



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT

(Hansard)

Volume 12

(10 September 2001 to 11 November 2001)

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Volume 12

10 September 2001 to 11 November 2001

(The Assembly was suspended for one day on 23 September 2001.)

ASSEMBLY MEMBERS

(A = Alliance Party; NIWC = Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; PUP = Progressive Unionist Party; SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party; SF = Sinn Féin; DUP = Ulster Democratic Unionist Party; UKUP = United Kingdom Unionist Party; UUP = Ulster Unionist Party; UUAP = United Unionist Assembly Party; NIUP = Northern Ireland Unionist Party)

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Close, Seamus (A) (Lagan Valley)
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de Brún, Ms Bairbre (SF) (West Belfast)
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Doherty, Arthur (SDLP) (East Londonderry)
Doherty, Pat (SF) (West Tyrone)
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Durkan, Mark (SDLP) (Foyle)
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Gallagher, Tommy (SDLP) (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Gibson, Oliver (DUP) (West Tyrone)
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Gorman, Sir John (UUP) (North Down)
Hamilton, Tom (UUP) (Strangford)
Hanna, Ms Carmel (SDLP) (South Belfast)
Haughey, Denis (SDLP) (Mid Ulster)
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Hilditch, David (DUP) (East Antrim)
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Hutchinson, Billy (PUP) (North Belfast)
Hutchinson, Roger (Independent Unionist) (East Antrim)
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Nelis, Mrs Mary (SF) (Foyle)
Nesbitt, Dermot (UUP) (South Down)
O'Connor, Danny (SDLP) (East Antrim)
O'Hagan, Dr Dara (SF) (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Éamonn (SDLP) (South Down)
Paisley, Rev Dr Ian (DUP) (North Antrim)
Paisley, Ian Jnr (DUP) (North Antrim)
Poots, Edwin (DUP) (Lagan Valley)
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Robinson, Mark (DUP) (South Belfast)
Robinson, Peter (DUP) (East Belfast)
Roche, Patrick (NIUP) (Lagan Valley)
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Savage, George (UUP) (Upper Bann)
Shannon, Jim (DUP) (Strangford)
Tierney, John (SDLP) (Foyle)
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Wilson, Cedric (NIUP) (Strangford)
Wilson, Jim (UUP) (South Antrim)
Wilson, Sammy (DUP) (East Belfast)

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE ASSEMBLY

<i>First Minister</i>	The Rt Hon David Trimble (<i>From 6 November 2001</i>) ¹
<i>Deputy First Minister</i>	Mark Durkan (<i>From 6 November 2001</i>) ²
<i>Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development</i>	Ms Bríd Rodgers
<i>Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure</i>	Michael McGimpsey (<i>Dismissed 18 October 2001; resumed office on 24 October 2001</i>)
<i>Minister of Education</i>	Martin McGuinness
<i>Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment</i>	Sir Reg Empey (<i>Dismissed 18 October 2001; resumed office on 24 October 2001</i>)
<i>Minister of the Environment</i>	Sam Foster (<i>Dismissed 18 October 2001; resumed office on 24 October 2001</i>)
<i>Minister of Finance and Personnel</i>	Mark Durkan
<i>Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety</i>	Ms Bairbre de Brún
<i>Minister for Employment and Learning</i>	Dr Seán Farren
<i>Minister for Regional Development</i>	Gregory Campbell (<i>Dismissed 18 October 2001</i>) Peter Robinson (<i>From 25 October 2001</i>)
<i>Minister for Social Development</i>	Maurice Morrow (<i>Dismissed 18 October 2001</i>) Nigel Dodds (<i>From 25 October 2001</i>)

JUNIOR MINISTERS OF THE ASSEMBLY

<i>Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister</i>	Denis Haughey Dermot Nesbitt
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¹ The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, exercised the functions of the office of First Minister by virtue of a designation until the election of the Rt Hon David Trimble.

² Séamus Mallon exercised the functions of the office of Deputy First Minister until the election of Mark Durkan.

**PRINCIPAL OFFICERS AND OFFICIALS
OF THE ASSEMBLY**

<i>Speaker</i>	The Lord Alderdice
<i>Deputy Speakers</i>	Sir John Gorman Donovan McClelland Jane Morrice
<i>Office of the Speaker</i>	
<i>Private Secretary</i>	Georgina Campbell
<i>Special Adviser</i>	Vacant
<i>Counsel</i>	Nicolas Hanna QC
<i>Board of Management</i>	
<i>Clerk to the Assembly</i>	Arthur Moir
<i>Deputy Clerk</i>	Vacant
<i>Head of Administration</i>	Gerry Cosgrave
<i>Clerk Assistant</i>	Murray Barnes
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<i>Examiner of Statutory Rules</i>	Gordon Nabney
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<i>Head of Research</i>	John Power
<i>Head of Security</i>	Gerald Colan-O'Leary
<i>Information Officer</i>	Patrick Price

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 10 September 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that Royal Assent has been signified to the Family Law Act. The Act became law on 17 July 2001. Royal Assent has also been signified to the Product Liability (Amendment) Act, the Budget (No 2) Act, the Department for Employment and Learning Act and the Trustee Act. The Acts became law on 20 July 2001.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Tourism Sectoral Meeting

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its tourism sectoral format held on Friday 29 June 2001 in Coleraine.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The third meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its tourism sectoral format took place in Coleraine on Friday 29 June 2001.

Following nomination by the former First and Deputy First Ministers, Dr Seán Farren and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James McDaid TD, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation. The report has been approved by Dr Farren and is also made on his behalf.

The Council received a verbal report on the recent progress of Tourism Ireland Limited from Mr Andrew Coppel, chairman of the company which included a presentation on the further development of the Tourism Brand Ireland initiative and the planning of marketing programmes for 2002. Mr Coppel also reported that the company board had selected a chief executive officer following an open recruitment process and that an

announcement on that appointment would be made shortly.

The Council approved proposals for a staffing structure for the new company, which covered issues such as remuneration, grading, conditions of service and staff numbers. The Council approved the company's operating plan for 2001, subject to a finalisation of annual budgets.

The Council appointed Mr Noel McGinley as a director of Tourism Ireland Limited. Mr McGinley was recently appointed as acting chairman of Bord Fáilte Éireann. The chairman of Bord Fáilte Éireann and the chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) are ex officio members of the company.

The Council discussed a paper on training in the tourism and hospitality sector. That paper contained a progress report on joint training initiatives and set out training proposals being jointly developed by the former Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment, and CERT (Council of Education, Recruitment and Training), the Irish tourism and hospitality training authority.

The Council formally approved a number of proposals concerning InterTradeIreland, the North/South trade and business development body. The Council noted InterTradeIreland's annual report and accounts, a copy of which has been presented to the Assembly.

The Council gave approval for InterTradeIreland to proceed to public consultation on its new draft targeting social need (TSN) action plan. The Council also approved InterTradeIreland's proposals to develop the demand and supply of equity funding. The Council agreed that its next meeting in tourism sectoral format would take place in the autumn.

The Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr P Doherty): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. He said that the company's planning of the marketing programme for 2002 is under way. Does that programme give any special recognition to northern counties? By northern counties I mean those north of County Dublin and County Sligo. It is recognised that marketing in those counties is at a premium.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that, according to the statement made on 18 December 1998, the establishment of the company specifically mentions that its operations had to take account of Northern Ireland's circumstances of the past 30 years.

The Member's question covers areas other than Northern Ireland. One issue with which we have found common cause is that counties north of Sligo, such as Donegal, feel that they do not share in the significant tourism growth that has taken place in recent years.

The success of the outworking of the company's marketing activity will be measured by the extent to which there is a greater spread of tourism activity, particularly to Northern Ireland. However, the marketing programme includes counties outside Northern Ireland, as it is clear that tourism activity is still concentrated in the south and south-west of the Republic and in Greater Dublin.

One of the key objectives is to ensure that there is a geographic spread and another is to increase the total market. The articles of the company specifically require it to pay particular attention to Northern Ireland's needs.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his statement. Has a decision been made about the exact location of the Northern Ireland headquarters of Tourism Ireland Limited? If not, when is the decision likely to be made?

Sir Reg Empey: I understand the Member's interest in the matter. The company is actively pursuing premises in Coleraine. The chairman and the chief executive, accompanied by developers and agents, have visited a number of premises in the town and are at the stage of determining the precise site. I hope that a decision will be imminent. The company has been very active, and it recognises the importance of establishing the office in view of the fact that its responsibilities are now to include the IT aspects of the new company. That will be an important part of the activities, and I am looking forward to the early resolution of the issue.

Dr McDonnell: I strongly welcome the Minister's statement and the significant progress that has been made in the matter. It is appropriate to put on record the deep appreciation of all those involved in tourism for the significant contribution that the Minister has made since devolution, and the difference it has made to their lives.

Tourism Ireland Limited has been established; the chief executive and his staff have now been appointed. When will the organisation begin to make its presence felt, and when will it make a significant impact on Northern Ireland's tourism figures?

Can the Minister give any financial assessment of the significant damage done to tourism by the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and by the continuing conflict at Drumcree every July?

Sir Reg Empey: The outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease came like a bolt from the blue and it had a particular impact on tourism in rural areas. The Executive are currently assessing the economic and financial implications of the disease across the Departments, because a number of them have been affected. That assessment has not yet been completed. However, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that there has been a

negative impact; which has been the case in the Republic of Ireland, and throughout the United Kingdom.

The summer months, which should be our peak season, have become a difficult period for the past few years because of the wider conflict, including that at Drumcree. Undoubtedly when you are trying to market any place a negative background is something you could well do without.

The company intends to begin its first marketing campaign in the new season of 2002, and I would expect it to start rolling out early in the new year. It was always envisaged that that would be the target because the preparation of material is time-consuming and needs to be carried out with great care. I look forward to the first marketing campaign under the flag of the new company in the spring season of 2002.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland tourism does not need to be an addendum to all-Ireland tourism because of the great opportunities it offers? Does the sale, development and marketing of the Giant's Causeway tourism opportunity site form any part of the Minister's discussions? Will he assure the House that the sale, development and marketing of this key tourism area will remain in the hands of Northern Ireland people who have the best interests of Northern Ireland at heart?

12.15 pm

Sir Reg Empey: Our purpose is to ensure that Northern Ireland is not an addendum to any particular agenda. As the Member will know, several years ago the NITB entered into arrangements for marketing the island of Ireland as a destination. However, the programme had already been rolled out and established before the NITB became involved. Consequently, it was felt that Northern Ireland's influence in the design of that programme was less than it ought to have been, and that was also reflected in other publications and literature.

As I have already said, it is written into the company's articles of association that it must pay specific attention to the needs of Northern Ireland as reflected over the past 30 years. The make-up of the board, with its 50/50 representation, and the fact that the chairman comes from Northern Ireland, should give us confidence that many of the people there will be directing their attention to ensuring that we maximise the benefits of tourism in Northern Ireland.

The sale and development of the Giant's Causeway are not within the remit of Tourism Ireland Limited. These are matters for the owners of the property. As for the specific marketing of the site, any marketing done in any part of this island will inevitably focus on one of our major assets — the Giant's Causeway — as the most popular destination on the island.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's statement. In paragraph 3 he referred to a chief executive officer. Has that officer been appointed, and where will he or she be based?

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Paul O'Toole has been appointed as chief executive officer. He will be based in the Dublin headquarters of the company. However, he visits Northern Ireland regularly, and he will have an office in Coleraine. I hope to have a meeting with him tomorrow.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. He states that the North/South Ministerial Council gave its formal approval to a number of proposals relating to InterTradeIreland. Will he elaborate on those proposals?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that it is possible for any sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council to deal with matters that are not necessarily the remit of that particular meeting, and occasionally that is done for administrative convenience. The Council gave approval to the annual report and accounts, which have been laid before the Assembly and can be found in the Library.

The Council also gave approval to InterTradeIreland to proceed with its consultation on its draft TSN action plan. As the Member will know, this is a statutory requirement. It was felt that, rather than waiting for the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its business and trade development format, it would be better to deal with this issue as early as possible so that consultation could take place, and that has been done.

Finally, the council gave approval to proposals on developing the demand and supply of equity funding. As the Member will know, in the statement of 18 December 1998 the supply of equity funding and people's access to it was one of the specific remits given to InterTradeIreland. A report on this subject was produced by chartered accountants with the assistance of the Industrial Development Board (IDB). Considerable progress has been made.

It was felt that for convenience and speed those matters would be dealt with under the tourism sectoral format rather than waiting several months until the next trade meeting.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his report. I refer him to the presentation of the development plan for 2002. Can the Minister, the NITB or Tourism Ireland Limited tell Members whether the programme of marketing for the eastern border region, which covers St Patrick's country (the Mourne and the Cooley peninsula), has been implemented? It is evident that this area has been greatly neglected in the past. Of the recent arrivals of cruise ships in Belfast, every single tour that was presented to passengers directed them

northwards. There was no marketing or propaganda available about the very good tourist attractions within twelve miles of their disembarkation. Is that situation remedied in the 2002 marketing programme? If not, will the Minister ensure that it is?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member knows that Tourism Ireland Limited is a company. It has charge of the marketing plan, but that does not mean that all marketing rests with the company. It deals with destination marketing — it markets the island of Ireland to the rest of the world. In our jurisdiction, there are regional tourism organisations, which the NITB will continue to support. The NITB has the ability to market, and will continue to have that ability. Many organisations are taking advantage of that. They are given a budget by the NITB to focus on particular areas. Local authorities will also continue to have a role.

The company will be marketing a destination. All parts and relevant assets in that destination will be incorporated in the marketing material. When you get down to specifics, it is quite clear that there is a limit below which you cannot go when you are marketing a destination. Therefore, the NITB, the regional tourism organisations — including those that cover the Member's constituency — and the local authorities will continue to have a role that will be financially supported by the NITB.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: That being so, will the Minister explain why invitations to the opening of the much-vaunted office in Brussels, which was to make those representations and to boost this country in all aspects, have been cancelled by a phone call to everyone who received an invitation? The office was to be opened on 18 September. How much money was spent on sponsoring the opening, which will not now take place?

Mr Speaker: The subject is within the Minister's remit, but it is not contained in his statement. It is a matter for the Minister whether he chooses to respond.

Sir Reg Empey: It is not a matter in the statement, as you say, and it is not a specific tourism issue. The opening of the Brussels office was noted in a number of diaries. Invitations were sent to permanent secretaries only, not to third parties. As the Member knows, events taking place in Brussels are frequently noted. A number of potential guests were notified about the opening, but invitations were not issued because it was considered inconvenient. However, the office is functioning and will have a full and proper opening in due course.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I do not take points of order during ministerial responses, but I will take it at the end of responses to the statement.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to training in the tourism industry.

It is appropriate that we address common issues on a North/South basis. Can the Minister give the Assembly an update on the delivery of those training programmes?

Sir Reg Empey: My colleague Dr Farren presented a paper at the last meeting on 29 June. I am happy to say that considerable progress has been made, and my understanding is that the Department for Employment and Learning, through the Training and Employment Agency, and CERT have agreed a joint training programme and identified a number of persons who will participate. I understand that that programme has commenced. That is a positive development.

Our ability to market and be successful in tourism will be determined by the quality of the product, and one key area will be the skills of individual operatives. Dr Farren's Department plays a significant role, and a significant effort was made in a very short time to put together a joint proposal. Funding is in place through the Budget, and I look forward to positive results in the near future. I can confirm that the programmes have commenced.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his welcome statement and for his frequent visits to Coleraine. Can he give any indication of the number of jobs that will be created locally in Tourism Ireland Limited? Can he assure local businesses that there will be opportunities to tender for contracts through the normal Government procurement procedure?

Sir Reg Empey: It is anticipated that when the office in Coleraine is fully operational, 16 people will be employed. The Member will know that I recently attended a meeting with Coleraine Borough Council. At our suggestion, a number of businesspeople and potential contractors from the borough were invited. The purpose of the meeting was to point out the potential to apply for, and obtain business from, the office in Coleraine, and there was a very good attendance. Questions were asked of officials, and I addressed the meeting. There is now a full understanding among the Coleraine business community of the opportunities that could arise from successful applications to provide goods and services to the company.

Mr Speaker: That is the end of questions to the Minister on the statement.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for the Minister to say that invitations were not sent out? I have a copy of my invitation to celebrate the official opening —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not a point of order. The question was outside the remit of the statement, which was on the question of Tourism Ireland Limited and not on the opening of an office in Brussels. There was some generosity tendered in permitting the Minister to respond to the question at all. If there is a question

about the details of this invitation. The Member will have to take up the matter with the Minister.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: In his statement there was a reference to something beyond tourists. There was a reference to targeting social need, action plans and equity funding. Surely that comes into this.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: So it is in order to deceive people and send them invitations and then not abide by them?

Mr Speaker: Order. The question that was raised was outside the statement. The Minister made a response. To allow further responses would be clearly out of order. The Member may take up the matter directly with the Minister, or, of course, in another context in the Assembly.

12.30 pm

**ASSEMBLY: AD HOC COMMITTEE
ON DRAFT CRIMINAL INJURIES
COMPENSATION (NORTHERN
IRELAND) ORDER 2001 AND DRAFT
NORTHERN IRELAND CRIMINAL
INJURIES COMPENSATION SCHEME**

Resolved:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 49(7), this Assembly appoints an Ad Hoc Committee to consider —

(a) the proposal for a draft Criminal Injuries Compensation (Northern Ireland) Order 2001; and

(b) the draft Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme, referred by the Secretary of State and to submit a report to the Assembly by 27 November 2001.

Composition:	UUP	2
	SDLP	2
	DUP	2
	SF	2
	Other Parties	3

Quorum: The quorum shall be five.

Procedure: The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine. — [Mr McGrady.]

Mr C Wilson: I was unsure of the procedure but, if permitted, I would like to make a comment about the motion.

Mr Speaker: Order. The opportunity is lost. Members cannot comment on a motion after the matter has been voted on.

Mr C Wilson: I tried to get your attention, Mr Speaker, simply to say that my party will not support the proposal.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must resume his seat. It was a business motion, and in the normal course of events such matters are not for debate. However, if, at any stage, there is a debate, it must take place before the Question is put — not after. The Question has been put, and while it was by no means unanimous for one reason or another, the ayes have it.

**ASSEMBLY:
BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

Mr C Wilson: Mr Speaker, may I make a statement on the composition of the Ad Hoc Committee?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member may not speak on the previous Question.

Mr C Wilson: I am sorry, but it concerns the change of appointment.

Mr Speaker: Order. Perhaps it may save the Member some trouble and embarrassment if I explain. The motion now before the House is about the membership of the Business Committee, not the Ad Hoc Committee. It is simply to do with a change of membership — the replacement of Mr Ford by Mr McCarthy on the Business Committee.

Mr C Wilson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I assure you that I will not be embarrassed. Those who should be embarrassed are those Unionists who are going to nominate Unionists to sit on that Committee.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is clearly out of order, and he knows it.

Resolved:

That Mr Kieran McCarthy shall replace Mr David Ford on the Business Committee. — [Mr Ford.]

HOLY CROSS PRIMARY SCHOOL

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allocated two hours for the debate on the Holy Cross Primary School. Many Members have indicated that they wish to speak. In order to facilitate as many Members as possible, I have decided to allocate times as follows: the mover of the motion will have 10 minutes to move and 10 minutes to wind up. One amendment has been accepted; the mover will have seven minutes to move and five minutes to wind up. The Minister responding on behalf of the Executive will have available the usual time for a ministerial response to a motion. However, it is for the Minister to decide whether he takes the full time. I remind all Members that those are maximum times, not minimum ones.

All other Members will have five minutes in which to speak. If the Question has not been put by 2:30pm, when Question Time must begin, the debate will resume at 4:00pm and continue until completion. The House will then vote on the amendment and the motion.

Mr G Kelly: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports the right to education of school children attending the Holy Cross Primary School in north Belfast.

Last week the entire globe watched a single image of Belfast. What can only be described as one of the most frightening and depressing episodes in the past 30 years was witnessed from every corner of the globe. Schoolgirls, aged four to 11, and their parents were physically and verbally assaulted. They were made to run a gauntlet of sectarian hatred and violence. Stones, bottles, curses, whistles, air horns and a blast bomb were the ammunition used by the so-called protesters who spent a week mounting a blockade at the Holy Cross Primary School. The protesters' objectives were to harass, intimidate, injure and, in the case of loyalist paramilitaries, kill Catholic school children and their parents. If anyone was in any doubt about that, the Ulster Defence Association, acting under the name of the Red Hand Defenders, issued death threats to back that up. —*[Interruption]*.

Members will get their chance to defend the protesters in a minute.

After a week of sectarian hatred and violence on Ardoyne Road, much of which was orchestrated by Loyalist paramilitaries and defended, as we can hear, by some within the Unionist political establishment, the blockade was back on the streets this morning. Once again, Catholic children had to pass through a tunnel of bigotry to get to school and receive their education. What has happened on Ardoyne Road is not complicated — it is a clear and simple case of sectarianism in its rawest and most unpalatable form.

It is unfortunately, all about “not having a Catholic about the place”.

The blockade of the children is politically, ethically and morally wrong. No argument can justify it, and no explanation can underpin it. Protesting against school children is wrong. Screaming sectarian abuse at school children is wrong. Blowing whistles and air horns at children is wrong. Throwing rocks, bottles and blast bombs at children is wrong. Any form of blockade or protest against children on their way to school is wrong. — *[Interruption]*. I notice that a teacher is attacking what I have said.

Politicians should recognise that those actions are wrong and they should call for the blockade to end. If they do anything short of that, they will let the bigots off the hook and provide them with the political cover for their attacks on young children. It is a matter of protecting the human and civil rights of children.

The blockade began at the end of the last school term, after a week in which Loyalists and the RUC prevented parents and their children from entering their school through the front door. During the 11 weeks of the summer holidays, channels between the Nationalist and Loyalist communities were opened, in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Parents engaged with Loyalist residents through the media and networked for six weeks. Cross-community contact was initiated involving workers from Ardoyne and residents in Glenbryn. Sinn Féin used its contacts in the Loyalist community for five weeks in an attempt to produce a resolution. In the end, all those efforts failed, but not through a lack of sincerity or attempts on the Nationalist and Republican side to reach an accommodation.

Despite the failure of the dialogue to produce a solution, and the week-long series of attacks on children and parents in Ardoyne, all sections of the Nationalist community have put on record their willingness to enter into dialogue urgently. Community leaders, parents, political representatives and ordinary residents are all saying that dialogue is the only way forward and that that must be achieved sooner, rather than later.

Throughout the last week, Unionists, Loyalist politicians and some community workers have sought to justify or excuse the blockade. They have aired spurious arguments through the media. It has been said that the protest is against the parents and not the children. The cameras show that the abuse is aimed directly at the children. Some say that the parents are Republicans. However, any Catholic school in the North will include a mixture of Sinn Féin voters, SDLP voters, non-voters and voters for other parties. Sinn Féin is the largest Nationalist party in the area; the children of its members have a right to education. Like any other children, they have the right to have their parents

leave them to school, regardless of their parents' politics — or lack of politics.

Some say that there is an alternative route. There is no safe alternative route. The route via the Crumlin Road is much longer and passes through the same Protestant area. There have been many attacks on Catholics and their homes on the Crumlin Road. There have been innumerable attacks on other children travelling to and from the other Catholic schools in the area. Furthermore, there is no disabled access, and children have to cross a muddy football pitch to get to the back door of the school.

Parents have also been attacked for allowing their children to go through the blockade. That is very distressing for the parents. Logic is turned on its head when those who perpetrate such acts of violence on children and their parents blame the victims for the abuse. It is a despicable misrepresentation of the deep and heartfelt anxiety that each parent has had to face each day.

It is said that Glenbryn is an isolated Loyalist enclave; it is not. Glenbryn is part of a huge Loyalist or Unionist area stretching from the Crumlin Road to the Antrim Road. In fact, it is difficult to get into the Nationalist Ardoyne area without passing through Loyalist areas. Glenbryn residents complain of attacks on their area by Nationalists — fair enough. However, the vast bulk of attacks in this interface area over the past 5 years have been carried out by Loyalists against Catholics and their homes. The DUP already knows that, because it has checked the statistics. Almost all of the gun and bomb attacks in the area have been by Loyalist paramilitaries on Catholics and their homes.

It is said that peaceful protest is a democratic right — again, fair enough. However, the human rights of children actually supersede any right to protest against them. David Ervine says that it is a cry for help, yet he knows that the UDA is deeply involved and has carried out around 200 bomb and gun attacks against Catholics this year alone. If it is a cry for help, it is a violent one.

Are there problems of deprivation and poverty in Glenbryn? Undoubtedly, there are. It is a working-class Protestant area that has suffered from much neglect. Unfortunately, the Catholic working-class areas have been suffering from the same governmental neglect, discrimination and oppression for generations. Nationalist and Republican residents and community workers are more than willing and ready to share experiences and work out ways to tackle common problems — and there are many common problems of economic and social neglect. However, primary school children are not to blame for any of that and should not be punished.

There is no doubt that communities such as Glenbryn have a range of problems that must be addressed by politicians and community leaders. Such problems are

not unique to that estate; they feature in many parts of north Belfast. Politicians and community leaders must work together on those issues as partners, both within and between communities. We must share our experience and knowledge. We must build relationships and accept the responsibility that comes with leadership and with living as neighbours.

I would like to pay tribute to all the parents, children and teachers of Holy Cross Primary School. They have shown magnificent resilience, courage and dignity in the face of an unwarranted onslaught. They have the respect of all decent people. This is the European Year of the Child. The European Convention on Human Rights places the rights of children above the right to protest. In my opinion, protesting against children is illegal and wrong. If Members support the rights of children, they should be united in their call for the blockade to end. Regardless of our differences, we should be united in calling for face-to-face dialogue to resolve the issue. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Speaker: One amendment to the motion has been selected. It was not the only amendment submitted, but it is the one that has been selected, and it is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Kennedy: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after “attending” and insert:

“all schools throughout north Belfast.”

The amendment is self-explanatory and deals with the issue on an educational basis, which I understood to be the purpose of the motion before the Assembly.

I listened to the proposer and he made little or no reference to education. Instead we had what might be called a Republican rant, which is very unfortunate.

12.45 pm

My amendment is inclusive and is worthy of widespread political support in the House. Due to the situation that exists in north Belfast, Members have a duty to act responsibly and not inflame that situation by their words or actions in the House. Many people will be watching for the reaction of the House.

I am speaking as the Ulster Unionist Party spokesman on education in the Assembly. The reason for the amendment is that it is a basic right of all school children, not just those in north Belfast but those throughout Northern Ireland, to be free from any let or hindrance, or interference, as they travel to and from school. That right extends from Coleraine to Crossmaglen. It applies to Holy Cross Primary School and other schools in that area. Many of the scenes we have witnessed in north Belfast have been unedifying and undoubtedly appalling. I want to place on record the Ulster Unionist position that the party condemns any violence in relation to that or any other incident.

All school children have the right to travel to and from school without interference, abuse or obstruction. I am aware of the possible adverse physical and mental health implications that can happen to the children concerned.

Problems have existed in the area for many years. The RUC has been actively involved for well over 20 years in ensuring the safe passage of pupils throughout that area of north Belfast. I am thinking of schools such as the Girls' Model, the Boys' Model, Wheatfield Primary School and others. Nominally they are state schools — controlled schools — and for many years their pupils have been subjected to verbal abuse and all manner of unnecessary and unwarranted abuse; and we must condemn that. To some extent both communities have been affected. No later than last week primary school pupils, ranging from primary one to primary three, had their school bus attacked en route to Cliftonville Primary School. The House has a duty to condemn that as well.

I hope we all agree that children should not be treated in this way. We should also agree that children should not be used by parents or, perhaps, by any political group to advance a particular agenda. Many of us have a great concern that there have been elements only too glad to see contention and trouble erupt in that area of north Belfast in an attempt to use it to their own narrow political advantage. Sinn Féin/IRA is directly responsible for that. Some people might see it as a way of taking attention away from political matters in other parts of the world such as Colombia. It is very wrong for Sinn Féin to think that it could do that. It is highly cynical, and it is an abuse of parents and children. It is also wrong to imagine that the events in Colombia will not be subject to proper scrutiny, and that they will not be returned to the centre of the political stage in the coming days.

I welcome the acceptance by the Sinn Féin Member for North Belfast that those who wish to peacefully process on a main route should be allowed to do so. That is welcome news for people in other parts of Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to the rights of Orangemen in Portadown.

It is unfortunate when school children have first-hand experience of the conflict. I remember the murderous attack on a school principal who was attempting to teach his class in Newry Model Primary School. That attack was carried out by Republicans, the IRA. It caused considerable trauma, and as a result the school no longer exists. Children have witnessed murderous attacks on school buses and part-time members of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), the RUC and the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR). It is unfortunate that children have been embroiled to a degree in the conflict.

The issues are complex and largely not related to education. I appeal to local community and elected representatives to stand back, cool off and initiate

talks to find an early solution. I welcome the Secretary of State's initiative and look for early progress. I hope that Members will conduct themselves in a manner befitting this House and its reputation.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome Mr Kennedy's condemnation, as Chairman of the Education Committee, of the blockade and protest at Holy Cross Girls' School. However, I cannot support the amendment because it distracts from the core issue — that very blockade by Loyalist protesters. It is insufficient to consider this in an omnibus motion which involves other schools that hitherto have not been affected and, I hope, never will be in the way that Holy Cross Girls' School has been. The amendment serves merely as a distraction from the core issue, and I regret the fact that the Chairman of the Education Committee has moved it.

Mr Kennedy: I rose as an Ulster Unionist party spokesperson on education and not in my role as Chairman of the Education Committee.

Mr A Maginness: I accept the Member's point. Nonetheless, Unionist politicians should not attempt to take attention away from the core issue — the protest and blockade of that school.

Mr McCartney: Read the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Mr McCartney will get plenty of opportunity later on, a man who claims to be non-sectarian. The situation in Ardoyne is symptomatic of the failure of all politicians to direct their energies towards dissolving the great sickness of intercommunal sectarianism in our society. The Good Friday Agreement should have given politicians and the community at large the opportunity to address that issue. Unfortunately no attention was paid to addressing sectarianism because of our involvement in political crises.

The two communities in Ardoyne relate to one another in a dysfunctional fashion, with young people hurling bricks and the communities hurling brick bats. That has to end. The Holy Cross Girls' School has become a victim of the collective failure of politicians and the community to respect each other and to live in peace and friendship. It is ironic that the school, under the leadership of Mrs Anne Tanney, an industrious and visionary headmistress, has led the way in trying to build better community relations with the Protestant community. The school was involved in joint holidays and educational ventures with its fellow primary school, Wheatfield, and ecumenical visits and exchanges with the local Church of Ireland church. Holy Cross Girls' School is truly a victim of sectarianism. The so-called protest at the school is not a protest at all. It is a blockade of the school, and it has no moral or political justification.

No objective, fair outsider could say that it has any moral or political justification. Therefore, the protest

must end because its continuance has no legitimacy whatsoever. If its alleged purpose is to highlight the Glenbryn community's concerns and grievances, surely after one horrendous week those issues have been sufficiently highlighted publicly. The protest should therefore be terminated to allow a real and constructive dialogue between the two communities — Glenbryn and Catholic Ardoyne — in the Greater Ardoyne area so that all the outstanding issues and grievances affecting the community can be addressed by both communities. There is no doubt that both communities have real concerns and grievances, and there is no doubt that there have been attacks and counter-attacks. All those issues must be addressed. It is not, however, a one-sided situation, and paramount in all of this is the welfare of the children. We must do all we can to end this protest because it is the children who are suffering. They should not be allowed to suffer any further.

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

Mr Dodds: We have heard much talk about the suffering of the children. No one has yet mentioned that the only child to have died in this recent period was a Protestant child, murdered as a result of sectarian hatred in north Belfast. It is incumbent on all of us to remember the family of Thomas McDonald, 16, murdered in cold blood last Tuesday morning in the White City area. He is to be remembered, and I deplore any attempt to distract from that.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The last remarks referred to the tragic killing of Thomas McDonald. The Member went on to talk about the motivation behind that killing. This matter is sub judice. The Member's remarks could well be prejudicial with regard to the proper trial of the person who has been accused.

Mr Speaker: Order. I hesitate to intervene between two lawyers on this matter. The laws of sub judice are rather strict, and they are rather tighter than people sometimes imagine regarding the timing at which matters become sub judice. I advise Members to be careful and cautious, and I trust that as lawyers they will not take it as inappropriate that I should advise them on this matter. I will certainly listen carefully to what is being said.

Mr Dodds: It is shameful that in all the talk about concern for children no one has mentioned the terrible plight of that Protestant family in the White City and what they have gone through. The media and commentators, in many cases from afar, who never speak to people to try to understand their fears and concerns or to work with them — with a few notable exceptions such as some members of the clergy and others — have been strangely silent in ignoring what is going on in other parts of north Belfast. If that had been a child from the other community, there would have been

worldwide headlines. People in our community are sick, sore and tired of the one-sided coverage of everything that goes on, not only in north Belfast but in Northern Ireland generally. It is important that that is put on the record.

To see Sinn Féin/IRA nauseatingly exploit this situation once again, as they tried to do in Belfast city hall on Friday and have been doing every day this week for their own narrow political ends, is sickening in the extreme. This is from a party and an individual who have been convicted of crimes not only against the community in Northern Ireland but also against children.

