GAC	Construction of Synthetic pitch and 2 changing rooms	821,226
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association	Exchequer modernisation programme for Gaelic games. Completion of floodlighting programme at main county grounds	251,400
Drumragh Sarsfields GAC	Second full-sized floodlit pitch; and two storey four changing room pavilion with ancillary services.	795,000
Pearse Óg GFC	Construction of a 4 changing room pavilion	245,000
Tempo Maguire's GFC	4 changing room pavilion	245,000
Ballerin GAC	Construction of a natural turf full size pitch.	225,000
Brookeborough Heber McMahon GAC	Construction of a natural turf training pitch.	68,987
Derrygonnelly Harps GFC	Reconstruction of existing natural turf pitch	142,302
Derrylin O'Connells GAA	Construction of a natural turf pitch.	137,604
Galbally Pearses GFC	Construction of a natural turf training pitch.	200,565
Glen Rovers GAC	Construction of a natural turf full size pitch.	188,793
O'Donovan Rossa GAC	Construction of a full size natural turf pitch with floodlighting.	225,000
Pearses Gaelic Football & Camogie Club	Construction of a full size natural turf pitch and training pitch	170,000
Slaughtneill GAC	Installation of floodlighting to training pitch.	119,140
St Malachy's GAC	Construction of a natural turf training pitch with floodlighting.	225,000
St Mary's GAC	Construction of a natural turf training pitch with floodlighting.	225,000
Wolfe Tones GAC	Construction of a natural turf training pitch.	180,000
		6,677,212.00

Bushmills Salmon Station

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much money has been spent on the Bushmills Salmon Station in each of the last five years. (AQW 4715/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The overall expenditure in the last five years for the above is as follows;

- 2004/2005 - £96,327
- 2005/2006 - £163,407
- 2006/2007 - £256,358
- 2007/2008 - £217,964
- 2008/2009 - £102,268 (figure to end Dec 2008)

Irish-Language Broadcast Fund

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what his Department has done to promote Irish language television and radio productions since coming into office and how he plans to continue this work.

(AQW 4741/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since my appointment as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure my Department has paid £2m to Northern Ireland Screen to administer the Irish Language Broadcast Fund (ILBF). A further £1m will be paid before the end of this financial year, 31 March 2009.

In June 2008 the UK Government directly allocated an additional £6m to the ILBF which will enable it to continue to March 2011.

10-Day Prompt Payment Pledge

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department and all its agencies and bodies operating under his Department, are complying with the 10-day prompt payment pledge. (AQW 4764/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My Department issued guidance on 28 November 2008 to all branches requesting that they should make every effort to process and pay valid invoices as promptly as possible.

In addition, Sponsor Branches were requested to forward the guidance to all Arms Length Bodies within their Responsibility.

In December 2008, 51% of invoices addressed to the Department were paid within 10 days of receipt.

Given the timescale involved, significant impact on December's payment statistics would not be expected.

My Department will continue to monitor progress towards this target and take steps to overcome any barriers to its achievement.

Civil Service Staff

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of civil service staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; and (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, as of (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4856/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure:

(a) Number of civil servants employed by DCAL at 1 May 2007: 420

(i) Breakdown of Staff by Grade

AA	32
AO	62
EO2	32
EO1	120
SO	74
DP	47

AA	32
G6/7	30
SCS	7
Industrial	16

(ii) Breakdown by Department/Agency:

DCAL Core – 260

Ordnance Survey Northern Ireland (OSNI)* – 160

* OSNI transferred to Land and Property Services of the Department of Finance and Personnel on 1 April 2008 and are not included in the January 2009 figures.

(b) Number of civil servants employed by DCAL at 1 January 2009:

279

(i) Breakdown of Staff by Grade:

AA	29
AO	56
EO2	29
EO1	25
SO	50
DP	35
G7	25
SCS	7
Industrial	23

(ii) Breakdown by Department/Agency:

DCAL 279 (no agency staff employed)

(The information requested has been provided by HRConnect, apart from the May 2007 figures for one division of DCAL Core – Public Record Office Northern Ireland (PRONI) - which has been taken from departmental records).

Capital Projects

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 4998/09)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There are no major capital projects in my Department that have been delayed either by lack of finance due to the recession or as a result of a backlog in Planning Service.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Schools in Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to list the number of students in each school in the Foyle constituency that has less than 200 students enrolled. (AQW 4043/09)

Minister of Education (Ms Caitríona Ruane): Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sa tábla thíos. Níl iarbhunscoil ar bith i dtoghcheantar an Fheabhail a bhfuil níos lú ná 200 dalta ag freastal uirthi.

The information requested is contained in the table below. There are no post primary schools with fewer than 200 pupils in the Foyle constituency.

NURSERY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY WITH LESS THAN 200 PUPILS – 2008/09

School Name	Total Enrolment
Lisnagelvin Nursery School	80
The Academy Nursery School	79
Belmont Nursery School	78
Bligh's Lane Nursery School	54
Galliagh Nursery School	53
Strathfoyle Nursery School	52
Carnhill Nursery School	52
Trench Road Nursery School	52

PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY WITH LESS THAN 200 PUPILS – 2008/09

School Name	Total Enrolment
Newbuildings PS	198
St Eugene's PS	192
Chapel Road PS	190
St Pauls PS, Slievemore	176
Glendermott PS	172
Bunscoil Cholmcille	161
St Oliver Plunkett PS	157
Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir	128
Cumber Claudy PS	124
Craigbrack PS	99
Mullabuoy PS	98
Ashlea PS	97
Fountain PS	91
Culmore PS	82
Ballougry PS	80
St Columba's PS	50
Gaelscoil Na Daróige	34
Groarty Integrated PS	31
Listress PS	26

SPECIAL SCHOOLS IN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY WITH LESS THAN 200 PUPILS – 2008/09

School Name	Total Enrolment
Belmont House Special School	163
Foyleview Special School	117

Note: Figures for primary schools includes nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.

Source: Annual school census.

Minister's Comments at St Colm's High School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if she gave a text of the speech where she referred approvingly to Bobby Sands, to Departmental officials, before she delivered the speech. (AQW 4080/09)

Minister of Education: Níor thug.

No.

Minister's Comments at St Colm's High School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the contribution made to community relations by the positive statement she made about Bobby Sands, in a recent school speech. (AQW 4081/09)

Minister of Education: Ní raibh sé ar intinn agam riamh damáiste a dhéanamh ar chaidreamh pobail agus mé ag tabhairt óráide ar bith. Is cearta daonlathacha iad ceart an díospóireachta agus ceart éagsúlacht tuairime ar ábhar ar bith a bheith ag duine.

I have never set out in any speech to damage community relations. Debate and the right to hold differing opinions on any subject is a democratic right.

Minister's Comments at St Colm's High School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if she has praised hunger strikers in any other speech as Minister other than her recent comments at St Colm's High School. (AQW 4082/09)

Minister of Education: Is féidir m'óráidí mar Aire a fháil ar líne ag an láithreán gréasáin www.deni.gov.uk
My Ministerial speeches can be accessed online at www.deni.gov.uk

Minister's Comments at St Colm's High School

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if she sought and if so, received any advice from Departmental officials before she delivered a positive statement about Bobby Sands, in a school speech. (AQW 4112/09)

Minister of Education: Níor chuardaigh agus ní bhfuair.

No.

CCEA Transfer Test

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) what academic standard will be required to obtain a grade A, B, C and D in a CCEA test; and (ii) the academic criteria against which this will be assessed. (AQW 4246/09)

Minister of Education: Níl na ceisteanna seo ábhartha níos mó i ndiaidh an ráitis a thug mé ar 2 Feabhra 2009 a shonraigh go bhfuil mé ag tarraingt siar an choimisiúnaithe le haghaidh teist CCEA.

These questions no longer have relevance in light of my announcement on 2 February 2009 that I am withdrawing the commission for a CCEA test.

CCEA Transfer Test

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what time will be given to pupils when sitting a CCEA transfer test. (AQW 4247/09)

Minister of Education: Níl na ceisteanna seo ábhartha níos mó i ndiaidh an ráitis a thug mé ar 2 Feabhra 2009 a shonraigh go bhfuil mé ag tarraingt siar an choimisiúnaithe le haghaidh teist CCEA.

These questions no longer have relevance in light of my announcement on 2 February 2009 that I am withdrawing the commission for a CCEA test.

CCEA Transfer Test

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how much has been spent on the development of the CCEA transfer test; and what is the anticipated final cost of this test. (AQW 4248/09)

Minister of Education: Actual expenditure to date is less than £1500. The test was commissioned in anticipation of Executive agreement of Regulations to govern post primary Transfer 2010. Given the absence of any such agreement the test has been decommissioned and CCEA has advised the Department that the final anticipated cost will be around £100000.

Academic Selection

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQO 1676/09, in which she stated ‘I want to reach agreement, but in the absence of agreement, I will issue guidance’; if she would confirm if this guidance would have the legal power to prevent any school from using academic selection. (AQW 4249/09)

Minister of Education: The guidance that I published for consultation on 2 February 2009 is guidance which schools are required to “have regard to”. This means that they cannot disregard it. It means that the guidance is an important document for them to consider in developing their admissions criteria and in performing their role within the admissions process.

If a Board of Governors does not comply with its duty to “have regard to” guidance issued by the Department under Article 16B of the Education Order 1997 (as amended by Article 30 of the Education Order 2006), the Department of Education can consider issuing a direction under Article 101 of the 1986 Order directing them to do so.

Tá súil agam go gcloíonn gach scoil leis an treoir ar mhaithe le leas na bpáistí.

I hope that in the interests of children all schools will adhere to the guidance.

Pupil Languages

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education how many pupils do not have English as their first language, broken down by (i) total; (ii) Education and Library Boards; and (iii) constituency. (AQW 4401/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an t-eolas a iarradh sna táblaí thíos.

The information requested is provided in the tables below.

CHILDREN WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD 2007/08

	Education and Library Board					NI total
	BELB	WELB	NEELB	SEELB	SELB	
EAL pupils	1,139	668	896	770	2,192	5,665

CHILDREN WITH ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE BY CONSTITUENCY 2007/08

Constituency	EAL pupils
Belfast East	277
Belfast North	231
Belfast South	592
Belfast West	148
East Antrim	139
East Derry	224
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	840

Constituency	EAL pupils
Foyle	181
Lagan Valley	287
Mid Ulster	330
Newry And Armagh	482
North Antrim	230
North Down	145
South Antrim	247
South Down	216
Strangford	170
Upper Bann	695
West Tyrone	231
Total	5,665

Source: Annual school census.

Notes:

1. Children with English as an additional language are those children who do not have English as their first language and who have difficulty with English and require assistance.
2. Figures relate to pupils in nursery, primary, post primary and special schools.

Substitute Teachers

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education if her Department has carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on the decision to cap central reimbursement for the employment of substitute teachers at main payscale point four. (AQW 4430/09)

Minister of Education: The arrangement whereby schools are compensated for teacher substitution costs at up to point M4 of the Teachers main payscale within the Common Funding Scheme for all schools, is a continuation of the maximum level of reimbursement which applied prior to the introduction of Common Funding in April 2005.

The effective management of expenditure on teacher substitution is one of the major tools available to Boards of Governors and school principals in managing their budget. The level of compensation seeks to maximise the levels of funding delegated to schools (as opposed to being retained centrally) while providing schools with the flexibility to decide to engage a substitute teacher at a higher cost, at a charge to the school's budget, if the school so wishes.

An Equality Impact Assessment was undertaken prior to the introduction of the Common Funding Scheme, which incorporates both the funding formula and arrangements by which schools to have access to central support funds and services. The Common Funding Scheme is subject to on-going review.

Má bhíonn fianaise de thionchar diúltach ann, nó má thagann deiseanna chun cinn a thabharfadh seans do níos mó comhionannais deiseanna bheith ann, cinnteoidh an Roinn go leasófar beartais dá réir sin.

If there is evidence of adverse impact, or if opportunities arise which would allow for greater equality of opportunity to be promoted, the Department will ensure that policies are revised accordingly.

Admissions Tests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education which grammar schools have indicated that they intend to use their own admissions tests. (AQW 4454/09)

Minister of Education: Tá socruithe don teist ag scoileanna gramadaí á bhforbairt go neamhspleách ar an Roinn Oideachais.

The development of test arrangements by grammar schools is being taken forward independently of the Department of Education.

I have issued guidance recommending the use of non-academic admissions criteria and hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

While I am aware through media reports that a number of schools have announced their intention to use independent admissions tests, of these schools only Lumen Christi College and Slemish College have notified me formally of their plans in this regard.

Admissions Tests

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether she has legal authority to prevent grammar schools from using their own admissions tests. (AQW 4455/09)

Minister of Education: If a Board of Governors does not comply with its duty to “have regard to” guidance issued by the Department under Article 16B of the Education Order 1997 (as amended by Article 30 of the Education Order 2006), the Department of Education can consider issuing a direction under Article 101 of the 1986 Order directing them to do so.

Tá treoir eisithe agam a mholann go mbaintear úsáid as critéir iontrála neamh-acadúla agus tá súil agam go gcloíonn gach scoil leis na moltaí ar mhaithe le córas a chruthú atá bunaithe ar cheartas sóisialta, ar chomhionannas agus ar shármhaitheas.

I have issued guidance recommending the use of non-academic admissions criteria and hope that all schools will adhere to these recommendations in the interests of creating a system based upon social justice, equality and excellence.

Sure Start Initiative

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education what funding will be available for the Sure Start Initiative for the year starting 1 April 2009. (AQW 4458/09)

Minister of Education: Is é neasmhéid an buiséid táscach reatha atá ar fáil don tionscnamh Sure Start sa bhliain airgeadais 2009 – 2010 ná £17303 K

The current indicative budget available for the Sure Start initiative in the 2009 – 2010 financial year is approximately £17303K

School Cleaners

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education when each Education and Library Board will be in a position to pay school cleaners the agreed back payments owed to them. (AQW 4476/09)

Minister of Education: Tá gach ceann de na Boird Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) ag próiseáil iocaíocht na riaráistí faoi láthair a d’éirigh ó thoradh phostmheastóireacht na nglantóirí.

Each of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) are currently processing the payment of the arrears from the cleaners’ job evaluation outcome.

An indicative timetable for the payment of job evaluation arrears and pay awards was agreed by the Boards and shared with Unions. The target date for completion of processing payments is August 2009. ELBs are

continuing to make payments as quickly as possible and has confirmed that work is progressing towards the achievement of their respective target date.

Electoral Office

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to list the 20 post-primary schools which did not co-operate with the Electoral Office in its School's Initiative; and what reason was given by each school for their non-participation. (AQW 4479/09)

Minister of Education: Chuir mé do cheist faoi bhráid an Phríomhoifigigh Thoghchánaigh. Cuirfidh sé freagra chugat go díreach.

I have passed your request to the Chief Electoral Officer. He will respond to you directly.

Breach of the Ministerial Code

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education if it is appropriate to praise a convicted terrorist in her capacity as Minister when speaking to school children. (AQW 4491/09)

Minister of Education: Ní bheadh sé fóirsteanach moladh a thabhairt do sceimhlitheoir ar bith i gcás ar bith. It would not be appropriate to praise any terrorist under any circumstances.

Breach of the Ministerial Code

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQO 1806/09, if she will place the full text of her speech in the Assembly library. (AQW 4517/09)

Minister of Education: Níor shíl mé go raibh sé riachtanach do m'oifigigh óráid a ullmhú, mar gheall ar an ionad agus an ócáid.

Given the venue and the occasion I did not think it necessary to have my officials prepare a speech.

Schools Sited Near Overhead Power Cables

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education for details of any schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board which are within 200 metres of overhead power cables. (AQW 4518/09)

Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais an t-eolas a iarradh. Thug NIE PLC an t-eolas a leanas an iarraidh seo.

The information requested is not held by the Department of Education. NIE PLC on this occasion has provided the following information. There are 20 schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board which are within 200 metres of overhead power cables, these are:

- Avoniel Primary School, Avoniel Road, Belfast
- Elmgrove Primary School, Beersbridge Road, Belfast
- Gaelscoil Na Móna, Monagh Link, Belfast
- Grosvenor Grammar School, Cameronian Drive, Belfast
- Holy Child Nursery School, Slievegallion Drive, Belfast
- Holy Child Primary School, South Green, Belfast
- Holy Trinity Primary School, Monagh Road, Belfast
- Matt Talbot Nursery School, New Barnsley Green, Belfast
- Orangefield Primary School, Marina Park, Belfast
- St Aidan's Christian Brothers Primary School, Whiterock Road, Belfast
- St Anne's Primary School, Kingsway, Belfast
- St Gerard's Education Resource Centre, Upper Springfield Road, Belfast

- St John The Baptist Boys' Primary School, Finaghy Road North, Belfast
- St John The Baptist Girls' Primary School, Finaghy Road North, Belfast
- St Martin's Nursery School, Monagh Link, Belfast
- St Oliver Plunkett Nursery School, Glen Road, Belfast
- St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Glen Road, Belfast
- St Teresa's Nursery School, Bernagh Glen, Belfast
- St Teresa's Primary School, Glen Road, Belfast
- Vere Foster Primary School, Moyard Parade,

Schools Sited Near Overhead Power Cables

Mr McCausland asked the Minister of Education for details of any schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board which are within 200 metres of overhead power cables. (AQW 4519/09)

Minister of Education: Ní choinníonn an Roinn Oideachais an t-eolas a iarradh. Thug NIE PLC an t-eolas a leanas an iarraidh seo.

The information requested is not held by the Department of Education. NIE PLC on this occasion has provided the following information. There are 15 schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board which are within 200 metres of overhead power cables, these are:

- Ballycarry Primary School, Hillhead Road, Ballycarry
- Ballee Community High School, Ballee Road West, Ballymena
- Camphill Primary School, Carolhill Park, Ballymena
- Carnaghts Primary School, Valley Road, Ballymena
- Acorn Integrated Primary School, Victoria Road, Carrickfergus
- Carrickfergus College, North Road, Carrickfergus
- Castleroe Primary School, Castleroe Road, Coleraine
- North Coast Integrated College, Cloyfin Road, Coleraine
- Kilcoan Primary School, Browns Bay Road, Island Magee
- Toreagh Primary School, Raloo Road, Larne
- Ballyhenry Primary School, Ballyhenry Avenue, Newtownabbey
- Mossley Nursery School, Hazelburn Road, Newtownabbey
- Mossley Primary School, Hazelburn Road, Newtownabbey
- St Macnissi's Primary School, Christine Road Off Manse Road, Newtownabbey
- Anahorish Primary School, Deerpark Road, Toome

Educational Psychologists

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education what plans her Department has to (i) address the current shortage of educational psychologists; (ii) ensure a sufficient number of educational psychologists are undergoing training; and (iii) address funding issues to enable the Education and Library Boards to expand their educational psychology services to schools. (AQW 4532/09)

Minister of Education: I am aware of the current difficulties experienced in some areas around the recruitment of educational psychologists and to this end I can confirm that my Department has been working closely with the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to consider future staffing requirements and to help ensure that supply matches demand. I should explain, however, that it is a matter for the ELBs in the first instance to determine their staffing levels.

Since 1999 the number of educational psychologists in training at QUB has been increased from 5 to 12 per annum, through the provision of additional resources. This increase was agreed following discussion with the ELBs and QUB. The increase in trainees has been sustained following the move to a 3-year Doctorate course, which replaced the 1-year Master's course, in 2006.

In addition the vacancy control measures, in place because of the Review of Public Administration, have been lifted in relation to the recruitment of permanent educational psychology staff due to the unique situation of the Educational Psychology Service.

In recent years the Department has also provided ELBs with additional funds to train and employ additional psychologists in an effort to enable them to meet increased demand for assessments, part of an additional £53m made available to Boards over the three years 2005/06 to 2007/08 for children with special educational needs.

Tá tugtha le fios dom fosta ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí na ELBanna gur bhain na seirbhísí síceolaíochta tairbhe mór as cúntóirí síceolaíochta a thabhairt isteach agus go bhfuil sé ar intinn ag gach ELB folúntais do shíceolaíthe oideachais a fhógairt.

I have also been advised by the Chief Executives of the ELBs that the introduction of psychology assistants has greatly benefited their psychology services and that all ELBs plan to advertise shortly for educational psychologist vacancies.

Educational Psychologists

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many educational psychologists are currently employed (i) full time; and (ii) part time, in each Education and Library Board; and how the number of educational psychologists for each Education and Library Board is determined. (AQW 4533/09)

Minister of Education: Tá sé tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí (CE anna) na Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELB anna) gurb iad seo a leanas líon na síceolaíthe oideachais atá fostaithe faoi láthair i ngach ELB:-

I have been advised by the Chief Executives (CEs) of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that the number of educational psychologists currently employed in each ELB is as follows:-

	Full-Time	Part-Time
BELB	10	20
NEELB	23	6
SEELB	21	11
SELB	20	12
WELB	17	7

The Department of Education does not determine the staffing complement of Educational Psychologists for ELBs. It is a matter for each CE to allocate resources from the overall funding available to the ELB, in order to determine priorities. The CEs have also advised that the full complement of educational psychology staffing is determined by a combination of historical spend and the budget made available to psychology services by each ELB in any particular financial year. In recent years additional funding provided directly by the Department of Education has also resulted in additional posts being established.

Children with Speech, Language and Communication Difficulties

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to her answer to AQW 3973/09, the cost for each child registered with speech, language and communication difficulties, in each Education and Library Board. (AQW 4592/09)

Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí na Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne nach féidir costas ar gach pháiste atá cláraithe le deachrachaí urlabhra, teanga agus cumarsáide a sholáthar.

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that it is not possible to provide a cost for each child registered with speech, language and communication difficulties.

The data provided in response to AQW 3973/09 related to children with speech, language and communication difficulties at all stages of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational

Needs. These children can access a range of support and provision at both school and ELB level. Stages 1- 3 are school based, calling as necessary on external specialists. At stages 4 and 5 ELBs can make provision in a variety of ways but always tailored to the needs of the individual child. It is not therefore possible to calculate a cost for the range of supports per child.

Children with Special Needs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to confirm that parents whose children have statements of special needs will be able to keep their children in mainstream schools with the help of school and classroom assistants. (AQW 4603/09)

Minister of Education: Déanann Airteagal 7 de The Education (NI) Order 1996, mar a rinneadh leasú air tríd an Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005, tagairt ar an dualgas le oideachas a sholáthar do pháistí a bhfuil ráitéisí faoi riachtanais oideachais speisialta acu i ngnáthscoileanna seachas cásanna nuair nach luíonn sé le:-

- (i) mianta na dtuismitheoirí, nó
- (ii) soláthar oideachais éifeachtúil do pháistí eile.