1.00 pm

We have seen people who have been engaged in taking the blood of innocent people coming to speak about education rights and the rights of children. I have a list of people — schoolteachers, principals and school bus drivers — who have been murdered by IRA/Sinn Féin, and the Minister of Education and his colleagues condoned it and egged them on, and indeed, in many cases, took part in murders. Look at the case of Ronald Graham who was murdered in 1981. That case involved a 13-year-old who was recruited by a teacher in IRA/ Sinn Féin. In other cases, teachers were murdered in front of their children. George Saunderson was shot at the primary school in Teemore in front of the children and kitchen staff.

This shows the type of people who are now lecturing us about the rights of children. Let me make it absolutely clear that I oppose the exploitation of children. I do not believe that children should be exploited for political purposes. I do not think that they should be abused. I do not think that any of us want any type of violence — we have condemned that. Let us be very clear who is doing the exploiting. As was stated in the 'Daily Telegraph' the other day:

"What part was played by Gerry Kelly, the local Sinn Féin representative and IRA bomber, who was yesterday fulminating against the Protestants?"

Who persuaded people not to take the alternative route that was advised by the local school headmaster, the board of governors, the teachers, 'The Irish News' editorial, the 'News Letter' and others to allow a cooling-off period? They are always lecturing us about the merits of alternative routes. Why was it that that advice was ignored at the behest of IRA/Sinn Féin? What has its role been in ensuring that this problem has been exacerbated, agitated and exploited? IRA/Sinn Féin are up to their necks in ensuring that this problem continues, rather than trying to get it solved. I commend everybody in north Belfast — community workers, clergy and politicians on the ground — who are genuinely trying to find a way forward in very difficult circumstances.

People have referred to underlying reasons: there are many. However, if this were a purely sectarian “hatefest”, as the SDLP and others have been talking about, there are many ways in which schools could be blocked, and many things that people could do. This is a community that has suffered at the hands of IRA/Sinn Féin for years. Their concerns, injustices and inequities have been ignored by the media, who are now up there in their thousands. For months during the summer, when the Protestant community and others were seeking talks and demanding that talks should take place, the media were absent. The Protestant community were rebuffed by those who said “Oh no, we do not want to listen to all the issues”. We have to try to find a way forward — not do what Sinn Féin does —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member’s time is up

Mrs E Bell: The start of the new term at Holy Cross Primary School was a sad and graphic example of a very violent type of physical and mental child abuse. Last week we saw a sinister development with children being used as political pawns to highlight grievances and concerns. No apparent thought was given as to how the awful scenes of hatred, stone-throwing, bottle-throwing — not to mention the pipe bombs — would affect the children and linger with them for a long time.

North Belfast, as other Members have said, has been an anxious area for a long time. I remember working in Ardoyne during the troubles, and it was dreadful. However, there was a sense of community, but that now seems to have been lost.

Many children have already been prescribed all types of medical treatment for anxiety. It is horrible to think how much more diazepam, or Valium, has been prescribed for those children. We saw the children walking up to their school, being taunted, experiencing all types of violence, and having to be guided to school by terrorised and often frightened parents, riot police in full gear, and fully armed soldiers. Remember, we are talking about four-year-olds and five-year-olds.

Staff and auxiliary workers have had to keep the school open. They must have been feeling intimidated and worried about their responsibility to the pupils. It was terrible this morning to listen to a snippet of a television interview with Dr Tan, a local GP. He expressed fully and clearly his concerns at having to prescribe sedatives because of the situation.

The situation at Wheatfield, while less violent and not as graphic, is still untenable. Those issues should also be addressed because those children have been involved in completely unacceptable situations.

Army and RUC personnel have been given a terrible assignment that should never have been necessary — that of protecting, facilitating and guiding four-year-olds

and five-year-olds at the start of their educational experience. Are we really, as citizens of Northern Ireland, losing all sense of propriety and rationality in our apparently crazed desire to achieve our own interests and aims at the expense of some of the most vulnerable in our society, our primary school children? Are we going to start on the nursery schools next?

It is to be hoped that all concerned in the two main areas will take up the Secretary of State’s offer of negotiations with open minds and no preconditions. Surely the church leaders must also be listened to, as well as the community workers who have done a wonderful job in trying to help the parents and all concerned.

Everyone must be determined to engage in principled compromise so that last week’s scenes will never be repeated. No concern or grievance can be worth further violence, greater intimidation, or even worse, death, as happened last week, to anyone, let alone children. Worst of all, no such pattern of behaviour has ever ended in agreement. Unfortunately, Holy Cross and Wheatfield are not the only schools affected by this wave of hatred and intolerance. There are already rumblings of potential trouble throughout many other parts of Belfast.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I wish to put on record our sincerest appreciation and our deepest gratitude to Mrs Tanney and her teaching and ancillary staff. I also thank Father Troy and the board of governors for keeping the situation as normal as possible for the children and their parents, and for keeping the curriculum going.

I also thank the Army and the RUC, who have done an excellent job in horrifically sensitive circumstances, and the little children for their bravery in the face of such frightening so-called protest. Let us hope that they can continue their education with safe passage in a secure atmosphere, and that the horrors of the last week can be put to the backs of their minds. Unfortunately, it may well be impossible to forget those horrors completely. Is that not a dreadful indictment of us all?

We must not forget that the basic element to be addressed in this situation is fear. The fear of the children, the fear of the parents, the fear of both communities, fears for the present and fears for the future. If we do not address those fears in all their complexities, nothing but further violence can result.

I hope and pray that the children will have only dim and distant memories of their experience.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member’s time is up.

Mr Agnew: On my way to the House this morning I thought to myself that it would be nice if we were able to speak in moderate tones about the terrible events of last week, and how sorry we were that all of

this had happened. Then we come here and hear so many dishonest statements by Sinn Féin about the situation in Ardoyne.

Strangely enough, we are told that most of the damage is being done to the Nationalist and Roman Catholic community. There is not one person on this side of the House who would not decry any such activities. The truth of the matter, however, is something entirely different. All the violence that we have seen in north Belfast in June, July and August has come from one source. It has all been highly orchestrated and organised. That is a fact.

During the past week we have seen the Protestant community in upper Ardoyne being demonised and made out to be some sort of monsters because of what has been happening in their area. Let me make it clear. In front of me I have 10 pages of incidents in the Twaddell Avenue area alone. These incidents did not happen over the past two or three weeks or months; they go back to the 1970s. These pages have been kept by a resident of Twaddell Avenue. They represent a catalogue of incidents that have been visited on her home and those of her neighbours over the past 25 years, including petrol bombings, riots, and broken windows. Why has that been forgotten? For purely political reasons. We have to describe today as a sad day, and, as a Protestant I have not been happy with the events of the past week. I have seen a good deal happen in this society. Last Monday morning I stood alongside Billy Hutchinson and heard him being threatened by some of those coming up from Ardoyne.

What we saw last Monday morning was a parade of Provos into a Protestant area, and that has been forgotten. More Provos have walked up Ardoyne Road every morning, taking children to school, than have school children. That is a fact, but we still hear nonsense from these people.

None of us is happy about the violence and protests, because such activity is largely self-defeating. Nevertheless, they have taken place because people from that community have been forgotten and their grievances ignored. It has been forgotten that they cannot go to the post office to collect their pension; or to the library in Ardoyne; or to the shops to buy groceries. Those are legitimate grievances. They cannot walk down the main arterial route, yet others can walk through a Protestant area.

Why are people walking from upper Ligoniel, past the back entrance to the school, and gathering at the Ardoyne shops to walk up to the front entrance? Every morning these people come into the area for one reason alone: to intimidate and antagonise a Protestant community. Members of that community have no objection to school children's going to school; around a dozen children have been using the front entrance to

the school for years. The others have been using the rear entrance, which is handy for car parking and so on. For the large part, these points have been ignored.

Let there be no mistake that these activities have been orchestrated by Provisional Sinn Féin. Why? We must record the simple answer and call a spade a spade: it is all about ethnic cleansing. They want the Prods out of upper Ardoyne, and they want those houses for their own people. It is not a coincidence that this is happening throughout north Belfast.

It is Protestant homes that are being attacked and are lying empty in the Tigers Bay and White City areas. It is Protestant, not Roman Catholic, homes that are being visited and bombed as part of this violence. The evidence is there for everyone to see. Last week the tragic death of a young boy took place. On the previous night three homes in the Whitewell Road area were damaged by Republican mobs from the Longlands area.

The Protestant people in isolated communities in north Belfast have been under constant attack for some time. Those attacks have been cleverly orchestrated as part of what I suggest is an insidious plan to ethnically cleanse the Protestant community from parts of north Belfast. That community suffers the same social and economic problems as the Roman Catholic community. However, this community has, for the large part, been forgotten because its suffering is regarded as if it were part of something sectarian. It is nothing of the sort.

Mr B Hutchinson: I support the amendment in the name of Danny Kennedy. Problems exist in schools across north Belfast, but Members are focusing on Holy Cross Primary School today. I remind Members that the problem did not start last week; it started on 19 June. It seems that people do not realise that.

It sometimes sickens me to listen to MLAs who, having merely watched events on television rather than seeing them at first hand, come here with their written speeches and tell us all about it. I have been in that area every day and night for over 12 weeks. On 19 June a parent carried out an attack on people in this community. When he returned with others in his car to continue the attack, and when parents left their children in the street, it was Protestant women who took the Catholic children back into the school for their own safety. That is a fact that people should remember.

We could quote story after story, and I am sure that Sinn Féin Members could do likewise, but that would not resolve the problem. Irrespective of whether the SDLP believes this to be a plot against all Catholics, if Protestants wanted to stop children from going to Catholic schools, they need only move 50 yards to the right. On the Crumlin Road they will find the Little Flower, St Gabriel's and Our Lady of Mercy schools.

All of those schools have continued to operate. None of them have been involved in stoppages, blockages or pickets. They have been allowed to go on as normal. I am sure that the other MLAs in North Belfast, not just me, have at some time spoken to the principals of those schools — probably with the exception of the Little Flower — about the behaviour of some of the secondary school pupils or their parents. Since I have been an elected representative I have had those discussions.

1.15 pm

Members must focus on the problem. Some adults accompanying the children to Holy Cross Primary School are acting in a sectarian manner; physical and verbal abuse have been doled out. The two communities must get into dialogue to resolve the problem.

The Education Minister is in the House today. Members should probably be talking about post-primary education rather than Holy Cross Primary School, but unfortunately they are not. If there is anything to be learned about pickets of schools, Sinn Féin can teach us a lesson or two. Do Members remember the Pushkin Prize and a school in Armagh being picketed?

What will happen when members of the new Police Service of Northern Ireland are invited into Catholic schools by the Catholic Church? How many pickets will there be then on Catholic schools? How many Catholic children and their parents will be prevented from going to school?

I stood on the Ardoyne Road in June and saw Nationalists prevent a group of Travelling children who wanted to get to school from doing so. Sky television captured those pictures. People who had the luxury of watching Sky television that day told me that the events were not covered. One must ask why people capture what they do on television.

There is a case in Galway where pupils or their parents do not want Travelling people in their school, but I do not hear too many people complaining about that. I have not seen many members of Sinn Féin or the SDLP from up here rushing down to support those Travellers. That is racist. But of course it is only racist or sectarian when it comes from this community.

Members, political leaders and community leaders in Ardoyne need to recognise the sectarianism that exists. Until that is recognised, the problem will never be solved. The people in Glenbryn have a legitimate case which should be heard, as do the people in Ardoyne who walk their children to school. However, it is the two communities that need to talk this out and nobody should stand in the way of that dialogue. For 12 weeks the communities have been unable to do this. Political leaders must encourage the two communities

to sit down and have dialogue. That is the only way forward.

It is said that the core issue is about the children not getting to school. That might be the core issue for the Nationalist community; it is not the issue in Glenbryn. The issue in Glenbryn is that there are adults — not parents — accompanying those children to school who have prevented people in that area from going about their daily lives.

Ms Morrice: I rise with a feeling of terrible shame. That shame is not based on how the world has watched the scenes that have taken place in north Belfast over the past week. Rather, it is based on the obvious fact that we as a people, as politicians, as mothers and fathers and as a society have not done enough for our children. Mixed with my shame is an incredible sense of responsibility for what has gone on. Now more than ever, Members must redouble their efforts to bring Northern Ireland to its sanity. If they do not, they condemn another generation and another and another to exactly what we have suffered — hatred, bigotry, violence, bloodshed, anger, suspicion, and sectarianism. The Assembly cannot let that happen. Politicians must stand together. We must speak out. We must learn from each other, understand and deal with this together.

We all know that dialogue holds the key. The process of dialogue that was initiated over the summer was an important beginning. However, as Billy Hutchinson and others have said, that process must be given the space to work, and it needs to happen fast. The House welcomes the fact that it will start again this week.

Media coverage has been referred to. It is essential to recognise that media coverage can distort the way we are. This matter must be dealt with at community level and through the political and community representatives, not through cameras and microphones. The local community and the people at the grass roots are what matter. We have been trying to contact them to find out whom they want as their representatives to get the dialogue going. That is essential.

It is important that we address the issues of economic and social problems, deprivation and poverty. However, we must also address, as a matter of urgency, the issue of sectarianism, which is rife throughout our society.

In July this year the Women's Coalition put forward a proposal to the Secretary of State recommending the creation of a commission on sectarian violence. We have a list of aims and objectives for the commission. These are to examine the frequency and nature of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland and the existing approaches by statutory agencies, including the police, and the range of community and voluntary organisations, to the violence.

We must explore the development of dynamics at interface areas and pay particular attention to local practices that increase tensions, such as graffiti and flags, and the issues relating to areas where young people gather. We must explore the effectiveness of community relations and see how well cross-community projects in interface areas are working. We must examine the differences between sectarian violence in rural areas and sectarian violence in urban areas. We must look at best practice in peace building and community relations and offer a broad strategic overview for dealing with communal violence and promoting peace building.

The situation in north Belfast has highlighted the need to get to grips with sectarianism and incidents of violence. We do not believe that sectarian violence has to be an inevitable part of life in Northern Ireland. There is no acceptable level of violence. It can be tackled, it must be tackled, and it must be reduced.

We accept that it is a complex and difficult issue for our society, but it must be addressed for the sake of those living in fear. A commission would explore those issues —

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

Mr McCartney: I have not the slightest hesitation in condemning the blockade of children attempting to attend Holy Cross Primary School. It is unacceptable and it is wrong. However, I think that we should look at the underlying causes.

In the late 1940s and in the 1950s I walked every day from the lower Shankill through the heart of the lower Falls to Grosvenor High School behind the Royal Victoria Hospital. At the same time boys attending St Malachy's got off the bus at the Falls Road end of Dover Street. They walked up Dover Street across the lower Shankill and made their way up Denmark Street to St Malachy's. In neither case were any of them interfered with, and I have no recollection of any difficulty.

From 1962 to 1969 I lived in a housing estate in Dunmurry. My next door neighbours were a Catholic family. I could not have had better neighbours; they took my children to school from time to time, and I took theirs.

However, as a result of the so-called peace process, the community is more bitterly divided than at any other time. The bogus peace process has not brought peace; it has segregated and divided the communities into their respective ghettos and has created small enclaves of Protestants and Catholics who are under pressure from the dominant group to which they are adjacent.

Ms McWilliams: We grew up together.

Mr McCartney: Yes, we did all grow up together. We grew up together in a better place than Northern Ireland is today. We grew up in a less vicious, a less

sectarian, a less divided place. Although I support, as everyone must, the right of school children to have access to their place of education, I deplore the nauseating hypocrisy of Gerry Kelly. Gerry Kelly, who murdered people, who murdered an anaesthetist, who placed and who helped to place bombs where they would go off indiscriminately — perhaps murdering children — represents and has been part of an organisation that has orphaned and widowed hundreds of people. That he should come here and prattle about the rights of children — a right that everyone acknowledges — must be the height of hypocrisy.

We have Mr Alban Maginness talking about the core issue. The core issue is the process that the people of the Protestant Unionist community recognise is directed towards a transitional arrangement for a united Ireland. They have become fearful for their future. In many areas they are being subjected to Nationalist triumphalism and are reacting as all fearful people do.

Something has to be done about the underlying causes that produce the terrible symptoms that have manifested themselves in the events around Holy Cross Primary School. However, that is not the issue. The issue is the so-called peace process that indicates the cynicism of both Governments. The Irish Government want to achieve a united Ireland and the British Government want to offload a part of the United Kingdom that has become difficult to manage. There has been prattle about what the so-called peace process has delivered. It has delivered nothing but division and increasing bitterness. Yes, there are jobs for many people, such as the Women's Coalition, which witters on about lofty sentiments that have absolutely no connection with people's real fears.

We have to stop the Holy Cross Primary School situation and we have to do something about violent people such as Gerry Kelly and those on the Loyalist side who dominate those communities and who use children for their own purposes.

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

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I welcome Robert McCartney's forthright statement that the blockade of Holy Cross Primary School is wrong and should cease. However, I was disappointed by many other Unionist speakers, both this morning and in the past week. They have failed to give clear leadership and advice to the Glenbryn community in dealing with its problems and its perception of a protest that has created more victims to add to our history of victims across many decades. New victims were made last week of children of four years of age and upwards from a primary school. We have to deal with that failure of leadership.

The image of the North that went across the globe was of sickening, ugly sectarianism. The question is,

is that an accurate judgement of this place or is it wrong? I do not think that it is. I accept that sectarianism exists across the board, but I believe that there is a basic sectarianism in this place which, from its formation in the 1920s, has defined politics ever since.

1.30 pm

We could discuss again the 50 years of one-party rule, or the Unionists, who were absolutely secure in the belief that it was their right to rule and that this place would exist unchanged and under their domination for ever. Yet they had such a lack of confidence as to persecute and inflict discrimination on the Nationalist community, and to deal with them as a second-class community over that period. Therein lies the clue to the difficulties we have now.

It was illuminating and useful that Robert McCartney addressed the implications of the peace process. I can empathise with his analysis that the people of the Unionist community are no longer certain of the future, and they react as people who interpret the peace process as a transition to a united Ireland. Republicans have the same view, but we take a positive perspective on it. It is legitimate for others to take a different perspective. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged as a legitimate aspiration. It is a normal aspiration — it is not threatening. It is not a justification for people to behave in the way that they did last week. I do not argue that the residents of Glenbryn are untypical. We have had some references to examples in the past. From time to time it is useful to remind ourselves of this so that we do not develop a single or holier-than-thou perspective on this problem. We all have problems to deal with. However, last week represented a singular failure of political leadership at a vital moment.

David Ervine made a pertinent comment which resonated with me; he said that it was a cry for help. I acknowledge that, because so often we have had to deal with pain in our community. We have had to deal with people reacting in particular ways to that pain. However, at all times there is a need to give leadership and to demonstrate that there is a way of dealing with these problems that does not involve creating more victims.

I do not know the people in the images we saw last week, but some of them may be grandmothers — they were of that age. Were they born with those attitudes? No more than those children who were attempting to go to school last week were born with sectarian attitudes. What is it about our society that has created this? What are we doing now to prevent it? If there is more overt sectarianism in our society, is it not to be understood as a knee-jerk or atavistic reaction to a process of peaceful change?

I see some political representatives sniggering at the idea that they have a duty to give responsible leadership and to help people understand that a process of change

is inevitable. In the circumstances of our shared history of conflict, it is essential. If we could all embrace this process of change, it would become easier and less painful. Let us put a stop to creating more and more victims.

The Acting Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate for two reasons. First, it gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to the principal, staff and board of governors of the Holy Cross school. I take the opportunity to do this because, as a teacher for many years, I know the type of pressures that this imposes on the teaching profession. Thank heavens they have been able to give the type of guidance that is wise and in the interests of the children.

Secondly, we should be looking forward as positively as we can. Throughout the summer the community relations unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister worked with the Department of Education, the Community Relations Council for Northern Ireland, the Mediation Network of Northern Ireland and other bodies and people to ensure a peaceful return to school. Despite their efforts they were unsuccessful.

In view of the events of last week, it has been necessary to put those efforts on a more public footing and in a wider context. Hence, the initiative in seeking a meeting with the Secretary of State and the agreement of Friday that we work together. Hence, the work that is now under way to establish a formal mechanism for dialogue to address a full range of local social, economic and community issues both now and in the longer term. Although that dialogue must essentially be between the groups at local level, it will of necessity involve the Executive and the Secretary of State.

I do not want to be prescriptive at this stage about the nature and form of that dialogue. That would not be helpful. Officials have instead been asked to begin a process of careful preparation. We want to build on and facilitate — not cut across existing measures and initiatives. The focus should be firmly on local issues.

North Belfast must not be used as a boxing ring for settling the wider pressures, conflicts and scores throughout Northern Ireland or as a pawn in a wider political context. What must be clear is that those efforts can only be effective if a peaceful and constructive atmosphere is created. It is time for everyone to de-escalate, not ratchet things up. I note and agree with the observations made by Bishop Walsh that there should be no need for supporters of the children and their parents. The fewer the numbers on both sides on the Ardoyne Road, the better.

It is self-evident that forms of protest that intimidate young children on the way to school are damaging the prospects of dialogue. They are damaging the reputation

of the community on whose behalf the protests are being made, and of north Belfast as a whole. They are also damaging the efforts of the Executive to promote the regeneration of that area and the image and standing of Northern Ireland throughout the world.

I am glad that the Executive will be discussing the situation at its next meeting. Colleagues will be asked to review their policies and programmes on north Belfast and to ensure that we make the maximum contribution to addressing the issues on all sides. The Executive will review the issues of housing, education, social development and community relations, and Ministers across the parties will be able to contribute positively. I hope that a further statement will then be made to the Assembly.

I conclude with the one thing that we have in common. We all have children. We are all parents. We have all dealt with young people. Let us now take this opportunity to address all the roots of the problems, however those roots are perceived, in such a way that that common factor, the welfare of young people, will be our priority as and from now.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is interesting to note that a report by Prof Liam Kennedy which was issued last month contained an analysis of the age and gender of victims of paramilitary punishments in Northern Ireland. A summary of his report, to be laid before the House of Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, states that punishment shootings of children, as well as brutal assaults, are much more prevalent in Northern Irish society than was previously thought. Principally, the UDA, the UFF, the Provisional IRA and the UVF, which are all connected to the so-called peace process, carry them out. The Provisional IRA has targeted children to a greater extent than Protestant paramilitaries. That is part of the summary of an up-to-date report.

I am very glad that I am not supported by the 'Belfast Telegraph', nor does Lindy McDowell agree with me religiously or politically, but the Nationalist community should perhaps listen to what she said:

"In nationalist areas the protest would never have happened. The wealthy, powerful Sinn Fein would of course have handled the residents differently. Sinn Fein is hot on claiming victimhood.

All week Gerry Kelly (trivialising the horror of the segregation and degradation of African Americans by comparing it to a squalid local turf war) has been rattling on about Alabama and the back of the bus. This is the same Gerry Kelly who is connected to the same Republican Movement which over the years has deposited many a pound of Semtex at the back of many a bus. The IRA, let us not forget, once shot dead a school bus driver in front of the children he was taking to school. No worries about children's rights there. I attended a tiny rural primary school. A ten-year-old girl a few years after me was murdered by the IRA, blown to pieces along with her father as she too was being taken to school. Which is why I find the sight of Martin McGuinness wringing his hands about the rights of innocent children so vomit inducing.

Many will have noted" —

and I have noted even in this debate —

"that the killing of a 16-year-old Protestant boy this week didn't even make the national news. If Tom McDonald had been a Catholic, would it not have made headlines across the world? There is no excuse for thugs and bullies who terrorise little children. Rightly the world's spotlight has been turned on those who do. But what about the people with genuine grievances who cannot get their voices heard? By ignoring them, aren't we sending a dangerous message?"

There has been much cant and humbug all over about the tragic happenings that have taken place. For a long time I, with my colleagues, have been pushing the standing of Protestant people in those areas, but the ears of Ministers and Westminster have been closed to them. The time has come not only to listen to those people's grievances but to deal with them. We hear the IRA crying aloud about how children are treated, and we think of how it has treated the whole community in past years.

I have no intention of obeying the summons from a man by the name of Mailey who has told me that as a leader I must go to a meeting. A man who shoots a policeman dead is not a man with whom I do business.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid the Member's time is up.

Mr Adams: All people, all children, whether Protestant or Catholic or of no religion whatsoever, have the right to live, to move freely, to shop and to be educated where they want. I have made it very clear that my position is one of sympathy with the family of Thomas McDonald, and I do so again today.

I have listened intently to what our friends on the Unionist Benches have said. They too need to listen to what they have said and to the type of message and signal that they are sending from this Floor. The proposal deals with the Holy Cross school, because the pupils of that school are victims of a blockade. I commend the teaching staff, the pupils, the families and all who are caught up in that situation. The blockade is wrong and should be ended.

1.45 pm

I listened intently to Nigel Dodds, Ian Paisley and Danny Kennedy, and even if everything that they say is true and accurate, what relevance has it to young school children? Ian Paisley and Robert McCartney say that Gerry Kelly had no right to put the proposal forward. The people of north Belfast gave him that right. Unionist speakers rail against the image presented to the world of sectarian, anti-Catholic action against young people. That is an accurate image. Those who have made their political careers from sectarianism — most famously the previous Member who spoke, Ian Paisley — must reflect on their roles since the 1960s

in creating the depressing situation and difficulties that are visited upon all of us.

We are told that the blockade is a cry for help from the Unionist and Loyalist section of people in north Belfast. What does that say about their representatives? What does it say about those who represent Unionism and Loyalism in Belfast and in the Six Counties? I, and others, are prepared for dialogue. It is an untruth to say that there has been no dialogue. There was dialogue, and attempts were made during the summer and before that to reach some understanding about the situation. What we have heard today from the Unionist representatives are excuses. We must be clear that sectarianism, racism, prejudice and bigotry are wrong. The House should unite in sending that message from here today — whatever else it is divided on, whether it is ideology, the constitutional question, or social matters.

It is important that Republicans listen to what the Unionist and Loyalist people of north Belfast and other places are saying. They clearly suffer the same social deprivations and disadvantage — albeit from a different historical route — as people from the Nationalist parts of Belfast. However, to rectify those rights they must be prepared to sit down and put the onus where it belongs: on Government, whether in London or in this place. They must stop treating young children and their parents as pawns.

A good start could be made here today if Members say that the blockade is wrong and should be lifted. Failure to do that will encourage the bigots, the rejectionists and the other good people who are caught up in the situation. Therefore, I ask for support for the proposal. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: Unfortunately Mr Cobain has been taken quite ill. I will represent his views as best I can. I am indebted to Dr McDonnell, who has left the Chamber to help Mr Cobain. Therefore, please excuse me if this is not quite to the same quality as it would have been had Mr Cobain delivered it.

The situation in north Belfast is symptomatic of a much wider problem affecting that area. There is a need to find solutions to that overall problem. North Belfast is riddled with endemic social and economic problems that are probably the worst in Northern Ireland. A recent Housing Executive report showed that north Belfast has some of the worst housing in western Europe. The report highlighted the fact that such is the appalling condition of housing in north Belfast, the Housing Executive needs to spend about £135 million over the next seven years to put those conditions right.

With regard to education, a majority of children in north Belfast leave school without any formal qualifications. They face the problem of trying to find work in a society where holding some sort of qualification is becoming more important and more likely to be a

requirement. Many pupils in north Belfast have problems with basic numeracy and literacy.

With regard to health, life expectancy is lower for those who live in north Belfast. The area faces endemic problems. There is a need for additional resources in the areas of health, education and housing to address some of these problems, not just in Ardoyne but throughout north Belfast, if we are not to see the type of scenes that we have witnessed over the past week to 10 days re-enacted in other parts of north Belfast.

A community infrastructure needs to be rebuilt across the whole area. Capacity building and community development are needed. The community needs a facility where it can come together to discuss and devise strategies to tackle the problems. Mr Cobain wishes to make it clear that he supports the proposals announced by the acting First Minister and the Secretary of State. He is pleased that they have followed his calls for the possible establishment of a forum.

If any area in Northern Ireland deserves to have immediate attention paid to the serious and deep-rooted problems that it faces, it is north Belfast. The problems can only be solved by the community working together. For that reason it is important to create the capacity and the mechanisms in the community to enable it to do that.

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

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. This is a crucial and overdue debate, and I am grateful to Gerry Kelly for tabling the motion on this important issue. However, as Minister of Education and as a parent, this is a debate that I hoped and prayed we would never need to have. As other Members have said, throughout the sad history of the troubles — even when the conflict was at its height — schools remained havens of peace where children were protected from events outside. Children could come to school without interference and in the knowledge that regardless of what was happening elsewhere, they would be taught in a safe and secure environment. It is deeply regrettable that this privilege has not been afforded to the young children of Holy Cross Primary School — or Wheatfield Primary School, which has also been affected by the events of the past miserable and distressing week.

Who could ever forget the appalling scenes, transmitted across the world last week, of terrified children aged four, five and six screaming in fear and clinging to their parents? Tears were streaming down their cheeks, while grown adults screamed sectarian abuse, spat and threw missiles at them. Who could ever forget the terror on their faces, and their parents' faces, when a blast bomb exploded beside them? Who could ever forget that these were just little children starting back to school at the beginning of a new school year?

In an incident not connected with schools, Thomas McDonald, himself a school boy, was killed, and I wish to extend my sincerest condolences to his sorrowing family.

On Thursday there was an attack on pupils travelling home from Cliftonville Primary School. Let us be clear and unequivocal — protests affecting school children, whether they involve throwing bombs or missiles, sectarian chanting, blowing whistles, letting off klaxon horns or turning backs, are completely unacceptable and must stop.

I believe I speak for the vast majority of people when I say that all children have the right to travel to school unhindered and without fear, and to be educated in an environment where they feel safe, secure, and ready and able to learn. It is the responsibility of everyone in society — but particularly of elected representatives — to guard and maintain that right.

Unfortunately there has been a marked failure by some Members to shoulder this responsibility. Although this issue first emerged in June, it was not adequately addressed over the summer. When it erupted again last Monday, on the first day of the new term, it fell to the parents, the teachers, the school governors and school authorities to pick up the pieces. They responded magnificently in the most difficult and uncertain circumstances, and they deserve the utmost credit. The children are always the teachers' priority, and each day staff in both schools affected by this situation have ensured that the children are reassured, settled down and quickly introduced to the comforting routine of the school day. Given the circumstances, it is humbling and a tribute to the skill and professionalism of the principals and teachers of Holy Cross Primary School and Wheatfield Primary School that normal lessons have continued and the children have been able to progress their learning despite the stresses and strains of the past week.

A vital role has also been played by the statutory education authorities — the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Belfast Education and Library Board, and officials from my Department — in working in a closely co-ordinated manner to provide advice, guidance and support to the schools caught up in the middle of this community conflict. These agencies and the two schools have come together as a group in order to identify and put in place practical measures to assist the teachers and children in dealing with the immediate and longer-term impacts of this stressful situation.

Schools of all types across the North have been in contact with Holy Cross Primary School to express their horror at what the children and staff have to endure and to offer their support.

As Education Minister, I have been extremely heartened and proud to see the wider education

community once again pulling together in the face of adversity to assert and maintain the basic right of children to education. That has been one of the positive things to come out of this dreadful situation. I applaud all those who raised their voices against this protest and called for it to end.

From the outset courageous leadership was shown by church leaders, including those from the Protestant community, who spoke out in such a forthright manner against the attacks on the Holy Cross children.

I said in a press conference in Ardoyne last Tuesday that this was a community issue that could not be left to the schools, authorities and the parents to sort out, and that there was a responsibility on politicians and community leaders, particularly those representing the local area, to get discussions going and reach an accommodation. Since then there have been calls for a resolution from all the political parties, and I particularly welcome the statement from the Education Committee affirming the right of children to travel to and from school free from interference, abuse or obstruction. Clearly there are wider issues of concern to both communities in Ardoyne which have not been addressed and have spawned a highly charged context to the current dispute. These must be tackled as part of a long-term solution, and this can only be achieved through the immediate commencement of dialogue between the two communities.

This is a task for local politicians and community leaders. It is not a task for children, schoolteachers and boards of governors, who must immediately be relieved of the terrible pressures that they face every day.

2.00 pm

The protest is wrong — it is untenable and must stop immediately. Although the situation has improved a little in recent days, and I am encouraged by the progress that has been made, much still remains to be done. I therefore sincerely appeal to everyone in the Assembly, to community leaders and to people of influence outside the House to do everything in their power to resolve the dispute immediately and restore to the children of Holy Cross and Wheatfield the safe, secure and normal educational environment to which they are entitled. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kennedy: I hope that I will have an opportunity to address the many points raised by Members. There were some points with which I agreed, and others with which I could not agree because of the way in which they were made. It has been a healthy exercise for the Assembly to consider the issue. I was rather surprised that Alban Maginness — and indeed Mr Mallon, the acting Deputy First Minister — said, on behalf of the SDLP, that they could not support my amendment. I remind the House of the reason why I put down the amendment: I believe that it is a basic right for all

children — in Holy Cross, in Wheatfield, in north Belfast, in Newry and Armagh and in all parts of Northern Ireland — to attend school in a completely peaceful environment. I cannot see why the SDLP cannot support that. I can only conclude that in some way it is, as usual, running scared of Sinn Féin. That is a matter of huge regret, given that Mr Alban Maginness and Mr Mallon both made a contribution to the debate. On behalf of my party, I want to express condolences to the McDonald family, who were mentioned by Mr Dodds.

Several Members did not actually refer to the amendment. They preferred to address themselves to the main motion, or to what they thought the main motion represented. It will be interesting to see where political parties and individuals will stand at the conclusion. I readily accept the points made by Members for North Belfast, such as Mr Agnew and Mr Billy Hutchinson, who are rightly concerned about organised campaigns conducted against the local Protestant community. They have to deal with that at the coalface and hear genuine concerns expressed by members of the local Unionist population.

I agree with Mr Mallon that things should not be ratcheted up. Many Members have attempted not to do that, while others have used terms that are highly damaging. I hope that people will reflect on what has been said. Dr Paisley was right to refer to the report by Prof Liam Kennedy highlighting the damage done to school children and young people, over a period of many years, by Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries.

I thank my Colleague, Tom Hamilton, who stood in for Mr Cobain, the Ulster Unionist Member for North Belfast. Many points raised in that speech should be seriously and urgently considered. I welcome the proposals from the Executive and the Secretary of State and hope that they can be speedily implemented.

The Minister of Education has a highly selective memory: he appears not to remember the many appalling incidents that affected school children and teachers over the years. Regrettably, he did not acknowledge them. Consideration must be given to the staff and everyone associated with Holy Cross Girls' School and Wheatfield Primary School. North Belfast is not Alabama, and attempts to create a Palestinian West Bank scenario should be avoided.

Mr G Kelly: I will ignore the vitriol of the debate, the personal attacks on me and all the stuff about Sinn Féin; it is irrelevant to the blockade on children going to a school. The Assembly must come to a conclusion. Danny Kennedy said that I welcomed the media support and that a peaceful protest was acceptable; I did not say that. I said that any protest, even if it was peaceful, was not acceptable if it were against children.

Numerous people spoke about Thomas McDonald, who was tragically killed. The parents of the Holy

Cross children were the first to show solidarity with that grieving family. They delayed their walk to the school for approximately 20 minutes; so that a prayer meeting could take place. They did not want to interfere with that. They then arranged an inter-denominational prayer with the Rev Norman Hamilton and others at the school. People need to know that there was understanding of the grief of that family.

I am against any sectarian attack on schools, children or the homes of anyone, be they Protestant, Catholic, any other denomination or none. It is wrong. I am against attacks on churches — and there have been many — as are Republicans. Dialogue did take place, but it did not work, and there was no conclusion. The dialogue lasted for approximately six weeks. Billy Hutchinson and I were there at the start of it in the Ardoyne, and we encouraged people to take part. A third party, Mediation Network, was then introduced, but the dialogue broke down. I will not talk about how it broke down. We were also involved with Loyalist politicians, trying to get fuller dialogue, because the Glenbryn residents said that nobody was listening to them. We tried to set up other dialogue, with representatives of the residents — as opposed to the parents — of the Ardoyne talking to the residents of Glenbryn in Belfast Castle. The venue was pipe bombed by the UDA.

Unionists make little reference to the fact that the UDA is deeply involved and is trying to wind things up with blast bomb and gun attacks. Frazer Agnew was more or less ranting that all the parents were Provos. I assume that that is his way of saying that they are all IRA members. That is an exceptionally, unbelievably dangerous attitude for him to take. That is the position of the UDA, and, under the name of the Red Hand Defenders, the UDA has made death threats against all the children and the parents. It is unacceptable for him to say such a thing in the Assembly. He should withdraw it because it turns people into targets. He is saying that they are all Republicans; they are not. It does not matter whether they are: they are parents trying to defend their children.

It may be of interest to Mr Agnew, who also accused the residents of Ardoyne and others of being involved in a type of ethnic cleansing, that if he reads the book 'The UVF' he will find that Glenbryn was a mixed area. The first threats, which were not from the UDA, in the late 1960s — when Rev Ian Paisley was at the peak of his young bigotry — were in the form of letters to Catholic houses in Glenbryn from the UVF, telling the occupants that they should leave the area. That was the intimidation then. We now have an entirely Protestant area, because Catholics were intimidated out of it. That should put the record straight.

Unionism is in denial. We went through the entire debate and did not deal with the UDA. People have said that the blockade is wrong — which is good —

but Unionism is in denial about the political process. Unionists are trying to bring the institutions down, and now they are in denial about what everyone can see from their television screen is a blockade of a Catholic girls' primary school. They must get real.

Nigel Dodds and Billy Hutchinson mentioned that only one school had been attacked. They said that if the problem really was bigotry, other schools could be attacked and blockaded. That is equivalent to a bully saying, "I beat up only one person. If I were really a bully, I would beat up three or four people." That is a ridiculous argument. When Danny Kennedy moved his amendment, I started to worry whether he thought that other schools in the area would be attacked. If so, that is also a dangerous situation.

Everyone has agreed that there should be dialogue. Everyone has agreed that children should not be stopped from going to school. If everyone in the Assembly is agreed on that, all parties should join together in support of this motion and make it difficult, if not impossible, for the people who are involved in the blockade to continue it. Go raibh míle maith agat.

2.15 pm

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48; Noes 43

AYES

Ian Adamson, Fraser Agnew, Billy Armstrong, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Paul Berry, Esmond Birnie, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Joan Carson, Wilson Clyde, Fred Cobain, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Nigel Dodds, Reg Empey, David Ervine, Sam Foster, Oliver Gibson, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, William Hay, David Hilditch, Derek Hussey, Billy Hutchinson, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, David McClarty, William McCrea, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Maurice Morrow, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Iris Robinson, Ken Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, David Trimble, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Cedric Wilson, Jim Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

NOES

Gerry Adams, Alex Attwood, Eileen Bell, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Seamus Close, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Bairbre De Brun, Arthur Doherty, Pat Doherty, Mark Durkan, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Tommy Gallagher, Michelle Gildernew, Carmel Hanna, Gerry Kelly, John Kelly, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Alex Maskey, Kieran McCarthy, Donovan McClelland, Alasdair McDonnell, Barry McElduff, Eddie McGrady, Martin McGuinness, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Eugene McMenamin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Conor Murphy, Mick Murphy, Mary Nelis, Dara

O'Hagan, Eamonn O'Neill, Sue Ramsey, Brid Rodgers, John Tierney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly supports the right to education of school children attending all schools throughout north Belfast.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Mr Speaker: I have received a request from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, to make a personal statement.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): In answer to an earlier question from the hon Member for North Antrim (Dr Paisley) about the opening of the Brussels Office, I said that invitations had been issued only to the Northern Ireland permanent secretaries. That was incorrect. I have subsequently discovered that a further six invitations were issued, including invitations to two European MEPs, a member of staff of a MEP and to two members of ECOSOC (European Parliament Economic and Social Committee). Therefore, I correct that answer. Invitations were not issued to the wider range of people who were likely to be invited. It is not uncommon for people's diaries in Europe to be noted about forthcoming events, but Mr Mallon and I agreed that the opening should take place later this year.

I wanted to correct the statement that I made earlier, and I apologise for the factual error to you, Mr Speaker, and to the hon Member.

Mr Speaker: As is normal practice and as the Minister's statement relates to a question raised by Dr Paisley, I call Dr Paisley.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I trust that at some later time he will tell the House how much money was spent on issuing the invitations and then cancelling all the arrangements.

The sitting was suspended at 2.28 pm.

On resuming —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Bloomfield Report

1. **Mr Ford** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister if they will make a statement on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Bloomfield Report. (AQO 19/01)

The Acting Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): The Bloomfield Report made 20 recommendations — some generic and some specific. The devolved Administration and the Northern Ireland Office have responsibility for taking forward the recommendations in the devolved, reserved and excepted fields respectively. With regard to the generic recommendations, all Government Departments are represented on the interdepartmental working group set up to co-ordinate activity on victims' issues. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has recently published a consultation paper on a cross-departmental strategy aimed at facilitating the co-ordination and improvement of the delivery of services. Health boards have established trauma advisory panels and issued directories of services; the criminal injuries compensation system has been reviewed; a trauma centre has been established; issues relating to the disappeared have been taken forward; and a memorial fund has been established to assist victims in a variety of ways.

Mr Ford: It is unfortunate that the two junior Ministers with direct responsibility never seem able to come to the Assembly to answer for actions that, Members are told, are their responsibility.

Is the acting Deputy First Minister satisfied with the present level of communication with the Victims Liaison Unit of the Northern Ireland Office? As well as the cross-departmental strategy, the Programme for Government mentioned capacity building and victims' groups, contact with victims' groups, informing the community about the presence of the Victims Unit and assessing what improvements are needed. What further movements have taken place, given that those were all aims of the Programme for Government for this year?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I am sorry that the Member has to make do with Sir Reg Empey and myself in the absence of junior Ministers.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is responsible for all devolved matters, and the Northern Ireland Office is responsible for reserved and excepted matters. We appreciate that, sometimes, that is confusing, and an information leaflet was sent out at the end of January to victims' groups, individual victims and the victims' spokespersons of political parties. The leaflet set out the responsibilities of the respective units and the responsibilities of the devolved Government.

The exercise has produced positive feedback from a variety of groups and has been built on by the continuation of a rolling programme of visits to victims' groups by the staff in the Victims Unit. The consultation process addresses the issue of what the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Office need to do to ensure that victims know which part of Government to deal with.

Executive Meeting

2. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the date of the next Executive meeting. (AQO 4/01)

The Acting First Minister (Sir Reg Empey): The next meeting of the Executive will take place on Thursday 13 September 2001.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the acting First Minister assure the House that he will use the next meeting of the Executive to raise the objections to IRA/Sinn Féin's continued presence in the Executive that many members of his party voiced during the summer recess during the Colombian episode? If so, and if he is genuinely concerned, will he sign the motion for the exclusion of Sinn Féin that the DUP has tabled and has left with the Business Office?

The Acting First Minister: The hon Member will know that the Belfast Agreement put a series of obligations on parties that signed up to it. One of those obligations was that disarmament had to take place. That is long overdue. The Member will also know that under the rules, exclusions can be processed if there is cross-community support for them. I do not know what measures, other than tabling the motion, he has taken.

A few weeks ago, the Member said that he would not be part of any coalition that included any non-Unionist. I do not know whether his party shares that view, but I am conscious that any motion for exclusion requires cross-community support in the House. In 1998, the Prime Minister made certain commitments, publicly and in writing, to our party and to the public in 1998. I look to him to honour his commitments.

Programme for Government

3. **Ms Hanna** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail progress on the

development of the latest Programme for Government and to indicate how it will differ from last year's programme. (AQO 103/01)

The Acting Deputy First Minister: Under the Belfast Agreement, we agreed that each year the Executive would agree and review, as necessary, a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to the policies. That programme was scrutinised by Assembly Committees and approved by the Assembly. The process of reviewing and rolling forward the Programme for Government is under way.

An interdepartmental group representing Ministers met during the summer. It prepared a draft, which the Executive will consider this week. The drafting process has taken account of the comments made by Assembly Committees and others in response to the Executive's position report on the Programme for Government and Budget.

The revised Programme for Government will focus on the 2002-03 financial year. We plan to present it to the Assembly in draft form, together with the draft Budget, in the week commencing 24 September 2001. The present consensus, as was clear from the comments made by Committees, is that the broad priorities endorsed by the Assembly in March remain valid. However, a year's experience of administration may enable us to refine our analyses and strategic direction. We will also work to improve the public service agreements and to introduce new service delivery agreements.

Ms Hanna: Will the revised Programme for Government reinforce the fight against sectarianism, which is all too evident in our society and has been especially evident during the past week in Ardoyne?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: We all deplore the situation at Holy Cross Primary School. We ask everyone connected with that dispute to take a step back and put the interests of the children first. We must build a process to secure a long-term resolution, and we are working to see how that can be achieved.

Children cannot be allowed to suffer the unacceptable intimidation and abuse that we have witnessed recently. Such sectarian strife, which places children at the forefront, is the road to disaster for all of us. The problem is not just north Belfast's problem; it is a problem for all of us. Adults have failed the children by allowing it to happen. We must reflect carefully on how we can help to stop it now. The Executive have unanimously supported the efforts made locally to resolve those problems. We have worked closely with those trying to facilitate a resolution during the past few weeks, and we are continuing to do all that we can to make progress.

We will consider the first draft of the Programme for Government later this week, and we will consider

carefully the proposals that it might include on measures to tackle the deep and painful divisions in our society. We expect that those proposals will reflect and build on the progress that has already been made.

Victims' Strategy

4. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to comment on the review and changes to the delivery of front line services envisaged in the consultation paper on a victims' strategy. (AQO 53/01)

The Acting First Minister: The consultation paper on a victims' strategy was issued on 7 August 2001, and the consultation period is due to last until 9 November 2001. Until the period of consultation has ended and all replies have been received and evaluated, it would not be appropriate to determine which services in the relevant Departments or agencies will need to be considered.

In implementing the strategy, the Executive will take appropriate steps to ensure that service delivery is improved. Not all the changes will require financial solutions, and in some cases a change to existing work practices may be all that is needed.

Mr McGrady: I thank the acting First Minister for his reply. He referred to the consultation paper on the victims' strategy that was issued on 7 August. That paper said that 30 years of violence had left a devastating trail of victims with a wide range of symptoms and requirements. Can the acting First Minister give an indication about the adequacy of the funding? Will it be sufficient to address seriously and fundamentally the continuing trauma of those people?

The Acting First Minister: Funding is one of the issues on which, I hope, we can find common cause. As I said, it is not always a matter of resources; it is, perhaps, a question of people altering their procedures and having an awareness of the requirements. There are funds available under the Peace II proposals. As the Member will know, there is £6·67 million provided in the peace and reconciliation funding. We are also negotiating with the Northern Ireland Office about a sum of money in its budget that could be the subject of a transfer to our budget. That is an ongoing negotiation. The combination of those two aspects, along with the responses that we hope to receive in the consultation exercise, will provide us with a more effective delivery of service.

Disability Rights Task Force

5. **Mr McMennamin** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on consultations it has had to advance the work of the disability rights task force. (AQO 104/01)

The Acting Deputy First Minister: The Executive are committed to ensuring that disabled people have comprehensive and enforceable civil rights. The Programme for Government includes a number of initiatives and actions which will honour that commitment, including additional places on the access to work scheme and an increase in the number of adaptations to existing homes to make them more accessible for disabled people. Our consultation paper on the Northern Ireland Executive's detailed response to the recommendations in the disability rights task force report 'From Exclusion to Inclusion', apart from those concerning education, will be issued shortly. The disability rights task force set us a challenging agenda, and we believe its impressive report will play an important role in achieving equality of opportunity for disabled people in Northern Ireland.

Mr McMennamin: I welcome the acting Deputy First Minister's comments that it is a matter of enforceable civil rights for disabled people. I also welcome his commitment to the forthcoming consultation paper. Will we proceed to legislation as soon as possible? That has already been done in Britain, with the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.

The Acting Deputy First Minister: The Member makes a good point. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001, which takes forward the disability rights task force recommendations on education in Britain, received Royal Assent in May. Responsibility for taking forward the recommendations in Northern Ireland rests with the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning, and both Ministers have stated their commitment to introducing legislation. I understand that it is intended to issue a consultative document later this year about what should go into the Northern Ireland legislation.

Visit of Ambassador Haass

6. **Mr McFarland** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to state what plans have been made to meet United States Ambassador Haass during his visit to Belfast this week. (AQO 82/01)

The Acting First Minister: We can confirm that Ambassador Haass is due in Belfast on a two-day visit beginning tomorrow. His itinerary includes meetings with representatives from several of the main political parties, as well as a range of other engagements. Mr Mallon and myself expect to be present at separate meetings with the ambassador during the course of his visit.

Mr McFarland: Mr Haass today said that he was deeply disturbed over the arrests of the Republicans in Colombia, a country in which there are hundreds of American citizens and in which America spends billions of dollars.

Will the acting First Minister encourage the United States Government to take action against Sinn Féin in the USA if the case that the three Sinn Féin members were involved in training activity with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in Colombia is proven?

2.45 pm

The Acting First Minister: We all accept that the arrests introduce a deeply disturbing dimension to the situation. We talked earlier about three-, four- and five-year-old children having access to schools, which I support. However, we must remember that FARC kidnaps five-year-old children and holds them for six months. An American child was released only after police action.

We must also remember that those people make their living from pedalling death to young people in America and Europe through narcotics. Action has allegedly been taken by certain paramilitary organisations in our society against people who pedal drugs. Therefore, I cannot understand how others can consort with an organisation that makes its living from selling drugs and narcotics and from kidnapping young people. As a result, a huge problem has arisen. It is interesting to note that some Members who are normally so vocal have been silent about this.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The activities of the child-kidnapping, drug-running, anti-United States terrorists, who have been found in Colombia recently, alarm the people of the Province. At his meeting with Ambassador Richard N. Haass, will the acting First Minister urge the Ambassador to ensure that the United States Government will take action now to close the fund-raising door that is open to IRA/Sinn Féin?

The Acting First Minister: I said that Ambassador Haass would be meeting party representatives. I hope to be one of those representatives. I have already made personal representations to him along those lines. I have no difficulty in repeating them, because FARC is a dangerous organisation. It poses a threat not only to American activities in Colombia, but to western Europe and the United States through the pedalling of poison, which is primarily aimed at young people. FARC is an unsavoury organisation. There is no way that any involvement with it can be swept under the carpet. The American Administration are genuinely shocked, and there may be congressional hearings. Some of my Colleagues will take the opportunity to draw those matters to the attention of the American legislators this week.

Decommissioning

7. **Mr Trimble** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what reports have been received and whether consultations have taken

place between them and Her Majesty's Government on the issue of decommissioning. (AQO 122/01)

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I thank the Member for his question and for the little bit of nostalgia that accompanies it; it will, no doubt, develop into neuralgia before the question is over. The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) has reported to the British and Irish Governments five times this year, and those reports have been published. The latest report was dated 6 August 2001. We have not jointly consulted the British Government on the issue of decommissioning. However, our respective parties have met the British Government separately to discuss the matter.

Mr Trimble: The Minister will recall that, back in those happy days when we were participating in office together, we were severally consulted by the Government from time to time on the issue. It would be valuable if it could be confirmed that, in the run-up to August this year, we were told that both the British and Irish Governments had made it clear to the Republican movement that the actual fulfilment of its obligations — the commencement of actual decommissioning — was necessary and that engagement with the IICD and agreement on modalities — welcome though that would be — would not be sufficient by themselves.

Will the acting Deputy First Minister join me in appealing — even if it is to remarkably empty Benches — to the representatives of the Republican movement to ensure that their obligations are discharged in the course of the next few weeks and that they do not put the continued operation of the Assembly in peril?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: The Member will be aware that all participants in the Good Friday Agreement have agreed that the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) has responsibility for achieving the decommissioning element of the Good Friday Agreement. The commission can achieve that objective only by working with all paramilitary groups, and I call on all groups to engage intensively with the commission without further delay. The latest IICD report reflected progress in respect of IRA weaponry, and it was deeply unhelpful that that progress was overtaken by that group's withdrawal from contact with the IICD.

I agree with the statement that was made subsequent to that by the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, in which he anticipated the type of action that would deal with the issue, following the undertaking given to the IICD. Unfortunately, that action has not taken place, but the will of the people is that the matter be dealt with once and for all and in such a way that it will no longer damage the political process.

Alongside the resolution of decommissioning, we must also make progress on policing, the operation of the institutions and normalisation if we are to resolve all the difficulties facing the political process.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Does the acting Deputy First Minister not think it strange that, when the former First Minister was asked that question in this House, he hedged? Now he asks the same question. That is an interesting situation. When the Democratic Unionist Party met Gen de Chastelain, he said that the talks had not been called off and that the IRA had said that it had withdrawn its offer but had not ceased to keep the link. Why is he telling us the opposite today?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I note the Member's remark about the gamekeeper-turned-poacher. It is a strange situation, not without its piquancy.

I cannot answer for the independent commission about discussions that the Member and his party might have had. Broadly, the issue has had a festering effect on the political process. It has damaged it and has led to the type of suspicion and antagonism that we saw only too vividly last week. The issue must now, surely, be dealt with once and for all.

Mr Dallat: Does the acting Deputy First Minister share my frustration and disappointment that the latest IICD report was withdrawn in days? Will he, on behalf of all the people in Ireland who supported the Good Friday Agreement, urge the IRA forthwith to reinstate its offer to IICD?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I fully agree with the Member's comments. Decommissioning is an integral part of the Good Friday Agreement and must be addressed if we are to overcome our current difficulties. I have no hesitation about asking the IRA to deal with the issue in a way that will allow the full political potential of the Good Friday Agreement to be realised.

Programme for Government: Economic Issues

8. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, in view of the more difficult economic climate predicted for the year ahead, to indicate how the revised Programme for Government will address the issue. (AQO 101/01)

The Acting First Minister: With the priority of securing a competitive economy, the Executive have agreed an important set of measures that will provide the infrastructure and environment for economic growth. Simultaneously, we have placed strong emphasis on ensuring that we have the skills needed for a modern economy, through investment in education and skills.

The revised Programme for Government continues to refine those priorities and seeks to develop our

programmes. That will create a stronger economy so that we may provide appropriate support to those affected by the downturn in the global economy and respond to changing economic circumstances.

Mrs Courtney: Although I welcome the acting First Minister's assurance that support for those affected by the downturn will be forthcoming, does he recognise that the downturn is already being felt in the north-west through, for example, the loss of jobs at Calcast Ltd in Campsie last week? A comprehensive package of measures, including the provision of gas to the north-west, is required.

The Acting First Minister: It should never be said that an opportunity to get that one in was wasted. The Member will be aware that Colleagues in the Executive are discussing the provision of gas beyond Greater Belfast, and we hope to determine our policy on that soon.

There has been a history of difficulties with Calcast Ltd. Its current parent company undertook an investment programme that resulted in the provision of new machinery and production lines, and that has led to some job losses.

The economy changes all the time. Our job is to ensure that we have the best skills and infrastructure possible, to ensure that our companies remain competitive in world markets. As the Member knows, I am frequently in the north-west and in her city. I take a keen interest in the economy of that part of the Province, and I assure her that my departmental agencies are doing all that they can in co-operation with local authorities and other organisations in the area to create the best possible opportunities for job growth.

Colombian Terrorists/Irish Republicans

9. **Mrs Carson** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail if it has had any contact with the Administration of President Bush in respect of the apparent involvement of Irish Republicans with Colombian terrorists and, if so, have these contacts suggested that the President shares with me a sense of disappointment at this apparent involvement. (AQO 85/01)

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I have been informed that there has been contact between the acting First Minister's office and the United States Administration on that matter. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has ongoing contact with President Bush's Administration on a range of issues pertaining to political developments here.

Mrs Carson: Does the acting Deputy First Minister have any information on when the United States House of Representatives International Relations Committee

will hold hearings in Washington? Will the Executive send representatives to those hearings?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: I understand that no decision has been taken on whether the United States Congress International Relations Committee will hold hearings into the recent arrests in Colombia. Until that matter is decided on by that body, it would be impossible for the Executive to form a proper opinion on the second part of the question.

Mr Shannon: Does the acting Deputy First Minister intend to impress upon President Bush's Administration the depth of the concerns of people in the Province? Will he seek an assurance that specific action will be taken against IRA/Sinn Féin in all its activities in the USA, whether they be fund-raising or public relations? Moreover, will he press for strict passport controls?

The Acting Deputy First Minister: As the acting First Minister said earlier, Ambassador Haass will be in Northern Ireland later this week. I assume that political parties will meet him.

3.00 pm

I have no doubt that points about the arrests in Colombia will be made in the meetings with political parties.

Mr Speaker: Our time is up for questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Mr McNamee: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We do not take points of order during Question Time, but we will happily take them at the end. I will ask my Colleague who is taking over from me to note that.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Craigavon Bridge

1. **Mr Hay** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total cost of upgrading Craigavon Bridge in Londonderry and what problems have been identified with the upgrading. (AQO 57/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Roads Service officials have advised me that the total cost of refurbishing Craigavon Bridge in Londonderry will be £4.2 million. The work is being undertaken in three phases. Phases one and two involved the refurbishment of the upper and lower decks of the bridge at a cost of £1 million each. Phase three will involve the painting of the whole structure at a cost of £2.2 million. Phases one and two have been completed; phase three has just started and will be completed by

the end of summer 2002. Some aspects of the resurfacing work that were carried out on the upper deck as part — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Whoever's mobile phone is ringing should get out — *[Interruption]*. The law treats everyone equally.

Mr Campbell: Some aspects of the resurfacing work that was carried out on the upper deck as part of phase one did not meet the required standard. Officials, therefore, instructed the consultant and the contractor to undertake remedial work. This work was substantially completed on 2 September.

Mr Hay: I welcome the Minister's detailed statement. However, as he is a public representative for Londonderry, he will be aware of the high level of congestion that the work caused for many who live in the city. The work particularly affected those who live on the east bank of the river. As we move into the third phase of the scheme, can the Minister assure us that we will be able to seriously address some of the traffic problems caused by the scheme while the main work was being done? That is very important. Most of the public representatives across the city received major complaints about the traffic congestion that this scheme caused.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for the supplementary question. I appreciate the disruption that was caused. I suspect that most Ministers who live close to works that cause disruption are lobbied on such matters, and I was not an exception. I am acutely aware of the problems that were encountered last weekend. During the first 10 weeks of the painting contract that constitutes phase three, minor lane restrictions will be in operation along the lower deck of the bridge. After that period, no further lane restrictions on Craigavon Bridge are envisaged, and I hope that that will be the case.

Mrs Courtney: I also welcome the Minister's response, and I agree that work has been an ongoing problem. Did the initial problem result from the original design or did the work have to be redone because of the way in which it had originally been carried out?

Mr Campbell: There was a change in the specification of the original work, and as a result the costs of the works that were carried out — the works in relation to the change in specification that caused the problem — were borne entirely by the contractor and the design consultant who were responsible for the specification in the first instance.

When the problem arose — and we were aware of it some months ago — Roads Service took the opportunity to do some additional works of its own that it would have had to carry out in any case. Roads Service paid for that work, but the cost of the work caused as a

result of the specification change was entirely borne by the contractor and the consultant.

Department for Regional Development: Decentralising of Functions

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail those plans that have been initiated to decentralise functions within his Department. (AQO 63/01)

Mr Campbell: At present three quarters of my Department's staff are located outside the Greater Belfast area. Staff are employed at 74 locations across Northern Ireland. Although I have no plans for further decentralisation I will continue to ensure that my Department's staff and functions are located where maximum efficiency in the delivery of services to all people in Northern Ireland can be provided.

Mr McElduff: Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I want to see an increasing dividend in the matter of decentralisation. There is a growing focus on decentralisation within the Civil Service, and a conference will be held in the second half of October on that very matter.

With regard to decentralisation, I would like the west of the Bann to be viewed positively. I understand — and I can be corrected by the Minister if I am wrong — that the Department for Regional Development undertakes some of its administration for the Six Counties in Enniskillen, not least the processing of discs for disabled parking.

Mr Campbell: By their very nature the services delivered by my Department are highly decentralised. A cursory examination, for example, of the four client divisional headquarters of Roads Service are ample testimony to that. They are located in Belfast, Omagh, Coleraine and Craigavon. The north, south, east and west are covered so we are already fairly decentralised.

There are a significant number of industrial employees in Northern Ireland. However, I will continue to examine ways of ensuring that decentralisation is ongoing. We aim to achieve maximum effectiveness in delivery of the service and will continue to do so.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank the Minister for the answer he gave to the original question. I welcome the fact that there are 74 locations for members of staff to work in. Can the Minister assure the House that these offices, services and staff will not be removed from the east of the Province, outside of Belfast, as dictated by Sinn Féin/IRA? He knows that the vast majority of the population of Northern Ireland lives in the east of the Province and therefore should have jobs, services and facilities available to them. Does he agree that to take jobs from the east, simply to give them to the

west, would create a false economy and is not a realistic approach to the problem of trying to bring new jobs to disadvantaged areas?

Mr Campbell: I am more than happy to confirm that the effective delivery of services will be the most important criterion in determining where those services are best delivered from and to. It is the case that the delivery of services across Northern Ireland has been adequate.

I will go so far as to say that that will continue to be the case without major change. If I were convinced that any elements within the Department for Regional Development were not already decentralised, I might be persuaded. However, given that we are effectively decentralised, I do not see a compelling case for further action on this.

Newry Rail Terminus

3. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what progress has been made towards securing a new passenger rail terminus in Newry. (AQO 39/01)

Mr Campbell: The Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo) and Translink have wanted to construct a new railway station in Newry for some considerable time. They have had regular dialogue with local council representatives on the matter. However the transport companies have experienced some difficulties in gaining access to their first choice of site, which is directly opposite the site of the present station. Consequently, several other site options have been considered including a site on land near the Cloghogue roundabout. There are certain constraints with this alternative site, such as limited space and distance from the town, making it less attractive as a potential solution. Officials in NITHCo and Translink will continue to investigate how best to provide a new railway station for Newry.

While I am keen to enhance the provision of public transport throughout Northern Ireland, and recent developments have shown that to be the case, I must point out that notwithstanding any agreement on site location, any scheme to provide a new railway station in Newry would have to compete for resources with many other pressing transport needs. As well as resolving the difficulties of location, the provision of a new station therefore depends on the Assembly's allocating sufficient resources to public transport.

Mr Fee: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he accept that there is a certain frustration in places such as Newry? They have seen resources put into all the other major train stations such as those in Belfast, Portadown, Dundalk, Drogheda and Dublin, and they are still suffering with temporary accommodation.

Can the Minister ensure that any consideration of a new station for Newry will include provision for park-and-ride facilities, free transport to the town centre, which exists in other towns, and will also include some revision of the timetable so that there are friendly train times for workers and students who commute every day to Belfast and Dublin?

Mr Campbell: The Member has raised a number of issues. If we had overcome the hurdles of location and the desirability of the most preferred location, we would be able to try to get the best possible station with the facilities that the Member has requested. Unfortunately we are not yet at that point.

I will undertake to ensure that NITHCo and Translink are reminded of the issues that the Member has raised in his question and in correspondence. I will remind them of the need not only to press ahead with all speed with the provision of a new station, if possible, but to take on board the other points the Member raised regarding facilities.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's reply. However, does he not accept that the existing considerations have all been rather ad hoc on the part of the holding company? Will he undertake to initiate a formal study considering all possible venues for any new station and give detailed costings?

Mr Campbell: I am to have discussions with senior officials in the transport holding company, and I undertake to ensure that this matter and the accompanying issues that Mr Kennedy and Mr Fee have raised with me today and that affect the people of Newry and the surrounding area are included in those discussions.

3.15 pm

Knockmore Railway Line

4. **Mr Close** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make a statement on the consultation process on the closure of the Knockmore railway line.

(AQO 27/01)

Mr Campbell: The Assembly Budget of 18 December 2000 did not provide sufficient resources for the retention of services on the Antrim to Knockmore line. Consequently, Northern Ireland Railways had to initiate the statutory consultation procedures to discontinue services on the line in accordance with section 60 of the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

More than 1,000 letters of objection to the proposal were received during the statutory process. Three cases indicated genuine hardship that could not be alleviated by the proposed substitute bus service. Subsequently I commissioned an equality impact assessment on the discontinuation of services on the line. A consultation paper was issued on 31 August to a large range of

consultees. The consultation process will remain open for a period of 12 weeks and will close on 23 November.

Mr Close: Can the Minister confirm that the 1,000 letters that were received — from groups such as the Crumlin Community Group, the Upper Ballinderry Group, Crumlin High School and St Joseph's Primary School, Crumlin — demonstrated a high degree of individual hardship, community hardship and social deprivation? Will he agree that a bus substitution scheme will not adequately deal with the general feeling of deprivation that will be brought about by the closure of the scheme? Will the Minister join with me in saying that it should remain open?

Mr Campbell: I readily join with the Member in concurring that there were a substantial number of replies. Unfortunately I am faced with a resource problem. I have been, and I am, concerned about trying to keep the line open. I ensured that a limited service would remain open in order to bridge the time until closure was likely. I also introduced free fares for the elderly in order to give more people an opportunity to use the line so that we could reassess the issue.

However, none of those things deals with the fact that the resources required to keep the line open are simply not available, and that leaves me in a difficult position. I am doing what I can to ensure that the line remains open and I will make additional bids for resources in order to ensure that it stays open. If that attempt fails, the Assembly will have to vote on whether to retain the line and the existing resources or to sanction closure.

Mr J Wilson: I thank the Minister for the reply to the question. More importantly, I welcome the recent issue of a consultation document on the matter, as it affects my constituents in South Antrim. Will the Minister consider my suggestion that he, as part of the consultation process, make himself available for a meeting? The Member representing Lagan Valley (Mr Close) and I will not disagree about the location, since our two constituencies are directly concerned. Will the Minister meet people who are directly involved in the campaign to keep the line open and hear their concerns?

Mr Campbell: I went on site the day I announced the extension of the service for approximately 12 months. I would have no difficulty in going back on site again. However, I will leave it for Members to decide the most appropriate location. I would prefer to do so once we have reached the conclusion of the consultation exercise, which has just opened in the past week. It would be improper for me to go along at this point.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Many people will appreciate the Minister's intervention in the issue. The Minister must know that the railway service in Northern Ireland has issued glossy brochures which have highlighted and gloried in the continuation of railway services,

especially identifying the Belfast circle line, which takes in Belfast, Lisburn, and Antrim. Surely it is insufficient to have glossy brochures glorying in this if the service were to be removed. The Assembly must take the bull by the horns and allow the money to be allocated to ensure that this service is retained.

Mr Campbell: I have received extensive lobbying on the issue from a range of public representatives, including the hon Member Dr McCrea, who led delegations, lobbied, campaigned and asked me to go on site, as did others. I am exercised about the issue, but none of this delivers the additional resources to me. I am conscious of the need to respond positively. I want to do so, and I can simply concur with the hon Member's comments and look forward to the unanimous support of the House when I ask for the money to carry out their wishes.