Article 7 of The Education (NI) Order 1996, as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005, refers to a duty to educate children with statements of special educational needs in mainstream schools unless this is incompatible with:-

- (i) the wishes of the parents, or
- (ii) the provision of efficient education for other children.

It is, therefore, the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), in discussion with the parents of children with statements, and taking into consideration the special educational needs of the child, to determine the type of school placement required. If the parents disagree with the placement proposed by an ELB they have the right to appeal to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal.

It should not be assumed, however, that all children who have statements of special education needs and who are educated in a mainstream school will have a classroom assistant. In many cases a classroom assistant would not be appropriate and a different type of provision would be named on the statement e.g. additional individual/small group teaching, specialist IT equipment, adapted materials etc.

Joint Negotiating Council

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education for an update on the pay award agreed with the Joint Negotiating Council; and to provide a timeframe for the implementation of this payment. (AQW 4605/09)

Minister of Education: Under public sector pay policy all public sector bodies, including the Education and Library Boards (Boards), are required to submit a business case for the approval of the parent department and the Finance Minister before a pay award can be implemented. This procedure applies even if the public body follows a nationally determined settlement such as the National Joint Council (NJC) award. In October 2008 the Boards agreed to follow the nationally agreed proposal to implement an interim settlement while arbitration to reach a final settlement continues.

Since the interim settlement was agreed the Department, in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), has been working closely with the Boards to ensure that each business case is cleared as quickly as possible. Approximately 40 business cases have to be submitted across the 5 Boards comprising 8 groups of staff. The business cases covering the vast majority of Board staff were submitted to the Department last month and on 29 January 2009 the Department submitted a composite 5 Board business case to DFP for approval. Approval for this group was confirmed on 4 February, enabling the Boards to implement the pay award and arrears by 31 March 2009.

Tá an Roinn ag obair go dlúth leis na Boird, mar a bhí sí, lena chinntiú go ndéantar próiseáil gan moill ar chásanna gnó a bhaineann leis na grúpaí foirne beaga eile.

The Department is continuing to work closely with the Boards to ensure that the business cases for the other smaller groups of staff are processed without delay.

Energy Efficiency and Climate Change Education

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what provision there is in secondary school education for learning about energy efficiency and climate change. (AQW 4623/09)

Minister of Education: The statutory revised curriculum, which is being phased in from the 2007/08 to the 2009/10 school years for all pupils from Years 1 to 12 of compulsory education, includes Sustainable Development as a key objective to be developed across all areas of the curriculum. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is included in the curriculum across all Key Stages.

Ar leibhéal bunscoile, cuirtear ESD san áireamh leis an chuid reachtúil Foghlaim ar an Domhan inár dTimpeall (Tíreolaíocht, Eolaíocht agus Teicneolaíocht).

Ar Eochairchéim 3, is mar chuid de na codanna Foghlaim don Saol agus don Obair (Saoránacht Áitiúil agus Domhanda, Infhostaitheacht) agus Timpeallacht agus Sochaí (Tíreolaíocht agus Stáir) agus Eolaíocht agus Teicneolaíocht.

At primary level ESD is built into the statutory Area of Learning of The World Around Us (Geography, Science and Technology). At Key Stage 3 it is included in the statutory areas of Learning for Life and Work (Local and Global Citizenship, Employability), and Environment and Society (Geography and History) and Science and Technology.

Through ESD, pupils will explore issues such as environmental and climate change and the need to manage human impact on the environment. They will come to understand the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment; to develop respect for the needs of both present and future generations and to act towards promoting an improved environment.

Energy Efficiency and Climate Change Education

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what provision there is in primary school education for learning about energy efficiency and climate change. (AQW 4624/09)

Minister of Education: The statutory revised curriculum, which is being phased in from the 2007/08 to the 2009/10 school years for all pupils from Years 1 to 12 of compulsory education, includes Sustainable Development as a key objective to be developed across all areas of the curriculum. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is included in the curriculum across all Key Stages.

Ar leibhéal bunscoile, cuirtear ESD san áireamh leis an chuid reachtúil Foghlaim ar an Domhan inár dTimpeall (Tíreolaíocht, Eolaíocht agus Teicneolaíocht).

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Through ESD, pupils will explore issues such as environmental and climate change and the need to manage human impact on the environment. They will come to understand the interdependence of society, the economy and the environment; to develop respect for the needs of both present and future generations and to act towards promoting an improved environment.

School Facilities in East Antrim

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to upgrade school facilities in East Antrim in 2009. (AQW 4628/09)

Minister of Education: Tá sceimeanna mhionoibreacha faoi phleanáil le feabhas a dhéanamh ar aiseanna sna scoileanna seo a leanas sa bhliain airgeadais 2009/10 agus faoi réir dhóthain airgid bheith ar fáil.

Schemes of minor works are in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in the 2009/10 financial year and are subject to resources being available:

MAINTAINED AND VOLUNTARY GRAMMAR SCHOOL SECTOR SCHEMES PLANNED FOR 2009/10

Name of School	Scheme
Seaview Primary School, Glenarm	Upgrade fire doors and fire alarm Replacement windows
St James' Primary School, Newtownabbey	Upgrade/replace school bell system Refurbish toilets

Name of School	Scheme
St Anthony's Primary School, Larne	Disabled Access– remove steps and construct ramp
Belfast High School	Access control system Perimeter fencing Comfort cooling system in ICT support room Replacement hot water system
St MacNissi's College, Carnlough	Toilet & girl changing refurbishment Fire risk assessment – fire doors & electrical wiring
Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne	Upgrade toilets
Acorn Integrated Primary School	Lay-by CCTV provision Fire detection & alarm system

CONTROLLED SECTOR SCHEMES PLANNED FOR 2009/10

Name of School	Scheme
Carnalbanagh Primary School	Internal Alterations
Carrickfergus Central Primary School	Provision of storage space
Carrickfergus Central Primary School	Improvements to reception area including DDA work
Carrickfergus Central Primary School	Fencing
Carrickfergus Model Primary School	Fire Escape
Carrickfergus College	Additional car parking facilities
Carrickfergus College	Provision of storage container
Carrickfergus Grammar School	1 science mobile
Downshire School	Provision of 1 Bus Studies mobile
Downshire School	Provision of Careers classroom
Downshire School	Fencing
Glynn Primary School	New school (mobile pilot scheme) - DE approval required

Name of School	Scheme
Kings' Park Primary School	Provision of play area for infant classes
Larne High School	Fencing
Linn Primary School	Refit all schools toilets
Linn Primary School	Extension of car park
Linn Primary School	Provision of admin and special needs
Linn Primary School	Emergency gate in perimeter fence

Name of School	Scheme
Linn Primary School - Nursery Unit	Refit all nursery toilets
Linn Primary School - Nursery Unit	Enclose entrance porch and turn into a multi-purpose room
Moyle Primary School	Refurbishment of toilets
Victoria Primary School	Nursery Unit - Improvements to access
Victoria Primary School	Fence
Victoria Primary School	Provision of office accommodation & DDA
Whiteabbey Primary School	Fencing
Whitehead Primary School	Fencing
Whitehead Primary School	DDA - Phase 2

SCHEMES SPANNING THE 2008/09 AND 2009/10 FINANCIAL YEARS

Name of School	Scheme
Sunnylands Nursery School	Minor works/DDA
Monkstown Nursery School	Minor works/DDA
Woodburn Primary School	2 mobile classrooms

Temporary Teaching Positions

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education how many retired teachers have been re-employed in temporary teaching positions, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4630/09)

Minister of Education: Is iad seo a leanas líon na múinteoirí a chuaigh ar scór agus a athfhostaíodh i bpostanna sealadacha ina dhiaidh sin iad, i ngach bliain le cúig bliana anuas.

The number of teachers who have retired and subsequently become re-employed in temporary teaching positions, in each of the last five years is as follows:

Financial Year	Number of Retired Teachers	Number of retired teachers who became re-employed
2003/04	730	314
2004/05	741	306
2005/06	955	455
2006/07	991	423
2007/08	969	360

The Department has repeatedly advised employers that retired teachers should only be re-employed to provide short-term cover where newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable.

The rules of the Teachers' Pension Scheme militate against the employment of retired teachers, in that such teachers may suffer a reduction in pension as a result of earnings from employment as a teacher. The Department has strict controls in place to monitor such cases.

Since 1999/2000 the level of central reimbursement by education and library boards of the cost of substitute cover has been capped at point 4 of the Main Scale. This provides an incentive for schools to employ newly qualified teachers to provide substitute cover in preference to costlier retired teachers. However, schools have the flexibility to decide to engage a teacher at a higher cost at a charge to the school budget if they so desire.

St Mary's College and St Cecilia's College

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education if she is aware of any difficulties which sub-contractors are experiencing in terms of accessing contracts associated with the two new-builds of St Mary's College and St Cecilia's College in Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 4647/09)

Minister of Education:

- (i) Tuigim ó chúdach na meán cumarsáide áitiúil go d'ardaigh roinnt breceadóirí atá ag obair mar fhochonraitheoirí ceist faoi na rátaí oibre á dtairiscint ag an conraitheoir, agus gur thug an conraitheoir a thuairim ar an scéal.
- (i) I am aware from local media coverage that a number of bricklaying sub-contractors have raised the issue of the rates offered for work by the contractor, and that the contractor has commented on the matter. I also understand that a number of brick-laying subcontractors have been employed to work on the project.
- (ii) Níl údarás ar bith agam idirghabháil a dhéanamh ar chonradh na scéime seo.
- (ii) I have no authority to intervene in the contract for this scheme which was signed between St Canice's Educational Trust and Belfast Education Services (Derry) Ltd in December 2008.
- (iii) Sular tugadh faomhadh don tionscadal seo, cuireadh faoi scrúdú costais iomlán an tionscadail maidir le luach ar airgid agus cuireadh bainistíocht foirngníochta agus aiseanna san áireamh le seo.
- (iii) Before approval, the overall costs of the project including the construction and facilities management over the life of the contract were examined for value for money. The examination of a public private partnership project such as this does not involve an assessment of a detailed Bill of Quantities.

St Mary's College and St Cecilia's College

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, given that the contracts in relation to the two new-builds of St Mary's College and St Cecilia's College in Derry/Londonderry were drawn up by a previous administration and prior to the implementation of new procurement guidelines, if she has any authority to intervene. (AQW 4648/09)

Minister of Education:

- (i) Tuigim ó chúdach na meán cumarsáide áitiúil go d'ardaigh roinnt breceadóirí atá ag obair mar fhochonraitheoirí ceist faoi na rátaí oibre á dtairiscint ag an conraitheoir, agus gur thug an conraitheoir a thuairim ar an scéal.
- (i) I am aware from local media coverage that a number of bricklaying sub-contractors have raised the issue of the rates offered for work by the contractor, and that the contractor has commented on the matter. I also understand that a number of brick-laying subcontractors have been employed to work on the project.
- (ii) Níl údarás ar bith agam idirghabháil a dhéanamh ar chonradh na scéime seo.
- (ii) I have no authority to intervene in the contract for this scheme which was signed between St Canice's Educational Trust and Belfast Education Services (Derry) Ltd in December 2008.
- (iv) Sular tugadh faomhadh don tionscadal seo, cuireadh faoi scrúdú costais iomlán an tionscadail maidir le luach ar airgid agus cuireadh bainistíocht foirngníochta agus aiseanna san áireamh le seo.
- (iii) Before approval, the overall costs of the project including the construction and facilities management over the life of the contract were examined for value for money. The examination of a public private partnership project such as this does not involve an assessment of a detailed Bill of Quantities.

St Mary's College and St Cecilia's College

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the contracts for the two new-builds of St Mary's and St Cecilia's colleges in Derry/Londonderry, to confirm that the estimates contained in the Bill of Quantities, tendered by the successful bidder, reflect the current market costs. (AQW 4649/09)

Minister of Education:

- (i) Tuigim ó chúdach na meán cumarsáide áitiúil go d'ardaigh roinnt breceadóirí atá ag obair mar fhochonraitheoirí ceist faoi na rátaí oibre á dtairiscint ag an conraitheoir, agus gur thug an conraitheoir a thuairim ar an scéal.
- (i) I am aware from local media coverage that a number of bricklaying sub-contractors have raised the issue of the rates offered for work by the contractor, and that the contractor has commented on the matter. I also understand that a number of brick-laying subcontractors have been employed to work on the project.
- (ii) Níl údarás ar bith agam idirghabháil a dhéanamh ar chonradh na scéime seo.
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- (v) Sular tugadh faomhadh don tionscadal seo, cuireadh faoi scrúdú costais iomlán an tionscadail maidir le luach ar airgid agus cuireadh bainistíocht foirngníochta agus aiseanna san áireamh le seo.
- (iii) Before approval, the overall costs of the project including the construction and facilities management over the life of the contract were examined for value for money. The examination of a public private partnership project such as this does not involve an assessment of a detailed Bill of Quantities.

Transfer 2010

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education if and when she will publish any legal advice she received, from the Department's solicitors, in relation to her statement on 2 February 2009 on Transfer 2010. (AQW 4694/09)

Minister of Education: Maidir le foilsiú treoracha i ndiaidh an ráitis faoi Aistriú 10 a thug mé ar 2 Feabhra 2009, is féidir liom a dheimhniú go bhfuarthas comhairle dleathach ó Oifig Dlíodóra na Roinne amháin.

In relation to the publication of guidance on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement on Transfer 2010, I can confirm that the only legal advice received was from the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

All Departments take legal (and other necessary types of advice) on many major actions. Like all legal advice obtained by Government Departments, this advice is privileged.

However, the legislative basis for the issuing of guidance has already been published. Paragraph 1 of the guidance states that it is issued under Article 30 of the Education Order 2006. I will quote what this Article says: "The Department may issue, and from time to time revise, such guidance as it thinks appropriate in respect of the arrangements for the admission of pupils to grant-aided schools".

Admissions Criteria

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education why random selection is her recommended tie breaker in admissions criteria. (AQW 4695/09)

Minister of Education: In order to work properly, admissions criteria have to be capable of distinguishing between individual applicants. Schools have an obligation in law to use admissions criteria that are capable of distinguishing exactly the number of applicants that their capacity permits them to admit.

Mar gheall ar na fáthanna seo, is cuid tábhachtach de hiontrálacha na scoileanna uile í an "cheist réitigh". Is critéar í an "cheist réitigh" a dhéanfaidh idirdhealú idir na hiarrthóirí aonair i mbealach trédhearcach, nuair a cuirtear i bhfeidhm í.

For these reasons, a "tie-breaker" is an important part of all schools admissions. A "tie-breaker" is a criterion that, when applied, will distinguish between individual applicants in a transparent manner.

The Department recommends a "random selection" tie-breaker because it is commonly used already. The Department does not recommend a "distance to school" tie-breaker (which prioritises children according to the precise distance between their home and the school) because that would disadvantage outlying (e.g. rural) applicants.

It will be for a post-primary school's Board of Governors to design a method of random selection, but the Department strongly advises schools to use random selection as a tie-breaker to ensure they have a clear audit trail of the process.

Transfer 2010

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the specific issues on which she sought legal advice from the departmental solicitors prior to issuing her statement on 2 February on Transfer 2010. (AQW 4696/09)

Minister of Education: Maidir le foilsiú treoracha i ndiaidh an ráitis faoi Aistriú 10 a thug mé ar 2 Feabhra 2009, is féidir liom a dheimhniú go bhfuarthas comhairle dleathach ó Oifig Dlíodóra na Roinne amháin.

In relation to the publication of guidance on foot of my 2 February 2009 statement on Transfer 2010, I can confirm that the only legal advice received was from the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

All Departments take legal (and other necessary types of advice) on many major actions. Like all legal advice obtained by Government Departments, this advice is privileged.

However, the legislative basis for the issuing of guidance has already been published. Paragraph 1 of the guidance states that it is issued under Article 30 of the Education Order 2006. I will quote what this Article says: "The Department may issue, and from time to time revise, such guidance as it thinks appropriate in respect of the arrangements for the admission of pupils to grant-aided schools".

Transfer 2010

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what legal advice, if any, she received other than from the departmental solicitors, prior to issuing her statement on Transfer 2010. (AQW 4719/09)

Minister of Education: Maidir le foilsiú treoracha i ndiaidh an ráitis faoi Aistriú 10 a thug mé ar 2 Feabhra 2009, is féidir liom a dheimhniú go bhfuarthas comhairle dleathach ó Oifig Dlíodóra na Roinne amháin.

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Ministerial Code

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education have her guidelines outlined to the Assembly on 2nd February 2009 been presented to the Executive in line with the Ministerial Code. (AQW 4736/09)

Minister of Education: Tá páipéir curtha os comhair an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin agam ar dhá ócáid, páipéir a dhéanann cur síos ar mholtaí agus bhí mé ag iarraidh go mbeadh plé dearfach á dhéanamh orthu agus go mbeadh creat reachtúil an Aistrithe 2010 mar thoradh air.

I have brought before the Executive on two occasions papers describing proposals around which I sought a constructive engagement with a view to achieving a legislative framework for Transfer 2010. In submitting my policy memorandum paper to the Executive on 26 January 2009 I made clear that if the Executive could not reach agreement around my proposals, I would withdraw them and given the urgency with which clarity on post-primary transfer is required, bring forward guidance under Article 30 of the Education Order, 2006. Although not my preferred course of action, having given the Executive the opportunity on two occasions to exercise its collective responsibility to discuss this issue, in the interests of teachers, parents and the children affected I have issued this guidance as I consider this to be the only responsible course of action open to me. The recommendations contained within the guidance are subject to consultation until 27 April 2009.

Guidelines on Post Primary Transfer

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what discussions she has held with her Ministerial colleagues on the impact that her guidelines on post primary transfer could have on the Programme for Government's aim to increase levels of employment, given that her recommendation, that a quota be introduced for those eligible for free school meals as the primary consideration in secondary level admissions, could be a disincentive to parents seeking to return to work. (AQW 4759/09)

Minister of Education: Bhí gá le treoir sholéir a eisiúint mar gheall ar theip na gComh-Airí dul i mbun plé liom faoi mo thograí a bhain leis an aistriú iarbhunskoile.

The failure of Ministerial colleagues to engage in discussion with me around my proposals for post-primary transfer led to the need for clear guidance to be issued.

School Facilities in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to upgrade school facilities in North Down in 2009. (AQW 4765/09)

Minister of Education: Construction work on a new school building for Towerview Primary School, Bangor is currently underway and is due to complete in summer 2009. In addition, plans for new school buildings for Bangor Grammar School and St Columbanus College are currently being taken forward and it is anticipated that construction work on these projects should start in 2009/10.

Tá líon scéimeanna mhionobreacha faoi phleanáil fosta le forbairt a dhéanamh ar aiseanna na scoileanna seo a leanas sa bhliain 2009/10, faoi réir dhóthain airgid a bheith ar fáil.

A number of minor works schemes are also in planning to improve facilities at the following schools in 2009/10, subject to sufficient resources being available.

St Patrick's Primary School Holywood	Toilet refurbishment Replacement windows
Sullivan Upper Holywood	Air conditioning system to selected rooms Fire Risk Assessment Refurbishment of music department
Trinity Nursery School Bangor	Rewire
Clandeboye Primary School Bangor	New boiler plant
Crawfordsburn Primary School	Toilet refurbishment Improvements to entrance way
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	2 or 3 classroom extension with shared play/resource space
Millisle Primary School	Disabled Access and enlarge Special Educational Needs room
Rathmore Primary School Bangor	Improvements to toilet facilities
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	Works to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act
Glencraigh Collegiate School, Bangor	Extension to lunch accommodation in basement

Clogher Valley Integrated Primary School

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the development proposal for the new Clogher Valley integrated primary school. (AQW 4792/09)

Minister of Education: Tháinig deireadh leis an tréimhse dhá mhí reachtúil comhairliúcháin, ar bhunú Bunscoil Dheontaschúnta Imeachta nua i gceantair Clogher Valley ar an 8 Nollaig 2008.

The statutory two-month consultation period on the Development Proposal to establish a new Grant Maintained Integrated Primary School in the Clogher Valley area ended on 8 December 2008. The department is currently assembling all material relevant to the proposal so that I can make a decision on it as soon as possible.

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the actual and target numbers of whole time equivalent educational psychologists in each Education and Library Board area; (ii) the reasons for the current shortfall; (iii) the steps being taken to increase the availability of educational psychologists; and (iv) the interim measures being taken to ameliorate this shortfall. (AQW 4800/09)

Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios dom ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí (CEanna) na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELBanna) gurb é seo a leanas líon na síceolaithe oideachais ar choibhéis lánaimseartha atá fostaithe i ngach ELB faoi láthair:

I have been advised by the Chief Executives (CEs) of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) that the number of full-time equivalent (fte) educational psychologists (EPs) currently employed in each ELB is as follows:-

BELB	24.51
NEELB	25.40
SEELB	27.55
SELB	27.51
WELB	21.60

I have also been advised that the current number of fte EP vacancies in each ELB is as follows:-

BELB	2.6
NEELB	1.0
SEELB	5.2
SELB	0
WELB	9.6

These figures include permanent and temporary posts and temporary vacancies created by career breaks and maternity leave.

The Department of Education (DE) does not determine the staffing compliment or target numbers of educational psychologists for ELBs. It is a matter for each Chief Executive to allocate resources from the overall funding available to the ELB, in order to determine priorities. The Chief Executives have also advised that the full complement of educational psychology staffing is determined by a combination of historical spend and the budget made available to psychology services by each ELB in any particular financial year. In recent years additional funding provided directly by the Department has also resulted in additional posts being established.

I am aware of the current difficulties experienced in some areas around the recruitment of educational psychologists and to this end I can confirm that my Department has been working closely with the Education and Library Boards and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to consider future manpower requirements and to help ensure that supply matches demand. I should explain, however, that it is a matter for the ELBs in the first instance to determine the staffing levels required to fulfil their statutory duties.

Prior to 2006 DE supported 12 students per annum on a 1-year Master's course. Since 2006 DE has provided significant additional funding to support a 3-year Doctorate course. Currently 24 trainees per annum are being supported at QUB at various stages of the Doctorate.

Interim measures being taken to increase the availability of EPs include the lifting of vacancy control measures, in place because of the Review of Public Administration, in relation to the recruitment of permanent educational psychology staff due to the unique situation of the Educational Psychology Service.

In recent years the Department has also provided ELBs with additional funds to train and employ additional psychologists in an effort to enable them to meet increased demand for assessments. This funding was part of an additional £53m made available to Boards over the three years 2005/06 to 2007/08 for children with special educational needs.

I have also been advised by the Chief Executives of the ELBs that the introduction of psychology assistants in some ELB areas has greatly benefited their psychology services and that all ELBs plan to advertise shortly for educational psychologist vacancies.