North Down Sewage Works

5. **Mrs E Bell** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current position in regard to the north Down sewage works; and to make a statement. (AQO 98/01)

Mr Campbell: A new waste water treatment works, estimated to cost £35 million, is planned to serve the Bangor, Donaghadee and Millisle areas. Two sites have been shortlisted. I have set up a working party comprising representatives of North Down Borough Council and Ards Borough Council to review the suitability of the criteria and processes used in site selection. The first meeting of the working party was held on 10 August, and further meetings are proposed. I hope that the review can be completed in the next few months and a consensus reached between the councils and the Department. That being the case, it would enable a decision to be made on the site for the proposed new works very early in the new year.

Mrs E Bell: I congratulate the Minister on the work that he has done on this matter. As you know, it has been going on for some years, and I am glad to hear that there has been some progress. Will the Minister issue a progress statement to the concerned residents at the two sites? They have been waiting four to five years to find out exactly what is happening. A progress statement from the Minister would be useful.

Mr Campbell: I would be happy to consider issuing a progress statement to the residents. I remind the House of the difficulties involved in this complex arena. I was at a meeting of Ards Borough Council on this issue some time ago. Most visits to councils that I undertake involve a range of opinions on a variety of topics. On that particular day, there was one opinion on that topic. The division that the location of the waste water treatment works has caused has been part of the problem in being unable to come to a conclusion.

That was the reason for my establishment of the working party. Obviously I will want to see consensus emerging, and I hope that it will. I will discuss the matter with my officials after the next meeting, and that should occur very shortly. At that point I will be happy to consider an up-to-date statement so that everyone will know exactly where we are and how long it will be before we reach the likely conclusion.

Mr Shannon: The Minister has touched on it, but my question is a follow-through from the water treatment works itself. Does the Minister agree that the best site for such a water treatment works would be in north Down, and that it would be the most cost-effective option? How will he ensure that the strong opinion of Ards Borough Council and all its residents will be upheld?

Mr Campbell: I genuinely thank the Member for reinforcing the difficulty that this problem has brought about from day one. Any humour aside, we had, not precisely the same problem, but a similar problem, in Omagh, where there was a dispute and difference about the location of a waste water treatment works. I was reluctant to simply proceed to one site in the face of opposition from some residents. We managed, through a protracted series of meetings, to get broad consensus. I do not think that it is possible in these situations to ever get 100%, but we got very close to it in Omagh. I hope that we can do the same with this plant. The hon Member will understand if I decline his request to state emphatically where the waste water treatment works should be in advance of the working party reporting.

Mr McFarland: Driving past the north Down sewage works at Holywood last night, I noticed that the site is still giving off its less-than-fragrant whiff. What is the current position there, and when will the new works be accepted into service and be fully active so that the people of Holywood can have some respite?

Mr Campbell: The hon Member will appreciate that not having had advance notification of the question, I do not have a ready-made response. I will ensure that he is written to as a matter of urgency.

Strangford Ferry: Free Travel for Senior Citizens

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce free passage for senior citizens using the Portaferry/Strangford ferry. (AQO 22/01)

13. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what steps will be taken to introduce free travel for senior citizens on the Strangford ferry service; and to make a statement. (AQO 51/01)

18. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to make it his policy to extend his free fares for the elderly scheme to the Strangford ferry; and to make a statement. (AQO 58/01)

Mr Campbell: I will take questions 6, 13 and 18 together, as they all relate to the same issue.

I am very sympathetic to the proposals contained in the questions posed by Mr McCarthy, Mr McGrady, and Mrs Iris Robinson. As part of the Roads Service's review of fares for the ferry service, I will be considering the feasibility of extending the arrangement of free travel for senior citizens on public transport to include those travelling as foot passengers or passengers in cars on the ferry. I will make a further statement on this matter when the review of fares has been completed.

Mr McCarthy: I am very disappointed at the response, in view of the fact that this should have been included in the free transport for all senior citizens. Furthermore, great concerns are now being expressed by the workforce of that ferry service about the threat to jobs and conditions should it be taken over by the private sector. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that the Department's staff on the ferry service will not be sacrificed simply for the dogma of privatisation?

3.30 pm

Mr Campbell: I am surprised that the Member is disappointed that I will consider the feasibility of extending the arrangement of free travel, which is what he asked me to do. I am surprised that he is disappointed that I have agreed, not only with what Mr McCarthy has asked for, but also with what Mr McGrady has written to me about and with what Mrs Robinson wrote to me and came to see me about. I am surprised that that is the case.

I will consider that feasibility. When the review of fares has been completed I will want to make an announcement. I do not want to pre-empt that review. As for the possibility of the ferry going into the private sector, I am the Minister for Regional Development and I have no knowledge of any such acquisition.

ENVIRONMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members that question 13, in the name of Mr Sammy Wilson, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development, and will receive a written answer. Question 17, in the name of Mrs Carmel Hanna, has been withdrawn.

Malone Conservation Area

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment to comment on the success or otherwise of the

Malone conservation area in south Belfast; and to make a statement. (AQO 76/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Malone conservation area was established in August 2000 in recognition of the area's special townscape merits. Planning policy statement 6, 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage', sets out my Department's planning policies for the control of development in conservation areas.

Designation as a conservation area introduces control over the demolition of unlisted buildings in the area. Anyone wishing to demolish a building must first apply to my Department for conservation area consent. It is a criminal offence to carry out such work without consent. Designation as a conservation area also brings with it a duty to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of the area.

Since designation, this has been the prime consideration for my Department in assessing the acceptability of development proposals in the Malone area. Recent decisions by the Planning Appeals Commission have endorsed the Department's approach and recognised the significance of the conservation area designation in considering development proposals.

Designation of the Malone area has therefore increased the weight attached to conservation of the built heritage in the area. It has also addressed local concerns, expressed prior to designation, regarding the level of uncontrolled demolition. Judged on these terms, I consider at this early stage that the designation has been beneficial in helping to conserve the built heritage of the area.

Dr McDonnell: I know that it is early days, and current information may indicate that it has been beneficial, but I put it to the Minister that there is still a fair amount of raping and pillaging of south Belfast in the developmental sense. Quite a lot of the development is fairly ruthless and tasteless, in its own way.

Is the Minister aware of the deep concerns in the Cleaver area about the plans to destroy 94 Malone Road? How they intend dislodging number 94 from number 96, which is closely attached to it, I do not know. Both are buildings of considerable merit; one is to be replaced with 14 or 16 town houses. The people who live there are not totally against reasonable development, but they are deeply concerned because an adjacent site at 102 Malone Road has approval for what they consider to be reasonably acceptable development. That development has been reviewed, and planning permission has had to be sought again. Is the Minister aware of the serious concern that while the conservation area designation has done a bit, it has not done enough, and is not strong enough against difficult developments?

Mr Foster: Many applications for development within the Malone area are currently being assessed. Many of these may be viewed as controversial to some extent because this is a highly desirable residential area in which both the existing residents and developers have a keen interest. In June 2001 the Planning Service received applications for the demolition of the Ulster Teacher's Union building at the junction of Cleaver Park, 94 Malone Road, and the erection of 15 apartments in two blocks linked by a stairwell and overpass, and an associated application for consent to demolish an existing building within the conservation area. There is another application in that area, and these applications are at an early stage in the planning process.

Consultation responses have not been received and the time period for public comment has not yet expired. As one of the applications relates to a listed building consent, the views of the Environment and Heritage Service will be fundamental to the determination of the applications. Opinions, of course, will be placed before Belfast City Council for consultation before any decisions later this year.

Dr Birnie: Many South Belfast constituents have greatly welcomed the Minister's initiative in introducing the conservation area, but I suppose the implication of Dr McDonnell's question is the problem of houses immediately beyond the boundary as well. Redevelopment has typically involved the replacement of large Edwardian or Victorian family dwellings with large numbers of flats and apartments, with implications of greater car ownership and traffic in the area. Does the Minister therefore accept that in the future the closest possible collaboration between the Planning Service and the Roads Service must be exercised in making decisions about what is sustainable new housing development within that broad area?

Mr Foster: We work in conjunction insofar as any application is concerned. Consideration is given and consultation undertaken, and no planning exercise is taken lightly. Planning policy statement 6, 'Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage' sets out my Department's current planning policies for the control of development in conservation areas. There is a presumption in favour of retaining any building which makes a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area, while new development proposals should respect townscape and retain the overall integrity of the area. As Members may be aware, work has recently commenced on the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. This will consider the need for specific planning policies for the conservation areas in the plan area, including the Malone area.

Giant's Causeway: Planning Procedures

2. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the planning procedures used by his

Department in the application at Giant's Causeway known as the Nook. (AQO 5/01)

Mr Foster: My Department received two planning applications and two related applications for listed building consent for a dwelling at 48 Causeway Road, Bushmills, on 4 May 2001. The dwelling, which is a listed building, is referred to locally as the Nook. These four applications were for two alternative proposals. One involved a change of use of the existing building with minimal modifications to its fabric and structure. The other changed the use of the building and proposed a substantial side extension which almost doubled the floor area of the existing building. The applications were advertised, neighbours were notified in the usual manner and appropriate consultations were carried out.

The applications were appraised with regard to all relevant development plans and policy documents including planning policy statement 6, 'Planning Archaeology and the Built Heritage', planning policy 1, 'General Principles: A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland' the North East Area Plan. Given the location of the development proposal and the issues raised with me in the course of considering the planning applications, I took a close interest in their consideration and made the final decision myself.

As a result, I determined that the application should be approved, and my Department issued approvals, both for a full planning and listed building consent on Friday 10 August 2001. I am satisfied that the applications were processed consistent with all standard procedures, that all the necessary consultations were carried out and that the advice of consultees was considered and taken into account.

All objections and representations were fully considered. The proposals were thoroughly appraised with regard to all development plan and policy documents, and all relevant material considerations were properly assessed.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister agree that the intention expressed by the National Trust in its autumn/winter magazine to seek a judicial review of the Department of the Environment's policy on this matter and on the application is a waste of National Trust resources, given the procedures that the Minister has so carefully outlined to the House? Will the Minister assure the House that in all future applications at the Giant's Causeway, the Department of the Environment will not become the "meat in the sandwich" of a commercial bidding war for valuable sites in that area?

Mr Foster: The Department of the Environment takes objective decisions on all such applications. I understand that the National Trust has publicly stated that it will seek a judicial review of my decision. However, it has not yet sought leave of the courts to

do so. In the circumstances, Members will understand that I do not wish to comment further on this matter.

Mr McCartney: The Minister will be aware that such are the feelings about the application, as evidenced by the judicial review threat, that several concerned parties are considering taking this matter further under the human rights legislation, as the current legislation does not provide for third-party appeals and is a violation of their human rights.

Dr McDonnell: What is your question?

Mr McCartney: It is not repetitive, unlike some. Has the Minister or the Department of the Environment sought legal advice on whether the current legislation for planning appeals, which does not provide for third-party appeals, is in contravention of the human rights legislation?

Mr Foster: With regard to third-party appeals, I understand from the Alconbury case in England that the planning authority was not against human rights issues. However, that has not yet been proven.

In determining the applications I satisfied myself of the scale, character and detailed design and layout of the proposed development; and that the topography of the surrounding area and the character of the site and its curtilage were such that the proposals could be satisfactorily integrated into their surroundings without having a detrimental impact on the Giant's Causeway or its setting.

I also satisfied myself that the whole development — including the proposed extension — would be in keeping with the existing building and the surrounding area; and that the proposed change of use would secure the upkeep and survival of this important listed building and would preserve its character and architecture for historic interest.

The decision has been made. The Department may be subject to a judicial review, and if that happens, so be it.

Mr McCartney: I asked whether the Minister had sought any advice —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McCartney, you have asked your question.

Mournes National Park

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what progress has been made towards the designation of the Mournes as a national park; and to make a statement. (AQO 49/01)

Mr Foster: My officials have prepared a report on national parks and on areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONB). The issues covered, including the involvement of local communities and the need to resource any management bodies, are complex and require careful

consideration. I am considering the report and I will be sending it to the Committee for the Environment soon. I look forward to receiving its views and I will issue a statement on the way forward when I have the benefit of those views.

In view of the proposals under consideration I have no plans at present to designate a national park in the Mournes. However, the Mournes will continue to benefit from the protection given by their status as an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Mr McGrady: As the Minister knows, the Mournes were designated an area of outstanding natural beauty many years ago. That is not the problem. The problem is that the demands of farmers, fishermen, small industries, commercial enterprises, rural dwellers, day trippers and full-time tourists are having an enormous impact on the Mournes, and if we get peace the problem will be exacerbated.

Does the Minister agree that it is unnecessary to fulfil a programme of other areas of outstanding natural beauty before addressing the issue of creating a new, unique- to-Northern Ireland type of national park to which the Mourne Heritage Trust is already committed as representative of these dimensions? Can he not progress the matter further and more quickly? As time goes on the damage is being done.

3.45 pm

Mr Foster: I can understand Mr McGrady's annoyance. He has pursued this issue several times and it is not an easy one to resolve. I hope to make an announcement on the way forward before the end of the year.

Careful consideration needs to be given to what type of park might be established here, and what its practical implications might be. We are not taking about publicly- owned land nor vast areas of remote countryside so careful consideration needs to be given to the administration of any proposed park and the relationships with any existing or future local government structures.

Mr Armstrong: Regarding the request of the Member for South Down (Mr McGrady) for the designation of the Mournes as a national park, would the Minister agree that a Province-wide study should be carried out with the aim of determining whether several areas should be designated as national parks? In addition, would he consider the need for an impartial advisory committee, representing a wide range of interested groups, to oversee the project?

Mr Foster: We have beautiful countryside throughout Northern Ireland, but I do not think that it would be feasible to designate all parts of Northern Ireland as a national park. There are areas of outstanding natural beauty, which have been recognised. However, in some parts of the Province people object to areas of

outstanding natural beauty being designated. The fear is that there may be further planning obstacles when these people make planning applications. However, I can assure the Member that these issues do not go unrecognised, and they will be pursued in the course of time.

Mr P Robinson: In relation to the Mourne, would the Minister agree that the great concern of a number of local people is that planning permissions are still being given — in this area of natural beauty — and that there is no third-party appeal system to allow people to have their human rights upheld?

Will the Minister answer the question asked by the honourable and learned gentleman for North Down, Mr McCartney? Will he confirm that his Department received legal advice that indicated that, as things stand, his Department does not have the necessary procedures in place to successfully stave off any challenge that would be made under the human rights legislation?

Mr Foster: My Department pursues all areas before it approves or refuses an application. The matter of third-party appeals is a difficult one. We have discussed it. At the present time, to introduce third-party appeals would prolong the situation within the planning system. Quite often we are knocked for having such a long planning approval process. The situation — and I think it was Alconbury that the Member referred to — is that it has not been found that the planning system was against — *[Interruption]*.

Mr McCartney: This is a different issue.

Mr Foster: This is not a different issue, Mr McCartney.

Mr McCartney: I have read that case very closely.

Mr Foster: As it is understood by the Department and myself, what we are doing insofar as planning is concerned, and without the present third-party appeals, is well within human rights legislation and is acceptable.

Road Safety

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads for the first six months of this year and to indicate if projected road safety targets are expected to be met for 2001. (AQO 109/01)

Mr Foster: There were 67 people killed and 789 people seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads between 1 January 2001 and 30 June 2001. During the same period last year 81 people died and 826 were seriously injured. Provisional figures indicate that by 9 September 2001, 96 people had died compared with

109 by the same date last year. Figures for serious injuries after June 2001 are not yet available.

While I welcome the lower number of serious road casualties so far, it is not possible to predict what the final outcome will be for the full year.

I sincerely hope that the level of road casualties will continue to decline, and I urge all road users to contribute to that by behaving responsibly on our roads at all times.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome the reduction in casualties. I congratulate the Minister and his Department on the professionalism of their current television advertising campaign relating to road safety issues. Can the Minister assure the House that the campaign will be closely monitored for impact, and intensified if necessary? Will the Minister ensure that the message about death and injury on our roads is transmitted by all relevant means and targeted at young people in the hope that Northern Ireland will cease to be a place where so many young road users regularly lose their lives in accidents that are totally avoidable?

Mr Foster: This is one of the issues that my Department and I take very personally. Road safety is a big issue and we will pursue it as far as we possibly can. I can assure the Member and the House that we will go to whatever lengths we can, within the system, to ensure that road tragedy eases considerably. We would love to see it cease completely, but it is no use pretending that that is possible.

The Department of the Environment focuses many of its publicity and education efforts on young drivers. In the United Kingdom the 17-to-24 age group represents 11% of driving licence holders but is involved in 25% of fatal and serious injury collisions. The 17-to-20 age group is 10 times more likely to be killed in a road crash than 35 to 54-year-olds. Sadly, it seems that young men are the main offenders when it comes to excessive speeding, drinking and driving, and failure to wear seat belts. While recent campaigns target young men in particular, the message I want to get through is equally relevant to other road users, young and old, male and female.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister agree that road safety issues are often raised when people make objections to planning applications? These objectors often feel that their right of appeal has been withheld because of the current planning laws. I give the Minister his third opportunity of the day to tell the House whether or not his Department has received legal opinion that indicates that, given the current absence of third-party planning appeals, the Minister is not complying with human rights legislation.

The Deputy Speaker: That question is not relevant and the Minister may prefer not to answer it.

Mr Foster: There seems to be an element of doubt and concern in three recent references to me in relation to our legal standing. In order to clarify the matter, I will ensure that the three Members concerned receive a written answer from my Department.

Regional Seas Pilot Scheme

5. **Mr A Doherty** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what action he is taking following Her Majesty's Government's initiative to develop a strategy for the conservation, protection and management of nationally important marine wildlife through a regional seas pilot scheme. (AQO 96/01)

Mr Foster: It is widely accepted that current practice for managing the marine environment in the European Union is unsustainable. An alternative approach was put forward in the recent review of marine nature conservation issued by the then Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Rather than apply uniform policies throughout EU waters, this regional seas approach would operate within defined and reasonably uniform areas. Its purpose would be to address the results of each of the activities affecting the marine ecosystem and develop tailored management regimes. My Department is co-operating with the Countryside Council for Wales on the potential of this approach and the sustainable management of fisheries in the Irish Sea. It is also considering an approach from England's North West Coastal Forum to explore other aspects of regional seas management using the Irish Sea as a pilot area. Both studies will address wildlife issues.

Mr A Doherty: Can the Minister say whether the review of marine nature conservation (RMNC) has considered the draft specification for the regional seas scheme and if the Irish Sea has been chosen as a candidate area for the pilot scheme? If so, is that not a good reason for the Department to accelerate the establishment of a coastal forum rather than put it on the long finger?

Mr Foster: When speaking about a coastal forum, I refer to the North West Coastal Forum's regional seas pilot study. I understand that this project proposes bringing existing Great Britain partnerships together with partners in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man. It seeks to improve the planning and management of the Irish Sea and give a holistic approach to resource management issues. The Irish Sea would no doubt be an ideal location for testing this regional seas approach.

I have consulted with colleagues in other Departments about the merits of the concept of establishing a

Northern Ireland coastal forum. Integrated coastal zone management is another issue on which the European Union is keen to see progress. In the light of these factors, I have asked my officials to arrange for a scoping study to be carried out to examine the issues that such a body would address, its potential membership and the resources it would require. I am not sure if I have answered the Member's question, but that is the information that I have.

Zebra Mussels: Lough Erne

6. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the action taken by his Department to reduce the ecological effects of zebra mussels on flora and fauna in Lough Erne. (AQO 91/01)

Mr Foster: Now that zebra mussels have become established in Lough Erne, I am afraid that there are no practical measures that can be taken to reduce their ecological effects there. My Department is working with the support of an interdepartmental zebra mussel control group on an awareness-raising campaign to stop their spread to other lakes. This is important, given the impossibility of removing zebra mussels once they have become established.

Mrs Carson: The Minister will agree that this is a disastrous situation for the Erne system. Can he assure the Assembly that appropriate action will be taken to counteract the spread of the mussels to other parts of Northern Ireland? Every weekend trailers and boats travel to all parts of the Province from the Erne system. What does the Department intend to do about that?

Mr Foster: Being a member of the community in the Fermanagh area near Lough Erne, I am conversant with what is taking place. Sadly, the zebra mussels have taken hold there. The interdepartmental group runs an awareness campaign aimed at limiting the spread of zebra mussels, and it is planning further research into their impact and into potential control measures.

The leaflet 'Zebra Mussels in Northern Ireland' published in June 2000 highlights the potential problem to users and anglers and outlines precautions that must be taken to prevent the spread of this nuisance to other waterways in Northern Ireland. These leaflets have been widely distributed through boating and angling outlets.

A zebra mussel newsletter was published in June 2001 which provides information on their impact in Lough Erne to date. The public awareness campaign is specifically targeted at the most vulnerable lakes, including Lough Melvin, Lough Neagh and several clusters of small lakes. Unfortunately, this problem has gripped Lough Erne, and we do not want it to spread to any other lake in Northern Ireland. I advise people to pay attention to the documentation that has been issued on the control of zebra mussels, because

once they arrive they are difficult, if not impossible, to exclude. I encourage people to take great precautions with the keels of boats and ensure that they hose them off before taking them to different waters.

4.00 pm

Planning Law

7. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to amend current planning law.

(AQO 25/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is preparing a Planning (Amendment) Bill, which I propose to introduce in the Assembly in June 2002. It follows the issuing of a public consultation paper in 1999, which sought comment on proposals to amend planning legislation. The responses received in the consultation exercise generally welcomed the proposals in the consultation paper.

The Bill will include provisions to simplify, streamline and strengthen my Department's existing enforcement powers. It is proposed that the Bill will introduce new contravention notices, breach of condition notices, new powers to seek a court injunction and higher penalties for breaches of planning control. Provisions will also be included to increase my Department's powers relating to the protection of listed buildings, together with proposals to introduce building preservation notices as a means of spot listing historic buildings. There will also be provisions to strengthen my Department's powers in relation to the protection of trees and tree preservation orders. The Bill will also include other provisions to strengthen planning control.

Mr Ford: The Minister will be pleased to know that I will not ask him about third party appeals, although it was on my mind. However, I ask him to give me the same information that he has promised to other Members. Is he satisfied with the current operation of planning appeals procedures? In particular, I draw his attention to the fact that the Planning Appeals Commission decided recently to allow a further 200 houses on the site known as Mayfield, at Hightown, Glengormley, in addition to the 1,100 first permitted.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Mr Ford. Minister, would you be kind enough to respond to Mr Ford's question in writing?

Mr Ford: The clock says 29:48. May I please continue, to make up for the time lost?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, if the question can be answered in five seconds.

Mr Ford: On a point of order. I was not allowed to ask my question in full because you cut me off at least 15 seconds before the end of the time that I had to speak. How can you redress that for me now?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member could get a written answer. I call Mr McNamee.

Mr Ford: On a point of order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Pat McNamee's point of order was made an hour ago.

Mr McNamee: I refer to Standing Order 19(2). During questions to the acting First Minister and acting Deputy First Minister, and while asking a supplementary question to Question 6, Mr McFarland made a statement that was factually incorrect. He referred to three members of Sinn Féin who were arrested in Colombia. That statement was incorrect and improper.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McFarland is not in the House. I shall ask him to respond to you.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order. Question Time for each Minister should last for 30 minutes exactly. You cut a Member off when the clock showed 29 minutes, 28 seconds. The Member obviously did not get to complete his question. It may well have been that he would not have received an answer — given the Minister's reputation, he probably would not have had an answer anyway even if he had had another 10 minutes — but he was unable to ask his question. It is incumbent on you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to explain how you intend to redress such a genuine grievance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I quote an old saying from my days of studying Latin:

"De minimis non curat lex".

It means, "the law does not concern itself with trivia". I am sure that that took me four seconds to say. I have no reason to believe that the Member was in any way inhibited. All that he could have got by way of a response was about — at the most — a sentence.

Mr Ford: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member has correctly quoted from Standing Orders that Question Time should last for 30 minutes. By his account, I was cut off 32 seconds before the end. After you cut me off, I looked at the clock and at least 15 seconds remained. Therefore, I probably lost at least half of the time that I should have had to pose the supplementary question to the Minister. I am afraid that my Latin is not as good as yours, but that does not seem to be "de minimis" to me.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister will respond in writing to the Member.

Mr Ford: Therefore, he will respond to a question that I have not yet asked.

Mr Foster: The Member will receive a written answer. I thank Mr Wilson for his gratuitous remarks.

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

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order. I am unsure, Mr Deputy Speaker, whether you or the preceding Deputy Speaker will respond to the point of order raised by the Member from Sinn Féin. However, if you do, will you take into account that one of those arrested in Colombia was a Sinn Féin election worker, another was a leading member on the platform at a Sinn Féin conference and the third man was the official Sinn Féin representative for South America?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robinson, you know that that is not a point of order.

IRISH JUSTICE SYSTEM

Mr Paisley Jnr: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the failure of the Irish justice system to resolve the rape/incest case of the daughter of British citizen Sarah Bland.

I bring the motion before the House because I believe that the rights of a British woman and her daughter, who lived in Dublin, were trampled underfoot in a most appalling manner by the authorities there.

The matter should have been debated in Dáil Éireann; it should have been processed by an Irish court. It is on today's Order Paper because of the failure of successive Dublin Governments and the Dublin courts to face up to their responsibilities. The case is a political message to all those in the political establishment of the South and, as long as the gross injustice, known as the Bland case, remains unresolved, anything that the Irish authorities may say about rights, equality, justice, honour and truth should be treated with contempt. If the Bland case is a lesson in how the Dublin authorities would treat one of its own, the political significance of that should never be lost on Unionists in the House and outside.

The case concerns a young Roman Catholic woman, Sarah Bland, living in the midlands of the Republic from 1980 to 1982 and the 20-year fight by her resilient mother, Patricia Bland, to right the crimes visited on that family. The case continues to this day, but I want the Assembly to note it because of the rape, incest and abuse that occurred during the early 1980s when Sarah Bland was a child.

The case is the only example that I can find in which a child suffered rape and incest as a result of being placed, by a High Court order, into the hands of the abuser. Instead of rescuing and protecting the child from abuse by a court order, the courts in the Irish Republic lent themselves to that abuse. We must publicly ask the Irish courts and the political establishment why a four-year-old girl was sent back to her abusing father by a court order after he had admitted in open court to being an abuser, a wife beater and an alcoholic. The child was subjected to incest, torture, drugging and rape by a number of men in a stately home, which, by Christmas 1980, was run down, filthy and chaotic. Had common sense prevailed in the Irish Republic's legal establishment, Sarah Bland would never have been placed in the care of her father.

For two years, Sarah Bland exhibited signs of extreme trauma. She endured hundreds of hypnotic comas and revealed to her mother the extent of the hedonistic torture and debauchery to which she had been subjected. However, no solicitor would act to defend the rights of this child or her mother. When the mother tried to get help, she was also made a victim. Sneering allegations

and threats were made against her. In this case, a child was raped and a family was robbed of its rights and, later, of its finances.

The case has been brought to the attention of five former Taoiseachs and the serving Taoiseach. It has also been brought to the attention of several TDs, including the current Minister of Foreign Affairs in the South of Ireland, Mr Brian Cowen. They have done absolutely nothing to investigate this terrible case of abuse. Why did the Dublin Government do nothing? The authorities know that to deal with the case in an open and transparent way would be to expose the hideous cover-up by the court system in the Republic of Ireland, where justice appears to be possible only when it will not damage a certain Dublin elite.

Mr and Mrs Bland lived in Rath House from 1971 until 1980. The family was given legal advice by a firm of solicitors called Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien. Mrs Bland approached the family solicitor to get help for her husband, who was already suicidal, in a state of depression and involved in domestic violence. She sought to have him made a ward of court for his own and his family's protection until his suicide attempts had ceased and he had received psychiatric help. Because of this action, increasing domestic violence was visited on Patricia Bland by her husband, and she had to flee the family home. She was amazed that the same company of solicitors — Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien — then began action on behalf of her husband. They did so in the knowledge that he was unable to manage his own financial affairs and that, if their legal action were successful, the children would be placed back into the care of the abusive father. Despite the conflict of interest, the company chased Mrs Bland and her children and had them brought to Dublin for that very purpose.

In an attempt to protect her children, Mrs Bland fled to England on the advice of another solicitor, Mr Guy French of Fred Sutton and Company. He gave her bad advice, but his intentions appeared to be good. However, despite a hearing in England at which her husband admitted in open court to wife-beating, alcoholism, catatonic collapse and psychiatric problems, Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien fought to have Mrs Bland returned to Dublin with her children. That duly happened, and her flight to England to seek justice in a British court was used continually against her in Irish courts to prevent her from having full custody of her children.

Once she was back in Dublin, Mrs Bland paid £1,600 to McCann, Fitzgerald, Roach and Dudley to fight her case. However, that company came to a private deal with the first company, Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien, to ditch this "troublesome British woman". The agreed action resulted in a court order to place her children in the care of their father, even though they both knew of the evidence that he had committed rape

and incest against his children. I hope that the case would have had a different outcome if that evidence had been brought to the attention of the Dublin courts. Not only is the fact that the evidence was never allowed to be brought to their attention alarming, but it shows that impropriety, greed and cover-up ruled the day.

Patricia Bland then turned to Dublin's leading family law expert, Mr Alan Shatter, who is known as "Mr Family Law" because of the many books that he has published and written on the subject. She paid him £2,000 and hoped that he could rescue her children from degrading torture. Mr Shatter had just commenced his political career in Fine Gael. In order for him to act in the interests of his new client, young Sarah Bland, he would have had to sue the previous solicitor, Mr Michael O'Mahoney, for negligence. Mr O'Mahoney just happened to be the legal adviser to Fine Gael, the political party of which Alan Shatter was a member. That aspiring TD, "Mr Family Law," did nothing. Later, he became the shadow Justice Minister in the South of Ireland. He still did nothing. It was only later when Patricia Bland recovered her legal files from his office that she discovered that her calls had been treated with contempt and that "Mr Family Law" had suppressed the evidence of seven witnesses, including a leading psychiatrist and a senior social worker.

4.15 pm

The handling of this case by the legal and political elite of Dublin makes Charles Haughey look squeaky clean. Every legal and ethical code has been trampled, tattered and debased. Every attempt that the mother made to protect and get justice for her children in the courts — or with the help of politicians — and regain her good name were met with indifference, obstruction and malice.

Her child was finally rescued when Judge McWilliam reversed a court order and sent the mother and children to Canada in 1983. They lived there in hiding, under police protection. However, after the rape came the robbery. Her estate was sold, and legal expenses of over £432,000 were claimed by and paid from that estate to Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien, the original solicitors who should have declared their conflict of interest and refused to act.

In the following 15 years, Patricia Bland contacted five Taoiseachs, numerous TDs and MEPs — the list reads like a 'Who's Who' of Irish politics — all of whom did nothing. Only in the North was her case considered, first, by the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue and today by the Assembly. It is an indictment of the Irish Republic and its establishment that it did not at least consider this case and the matters raised by it. I hope that this debate will prompt someone with integrity in the South to come forward and say that enough is enough and seek an inquiry or

tribunal into a sorry nightmare that could have been avoided if appropriate action had been taken in the first place. The evidence for the allegations is well-documented, and the documentation, tape recordings and video cassette can be made available to any Member who wishes to see them.

Sarah Bland is now 24 years of age. She is in the Building today. She has had a difficult life and has experienced fear and post-traumatic stress. From an early age, she has known little but abuse, exile and poverty, but at long last she can see her case put forward. Today's vindication does not come from a Southern courtroom or the Irish state or any of its statutory bodies. Sarah Bland is willing to meet MLAs and tell them about her plight. She is also willing to be an advocate for victims of child sex abuse. I hope that the House can lend its full support to the motion and show that we want to see justice and honour in the case.

Sir John Gorman: I first heard about Mrs Bland when I was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue. Ian Paisley made a moving speech which I took to heart. I made some enquiries and, as a result, was convinced that the actions of the original solicitors, Gerrard, Scallan and O'Brien ought to be investigated, as they acted for Mrs Bland when she first told the family solicitors of the dreadful way in which she was being treated.

It was as a result of that first description of her problems that the first actions were taken towards having her husband declared a ward of court. What happened next was that Mr Rory Bland went to the same solicitors. Having acted for Mrs Bland for 11 years, those solicitors then acted against her by suing her on behalf of her husband, repeatedly admitting that their client was Rory Bland. I brought the matter to the attention of the Minister for Justice, Mr John O'Donoghue, on 25 August 1998 and had a rather dismissive reply from him. Of course, he had received a series of letters from many other quarters pointing out the extraordinary instance of a solicitor acting for both clients in a conflict.

The guide to the professional conduct of solicitors in Ireland says that when a solicitor acts for two clients and conflict arises between the interests of those clients, he should cease to act for both clients — clear and simple. However, for 11 years, that rule of the Law Society was not observed. Mrs Bland pursued her case in Dublin, London and Canada, where she went to stay with her father, who put a great deal of money into the law case there. However, those cases have all fallen because the solicitors stood up for her husband rather than her.

Our equity in this — our right to comment on the law of another country is strictly limited. It was limited in England, and it was limited in Canada in the same manner. I have a great deal of sympathy for Mrs Bland

in relation to the solicitors in the party. She had a rather excessive go at the rest of the judicial system in the Republic which, I think, is not to be criticised in the same manner as that particular firm of solicitors.

Ms McWilliams: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this subject. It is in no way peculiar to the Irish justice system. There are huge inadequacies for victims trying to get successful prosecutions for ritual abuse, sexual abuse, rape or even domestic violence.

The largest and probably the most sophisticated study ever carried out is the Statistics Canada study. It is used throughout the academic world and the judicial system as an example of what can happen when cases come forward. It used a sample of over 12,000 people in Canada and showed that only 6% of cases are reported to the police. There is an enormous amount of under-reporting. Most rape and sexual abuse is not carried out by strangers — 81% is carried out by men known to the women. That 6% is tiny; 50% of that huge 12,000 sample had not reported the incident, because they felt that the police could not do anything about it.

In 1992, the police were still using the official term "No Crime", and that term was used on the papers. Our work in Northern Ireland and in the Republic has, I am glad to say, moved on since then. I know that because I used to go through papers to which a large "NC" had been attached. Today, reasons must be given for not pursuing a case. Fifty per cent of that sample said that they did not think that they could do anything; 41% felt that the nature of the abuse made it difficult for the victim to gather evidence that would stand up in court. However, it has little to do with that. Thirty-three per cent feared further attack. Recent studies in the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland show that even when victims are persuaded to take their cases to prosecution, less than half of the cases are pursued — even after the police have taken them up.

I want to pay tribute to the child abuse and rape inquiry teams that I have accompanied to court in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. They have taken innumerable cases to court, only to find that many of the cases are dropped by the Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) in Northern Ireland or in the Republic. They found that the witnesses were only as good as their evidence and that the state will take a case only if it feels that the witness is competent. If the state feels that the witness is not competent, it will not take the case.

I recently had to write to the DPP about the case of a young woman who had cerebral palsy and who had not even been interviewed by the DPP. The department read the words "cerebral palsy", dismissed the witness as incompetent and did not pursue the case. The DPP had told the perpetrator that it was not pursuing the case, but when I wrote asking the department to interview the girl, it changed its mind. As is normal, the perpetrator

came after me, as, unknown to me, the DPP had given him my name without informing me. He took an abusive process application, arguing that his rights had been infringed. However, the DPP did pursue the case. The DPP had never actually interviewed any of the witnesses to determine their competence.

It is little wonder that statistics show that less than half the cases go forward to prosecution and that only 6% officially go to the police or to the judicial system. Only half of those go to trial, and only 10% end in convictions. Depressingly, the most recent studies show that conviction rates are decreasing while reporting is increasing. That is not peculiar to the Republic of Ireland – it is the case in Great Britain and in Northern Ireland. Although more cases are reported today, our conviction rates are lower today than they were in the 1980s. Something is wrong with the judicial system, and it must be put right before we criticise other jurisdictions.

I want to take up the issue of flights out of jurisdiction. That must be taken much more seriously in all courts here, in the Republic of Ireland and in Great Britain. When women flee because they fear for the safety of their children, they are held in contempt of court. There must be reasons for taking such drastic steps; some are even prepared to challenge the court that has asked them to hand over their children. That came up in another case in which I was involved — one that resulted in a successful conviction. It concerned a prison officer, well known in Carrickfergus, whom I can name, because the right to anonymity disappears with conviction. Occasionally, such people must be named in order to protect others. I did not name the individuals in the first case because, although the case went to court twice, no verdict was reached. The two unfortunate victims were separated, which is often the case. The victims are not able to support one another as they cannot be taken together through the courts. They are separated, and one is not allowed to mention the other. The minute that happens, the case is thrown out.

4.30 pm

In this case, the Caldwell case, the woman had to change her identity. It is ironic that the troubles in Northern Ireland have given us information that we can use to get others out of the country. We were able to use the systems in place to help informers. The woman had to have a new name and a new insurance number, and she had to leave the country. Her daughters, who were students, had to sit their exams abroad. Then, after all that money had been spent, the court decided that she had to be brought back when the father from inside prison decided, as in this case, that he wanted the children made wards of court. That shows that the judges had little expertise and training. We spend a fortune doing all this, and it is all wasted. The poor woman had to return.

Fortunately, two police officers came to court to say that if her new identity were exposed, then all the time in England, where the woman had to go underground, would have been wasted. Many other women are in hiding. The man in this case had attempted murder. He swore in the courts and in the hospital to which she was taken — again, it was bad practice, for he was put in the bed in the next cubicle to her — that if he could not get her this time, then as long as he was alive, he would get her. That is often what such men say. That is undoubtedly why victims must take such enormous precautions.

In the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom, we are learning from such cases. Police officers have been trained to deal with them, and police policy has moved so far forward from the 1980s. The judiciary, however, has not yet been touched. The Law Societies in the Republic and Northern Ireland must take the issue of conflict of interest much more seriously. Recently, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was challenged because a judge had to put a young man into Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre — a juvenile who was too young to be there. The case famously came up in the newspapers. The judge had ruled that the elderly woman in the case should not have contact with the young man as he was below the age of sexual consent. The solicitor was dealing with both cases simultaneously, working for the woman and the young man and passing messages between the two of them. Again, it was the parents and an aunt and uncle who contacted me to highlight that. The Law Societies should stop allowing that to happen. The conflict of interest that solicitors have in such cases must be taken seriously.

This morning, I had a phone call about bail conditions. I had to arrange to have someone rehoused, to be moved from somewhere where she was quite happy to live. The perpetrator in that serious case had decided that he could get rehoused just around the corner while the case was going through the courts. The victim, who is taking that person to court, is living in terror. The bail conditions were such that he had to present himself at police stations on a four-weekly basis. Why were they not such that he was not allowed to go anywhere in the vicinity of the woman? What can be learnt from that to ensure that witnesses do not repeatedly withdraw? One third of all witnesses who start the process of going to court in rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence cases withdraw because of the fear of more attacks or intimidation by the person who perpetrated the abuse in the first instance. When victims come forward, they must be able to have confidence in the judicial system. They are victimised once by the perpetrator and again by the system to which they turn for help.

I will not support the motion. First, it has not been well worded. Perhaps Mr Paisley can tell us why it says:

“the daughter of British citizen Sarah Bland”.

It might have read:

“the daughter of British citizen” —

comma —

“Patricia Bland”.

That is not why I am not supporting it.

I will do whatever I can in the case of Sarah Bland, as in any other case. I am concerned that the motion points simply to the failure of one judicial system, and I am concerned that that is the reason behind it. It is not a criticism of the judiciaries, North and South. Had it been like that, I would have taken a different view, but I never, ever, want to see a sex abuse case used for political reasons.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I regret that Ms McWilliams is looking at this in a partisan way. If anything similar had happened in Northern Ireland, most Members would condemn it strongly. It does not matter where the abuse takes place. It does not matter who is responsible for the abuse or where they live; before God, and before morality and decency, they are to be condemned.

The House has a responsibility to lift its eyes beyond its own territory — especially to a country that invites us to become part of its system, invites us to go under its laws and tells us that our system is not the right system. It is to be regretted that that is not the view of Ms McWilliams. We all know about her work in this realm, and it is widely appreciated. However, her position today, adopted because the motion relates to the Irish Republic, is to be regretted.

The Irish Republic already stands indicted before the whole world with regard to corruption. There are five legal and public inquiries going on at the moment in the South of Ireland. The highest of the land — or their families — are involved in those inquiries. The legal system in the Irish Republic has taken the right to deal with such matters upon itself. We know the shenanigans of one former Taoiseach and we know how the courts reacted to that. I am glad that the inquiries have been set up in the South of Ireland, and I am glad that they are proceeding against the high and mighty elite, who thought that they were free to do what they liked, breaking the commandments of the land.

It is obvious from the evidence that there were matters in the Irish Republic that could not be justified. The Ulster Unionist Member who spoke in this debate — an ex-police officer — made it clear that on one matter alone there was a case that must be answered. How could a solicitor be justified in having two clients, and, after changing horses halfway through, go against the client that he had been instructing and taking large sums of money from? When one considers the relationship of those solicitors with people in high office in the South of Ireland and their standing in society in the South, one comes to the conclusion that

those relationships were stronger than truth and stronger than righteousness.

I salute Sarah and her mother for having the courage and the strength to take on the case. I know something of what they have come through, and I know from my own 50 years' pastoral work in this city how such cases drain the victim and those associated. I salute them today, and I trust that the Assembly will salute them by passing this resolution.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I thank those who have spoken in favour of the motion. I thank Sir John Gorman for his comments, and for putting his finger on the nub of the case. It was not a case of not having the right expert; it was not a case of missing a point of evidence; it was about the crime committed by the original solicitor. If the first solicitor had not acted in conflict with his professional interests, such a travesty would not have occurred, or it would have taken a different course. Sir John is right to raise that point. Had that solicitor acted differently, the financial estate of the Bland family would also have been protected, ensuring that the family did not endure the double victimhood of having to live in poverty subsequent to the rape and incest. It is clear that the first lie is always the most difficult to tell. In this case, the most difficult lie was that of the solicitor. Once it was told, as we well know, the spinning of the web was begun. It had to continue, in order to conceal the original cover-up. That lies at the heart of the case.

The House was shocked by the comments of Monica McWilliams. There was a good deal of padding, but, when it all came down to it, her reason for not supporting a case that highlights the plight of a rape victim and a brutalised mother was a missing comma. That is pathetic. What kind of excuse is that to give to the House?

Monica McWilliams was correct when she said that elements of the case were not unique. That is true. It happens every day in other jurisdictions. However, we are debating a specific issue. At some point, we must be specific; life is not always full of generalities. In this case it is disappointing, to say the least, that a missing comma has been used as an excuse by the Member for South Belfast. The allegation was made that —

Ms McWilliams: Will the Member give way?

Mr Paisley Jnr: No, you have done yourself enough disservice today.

Ms McWilliams: You are not giving way because you know that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Member has done herself enough disservice. The measures mentioned by the Member

have been in place since 1992, and the campaign has been ongoing since 1980. The measures that have been identified have therefore been wholly inadequate to address the problems that this case has thrown up. Pious words will do nothing unless we have action.

Members should vote in favour of the motion. By doing so, they will demonstrate that, in this jurisdiction, we are at least prepared to note the concerns and plead with others down there to listen and to take genuine action.

4.45 pm

It was a mistake to divulge the identity of the Carrickfergus family. I hope that on reflection the Member will consider that. I know that the daughter in that case is still in hiding away from Northern Ireland. Her life has been messed up considerably —

Ms McWilliams: She is one of my students.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That may be the case, but I wish that the Member had not mentioned her name.

Ms McWilliams: It is in the newspaper every day.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is all very well. It was very sad for that young girl who is trying to get a new life. That her case has been raised in the newspaper is not a justification for raising it today. It does damage; it brings it back; and it brings it home. That is what I have been told —

Ms McWilliams: She wants publicity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is what I have been told by the victims and, on that basis, the Member should have some respect for the victims. She may have been speaking

to other victims who want a different course of action, but there are victims who do not.

The other claim — that in this case the judges lacked expertise — is also nonsense. The judges in the Bland case were not permitted to see the evidence. Therefore, they could not make the decision to prevent the child falling into the custody of the abuser. Again, that goes back to the original misdemeanour by the first solicitor. If the first solicitor had not acted in the way that he did, the judges would have eventually got to see the evidence. However, the fact that the judges never got to see the evidence until much later in the case, when the damage had been done, shows that it is a question not of missing expertise — although it might be so in other cases — but of the failure to show the bench the evidence. It was only after the bench saw the evidence that they made sure that the child was taken to Canada and put under police protection in exile there.

I hope that, given the evidence about the cover-up in this case, Members will not hide behind flimsy excuses but will put their money where their mouth is and support the motion in the way that it has been worded. I cannot explain the missing comma. It has gone astray somewhere in the transmission of the documents, but the meaning is very clear. I hope that no flimsy excuse will be used by any Member to avoid taking a decision that others have been too frightened to take because of fear of the elite — legal or political — whom they wish to protect.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the failure of the Irish Justice system to resolve the rape/incest case of the daughter of British citizen Sarah Bland.

Adjourned at 4.49 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Thursday 13 September 2001

The Assembly met at 2.00 pm (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

TERRORIST ATTACK ON THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Message of Condolence

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Members and those outside should understand what has happened here today. I tabled an amendment, which you assured me was competent. However, it has not been accepted. You explained the reason that it was not accepted. That should be made known to the House and to the public.

Mr Speaker: An amendment was tabled in the name of Dr Paisley. I have advised him, and I advise the House, that in exercising the responsibilities devolved to me under Standing Order 15, it will not be my practice on this occasion, nor will it be my intention on any future occasion, to select an amendment to a motion of condolence.

Yesterday I received from the acting First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister the following letter dated 12 September 2001:

“In view of the deeply tragic events yesterday in the US, we hereby give notice under Standing Order 11 that the Assembly should meet as soon as possible for the purpose of the transaction of the following specific business:-

That this Assembly condemns the shocking and inhuman acts of terrorism carried out in the United States of America on Tuesday and, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, extends its deepest sympathy to the Government and people of the United States of America and all who have suffered so grievously.”

Today's sitting is in pursuance of that request under Standing Order 11.

It is with warm but undoubtedly heavy hearts that we welcome to the Assembly on her first official visit as the new United States consul general, Barbara Stephenson.

We trust that there will be happier times when she will be able to be with us.

The Acting First Minister (Sir Reg Empey): I beg to move

That this Assembly condemns the shocking and inhuman acts of terrorism carried out in the United States of America on Tuesday and, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, extends its deepest sympathy to the Government and people of the United States of America and all who have suffered so grievously.

Mr Speaker and Members of the House, we meet today under a heavy cloud to express sympathy and to show solidarity with the United States and its people. As you indicated, Mr Speaker, we have invited Barbara Stephenson to attend our proceedings. In the midst of what must be a most harrowing and painful time for her and her colleagues, we are grateful that her party can be with us today.

Perhaps the most disturbing fact about the events of the last two days is that the passage of time has served only to heighten awareness of the enormity of what has taken place. The impressions of catastrophe created by the terrorist attack on the United States have not lessened as the clock has ticked by; rather its implications have become more stark, more horrible and more traumatic. Make no mistake about it, Western democracy, Western freedoms and Western values are under an attack of the most extreme, most cynical and most murderous kind.

As a politician I have worked towards the day when I might play a part in promoting commerce and generating wealth in this country to make it a better, more prosperous place for our citizens. As a Minister with responsibilities and interests in international trade and investment, I was devastated to watch what was taking place at the heart of world business and at the heart of the business world.

The atrocity has touched the lives of many innocent people around the globe. This morning the Foreign Secretary talked about the number of citizens from this country who lost their lives in Manhattan. The confirmed figure is approaching 100, but it is feared that hundreds more of our fellow citizens also perished in this cowardly attack.

People from Northern Ireland have been caught up in this harrowing maelstrom. We do not know if any have lost their lives, nor do we know how many were fortunate to escape. All of us thank God that so many were saved.

My ministerial Colleague Michael McGimpsey knows only too well the sense of relief that a family experiences when a loved one telephones to say that he or she is all right. Michael's nephew Jason is a fireman in New York and was in the north tower searching for survivors on the nineteenth floor when the south tower was attacked. Jason managed to get out in time before the huge skyscraper collapsed. Regrettably, 250 of his colleagues were not so fortunate.

People in Northern Ireland know only too well what it means to have to endure terrorist violence. Yesterday's attack on the RUC in Londonderry demonstrated that terrorists on this island are also intent on inflicting pain and suffering. As world leaders begin to face up to international terrorism, it is worth remembering the words of the United States Secretary of State, General Colin Powell:

"We are building a strong coalition to go after these perpetrators, but more broadly go after terrorism wherever we find it in the world."

Those are strong words, and words that I wholly endorse.

Given our experiences, it is worth reminding the House of a simple truth. As stated in 'The Irish News' editorial:

"In moral terms, attacks on Canary Wharf in London and the World Trade Centre differ only in terms of scale."

I do not propose to dwell on that now, but we must acknowledge the read-across to our situation, which we will address in the coming days.

Tomorrow, meanwhile, we will officially remember our American friends as they attempt to come to terms with their loss and to mourn. It will be a time to stand side by side with President Bush and the American people and present a defiant face to those people who would threaten basic freedoms and the democratic way of life. It will be a time to recognise our duty to our friends and to stand by the side of right.

The Acting Deputy First Minister (Mr Mallon): Mr Speaker, it is with a very heavy heart that I rise to speak on the motion in the name of Sir Reg Empey and myself. The horror and the scale of the destruction visited on the United States of America on Tuesday has shocked us all. It is a horror that will burn in our minds for many, many years to come. Our hearts go out not only to those affected but to all the people of America who have suffered physically and psychologically from the impact of these horrendous acts of terrorism.

Sir Reg Empey and I have written to the President of the United States offering the sympathy of the Executive. We are grateful to Barbara Stephenson, US consul general, and her colleagues for their presence today to hear at first hand the views of the Assembly.

Our prayers are with the victims of these unspeakable atrocities. Many of us have family, close friends and acquaintances in New York and Washington. Many people from Northern Ireland have found new lives in America. American investment has been very important in creating employment and opportunity here.

This was not simply an attack on America; it was an indiscriminate attack on a centre of world commerce used and staffed by people of all nationalities. It was an attack on us all. Many of us can recall parades on St

Patrick's Days and on other occasions that included members of the New York City Police Department and the New York City Fire Department — members of all nationalities. We pay tribute to their heroism in the face of this outrage, a heroism that has seen all too many of them perish in their endeavour to save lives.

As part of a society that hopes to emerge from conflict, we have some understanding of the American people's feelings at this time. Just as they have supported us in so many ways as the peace process has developed, so we should now offer them our support in coming to terms with their pain and loss. Their solidarity, most notably in the aftermath of the horror of Omagh, is a fine example of the way in which friends from other nations can help in times of great distress. It is an example that we should seek to respond to now as the American people face a time of great loss.

For other reasons, the events in America touch us all. This unprecedented attack makes the world a less safe place. For evil people, advances in civilisation offer a new and more horrific means to kill and new opportunities to terrorise. That raises the issue of global security. The impact of these attacks will reverberate around the world in different ways. It is important for democracy that those responsible for the planning and organisation of these crimes be brought to justice quickly.

We ask ourselves what we can do to help. I suggest that the greatest tribute and help that we can give, as human beings and as leaders of our community, is to ensure that terrorism will never again be seen or enacted in our country. We must create the stability and the type of progress that alone can end and replace the awfulness of terrorism on a global scale.

2.15 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The world has been given a fiercely highlighted message through this atrocity that razed a feature of New York's skyline to sea level and made its rubble the cruel sepulchre of thousands of unsuspecting victims.

Rulers of Western democracies must learn the lesson that there cannot be dialogue with terrorism — for it is the lie incarnate. Its high priests and acolytes are unchangeable liars. They are hellish bloodsuckers, who in these crimes were prepared to knife young children to reach their heinous ends. Concessions have turned the monster into a greater monster, which now rages across the world and comes forward to torment us all.

A new and terrible dimension has been added to the terrors of our unknown tomorrows. We must have firm faith in a sovereign God — the only true and living God — who will ultimately bring evil to the judgement bar and mete out his judgements on those who have committed such dastardly deeds.

Reference has been made to the Omagh bombing. Tragically, the authorities in this land have not brought a single person to justice, and the victims have to gather up the money to take the case to court. In the past, we have heard strong statements in reaction to such terrible deeds as we have witnessed, about dealing with evil men and about bringing them to justice. However, those reactions have not attained their claimed ends. The tragedy is that terrorism has been made respectable through concessions. Terrorism has decided that it can take on the world and wring more and more concessions out of those who abide by democratic principles.

I have already had a personal letter delivered to President Bush. Today, on behalf of the people I represent, I record our sympathy and the brokenness of our own hearts, because we too have passed this way. We can only continue in the confidence that right will prevail. I speak not only for the members of my party, but for the United Unionist Assembly Party, which is associating itself with my remarks.

I must point out that there are those in the House whose organisation is part of the international organisation that brought about those awful crimes. There is a time to speak and a time to take action. The only action that those who believe as I do can take is to withdraw from the House while the spokesperson of that organisation, which is allied with international terrorism, makes his remarks.

I intend, with my Colleagues, to leave the House now. We will return to hear the other Members who wish to make a contribution. However, I will not give my presence or credence to crocodile tears, or to an impious demonstration of a conviction of guilt; a guilt that should be properly expressed by handing in the weapons that they have, which are used for the same type of killings in our country.

Mr Adams: Two years ago, I visited the north tower of the World Trade Centre. Some Irish-American friends, associated with Friends of Sinn Féin, who work in the World Trade Centre and in the financial district adjacent to it, had organised a lunch in the Windows on the World restaurant at the top of the tower. Sadly and tragically, one of the people who organised our visit is now missing. Friends in New York tell me that there is little hope of finding him alive.

Last night, I spent several hours on the phone trying to get through to friends in New York City to ensure that they were safe and to hear news of the extent of the tragedy. The enormity of the catastrophe is very personal for many of them, as it is for me. My telephone conversations will be repeated by many Irish people who are reaching out to relatives and friends in the USA.

Among those who died was Fr Mychal Judge, chaplain of the New York City Fire Department. I met Fr Mychal several times. He was a close friend of New York policeman, Steven McDonald, who was left a quad-

riplegic after being shot down in the line of duty and who has devoted his life to the cause of peace. Steven was at the Assembly only recently. Another New York friend of mine, an ex- fireman who has survived the tragedy, is coming to terms with the fact that all his colleagues in the station have been wiped out.

Many people in the Chamber have experienced the grief and hurt of loss during the years of our conflict. We understand the personal trauma that now touches thousands of American homes, and homes in Ireland, Britain and elsewhere in the world.

Like everyone else in the Assembly, I unequivocally condemn those who carried out the attacks. I have sent my deepest condolences and sympathy to the people of the United States, to President Bush, to Governor Pataki, to Mayor Giuliani and to other representatives. It is clear that the atrocity will have profound, far-reaching and long-term consequences, not just for the victims or for the USA but for the rest of the world. Humanity collectively, including people on this small island, should be mindful of that in the time ahead.

It is right that we should express solidarity and sympathy with the people of the USA. However, we must go further in those essential and necessary expressions of our sorrow, shock and denunciation. The best contribution that parties represented here — together with the Irish and British Governments — can make to world peace, to the cause of justice throughout the world and to the memory of those who died in the USA and in other conflicts, including our own, is to make our peace process work.

When viewed in the awful context of the difficulties that other regions are experiencing, together with the enormous human suffering in New York and Washington, it is true that great progress has been made here. Is that to be squandered? We know the issues — they have been well rehearsed. I do not challenge only Unionists or the British Government by those remarks. There is a collective challenge for all of us.

Our party is totally committed to the peace process. I rededicate myself and my Colleagues to do our best to resolve the problems that confront us. We share real difficulties. I cannot underestimate them, and I do not underestimate them. Nor do I suggest that Republicans or Nationalists have a monopoly on grievance or problems. However, let us realise that our duty is to make peace with one another, and that our response to the atrocity is to build democracy and justice here and to resist all the factional urges that divide us.

We have still a long way to go to surmount our difficulties and to deal with the problems that beset the process. If we fail to resolve those problems, we will have failed our people — we will have failed ourselves. While we absorb, on both a personal and a political level, what has happened in the USA, we will

have failed to meet the challenge and spurned the opportunity, amid the anger, chaos, suffering and sorrow, to make a difference and show that a better way exists.

Sin an tslí atá romhainn. Ba rud millteanach, ba rud trom, ba rud an-bhrónach an rud a tharla sna Stáit Aontaithe. Caithfidimid an difear a dhéanamh. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mrs E Bell: Although I rise with deep sadness and profound regret, I welcome the opportunity to support the message of condolence. My deep sadness is a result of the thousands of human beings — most still not found or identified — who had life snatched from them at the scenes of tragedy. The true number of those killed will not be known for a long time, if ever, and it will be a harrowing time for their colleagues, friends and relatives left behind. We must remember — even if it is for our own comfort — that, only minutes after the initial explosions, hundreds of firefighters, paramedics and other rescue workers entered the burning buildings without thought for their own safety. Many of them paid the ultimate price for their caring behaviour.

My profound regret is that, even in the twenty-first century, man's inhumanity to man achieved a new low with such basic terror. There are men and women who are completely guided in all aspects of their lives and their behaviour by radical conviction or rabid fanaticism. They sincerely believe that the end justifies the means, even though their other beliefs specifically preach the value of life and the evil of taking it. I remember all too clearly, as others will, that in our own dark times a number of terrorist organisations stated that, unfortunately and in some instances, even children's lives were expendable. We have not really learned.

The public was naturally horrified. However, that attitude is obviously still present in those groups that use terror and murder as the chief weapons in their struggle — even in Northern Ireland. Here we have witnessed graphic horrors, such as Darkley, Enniskillen, McGurk's Bar, La Mon House Hotel and, ultimately, Omagh. Each of those caused a new wave of revulsion, but the scenes from New York and Washington have undoubtedly resulted in even greater disbelief and absolute disgust because of the scale of what happened.

We must show our support and sympathy to the people of America, as they have done to us so many times in the past. I ask President Bush and other world leaders to spare no effort to seek out the perpetrators and their supporters, but I also ask them to react in a measured way and not to retaliate on the same scale. That would only mean further loss of innocent life. Seek justice, not revenge.

I support the motion.

Mr Ervine: Like others, I have watched the almost 24-hour coverage of the horror and tragedy in the

United States. In many ways, anything that I say or that is likely to be said will by now be clichés, as so many people have poured out their condemnation, anger, frustration and disbelief.

There are moments in life — and this has to be one of them — when those of us in our divided society who have suffered from terrorism or who have felt that they were freedom fighters must consider where we are now and what contribution we can make to our lives and the lives of those around us in the future.

2.30 pm

There are few words that I could say to reassure people that they are not in danger. It is one thing to think that you might have the capacity to protect yourself, and another to launch attacks on innocent people. Terror can be on a small or a large scale. We must remember that the United States has suffered both, when terrorists murdered its citizens in Tanzania, Kenya, Beirut and throughout the world. However, whether terror is on the small scale, or on the spectacular and, frankly, bloody awful scale that we see now, the outcome is the same.

Can anyone imagine what it was like to be herded to the back of a plane in the knowledge that, as the New York or Washington skyline rose to meet you, you were breathing your last breath? Is that any different from having a 9mm pistol put to your head and finding, in those last fleeting moments, that you are breathing your last breath?

Mr Speaker, I have a personal sense of hurt and anger about what we have seen. Terrorism is wrong; it is unjustifiable. As another Member said, our contribution to the future should be to ensure that our little bit of world peace is helped by our recognising that, although we want to be safe, there is no excuse for making an attack.

Ms McWilliams: If we are in shock here in Northern Ireland, we can only begin to imagine how people in Pittsburgh, Washington, New York and throughout the United States must feel.

Barbara Stephenson must have been in a terrible state on Tuesday, because I understand that she has children in Washington. We made our telephone calls to ensure that any friends and relatives that we have in America were safe, that they had managed to scoop up their children, take them from their schools and homes, and get to safety. To have heard the telephone calls of people who are concerned about the many who are still missing, we in the Assembly can only express our deepest condolences.

This was cruelty of the most volcanic proportions and it has shaken the geopolitics of the world. All we can think about is how we, in our humanity, can reach out to all those Americans who throughout the years

have reached out to us with humanity, time and time again.

As we once said, the Americans never had to send soldiers to Northern Ireland or bring bodies home in body bags. They sent us diplomats, community workers, academics and funding. We thank them for that. All we can say is that, in this moment of their terrible horror, we shall give them anything that they ask of us. That is the least that we can do in our humanity. We shall also remember them as the weeks go on.

In the end, we must redouble our efforts to find democratic, anti-oppressive methods to deal with differences, both in our own very small part of the world and throughout the world.

I would like Barbara Stephenson to know that — as we say in Northern Ireland — we are very sorry for your trouble.

Mr McCartney: I extend my profound sympathy to the President and people of the United States. Events of such horrific magnitude make language inadequate to express our empathy and solidarity with those who suffer. The words of Colin Powell and the resolution of the United Nations Security Council to combat all terrorism, wherever it may be, must bring some sense of belief that, following this enormously tragic event, the world has at last awakened to the fact that the third world war, which began long ago, is reaching a new level of horror. This horrific outrage outlines the principle that my party and I have always contended: democracy cannot co-exist with terrorism.

There is no difference in principle between the outrages of the Baltic Exchange, Canary Wharf, Manchester, Thiepval and the present catastrophe in New York; the difference is in the scale. Their purpose and effect are exactly the same — to induce, by terror, policy adoption by the nation that suffers, whether it be the United States or the United Kingdom. The purpose is to force nations to adopt policies that are conducive to the realisation of terrorist aims.

ETA, Libya, Colombia and the Balkans have all inflicted terror that was internationally organised, and people in this part of the world have played a central part in that. My refusal to countenance any kind of political intercourse with the political representatives of armed terrorists of whatever kind, colour or persuasion has been criticised by the so-called liberals of political life in Northern Ireland as rigid, implacable and unbending. However, there can be no point of compromise between the arsonist and the fireman — and many firemen died, discharging their duty in New York. Nor can there be any point of compromise between the democrat and the terrorist.

The Republican movement's contributions to terrorism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been

the car bomb, which decimated American citizens in Beirut and in their embassies in east Africa, and the more recent concept of attacking the commercial heartland of the country that terrorists wish to persuade to follow policies that will realise their terrorist aims. In the commercial and media heart of London are the Baltic Exchange and Canary Wharf, just as New York had the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. The bitter lesson of London was learned by those who perpetrated the outrage in New York. However, the British Government were willing to follow a policy of abject appeasement to protect the mainland. We did not hear the kind of words that came from Colin Powell from a British Minister. We did not hear a British Minister say that the Government would hunt down terrorists and eradicate them wherever they were found.

I deliberately stayed to hear what Mr Adams had to say, although my sympathies were with those who left. Mr Adams held a position in the Belfast brigade of the IRA when it blew apart the bodies of 11 people on Bloody Friday. I treat his words of consolation with contempt.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Mr Ervine —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: I did not understand, Mr Speaker, that there was —

Mr Speaker: Order. There can be no one in the Chamber who has not had to be present in places of sadness and at funerals. Most of us are aware that more words spoken do not necessarily mean more condolences expressed. It is time to express our condolences in ways other than in words.

Question put and agreed to nemine contradicente.

Resolved:

That this Assembly condemns the shocking and inhuman acts of terrorism carried out in the United States of America on Tuesday and, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, extends its deepest sympathy to the Government and people of the United States of America and all who have suffered so grievously.

Mr Speaker: I have arranged for a book of condolence to be made available for Members, staff and press working in the Building or on the Stormont estate who wish to sign it. I invite Sir Reg Empey, Mr Séamus Mallon and other Members who wish to sign the book to do so with me in the Chamber after the Adjournment. The book will then be made available in the Great Hall for Members' staff, party staff, Assembly officials, civil servants and others who work on the estate, and the press corps.

Adjourned at 2.42 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 17 September 2001

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees the regional development strategy ('Shaping our Future') for Northern Ireland 2025.

On 2 July we were able to debate progress on the formulation of the regional development strategy. That debate was very positive. I valued greatly the contributions from individual Members and was very heartened by the broad support received from the Assembly. Following the debate I wrote to several Members in response to points that I was unable, because of lack of time, to deal with when winding up.

Since then I have made several changes to the text. In the main, these changes tidy up the text and, I hope, in the light of comments made during the debate, make a number of sections of the document clearer. Details of those changes have been incorporated in the final text of the strategy, copies of which have been made available to Members.

However, I wish to inform the House that in response to an approach made by the Regional Development Committee on Wednesday past I propose to make a further amendment to the change that I was proposing to the text on page 73. The last sentence of the second bullet point will now read:

"While the balance of the housing need shall be provided from 'greenfield' sites, as much new housing as practicably possible, (as assessed following receipt of the Urban Capacity Study), will be provided within the built up area *to seek to achieve* the regional 'brownfield' target of 60% but without town cramming."

I believe that this further change will reassure the Committee and the Assembly of my earnest commitment to the urban housing drive.

I stress again that the key principles set out in the text that was debated on 2 July remain unchanged. Those principles must underpin, indeed validate, the strategy, and it is worth repeating them.

The strategy is about establishing an important strategic planning framework for the next 25 years, which is much more than planning effectively our public infrastructure over the next 25 years, important as that is. It is about creating the conditions for a long-term competitive and sustainable economic and physical development of the region. Sustainable development concerns all of us. Whether we are in the public or private sector, we need to take account of it in our strategic planning. The strategy is about environmental, economic and social sustainability.

During the last debate I made the point — and this is an important view that is shared by many in the Chamber — that the strategy is critically about building sustainable communities. Social and economic cohesion is at its heart. That need has been all too visibly underscored by the terrible scenes in north Belfast over the past few weeks.

The strategy emphasises the need for balanced development. Every part of Northern Ireland, whether a rural or an urban area, should be able to contribute to a strong and prosperous Northern Ireland, and the regional development strategy is about urban and rural, not urban versus the rest.

It is also about achieving a balanced approach. We need to energise the contribution of different areas and ensure development in the north, south, east and west of the Province. It is also important to support the complementary roles of urban and rural areas — and do so in a way that promotes the overall development of the region.

The implementation phase of the strategy is important. For implementation to be successful, there must be a credible delivery mechanism that has the active support of key stakeholders. Achieving that requires Departments, agencies, councils, business, the voluntary and community sectors and individuals to work together to benefit the region as a whole. However, organisations do not take action, people do, and people implement what they are involved in creating.

Many people have already been involved in getting us to the point where, by leave of the Assembly, the strategy is agreed. That is a major plus. Over the next few months, I will put in place innovative and responsive arrangements at sub-regional level to assist Departments to deliver the strategy and ensure that progress is made across Northern Ireland.

The form of those sub-regional arrangements needs to be discussed. However, the city visioning processes under way in Belfast, Londonderry, Craigavon and Armagh, the work of several district councils that have formed strategic clusters, such as the rural west, and the development of local strategy partnerships under Peace II provide valuable new opportunities for focusing on the needs of specific places. To ensure that progress

is managed in a co-ordinated and effective manner, I will establish and chair an interdepartmental steering group.