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to provide a list of services to which (i) an educational psychologist; and (ii) an Assistant Educational Psychologist, can refer children. (AQW 4802/09)

Minister of Education: Tá tugtha le fios domh ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne go dtiocfadh le síceolaí oideachais páistí a atreorú chuig na seirbhísí tacaíochta cineálaí seo a leanas:-

I have been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that an educational psychologist could refer children to the following generic support services:-

- behavioural;
- moderate learning difficulties;
- specific learning difficulties/literacy;
- autistic spectrum disorder diagnostic;
- autistic spectrum disorder ;
- social services;
- educational welfare service;
- audiology;
- pre-school;
- speech and language therapy;
- children and adolescent mental health services;
- occupational therapy;
- physiotherapy;
- education other than at school;
- language and communication;
- pupil personal development;
- sensory;
- school medical;
- learning.

Specific services may differ across Boards.

In addition to the above educational psychologists, in all ELBs, play a key role, through the statutory assessment process, in arranging placements in all types of special schools, special units and mainstream schools.

The Boards do not employ assistant educational psychologists. The Southern and Western Education and Library Boards each of these Boards employ 3 psychology assistants who can refer children to the literacy support service. A psychology assistant is employed mainly to screen/test children under the supervision of a senior educational psychologist to ascertain whether they meet criteria for support from the literacy support service.

Educational Psychologists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how many children, who were awaiting an educational psychology assessment, have been assessed by an Assistant Educational Psychologist. (AQW 4803/09)

Minister of Education: Ní fhostaíonn Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne (ELB) ar bith síceolaí oideachais cúnta. Tugadh le fios dom, áfach, ag Príomhfheidhmeannaí na mBord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne gurb é seo mar a leanas líon na bpáistí a ndearna cúntóir síceolaíochta measúnú orthu:-

None of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) employs assistant educational psychologists. I have, however, been advised by the Chief Executives of the Education and Library Boards that the number of children who have been assessed by a psychology assistant is as follows:-

Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB)	0 *
North-Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB)	0 *
South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB)	0 *
Southern Education and Library Board (SELB)	658
Western Education and Library Board (WELB)	643

* BELB, NEELB and SEELB do not employ psychology assistants.

Since April 2008, 643 children have been tested by a psychology assistant in WELB to ascertain whether they met criteria for literacy support. In the 2007/08 academic year 658 children were assessed by a psychology assistant in SELB again to ascertain whether they met criteria for literacy support. Children in both Board areas were not assessed by a psychology assistant if they were referred for a comprehensive assessment by an educational psychologist.

Specialist Teaching

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Education how many pupils in grammar schools require specialist teaching. (AQW 4838/09)

Minister of Education: Sa bhliain 2007/08, bhí taifead de 2,858 dalta i scoileanna gramadaí a raibh Riachtanais Speisialta Oideachais acu.

In 2007/08, 2,858 pupils in grammar schools were recorded as having Special Education Needs.

Note:

1. Figure includes pupils at stage 1 – 5 of the SEN Code of Practice.

Lislagan Primary School

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what is the North Eastern Education and Library Board doing to improve road safety and parking provision at Lislagan Primary School; and if it is working with other agencies on this initiative. (AQW 4845/09)

Minister of Education: Ní bhfuair Bord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirthuaiscirt iarrtas ó Lislagan Primary School le déanaí maidir le feabhsúcháin ar áiseanna phairceála. Nuair a bhíonn fadhbanna tráchta ann, oibríonn an Bord i gcónaí le Seirbhís Bóithre an DRD le réiteach na ceiste a fháil.

The North Eastern Education and Library Board has not received a recent request from Lislagan Primary School for improvements to car-parking facilities. Where traffic management problems arise the Board always liaises with DRD Roads Service in seeking to find a resolution.

Civil Service Staff

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of civil service staff employed by her Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4852/09)

Minister of Education: Tá an teolas a iarradh sna táblaí thíos:

The information requested is detailed in the tables below:

CORE DEPARTMENTAL STAFF BY GRADE

May 2007		January 2009	
Grade	No of Staff	Grade	No of Staff
Permanent Secretary	1	Permanent Secretary	1
Chief Executive (Designate) ESA	1	Chief Executive (Designate) ESA	1
Grade 3	3	Grade 3	3
Grade 5	13	Grade 5	11
Grade 6	57	Grade 6	65
Grade 7	34	Grade 7	33
Deputy Principal	76	Deputy Principal	87
Staff Officer	78	Staff Officer	81
Executive Officer 1	62	Executive Officer 1	56
Executive Officer 2	90	Executive Officer 2	88
Administrative Officer	145	Administrative Officer	144
Administrative Assistant	26	Administrative Assistant	50
Programmer Analyst	7	Programmer Analyst	6
Programmer	5	Programmer	4
Operator	0	Operator	2
Senior Personal Secretary	3	Senior Personal Secretary	3
Personal Secretary	13	Personal Secretary	13
Senior Professional & Technical Officer	1	Senior Professional & Technical Officer	1
Senior Systems Analyst	4	Senior Systems Analyst	1
Systems Analyst	4	Systems Analyst	4
Typist	11	Typist	11
SGB2	8	SGB2	0
Total	642	Total	665

AGENCY STAFF BY GRADE EQUIVALENT

May 2007		January 2009	
Grade Equivalent	No of Staff	Grade Equivalent	No of Staff
Accountant	1	Executive Officer	5
Executive Officer	2	Personal Secretary	1
Programmer	1	Administrative Officer	4
Administrative Officer	3	Support Grade Band 2	3
Administrative Assistant	1	Receptionist	1
Total	8	Total	14

Capital Infrastructure Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Education to list all capital infrastructure projects (i) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised in this financial year, in the Strangford constituency and to detail the aggregated value of each. (AQW 4898/09)

Minister of Education: Níl aon tionscadal mórchaipitil bonneagair á dtógáil faoi láthair i dtoghcheantar Loch Cuan, agus ní bheidh ceann ar bith á fhógairt sa bhliain airgeadais seo ach oiread.

There are no major capital infrastructure projects currently under construction in the Strangford constituency, nor are any to be advertised in this financial year. There are two projects in the procurement process which are expected to be advertised or start on site in the 2009/10 financial year. These are:-

Glastry College, Ballyhalbert – New School Building on an Extended Site.

Total Aggregated Value - £12.5m

St Joseph's Primary School, Carryduff – New School Building on Existing Site. Total Aggregated Value - £5.4m

Pupil Languages

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Education the total number of pupils who do not have English as a first language; and to provide a breakdown of these other languages, including the number of pupils within each language category. (AQW 4920/09)

Minister of Education: Tá freagra na ceiste sa tábla thíos:

The answer is contained in the table below.

PUPILS WHO ARE RECORDED AS HAVING ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE BROKEN DOWN BY FIRST LANGUAGE – 2007/08

First language	Total
Arabic	63
Bengali	67
Cantonese	465
Chinese (other dialects)	13
Czech	12
Dutch	19
Filipino/Tagalog	354
French	13
German	40
Greek	9
Gujarati	11
Hindi	108
Hungarian	47
Indian (not specified)	30
Italian	19
Japanese	5
Latvian	112
Lithuanian	647
Malaysian	58
Mandarin	72
Malayalam	33

First language	Total
Other	874
Punjabi	55
Pashto	5
Polish	1,850
Portuguese	409
Romanian	38
Russian	55
Slovakian	63
Spanish	39
Thai	9
Turkish	11
Urdu	60
Total	5,665

Source: Annual school census.

Notes:

1. Figures relate to children at nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools.
2. A child with English as an additional language is defined as one for whom English is not their first language and who has significant difficulty with the English language and requires assistance.
3. 'Other' includes cases where the language was not specified and languages where the number of cases was less than 5.

School Transport

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education if she would consider changing the criteria in those instances where a bus passes the household of children who have applied for free travel but do not currently qualify due to living within three miles of their destination. (AQW 4936/09)

Minister of Education: The current home to school transport policy requires Education and Library Boards to provide a transport service for children who meet the criteria laid down in the arrangements. However, the current policy includes a provision whereby spare seating capacity on Education and Library Board buses may be awarded on a concessionary basis to pupils who are otherwise ineligible to receive school transport assistance.

Is ceist feidhme iomlán don Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne ábhartha í ceist an chinnidh faoi thaistil lamháltais a sholáthar do dhaltaí aonair.

The decision regarding whether or not to provide concessionary transport to individual pupils is entirely an operational matter for the relevant Education and Library Board.

Boards will not provide concessionary seats to ineligible pupils who seek to travel beyond their nearest suitable school, as to do so could have a potentially damaging effect on the viability of the nearer school. I have no plans to change the current arrangements.

Capital Projects

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Education if there are any major capital projects in her Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 4999/09)

Minister of Education: Ní fios dom aon mhoill ar thionscadal mórchaipitil ar Chlár na Roinne mar gheall ar easpa maoinithe de thairbhe an chúlaithe airgeadais ná mar gheall ar riaráiste oibre sa tSeirbhís Pleanála.

I am not aware of any major capital projects in the Department's Programme which have been delayed either by lack of finance due to the recession or a backlog of work in Planning Service.

DEPARTMENT FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Christian Ethos of Stranmillis Teacher Training College

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether the Christian ethos of Stranmillis Teacher Training College will remain a distinct identity if it is fully subsumed by Queens University Belfast. (AQW 4436/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): My Department has received assurances from the University that there will be no change to the agreed Religious Education curriculum following any proposed merger with Stranmillis University College. The programmes for training Religious Education teachers in the School of Education at Queen's through its PGCE, and at Stranmillis through its Bachelor of Education (BED), prepare a sufficient number of teachers to deliver the agreed curriculum in any school in Northern Ireland. My Department has received assurances that the University will continue to deliver on this commitment should any merger take place.

In June 2008, I also met with representatives of the Transferors Representatives Council to discuss the future of Religious Education provision in the context of a merger between both institutions. The Board of Stranmillis previously had 3 Transferors Representative Council representatives. This ceased to be the case in 2005.

Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning which third party organisations received funding through the 'Learner Access and Engagement Pilot Programme'. (AQW 4599/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Further Education Colleges awarded contracts to third party organisations, for the provision of learner support under the Learner Access and Engagement Pilot programme, on the basis of open competitive tender.

The Department understands that colleges have awarded the following contracts:

Belfast Metropolitan College awarded contracts to the Upper Springfield Development Company Ltd, a consortium which comprises Ashton Community Trust, GEMS NI, Workforce Training Services, Impact Training, and Oasis Caring in Action.

Northern Regional College awarded contracts to the Workers Educational Association (WEA), and FIT NI.

North West Regional College awarded contracts to WEA, FIT NI, Churches Training Company, Dovehouse Community Trust and the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership.

South Eastern Regional College awarded contracts to the Training for Women Network (TWN), a FIT NI led consortium (consisting of FIT NI, RNIB, RNID, USEL, Extern and Gingerbread) and WEA.

Southern Regional College awarded contracts to WEA and the LEAP consortium, which includes Clanrye, RNIB, RNID, USEL, Extern and Gingerbread.

South West College awarded contracts to FIT NI, WEA, TWN and the STEP Training and Learning consortium, which includes South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP), Willowbank, Coalisland Training Services and Customised Training Services.

Student Grants

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is aware that students taking Osteopathy as a second degree are unable to get student grants under the Equivalent Lower Qualification; and what steps he is taking to address this issue. (AQW 4604/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: From academic year 2009/10, most new eligible Northern Ireland domiciled students applying for student support for a second full-time, part-time or full-time distance learning course that is equivalent or lower in level than their first Higher Education course will be excluded from further fee and maintenance (grant and loan) support. This will apply if a student has a degree from a UK or overseas institution.

A number of exceptions to this policy will continue to apply to certain categories of students. Eligible students may be entitled to further student support for:

- Postgraduate Certificate in Education courses (fee and maintenance support)
- first degree Bachelor of Education courses (loan for living costs).
- medicine, dentistry, veterinary science, architecture and social work (loan for living costs)
- courses that attract means-tested National Health Service bursaries (reduced rate loan for living costs)

Courses in osteopathy do not fall under any of these exceptions.

In terms of student support, however, this policy change will have a minimal effect on Northern Ireland second degree students as, under the Education (Student Support) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, students with an honours degree from an institution in the UK or Republic of Ireland are already generally excluded from fee and maintenance (grant and loan) support for a further undergraduate course (previous study rules).

The rationale for applying these rules is to target resources more effectively at those students who have not had a chance to experience higher education and to contribute, therefore, towards widening participation.

16-18 Year Olds not in Education, Employment or Training

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what percentage of 16-18 year olds are not in (i) education; (ii) employment; and (iii) training. (AQW 4612/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The latest figures from the July 2007 – June 2008 Labour Force Survey estimate that (i) 27% of 16-18 year olds were not in full-time education¹; (ii) 70% were not in employment; and (iii) 91% were not in Government employment and training programmes. However, these categories are not mutually exclusive e.g. someone in full-time education may also have a part-time job.

During the same period an estimated 9% of 16-18 year olds were not in full-time education, employment or Government supported training schemes.

¹ Figures exclude those in part-time education or training.

Helping Unemployed Back to Work

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what efforts his Department is making to help those who are 45 years old and over and unemployed, to get back into work. (AQW 4660/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The comprehensive range of services available through my Department's Jobs and Benefits offices and JobCentres and through contracted Providers is designed to help all unemployed clients find work.

In response to the need to provide the help that each individual needs the Department has recently rolled out the Steps to Work initiative. This will provide a flexible approach to the use of its adult return to work provision and in effect, will allow provision to be tailored appropriately to each individual's needs, to help overcome their barriers to returning to employment.

For those with health problems or disabilities who are keen to find a suitable job, Pathways to Work provides a fresh and innovative approach aimed at providing tailored support for the individual regardless of age.

Access NI

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he has taken to ensure that candidates applying for jobs, where clearance from Access NI is required, do not have to make multiple payments if they use more than one recruitment agency. (AQW 4693/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The policy in relation to the operation of AccessNI a matter for the Northern Ireland Office. However, it is my understanding that a disclosure certificate can only indicate what is known about any individual at a given point in time. It cannot be regarded as an indicator of future behaviour. For this reason, I am advised that AccessNI disclosures are not portable - they cannot be taken from one post to another, and it is therefore entirely possible that if an individual signs up with a number of recruitment agencies and applies for posts requiring disclosure certificates that a cost will be incurred each time an application is made to AccessNI by a different agency.

The private recruitment sector is governed by the Conduct of Employment Agencies and Employment Businesses Regulations (NI) 2005. Under the Regulations, an employment agency may not introduce or supply a work-seeker to a hirer unless it has obtained confirmation that the work-seeker has any authorisation which the hirer considers is necessary, or which is required by law, to work in the position the hirer seeks to fill. This may include an Access NI check. When a work-seeker applies for a post through an employment agency, the Access NI check relates to the vacancy the agency is proposing to fill so it is possible that a check will be required for every vacancy applied for, and each check will be subject to a fee. It is a matter to be decided between the agency and the work seeker or hirer as to who pays for the checks.

The Regulations state that, on the first occasion that an agency offers to arrange the provision of a service, the agency shall provide the work-seeker with a notice detailing any charges or fees payable by the work-seeker in respect of that service. The work-seeker therefore has the opportunity to agree with the agency who will pay the Access NI fee. The Department's employment agency inspectors enforce the regulations to ensure compliance with all aspects of employment agency legislation (including in relation to the fair administration of charges to work-seekers) and will take appropriate advisory or legal action where necessary.

My Department, via Jobs and Benefits Offices will consider reimbursing an individual for the costs of vetting checks in circumstances where they need the clearance to be able to take up an offer of employment, in other words to remove an immediate barrier to work.

Super Colleges

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) the cost to his Department of all redundancies in the FE sector following the restructuring and creation of the six 'super colleges'; and (ii) how many redundancies were made and the cost in saving to his Department, per 'super college'. (AQW 4720/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of redundancies in the FE sector following the creation of the six new FE colleges on 1 August 2007, and the associated cost and annual savings per college, are provided in the Table below. The redundancies include teaching and non-teaching staff.

College	Total No. of redundancies	Cost to the College	Annual savings
Belfast Metropolitan College	64	£4,800,000.00	£3,200,000.00
North West Regional College	25	£1,720,007.20	£1,205,129.10
South Eastern Regional College	65	£4,395,000.00	£2,361,000.00
Northern Regional College	23	£1,797,574.00	£1,246,189.00
Southern Regional College	30	£2,854,581.63	£1,261,390.00
South West College	41	£2,188,000.00	£1,460,000.00

Irish Language

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many lecturers teach Irish language courses in further education colleges. (AQW 4805/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: At present, there are 18 lecturers teaching Irish language courses in Northern Ireland's six Further Education colleges. The number of lecturers will vary depending on demand in any given year.

Consultation on Vocational Qualifications

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if his Department's consultation on vocational qualifications is intended to bring regulatory practices into line with those in England and Wales. (AQW 4821/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: QCA has been regulating National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in Northern Ireland since they were introduced and legislation is currently progressing to extend this remit in Northern Ireland to all vocational qualifications. DEL's consultation on the new regulatory arrangements for Vocational Qualifications in Northern Ireland was with the view of moving forward together with its counterparts in England and Wales.

Further Education Rationalisation Strategy

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why his Department has endorsed college policy to re-employ college lecturers made redundant as part of the Further Education rationalisation strategy; and to detail the benefits of this action and how it assists his Department's strategy to reduce unemployment among job seekers. (AQW 4888/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: My Department has not endorsed this policy. There is no legal impediment to the re-employment of prematurely retired lecturers, however, as a general principle, my Department does not encourage this practice, in view of the significant pension and compensation costs that may have been incurred already.

It is a matter for colleges to determine their staffing requirements to meet their business needs. The Department has been assured by the colleges that adopted this approach that any re-employment of prematurely retired lecturers has been on a short-term, temporary basis to meet immediate business needs.

The Department of Education (DE), which administers the Teachers' Pensions Scheme, is currently exploring options for further restrictions on the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers and lecturers, taking into account possible legal and equality issues which might arise from any potential new measures. My Department is fully supportive of DE's actions in this regard.

Capital Infrastructure Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to list all capital infrastructure projects (i) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised in this financial year, in the Strangford constituency and to detail the aggregated value of each. (AQW 4899/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning has one capital infrastructure project, value £4.85m, under construction in the Strangford constituency. The project is in the further education sector, at the Newtownards campus of the South Eastern Regional College. There are no further projects in procurement or due to be advertised in this financial year.

Departmental Staff

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4902/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The number of staff employed by the Department for Employment and Learning by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009 was as follows:

CORE DEPARTMENT

Grade (and Analogous grades)	May 2007	January 2009
Permanent Secretary	1	1

Grade (and Analogous grades)	May 2007	January 2009
Under Secretary	2	2
Grade 5	6	6
Grade 6	6	5
Grade 7	37	40
Deputy Principal	97	106
Staff Officer	168	183
EO1	317	315
EO2	497	564
AO	538	572
AA	92	73
SGB 1	1	0
SGB 2	8	6
Industrial band 10	1	0
Casual AA	25	44
Casual SGB2	5	6
Total	1801	1923

AGENCY WORKERS

Personal Secretary	1	0
DP Accountants	0	1
SO Accountants	1	2
SGB 2	0	1
AO	0	3
Total	2	7

Capital Projects

Mr Ford asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5000/09)

Minister for Employment and Learning: Funding availability and a request for revised terms has caused a delay in achieving contract closure in the Belfast Metropolitan College PPP campus development. It is however anticipated that these issues will be overcome in this financial year.

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT**Attracting Tourists to the North Coast**

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she is taking to attract tourists to the North Coast. (AQW 4513/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Arlene Foster): The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) promotes Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland markets. This is achieved by extensive marketing activity throughout the year with the Causeway Coast as one of our key attractions. In 2009, NITB will launch an extensive spring campaign in February in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with further campaigns to follow later in the year.

NITB also works in partnership with and provides business and financial assistance to the Causeway Coast and Glens Regional Tourism Partnership (CCGRTP) which has responsibility for marketing, product development and visitor servicing for its region.

Tourism Ireland works in close collaboration with NITB and CCGRPT to showcase and promote the Causeway Coast and the Glens as a must-see holiday destination in Great Britain and overseas. The Giants Causeway has featured prominently in Tourism Ireland's global television advertising campaigns in markets across the world aimed at general consumers. Tourism Ireland activity includes targeted television, radio and print campaigns in key overseas markets, overseas media and trade visits to the Causeway Coast and Glens and Tourism Ireland and Causeway Coast and Glens presence at overseas travel and trade events.

From a development perspective the North Coast is part of the Causeway Coast and Glens Signature Project, one strand of which is the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan which provides the overarching tourism strategy for the area. A key project of the Masterplan was the development of the Causeway Coastal Route which was launched in July 2007 and which is designed to encourage visitors to move safely and comfortably beyond the iconic Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site (WHS) to other rural and coastal areas, which can then enjoy the associated economic and social tourism benefits. Development of this area is on-going.

Business Start-ups in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much financial assistance was given to business start-ups in the North Down constituency, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4523/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: During the period 2003/04 to 2007/08 Invest NI directly offered assistance to 17 new locally-owned businesses in the North Down Parliamentary Constituency Area. These businesses have the potential for significant growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

In addition, 659 offers were made to individuals intending to set up a business with a focus on the local market. Most of these were assisted indirectly through the Start A Business programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland.

These 676 offers amounted to £1.2m of assistance during the 5 year period. Table 1 below shows the number of offers approved in the area and the corresponding amount of assistance offered in each year.

TABLE 1: INVEST NI OFFERS APPROVED TO INDIGENOUS BUSINESS STARTS IN NORTH DOWN PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY AREA (2003/04 – 2007/08)

Year of Offer	No of Offers	Total Assistance (£)
2003/04	157	231,955
2004/05	160	301,573
2005/06	148	404,606
2006/07	112	62,200
2007/08	99	182,315
Total	676	1,182,649

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much money her Department has made available to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4545/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment:

- (i) NITB has not made any money available to the Ulster-Scots Academy.
- (ii) In 2007 NITB produced and distributed over 25,000 copies of 'Northern Ireland: The American Connection' publication which outlines the migration of the Ulster-Scots community to North America and highlights the Ulster presidential connections and trail. The publication was reprinted specifically for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival 2007, at a cost of £13,000.

Tourism in the North Coast Area

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment on whether a new greyhound track and four star hotel in Ballymoney would help improve the tourist attraction of the North Coast. (AQW 4610/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The North Coast region is part of the Causeway Coast and Glens Signature Project area, one strand of which is the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Masterplan. This provides the overarching tourism strategy for the area. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board welcomes product development initiatives that will improve or enhance the visitor experience. These should be in line with the product development priorities highlighted in NITB's Draft Corporate Plan (2008 – 2011).