Monitoring and evaluation are critical for measuring the progress of the regional development strategy. In the autumn I will advance details of the monitoring and evaluation framework to the Committee for Regional Development for its consideration. I want to work closely with the Committee on shaping that.

We need to ensure that the strategy remains appropriate over time, and we need to record and measure change across the community. That is particularly important in the context of the planning process. Therefore the strategy needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable it, area development plans and the development control process to respond appropriately to emerging trends and opportunities. That need to remain flexible, yet still provide a tension between the various elements, is the reason why I will soon be advancing proposals for a relatively short strategic planning Bill, which will make a minor, largely technical, change to the Strategic Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Another important component of the strategy will be the development of key regional planning policy statements. The first of these will cover housing, retailing, transportation and the countryside. These overarching regional policy statements are designed to augment and guide a comprehensive set of operational planning policy statements being prepared by the Department of the Environment, which inform the preparation of development plans and decisions on development control. This programme of work on both the regional and operational policy statements is already well under way and will be developed by my Department and the Department of the Environment, working in close co-operation.

In looking at implementation, the spotlight will inevitably fall on housing and the progress towards the regional brownfield target of 60% by 2010. Let us not underestimate it: the target is challenging, particularly when one considers our baseline performance during the 1990s. However, the approach set out in the strategy is a more sustainable way of meeting our regional housing needs.

If we are to achieve that target, there is an onus on my Department and the other key Departments to engage positively with the developers and the builders. My Department is prepared to work with the industry — in whatever forum is most appropriate for it — to see how we might together meet the regional brownfield target.

Another area that will rightly come under the spotlight is the regional transportation strategy, since it is so fundamental to the success of the regional development strategy. On 28 September there is to be a major conference on the transportation strategy. It will bring

together over 300 people to help us advance our thinking on how we might deliver a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system that will benefit society and the environment and will actively contribute to social inclusion and everyone's quality of life.

I want to make a few final remarks. The regional development strategy is not a static single-dimensional framework. It is multidimensional. It must also be dynamic. Beneath the framework there will be a convergence — and I hope just a few divergences — of separate and often linked policies that will have an impact on future development. The trick will be to bring greater coherence to those policies. Also, we need to animate the strategy, by which I mean that we should stimulate debate around emerging policy issues that might have an impact on our drive towards a more sustainable Northern Ireland.

Benjamin Disraeli said that

“The secret of success is constancy of purpose”.

In implementing the strategy we should aim for constancy of purpose and for success. I ask the Assembly to agree the regional development strategy.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): This important document will shape and form the development of this region over the next 25 years, and no one should underestimate its importance. We should congratulate the Minister and his officials on producing such a good document. As the Minister has pointed out, it is a framework; it is not something that is set in stone. It will be developed over the years. Nonetheless, this document represents a very important start to the future development of our region.

12.15 pm

I thank the Minister for the way in which he and his officials have worked to shape the document in consultation with the Regional Development Committee. On numerous occasions, and at short notice, he and his colleagues went out of their way to listen to the Committee's concerns.

As the Minister has said, the regional development strategy is about establishing an important strategic planning framework for Northern Ireland over the next 25 years. I commend him and his Department for the extensive consultation that has taken place, and I hope that that spirit of consultation will continue. As the Committee's Deputy Chairperson, Mr McFarland, said during the debate on 2 July:

“The support of a panel of international experts, the public examination and the appointment of an independent panel has ensured a rigorous examination that has taken into account a wide spectrum of views, right across Northern Ireland.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 11, p335*].

It is now vital that the strategy be implemented successfully.

I welcome the Minister's appreciation that the strategy is critical to building sustainable communities. As MLA for North Belfast, I agree with him that the recent sad events in my constituency highlight the urgency of starting that work.

I also welcome and support the Minister's statement that the strategy emphasises the need for balanced development across the region. The Committee was concerned that the strategy would place too much emphasis on the Greater Belfast area and would neglect rural areas. The strategy must reflect the needs of all parts of Northern Ireland, urban and rural, and I welcome the fact that the Minister has taken account of those views and has ensured that the regional development strategy gives due regard to the importance of balanced development.

Successful implementation of the strategy is vital. The Committee debated the draft plans for implementation extensively and made certain recommendations to the Minister. As the strategy is cross-departmental, it is essential that all Departments support it, co-operate, and play their roles fully in implementing it in order to ensure its credibility and ensure the achievement of its aims. I cannot overemphasize that the regional development framework is not simply for the Department for Regional Development; it is for all Departments. It is an all-embracing strategy affecting areas as diverse as the environment, housing, rural development, tourism, business and employment opportunities. Consequently, it is a framework that must overarch the work of all Departments.

The strategy represents a golden opportunity for all of us to create a vibrant and cohesive society with a strong local economy, supported by excellent public services throughout Northern Ireland. I welcome the intention to establish an interdepartmental steering group, to be chaired by the Minister for Regional Development. I also welcome plans to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the strategy carefully. The Regional Development Committee is committed to playing its role in scrutinising progress in these areas and ensuring the successful implementation of the strategy.

The strategy will be vital for future development and planning control. Developers and builders must also support and co-operate with the implementation of the strategy to ensure that its aims are achieved. In particular, I refer to the development of brownfield sites in urban areas. The Committee welcomes the setting of the challenging target of 60% in regard to the use of brownfield sites and urges everyone involved in the development of housing to take every opportunity to avail of such sites.

As the Minister is aware, the Committee pushed the Department very hard on that issue. As recently as the Committee meeting of 12 September, the Committee proposed an amendment to the text of the document at page 73 to include an additional reference to the 60% target for brownfield development. I am pleased that the Minister has accepted the amendment. It reflects a deep and genuine concern on the part of the Committee to seek to ensure that there is a real commitment to developing urban housing, rather than building on greenfield sites.

The Minister's acceptance of the amendment is a reassurance to the Committee and the many others who lobbied the Committee and who are concerned about the future development of our urban areas. I am pleased that the Department will drive forward a strategy with the primary objective of developing brownfield sites. A clear message must be sent to developers, and the rules must be made clear to planners: brownfield options must be exhausted before consideration can be given to building on greenfield sites. That condition is crucial to ensuring that our cities and towns are regenerated and made much more attractive. The Committee welcomes the strategy's sequential approach to choosing sites for development and urges that greenfield sites be used as a last resort only.

The impact of the regional transportation strategy is also vital to the successful implementation of the regional development strategy. The vision of a modern, sustainable and safe transportation system, which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion, must be realised to underpin and support the regional development strategy. The Regional Development Committee will continue to work with the Department to ensure that a viable transportation strategy is developed and implemented as soon as possible. I wish the regional transportation conference on 28 September every success. It will be an important public consultation. I hope that it will be constructive and used by the Department.

I urge the Minister and the Department to implement speedily the strategy. I also urge all other involved bodies, including Departments and district councils, to play a full and honest role in its implementation. I also urge the Department to press on with the development and implementation of the regional transportation strategy, which will be a vital complement to the regional development strategy.

As the Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, Mr McFarland said on 2 July,

"We must all look very critically at how the necessary funding for the regional development strategy is to be found It is clear that alternative means of funding must be found to ensure that the improvements to our roads and water infrastructure, and the transport system, can go ahead." [*Official Report, Bound Volume 11, p337*].

— there is little point in developing plans such as the regional development strategy unless adequate funding is made available —

“The Committee for Regional Development will be carefully monitoring and examining progress on that issue.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 11, p337*].

This problem can be addressed in part through the allocation of additional funding under the Executive programme funds. I urge the Minister to make a strong case for such funding to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

I thank those Committees that provided constructive commentary on the regional development strategy. I pay particular tribute to the Regional Development Committee, which worked very hard to painstakingly examine and study the various drafts of the strategy. They have made useful and constructive suggestions to guide and advise the Department, and we now have a strategy that provides a vital framework for the future development of this region over the next 25 years and beyond.

I support the motion. The Committee unanimously supports the strategy document, and I ask Members to agree the report and allow the Minister to begin the implementation of this vital strategy.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): I welcome the document and associate myself with the Chairperson’s remarks. I pay tribute to the Minister and his colleagues in the Department for their close co-operation, which is probably a model of co-operation that other Committees should look at because of its excellence.

At last we have a plan to take Northern Ireland forward. However, it needs to be co-ordinated. The Minister, notwithstanding the Committee, might want to look at the possibility of an executive steering committee as a way of tying the Executive and the Ministers into supporting the strategy. It could be that if particular Ministers were to object to the strategy, there might be a difficulty at ministerial level rather than at Executive level. He might consider such a committee if things were not to move forward at the speed that he would wish them to.

The targets for brownfield sites, which the Chairperson mentioned, are ambitious: they depend on the urban capacity study. When we discussed this issue we understood that 60% was a high target. The logic behind it is that if we have such a target, subject to confirmation from the urban capacity study, we stand some chance of achieving it. If a low target is set, we would almost certainly achieve it, but that would not do what we are trying to do, which is to encourage brownfield development in urban areas.

A change of planning ethos comes with the document, and that is something that developers should pay close attention to. The document changes the practice of building and development in Northern Ireland forever. Its fundamental ethos is that we look at our environment and pay closer attention to it. We cannot any longer simply build where we wish to; sadly, that, has been the practice over the last number of years. We have only to look at our constituencies to see that that is the case. This is one issue that will unite all 108 Members. There are planning problems in our constituencies due to builders and developers building in an unplanned way. It is to be hoped that the regional development strategy will get a grip on that situation and solve the problem.

As regards how the strategy might be advanced and the issues developed, I have particular pet issues that I would like to share with the House. First, there is the use of existing rural sites. Throughout Northern Ireland’s rural community there are sites where buildings have started to fall down. For some reason we seem to ignore rebuilding on those sites because it is cheaper to build on new greenfield ones. We should look at rural communities and build on existing sites.

Secondly, we have all had experience of developers. Behind my property a perfectly serviceable house was knocked completely flat because it was cheaper for the owner to do that and build a new house than to extend the existing one. It is absolutely crazy. I appreciate that such matters are not necessarily the Minister’s responsibility, but they are part of the whole business of planning and strategy, and we need to look at them.

We need a co-ordinated transport network, and the regional transportation strategy will help us with that. When driving a goods vehicle from Dungannon, one can hurtle up the M1 — or if coming from Ballymena, one can hurtle down the M2. However, the moment that one hits the Westlink, one virtually stops. It is ridiculous in this day and age — and the Minister has got this issue in hand. It is crazy not to have a system that allows drivers to get through Belfast quickly. We need a system for taking goods rapidly to our airports, railheads and seaports.

That needs to be developed as part of this sort of strategy. Northern Ireland’s links across the Irish Sea need to be improved. Yesterday I headed off down the A75 — a road beloved of us all — when travelling with my children to university. The Assembly must work with the Scottish Parliament to sort out some way of improving our east-west links; they are not fit for the twenty-first century.

12.30 pm

Rural roads must also be tackled, as Members from west of the Bann will know well. From Lough Neagh eastward one can get to most places fairly quickly. However, in the west of the Province the key transport

corridors must be improved to allow the emergency services and others to get around and have fast access.

This is a good day. The strategy gives firm leadership. I commend the Minister and the Department for Regional Development and urge the House to support the motion.

Mr R Hutchinson: I join the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development in congratulating the Minister on the document. I would also like to thank the many departmental officers who took time over recent months to come to the Committee and explain in detail the many aspects of the regional development strategy (RDS). That has been helpful. It has added to the smooth running of the process and contributed towards our eventually getting to the stage where the Committee could give its total support to the Minister's plans.

The regional development strategy is a wide-ranging document of considerable content. Twenty-five years seems a long time, but, as Members know, time has a habit of creeping up on us.

Will the Minister tell the House if all the councils in Northern Ireland have finished their area plans and if those plans were taken into account when pen was put to paper on the document? Have some councils neglected to get their plans produced? It is important that every council has an input to the regional development strategy, and I wonder if that has happened.

Housing is a subject that people in Northern Ireland hold dear. The document states that the Minister seeks to widen opportunity and choice and to improve the supply and quality of housing; no Member would disagree with that. It also states that he wants to promote sustainable development. The last two Members who spoke put some emphasis on development in greenfield and brownfield sites. Every Member realises that there must come a time when builders are brought to account. For too long there have been builders in Northern Ireland who seem to have been able to build where they want, when they want and how they want. Under the regional development strategy it is hoped that that will stop, and I am glad that we will begin to see sensible developments — not just in Belfast but throughout the Province. For that reason I welcome the document's housing policy.

All Members want a vital, modern and safe transport system. Those of us who have travelled in Europe have been amazed at the modern railway and road transport systems that seem to be the norm with our European cousins.

At the end of September we will have a taste of what will be in the transport strategy programme when 300 people will be brought together. The strategy will be put before them, and they will provide feedback.

Will the Minister take another look at some of the railway systems? At the Regional Development Committee meeting last Wednesday alarm bells rang in some Members' ears when we were told that some of the lines may be mothballed. I realise that money cannot be thrown at everything, but will the Minister consider that some of those railways take people to ports and to crossings between Northern Ireland and Scotland? That needs to be given grave consideration.

I welcome the Belfast metropolitan area plan. No one can oppose investment in our capital city, which has borne the brunt of terrorism for far too long. I congratulate the Minister on that plan, as well as on the Londonderry one. However, will he remember that there are several significant rural towns that also need some type of investment? Together with three of my colleagues, I met with development officers from Larne on Friday afternoon. They are looking for a way to revitalise their town and buildings and bring people back into the town. I thank the Minister for the document, and I am glad to support it. I wish him well in the future.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla pointe ginearálta a dhéanamh faoin straitéis, gan rud ar bith a athrá a dúradh cheana féin. The Committee has spent a considerable amount of time and effort discussing the regional development strategy. There has been frequent consultation with the Minister and the Department's officials, and I thank them for persevering with the Committee on the issues raised.

The regional development strategy is a critical document, which will have interdepartmental consequences in developing the region over the next 25 years. The strategy provides for that period, so the document should contain a vision of how we would like to see the region at the end of that time. In the context of the Good Friday Agreement, the vision should be one of social inclusion, economic development, equality in environment and equality for people across the region. The strategy sets out those themes as part of its objective.

The effectiveness of the strategy will depend on its implementation by each of the Departments, with co-operation from social and voluntary bodies. It will also be dependent on the financial resources available.

It is proposed to alter the schedule to the Strategic Planning Order (Northern Ireland) 1999 so that departmental development plans, particularly those of the Department of the Environment and the Department for Social Development, will conform to the strategy as opposed to being consistent with it. The reasoning is that full consistency with the strategy requirement could create unnecessary and undesirable flexibility in the development plans.

I accept that reasoning, but to have plans that, in general, conform with the strategy does not mean that

the strategy can be ignored, sidelined or weakened because of other considerations.

I welcome the Minister's intention to establish an interdepartmental steering group to ensure the strategy's implementation, to monitor and evaluate its progress and to provide an annual report to the Assembly.

Financial constraints, particularly on transport and the transportation system, will be a major factor in the strategy's success. The Minister referred to the regional transport strategy that is currently under consultation. That strategy will consider possible sources of finance. However, we must be realistic about the starting point for all aspects of the strategy, not just transportation. It is a sobering thought that the current available budget for essential road maintenance in the region supplies only half of the necessary funding. We must bear in mind that such financial constraints will determine both the strategy's effectiveness and its outcome.

Tough decisions must be made to agree the regional development strategy on transportation, especially as regards the sources of finance. If we go by current budgetary allocations, we will have to consider sources of finance other than public spending.

The regional transport strategy recognises that meeting future transport demands through road improvements and unrestrained car use is not a sustainable option. It recognises the need to focus on moving people and goods within, into and out of the region, rather than on an increase in the number of vehicles. Moreover, it recognises the need to change travel culture through more responsible car use. Hard decisions will have to be made on those issues.

The strategy's aim is to change travel culture and to extend travel choice. Reform of a travel culture that sees private car use as the primary means of transport will require a viable and attractive public transportation system. Other measures such as reasonable journey duration and cost may be needed to encourage people to choose public transport ahead of the private car, particularly in larger urban centres and their hinterlands.

The regional development strategy document is a vision for the next 25 years. On other occasions, I have referred to a lack of vision concerning the future of the region's rail network. The strategy refers to the long-term options to complete a circular link from Belfast to Bleach Green, Antrim, Lisburn and back to Belfast, to create a rapid transit system in the Belfast metropolitan area and to enhance the lines from Belfast to Derry and to Dublin.

12.45 pm

I accept the railway taskforce report, which looks at the short-term future of the rail network. The report opts to consolidate the existing rail network for a short-term period of three to five years. However, if the regional

development strategy is to move towards equality and social inclusion across the region, there should be a long-term plan to extend the rail network through Portadown to places such as Armagh, Omagh and Strabane. I hope that when formulating the regional transportation strategy, that will be addressed more positively.

Partnership is the guiding principle for implementation of the strategy, which states that plans for the development of the region will be fully implemented only if there is co-operation with our neighbours on this island and with Britain. There must be co-operation on this island on transportation.

The focus of a cross-border transportation system tends to be on routes from Larne to Dún Laoghaire and from Belfast to Dublin. Historically, under direct rule, there has been a focus on the Belfast metropolitan area. The issue of balance between the Belfast metropolitan area and Derry and rural areas has been raised during the Committee's work, but there must be a localised focus on cross-border transportation, if towns such as Enniskillen, Omagh and Armagh city are to reach their full development potential.

Brownfield sites were discussed at length by the Committee. Several Members referred to them during the debate on July 2, and I do not want to repeat the arguments. The Minister has accepted that a clear signal must be sent on the development of brownfield sites. However, the strategy sets a target of 60% brownfield development by 2010. That will depend on the result of the survey that is being carried out on the land database as regards availability.

The availability of a site, and the extent of that land database, will be influenced by the Minister's commitment to the development of brownfield sites. Developers must understand that it is not a matter of what they want to do or can do; it is a matter of what they must do. If the "must do" message is sent, the availability of sites for brownfield development will increase.

Finally, I want to talk about the more local issue of Warrenpoint harbour. Warrenpoint is about four miles from Newry's town centre, linked, as is said in the strategy, by a dual carriageway. All port traffic to and from Warrenpoint harbour must go through Newry's town centre. If Warrenpoint is to remain a sustainable and competitive port over the next 20 years, consideration will have to be given to linking the harbour with the Newry bypass, thus avoiding the town centre.

Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: Like other Members, I welcome the report, which is based on the principle of sustainability, and I congratulate the Department on the consultation process.

Some time ago the process of consultation began with a public meeting in Belfast. The consultation process has been wide ranging and time consuming. However, it is important to get it right. In the Minister's introduction to the report, he was realistic enough to concede that there must be some form of flexibility. The report reflects the benefits of devolution for the people of Northern Ireland, and those must be recognised. Although the Department for Regional Development is taking the lead, it is important to ensure that there is an interdepartmental approach to carrying out the plan, particularly in relation to social, economic, transport and environmental issues.

The process must develop in tangent with the area plans, and it must be consistent. It will come as no surprise that one of my major interests is the development and delivery of the Belfast metropolitan area plan.

I have one concern. If there is to be an interdepartmental approach towards delivering the proposals, better co-ordination is needed between Departments, particularly between the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development. As the Minister knows, a major business development in my constituency has been delayed because the two Departments have not agreed on the final process. It is to be hoped that this can be resolved quickly.

I also welcome the proposals for a regional transport policy for Northern Ireland. However, I have serious concerns about the required funding. The Department of Finance and Personnel needs to recognise the importance of the report. It would be remiss of me not to mention the problems of the A2 from Carrickfergus to Belfast. This is an example of area overdevelopment where inadequate infrastructure has been introduced to deal with the subsequent transport issues.

Many Members representing metropolitan areas will welcome the proposed introduction of the Belfast Lough ferry service — a novel idea. There have been experiments with ferry services in other cities worldwide, and I hope that when the project gets off the ground it will be a success.

I welcome the Minister's statement about brownfield sites. Members have been lobbied strongly by interested parties throughout Northern Ireland. The Minister and the Department should perhaps concede that this is the best approach, as it should set a target that I hope is achievable, particularly in urban areas.

It is important that the Assembly monitor progress on the railways. I hope that the new rail sets will come into operation sooner rather than later, together with the improvements required for various lines.

The issue of transport must be examined from an external point of view as well as an internal one.

As Members may know, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee travelled to Brussels and Copenhagen last week with the Sabena travel company. Unfortunately, Sabena intends to withdraw that route soon. Brussels is one of many important international links. If Northern Ireland is to develop as a region of the European Union, external transport links are vital.

We must ensure that the general infrastructure — not just roads and railways — is adequate. There must be a level playing field; in particular, I stress that the natural gas pipeline to Derry must be developed. The Assembly should do all that it can to ensure that that project happens.

We must examine social issues at local and regional level. If the plan is to be implemented to the maximum benefit of the people of Northern Ireland, affordable public sector housing, good health and education services and modern retailing facilities must be provided. The Planning Service must adhere to realistic guidelines if we are to protect our countryside. Members must remember that some rural areas are among the poorest in Northern Ireland. The necessary public transport facilities should be provided in those areas. On its visit to Denmark last week, the Committee learnt much about the kind of sustainable waste management programme that we need for Northern Ireland. We should consider that issue for Northern Ireland as a whole. The strategy document is of vital importance to our future.

Ms Morrice: I said on 2 July that the document was a good start. However, the strategy is meant to cover 25 years, and I am concerned that it is not yet good enough.

Members should look back to 1975. We had not heard about the information superhighway — our superhighway was the Westlink. Bill Gates was a child. Life has changed dramatically since 1975. Members must think about where we are likely to be then, and we must use our imagination and strategic long-term thinking to guide ourselves in that direction.

I welcome the work that has gone into the document, and I do not doubt that it is a starting point. However, we need much more commitment to change. We should think about cars that run on electricity and about energy supplied by the wind, waves or biomass. We must put people at the centre of policy, rather than cars and buildings. There should be children's play areas on every street corner and green and pleasant land. That vision is within our reach. It is 25 years ahead. People are realising it elsewhere.

We need to be prepared to become much more radical in our approach to change, and we need to start now.

1.00 pm

I am not convinced that the document will get us to where we need to be. I am disappointed that there have

been no fundamental amendments as a result of the 2 July debate on the regional development strategy. That debate lasted several hours, and I understood that it was to serve as a contribution to the consultation process and result in amendments to the document. Six amendments were made as a result of the debate, but I will stand corrected if the Minister can show me that the document has since been radically changed. One amendment provided for the adjustment of a diagram so that it includes Harry Avery's Castle near Newtownstewart. I concede that it is important that the castle be included in the diagram, but where are the fundamental amendments based on the debate that took place in the Assembly on 2 July?

Admittedly, the Minister has been lobbied on the use of brownfield sites, and there was movement on that issue even at the last minute after the Regional Development Committee lobbied the matter further. That is to be welcomed, although we have always said that we should go beyond the 60% mark. We need to listen to people, but the strategy does not comprise a listening exercise, which is a vital ingredient.

I will detail four areas in which more should and could be done: planning; transport, with special reference to road safety; leisure, including children's play strategies and youth leisure strategies; and environment and energy policy.

Greater account needs to be taken of communities when planning decisions are made. For a long time we have called for the implementation of a community impact assessment. Environmental impact assessments are made, and we worry about what the birds, bees, flowers and trees think about a new building, but we do not ask the neighbours. How many times do I need to say that? A community impact assessment would mean that the developer would be obliged to consult the neighbours before putting up a building. That is a vital factor — it is the way to listen to the community.

I have already said that we should match the legislation of other countries. In the South of Ireland a children's play facility must be provided with every hundred houses that are built. Returning to the idea of swings and slides, we have huge sprawling housing developments without one area for children to play in. When are we going to bring about legislation to force that change? It will not happen otherwise. Alternatively, shall we retain the cul-de-sac kid mentality towards which we are moving? We say that kids can play on the streets while we worry about the safety of our car parking spaces.

On the issue of transport, I am very concerned about road safety. Traffic calming areas around schools, hospitals and residential areas are vital. A nod in that direction is made in the strategy; I welcome that, but it is not enough. The vital issue of public transport has

been raised. We should be moving into an era of reduced car use and increased use of public transport. Why are we not pushing far harder for more investment in public transport? We should be investing in tram systems, light rail systems, buses and cycle lanes. A good deal more needs to be done.

In regard to leisure, have we forgotten about the importance of children's play and how it can help kids' futures? Youth leisure is also required to get our young people off the streets. There are not nearly enough facilities for the under-fives and the under-17s. We need to focus, if only at local council level, on the need to create children's play strategies so that we have play parks, children's areas, youth leisure areas, skateboard parks and other such amenities. We cannot forget them. They are just as important as car parking.

My thoughts on the environment and energy have been much influenced by the recent trip by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee to Denmark to study energy policy — something that Sean Neeson has also mentioned. We must do more to prepare ourselves for the huge changes that will take place in the next 25 years. Next year, for example, there will be changes regarding our dependency on oil. There will also be a need for us to move into the renewable energy sector.

In chapter 12, paragraph 5.1 ('Consider the implications of climate change'), of 'Shaping our Future' it is stated that we must

"identify key issues for action" .

We should be able to identify key areas for action, such as promoting wind energy, wave technology, tidal technology and biomass schemes. If it is being done in Denmark, there is no reason why we should not do it. What is stopping us?

I was pleased to hear the issue of waste management mentioned earlier. Denmark is not even a thousand miles away from us, and it has a waste management strategy. Denmark is way ahead of us. We need guidance, direction and greater imagination.

I welcome the hard work that has gone into the document. I welcome the fact that there was a consultation process. I also welcome the Minister's commitment to joined-up government, which is something we desperately need. I make an appeal to everyone who may be involved in any steering committee set up to implement the document: do not close this book — changes will be required very soon, and we must be prepared for them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The first round of Members from each party has now finished. In the past 10 minutes, many Members have expressed a wish to speak. Therefore, I must reluctantly limit each Member's

time to six minutes, in order to allow the Minister to wind up.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the motion and the finalisation of the regional development strategy. The strategy offers the opportunity to start a dynamic development plan for Northern Ireland over the next 25 years. I welcome the Minister's comments on how an implementation process for the strategy can be delivered. We need to have five-yearly reviews on the strategy's development.

The 'Shaping our Future' project has been a good post-devolution consultation exercise for Northern Ireland. The Department for Regional Development's plan has been published after extensive consultation and enhanced drafting over a two-year period. Senior departmental officials have been sensitive and professional in their approach to finalising this important public development project for Northern Ireland. As a member of the Regional Development Committee, I appreciate the due consideration they gave to our concerns and views throughout the consultation and development process. In his meetings with the Committee, the Minister showed due regard and consideration for the various issues that we put to him.

I welcome the fact that the regional development strategy recognises the importance of the promotion of social cohesion and economic development, along with equality of opportunity and spatial equity throughout the region. I also welcome the Minister's comments on a balanced urban/rural approach to development for the future. That is very welcome for Northern Ireland at this stage.

The concept of decentralisation of services is addressed in the strategy, and that is welcome. However, I would like the Executive to lead by example. Entire sections of Departments should be moved out of Belfast and relocated to realise the vision of balanced development right across the region. Overall, the strategy is innovative and dynamic, addressing many of our concerns about issues covered in earlier drafts. It contains many positive proposals relating to urban and rural development, transportation strategy, housing needs, environmental concerns and the tourism infrastructure.

Transport policy is vital to ensuring that the core principles of equality, choice, efficiency and accessibility, as well as environmental concerns and public safety issues, are taken into consideration. I am aware that the Department is currently devising a regional transportation strategy, and the Regional Development Committee is engaged in deliberations on that. The commitments to improve cross-border road and rail links are also welcome. It is important that the transport infrastructure be upgraded in an all-Ireland and European context. The measures to upgrade roads in Northern Ireland are long overdue, and I am pleased to read that this strategy

proposes a more integrated approach to transportation in rural areas. That will improve accessibility, with, I hope, the objective of sustaining rural communities.

This strategy is an imaginative document with the capacity to address the problems associated with the uneven development of the region in the past. It is to be hoped that its proposals are not rigid and that they can be adapted and tailored, as circumstances require, to ensure that the principles of equality and social justice remain at its core.

One of the key tasks will be implementation. Securing the necessary financial resources will be the major task in realising the delivery of the regional development strategy. I hope that the interdepartmental steering group will tackle this problem in a committed way, particularly given the need for a lot of expenditure on transport infrastructure and water and sewerage investment needs. I welcome the fact that the steering group will be co-ordinating the implementation of the development strategy. The devising of local area plans is now very necessary. In my constituency, both Omagh and Strabane councils are awaiting the drawing up of the west Tyrone area plan. It is most important that it be drawn up as soon as possible so that the regional development strategy can be connected into it. A joined-up government approach will be necessary to deliver the implementation of this plan. This development plan offers a template for Northern Ireland's future. If we can achieve joined-up government among Departments, in collaboration with the district councils, then we can deliver social and economic development for all our people across the region.

I support the Minister's motion and congratulate him and the Department for bringing forward a radical and important document for the development of Northern Ireland.

Mr Armstrong: I want to express my thanks to all involved in preparing the regional development strategy document. As an elected representative for Mid Ulster, I regard 'Shaping our Future' as being of particular relevance. The area that I represent has many long-standing social and economic problems that need to be addressed. I hope that this document can provide equality for all people living in rural areas. The document raises awareness of several key issues that must be remembered when developing a 25-year plan to rejuvenate Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland has a population of approximately one and a half million people, of which 60% live outside the cities of Belfast and Londonderry, and we must spread our resources fairly and not just around the east or west of the Province. 'Shaping our Future' aims to tackle inequality in health, education and living standards.

1.15 pm

Recently hospital services in Mid Ulster were cut back. Initially we were told that it was a temporary measure, but that was only to soften the blow. If the Hayes Report recommendations are fully implemented, Tyrone will be without accident and emergency and maternity services. I cannot reconcile those developments with Government calls for equality. Where is the healthy living environment for the people of Mid Ulster?

The quality of many roads in Mid Ulster is another cause of concern. If hospital services are to be moved away from our area, the infrastructure needs to be upgraded. The safety of Mid Ulster residents is at stake because of the poor condition of our roads.

The document mentions the environment, community life and rural society. I support facilities such as churches, community organisations and other voluntary groups that contribute to the sense of belonging that is so often absent in rural settings. In my constituency, agriculture plays a vital part. Retailers in rural towns rely on farmers to buy their goods, and all benefit from the industry. For example, Cookstown is known as a market town, as it is built on agricultural roots.

I accept the need to look ahead when considering the development of Northern Ireland. I agree with the notion of diversification, yet to many farmers that means only one thing — building a golf course. Agriculture has been hit by successive disasters in the past decade. BSE and foot-and-mouth disease did most miserable damage to the industry, and the problems were compounded by financial factors such as trade enlargement, market globalisation and the strong pound.

It is one thing to suggest diversification; actually doing it is another. Farming is a way of life, not simply a job. Our farmers receive unfair treatment at the hands of those organisations that process or retail their products. For example, they get 18p for a litre of milk, yet it is sold in the shops for 90p. Revenue has been drained from rural areas because of unfair markets. That problem needs to be addressed.

Successful and sustainable development requires using those resources that we have on a scale and quality not enjoyed elsewhere. Tourism has enormous potential, and we can attract people to the natural and unspoilt beauty of Northern Ireland. Our rural areas would benefit from tourism, and I support the Sperrins and Lough Neagh as attractions. We need to raise awareness of such natural beauty spots as well as provide amenities for tourists.

Magherafelt has witnessed impressive levels of growth, particularly between 1981 and 1996. Its population has grown by almost one third, the second largest growth in any Northern Ireland urban centre. In addition, that population growth in the past year has been double the

Northern Ireland average, and I am disappointed at the report's failure to recognise Magherafelt as a town of great potential.

In the past 10 years it has faced many constraints to its growth. For example, sufficient land has not been allocated for industrial, commercial and housing purposes. However, in spite of all those difficulties Magherafelt has achieved those impressive figures, and the town has an important infrastructure asset in its connection to the A29, which runs from Newry to Coleraine. In addition, the town is located in the centre of the Province, so I ask that Magherafelt be classified as a main hub.

We know that the Mid-Ulster Hospital —

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

Mr Armstrong: I conclude by summing up the areas where action under the regional development plan will affect the Mid Ulster constituency, which has been underdeveloped for far too long.

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

Rev Dr William McCrea: The difficulty that we face in Mid Ulster is that no Member from there is on the Committee. While the Committee has done a good job, and I commend both the Committee and the Minister for their general approach, there are concerns for the area that I represent.

Magherafelt, a part of the Mid Ulster constituency, has not been designated as a main hub town. I cannot understand that. I notice that Cookstown has, and I welcome that. The problem is that it seems to put Magherafelt against Cookstown. I was born in the Cookstown area; I reside in the Magherafelt area; and I believe that both these towns should have been classified as main hubs. Seventeen or 18 of the district councils are identified on the map as main hubs.

Magherafelt's development, and especially its industrial development, has been curbed by the fact that its area plan is too rigid and long out of date. We also find that our town had one of the highest growth rates in the whole of the Province. That does not seem to have been recognised in the summing up of the report. It is important that Magherafelt should be identified as a main hub, and if it does not mean anything, why have other towns been identified as such? We all know that identification as a main hub is important, and this document will be used for the development of the area in years to come.