Greyhound racing has not been identified within either the Signature Project Area Masterplan or the product development portfolio. However, NITB is always keen to see the provision of high quality, well designed and managed tourist accommodation that meets or exceeds modern visitor expectations.

Proposals must be based on a sound business plan which includes an assessment based on market analysis.

Households in which no-one is Working

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for the percentage of households in which no-one is working. (AQW 4615/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At April – June 2008, the Labour Force Survey estimated there were 692,000 households¹ in Northern Ireland. Of these, an estimated 33.6% had no-one in employment (the equivalent UK figure was 34.9%).

¹ This analysis is based on all households and will therefore include households consisting solely of persons who are past retirement age.

Project Kelvin

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she received any political representation from her party colleagues in relation to the siting of the Hibernia Atlantic telehouse facility in Coleraine and, if so, if the decision to locate in Coleraine, as opposed to Derry/Londonderry, was taken after receiving this representation. (AQW 4641/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I did not receive any political representation from my party colleagues in relation to the siting of the telehouse facility that forms part of Project Kelvin. The decision to locate the facility in Coleraine was taken by Hibernia Atlantic and submitted in its tender for the Project.

Attracting Investment to Upper Bann

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her efforts to attract investment to the Upper Bann constituency. (AQW 4659/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In the last 12 months, Invest NI facilitated 6 visits by potential investors to the Upper Bann constituency.

Whilst Invest NI is concerned to see a spread of investment across the region its role is to promote Northern Ireland as an entity. Ultimately the location decision rests with the investor. If the investor seeks information on specific areas within Northern Ireland then Invest NI will work with the local stakeholders to best promote the area.

In promoting Northern Ireland, Invest Northern Ireland's sales message is based on Skills, Competitive Costs and Excellent Infrastructure.

Project Kelvin

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the process for selecting the locations for the hubs to be connected with the new international telecommunications infrastructure as part of Project Kelvin. (AQW 4661/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The contract for Project Kelvin was awarded on the basis of an open procurement. The invitation to tender for the project specified that direct access to the infrastructure had to be available at three locations – Londonderry, Letterkenny and Monaghan. However, it also encouraged bidders to add additional access points across Northern Ireland and border county regions and the evaluation process gave credit for the number of these additional access points.

The contract was awarded to Hibernia Atlantic who indicated that they would provide an additional ten locations - Armagh, Belfast, Ballymena, Coleraine, Omagh, Portadown, Strabane, Castleblayney, Dundalk and Drogheda.

Project Kelvin

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment the reasons why no location within County Fermanagh was selected as a location for a hub to connect with the new international telecommunications infrastructure as part of Project Kelvin. (AQW 4662/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The invitation to tender for Project Kelvin specified only three mandatory locations for direct access to the infrastructure – Londonderry, Letterkenny and Monaghan. However, it encouraged bidders to add additional access points across Northern Ireland and border county regions and the evaluation process gave credit for the number of these additional access points. The location of any additional access points was a decision for tenderers.

The contract was awarded to Hibernia Atlantic who indicated that they would provide an additional ten locations - Armagh, Belfast, Ballymena, Coleraine, Omagh, Portadown, Strabane, Castleblayney, Dundalk and Drogheda.

My Department and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (Ireland) have already worked together on a number of cross border projects. DCENR have engaged consultants to perform a technical and economic feasibility study to establish if further joint DETI/DCENR projects are needed to improve telecommunications in the border region. The Fermanagh –Leitrim border area is included in this study. The report will be finalised shortly and I will consider the recommendations in due course.

Former Army Barracks at Ballykelly

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she would consider developing the former army barracks at Ballykelly as a centre and hub for industry, trade and commerce for the creation of new employment; and to make a statement. (AQW 4691/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My department has no plans to develop the former army barracks at Ballykelly.

Invest NI's current available landholding in the surrounding areas of Londonderry, Limavady and Coleraine (174 acres) is considered sufficient for the medium to long term needs of its client companies in the North West. There is also significant private sector industrial landholding in the area.

Small and Medium-Sized Businesses

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 373/09, what support and assistance was given to small and medium-sized businesses in the Foyle constituency. (AQW 4710/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The number of offers made by Invest NI to small and medium sized businesses in the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency Area in each of the last 5 years is set out in the table below. The table also provides details of the £21.66m of assistance offered to these projects.

In addition to the support provided directly by Invest NI, 1,299 offers were made through the Start A Business Programme, which is delivered in partnership with Enterprise Northern Ireland. These projects were offered assistance of £686,000, details of which are also set out in the table.

INVEST NI ASSISTANCE OFFERED TO SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED BUSINESSES WITHIN THE FOYLE CONSTITUENCY (2003/04 - 2007/08)

Year	Invest NI Direct Support		Start A Business Programme	
	No of Offers	Total Assistance Offered £000	No of Offers	Total Assistance Offered £000
2003/04	211	3,308	200	144
2004/05	211	4,875	353	240
2005/06	146	7,716	250	110
2006/07	157	3,390	221	84
2007/08	124	2,365	275	107
Total	849	21,656	1,299	686

Notes: Table totals may not add due to rounding.

Reconnect Scheme

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of grants paid out under the Reconnect scheme; (ii) any payments still outstanding; and (iii) the number of applicants who were not offered a grant. (AQW 4724/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: In relation to your queries on the Reconnect scheme I can advise:-

- (i) 4220 grants have been paid;
- (ii) 13 claims for payment are still outstanding;
- (iii) 3,200 applicants were not offered grant.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance she is providing to those with investments in the Presbyterian Mutual Society. (AQW 4733/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: At its meeting on 15th January 2009, the Executive considered the Presbyterian Mutual Society and it was agreed that the First Minister and deputy First Minister would seek to raise with the Prime Minister the issue of help to the members of the Society and to impress upon him that the UK Government provide support in terms of depositor protection.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister wrote on 26th January 2009 to the Prime Minister requesting a meeting and it is hoped that this will be arranged as soon as possible.

Specialist Debt Advisers

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many Specialist Debt Advisers her Department funds in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 4756/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department is funding the provision of a free face to face debt advice service with advisers based in 11 parliamentary constituencies.

Name of Parliamentary Constituency	Number of Advisers
Belfast East	1
Belfast South	2
Belfast West	2
East Londonderry	1
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	1
Foyle	3
Mid Ulster	1
Newry and Armagh	1
South Antrim	1
Upper Bann	1
West Tyrone	1

Small Business Growth

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if small business growth is a priority for her Department. (AQW 4772/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department remains fully committed to the growth and development of Northern Ireland's small business base. In particular, our focus is on helping these businesses achieve the scale necessary to compete effectively in global markets and thereby make a significant contribution to the greater wealth and economic strength of Northern Ireland.

This commitment to our small businesses is evident from the wide range of targets contained within the Programme for Government. These include, encouraging first time exporters, supporting companies to diversify into new markets, supporting the establishment of new business starts with an export or global focus, working with existing Invest NI client companies whose investment plans demonstrate increasing productivity and promoting growth projects from locally-owned clients.

Invest NI also continues to develop new schemes of support such as the Growth Accelerator Programme and the Accelerated Support Fund which are focused on encouraging business starts and assisting them to maximise opportunities. Between 2002/03 and 2007/08, Invest NI offered start-up assistance to 18,817 locally-owned businesses and individuals. Of these new businesses, 493 were supported because of their potential for significant growth, primarily through the development of markets outside Northern Ireland.

Invest NI

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many visits have been made by potential inward investors, facilitated by Invest NI, to each constituency in the last 12 month period for which figures are available; and how many jobs have been created as a result of these visits. (AQW 4863/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Invest NI's role is to promote "Northern Ireland" as an attractive and viable location for new inward investment opportunities.

Invest NI promotes all constituencies to potential investors on an impartial basis. Invest NI does not determine locations for visits for a potential investor and the final location for investment; this decision is taken by the investor.

In the last 12 months, Invest NI facilitated 153 visits made by 126 companies. These potential investors visited the following constituencies during their stay in Northern Ireland:

Constituency	No. of Visits
Belfast North	10
Belfast East	89
Belfast South	95
Belfast West	13
East Antrim	5
Mid Ulster	3
North Down	44
South Antrim	14
Foyle	7
Lagan Valley	43
Newry and Armagh	4
Upper Bann	6
West Tyrone	3
Strangford	1
East Londonderry	2
South Down	1

Invest NI, and its predecessor legacy bodies, has always used the 'jobs promoted' rather than 'jobs created' measure as the jobs are actually created by the company undertaking the investment, not Invest NI. It is also the case that investments often need three or more years for the company's plans to be put fully into effect, with the jobs being created over this extended timeline. It follows, therefore, that it is not appropriate to seek to link visits by potential investors to offers made and jobs promoted, particularly over such a short timeframe.

However, the table below details a list of projects and jobs promoted in approved Invest NI offers to inward investors over the time period of the visits requested (1 February 2008 to 31 January 2009).

Invest NI Jobs Promoted / Safeguarded by Approved Inward Investment Offers by Parliament Constituency (1 Feb 08 to 31 Jan 09):

Parliamentary Constituency	Total		
	No of Projects	New jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	7	132	1,883
Belfast North	1	1	0
Belfast South	10	1,248	7
Belfast West	2	13	29
East Antrim	2	237	0
East Londonderry	2	34	30
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	4	93	0
Foyle	1	120	0
Newry And Armagh	2	17	0

Parliamentary Constituency	Total		
	No of Projects	New jobs	Safe Jobs
North Down	2	773	152
South Antrim	1	100	0
South Down	1	511	0
Strangford	2	17	0
West Tyrone	2	122	0
Not Yet Determined	1	67	2
Grand Total	40	3,485	2,103

Notes:

1. Figures for 2008/09 are provisional and may be subject to amendment
2. Inward Investment refers to investment by overseas owned clients, including GB owned clients.
3. New Jobs represents the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.
4. Safe Jobs represents the number of jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.
5. Some projects offered assistance may not proceed as planned.

Programme for Government

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what risk assessment she has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4884/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Programme for Government (PfG) and DETI's Corporate Plan (2008 -2011) indicate that targets were framed in the context of the then predicted economic downturn. The documents also explained that targets will be continually tracked and monitored against changing markets and, where appropriate, amended over the PfG period.

As part of this process, my Department has implemented detailed Delivery Agreements which outline the actions to be taken to deliver on the targets and commitments contained in the PfG. Robust monitoring procedures have also been established to track performance and they continue to be used to identify areas of concern and where remedial action may be required. In addition, I have also asked the Independent Review Panel to provide an assessment of my Department's economic goals and targets as outlined in the PFG.

It should be noted that performance on operating plan targets for 2008/09 has been generally positive. However, given the global downturn, there are obvious concerns relating to falling demand for locally produced goods and services, and for potential investment opportunities. The combination of these factors suggests that certain targets for 2009/10 and 2010/11 will need to be carefully monitored and kept under review.

Departmental Staff

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of staff employed by her Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009. (AQW 4903/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Number of staff employed in DETI by (i) grade & (ii) core departmental staff

Grade	May 2007	January 2009
Industrial Band 10	2	0
Admin Assistant	39	30
SGB2 Watchperson/Cleaner	6	4
Support grade Band 2	9	6

Grade	May 2007	January 2009
SGB 2 Security Guard	3	3
Typist	7	7
Admin Officer	131	113
Supp Grade Security Guard	2	2
Support Grade Band 1	1	0
TSS Tech Grade 2	6	6
Executive Officer 2	69	85
Programmer	7	0
ICT Level 3	0	5
Typing Manager	1	0
Senior Personal Secretary	2	1
Personal Secretary	6	4
Executive Officer 1	67	53
Higher Instructional Officer	1	1
Assistant Info Officer	0	1
Mapping & Charting Officer	1	1
ICT Level 4	0	3
Assistant Librarian	0	1
Programmer/Analyst	4	0
Trading Standards Inspector	15	10
Staff Officer	57	58
Staff Officer (Accountant)	7	8
Auditor (SO) MIIA or BATS	4	5
Auditor (SO) MIIA & BATS	2	1
Asst Economist	4	3
Fire Officer	1	0
Information Officer	0	1
Librarian	2	1
Systems Analyst	5	0
ICT Level 5	0	2
Area Inspector	6	8
Deputy Principal	49	55
Accountant DP	10	12
Auditor DP MIIA or BATS	2	2
Auditor DP MIIA & BATS	1	1
Deputy Economist	1	4
Deputy Principal Info Officer	2	1
Senior Scientific Officer	1	0
ICT Level 6	0	1

Grade	May 2007	January 2009
Senior Systems Analyst	1	0
Dep CHF Trading Stnd Officer	1	2
Principal (G7)	28	24
Accountant Grade 7	1	2
Development Executive	1	0
Principal Economist (G7)	1	2
CH Inspt Trading Standards (G7)	1	1
Principal Information Officer (G7)	0	1
Senior Principal (G6)	1	1
ICT Level 7	0	1
SP Economist (G6)	1	1
Assistant Secretary (G5)	6	6
Under Secretary (G3)	2	2
Special Adviser	0	1
Permanent Secretary (G2A)	1	1
Total	578	544

(iii) Numbers of Agency workers employed at May 2007 & January 2009 – NIL

Project Kelvin

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if there were technical, cost or engineering reasons for the decision to locate the Project Kelvin Broadband Cable at Portrush rather than Derry/Londonderry. (AQW 4947/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The main reasons for the contractor selecting Portrush for the submarine cable landing point are environmental. There were also technical and commercial considerations, for example, the distance from the existing Hibernia North submarine cable and topography of the seabed.

Londonderry will have a fibre optic cable connecting it to the submarine cable, as will seven other locations in Northern Ireland.

Capital Projects

Mr Ford asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if there are any major capital projects in her Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5001/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, including its Non Departmental Public Bodies, does not have any major capital projects which were due to commence in the current financial year but have been delayed either by lack of finance due to the recession; or a backlog of work in Planning Service.

Economic Downturn

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what impact the current economic downturn is having on Northern Ireland's per capita GDP; and the impact she projects for the next two years. (AQO 2031/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Last week my Department released its Quarterly Economic Review detailing our latest assessment of the impact of the economic downturn, both globally and in Northern Ireland.

Recent estimates suggest that Northern Ireland's output may contract by 1.6% in 2009. In addition, certain independent forecasters are suggesting that the local economy may return to marginal growth in 2010.

Output, GVA, per head, is a broad measure of economic prosperity and Northern Ireland has remained at or around 81% of the UK average. Recent forecasts estimate that this will remain largely the same during the downturn.

Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of how the Enterprise Guarantee Scheme is helping small and medium size businesses to offset job losses and business closures. (AQO 2032/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Enterprise Finance Guarantee was part of a package of financial measures announced by the UK Government on 14 January 2009 designed to address the cash flow, credit and investment needs of small and medium businesses.

The Scheme is available through a number of high-street banks. Its delivery, in particular decisions on the approval or rejection of proposals, is a matter for the participating lenders and, as such, I have no specific evidence of the uptake of the scheme so far.

As you will appreciate, as the scheme has only been operational for a few weeks it will take time to before its impact is determined.

In respect of Invest NI's clients, which represent only a small proportion of NI's overall business base, several have indicated their intention to pursue an application with the relevant lender and Invest NI will monitor their progress in this respect.

Accessing Credit

Mr Burns asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the ability of companies to access credit for investment; and what steps her Department is taking to ensure that companies are able to access credit over the coming months. (AQO 2033/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There is no doubt that accessing credit has become much more difficult as banks seek to restructure their risk profile. Through discussions with Invest NI, and directly with their clients, I'm aware that an increasing number are experiencing difficulties in securing affordable credit to allow them to undertake investment and development projects.

The worrying aspect of this trend is that even viable and profitable businesses are facing more onerous credit arrangements which, in turn, are putting increasing pressure on their working capital and competitiveness.

In December, I, along with the First and deputy First Ministers and the Minister for Finance and Personnel, met the Chief Executives of the four main banks in Northern Ireland to discuss the general state of the local financial sector and lending policies to consumers and businesses.

I intend to meet with the four local banks again in the near future to discuss a number of issues including progress in participating in the UK-wide package of finance measures announced in January 2009 to meet the needs of the changing economic environment and address the cash flow, credit and capital needs of businesses. I will particularly encourage them to maximise the potential offered by the Enterprise Finance Guarantee Scheme

Inward Investment

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an assessment of her Department's plans to make Northern Ireland attractive to inward investment. (AQO 2034/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Northern Ireland is an attractive location for inward investment. Its selling messages continue to be based on access to skills, competitive operating costs and an excellent infrastructure.

Since 2002 Invest NI has offered assistance of £253 million to 199 inward investment projects, contributing towards £1.3 billion of planned investment and promoting almost 16,000 new jobs whilst safeguarding nearly 12,000 existing jobs.

This year inward investment activity levels have remained encouraging high particularly during the first half of the year, primarily due to the goodwill that flowed from the US/NI Conference in May 2008. Follow-up to the conference continues but following the financial turmoil which began last autumn, and global economic conditions Invest NI is seeing growing uncertainty and caution in the FDI market and companies are beginning to significantly tighten their belts. Companies are increasingly focusing on cost containment and indicating they are deferring investment decisions. As a result the early-stage pipeline of new FDI prospects is significantly reduced in comparison to the same point last year.

Despite the current economic conditions, Invest NI is working towards meeting the challenging 2008-09 inward visit, investment project and employment targets.

Job Creation and Job Losses

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is her Department's projected total figure for (i) job losses; and (ii) job creation, over each of the next three years. (AQO 2035/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: As part of working with the Economic Development Forum, my Department commissioned updated economic forecasts on a range of variables, including net job losses. The latest forecast suggests that net job losses in 2009 could be in the region of 14,000, with further losses expected in 2010, albeit at a lower level.

However, it should be recognised that, given the rapidly changing global economic conditions, these forecasts are subject to change. In that light, I have asked to be provided with updated economic forecasts as they become available. I expect to discuss the latest forecasts when I chair the Economic Development Forum meeting on Thursday

I would also stress that I continue to do all that I can to promote job creation opportunities in Northern Ireland. For example, I recently announced the creation of 132 new consultancy positions and 10 new managerial positions in the Newry-based consultancy and software solutions company, First Derivatives. This investment, with financial support from Invest NI, will generate an additional £11.6million in salaries over the next two years.

Renewable Technologies

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what target her Department has set for the number of jobs to be created in the development and production of renewable technologies over the next ten years; and what steps are being taken, along with the Department for Employment and Learning, to ensure that the necessary capabilities will be in place to enable such development and production. (AQO 2038/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: My Department has not set a target for jobs created over the next 10 years in respect of the development and production of renewable technologies.

Nonetheless, the Energy and Environmental sector in Northern Ireland has experienced strong growth in recent years and I am confident that it will offer many opportunities for business in the areas of design, installation and the manufacture of component parts.

There is huge potential for the creation of 'green jobs' in the region, which has already demonstrated its ability to pioneer new technologies with the successful Sea Gen project, located in Strangford Lough.

My Department, including Invest NI, is actively engaged with the Department of Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, the Department of Energy and Climate Change, UK Renewables and the UK Renewables Deployment Group in the targeting of renewables as a growth sector. Invest NI is also developing a strategy to maximise the potential economic benefits of the Energy and Environmental sector targeted for completion by the end of 2009.

Now is the right time to encourage investment in renewable technologies for the future. My Department will be consulting shortly on a new Strategic Energy Framework. This will include a focus on renewable technologies and how they can help deliver security and diversity of energy supply, address climate change and create local employment opportunities.

Furthermore, the recently established Inter-Departmental Working Group on Sustainable Energy, which I chair, has agreed to set up a sub-group looking specifically at opportunities for 'green jobs' and skills development within Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is doing to attract visitors from the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2039/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board had a calendar of activity during 2008 that ensured exposure for Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland throughout the whole year, and 2009 will be equally intense.

In 2008 NITB focused on awareness campaigns to challenge directly some of the barriers that research had identified - for example that Republic of Ireland residents would consider a break to Northern Ireland but lacked awareness of things to see and do.

The Spring campaign consisted of generic Northern Ireland advertising along with a series of regional advertorials which concentrated on specific activities and attractions.

The Summer campaign targeted international visitors to the Republic of Ireland to encourage them either to take a trip to Northern Ireland during their stay or to extend any planned trip here.

As well as traditional advertising, NITB used a number of innovative methods to get the message across to consumers. These included a mobile Tourist information centre in the form of a Winnebago which covered all the major events in the Republic of Ireland throughout the summer and afforded a real opportunity to meet prospective consumers face to face.

The Autumn 2008 campaign in both Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland used new creative designs to encourage customers to 'explore more' in Northern Ireland, promoting the sense of the 'undiscovered' and the uniqueness of Northern Ireland.

In 2009, NITB will launch an extensive Spring campaign at the beginning of February in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The campaign will use two new TV adverts as well as press advertising, outdoor, on-line and PR, and will continue the development of the new creative designs. There are also plans to carry out face to face promotion through shopping centre promotions in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland border areas to encourage Republic of Ireland residents who are already coming to Northern Ireland for the day to shop, to extend their stay and take a short break. Exploiting the euro / sterling rate will be a key priority.

Thereafter NITB is developing plans for a summer Gateway campaign and an autumn campaign to ensure consistent exposure for the Northern Ireland product in the Republic of Ireland.

Value of Trade Coming into Northern Ireland

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the estimated total annual value of trade coming into Northern Ireland as a result of shopping by visitors from the Republic of Ireland. (AQO 2041/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Information on the total annual value of trade coming into Northern Ireland as a result of shopping by visitors from the Republic of Ireland is not collected via any DETI survey and therefore relevant figures are not available.

My Department does, however, continue to promote Northern Ireland as a key shopping destination. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board had a calendar of activity during 2008 that ensured exposure for Northern Ireland in the Republic of Ireland throughout the whole year, and 2009 will be equally intense.

In 2009, NITB will launch an extensive Spring campaign at the beginning of February in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The campaign will use two new TV adverts as well as press advertising, outdoor, on-line and PR, and will continue the development of the new creative designs. There are also plans to carry out face to face promotion through shopping centre promotions in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland border areas to encourage Republic of Ireland residents who are already coming to Northern Ireland for the day to shop, to extend their stay and take a short break. Exploiting the euro / sterling rate will be a key priority.

NITB is developing plans for a summer Gateway campaign and an autumn campaign to ensure consistent exposure for the Northern Ireland product in the Republic of Ireland.

Social Economy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the importance of the social economy, given the current economic downturn. (AQO 2042/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Government values the distinctive role played by social economy enterprises in NI arising from their social and economic objectives, and their impact on local communities and particularly disadvantaged people, groups and disadvantaged areas.

In recognising the importance of the sector, my Department led the development of the Executive's cross-departmental strategy entitled "Developing a Successful Social Economy". We are currently finalising the follow-up to that strategy, working closely with the sector and other key stakeholders with a role to play in supporting its development. Given the cross departmental nature of the strategy, the ETI Committee is currently consulting with other relevant Departmental Committees.

The new strategy will continue the Executive's commitment to three strategic objectives – to increase awareness of the sector, develop its business strength and provide a supportive environment in which it can prosper. These continue to be relevant even in the current economic downturn.

We plan to put the strategy out to public consultation in Spring 2009.

The development of a strong and sustainable Social Economy Network, acting on behalf of the sector, is a key element in the Executive's strategy to develop the sector in Northern Ireland. My Department currently supports the development of the Network with a grant totalling £600,000 for the 4 year period up to 2011.

Economic Downturn

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what measures she is taking to support local businesses, including small businesses, in the current economic downturn, and what relevant representations are being made to other Departments. (AQO 2043/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: There are a number of initiatives underway to assist businesses during the downturn. Along with the Finance Minister, I met representatives of the local banks in December to discuss their lending policies to businesses, and how they might make more use of the UK wide lending initiatives announced by the Chancellor in his Pre-Budget Report to help small businesses.

Invest NI has also developed a programme of initiatives designed to enable its clients to tackle the impact of a sustained economic downturn. At the end of September 2008, I launched Invest NI's £5 million 'Accelerated Support Fund' which can make fast track advice and assistance available to client companies to help them respond to the effects of the downturn.

Since the end of September we have held nine seminars on the theme of "Navigating through Challenging Times". These have attracted over 600 attendees from 460 Client Companies.

Participants at these events have the opportunity to discuss their individual business needs in detail and identify key projects to improve performance. This can result in the provision of up to five days of free specialist consultancy support for a diagnostic investigation to develop actions that can deliver significant benefits and help firms through the downturn. Where suitable projects are then identified clients can then obtain 50% support from the Accelerated Support Fund.

Invest NI has also continued to increase its focus on export support to exploit the current weaknesses in the exchange rate and has initiated additional trade missions to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States & Europe as well as developing a new export mentoring programme.

For those businesses that are not Invest NI clients, a “Beat the Credit Crunch” section has been added to the nibusinessinfo website. The website provides practical tools and guides on key business activities such as managing finances and securing extra sales. And, in partnership with Enterprise NI, District Councils and the NI Chamber of Commerce, we are now rolling out a programme of business information seminars specifically focused at non Invest NI clients having held five seminars to date with a further five scheduled for this month.

All Northern Ireland businesses can also access the Carbon Trust’s Interest Free Loan Scheme which aims to maximise energy efficiency. To date 24 applicants have received a total of £3.2million funding under this scheme, and 95 free energy efficiency surveys completed.

As you know, the Start a Business Programme has now been operating for approximately nine months without grant and while there has been some reduction in the numbers coming forward, it is very difficult to say whether this is due to the absence of grant per se or the wider economic climate. However, I am keen that we monitor the impact of grant withdrawal on an ongoing basis, particularly given the rapidly changing economic climate. To this end, Invest NI has commissioned KPMG and Oxford Economics to carry out an independent review of the evidence to date and also to seek the views of clients that have dropped out of the programme over the past nine months. I hope to have this report by the end of this month, which I will share with you thereafter.

Both DETI and Invest NI continue to proactively work with the companies and entrepreneurs whose business strategies and investment decisions are essential to progressing towards the targets contained in the Executive’s Programme for Government.

Giant’s Causeway Project

Rev Dr Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the Giant’s Causeway project. (AQO 2044/09)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I welcome the announcement that the Minister for the Environment has granted planning approval for the National Trust’s proposals for a new visitor centre at the Causeway.

I would hope that the National Trust can now move forward in developing the centre and meet their target for opening in 2011.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Coastal Communities

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment what his plans are to implement European Union planning policies that are intended to sustain coastal communities. (AQW 4108/09)

Minister of the Environment (Mr Sammy Wilson): There are no European Union planning policies on this matter.

Planning Policy Statement 21

Mr J Wells asked the Minister of the Environment what the differences are between Policy CTY6 in Draft Planning Policy Statement 21 and the equivalent policy in the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland. (AQW 4280/09)

Minister of the Environment: There are no salient differences between Policy CTY 6 of Draft PPS 21 and the equivalent policy (HOU 12) in the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland. The amplification text with

this policy does however set out the type of information an applicant may wish to submit in support of a planning application made under this policy provision.

Divisional Planning Offices

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to the answer to AQW 2993/09, if Divisional Planning Offices have a legal duty to refuse applications for housing development, specifically where it is an extension to a home that would be too close to overhead electricity cables. (AQW 4385/09)

Minister of the Environment: My Department is duly bound to process each planning application on its individual merits. My Department's guiding principle in determining applications is that 'development should be permitted, having regard to the development plan and all material considerations, unless the proposed development will cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance' (PPS 1: General Principles, Paragraph 59). The Planning Service has no legal duty to refuse applications for housing development including where it is an extension to a home close to overhead electricity cables.

My Department ensures that Northern Ireland Electricity plc (NIE) is consulted on all individual planning applications on land crossed by existing overhead power lines. NIE will provide advice on operational safe clearances for development proposals.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment whether all planning applications that add to the capacity of storm and foul sewers in Newcastle are to be put on hold, at the request of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQW 4463/09)

Minister of the Environment: Planning Service have not put all planning applications that add to the capacity of foul and storm sewers in Newcastle on hold. However, some applications are still under consideration pending further discussions between Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Northern Ireland Water (NIW).

Whether or not a planning application should be granted approval is solely a matter for Planning Service. However, recommendations and decisions are guided by the advice from our consultees such as Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Northern Ireland Water (NIW).

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment why the Northern Ireland Environment Agency failed to consult with elected representatives and Planning Service prior to their announcement of Tuesday 20th January 2009. (AQW 4464/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) did not make an announcement on 20 January 2009 but has been expressing concern over further development in Newcastle to Planning Service since 2006. It recommended to Planning Service in February 2008 that all future development in Newcastle be refused until the Waste Water Treatment Works and sewer network upgrades were in place, but decisions on planning applications are, however, a matter for Planning Service.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment when the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 will be adopted. (AQW 4485/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan 2015 (BMAP) was published in November 2004. The Public Inquiry commenced in April 2007 and concluded in May 2008.

The PAC is currently considering all the information before it prior to completing its report and making its recommendations to the Department. The PAC has indicated a preliminary timescale for delivery of the report to Planning Service as early summer 2010. However, the Commission would hope to be in a position to announce

a firmer timescale later this year. Any review of timescales undertaken by the PAC may advance the Report or elements of the Report.

Upon receipt of the report, Planning Service will consider the recommendations of the PAC and prepare the Plan for adoption.

In October 2008, the Department wrote to the PAC and requested the early release of that part of the BMAP Report relating to strategic retail issues, including Sprucefield. The PAC took the view that this was a discrete issue and, as the public sessions of the Inquiry were complete, it could comply with the Department's request. The Commission issued the report to the Department on 21 January 2009. It is anticipated that this report will be made available to the public when the Minister has made a decision on the process to be followed in respect of Sprucefield.

George Best Belfast City Airport

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment if he has held any discussions with the management of the George Best Belfast City Airport on the proposed extension of the runway. (AQW 4486/09)

Minister of the Environment: I have held no discussions with the management of the George Best Belfast City Airport on the proposed extension of the runway.

Hydro Turbines

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3807/09, to detail the locations of the seven hydro turbines. (AQW 4496/09)

Minister of the Environment: The locations of the 7 planning applications received by my Department for hydro-electric turbines between 1st April 2002 and 30th September 2008 are as follows:

1. X/2005/0786/F – Glenvale Conservation, Crawfordsburn Road, Newtownards, Co Down
2. E/2006/0396/F – Salmon Leap, accessed through Ballyness Park, Bushmills, Co Antrim
3. R/2006/0705/F – Viewpoint, Glen River, 65m north east of 7 King Street, Newcastle, Co Down
4. J/2007/0072/F – 190m south east of 26 Letterbratt Road, Plumbridge, Co Tyrone
5. K/2007/0035/F – Land adjacent to the Camown River in Stranamullagh Recreation Area, Omagh, Co Tyrone
6. Q/2007/0758/F – Hazelbank Mill, Lawrencetown, Banbridge, Co Down
7. B/2008/0324/F – Site adjacent to the flood bank of Tircreven Burn, running 500m downstream and 900m upstream of the point Tircreven Burn crosses the Duncurn Road, Limavady, Co Londonderry

Applications for Enforcement Action

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many applications for enforcement action are still outstanding in the North Down constituency. (AQW 4520/09)

Minister of the Environment: At present there are 236 live enforcement cases in the North Down constituency.

Greenbelt Foundation

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment the legal status of maintenance agreements entered into by residents of housing developments with the Greenbelt Foundation given that, the company is not (i) a charitable trust registered by the Charity Commission; nor (ii) a management company supported by such a trust as required in Planning Service's Planning Policy Statement 8 Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation; and how his Department will view this company in relation to future agreements with residents of housing developments. (AQW 4538/09)

Minister of the Environment: The legal status of maintenance agreements entered into by residents of housing developments with the Greenbelt Foundation or any other management company is a matter entirely between the company in question and the residents.

Policy OS2 of Planning Policy Statement 8: Open Space, Sport and Outdoor Recreation advises that if an applicant wishes to follow an alternative management approach they will have to demonstrate to my Department how such an approach can meet the policy requirement for the open space to be managed and maintained in perpetuity.

In relation to future planning applications where developers wish to make use of the Greenbelt Foundation to manage and maintain areas of open space, these will continue to be assessed on their merits against relevant policy relating to the provision of open space in new residential developments. Developers are required to satisfy the Department that suitable arrangements will be put in place for the future management and maintenance, in perpetuity, of any areas of open space that are to be provided.

House Sparrows

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of the decline in the numbers of house sparrows; and if his Department has made any enquiries into the issue. (AQW 4560/09)

Minister of the Environment: Currently available data does not make it clear that the population of House Sparrow is declining in Northern Ireland.

The Department is not aware of any studies which have been undertaken in Northern Ireland to look at factors affecting the population of House Sparrow. The Department is, however, continuing to support surveys which provide important data on all breeding and wintering bird populations, including House Sparrow.

As a result of the declines in House Sparrow populations in the UK as a whole, it is treated as a priority species in Northern Ireland. A Species Action Plan has been published that includes a range of actions being undertaken to benefit this species.

Gracehill Golf Club in Stranocum

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment when a decision will be made on the application for a (i) greyhound racing circuit; (ii) horse training track; and (iii) four star hotel at Gracehill Golf Club in Stranocum. (AQW 4608/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Department is not yet in a position to make a determination on this application as additional information that was requested up to a year ago on Environmental Health issues, and also clarification of ownership and need that was asked for in March 2007, is still awaited. The Department has also recently had to request detailed landscape proposals and a landscape management plan.

Demolition of 2-4 Station Road, East Belfast

Mrs Long asked the Minister of the Environment for a statement on the demolition of 2-4 Station Road, East Belfast. (AQW 4636/09)

Minister of the Environment: I understand that numbers 2 and 4 Station Road, Sydenham were demolished on 18 January 2009. Although Building Preservation Notices were served on the houses on 16 July 2008, these expired after 6 months. During those 6 months and following further detailed assessment of the architectural and historic interest of the buildings, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) determined that the buildings did not meet the statutory and criteria based standard for 'full and formal' listing as buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

As a result there was no requirement for further consent or input from NIEA and the owner decided to demolish them.

Fish Kills

Mr Burns asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4006/09, to detail the other ten 'high severity' incidents which did not involve fish kills. (AQW 4637/09)

Minister of the Environment: Further to the details provided to you in response to AQW 4006-09, the attached table gives details of the 10 'high severity' pollution incidents recorded by Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), for 2008, which did not involve fish kills.

2008 – HIGH SEVERITY POLLUTION INCIDENTS INVESTIGATED BY NIEA - (NO FISH KILLS)

Date	Alleged Source of Pollution	Details
08/01/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone.
25/01/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone.
28/01/2008	Farm Near Dromore Co Down	Silage effluent was discharging into the river lagan via the storm drainage system. (Source was traced; farmer was prosecuted and fined £ 200.)
07/02/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone.
08/02/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone .
08/02/2008	Farm - Near Kilmore Co Armagh	Sewage fungus was detected by niea staff in the tall river and source was traced to a farm yard at kilmore. (Source was traced; farmer was prosecuted and fined £ 750.)
11/02/2008	Farm - Near Cookstown	Pig slurry in waterway at grange road cookstown traced to a farm. A file is being prepared for submission to the pps recommending prosecution.
06/03/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone.
10/04/2008	Unknown – Farm Source Suspected	High ammonia levels reported by ni water as being present in the intake water at derg water treatment works near castlederg co tyrone.
25/07/2008	Engineering Company – Co Londonderry	A spill of acid occurred when a container fell off a forklift truck. The fire and rescue service employed a number of remedial measures. The incident was reported by the owner of the firm and a warning letter was issued by niea.

Planning Applications

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications, both domestic and commercial, are awaiting approval in each Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 4663/09)

Minister of the Environment: While it is not known how many applications will be approved the breakdown of domestic and commercial planning applications which are being processed and still have to be decided in each Divisional Planning Office at 30th September 2008 is as follows:

Divisional Planning Office	No of Domestic Applications	No of Commercial Application
Ballymena	1211	112
Belfast	1317	238
Coleraine	780	72
Craigavon	2070	177
Downpatrick	2253	198
Enniskillen	567	49

Divisional Planning Office	No of Domestic Applications	No of Commercial Application
Headquarters	20	44
Londonderry	441	118
Omagh	1419	137

These figures are extracted from my Department's published Development Management Statistics Northern Ireland 2008/09 Second Quarterly Statistical Bulletin (July to September 2008) published in December 2008 and exclude those applications deferred due to the former Draft PPS14 and current PPS21. The next Development Management quarterly statistics are due for publication in March 2009.

Planning Applications

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications, both domestic and commercial, have been awaiting approval in each Divisional Planning Office, for more than 12 months. (AQW 4664/09)

Minister of the Environment: The breakdown of domestic and commercial planning applications in the planning system for over 12 months in each Divisional Planning Office at 30 September 2008 is as follows:

Divisional Planning Office	No of Domestic Applications (Over 12 months)	No of Commercial Applications (Over 12 months)
Ballymena	253	32
Belfast	284	55
Coleraine	173	20
Craigavon	821	62
Downpatrick	537	60
Enniskillen	138	14
Headquarters	6	29
Londonderry	143	37
Omagh	305	28

These figures are extracted from my Department's published Development Management Statistics 2008/09 Second Quarterly Statistical Bulletin (July to September 2008) published in December 2008 and exclude those applications deferred due to the former Draft PPS14 and current PPS21. The next Development Management quarterly statistics are due for publication in March 2009.

Planning Applications

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what targets are set by his Department for processing planning applications. (AQW 4665/09)

Minister of the Environment: Key Ministerial targets for Planning Service are set out in my Department's Public Service Agreement (PSA). These set the time taken to process planning applications or withdrawal by March 2011 and are as follows:

- 60% of Major planning applications processed in 23 weeks;
- 70% of Intermediate planning applications processed in 31 weeks; and,
- 80% of Minor planning applications processed in 18 weeks.

In addition to the PSA targets, the Planning Service Business Plan 2008/09 includes operational targets for validating applications, issuing decisions and for reducing the number of long outstanding applications. These are as follows:

- 75% of all applications to be validated within 6 days;

- 95% of all applications to be validated within 10 days;
- 75% of decisions to issue within 2 weeks of last Council consultation;
- 95% of decisions to issues within 4 weeks of last Council consultation;
- 15% reduction in the number of applications in the system for longer than 12 months; and
- Decide all large scale investment planning proposals within 6 months, provided there has been formal pre-application discussion.

Planning Applications

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of the Environment what is the average length of time for processing planning applications in each Divisional Planning Office. (AQW 4666/09)

Minister of the Environment: Publicly available average processing times for each Divisional Planning Office for 2007/08 and 2006/07 are contained within the Annual Development Management Report available on my Department's website. Processing times for 2008/09 will be available in October 2009.

The average number of weeks taken to process planning applications in 2007/08 by Divisional Planning Office is shown in the table below:

Divisions	Major (average no of weeks)	Intermediate (average no of weeks)	Minor (average no of weeks)
Ballymena	21	19	12
Belfast	24	22	12
Craigavon	38	54	19
Downpatrick	32	27	18
Headquarters	45	0	0
Londonderry	31	24	18
Omagh	29	23	16

Professional and Technical Officers

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment how many casual professional and technical officers are employed by the Planning Service. (AQW 4702/09)

Minister of the Environment: There are currently 34 casual professional and technical officers employed by the Planning Service.

Professional and Technical Officers

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment when professional and technical officers who were successful at the recent recruitment process will be taking up their posts. (AQW 4703/09)

Minister of the Environment: The only current competition for professional and technical planners is for the Professional and Technical Officer (PTO) grade. The competition is now reaching its final stages.

Against the background that there has been a significant drop in the number of planning applications in recent months, the Agency is presently considering its staffing requirements. While those considerations are ongoing, it has been decided to suspend recruitment from this competition.

Creation of Artificial Reefs

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the planning process in relation to the creation of artificial reefs on the coastline to develop (i) fisheries management; (ii) coastal protection; and (iii) marine recreation. (AQW 4752/09)

Minister of the Environment: In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, planning control only extends to the Mean Low Water Mark, therefore Planning Service has no jurisdiction in terms of the sea bed.

However, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is required to control the deposition of materials below the High Water Mean Spring Tide Mark, under Part II of the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 (FEPA).

A FEPA licence would be required for the creation of any artificial reef or structure on the coastline whether it be for the purpose of fisheries management, coastal protection or marine recreation.

Enforcement Orders

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment what is the legal time frame his Department has to conclude issuing an enforcement order. (AQW 4782/09)

Minister of the Environment: The Department must issue and serve an enforcement notice relating to breach of planning control within the time limits on enforcement action generally in Article 67B and the period for service of a notice in Article 68(3) of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

Where the breach of planning control consists of the carrying out of building, engineering or mining operations in, on, over or under land, the enforcement notice must be issued within 4 years beginning with the date on which the operations were substantially completed.

Where the breach consists of the change of use of any building to use as a single dwellinghouse, the enforcement notice must be issued within 4 years beginning with the date of the breach.

In the case of any other breach of planning control, the enforcement notice must be issued within 10 years beginning with the date of the breach.

Where the enforcement notice relates to unauthorised works to a listed building or demolition of a building in a conservation area, Articles 51(5) and 77 – 79 of the 1991 Order apply and there is no period specified with which the Department must issue the notice.

In all cases, once issued, the service of the notice must take place not more than 28 days after its date of issue; and not less than 28 days before the date specified in it as the date on which it is to take effect.

Mourne National Park

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made in setting up the Mourne National Park; and when the legislation will be brought to the Assembly. (AQW 4804/09)

Minister of the Environment: I am considering National Parks very seriously and will wish to discuss the issue with my Executive colleagues in due course. If it is decided to proceed with National Parks the first step would be new enabling legislation. At this stage I have no plans for any specific area.

Programme for Government

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment what risk assessment he has carried out on the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4885/09)

Minister of the Environment: As part of the development of my Department's PSA contribution to the Programme for Government, Delivery Agreements were produced for each related target. This included a Risk Management Strategy which summarised the key risks to the successful delivery of each target and the strategy for managing these risks.

DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Ulster-Scots Academy

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much money his Department has made available to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; and (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4544/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Nigel Dodds): The Department of Finance and Personnel has not provided funding to (i) the Ulster-Scots Academy; or (ii) Ulster-Scots projects, in the last two years.

HR Connect

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much HR Connect receives from his Department per annum and what services it provides. (AQW 4658/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The HRConnect service provider has received the following capital milestone and service charges:

Financial Year	Capital Milestones (£000s)	Service Charges (£000s)	Total (£000s)
2006/07	£15,337	£0,000	£15,337
2007/08	£11,463	£4,000	£15,463
2008/09*	£5,200	£6,000	£11,200
Total	£32,000	£10,000	£42,000

* The 2008/09 capital milestone and service charges are estimates.

Additional capital milestone payments of £5.75m are due to be made to HRConnect during 2009/10 as the remaining services come on stream. Following full implementation of the HRConnect services the estimated annual service charges due will be £12m per annum.

The services currently being provided by HRConnect are External Recruitment, Employee Relations, Exit and HR Data Management, Absence Management and Non-Industrial Payroll. HRConnect is also delivering the ICT functionality to support Welfare, Learning and Development and Health and Safety. The industrial payroll, internal resourcing and performance management services are currently being implemented.

Civil Service Staff

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if some Civil Service employees received their January 2009 salary late; and to state the extent and cause of this problem. (AQW 4779/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: An analysis of the January 2009 pay run shows that 39 civil service staff out of the 27,400 staff paid through HRConnect did not receive their salary on the due date which was Wednesday 28th January 2009. All of these staff have now received a salary payment.

The two main causes of these non-payments were staff who commenced employment in the civil service after the January pay run cut-off date and a number of staff returning from career breaks who were not identified by the system.

Varney II Report

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what was the response of the Executive to the Varney II report. (AQW 4971/09)

Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Executive issued its formal response to the second Varney report on 7 January 2009. In that response we reiterated our disappointment at the failure to acknowledge the need to offer some form of fiscal dispensation to Northern Ireland. Most of the recommendations in this second report relate

to policy areas within the Executive's remit, and many are already being addressed by the Executive in existing policies.

The second Varney report endorsed the Executive's Programme for Government with its emphasis on promoting regional productivity and competitiveness. We now need to ensure that relevant policies are pursued vigorously.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Adults with Autism

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there is a designated professional contact person with relevant qualifications specifically assigned to deal with the needs of autistic adults.

(AQW 4371/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr Michael McGimpsey): Whilst there is no such designated professional contact person within my Department to deal with the need of adults affected by autism, there is a professional who has worked as a clinician in the field of learning disability and who has had frequent contact with children and adults affected by autism.

The Department has also established a Regional ASD Group which will oversee the implementation of the ASD Strategic Action Plan. The membership of this group includes a lead Director for ASD within each HSC Trust. This Group will be chaired by Dr Stephen Bergin, Consultant in Public Health Medicine in the Southern Health and Social Services Board.

Adults with Autism

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many adults with autism there are in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 4372/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Adults with Autism

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many adults were diagnosed with autism in each Health and Social Care Trust in the last two years.

(AQW 4373/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Adults with Autism

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are available for adults with autism in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 4374/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: All Health and Social Care Trusts provide a range of services for adults with autism. Services provided range from assessments and interventions carried out by Clinical Psychologists and Speech and Language Therapists to day support and residential placements.

Due to the number of different settings in which assessment can take place and the professional skills involved, the services will be identified through individual care planning processes, involving the full multi-disciplinary team as appropriate.