We have difficulties in this respect because when it comes to our fight to retain acute services in the Mid-Ulster Hospital, it will be shown that we are not identified in this plan as a main hub. I differ with the Member for Mid Ulster, Mr Armstrong, who said that

if the hospital services are removed, the roads must be upgraded. I do not believe that we should be saying "if the hospital is downgraded". If we are to have proper acute services and hospitalisation, we must not entertain the thought of our hospital's being downgraded. Our roads need to be upgraded, and we have been pressing for that. It is one of the things that the Minister has been well aware of for years.

We have endeavoured to achieve a continuation of economic growth in the area. Land has been acquired by the Department at Craigs, which is outside Toomebridge in the Magherafelt district area. The fact that Magherafelt is not identified as a main hub area is going to hinder progress with our economic growth. While I appreciate all the other things that the Minister and the Committee have identified, it must be clearly seen that there will be problems as a result of the fact that Magherafelt district and town has not been classified as a main hub area for future development.

It is acknowledged that the figures for housing are higher for Magherafelt than for neighbouring towns, yet for some reason that was not recognised by classification as a main hub. I appeal to the Department, and I still appeal to the Committee, to look further at this matter and make recommendations on it. I trust that this is not so rigid that it cannot be adapted if required. Magherafelt is vital to the economic development of Mid Ulster and to the wider prosperity of our Province.

There is a concern that some areas of the Province, identified for large increases in housing numbers, could be overdeveloped. They could lose their identity. Some of the smaller towns surrounding such areas could find themselves consumed completely. Smaller towns do not want to lose their identity, and it should not happen.

If areas in the Province have been identified as growth areas, it is essential that proper road networks accompany such growth. Many roads are already chock-a-block. Putting large numbers of houses into such areas without road networks would not be in their best interests.

While giving a general welcome to the strategy, I ask the Minister to seriously consider its deficiency with respect to the Magherafelt District Council area.

Mr P Doherty: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I give critical acceptance to the report. I accept the plan's value and recognise the time, energy and commitment of the Minister, his officials and the Regional Development Committee, and its work with the Department.

It is clear that departmental thinking links regional development with the priorities of 'Strategy 2010', the economic development strategy document. However, 'Strategy 2010' has been widely criticised for its top-down approach, its continuation of failed policies, its bias towards the Belfast area at the expense of the western and southern parts of the Six Counties and its

presentation of the economy as being almost completely dependent on British policy decisions.

Earlier this year, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment advanced a report to the House that was accepted by all Assembly parties. One of the key aspects of that report was the fact that infrastructure is a tool of the economy. We must recognise that the infrastructural tool we have now is not adequate to sustain a growing economy.

I draw the attention of the House to three of the many recommendations that were accepted. Recommendation 13 speaks of regional disparities:

"The Committee recommends that the Economic Development Forum needs to address the regional disparities within the Northern Ireland economy and promote distinctive measures to redress the geographical imbalances."

Recommendations 24 and 25 mention transport infrastructure. Recommendation 24 states:

"The Committee recommends a massive injection of funding over the next 10 years to develop a world class transport infrastructure within all regions of Northern Ireland to bring it into line with the needs of a modern world class economy, taking into account the legal equality duties and policies."

Recommendation 25 states:

"The Committee recommends a strategic approach to transport policy on the island of Ireland and within these islands with regular meetings of the regional/national transport Ministers of the relevant authorities to provide for increased co-operation."

I ask the Minister, when he sets up his inter-departmental committee, to take on board the agreed recommendations of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee. He should not base his recommendations and way forward on 'Strategy 2010' as it was written originally.

1.30 pm

There is a need to take on board what was said by the Committee and accepted by all parties on the Committee. I also note that the Minister's time frame is 25 years. Very few people in the House will be around in 25 years' time. Some of us might be. I therefore urge the Minister to have annual or biannual progress reports in the interim.

I ask the Minister to have an ongoing look at the road from Strabane to Aghnacloy in my constituency of West Tyrone. There is a need for a fundamental and continual upgrading of that thoroughfare.

There is currently a huge debate in counties Tyrone and Fermanagh in relation to the Hayes Report. One of the key points in a rural context is accessibility to hospitals. The responsibility for that matter lies with the Department for Regional Development. It must take the need for accessibility on board in a very clear and focused way.

Transport, for instance, needs to be addressed on an all-Ireland basis. That was specifically provided for under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement's 12 areas of North/South co-operation. It is not being pursued actively enough. There needs to be a huge shift in official culture if informed co-ordination of cross-border planning is to be achieved. Nevertheless, this report deserves study. We must engage with it in a very critical way. I hope that the result will be a better document and a better way forward.

Mr Bradley: I, as the Committee Chairperson and other Members have done, wish to compliment the Minister on his handling of the consultation process since he inherited the role of Minister for Regional Development. I welcome the fact that we have reached the stage where the Assembly is being asked to agree the regional development strategy. On Monday 2 July, when Members debated a motion on the progress of the report, 17 Members made largely supportive comments on the content of the publication titled 'Shaping Our Future'. I want to follow up some of the observations and comments that I made in that debate.

I expressed at that time a degree of disappointment that farming and farm-related matters had little or no mention in the document. I commented, however, that the promise of rural proofing by all ministerial Departments should ensure that the farming community gets equality of treatment when the strategy is up and running. I want to hear what plans the Minister has to assure those with agricultural interests that the regional development strategy will be thoroughly rural proofed, where appropriate, by his Department.

On the upgrading of our major traffic corridors, I make a special plea to the Minister to use his influence to bring forward the programme for a dual carriageway on the A1 between Loughbrickland and Newry. I do that for a particular reason. As I made my way to the Assembly on Thursday morning last, I had to join other motorists making a detour in the Loughbrickland area due to a traffic accident on the A1. Sadly, that accident proved to be fatal. A 69-year-old female tourist from France lost her life in a head-on collision on that terrible stretch of road. Coincidentally, that was the second time recently that I have had to make the same detour for a similar reason — sadly with a similar outcome.

The route I refer to forms a portion of the eastern seaboard corridor as printed in diagram 12 on page 162 of the final text before us. Anything that the Minister can do to advance the proposals for that stretch of road will be greatly appreciated by the large number of daily commuters who use the A1 Newry to Belfast road.

I address my third comment on the strategy to those currently engaged in drawing up the new area plans. I

recently attended public consultation meetings organised by the Planning Service in Rathfriland and Warrenpoint. Those meetings dealt specifically with the new Newry/Banbridge area plan. On matters of rural development, there was widespread agreement among rural participants that the pending area plan would have to develop an attractive and prosperous rural area, based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside, to sustain a strong and vibrant rural community.

I make no apology to the wordsmith for copying the words that he or she penned under the heading 'Strategic Rural Development Objectives' on page 93, which refers to the overall aim of the strategy:

"to develop an attractive and prosperous rural area, based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside, in order to sustain a strong and vibrant rural community".

I am satisfied that the document's declared aims are compatible with the overall wishes of the rural community. I can only add that planners should take note.

Finally, I share Jane Morrice's concern about the level of attention paid to the comments on 2 July. Does the Minister still view the contributions made then as being helpful and relevant? I hope that his answer will be yes. I support the motion, and I call on the Minister to remember the debate on 2 July when he is implementing his strategy.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the strategy document. The Minister and his officials will recall the origins of the strategy, when the main area of concern and complaint from some Members was that we felt that what was being offered was the Belfast metropolitan area plan with a bolt-on to keep the country boys happy. All Members would agree that there has been considerable consultation since then, and I must praise the Minister, his predecessor and his departmental officials, who have proved that they can listen to the concerns of people beyond the Belfast area. They have produced a much more balanced regional document as a result.

I regard the strategy as a macro-statement that can only succeed as it evolves at the micro-level of area plans. Today, the Minister has heard many concerns about area plans that have gone past their sell-by date. I urge the Minister to use his considerable influence to ensure that area plans can now take centre stage, as their role is vital in achieving the aims of the overall expectations of this truly co-ordinated strategy.

I am sure that the House will agree that the regional transport strategy will be vital. Within the transport strategy lies the means, not only of drawing the region together within the regional development strategy, but of ensuring the success of that development strategy at a local level, particularly with regard to the provision of services.

I may become slightly parochial at this stage, when I refer to the Health Service, for example, and the concerns that many of us have regarding a local acute hospital in the south-west — most logically sited in the Omagh area. We need a transport system to ensure that those in Fermanagh who are concerned about this can get to the Omagh hospital within the “golden hour”. The Minister should understand that concern.

We look at the spatial framework and at people’s expectations about the various hubs that are to be established. Education and certain facilities are to be provided within such hubs. Accessibility — as Mr Doherty said — is vital. We need to ensure that the transport strategy put in place in the western area will guarantee people accessibility to the various services available. As much has already been said, I close by urging all Members to support the motion.

Mr Poots: I welcome this very useful document. It is good to have strategic plans laid out in front of us. There are several areas in the document that I would like to address. In my constituency, the Department has, by and large, listened to most of what has been requested. Lisburn has been outlined as an area of high development potential, and the local council will have seen that. Lisburn would welcome the development of more housing and facilities.

The buffer wedges that have been put in place between Belfast and Lisburn and between Belfast and the other council areas in the Belfast metropolitan area plan are also welcomed. It is essential that significant communities maintain their independent identities.

I also welcome the document’s indication that the Department for Regional Development is seeking more efficient links between areas such as Lisburn and Belfast. I welcome the circle line that is proposed in the regional development strategy. It is envisaged that the circle line will travel from Belfast to Antrim to Lisburn and back to Belfast. The Minister made a good move earlier this year when he maintained that line despite strong pressure on him to mothball it. I implore the Minister to maintain that stance and ensure that the circle line becomes a reality now that the Bleach Green line is in progress.

I am concerned about the significant expansion planned for Moira village. Moira is under severe pressure. Anyone who knows the village or travels through it to go to Lurgan or Portadown knows that they will hit a tailback in the evenings as soon as they come off the motorway. Moira will need a bypass in order to assist significant further development. That may be in the Department’s mind, but it needs to be made abundantly clear that any further development could be accommodated only if a bypass were built. I understand where the Department is coming from in wanting to develop a village such as Moira, because it

has access to the motorway and the rail system. It is beneficial that it accesses the main corridors.

The application of caring for the environment is necessary, as not enough attention has been paid to the built environment until now. The section of the regional development strategy that deals with conservation could have been strengthened so that dwellings with large gardens could be left intact, rather than have developers opportunistically demolish them and replace them with large numbers of apartments.

I am grateful that the Department identifies the problems of rural areas, particularly in relation to agriculture. However, less stringent criteria should be applied to those people who seek farm dwellings. It might be worthwhile for the Department to look to extend the green belt so that one-off sites could not be approved for individuals who merely wish to sell them on. The Department might also consider reducing the criteria that must be met to allow young people who live in the countryside, who have been brought up on farms and who wish to stay in the area, to get a house for themselves approved.

It is more necessary than ever to reduce the new criteria because more and more young people are having to farm part-time and take other jobs. In those instances, it is necessary for the young people to live on the farm because they work there for such a short time that it needs to be accessible. I ask the Department to re-examine those criteria.

I would like to see a fairly large-scale development of small settlements and hamlets in the countryside, particularly in Greater Belfast. Young people cannot afford to buy houses in the area of Greater Belfast in which they were reared. They cannot afford to buy houses, particularly in Hillsborough and Moira. Demand for development land is so high that house prices are out of their reach. I would like to see more development of small hamlets in those areas to allow young people to stay in the areas in which they were raised.

1.45 pm

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I give the document a critical welcome. I welcome the changes that have been taken on board, particularly the upgrading of the north/south corridor — the A29 — which is important to the infrastructure of the North. That was left out of the earlier document. Our community depends on having a coherent and far-reaching development strategy. Unfortunately the ‘Shaping our Future’ strategy contains some shortcomings. However, with some flexibility in our interpretation, we can, perhaps, overcome some of those.

We must put regional development in the context of the Good Friday Agreement. We want to create opportunities for people. The infrastructure of the area

west of the Bann is in need of development. There is an opportunity to bring in new thinking and create regional hubs and key transport corridors. I agree with Rev William McCrea that roads are no replacement for hospitals. We must ensure that we have proper hospital facilities in the regional hubs, so that we do not have to depend on the road system. We need hospitals in the regional hubs. If we identify somewhere as a hub for one type of development, we cannot downgrade its status for another.

We must abandon the approach that was taken in the past. It discriminated against people who lived west of the Bann, whether Catholic or Protestant. The infrastructure was not put in place; there was no development of the east-west corridor and no development of the motorway network. The M2 does not go beyond Antrim on the northern side of Lough Neagh, and, on the southern side, the M1 stops at Dungannon. The infrastructure and everything that goes along with it also stop there.

It is clear that the Department's thinking is still linked with 'Strategy 2010'; that is a flaw. That document has been criticised for its top-down approach and lack of local consultation. We must take on board the need for local consultation and build a structure that people can get involved with. Now that we have a devolved Administration, we can ensure that we have local input.

The development of transport must be carried out in line with housing and community development. I agree with Jane Morrice, who said that we had an opportunity to enforce planning regulations and ensure that play areas become part of the local structure. Communities have been deprived of building; motorways are not the only infrastructure. Planners should adopt a "play before build" approach. During the PPP inquiry, we found that there were examples of developers being obliged to create play areas before they began to build massive housing estates. That protects the right of children to play.

We can interpret the strategy in our own way. We can put together a structure that will allow for planned development, as opposed to jumping from one area plan to another. I hope that all the area plans will be implemented, but I am concerned that a number of those plans will be out of date by the time that they are put in place. The plan for my area covers the period up to 2010 and is not yet complete. It will be 2005 before it has been completed and the relevant inquiries held, so we will end up with a five-year plan. I encourage the Minister and the planning authorities to create a structure that will enable us to make more long-term plans for the environment and allow us to take account of local communities, the need for infrastructure and the importance of linking services.

Another important aspect is the link between rail and road services. Unfortunately, we have not taken on board the European concept of linking such services. In the few towns here that have railway stations, they are often located at one end of the town, while the bus station is at the other end. For example, a new bus station has been built in the centre of Newry, but there is just a rail stop in the town, instead of a proper station. The rail structure needs to be developed alongside the M1 to expand the network of linked services.

Mr Gallagher: I recognise the energy and effort that the Minister has put into seeking an agreed strategy. The widespread consultation that has taken place has undoubtedly been helpful. For example, road safety is to receive more attention. There is now an attempt to tackle the increasing numbers of fatal and serious road accidents, and measures such as traffic calming have been mentioned.

As elected representatives, many of us know that it is sometimes difficult to get a response from the Department for Regional Development on issues such as the introduction of speed limits, street lighting and improved signage. The strategy is a hopeful sign, and I hope that the Department will re-examine the criteria relating to these measures and remove any inconsistencies.

The urban/rural balance needs to be attended to. There has been poor funding of roads in Fermanagh. There has been an imbalance in the allocation of funding, and that has been to the detriment of the west of the North of Ireland, especially Fermanagh. I hope that that will be improved, but the key transport corridors identified in diagram 10 of the strategy document suggest that the imbalance might well continue. In other parts of Northern Ireland the routes run east to west, north to south and diagonally, but there is only one key priority route in Fermanagh, and it runs from east to west. Many who live in that area and operate businesses there — regardless of their political allegiance — recognise the importance of North/South links. I want that issue to be looked at as the strategy progresses.

The draft strategy has emerged after the publication of the Hayes Report on future acute hospital provision, in which the matter of accessibility crops up repeatedly. I will not be as presumptuous or as partisan as the Member for West Tyrone, Mr Hussey, to say that one town would be better than another for the purposes of implementing the Hayes review. Everyone would agree that the Hayes review showed that future hospital provision must be based on certain and agreed principles that are in the best interests of everybody, whether they live in Omagh, Enniskillen, Antrim or County Down. The Enniskillen to Omagh road will be a key corridor in future hospital provision in the west of the Province. That road will have to be kept under review, and I

hope that, before very long, it will be identified for funding.

There have been strong statements on rural development and the importance of maintaining and promoting the rural community. It almost goes without saying that employment is central to rural development. A review of the Water Service is currently under way. Rationalising the service and reducing jobs have been mentioned. Over recent years, people from the west who have been involved with the service have seen jobs being moved elsewhere. I bring that to the Minister's attention. I look forward to his response and to whether he will give a commitment that the review will not lead to further centralisation of the Water Service. People in the west of the Province generally want decentralisation in the range of services.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the bulk of the report and the degree of consultation that went into producing it. However, I have some reservations.

I particularly welcome increasing the target for brown-field development to 60%. However, achieving that will require subsequent moves and perhaps subsequent changes in legislation. Making it a reality is not just a matter of setting a target. Practical aspects have to be established for the target to be achieved. How will developers be encouraged into town-centre regeneration, rather than perpetuating the doughnut effect that is occurring in many rural towns in Northern Ireland?

I welcome the report's commitment to the continuing development of Larne as a gateway into Northern Ireland. Larne is one of the most important gateways, and the plans to continue the development of the potential of the Port of Larne, which is one of the largest roll-on/roll-off ferry facilities in the British Isles, are also to be welcomed.

The trans-European network route between Larne and Dún Laoghaire has also been recognised and must be developed. However I must flag up some aspects of that route, particularly the urgent need to upgrade accident black spots on the A8, between Larne and Belfast, at the Millbrook and Ballyloran junctions, where there have been several fatalities.

I welcome the report's recognition of Carrickfergus as a heritage town. However, the town's importance as an industrial centre and a service centre must also be recognised. There must be a more efficient linkage between Belfast and the neighbouring towns in the metropolitan area. Carrickfergus is the only one of those towns that does not have a four-lane carriageway linking it to the centre of Belfast. Indeed, investment on the A2 has been overlooked when its traffic usage is compared with other routes in Northern Ireland that have received funding for four-lane carriageways.

I welcome the concept of strengthening the regional rail system, under the heading of 'Developing a Regional Transportation System', contained in the report. While Carrickfergus is included in the Belfast metropolitan area for an increased rail service, I am concerned that Larne, which is a major gateway to Northern Ireland, is not mentioned in the report's opening comments on the subject on page 159. Indeed, it is only later in the report — when discussing linkages — that Larne is mentioned.

2.00 pm

The importance of the trans-European network rail route to Larne should be better appreciated in the development plan for our rail service. By encouraging more commuters from east Antrim and Larne to use the railway, we might minimise — or remove — the major daily road blockage at Mallusk.

Several Members talked about the need for investment in hospitals and education in the west of the Province. Parts of the east of the Province have also suffered from underprovision. The hospitals in Larne and Carrickfergus have been closed, as have the further education colleges. Transportation routes in the east of the Province must be improved to ensure that those important towns are better connected to hospital services and to provide access to further education.

I too encourage the provision of green space and play facilities in new development. This should be concentrated in areas that have suffered from underprovision. We must learn from past failures. There are huge areas of towns in which planners and developers have been allowed to make money simply by building as many houses as they wished. It is essential that development should be properly planned and that the needs of coming generations are recognised by developers through the provision of play areas. We should not beat about the bush; such areas should be provided at the start. There is no point in leaving them until later, when people who live close to an earmarked play area might object. They should be there from the start, and planning must provide for them.

The plan is not perfect, but it is better than what preceded it. On that basis, I am content to see it proceed.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I thank Members for their contributions and for the many positive comments on the strategy. I acknowledge some of the concerns raised. There were 16 contributions, ranging from the price of milk to hospital provision, so Members will appreciate the size of my task in dealing with all the issues raised.

There was some concern for balanced development. I heard over and over again that the implementation of the strategy would be the most important and relevant consideration for the community. I understand that. There were queries relating to specific areas, particularly

rural ones. Concerns about rural proofing, overdevelopment in some areas and about the lack of infrastructural development in others were also voiced.

The document emphasises the need for balanced development. This is not an urban versus rural matter. We have a regional strategy for the long-term development of Northern Ireland. It provides a framework that goes beyond the land-use plans of the past, and it supports the drive towards the creation of a dynamic, prosperous and outward-looking Northern Ireland.

Some Members commented on the lack of forward-looking initiative in the document. However, I looked briefly over the debate of 2 July and my senior civil servants, to whom I pay tribute again, and I have endeavoured to respond as positively as we can. It is important that both Members and the public are aware that the document is not static. It lays down guidelines and a framework and, like Northern Ireland, will evolve in the coming years. It is a spatial plan concerned with the patterns of development and the scale and nature of activities and services to create and sustain communities.

Several Members referred to specific circumstances, and if I do not respond individually to each one now, I will write to those individuals. However, the document is a framework for balanced development within which area planning and increased local council-led community planning will play critical roles. Public policy alone will not deliver the strategy, and I take on board Mr Beggs's comment that, particularly due to private-sector investment and individual choices, the market will play a key role. Policy can influence decisions and choices.

In my opening address, I focused on the implementation phase. I did not intend to pre-empt the debate but to signal that if we are broadly content with the key principles of the strategy — and I believe that we are — the real task is to get on with that implementation.

I looked at the range of consultations undertaken since the initial documentation entered the public domain. On over 20 occasions, successful efforts were made to deal comprehensively with the views, concerns and issues that people raised.

The task ahead of implementation is challenging, but it is doable. It will require a partnership made up of key stakeholders, some of whom are Assembly Members just as some are district councillors. They will have an important role to play in helping to deliver the strategy. Over the next few months, my Department will initiate discussions with local council staff to see how we might work on key aspects of the regional development strategy with the emerging local strategy partnerships.

Several Members referred to the brownfield target. I thought that they would; in fact, I would have been disappointed had they not referred to it. I must be

honest. My Department will not be able to deliver that target on its own. That is why I have signalled clearly that we will work with the development industry in whatever forum is appropriate to meet the challenge of achieving that target.

I also made the point that through the strategy we are attempting to bring coherence and synergy to policies that will have an impact on the long-term development of the region. The creation of an agreed transportation strategy will be critical to our long-term development. Members referred to transportation, and I heard references to the A2, the circle line, the Knockmore line and Carrick. Obviously, the conference at the end of the month will bring us a step forward in addressing transportation matters.

In the autumn, after that conference, the draft regional transportation strategy will be published. That will be a key, tangible, first piece of the implementation jigsaw of the regional development strategy.

To assure Members of the importance that I attach to their contributions I give a commitment that I will keep the Assembly updated on progress, as we implement the strategy. If Members believe that some issues are not being addressed quickly enough, we will see how we can improve that. If Members believe that some issues are not being dealt with at all, we can look into the reasons for that and endeavour to deal with them.

I want to thank Members for the debate today. If, after checking Hansard, I see that there are issues that I have not dealt with, I will respond in writing. The Magherafelt issue that was raised by Rev William McCrea and others springs to mind as does the Loughbrickland-Newry Road problem raised by Mr Bradley. I will check and write to Members as appropriate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees the regional development strategy ('Shaping our Future') for Northern Ireland 2025.

HOUSING BENEFIT (DECISIONS AND APPEALS) REGULATIONS (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2001

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I ask the Clerk to read the motion, I wish to remind Members that a Statutory Rule that is subject to confirmatory procedure becomes law once it has been laid before the Assembly. It ceases to have effect, however, unless approved by the Assembly within a specified period. This Statutory Rule was made on 18 May 2001 and will expire on 2 February 2002 unless approved by the Assembly.

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

That the Housing Benefit (Decisions and Appeals) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 213/2001) be approved.

I wish to seek the Assembly's approval for a set of regulations that introduces new procedures for decisions by the Housing Executive and the Rate Collection Agency on claims for housing benefit. These regulations are subject to the confirmatory procedure and must be approved by the Assembly within six months of their operative date, 2 July 2001. These regulations were made under powers contained in the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act (Northern Ireland) 2000, which provided for a new decision-making and appeals system for housing benefit claims.

The regulations also provide the detailed framework for a new decision-making and appeals system with the right of appeal to a tribunal, constituted under the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. There is a further right of appeal, on a point of law, to a social security commissioner.

I will now explain why reform of the system was required. Under the previous system, if a person wished to dispute a decision on a housing benefit claim, this was done by an initial internal review by the Housing Executive or Rate Collection Agency, with the right to a further review by a review board. The decision of the review board could only be challenged by way of a judicial review. Housing benefit claimants did not have the same rights of appeal to the social security commissioner or higher courts as social security benefit claimants.

2.15 pm

Therefore, these regulations bring arrangements for decision-making in housing benefit claims into line with those applying for all other social security benefits; they also bring the arrangements into the mainstream appeal system.

I now turn to the substance of these regulations, which provide for the implementation of the new procedures. The regulations closely mirror decision-making provisions

for other social security benefits administered by my Department. They set out the procedures for revising or superseding decisions and the procedures to be followed in making an appeal. They also provide that the general provisions relating to powers and procedures of appeal tribunals, and the procedures for making appeals to the commissioners, apply to housing benefit appeals. I do not propose to explain the detail of each individual regulation, but I am happy to respond to Members' questions.

The regulations are beneficial in that the same rules for decision-making and appeals will now apply across all social security benefits. That will make matters easier for claimants to understand, as many claim other social security benefits. The regulations will allow the authorities to correct mistakes quickly and encourage claimants to make early contact to resolve queries and discuss any areas of disagreement. People will know how much time they have to ask for a decision to be changed, and they will still be able to appeal. These more transparent rules are designed to improve the service to claimants.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Housing Benefit (Decisions and Appeals) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2001 (SR 213/2001) be approved.

GAME PRESERVATION (AMENDMENT) BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 29 October 2001 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill (NIA15/00).

The Committee for the Environment formally started consideration of the Bill on 19 June 2001. However, this work was delayed because of the large number of issues that the Committee had to deal with before the summer recess. For example, we dealt with the Committee's report on its inquiry into the transport used by children travelling to and from school, as well as finalising our input to the Department's consultation document on a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland.

The primary purpose of the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill is to extend the period during which partridges may be shot. However, several other clauses have been included and they will require due and proper deliberations by my Committee, especially in light of representations that we have already received. The Committee has therefore considered it prudent to apply to the Assembly for this time extension, but it hopes to be able to complete its work by a much earlier date. I therefore ask Members to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 29 October 2001 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill (NIA15/00).

Mr Speaker: In the normal course of events, I would move to the next item of business — in this case, the motion on Titanic Quarter leases. However, as there are now less than ten minutes to Question Time, I suggest that the House take its ease for 10 minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 2.20 pm.

On resuming —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Drug Education

1. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Education to outline the steps he is taking to educate children on anti-drug taking practices. (AQO 7/01)

8. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Education to indicate what changes have been made to the drugs education programme for the new school year. (AQO 77/01)

17. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Education to explain the various initiatives which he has put forward to promote awareness of drug misuse within schools. (AQO 46/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 8 and 17 together.

Schools have a statutory duty to provide drug awareness education to all pupils, throughout their compulsory schooling. The topic is included in the curriculum, under the cross-curricular theme of health education. In 1996 my Department produced a drug education guidance pack for teachers, 'Misuse of Drugs: Guidance for Schools', in conjunction with the education and library boards and the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). Under the Northern Ireland drugs strategy, approximately £800,000 was allocated to six projects in the education sector in March 2000 to strengthen provision in schools and the youth service. Funding will be available until March 2002. No further initiatives or changes to the existing drug education programme in schools are proposed for the new school year.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Minister take the opportunity to publicly condemn the FARC organisation for its spreading of illegal drugs? What example does he believe that he, as Minister of Education, sets given that his party is clearly identified with, and linked to, people who are involved with an organisation that spreads illegal drugs across the world? Does he not regard that to be a condemnation of himself? Will he take the opportunity to condemn, without prevarication, that organisation and all its associates?

Mr M McGuinness: Neither I nor my party would support any group, movement or Government involved

in narco-terrorism, nor do we approve of interference in the affairs of other sovereign countries. I am opposed to drugs, and my party and I have campaigned against them. People should be conscious that Sinn Féin has been to the forefront of the battle against drugs, not just in the North of Ireland but in Dublin and throughout the island.

The attempt that has been made to link Sinn Féin to any drug organisation in South America must be seen as an attempt at cheap political point scoring that bears no relation to the truth. We need to recognise that nobody has been charged or convicted of a crime. We share a responsibility to do everything in our power to defeat the drug barons — in Ireland and elsewhere — and everyone involved in this trade, which is detrimental to our children.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister recognise that the taking of soft drugs often leads to hard drugs consumption? One of those hard drugs, cocaine, is supplied in Colombia. Will he, as Minister of Education, condemn those members and associates of his party who have been connected with the drug suppliers from Colombia?

Mr M McGuinness: Nobody in my party is associated with anyone who is involved in drugs transactions. The Sinn Féin leadership has made abundantly clear its position in this regard. If anyone in my party were associated with someone in the drugs trade, in Ireland or internationally, I would not be a member of Sinn Féin.

Mr S Wilson: Obviously the Minister, during his many years of interrogation at centres across Northern Ireland, has honed his ability to deny facts. Will he accept — and this is the third time that he is being asked to do so — that people who have been identified on Sinn Féin platforms, and who are described as Sinn Féin representatives in Cuba, have been associated with drug dealing terrorists in South America?

Will he condemn that activity and tell the House that his party will have nothing to do with the drug dealing that is perpetuated on behalf of the terrorist organisation here in Northern Ireland also?

Mr M McGuinness: I have made my position abundantly clear. I condemn without reservation anyone involved with any group involved in the drugs trade. I do that without any reservation whatsoever. As a Minister, I work very hard in a group with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to combat the drugs situation in the North of Ireland. The work that we participate in with that group would be much enhanced if the Minister for Social Development, who presently boycotts those meetings, would attend them and contribute to the enhancement of the fight against the drugs trade in the North. That would be a very important step and a very clear indication of the

Minister for Social Development's commitment to the fight against drugs.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Aside from all the political point scoring and the false interest in this issue from some of the DUP Members — some of whom represent the constituency that includes the drugs capital of the North — can the Minister tell us what steps are being taken to ensure that schools carry out their statutory responsibilities with regard to drug awareness?

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's Education and Training Inspectorate carried out a survey of the drug education provision of post-primary schools and colleges of further education from 1996 to 1998. A report of its findings was issued to schools in 1999. The Department continues to monitor the quality and extent of drug education, and a detailed follow-up survey has been carried out in all post-primary and special schools. Follow-up letters have been issued to schools identified by the survey as not meeting all the statutory and non-statutory requirements.

Non-Qualified School Leavers

2. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils on rolls on 1 September 2000 who left school on 30 June 2001 without GCSE or equivalent qualifications and to indicate what steps have been taken to identify their special needs where relevant so that they can be addressed. (AQO 110/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Statistics on 2000-01 school leavers will not be available until later in the year. Support and guidance are available to such young people on a continuing basis through their teachers while they are at school and through careers teachers and the local careers advisers of the Training and Employment Agency when they leave school.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that a recent report, prepared by an eminent member of staff at the University of Ulster, claims that levels of literacy and numeracy are now worse than in 1912. Does the Minister reject that claim, and can he assure the House that human and financial resources are being directed at children in the best way possible so that when they leave school their disadvantage is not up to five times greater than that of industrial competitors such as Sweden, Denmark and Germany?

Mr M McGuinness: My Department and I took note of that report, and we are very conscious of the need to ensure that we are raising standards in all schools. That is one of the key objectives. I am advancing a range of initiatives with this aim firmly in sight. They include massive capital investment in schools, and the school improvement programme, which is designed to raise standards in all schools by addressing literacy

and numeracy, discipline, target-setting, school development planning and low achievement.

There is a pilot initiative to provide flexibility for an increased focus on work-related learning at Key Stage 4, and investment in information and communication technology as well as ongoing work to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching. Action is being taken to address the educational needs of pupils who are at risk of exclusion from school, and a range of programmes offer alternative education for pupils who have become disaffected from mainstream education.

The expansion of pre-school education is another very important dimension, as is the reduction of class sizes for four-year-olds to eight-year-olds. Other measures include the abolition of school performance tables and the three major reviews of key aspects of our education system — the post-primary review, the curriculum review and the consultation on the local management of schools commonality.

I take the point that has been made. Efforts are being made in the Department to tackle what is undoubtedly a big problem. However, as politicians, we need to recognise our responsibility to get this right and to provide the proper backdrop to ending social deprivation and increasing employment prospects. All Members can contribute to the improvement in education standards by continuing to contribute to the success of the peace process, the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and the provision of essential political stability. These gains are required to give hope to everyone in our society in their dealings with their children, so that they can impress on children the need to have a good education in a secure and caring environment.

Mr K Robinson: I am glad to hear the Santa Claus list that the Minister has been reading out to us. However, does he agree that his Department is not achieving satisfactory progress towards improving literacy and numeracy skills, despite funding being provided? What action does he intend to take to improve the situation immediately?

Mr M McGuinness: It is my objective that all young people should achieve their full potential, irrespective of background and circumstances. No young person should leave school without qualifications. A wide range of initiatives through the school improvement programme — the strategies for the promotion of literacy and numeracy in particular — are contributing to improving standards, especially in primary schools. The Member is absolutely correct. More needs to be done, particularly in post-primary schools. My officials, in consultation with the education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), are reviewing how these strategies can be strengthened and developed.

A Levels: Re-Marking of Papers

3. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) how many A-level papers were re-marked in 2001; and (b) how long did it take to get these papers re-marked. (AQO 79/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The latest figures available from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) reveal that 1,167 A-level papers have been re-marked in 2001. The CCEA's target is to complete re-marks within 20 days, and that was achieved in 100% of cases. The CCEA also offers an accelerated re-mark service for students whose marks fall slightly short of the required grade for a university place. The target for this service is 15 days, and that was met in 99.6% of cases.

Mr Fee: Will the Minister accept that we are now facing a serious problem as regards the examinations council and marking authorities? A situation has arisen at one school in Newry in which an entire year group — 38 pupils — have had to have their papers re-marked. That has implications for applications for university places, which are now in jeopardy. Can the Minister ensure that the wholesale re-marking of examinations will not be required in future?