Adults with Autism

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff are specifically employed to diagnose and treat adults with autism in each Health and Social Trust area. (AQW 4375/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are no staff specifically employed to diagnose and treat adults with autism in each of the Health and Social Trust areas.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what the capital budget is for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the next three years. (AQW 4376/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Capital allocations beyond the current financial year have not yet been formally advised to Trusts until details of the financial profiles are finalised. However, the current planned allocations for the remainder of the CSR are as follows;

	2009/10	2010/11
Planned allocation	£33m	£40m

Within these planned allocations, funding is profiled for projects currently in progress as well as those being planned. Expenditure cannot be incurred on any of these schemes until the respective business cases have been assessed and approved and contracts have been finalised as appropriate.

No annual capital budget allocations have been identified beyond 2010/11 which ends the current budget period.

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the capital projects scheduled for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the next three years. (AQW 4377/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Capital allocations beyond the current financial year have not yet been formally advised to Trusts until details of the financial profiles are finalised. However, the current planned allocations for the remainder of the CSR are as follows;

	2009/10	2010/11
Planned allocation	£33m	£40m

Within these planned allocations, funding is profiled for projects currently in progress as well as those being planned. Expenditure cannot be incurred on any of these schemes until the respective business cases have been assessed and approved and contracts have been finalised as appropriate.

No annual capital budget allocations have been identified beyond 2010/11 which ends the current budget period.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of the last year, the total number of patients presenting at Accident and Emergency departments that were sent home and told to return the next day, broken down by A&E department. (AQW 4395/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of patients presenting at Accident and Emergency departments that were sent home and told to return the next day is unavailable.

Children with Speech Difficulties

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children have speech difficulties. (AQW 4396/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Respite Care

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provisions are available for respite care for (i) adults with a learning disability; and (ii) children with a learning disability, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4410/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Health and Social Care Trusts (Trusts) have responsibility for the provision of services in Northern Ireland.

The Western Trust provides a range of respite provisions as follows –

- (i) within adult services provision is made for statutory overnight respite, overnight stays and day respite with the host family scheme, summer respite, respite for individuals with complex health care needs and respite through the Crisis Intervention Service and the Direct Payments Scheme, and
- (ii) within children's services provision extends from residential respite services to innovative carer support which is provided directly to families through the Direct Payments Scheme, creating more flexibility of choice.

Respite Care

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the waiting times for respite care provision for (i) adults with a learning disability; and (ii) children with a learning disability, in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 4411/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Wet Age Related Macular Degeneration

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to reduce the waiting list for treatment for people with age-related macular degeneration in one eye. (AQW 4415/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: On 21 October 2008, my Department endorsed NICE guidance recommending the use of Lucentis as a treatment option for wet age related macular degeneration (wet AMD) where a patient meets specified clinical criteria and where the manufacturer of the product meets the cost of treatment beyond 14 injections in the treated eye. The circular asked the HSC to put plans in place within 3 months to facilitate implementation of the guidance.

Health and Social Services Boards have, since April 2007, provided funding for treatment for wet AMD patients with the greatest clinical priority. In the main, these are patients who have already lost sight in one eye, although other exceptional circumstances may be considered.

I have allocated £39 million in 2008-11 for hospital and specialist drugs, which will allow the health service to improve access to specialist therapies for a range of conditions, including wet AMD. It is estimated that the introduction of wet AMD treatments in Northern Ireland will cost in the region of £8 million over the next three years.

Providing treatment to patients in line with the NICE guidance requires a significant expansion of the existing service and HSC Trusts are currently in the process of recruiting the additional staff who will be required to deliver this expanded service. Patients with the disease in the first eye will be recalled by the Trusts when the service is established.

Neurologists

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many neurologists are working on a permanent basis compared to January 2008. (AQW 4416/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As at January 2009, there are 14 (13.5 Whole-Time Equivalent) Consultant Neurologists employed on a permanent basis within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Trusts, compared with January 2008 when there were 15 (14.3 Whole-Time Equivalent) Consultant Neurologists employed on a permanent basis. The vacant post in the Belfast Trust will be filled in March.

The figures above for both January 2008 and January 2009 include 1 (0.5 Whole-Time Equivalent) joint appointment with Queen's University Belfast. The information for this question was supplied by the five HSC Trusts.

Review of Public Administration

Mr O'Loan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has for the location of health bodies affected by the Review of Public Administration and the restructuring of the Health Service; and whether consideration of this issue is being conducted in the terms of the recommendation of the report by Sir George Bain on the Review of Policy on Location of Public Sector Jobs. (AQW 4420/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have noted the recommendations in Professors Bain's Report and am aware that decisions around the future location of public sector jobs could have important implications for communities throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, the wide dispersal of 70,000 health and social care sector jobs in NI, particularly high quality jobs outside Belfast, is already in evidence.

I will engage with colleagues on the Executive in response to the recommendations of the Bain Review, but this process will inevitably take some time. In the interim, it is imperative that the Department continues with its work, in line with current guidance, to determine the location of the new health and social care bodies from April 2009 and address the concerns of staff that are affected. On completion of the necessary approvals and equality screening, I therefore intend to announce my final decisions on the location of the new Health and Social Care bodies in the next few weeks.

Children Missing from Care

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 3498/08, how many children have gone missing from care, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4424/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Neonatal Nursing Staff

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment he has made of the risk that the shortage of neonatal nursing staff represents to patients. (AQW 4425/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW/2661/09.

Neonatal Nursing Staff

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to address the shortage of qualified neonatal nurses. (AQW 4426/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW/2661/09.

Neonatal Nursing Staff

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his Department's assessment of the training and recruitment processes that will be necessary to increase the number of neonatal nurses. (AQW 4427/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW/2661/09.

Neonatal Nursing Staff

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional investment is being assigned to tackle the shortage of qualified neonatal nurses. (AQW 4428/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I refer the member to the answer I gave to AQW/2661/09.

Christmas Card Costs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff received a Christmas card with their December pay slips and the total cost incurred. (AQW 4439/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: None of my Departmental staff received Christmas cards with their pay slips.

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to breakdown by religion the Director level staff of the Western Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4440/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: This information cannot be provided as it is not held centrally.

Altnagelvin Hospital

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) the total cost of placing new plasma televisions in Altnagelvin Hospital; and (ii) the total number of televisions purchased. (AQW 4441/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western HSC Trust has spent £15,154 for 72 LCD televisions for ward areas in Altnagelvin Hospital. This purchase was funded from donations made by the public under Endowments and Gifts.

Efficiency Savings

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will veto any areas of the Health and Social Care Trusts efficiency savings plans, if they effect front line services. (AQW 4452/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Consultation on key proposals is currently ongoing and it would not therefore be appropriate for me to make an assessment of the proposals until that process is complete. The impact on front line services will be an important part of my assessment after the consultation processes have been concluded.

All the resources released by DHSSPS through greater efficiency will be reinvested in Health. To the extent that the efficiency savings are not achieved, planned CSR investments in existing commitments and new services cannot happen.

Regional Fostering Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps it is taking to deliver a Regional Fostering Scheme in with special reference to finding the 300 foster parents that are needed. (AQW 4462/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Regional Fostering Recruitment and Training Co-ordination Service was established in November 2007 to help raise the profile of fostering in Northern Ireland and assist each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust with the recruitment and training of their foster carers. Since its creation a number of initiatives have been introduced which include:

- The introduction on 1 February 2008 of a free 24/7 Regional Helpline.

- The development of a Regional Marketing Recruitment Strategy running from 2008 – 2013.
- The production of an on going televised fostering advertisement campaign
- The establishment of a HSC website, www.fostering.hscni.net
- A total of 128 regional enquiries were made between April and November 2008. Of these 75 can be directly attributed to the TV AD Campaign (55) and the website (20)

These new initiatives have contributed to the achievement of PSA target 4 which had been set to increase by 31 March 2010 the number of foster carers across Northern Ireland by 300 from 31 March 2006 baseline figure of 1528. At 31 December 2008 there were 1,812 registered foster carers in Northern Ireland.

Hospital Acquired Infections

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if consideration has been given to the compulsory testing of all levels of medical staff for spores of hospital acquired infections, such as Clostridium Difficile and MRSA. (AQW 4484/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Clostridium difficile can form spores, but MRSA does not form spores.

There is currently no clinical evidence or evidence about cost effectiveness that would support routine screening of all staff for MRSA. Screening for Clostridium difficile is not feasible. Trusts will undertake screening of staff for MRSA in the context, for example, of clusters of infection or outbreaks.

The rigorous application of the following measures are known to contribute to a reduction in the spread of Clostridium difficile diarrhoea and MRSA:

- hand hygiene,
- environmental cleaning,
- isolation/cohort nursing,
- use of personal protective equipment by staff and
- prudent use of antibiotics.

Child Protection

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the issue of child protection on an all island basis. (AQW 4515/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council, a cross-border group of officials has been established to intensify co-operation on child protection issues and areas for co-operation on children's services emerging from the North South Feasibility Study on health and social services.

Specific initiatives have been identified and are being taken forward jointly through a sub-group structure. These are:

- Vetting and Barring – to be led by DHSSPS;
- Research - to be led by DHSSPS;
- Internet Safety – to be led by ROI;
- All-island media awareness group - to be led by ROI; and
- Protocol for the movement of children and vulnerable families across our borders - to be led by ROI.

Regular progress reports on each area are being provided to the North South Ministerial Council.

Child Protection

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to meet with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to advance child protection issues on an all island basis. (AQW 4516/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council I, along with other Ministerial colleagues from Northern Ireland meet with Ministerial counterparts from the Republic of Ireland to discuss a wide range of interests which are of mutual benefit to both jurisdictions. Child Protection forms part of these discussions.

We have established a cross-border group of officials to intensify co-operation on child protection issues and areas for co-operation on children's services emerging from the North South Feasibility Study on health and social services.

I and my counterpart in the Republic of Ireland have commissioned the North South Feasibility Study on health and social services. The main objective of the Study is to develop a strategic framework for taking forward future collaborative work in health and social care and in planning and delivering health and social care services, where appropriate, on a North-South basis.

Consideration is also being given to including child protection as part of the work of the British Irish Council. Both Councils provide a framework for discussion of child protection issues as they impact across jurisdictions.

Respite Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the projected increase in the need for respite care, in the next ten years. (AQW 4522/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information is not available in the form requested.

Respite Care

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many respite care beds are available in the North Down constituency. (AQW 4524/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information provided by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust indicate at 2 February 2009, there were 41 respite care beds available in the North Down constituency.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts, for legal advice, in the last financial year. (AQW 4527/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts for legal advice in 2007-08 are set out in the table below:

HSC Trust	2007-08
Belfast HSC Trust	£814,120
Northern HSC Trust	£646,753
Southern HSC Trust	£623,713
South Eastern HSC Trust	£818,750
Western HSC Trust	£611,999

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts, of cancelled clinics, in the last financial year. (AQW 4528/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of clinics that have been cancelled is not available centrally.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts, of cancelled operations, in the last financial year. (AQW 4529/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The cost of operations that have been cancelled is not collected centrally.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts, for car loans to staff, in the last financial year. (AQW 4530/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The costs, in the last financial year, to the five Health and Social Care Trusts for car loans to staff were NIL.

Health and Social Care Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the costs to the five Health and Social Care Trusts, of providing cars for staff. (AQW 4531/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not available.

Road Rescue Team

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the reasons why five officers resigned from the proposed dedicated Road Rescue Team of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service due to commence on 1 February 2009. (AQW 4539/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has advised that there have been no resignations associated with the new Road Rescue Team, which is scheduled to take up its role on 9 February.

Asperger's Syndrome

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what pathways Health and Social Care Trusts have to enable adults with Asperger's Syndrome or high-functioning Autism to access assessment and support. (AQW 4548/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Assessment and support pathways for adults with Asperger's Syndrome or high-functioning Autism currently vary across the Health and Social Care Trusts.

As you will know, on 17 September 2008 I launched an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Strategic Action Plan for a 3 month public consultation period. This consultation period ended on 12 December 2008. A summary of responses is currently being prepared and a revised ASD Strategic Action Plan will be prepared and is expected to be available from April 2009.

The Action Plan outlines the proposed actions to be taken to improve autism services across Northern Ireland. These actions include:

- The adoption by all Health and Social Care Trusts of standardised referral processes / protocols across Northern Ireland for cases where there is a suspicion of ASD.

All Health and Social Care Trusts will therefore be expected to standardise their pathways in line with the Action Plan once it comes into force.

Adults with Autism

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what training health professionals receive for adults with autism. (AQW 4549/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Different types of training on Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are available from a range of sources for separate groups of health professionals. Individual groups of staff require different types of training.

The need to develop and implement an ASD training strategy was referred to in the draft ASD Strategic Action Plan recently published for consultation. The Action Plan refers to the need to develop a skilled workforce with training on the needs of children and adults affected by ASD. This training can be provided in house or through suitable external providers. The recently established ASD Regional Group will develop and implement a training strategy. This will range from awareness training to more specific training appropriate to particular groups of staff.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many adults suffer from Autistic Spectrum Disorders. (AQW 4550/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The information requested is not collected centrally, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Autistic Spectrum Disorders

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to achieve an accurate picture of the number of adults with Autistic Spectrum disorders. (AQW 4551/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The need for more detailed information on the numbers of children and adults affected by Autistic Spectrum Disorder is widely accepted. The newly established Regional ASD Group will be tasked with overseeing the implementation of the ASD Strategic Action Plan, which will be published in April. This multi disciplinary, multi agency group will help develop and implement plans for the collection of data in relation to all those affected by ASD including adults.

Foster Parents

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps he is taking to encourage young couples to become foster parents, considering the statement by Barnados that showed a need for 350 foster parents. (AQW 4559/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Any adult who genuinely cares about children can become a foster carer provided they meet the necessary requirements whatever their marital status, sexual orientation, religious or ethnic background, whether they have a disability or medical condition and whether or not they work.

To enhance the ability of Trusts to recruit more foster parents a range of steps have been taken. These include:

- The establishment of a Regional Fostering Recruitment and Training Co-ordination Service.
- The introduction of a free 24/7 Regional Helpline.
- The production of an ongoing televised fostering advertisement campaign
- The establishment of a HSC website, www.fostering.hscni.net
- Payment of Foster Care allowances and other ad hoc payments

My Department is committed to increasing the number of foster carers and at 31 December 2008 there were 1,812 registered foster carers in Northern Ireland compared to 1528 at 31 March 2006.

Respite Beds

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many respite beds there are in each (i) Health and Social Care Trust Area; and (ii) constituency. (AQW 4616/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

(i) Information provided by the Health and Social Care Trusts is detailed below.

NUMBER OF RESPITE BEDS IN EACH HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE TRUST AT 5TH FEBRUARY 2009

HSC Trust	Number of Respite Beds *
Belfast	**
Northern	66
South Eastern	105
Southern	80
Western	41

* Information is currently provisional and may be subject to change.

** Information could not be provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.

(ii) The information is not available in the form requested.

Senior House Officers and Registrars

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Senior House Officers and Registrars are allowed to hold outpatient clinics if the consultant is on leave. (AQW 4617/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In keeping with the General Medical Council's guidance for all doctors, Good Medical Practice, consultants must be satisfied that, when they are off duty, suitable arrangements have been made for their patients' medical care. When they delegate care, including out-patient care, to doctors in training they must satisfy themselves that the degree of supervision and support available is consistent with the level of experience of each of the training grade doctors.

New Complaints System

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his proposals for a new complaints system. (AQW 4618/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The new Complaints in Health and Social Care: Standards and Guidelines for Resolution and Learning becomes effective from 1 April 2009. A draft version giving details of the new system is currently available on <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/complaints-hsc-standards-guidelines-resolution-learning-july08.pdf>

Patients at Risk from Self-harm or Suicide

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has implemented a system whereby a card stating that a patient may be at risk from self-harm or suicide, is on file, before the patient leaves hospital. (AQW 4619/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Where a patient has presented at hospital and been assessed to be at risk of suicide or self-harm their hospital records are annotated accordingly.

Patients at Risk from Self-harm or Suicide

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he is considering giving a follow-up appointment within a week, to outpatients who are considered to be at risk of suicide or self-harm.

(AQW 4620/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has tasked the South Eastern HSC Trust to co-ordinate work to develop a regional “Card Before You Leave” system, whereby patients leaving either an in-patient, or an A&E setting, who are considered to be suicidal or at risk of self-harm will receive details of a follow-up appointment prior to their discharge. The aim is to have a system in place by April 2009. In support of this the following target is included in my Priorities for Action for 2009/10:

From April 2009, all mental health patients discharged from hospital who are to receive continuing care plan in the community should receive a follow up visit within seven days of discharge.

Mater Hospital

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Mater Hospital clearly advertises its complaints procedures to patients, so that they do not have to ask staff.

(AQW 4621/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Posters and leaflets explaining to patients the arrangements for complaints handling are displayed in public areas, including the Accident and Emergency Department, within the Mater Hospital.

ME Sufferers

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how are ME sufferers catered to in the Health Service in terms of specialist care.

(AQW 4837/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A range of treatment and support options is available for people with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME). Decisions on the specific care of an individual patient will normally be taken in conjunction with their medical practitioner or hospital consultant. Their care will be tailored according to their condition and its severity.

Patient care is for the most part provided by GPs, however patients may access other areas of the health service including community care and support, neurology services and mental health services which can provide treatment like cognitive behaviour therapy, which is thought to help manage the illness. All patients with ME may be referred to general clinics or neurology clinics for treatment.

I am advised that there is no clear clinical consensus on the best form of treatment for CFS/ME and to date the Department has not received any proposals for the introduction of specialist ME or CFS services. A CFS assessment clinic in the Belfast area for mild to moderate sufferers is run by a psychiatrist with a special interest in CFS/ME, although it only take referrals from the catchment area for the Belfast Trust. Severe cases, from any part of Northern Ireland, may be referred to specialist clinics in the rest of the UK with the prior approval of the appropriate Health and Social Services Board.

Civil Service Staff

Mr Attwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of civil service staff employed by his Department, broken down by (i) grade; (ii) core departmental staff; and (iii) agency workers, at (a) May 2007; and (b) January 2009.

(AQW 4851/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

DHSSPS STAFF IN POST @ 1 MAY 2007

Grade	Core Dept	Health Estates Agency	Total
G5 +	32	2	34

Grade	Core Dept	Health Estates Agency	Total
SP	23	4	27
G7	65	26	91
DP	136	27	163
SO	156	20	176
EO1	104	11	115
EO2	120	9	129
AO	109	4	113
AA	113	13	126
Total	858	116	974

Notes:

Data sourced from HRMS at 1st May 2007

Excludes those on career break

DHSSPS STAFF IN POST @ 1 JANUARY 2009

Grade	Core Dept	Health Estates Agency	Total
G5 +	28	2	30
G6	15	7	22
G7	75	22	97
DP	139	26	165
SO	161	17	178
EO1	86	11	97
EO2	113	11	124
AO	81	5	86
AA	70	7	77
Total	768	108	876

Notes:

Data sourced from HR Connect at 1st January 2009

Excludes those on career break

Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr Simpson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the difficulties facing maternity staff in Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 4919/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The maternity unit at Craigavon remains busy, however the obstetric and midwifery staff continue to manage these pressures effectively. The Chief Nursing Officer visited the unit on Thursday evening and spoke to a wide range of staff and management.

The situation on Monday (9/2/09) was as follows:

	Beds	
	Occupied	Vacant
Ante-Natal Ward	14	2
Post-Natal Ward	19	3

	Beds	
	Occupied	Vacant
Midwife Led Unit	1	8
Delivery Suite	2	4

Multi Systemic Therapies

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety following recent announcements of £16m allocated for Multi Systemic Therapies (MST); (i) how much money his Department will receive; and (ii) if there are any units already carrying out MST, if so, (a) where; and (b) who funds them; and (c) what is the future plans for the programme. (AQW 4931/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The allocation for Multi Systemic Therapies was to establish a further 10 pilot sites in England. There was no allocation for Northern Ireland.

There is one unit providing MST in Northern Ireland. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has a contract with Extern for the provision of MST through the Linden Services Unit based in Newtownabbey. It provides services for children in the whole of the Northern Trust area. This includes a 6 bed short term residential unit, a 24/7 service to families in the community and youth support services.

There are currently no plans to extend MST in Northern Ireland. However, additional resources of £2.9m, £3.4m and £7m have been secured for the current CSR period to develop psychological therapy services. These resources will enhance access to psychotherapeutic interventions, including family therapy.

Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5004/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have available a total budget of just under £700m for the CSR period 2008/11. This is considerably less than the £1 billion for which I made bids. A large proportion of the £700 million is needed to meet contractual commitments and unavoidable expenditure leaving little scope to start new projects during the CSR period. In this light no major projects have been delayed by lack of finance due to the recession.

Planning Service have advised that they are not aware of any proposals from NI Departments for major capital projects which are being delayed in the planning application process.

Craigavon Area Hospital

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4236/09, how many midwives will be recruited by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, to cover the vacant 88 hours at Craigavon Area Hospital. (AQW 5044/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The vacant 88 hours will be covered by the recruitment of 3 midwives (2.74 whole time equivalent).

Parking Provisions

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what parking provisions are available for people who urgently have to attend hospital when no regular spaces are available. (AQW 5088/09)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: In such circumstances Trust staff will respond appropriately to ensure that risks and inconvenience to patients and visitors are minimised.

DEPARTMENT FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Water

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development if Northern Ireland Water will withhold comment on all planning applications in Newcastle until instructed otherwise by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. (AQW 4465/09)

Minister for Regional Development (Mr Conor Murphy): I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that they will withhold comment on new planning applications for an interim period pending clarification on the ongoing upgrade of the sewer network with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. NIW is endeavouring to clarify the environmental issues as speedily as possible and would not see a sustained period without comment.

NIW is not in a position to withhold all applications as Planning Service has advised that previously approved planning applications cannot be refused without risk of significant challenge. Ultimately the decision on whether a planning application is approved rests solely with The Planning Service.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development if Roads Service would consider putting traffic calming measures, including road humps, on the Gortahar Road next to St Patrick's Primary School in Rasharkin. (AQW 4483/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I understand the Member has already raised this issue with my Department's Roads Service and that a commitment was given to assess this particular route for possible traffic calming measures.

I have asked the Divisional Roads Manager to write to you, when the outcome of the assessment is known.

Departmental Claims Unit

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development how many claims have been received from his Department's claims unit from the Strangford constituency in each of the last three years. (AQW 4508/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Unfortunately, my Department's Central Claims Unit does not hold the information in the format requested. However, Central Claims Unit does maintain a record of the number of claims for each Roads Service Section Office. The area of the Strangford constituency includes almost all of the Ards Section Office plus small areas of the Down and Castlereagh Section Offices. The following figures show the total number of compensation claims received by the Central Claims Unit from the Ards Section Office area for each of the last three calendar years. The figures relating to the small areas from Down and Castlereagh Section Offices and the small area of Ards Section Office not included in the Strangford constituency could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

	Number of Claims
2006	94
2007	88
2008	73

Unpaid Parking Fines

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he intends to have with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about unpaid parking fines from Republic of Ireland registered drivers, including how to secure these payments. (AQW 4521/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has been working closely with the northern and southern vehicle licensing authorities to resolve the current difficulties in acquiring keeper details for vehicles in the South, who have been issued with parking tickets in the North.

I am content that Roads Service is doing everything in its power to move the issue forward, and it is hoped that a solution will be in place as soon as possible, that will allow the Department to pursue the outstanding penalties issued to southern drivers.

Blue Badge Holders

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development why blue badge holders are given a penalty charge notice if their badge is displayed upside down. (AQW 4669/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that, when making use of parking concessions available under the Disabled Persons Badge Scheme, the blue badge must be correctly displayed so that the relevant details, that is, the serial number and expiry date are legible from outside the vehicle. Where a badge is incorrectly displayed and a traffic attendant is unable to determine if the badge is valid, a Penalty Charge Notice (PCN) may be issued. This procedure has been agreed with groups representing people with disabilities, including the Inclusive Mobility Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC).

Road Signs

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to confirm if the defacing of road signs is illegal. (AQW 4680/09)

Minister for Regional Development: It is an offence under Article 33 of the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1981 for a person to unlawfully and intentionally interfere with or damage a traffic sign.

Road Signs

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to stop the defacing of road signs. (AQW 4681/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that any one caught defacing road signs will be prosecuted. However, you will appreciate the many difficulties in proving a case in this regard, as the courts will require substantial and clear evidence before an effective prosecution can be brought.

Road Signs

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) what investigation his Department has taken into the obliteration of 'London' in 'Londonderry' on road signage, particularly in the East Londonderry, Foyle and West Tyrone constituencies; and (ii) how long does it take to remove or replace damaged signs. (AQW 4682/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that, in the subject constituencies, no formal investigations, into specific incidents, have been carried out by Roads Service and no prosecutions taken. However, where there have been incidents of sign theft, these have been reported to the PSNI.

I should explain that, Roads Service carries out regular inspections of all public roads and footways, to ensure that essential maintenance needs are identified and remedial work is completed as necessary. During these inspections all defects are noted, including defective or vandalised signs, as well as, those signs that require cleaning to improve their visibility. The frequency of these inspections depends on the type of road and the volume of vehicular and pedestrian traffic. Town centres and major traffic routes are inspected monthly, while all other roads and footways are inspected at either two or four monthly intervals.

It normally takes around six weeks to replace a directional sign, as it has to be ordered from a sign supplier. Other regulatory or warning signs are usually held in stock and can be replaced within a few days of being identified as damaged or missing.

Road Signs

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) how much did deliberate damage to road signs cost his Department in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many prosecutions there have been in relation to this offence. (AQW 4683/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service has advised that the cost of replacing road signs, that have been vandalised or stolen, is not recorded separately from other maintenance activities and that there have been no prosecutions in relation to this offence.

Road Signs

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development if (i) he condemns the deliberate damage to road signage; (ii) he will increase measures to repair damaged signs; and (iii) he will prosecute those responsible for perpetrating these acts of vandalism. (AQW 4684/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can advise that I do condemn the deliberate damage to road signage as it is an offence under law. I can also advise that any damaged signs will continue to be identified by Roads Service, as part of its routine inspections and prioritised for replacement or repair as necessary. If adequate evidence is available, Roads Service will prosecute those responsible for carrying out these acts of vandalism.

Blue Badge Holders

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development how long is a blue badge holder allowed to park in a disabled parking bay, in any one day; and to detail the locations where there is variation in these arrangements. (AQW 4685/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that, where a blue badge is correctly displayed, a vehicle may remain in an on-street disabled persons' parking space for as long as indicated by the signage for the relevant space. Where no time restriction is applicable, the vehicle may remain without restriction.

In addition to these arrangements, where a blue badge is correctly displayed, a vehicle may park free, and without time limit, in charged on-street parking areas, and also park on single and double yellow lines, with some exceptions, for up to three hours. However, displaying the blue badge does not provide free parking in Roads Service's off-street car parks.

Blue Badge Holders

Dr W McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development why parking attendants take down blue badge holders' car registrations; and for what purpose is this information used. (AQW 4686/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that noting vehicle registrations is normal procedure for parking enforcement operations. For blue badge holders, noting the registration number will assist in determining if a parking contravention has occurred, for example, if a vehicle been parked on yellow lines for more than three hours. In addition, when a Penalty Charge Notice is issued, but subsequently not paid, the registration number is required to obtain name and address details from the Driver and Vehicle Agency for enforcement purposes.

Traffic Calming Measures

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4087/09, to provide details of the proposed traffic calming measures for Rathenraw and Stiles. (AQW 4731/09)

Minister for Regional Development: A traffic calming scheme was introduced in the Stiles Estate / Stiles Way area of Antrim in 2008. These works are Phase 1 of a scheme, to address traffic calming concerns in both the Stiles estate and Rathenraw. The scheme included 'bus friendly' road humps along the main spine road in the Stiles estate as well as the introduction of pedestrian refuge islands on Stiles Way which is aimed at assisting pedestrian movements in the vicinity of bus stops. Details of this scheme were included in the Roads Reports which were presented to Antrim Borough Council in July and November 2008.

Roads Service has advised that Phase 2 of the scheme, covering Rathenraw, is planned for the 2009/10 financial year, with work due to commence in April 2009. The detailed design for Phase 2, which is still being discussed, is due for inclusion in the Spring Roads Report to the Antrim Borough Council.

Roadworks

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration he has given to imposing a fine or charge when roads have not been resurfaced to an appropriate standard following roadworks. (AQW 4737/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that Utilities have a statutory right to open roads and footpaths for the purpose of installing and maintaining their equipment. Whilst Roads Service has no control over the number of these openings, it does have the power, under the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, to regulate the process.

Roads Service undertakes regular inspections of utility reinstatements, to ensure that these works are completed in accordance with the technical requirements set out in the statutory reinstatement Code of Practice, "Specification for the Reinstatement of Openings in Roads". This prescribes the materials to be used and the standards of workmanship to be observed when reinstating roads and footways, following roadworks. Where a Utility fails to meet the specified criterion, Roads Service will request that they repair or replace this reinstatement so as to conform to the specification.

However, I can confirm that Roads Service has a policy to seek prosecutions, through the courts, that result in fines for other breaches of Street Works regulations in relation to public safety.

Kilcooley Estate, Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to remove unsightly wooden fencing in Kilcooley Estate, Bangor. (AQW 4814/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I understand that officials from my Department's Roads Service will be meeting with the Member, on the 13 February 2009, to discuss proposals for the perimeter fence around Kilcooley Estate, Bangor.

I hope that this meeting will help address the Member's concerns.

Cycle to Work Scheme

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development if the 'cycle to work scheme' is available to Translink employees; and what is the eligibility criteria used to determine who can lease a bicycle. (AQW 4817/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I can confirm that Translink operates a cycle to work scheme which is available to all full or part time staff after six months of employment. The criteria for the scheme are, that applicants must be:-

- eligible for the tax benefits resulting from the salary sacrifice arrangement;
- earning a salary that after deductions remains above the national minimum wage;
- 18 years of age or over;

- a UK taxpayer, who can benefit from the tax efficiencies of the scheme;
- more than a year from retirement.

Directional Signs

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Regional Development how many unapproved directional signs were removed in 2008, broken down by District Council. (AQW 4819/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it does not record details of the number of unapproved directional signage removed from the road network and, in these circumstances, I am unable to provide you with the information that you have requested.

Directional Signs

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Regional Development the cost to his Department of removing an unapproved directional sign. (AQW 4820/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it costs £50 to remove an unapproved sign from the road network.

Meetings with MEPs

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many meetings he has had with each of the three MEPs from 2007 to date. (AQW 4894/09)

Minister for Regional Development: I have not met with any of the three MEPs since taking up my Ministerial post.

Capital Infrastructure Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all capital infrastructure projects (i) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised in this financial year, in the Strangford constituency and to detail the aggregated value of each. (AQW 4896/09)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Roads Service has advised that in the 2008/09 financial year two major road schemes were under construction within the Strangford constituency, these are listed in the table below:-

Project	Cost	Start Date	Finish Date
A20 Newtownards Southern Distributor	£20.5M	March 2008	On-going
A20 Newtownards Frederick Street Link	£2.4M	June 2008	November 2008

There are no further Major Works schemes for the Strangford constituency in the procurement process, or due to be advertised this financial year.

Roads Service does not hold details of capital infrastructure projects on a parliamentary constituency basis. However, all information on other capital infrastructure projects in the Strangford constituency are included in the Autumn 2008 Council Reports for Castlereagh, Ards and Down, which can be viewed on the Roads Service internet site using the link below:-

http://www.roadsni.gov.uk/index/publications/publications-council_reports.htm

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it does not hold details of capital infrastructure projects broken down by parliamentary constituency. Projects with a total estimated value of £13.75 million are currently under construction in the Ards Borough Council Area, which covers most of the Strangford area, are listed in the table below:-

Location	Project
Portaferry	Wastewater Treatment Works
Ballywalter	Wastewater Treatment Works
Cloughy	Wastewater Treatment Works
Portaferry	Drainage Area Plan
Carrowdore	Sewer Replacement
Carrowdore	Wastewater Treatment Works
Ards North Zone	Watermain Improvements
Moss Road, Millisle,	Sewer and Watermain Replacement
Castle Street, Comber	Storm Sewer
Longisland Drive, Kircubbin	Sewerage Pumping Station Rising Main

The following projects are programmed for procurement this financial year with a total estimated value of £2.2 million:-

Location	Project
Ballyhalbert	Wastewater Treatment Works
Portavogie	Wastewater Treatment Works
Killinchy Street, Comber	Sewer Extension

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4389/09, for the start and end dates of all fuel supply agreements negotiated in each of the last five years. (AQW 4930/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The start and end dates of all the fuel supply agreements negotiated in each of the last five years are:

- 24 Months April 2004 to March 2006
- 6 Months April 2006 to September 2006
- 6 Months October 2006 to March 2007
- 6 Months April 2007 to September 2007
- 6 Months October 2007 to March 2008
- 6 Months April 2008 to September 2008
- 3 Months October 2008 to December 2008
- 6 Months January 2009 to June 2009
- 3 Months July 2009 to September 2009
- 3 Months October 2009 to December 2009
- 6 Months January 2010 to June 2010

Each agreement covers gas oil and ULSD.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4355/09 and AQW 3742/09, (i) in which months of 2008 and 2009 did Translink pay above the market value for fuel; (ii) what was the market value for this fuel compared to the hedged price; and (iii) what were the dates when the hedged price was above the market price. (AQW 4968/09)

Minister for Regional Development: Translink have informed me that they paid above the market value for Ultra Low Sulphur Diesel (ULSD) and gas oil from October 2008 to the present. These are the same dates at which the hedge price was above the market price. From January to October 2008 the hedge price was below the market price.

It is not appropriate to release information regarding the price of the hedges, as it is likely to prejudice the commercial interests of both Translink and the other organisations involved in the hedge contracts. Translink believe that disclosure could inhibit or restrict future contract options.

Capital Projects

Dr Farry asked the Minister for Regional Development if there are any major capital projects in his Department that were due to start but have been delayed either by (i) lack of finance due to the recession; or (ii) a backlog of work in Planning Service. (AQW 5006/09)

Minister for Regional Development: No capital projects in my Department were delayed, as a result of a lack of finance, due to the recession or a backlog of work in Planning Service.

Translink

Mr Burns asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to his answer to AQW 4930/09, if any price changes took place at the end of each agreement and to state, for each contract, if the negotiations resulted in an (i) increase; or (ii) decrease in the hedged price of fuel paid by Translink and the percentage of this change. (AQW 5017/09)

Minister for Regional Development: The percentage changes to the net price per litre from each agreement to the next were as follows:

	ULSD	Gas Oil
• 12 Months April 2004 to March 2005	+17%	+3%
• 12 Months April 2006 to March 2006	-7%	-6%
• 6 Months April 2006 to September 2006	+238%	+213%
• 6 Months October 2006 to March 2007	+3%	+2%
• 6 Months April 2007 to September 2007	-0.5%	-8%
• 6 Months October 2007 to March 2008	-8%	-8%
• 6 Months April 2008 to September 2008	+50%	+49%
• 3 Months October 2008 to December 2008	+11%	+11%
• 6 Months January 2009 to June 2009	+24%	+25%
• 3 Months July 2009 to September 2009	-8%	-8%
• 3 Months October 2009 to December 2009	-0.4%	-0.3%
• 3 Months January 2010 to March 2010	-6%	-5%
• 3 Months April 2010 to June 2010	+0.5%	0%

* Percentage changes up to September 2007 based on chart data and may be subject to a degree of error. Figures based on information supplied by Translink.

In view of the line of questioning I have asked Translink to arrange a meeting with you to discuss the hedging process employed.

DEPARTMENT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Executive

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development to explain the necessity of the cancellation of repair and improvement contracts by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, resulting in the potential unemployment of construction workers in the Coleraine borough area. (AQW 4018/09)

Minister for Social Development (Ms M Ritchie): The collapse of the housing market combined with the credit crunch has resulted in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive having a significant lack of resources available to deliver its planned programme. A proposal to reallocate £10.5 million from existing Departmental resources to the Housing Executive has been made; this is subject to Executive agreement which will be sought as part of February monitoring. This would allow a significant amount of work to be undertaken this year that would otherwise not be possible, including all emergency and urgent tenant repairs.

Housing Executive Properties

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties have been (i) sold; and (ii) built, in the Limavady Borough Council area in the last ten years. (AQW 4307/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive had 720 house sales completions in Limavady in the period from 1998/99 to 2007/08.

During the period 1998/99 – 2007/08, 146 units of social housing were built in the Limavady Borough Council area: 142 by Housing Associations and 4 by the Housing Executive.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are classified as living in fuel poverty, broken down by constituency, for each of the last three years. (AQW 4384/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available by constituency area or for the period requested.

The table below details households in fuel poverty by District Council area in 2001 and 2006 (taken from the Housing Executive's Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2006).

HOUSEHOLDS IN FUEL POVERTY BY DISTRICT COUNCIL AREA

District Council area	Households in Fuel Poverty 2001	Households in Fuel Poverty 2006
	%	%
Antrim	34.6	23.6
Ards	22.0	39.5
Armagh	23.4	37.1
Ballymena	32.9	34.8
Ballymoney	37.7	35.2
Banbridge	26.6	31.1
Belfast	26.8	38.5
Carrickfergus	23.9	30.7
Castlereagh	18.7	27.4
Coleraine	28.4	30.7
Cookstown	29.2	41.2

District Council area	Households in Fuel Poverty 2001	Households in Fuel Poverty 2006
Craigavon	38.6	31.9
Derry	26.3	30.0
Down	24.2	30.5
Dungannon	19.6	38.7
Fermanagh	29.3	36.3
Larne	26.9	43.1
Limavady	34.0	39.9
Lisburn	26.6	29.4
Magherafelt	37.4	34.2
Moyle	33.0	45.3
Newry & Mourne	24.8	39.2
Newtownabbey	28.1	26.3
North Down	19.2	33.6
Omagh	31.5	33.9
Strabane	36.9	40.7
Total	27.3	34.2

Notes:

* Source: Housing Executive's Northern Ireland House Condition Survey 2006.

The total number of households in Northern Ireland was:

- 611,230 in 2001

- 658,730 in 2006

Hospital Lane Improvement Scheme, Limavady

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to update the funding situation in relation to the Hospital Lane improvement scheme in Limavady. (AQW 4414/09)

Minister for Social Development: The first phase of this scheme was programmed to commence in August 2009. However due to budgetary pressures in this financial year and in anticipation that these will continue into 2009/10, decisions will be taken with regards to all Multi Element Improvement Schemes, such as the one at Hospital Lane, when budgets are finalised.

Applications for Allowances

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what is the current waiting time for processing an application for (i) Jobseekers Allowance; (ii) Incapacity Benefit/Employment and Support Allowance; (iii) attendance allowance; (iv) carers allowance; (v) child tax benefit; (vi) disability living allowance; (vii) income support; (viii) housing benefit; (ix) pension credit; and (x) working tax credit; and how this compares with the same period last year. (AQW 4423/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available in the form requested. However the table below sets out the average year to date (April to December) clearance times for processing new claims to benefit from the date of their receipt by the Social Security Agency and in the case of Housing Benefit by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I am unable to provide information on Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit as these are administered by HM Revenue and Customs.

	Target 2007/08 (Days)	Year to date performance at December 2007 (Days)	Target 2008/09 (Days)	Year to date performance at December 2008 (Days)
+ Jobseekers Allowance	12	8.8	12	11.3
+ Incapacity Benefit *	22	19.4	22	21.8
Employment and Support Allowance **	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	13.8
+ Attendance Allowance	45	28.1	40	29.8
+ Carers Allowance	35	26.2	30	22.3
+ Disability Living Allowance	50	45.0	47	40.9
+ Income Support	12	9.2	12	10.6
Housing Benefit ***	100%	94.3%	100%	82%
+ State Pension Credit	12	11.7	15	15.0

+ These benefits are administered by the Social Security Agency and all of these clearance times have been met within target in 2007-08 and in 2008-09 to date. This is despite a very significant increase in workloads across many of the SSA benefits. For example, Jobseekers Allowance new claims year to date are up 57% above forecast and State Pension Credit new claims year to date are up 51% above forecast. These workload increases have occurred in parallel with a major modernisation programme, including the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance being undertaken by the Agency.

* The Year to date performance reported covers the period 1 April to 31 October. Incapacity Benefit was replaced by Employment and Support Allowance for new claimants from 27 October 2008.

** Employment and Support Allowance was introduced on 27 October 2008 and a clearance time target has not yet been set.

***Housing Benefit is administered by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The target and performance for this benefit is expressed as the percentage of cases assessed within 14 days.

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development if plans by her Department for social housing and disabled adaptations in Newcastle will be suspended until the Northern Ireland Environment Agency removes the current restriction on all planning applications. (AQW 4466/09)

Minister for Social Development: In relation to the Social Housing Development Programme, one new build scheme for 35 units is currently programmed to start on site in 2010/11. A planning application has not yet been submitted for this scheme. With regard to Disabled Adaptations to Housing Executive stock, there are currently no delays in terms of obtaining Planning Permission for any in the Newcastle area.

Housing in North Antrim

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are on the waiting list for housing in North Antrim, broken down by (i) electoral ward; (ii) religion; (iii) those with dependants; (iv) those without dependants; (v) those with disabilities; and (vi) those without disabilities, in each of the last two years. (AQW 4481/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not collate waiting list information by electoral ward or on the basis of whether an applicant is a person with a disability. For the purposes of this question North Antrim has been defined as including the geographical areas within the Housing Executive's Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle District Office areas.

The following tables sets out information for the last two years:-

- Table 1 - Applicants on the waiting list for social housing in North Antrim
- Table 2 - Applicants on the waiting list for social housing in North Antrim by religion.
- Table 3 - Applicants on the waiting list for social housing in North Antrim by household type.

TABLE 1.
#APPLICANTS ON THE WAITING LIST FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN NORTH ANTRIM

District	at 31st March 2007	at 31st March 2008
North Antrim Total	2,189	2,526

Refers to Position 1 Applicants on the Social Housing Waiting List.
(Position 1 refers to the person appearing first on the General Housing Application Form)

Notes:-

1. The breakdown of the waiting list is a snapshot of applicants for social housing on the waiting list on the last day of the month shown.
2. This dataset does not include Housing Executive transfers or Housing Association transfers.

TABLE 2.
#APPLICANTS ON THE WAITING LIST FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN NORTH ANTRIM BY RELIGION

	at 31st March 2007	at 31st March 2008
Catholic Applicants	563	598
Other Applicants	135	160
Protestant Applicants	1,231	1,239
Undisclosed Applicants	260	529
Total	2,189	2,526

Refers to Position 1 Applicants on the Social Housing Waiting List.
(Position 1 refers to the person appearing first on the General Housing Application Form)

Notes:-

1. The religious composition of households is based on 'self reported' answers to the question held in the General Housing Application Form. The religion of the Position 1 individual (i.e. the person appearing first on the General Housing Application Form) in the household is assumed as a proxy for the religion of all individuals in the household.
2. The Equality Unit is currently unable to identify 'mixed' religion households although we are aware that a number of households currently described as 'Roman Catholic' or 'Protestant' would clearly fall into a 'Mixed' category.
3. The breakdown of the waiting list is a snapshot of applicants for social housing on the waiting list on the last day of the month shown.
4. This dataset does not include Housing Executive transfers or Housing Association transfers.

TABLE 3.
#APPLICANTS ON THE WAITING LIST FOR SOCIAL HOUSING IN NORTH ANTRIM WITH/WITHOUT DEPENDANTS

	Without dependants		With dependants	
	At 31st March 2007	At 31st March 2008	At 31st March 2007	At 31st March 2008
Totals	1547	1726	642	800

Refers to Position 1 Applicants on the Social Housing Waiting List.
(Position 1 refers to the person appearing first on the General Housing Application Form)

1. The breakdown of the waiting list is a snapshot of applicants for social housing on the waiting list on the last day of the month shown.
2. This dataset does not include Housing Executive transfers or Housing Association transfers.
3. Single includes single males and females aged 16 to 59, Small Adult includes 2 adults aged 16 to 59, Small Family includes 1-2 adults and 1-2 children, large family includes 1-2 adults with 3+ children and 3 adults with 2+ children, large adult includes 3+ adults and 0-1 children, Older People include households with members aged 60+.

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what plans are in place to take forward neighbourhood renewal strategy after 9 March 2009, and, in particular, what the situation is in relation to Category 2 posts. (AQW 4497/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has committed significant funds, until 2011, to provide services to Neighbourhood Renewal areas. It is also my intention to build on our existing work with local

government and give greater responsibility for Neighbourhood Renewal to Councils as part of the new vision for local government in Northern Ireland.

My Department has been in discussion with other Departments in relation to the long-term provision of some services in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, currently supported by DSD but which fall under the functional responsibility of others. I will be making an announcement in the near future on the outcome.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development how she plans to address the £25 shortfall in a disabled client's income arising from the changes between the previous incapacity rules and the new Employment and Support Allowance rules. (AQW 4537/09)

Minister for Social Development: I assume the Member is referring to the disability premium which is not part of the new employment and support allowance. It is not that employment and support allowance ignores the needs of people with disabilities; rather it takes account of these needs in a different way through the work-related activity or support components. Many people will be entitled to the new components sooner than they would have been entitled to the disability premium under the previous system: after 13 weeks rather than having to wait 28 or 52 weeks. Many of the poorest and most severely disabled claimants are nearly £16 a week better off under employment and support allowance than they would have been on incapacity benefits. Over the first five years it is estimated that over £15m more will be paid in benefits under employment and support allowance compared to what would have been paid through incapacity benefits.

Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development how many calls on average per week, in respect of Employment and Support Allowance, go unanswered. (AQW 4565/09)

Minister for Social Development: Overall the implementation of the new Employment and Support Allowance has been positive. As with all new programmes it will take time for the systems and processes to become fully operational and effective. Between 27 October 2008 and 23 January 2009 the ESA Centre received a total of 37,244 telephone calls. The Centre has answered 21,907 calls with the remaining 15,337 calls being unanswered.

The Centre operates both a New Claim telephone line and an Enquiry line. Since 27 October 2008 the New Claim line has received 13,108 calls. A total of 1,588 calls to that line were unanswered, an average of 123 calls each week.

During this same period the Enquiry Line has received 24,136 calls. A total of 13,749 calls to that line were unanswered, an average of 1,057 each week.

In line with developments in Great Britain, the call volumes for ESA in Northern Ireland are more than twice those anticipated at the initial planning stage. This demonstrates a high level of interest in the telephony based service. To ensure that customers receive the required level of service, an additional 18 staff have been recruited for the telephone teams which will significantly increase the ESA Centre's capacity to answer calls promptly.

Housing Executive 5 Year Housing Condition Surveys

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Social Development who won the tender for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 5 year housing condition surveys. (AQW 4598/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive and its staff have responsibility for production of the House Condition Survey.

Legislation to Protect Landlords

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what legislation is in place to protect landlords from tenants who vacate their properties without giving notice and without paying rent. (AQW 4607/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 introduced on 1 April 2007, requires both landlords and tenants to give four weeks written notice of their intention to end a tenancy. In addition a landlord/ tenant relationship is a contract and as such is enforceable through the courts.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many incapacity claimants have had their cases reviewed in the last three years and how many of those reviewed had their benefits removed. (AQW 4613/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested on the total number of reviews of Incapacity Benefit is not available. The figures provided in the table below relate to claims where entitlement to benefit was removed as a result of a review.

Year	Claims*
1/09/05-31/08/06	21,693
1/09/06-31/08/07	19,658
1/09/07-31/08/08	18,714

* The figures include claims to Incapacity Benefit where an amount of Incapacity Benefit was in payment and where National Insurance credit only was awarded.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many incapacity claimants in the North Down constituency have had their cases reviewed in the last three years; and how many of those reviewed had their benefits removed. (AQW 4614/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested on the total number of reviews of Incapacity Benefit is not available. The figures provided in the table below relate to claims (for North Down Parliamentary constituency residents) where entitlement to benefit was removed as a result of a review.

Year	Claims*
1/09/05-31/08/06	611
1/09/06-31/08/07	499
1/09/07-31/08/08	515

* The figures include claims to Incapacity Benefit where an amount of Incapacity Benefit was in payment and where National Insurance credit only was awarded.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Incapacity Benefit appeals were (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed, in the last three years. (AQW 4650/09)

Minister for Social Development: The total number of Incapacity Benefit appeals (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed, in the last three years were as follows:

	Allowed	Disallowed	Total
2005/06	1,270	2,585	3,855
2006/07	1,616	2,790	4,406
2007/08	1,096	2,132	3,228

Incapacity Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Incapacity Benefit appeals from North Down claimants were (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed, in the last three years. (AQW 4651/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested cannot be provided as The Appeals Service does not maintain statistical data on the basis of constituency areas.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disability Living Allowance appeals were (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed, in the last three years. (AQW 4652/09)

Minister for Social Development: The total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed, in the last three years were as follows:

	Allowed	Disallowed	Total
2005/06	1,546	3,758	5,304
2006/07	1,560	3,003	4,563
2007/08	1,716	3,307	5,023

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disability Living Allowance claimants had their case reviewed in the last three years; and how many of these cases were (i) reduced; and (ii) removed completely, from the claimant. (AQW 4653/09)

Minister for Social Development: The table below shows the number of Disability Living Allowance cases reviewed in each of the last 3 years, how many were reduced and how many were disallowed.

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	Number of Reviews	Number Reduced	Number Disallowed
2005/06	15,486	194	349
2006/07	14,525	210	359
2007/08	19,317	210	427

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many Disability Living Allowance claimants in North Down had their case reviewed in the last three years; and in how many of these cases was it (i) reduced; and (ii) removed completely, from the claimant. (AQW 4654/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is not available. While this information is available on a Northern Ireland wide basis (AQW 4653/09 refers) the data is extracted from the Department for Work and Pensions IT Systems which in this instance cannot be further broken down by Parliamentary constituency.

Housing Benefit

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development what is the target timescale for processing Housing Benefit applications. (AQW 4655/09)

Minister for Social Development: The target timescale for new Housing Benefit claims is to process 100% of new claims (where all required information has been provided) within 14 days.

Housing Benefit

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development the actual timescale for processing Housing Benefit applications, on average, for (i) Northern Ireland; (b) Cookstown District Council; and (c) Magherafelt District Council. (AQW 4656/09)

Minister for Social Development: The figures below detail the percentage of new claims processed within 14 days (at the end of December 2008):

Northern Ireland	82%
Cookstown	80%
Magherafelt	82%

Housing Benefit

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development how many housing benefit applications are still being processed in total for (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) Cookstown District Council; and (iii) Magherafelt District Council. (AQW 4657/09)

Minister for Social Development: The figures below detail the number of claims still being processed in the areas in question (at the end of December 2008):

Northern Ireland	3781
Cookstown	64
Magherafelt	119

Housing Executive

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many ASBOs were issued by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in each year since their inception; and what was the cost to the NIHE for issuing them. (AQW 4674/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Anti Social Behaviour Order (ASBO) was introduced in 2004. Since then the Housing Executive has applied to the Courts in two cases for the award and issue of an ASBO:

- 1 Interim Anti Social Behaviour Order was granted in May 2005.
- 1 Anti Social Behaviour Order was granted in December 2006.

Obtaining an Anti Social Behaviour Order would incur approximately £2,500 in legal fees but this would vary depending on the length and complexity of the case. The cost to Housing Executive resources involved in the preparation of cases is not available.

Carers Review

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Carers Review; and when he expects to report the review. (AQW 4688/09)

Minister for Social Development: The joint review with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety of support for carers is progressing well and I expect that the review will be completed in the near future.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many DLA appeals from North Down claimants in the last three years were (i) allowed; and (ii) disallowed. (AQW 4697/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested cannot be provided as The Appeals Service does not maintain statistical data on the basis of constituency areas.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for Disability Living Allowance (i) have been received; (ii) went to appeal and (iii) had their appeals rejected, in each of the last five years. (AQW 4700/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below:

DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE

Year	*DLA Applications Received	Appeals Received	Appeals Rejected
2003/04	36,240	8,966	5,978
2004/05	38,844	6,584	3,790
2005/06	40,034	5,552	3,752
2006/07	39,320	5,442	2,985
2007/08	38,323	6,125	3,309

* Figures include both new claims and renewal applications for Disability Living Allowance.

Health and Well Being Programme

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment regarding the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone of the delivery of its Health and Well Being programme; and whether the Action Zone is the best delivery agent for the programme. (AQW 4701/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Health and Well Being Programme for the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Area, which was funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund, was promoted by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust using the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone as the delivery agent. I am aware that there have been some difficulties in terms of staff resources in the Health Action Zone. However, officials from my Department are engaging with both the Trust and Health action Zone and I am content that a wide range of programmes are being delivered to meet the health needs of the residents of the Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Neighbourhood Renewal Communities

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact, on neighbourhood renewal communities in Armagh City, of Dungannon Health Action Zone having no project worker in place. (AQW 4704/09)

Minister for Social Development: I am aware that the health and well-being programme in Armagh, which is funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment fund, has experienced some difficulties with the availability of staff resources. Officials from my Department are engaging with representatives from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and the Armagh and Dungannon Health Action Zone to ensure that the impact of these difficulties is minimised and a wide range of programmes has been delivered to meet the health needs of the residents of the Neighbourhood Renewal Area.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Social Development if she is aware of any guidelines regarding how community groups should engage participants for courses and projects funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Boards. (AQW 4705/09)

Minister for Social Development: Community involvement is core to the ethos of Neighbourhood Renewal. Whilst there are no specific guidelines in place in relation to the role of community representatives as regards the engagement of participants for courses and projects funded through Neighbourhood Renewal it is considered that community representatives, with their extensive local knowledge, are well placed to be active partners in this regard. The overarching principle is that projects must benefit residents of Neighbourhood Renewal areas.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact that the long term precautionary suspension of a neighbourhood renewal worker and other subsequent actions by Armagh City District Council will have on; (i) Armagh City neighbourhood renewal communities; (ii) relations between community representatives and Armagh City and District Council; and (iii) the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board and sub groups. (AQW 4706/09)

Minister for Social Development: I am aware that there are tensions in the relationship between a number of community representatives on the Armagh Neighbourhood Partnership and Armagh City and District Council. Officials from my Department have been engaging with all the parties involved to ensure that the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal programme in Armagh is not affected by the present situation.

Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership Board

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the failure by the Chief Executive of Armagh City and District Council to respond to a letter from a senior official from her Department to try to resolve the breakdown on relations between community representatives, the Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership board and Armagh City and District Council. (AQW 4707/09)

Minister for Social Development: A reply to the letter in question was issued on behalf of the Chief Executive of Armagh City and District Council on 30 January. However, some of the issues raised relate to an ongoing human resources case and the Chief Executive is unable to respond to these at this stage. Officials from my Department have been engaging on a bi-lateral basis, with both parties to ensure that the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal programme in Armagh is not affected by the present situation.

Cathedral Road Complex, Armagh City

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the renovation of the artificial pitch at the Cathedral Road complex, Armagh City; to outline if the project is on target and when it will be completed. (AQW 4708/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Cathedral Road playing field replacement project is progressing on target and is on schedule, subject to the normal considerations associated with a project of this nature, to be completed by its target date of 30 March 2009.

Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Social Development if she will investigate the reasons for the failure of Mullacreevie Community Flat to be renovated for use in youth activities, as it has been on the Armagh Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plan for over two years. (AQW 4709/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive has leased flats 23a and 23b Mullacreevie to the Mullacreevie Development Association for use as a community base. The property at 23a was refurbished using Neighbourhood Renewal funding in 2004 and the Armagh Neighbourhood Partnership has endorsed a further

project to refurbish 23b to cater for youth activities within the estate. Sketch drawings have been completed and consultation with the community group on the final layout is ongoing. The Housing Executive proposes to submit an application for funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund with a view to carrying out the work in the 2009/10 financial year.

Social Security Offices

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the general conditions of all Social Security Offices; and what plans there are for a modernisation programme. (AQW 4713/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Jobs and Benefits Project has modernised the estate of 25 of the 35 local offices. Working on behalf of the Social Security Agency and Department for Employment and Learning, the project is currently progressing the implementation of the final 10 Jobs & Benefits offices which will replace the last remaining Social Security Offices and Jobcentres with new Jobs & Benefits offices.

Work is already underway for the development of Jobs & Benefits offices in Andersonstown and Ballymena and these are scheduled for go-live early 2010. A procurement programme is currently ongoing to secure sites and developers or contractors for the remaining 8 offices and plans are at various stages of development for the respective locations.

Subject to the outcome of the Agency's Strategic Business Review public consultation, securing planning permission and the procurement of contractors, the remaining offices will be developed over the next number of years. The project is also taking forward further refurbishment work to the Foyle Jobs & Benefits office.

Pension Credit Applications

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development how many pension credit applications (i) are currently in the system; and (ii) have been in the system for more than 4 weeks. (AQW 4721/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out below;

- (i) State Pension Credit applications cannot be processed until all necessary evidence has been received as required by the benefit legislation. This is to ensure entitlement is determined correctly. At February 3rd 2009 Pension Service had 471 applications with all supporting evidence and a further 2779 awaiting information from customers. The overall time taken to process a claim does not affect the start date of payment. Payment will be backdated to the point the claim was first submitted.
- (ii) It is not possible to provide information on individual cases which are over 4 weeks, as the clearance time for processing Pension Credit new claims is measured as an Average Actual Clearance Time from the point at which claimants have supplied all necessary supporting evidence. Since July 2008 an average of 1400 new Pension Credit claims have been received each month.

Pension Credit Applications

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development what is the average processing time for pension credit applications. (AQW 4722/09)

Minister for Social Development: The average time to process State Pension Credit applications to date this year is 14.97 days and within the target of 15 days. This is measured from the point at which the customer has provided all necessary information to enable entitlement to be determined.

Performance Report on the NIHE Wood Pellet Boilers Trials

Mr B Wilson asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the findings from the Performance Report on the NIHE Wood Pellet Boilers Trials, and in particular, the costs to tenants in comparison to other heating systems. (AQW 4725/09)

Minister for Social Development: There has not been a Performance Report published on the NIHE Wood Pellet Boilers Trials. The initial Housing Executive trial scheme only involved the installation of 4 wood pellet

boilers. In total 26 wood pellet boilers have now been installed by the Housing Executive in pilot schemes. However, the Housing Executive does not consider that there is yet sufficient data regarding the ongoing maintenance costs of wood pellet boilers to allow a comprehensive analysis of its true lifetime costs. The Housing Executive will continue to evaluate the pilot schemes.

Grants Office in North Down, Ards and Strangford

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the budget for the grants office in North Down, Ards and Strangford for the 2009/10 financial year. (AQW 4738/09)

Minister for Social Development: The budget for grants provision for the areas in question is not yet available. The detail of overall grants provision for 2009/10 is currently being formulated and will be made available after approval by the Housing Executive's Board.

Strategy for Communities at Risk

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline her strategy for communities at risk, in particular Beechfield Estate, Donaghadee. (AQW 4751/09)

Minister for Social Development: I would refer the Member to his letter of 28 January and my response.

Specialist Debt Advisers

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many Specialist Debt Advisers her Department funds in each parliamentary constituency. (AQW 4755/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department does not directly fund Specialist Debt Advisers. Through the Community Support Programme which is delivered by local councils, my Department provides over £5 million of funding of which almost £2 million goes specifically for providing front line advice services. One of the key services provided by advice agencies is advice and representation on all matters regarding debt issues.

Additionally, Minister Foster from the Department of Enterprise Trade has invested in the provision of a free confidential face to face debt advice service since 2005. The Department of Enterprise Trade and Industry has recently renewed a contract with Citizens Advice to provide 12 full-time debt advisers across NI through to 2011. The locations of these advisers are as follows; three based in Belfast (Andersonstown, City Centre and East Belfast), three in Derry, and one in each of Coleraine, Antrim, Enniskillen, Lurgan and Newry.

Social Security Benefit

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many Social Security Benefit Application forms were received that were subject to (i) staff error and; (ii) the loss and/or misplacing of information. (AQW 4758/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information sought is not available. Many individuals are able to complete their benefit application forms themselves. Others may seek help from an external advice body or they can seek assistance from a Social Security Agency member of staff. It is however the personal responsibility of each individual claimant to ensure that their application form is both accurate and completed in full.

Each year the Social Security Agency receives over 500,000 benefit and Social Fund applications including those made by telephone. Given such volumes, there may be occasions when an item is mislaid or not received. Where such instances are brought to the Agency's attention urgent steps are taken to locate the missing item, and if necessary, action is taken to obtain a replacement application form from the customer.

Housing Benefit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many housing benefit applications are still being processed in North Down Borough Council. (AQW 4769/09)

Minister for Social Development: 150 Housing Benefit claims were in the process of being assessed by the Housing Executive at the end of January 2009.

Mortgage Payments

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development if there have been changes in mortgage payments for the unemployed in receipt of income support to have the reconsideration period reduced from 40 to 13 weeks. (AQW 4774/09)

Minister for Social Development: From 5th January 2009 a package of measures was introduced to support vulnerable home owners who may face having their homes repossessed during the current economic downturn. The measures include shortening the waiting period in Income Support, income-based Jobseeker's Allowance and income-related Employment and Support Allowance for assistance with mortgage interest payments. The waiting period is shortened from 39 or 26 weeks to 13 weeks for new working age claims. There is an increase in the capital limit on loans from £100,000 to £200,000 for which assistance is available for new working age and certain Pension Credit claims.

These measures should go some way in helping to prevent the rise in repossessions.

Programme for Government

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Social Development what risk assessment she has carried out of the Programme for Government targets. (AQW 4786/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department has risk management processes in place and there is an objective based assessment of all risks. Progress against my Department's Programme for Government targets is formally monitored and an assessment is made of the impact and likelihood of any risk to the achievement of targets. For example, the pressures on the Housing programme due to the shortfall in capital receipts has the potential to impact on the provision of 10,000 social and affordable houses by 2013. Notwithstanding this, I am doing everything in my power to deliver the number of houses promised.

In relation to the Urban Regeneration work of my Department, difficulties in levering in private finance and disposing of assets due to the economic downturn has resulted in some work being re-phased, however this is not yet impacting directly on the Programme for Government Targets.

Neighbourhood Renewal Project

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development when will her Department make a decision on the category 2 jobs through the Neighbourhood Renewal project. (AQW 4787/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy is about providing services which most effectively address the causes of deprivation.

My Department has been in discussion with other departments in relation to the long-term provision of some services in Neighbourhood Renewal areas, currently supported by DSD but which fall under the functional responsibility of others. I will be making an announcement in the near future on the outcome.

Funding Allocated by Department

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding her Department has allocated to the private sector, public sector, public and private partnerships and the community voluntary sector, since taking up post. (AQW 4807/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information relating to all funding by my Department is set out in the following table:

Funding allocated to:	Years 2007-08 & 2008-09 (£m)
Private Sector	13.28
Public Sector	854.05
Public/private partnerships	-
Community/voluntary sector	85.38
Total funding allocated	952.71

Supported Housing Schemes

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister for Social Development what level of co-operation exists between her Department and the Health and Social Care Trusts in providing supported housing schemes; and to list all proposed and existing schemes, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 4809/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department, through the Housing Executive, is tied into well established Supporting People commissioning structures with the Health and Social Care Trusts, that prioritise supported housing schemes for entry to the Social Housing Development Programme.

There are 930 existing schemes in receipt of Supported People funding. I have arranged for a table detailing the schemes to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Proposed schemes are included in the Social Housing Development Programme. The new programme, covering the period 2009/10 to 2013/14, is currently under review and will issue during February. On issue, I will arrange for a table detailing the most up to date position to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Queens Parade Project in Bangor

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Queens Parade project in Bangor. (AQW 4871/09)

Minister for Social Development: My Department is currently reviewing a response to the Department's development brief from Karl Greenfarm Limited. This review is well advanced and is expected to be completed by the end of March 2009.

SSA Strategic Business Review

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have written to her Department opposing the proposal to cut staff as described in the SSA Strategic Business Review. (AQW 4876/09)

Minister for Social Development: The Social Security Agency has not proposed any cuts in staff. As set out in the Strategic Business Review consultation documents no staff will be losing their employment.

Nevertheless, out of 235 responses received, 21 people (including 6 MLA's, representatives of 5 District Councils, 5 Voluntary Organisations, 3 Trade Union Councils, 1 member of the public and 1 from a local newspaper) have written to the Agency regarding potential cuts in staff and the Agency has replied to address these concerns.

Capital Infrastructure Projects

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development to list all capital infrastructure projects (i) under construction; (ii) in the procurement process; or (iii) to be advertised in this financial year, in the Strangford constituency and to detail the aggregated value of each. (AQW 4897/09)

Minister for Social Development: The information on infrastructure projects in my Department relevant to the Strangford constituency, is as follows:

- (i) There are five capital infrastructure Housing projects under construction in the Strangford Constituency as follows:-
- a) 1 general needs housing unit at 4 Inisharoan Court, Newtownards
 - b) 40 general needs housing units at 31-35 Donaghadee Road, Newtownards
 - c) 20 Category 1 Elderly units Church Street, Newtownards
 - d) Environmental Improvement scheme at Bowtown Phase 1 – total cost £853,000
 - e) Estate infrastructure scheme, Rectory Road parking – total cost £264,000

For reasons of commercial sensitivity the Housing Executive does not release individual scheme values with regard to the Social Housing Development Programme.

- (ii) There are four capital infrastructure projects in the procurement process in Strangford Constituency as follows:-
- 1 general needs housing unit at 60 The Old Mill, Killyleagh
 - 10 Category 1 Elderly units at 38 Belfast Road, Comber

Both of these schemes have received full scheme approval by the Housing Executive and 38 Belfast Road also has full planning approval. In addition there are a further two Urban Regeneration projects at the procurement stage as follows:

- Ards Development Bureau and Community Network - £1.1m
- Peninsula Healthy Living (build in Portaferry) - £0.06m, although no construction is expected before June 2008.

- (iii) There are no further projects to be advertised in this financial year.

The Member may also wish to note that plans for work to Newtownards Social Security Office are at an early stage and currently focus on the redevelopment of the Social Security Agency site at East Street in the town. Once office requirements are decided and planning permission approved, a procurement exercise will be required to secure a building contractor. Current planning assumptions suggest that the earliest possible start date for the Newtownards office development is likely to be December 2010, with costs expected to be in the region of £3.62m.

Good Morning Projects

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to her answer to AQW 4438/09, if her Department is planning to fund the Good Morning Project in Belfast. (AQW 4927/09)

Minister for Social Development: As previously stated a potential funding package has been identified for this project. My Department is one of the potential funders and will contribute subject to the required economic appraisal and a full funding package being confirmed.

Social Security Benefits

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development what sub-categories are contained in the definition of “error” in relation of the administration of social security benefits. (AQW 4945/09)

Minister for Social Development: In the administration of social security benefits error divides into two subcategories of official error and customer error as defined below.

Official error occurs when benefit awards are miscalculated as a result of an official not applying the benefit specific rules correctly or not taking into account all the circumstances applicable to an individual.

Customer error occurs where there has been a failure by the customer to notify a reportable change that affects the benefit in payment but there is no suspicion of fraud/fraudulent intent.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Ormiston House

Mrs Long asked the Assembly Commission to outline its current plans for Ormiston house, the current position on the development plans and when a formal planning application will be lodged. (AQW 4622/09)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mr Sean Neeson): A range of options for the future use of the Ormiston House site are currently being considered by the Commission.

One of the options being considered is a proposal for residential development on the site, in conjunction with the restoration of the listed buildings, in order to maximise the potential value of the site. An application to formally enter into pre-application discussion (PAD) in respect of this proposal has been submitted to the Planning Service.

No formal planning application has been made nor will one be made until further consideration is given to all of the potential options.

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