Mr M McGuinness: In surveys carried out by the regulatory authorities, the CCEA is the only awarding body offering A levels here to have successfully reached a 100% response rate by the target date on every single occasion. For an accelerated re-marking service, the target for other awarding bodies is about 30 days. The CCEA alone sets a much tighter target of 15 days for this service, and regularly meets that target. I am aware of the complaints that have come from the Newry area in relation to a London-based examining body. I have asked departmental officials to investigate the complaints that have been made by parents and pupils.

Mr Armstrong: How is the Minister tackling the problem of restoring pupil confidence in the marking procedure?

2.45 pm

Mr M McGuinness: Pupils are confident in the marking procedure. A small number of complaints have been made, principally against examination boards that are outside our authority. However, I am concerned about that. I have asked my departmental officials to look at the problem urgently and to investigate the complaints. When that investigation is completed, we will decide how we should proceed to make it clear to all examination authorities that we have to get this system right. It is absolutely wrong that young people who are already under enough work pressure in the

lead-up to examinations should then be subjected to further pressure in the aftermath.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Members of the Education Committee have tried to address the problem of marking. Mistakes can be made in any situation, but these mistakes were particularly bad because they affected children. How does the performance of the CCEA compare with that of other awarding bodies?

Mr M McGuinness: The CCEA compares very favourably. It is the only awarding body offering A levels here to have succeeded in reaching a 100% response rate by the target date. That is a first-class position for us to be in regarding the re-marking of papers. I do not have a problem with how the CCEA handled this situation. The problem centres on the longer period of time being taken by other examination boards outside the North. The current criticisms seem to be directed against awarding bodies in London.

Regent House Grammar School

4. **Lord Kilclooney** asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of applications to enrol in Form 1 in Regent House Grammar School for the academic year beginning September 2001; and (b) how many were successful. (AQO 9/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Regent House Grammar School received 240 applications for admission to Form 1 for the school year beginning September 2001, of which 212 were successful.

Lord Kilclooney: Does the Minister recognise that Regent House Grammar School, with 1,610 pupils, is the largest controlled grammar school in Northern Ireland? A scheme costing £6 million is currently under way, but it will replace only 17 of the 32 mobile classrooms. If the Minister remains in office, will he give sympathetic consideration to the next phase of building 20 classrooms to replace the remaining 15 mobiles? A proper academic environment is needed for the pupils at the school. Will he also take into account the fact that, in population terms, Ards borough is one of the most rapidly growing areas in Northern Ireland, and that the demand for places will increase in that school? I am shocked to hear that 12.5% of new applicants have been rejected this year.

Mr M McGuinness: I appreciate the fact that Regent House Grammar School is one of the largest grammar schools in the North. The Member will appreciate that there has been a legacy of underfunding and neglect of the schools estate over many decades, a fact widely appreciated by most Members. There are undoubtedly competing demands from schools in different sectors all over the North.

That imposes a tremendous burden on the Department and on its desire to increase, as best as it can, the provision of a proper environment for pupils' education. The Department of Education will look at the case made by the Member and by other Members about schools in their area, and it will do the best that it can with the limited resources available.

The need for places in grammar and other schools is kept constantly under review. Unsuccessful applicants have their applications passed on to other schools. The Department understands the difficulties, pressures and problems faced, but, considering the limited resources available, the Department is doing its best to provide a proper education for all children.

Safety of Pupils Travelling to School

5. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister of Education to outline the role envisaged by his Department in relation to the continued safety of pupils travelling to school on, or close to, the Belfast interface areas, for example the Model, Wheatfield and Ballygoland schools.

(AQO 90/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Education will continue to provide home-to-school transport in accordance with the approved transport arrangements. All children have a basic right to travel to school unhindered and without fear. It is the responsibility of everyone in the community, particularly the elected representatives, to ensure that that is achieved.

Mr Cobain: Will the Minister confirm that all necessary financial assistance will be made available to schools in north Belfast currently affected by the ongoing troubles?

Mr M McGuinness: I am concerned about the situation in north Belfast. The Department of Education is keeping the situation under review and working with the school authorities — the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the principals and the boards of governors — to deal with the difficulties that exist. However, it is vital that everybody, particularly Members, appreciate that the responsibility to relieve the burden on the school authorities, parents and children rests with the area's elected representatives and community leaders.

Everyone must recognise that if a problem is created or exists outside of the school yard or the school buildings — whether it be in north Belfast or elsewhere — there is a duty and a responsibility on everybody in society to pull together to address that as a matter of urgency.

The situation affects everybody. It affects Nationalist, Republican, Unionist, Catholic and Protestant children. The latest débâcle on the Ardoyne Road concerning Holy Cross Girls' Primary School has shown that it is

not only the children in that school who are affected, but the children at Wheatfield Primary School. The House must take account of that when fulfilling its responsibilities to resolve those difficulties.

The story that went around the world during that very bad week on the Ardoyne Road was shameful. It did no one any good, and it was an embarrassment to us all. Members — as elected representatives — must understand and appreciate that they have a duty and a responsibility to do everything in their power to ensure that society moves in a co-operative fashion and that children can get to school without fear of threat, intimidation or abuse.

Mr J Kelly: Does the Minister agree that the right to attend school in safety should be afforded to all children, particularly those from Holy Cross Girls' Primary School in Ardoyne?

Mr M McGuinness: The right to get to school safely is a right that all children have; it does not matter where they come from. However, a particular situation exists at Holy Cross Girls' Primary School.

As I stated previously, all children should be able to travel to school unhindered and be educated in an environment where they feel secure.

The protest at Holy Cross Primary School should stop; that is the sensible way forward. The issues need to be addressed by the local community and the elected representatives not by targeting innocent school children. We have to realise that this is a bad-news story for everyone. It is particularly difficult for parents of children who live in that part of north Belfast. It does not matter what side of the community they are from.

Everyone was shocked and horrified by reports from a GP in the area about young children who were on medication and about some who were bedwetting. If that does not bring home to us the great responsibility we have to ensure that every child, no matter what section of the community they come from, has the right to travel to school without fear, then I do not know what will.

I appreciate the problems and the difficulties. We are hopeful that the point of contact established between the Executive and the people in the local community, alongside ongoing work on the ground, can bring about a successful resolution of the problems that affect the people of that area.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Minister take this opportunity to pay tribute to all teaching staff in schools in north Belfast, in particular Mrs Tanney and the team of the Holy Cross Primary School, for maintaining education throughout these difficult weeks?

Will he assure staff who normally work under difficult circumstances, not just in the present circumstances,

that they will receive sufficient support if they need to turn to the Department for additional resources?

Mr M McGuinness: I wholeheartedly pay tribute to all teachers in the north Belfast area, and in particular to the principals of Holy Cross Primary School and Wheatfield Primary School, and the teaching staff in both schools. We know and understand that both schools have been under pressure.

The teaching staff at Holy Cross Primary School led by Anne Tanney, who has proven to be a first-class principal, and supported by Fr Aidan Troy, have had a huge amount of work to do in providing education for children over this difficult period.

Within the schools authorities, the boards of governors and our schools, we can see many people — who I have often described at prize-givings and meetings I have attended — who are the heroes and heroines of our education system, no matter what section of our community they come from. This has been a particularly difficult period for all of them.

At departmental level, we have worked with the schools authorities, the Belfast Education and Library Board and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). We have met with the principals and assured them that the resources required to take us through this period will be provided.

Students: Opportunities to take Examinations in Mother Tongue

6. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education to detail the opportunities that exist for students to take examinations in their mother tongue. (AQO 13/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The current policy is that pupils living here take their examinations in English unless they are being taught in Irish, in which case a range of examinations are available in that medium.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response, which did not reveal anything in particular. This is a clear case of the difficulty we have with the invisible ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland.

We have substantial numbers of people here for whom Cantonese and various other south Asian languages are their mother tongue. We have an increasing number of people who are legitimate refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. Is it therefore not incumbent upon the Department to make better arrangements for people who come from those ethnic minorities so that they can take languages other than English as their choice in examination?

Mr M McGuinness: There are no plans to change the current policy.

3.00 pm

No representations have been made to me about this issue during my period as Minister of Education. I am very interested in the subject, which has been brought to the Floor of the House, and if the influx of large numbers of people from other countries continues — and there is no indication that we are oversubscribed at the moment — my Department will look at the situation. However, there is no demand for such a service at present.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Hospital Waiting Lists

1. **Mr Shannon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the length of time that patients are waiting to have varicose vein operations by health board area for the past three years.

(AQO 37/01)

2. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients on all hospital waiting lists in September 1999 and the current numbers on all hospital waiting lists.

(AQO 94/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, freagróidh mé ceisteanna 1 agus a 2 le chéile mar go mbaineann siad le hábhair chosúla. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions one and two together as they deal with similar subjects.

Maidir leis an mhéid ama a fhanann othair le hobráidí féithe borrrtha, tá an t-eolas a iarradh iontach mion agus bheadh sé neamhphraiticiúil agam plé leis an cheist anseo. Mar sin de, shocraigh mé go gcuirfi an t-eolas seo i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Maidir leis an dara ceist, i mí Mheán Fómhair 1999, bhí 46,432 duine ag fanacht le dul isteach in otharlanna anseo mar othair chónaitheacha. Is é 54,246 an figiúr do Mheitheamh 2001.

I mí Mheán Fómhair 1999, bhí 98,712 duine ag fanacht lena gcéad choinne othair sheachtraigh in otharlanna anseo. Is é 128,438 an figiúr do Mheitheamh 2001.

The information on the length of time that patients wait for varicose vein operations is very detailed, and it would be impractical for me to deal with the question here. Therefore I have arranged to have that information placed in the Library.

In answer to question 2, in September 1999 there were 46,432 people waiting for inpatient admission to hospitals here. The equivalent figure for June 2001 is 54,246. In September 1999 there were 98,712 people

waiting for their first outpatient appointment at hospitals here, and the equivalent figure for June 2001 is 128,438.

Mr Shannon: It is unfortunate that the information required has not been delivered, especially as there are approximately 23,000 people waiting for operations across the Province and 5,000 people waiting for operations in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area alone. The Minister has lost the plot in relation to delivering a service to the people of the Province, and they are concerned about it.

People in my constituency have been waiting two years for varicose vein operations. Can the Minister say whether it is possible for these people to have their operations carried out in Scotland — in the same way as some people have had heart operations carried out — so that they can move up the list and get the service and health care that they need?

Ms de Brún: It is possible for people to have operations at another hospital here in the North. For example, such an offer was made recently to patients in the Southern Board area. I am sure that it would be possible, although I cannot answer for the Eastern Board today. As part of the framework for action, people have been asked to look at instances where it is possible to have operations carried out at another hospital here. That has also been done in relation to several other questions.

The Member must understand that, given the pressures on the service and the difficult situation we are in, it is natural that hospitals will carry out operations according to clinical priorities. That will impact on those seeking treatment for conditions such as varicose veins.

Mrs Carson: The Minister seems to be presiding over a continual disaster. We were hoping for an improvement once we had our own Assembly, but it seems that the situation is getting worse despite having local hands on the helm.

In the south Tyrone catchment area that covers Craigavon, there is no reduction in waiting lists. Instead, frustrated GPs are sending patients to accident and emergency departments because they cannot cope. Urology patients and those waiting for angiograms and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans in the Craigavon area must now wait for up to three years. That is unacceptable. Last year, £5 million was thrown at waiting lists, with no improvement. This year, £8 million has been thrown at them —

Mr Speaker: Order. It is for the Minister to give facts and figures, and for Members to ask questions on those facts and figures.

Mrs Carson: She does not know.

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Member ask her question?

Mrs Carson: I was just in the last breath of it.

Mr Speaker: You were indeed.

Mrs Carson: Can the Minister now give us something to look forward to, and explain the unacceptable growth of the waiting lists?

Ms de Brún: There are many good examples of what is being done. Given the pressures on the service, had that work not been carried out, the situation would be a good deal more serious.

Many hundreds have been offered the opportunity of undergoing their operation at a different hospital, if they have been waiting a long time. For example, the Eastern Board has recently offered 300 patients the opportunity to be treated at Downe Hospital, rather than wait for their operation elsewhere. A further six ophthalmology patients have been treated as day cases in the Mater Hospital — they would otherwise have had to wait for treatment elsewhere. Ward 8 in the Royal Victoria Hospital has been reorganised as an elective ward for six months a year, and as an emergency admissions ward for the rest of the year.

Several pilot studies have been carried out. For example, a study at the Royal Victoria Hospital is aimed at finding ways to reduce waiting times for oral surgery. Other patients have travelled to Glasgow to have cardiac surgery, rather than wait for treatment locally. As the Member so kindly pointed out during her question on scanning, a mobile MRI unit was brought in to provide a scanning service for the Northern Board and Western Board areas to help reduce waiting lists there. Additional scanning capacity from a mobile unit also continues at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Waiting lists have grown for two reasons. First, the overall capacity of the system: in spite of the funding that I have allocated for the reduction of waiting lists — which the Member highlighted — more investment in the service is needed if it is to meet the demands being placed on it. The additional resources allocated in this year's budget fall far short of the bids that I made.

The increase in the inpatient waiting list in the last quarter can, for the large part, be explained by delays in some operations resulting from the directive to use single-use instruments for tonsillectomies. Around 60% of the increase in waiting lists occurred in the ear, nose and throat speciality. Other issues were involved, and I can come back to them if Members want more detail on the specific figures for the last quarter.

Dr McDonnell: Is the Minister aware that people awaiting hip replacements, which in some cases could have been done in a couple of months two years ago, are now having to wait more than two years? Furthermore, people awaiting coronary artery bypass grafts cannot even get on a waiting list. Much of the flexibility and options for shopping around that she referred to

earlier are no longer permitted. Those are some of the difficulties.

Many other GPs and I want to know what to tell those patients and their relations. One lady said to me that, as far as she was concerned, the Health Service is leaving her husband, who has coronary artery disease, to die.

Ms de Brún: I am aware that the rise in waiting lists means that some people are having to wait longer for their much-needed treatment. As I said in answer to a previous question, it is clear that clinical priorities are being dealt with. However, it is worth remembering that three out of four people waiting for either inpatient treatment or outpatient appointments are still being seen within three months.

Specifically regarding cardiac surgery, I am very conscious of the difficulties. For that reason I have asked the Chief Medical Officer to carry out an urgent review of that area. She has examined it and has made several recommendations. I hope to issue the review report in the near future. I have also allocated additional funding for supernumerary posts in cardiac intensive care to support existing staff, allowing additional nurses to give specialised treatment. That will help to increase bed capacity and the number of operations. Some people who have been waiting longer have been offered surgery elsewhere. Angiographic facilities due to open at Altnagelvin Hospital will increase overall capacity for this diagnostic facility and testing and will help to reduce waiting time.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What additional finance is needed to resolve the matter, given that a similar situation exists in the UK? The Labour Government have had to inject massive resources into that.

Ms de Brún: Money is specifically put into waiting list initiatives, and money is also put into the service as a whole. Clearly, regardless of the amount of money put into waiting list initiatives, if the service is under considerable pressure we will see a rise in waiting lists rather than the fall we would like to see. The service has faced some very difficult choices this year. To make a lasting impact on waiting lists we must address the capacity in hospital and community services.

I have given an extra £3 million for action on waiting lists this year. In addition, last year's normal allocation of £5 million was made recurrent, bringing the total additional resources specifically for action on waiting lists this year to £8 million. However, in the Eastern Board area alone, medical activity in hospitals is calculated to have increased by almost 9% since last year. Our hospitals are generally operating with occupancy levels in excess of 80%. When that kind of capacity difficulty exists, any increase in the number of emergency admissions or the loss of capacity on a

given day can increase pressure considerably. On some days occupancy levels are well in excess of 90%. The system is running so close to full capacity that any small increase in demand can be a problem. I as Minister, and the Assembly as a whole, need to address that budget in the coming period.

Mr Speaker: I am aware that there is considerable interest in the question of waiting lists, but almost half the Question Time has gone, and we must move on to other questions. Mr McCarthy has asked for a written answer to be given to question 3.

Drug Misuse: Prevention and Treatment

4. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the initiatives put forward by her Department to combat drug misuse and detail what countries are the main sources of drug supply to Northern Ireland. (AQO 44/01)

13. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the steps she is taking to prevent the spread of illegal drugs in Northern Ireland. (AQO 8/01)

20. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her budget for (a) drug treatment; and (b) drug education. (AQO 15/01)

Ms de Brún: Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, freagróidh mé ceisteanna 4, 13 agus 20 le chéile. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 4, 13 and 20 together.

Rinneadh dul chun cinn maith i gcomhlíonadh aidhmeanna agus cuspóirí na straitéisí drugaí agus alcóil. Chuir an Roinn foireann dhíograiseach straitéise drugaí agus alcóil le chéile le gníomh daingean a dhéanamh ar fud na Ranna agus na ngníomhaireachtaí uile.

Dáileadh breis agus £4.5 mhilliún ar 36 scéim ag soláthar réimse seirbhísí, lena n-áirítear oideachas, scoileanna agus grúpaí pobail a chur ar an eolas agus oideachas ar dhruaí a chur ar fáil do thuismitheoirí.

Good progress has been made in delivering the overall aims and objectives of the drug and alcohol strategies. The Department has created a dedicated drug and alcohol strategy team to drive action forward across Departments and agencies.

3.15 pm

Over £4.5 million has been allocated to 36 projects, covering a range of services such as education and awareness raising in schools and community groups and drugs education for parents. We have also improved and expanded treatment, rehabilitation and counselling services for drug users, including a 10-bed inpatient

unit at Holywell Hospital and a needle and syringe exchange scheme. Funding has already been made available for action to reduce drug use in prisons and among offenders.

In May, the Executive approved the joint implementation of drug and alcohol strategies. The source countries for drug supply are Holland, Belgium, Morocco, Spain, Turkey, Afghanistan, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. In the past three years, £5.5 million has been spent on tackling drug misuse. In the most recent Budget, the Chancellor allocated an additional £9.3 million to help tackle drug misuse here. A total of £6.3 million was transferred to the Executive, and discussions on how those resources can be deployed most effectively are under way.

Mr S Wilson: Can the Minister confirm that, following this summer's episode, Colombia will be added to the list that she read out? I know that the drugs issue is embarrassing for the Minister and her party. However, I trust that we will not see the same political monkey act that we had from her Colleague, the Minister of Education. He seemed to see no evil, hear no evil and did not believe that his party did any evil in relation to drug dealing and other drug-related activity in Northern Ireland.

Does the Minister unequivocally condemn the actions of the IRA/Sinn Féin canvasser, the IRA/Sinn Féin executive member and the IRA/Sinn Féin foreign representative who were caught with drug-dealing terrorists in Colombia? Given that she is so concerned about the drug problem in Northern Ireland, what co-operation has she given to the RUC in its efforts to defeat it?

Ms de Brún: The Member knows that questions about the supply of drugs are not within my remit. However, to be helpful to him, I approached the NIO for information about the sources of drug supply, and I have given him the answer that my officials received.

Secondly, I can only presume that the Member is referring to the three Irish men recently arrested in Colombia. I would certainly not refer to people in the way in which he did. Thirdly, Sinn Féin — as the Member well knows — is not involved in drug trafficking, nor is it associated with any organisations that are. My party's position on drug trafficking is clear, and it is absolutely and entirely consistent with my considerable efforts, as Minister, to implement the drug strategy and to combat drug abuse.

Finally, the Member wants to know what work I am doing — *[Interruption]*. I am sure that, having asked the question, he and his Colleagues want to hear the answer. As the Member knows, I am working with the new structures and the six working groups on the joint implementation of the drug and alcohol strategies, as agreed and supported by the Executive.

Two of the working groups — the social legislation working group and the criminal justice working group — are concerned with legal issues. The RUC is represented on four of the six working groups and on the drug and alcohol implementation steering group. The Executive and I feel that the structures that were agreed represent the best way of taking the matter forward.

Mr Paisley Jnr: The Minister will be aware that Members of her party have described part of my constituency as the drugs capital of Northern Ireland. If there is a drug problem there, as she knows there is, will she tell the House what she is going to do to help tackle the problem? What is the Minister going to do in order to work with the RUC, who require help in dealing with the problem? Will she give unequivocal support to the RUC? When will she be prepared to meet them? When will she be prepared to commit resources to the RUC, and when will she work with them to tackle drug abuse in my constituency and across Northern Ireland? Her failure to embrace the RUC is at the root of the problems concerned with tackling drug abuse effectively.

Ms de Brún: The Member will be aware that, given the other considerable pressures on my budget, committing resources to the criminal justice field, which is not within my remit, would hardly be part of my answer today, or part of anything that the Member or anyone else would expect. The considered and lengthy answer to the original question set out precisely what we have done and are doing to combat the drugs problem.

Good progress has been made since the launch of the drugs strategy in August 1999. Four drug and alcohol co-ordination teams are now in place, with representatives from the agencies working in the field. Each of those teams has produced, and is putting into effect, an action plan that reflects circumstances and priorities in their respective areas. Therefore, there is an action plan designed to help tackle the problems that are specific to the Member's area. The key Departments and agencies have also produced, and are implementing, plans for action at the regional level across their various responsibilities.

The Member will also know of the work being done by the Drug Information and Research Unit (DIRU). As heroin addiction is such a difficult problem, treatment is mainly provided through local community addiction teams. There are eight teams, which offer a variety of treatment services at their clinics. Each team has a consultant psychiatrist who will see the individual concerned after a member of the community addiction team has made an initial assessment. A treatment programme is then agreed on, which can range from residential treatment and detoxification in the community

to the prescription of substitutes in exceptional circumstances.

The additional resource package, worth £4.5 million, was used to pay for the 10-bed inpatient unit that was recently opened at Holywell Hospital. That means better residential and detoxification facilities for the Ballymena area.

Mr Neeson: Will the Minister clarify her budget? What is the total annual budget this year to deal with the issue of drug abuse? Could she provide me with details of the 36 projects in writing? Are certain areas in Northern Ireland being targeted, especially those with a known history of cocaine abuse?

Ms de Brún: There have been two main sources of money specifically to deal with the drug issue. People who come into an accident and emergency unit and are suffering from drug and alcohol abuse will get treatment that is not paid for from that budget. Those people might be seen by a consultant psychiatrist or by other staff for different difficulties. In 1999, £5.5 million was made available to implement the drugs strategy, and £4.5 million of that was allocated to the 36 projects. I am happy to send the Member the information he requested.

This year, in addition to the £5.5 million, we had an extra £9 million from the Chancellor's Budget. To date, £6.23 million of that money has been transferred into the Executive Budget. Discussions are now under way to determine how to deploy these resources most effectively within our remit.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give her assessment of whether the drugs strategy is working?

Ms de Brún: We are making considerable progress in implementing the strategy and in tackling the problem. An extensive range of work must be carried out. We have ensured that work has been organised across the spectrum of society. Therefore, in the new working groups, work is being advanced that involves treatment, education and prevention, information and research, local communities and social legislation. The NIO will carry out work in the criminal justice field.

Not only do we have a range of projects in place that impact keenly on the issue, but structures have been formed that can impact on the problem and that are a model of inclusiveness. They allow for the voluntary and community sectors to have more than 20 seats throughout the structure, which will also help to impact on the measures that are needed to advance the strategy.

Work is being carried out in the education and treatment fields, and specifically, as the drug strategy suggested, in dealings with young people and in the field of peer education. Work is being also carried out — successfully — in communities.

Beta Interferon

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy that beta interferon remains freely available to those suffering from multiple sclerosis. (AQO 17/01)

7. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy that the availability of beta interferon to MS sufferers on the National Health Service in Northern Ireland will not be affected by draft recommendations from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence to withdraw its use in Wales and England. (AQO 1/01)

Ms de Brún: Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, freagróidh mé ceisteanna 5 agus 7 le chéile. I will answer questions 5 and 7 together.

Is eol domh gur cúis mhór bhuartha iad na dréachtmholtaí a d'eisigh an Insititiúid Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Cliniúil faoi infhaighteacht beta interferon sa todhchaí. Bhuail mé leis an Chumann Ilscéaróise cheana féin le héisteacht lena gcuid tuairimí agus níba déanaí bhuail mé le gairmithe sláinte atá rannpháirteach go gníomhach i láimhseáil na hilscléaróise.

Is measúnacht shealadach í ar cheithre chógas atá in úsáid an ilscéaróis a láimhseáil an cháipéis seo a d'eisigh INFC ar na mallaibh. Níl ann ach cáipéis chomhairleach, agus ag an am seo ní thugann sí treoir úr ar bith ar úsáid beta interferon.

I am aware that the draft recommendations issued recently by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) have given rise to considerable concern about the future availability of beta interferon. I have already met with the Multiple Sclerosis Society to listen to its views and, more recently, I have met with health professionals who are also involved in the management of multiple sclerosis. The document that NICE issued recently represents a provisional appraisal of four medicines used in the management of multiple sclerosis. It is a consultation document only and, at this stage, does not constitute fresh guidance on the use of beta interferon.

As Members may be aware, NICE guidance applies only in England and Wales. However, I may wish to consider local implications when the guidance is formerly published later this year. In the meantime, patients with multiple sclerosis will continue to receive drugs such as beta interferon for as long as their consultant neurologist considers that they are likely to benefit from the treatment — having discussed the risks and benefits of treatment with the patient, and having taken account of the evidence of effectiveness, departmental guidance and the guidelines of the Association of British Neurologists.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for that response, which will provide some reassurance to those who are currently receiving beta interferon and who are concerned that the apparently financially-driven decision by NICE in England would be implemented here.

3.30 pm

The Minister has just said that in the meantime a consultant neurologist who wishes to prescribe beta interferon will be able to do so. Will the Minister give an assurance that this will continue to be her position, and that she will put the needs of patients in Northern Ireland, and the recommendations for specific patients from specific consultants, ahead of any financial considerations deriving from London?

Ms de Brún: I said “in the meantime” because once formal guidance is available — albeit applying to only England and Wales — I will want to look at it. I am simply making the position clear between now and then. I understand that the earliest likely date for the publication of the NICE guidelines is November 2001. It is appropriate that the Department continue to take account of changes in the management of multiple sclerosis, including new and emerging evidence on both the clinical and cost-effectiveness of these medicines. The Member will understand that, at this point, I do not wish to say anything further than that. I will look at the guidance.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister's time is up. There are clearly substantial interests and concerns in all portfolios, but particularly in this one. That is clear from the number of questions listed and from — and this is perhaps less clear to the House — the number of requests for supplementary questions that came to me on this portfolio. The time allotted is the same as for the others and, regrettably, we have come to the end of that time.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Public Accounts Committee

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to indicate what steps he intends to take to ensure that Departments accept reports from the Public Accounts Committee, including criticisms where appropriate. (AQO 114/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The Department of Finance and Personnel acts to ensure that the views and recommendations of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) are considered carefully by the relevant Departments and that the Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply gives an appropriate response to each PAC conclusion. There can be occasions where a Department

takes the view that it would not be appropriate to accept a PAC recommendation. Should that be the case, the memorandum of reply would need to explain why, so that the Committee can reflect on whether the response is acceptable.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister aware that the Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply to the fifth report from the Public Accounts Committee rejects the conclusion that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety failed to introduce legislation in time to curb pay increases to health board chiefs? Can he reassure the House that the work of the Public Accounts Committee is not treated in a cavalier fashion by any Department, that its work is taken seriously and that its conclusions are accepted, rather than simply rejected without explanation?

Mr Durkan: A Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply conveys the response of the relevant Department to the PAC's conclusions. I have seen both the Committee's conclusion and the Department's reply. As I read it, there was a difference of opinion over a course of action that had taken place over several years. The Committee was of the view that the Department had not acted swiftly enough to resolve a particular issue, while both the accounting officer and the departmental Minister considered that the action had been as swift as possible. I would find it difficult to second-guess another Minister in relation to whether a Department had acted quickly enough in a complex situation. However, I am sure that the Department concerned is well aware of the need for urgent and effective action should a similar situation reoccur.

I accept that a memorandum of reply might, in some circumstances, include a Department demurring in relation to PAC recommendations or disagreeing with PAC views; that goes with an open and transparent process. However, I also accept that it might be more appropriate for a Department not to baldly reject the PAC's view, and the Department of Finance and Personnel will ensure that such summary terms are not repeated.

Intermediate Funding Bodies

2. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the negotiations on the contracts with the various intermediate funding bodies. (AQO 111/01)

Mr Durkan: Following the outcome of the competitive tendering process for the selection of organisations or consortia to become intermediary funding bodies, the next step was to engage the organisations and consortia involved in contract discussions.

The detailed contracts under negotiation involved complex issues, reflecting the requirements of the

European structural funds regulations, which were addressed through a programme of negotiation meetings between the Special EU Programmes Body and the recommended organisations or consortia. My departmental officials, and those from other relevant Departments, were also involved, and negotiations with all 11 recommended organisations or consortia have now been completed.

Mr McMenamin: What steps can the Minister take to address the concerns of people in projects in the community and voluntary sectors that are now receiving gap funding that will cease at the end of October?

Mr Durkan: I am aware that many projects receive gap funding under the interim arrangements agreed by the Executive in February and that that funding is due to cease at the end of October. I am keeping the position under close review in light of the emerging timetable for the flow of funds, particularly from newly-appointed intermediary funding bodies, and from the new local strategy partnerships.

Mr Kennedy: Given Mr Hume's announcement this morning, will the Minister confirm if he is willing, able and available to undertake a new contract as leader of the SDLP?

Mr Durkan: Mr Speaker, I was hoping that you would rule on the irrelevance of the question.

Mr Speaker: My remit extends entirely to the Chamber. I would not dream of making the judgement as to whether that question was relevant or irrelevant to the Minister. Perhaps Mr Eddie McGrady will enlighten us.

Civil Service: Decentralisation

3. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what progress has been made on the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs to rural areas in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO 55/01)

4. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress is being made on the decentralisation of public sector employment. (AQO 40/01)

10. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail progress to date on the decentralisation of Government offices outside the Greater Belfast area. (AQO 28/01)

11. **Dr Hendron** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the work of the accommodation review. (AQO 118/01)

Mr Durkan: I will take questions 3, 4, 10 and 11 together. In May, consultants were appointed to carry out a strategic review of Government office accommodation. That includes an examination of the scope

for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs. The outputs and milestones agreed in the review are being met as scheduled. The current timetable for the delivery of the consultants' report is the end of November.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr McGrady: I will refrain from taking up the option proposed to me by the Speaker before he left the Chair. The Civil Service review will take account of targeting social need, equal opportunities and regional planning strategy. Will the Minister confirm that it will take into account, as it states in the Programme for Government, the need for rural proofing, and when can we expect to see some practical changes from the review regarding decentralisation to the rural community? Can he ensure that reasonable additional funds are provided to make that transition?

Mr Durkan: I expect to receive the consultants' report by the end of November, at which stage the scope for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs will become clear, as should the level of resources required to deliver any decentralisation options. Where options for decentralisation are identified, the impact on the exporting and importing areas, urban or rural, will have to be considered. I intend to examine any options and the associated financial implications as a matter of urgency, together with Colleagues on the Executive, and in appropriate consultation with other interested parties. It is too early to say what resources might be required or to identify how they might be secured.

Mr Fee: Does the Minister agree that decentralisation of public-sector employment does not mean a redeployment to two or three urban centres across Northern Ireland? When the Minister for Regional Development spoke about decentralisation a few days ago he said that roads, water, planning and other services were in place across the rural community. That is contradicted by the experience in south-east Ulster, where planning, roads, water, sewerage, land valuation and rate collection, among other functions, are centralised in Marlborough House in Craigavon. Will he give specific attention to that?

Mr Durkan: By definition, the examination of the scope for decentralisation will concentrate on the potential for jobs to be relocated from Belfast and north Down. One factor that must be taken into account in deciding where such jobs might go is the number of Civil Service jobs in any one area in relation to the local workforce.

Mr Ford: I remind the Minister that as well as the issue of where jobs might be taken to, with the consequent benefits for the receiving areas, there is also a severe problem with office accommodation in the Greater Belfast/north Down area. That is particularly true for organisations such as the Environment and Heritage

Service, whose premises, I understand, are already overcrowded, yet it is supposedly recruiting additional staff. How quickly does the Minister expect to be able to do anything about those pressures, given the long timescale under which jobs will be decentralised?

Mr Durkan: I appreciate that many Departments are already suffering acute accommodation pressures as a result of departmental reorganisation and accommodation constraints, not least those that the Member has referred to in the Greater Belfast area. Notwithstanding the strategic importance of the review that I have referred to, we are also considering shorter-term measures that can relieve some of the pressures currently facing Departments.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I do not wish to pre-empt the November consultation, but in view of the Assembly accommodation plans and the Minister's authorisation of expenditure of £9 million on accommodation in east Belfast, will he give the House some assurance that civil servants' jobs, perhaps under pressure for accommodation, will be decentralised?

Mr Durkan: I must correct the Member. I did not give approval for the Assembly Commission to spend £9 million on accommodation in east Belfast. Expenditure by the Assembly Commission is not subject to the approval of the Minister of Finance and Personnel or the Executive. The Member should know that, and she should have read her correspondence carefully. That expenditure is undertaken by the Assembly Commission, on which a range of parties are represented. I understand that the Assembly Commission's decision was unanimous.

Executive Programme Funds

5. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the timetable for the next round of allocations from the Executive programme funds. (AQO 112/01)

Mr Durkan: The Executive plan to make allocations from the new directions, service modernisation and social inclusion funds in October 2001. It was previously decided that there would be no further allocations from the infrastructure and children's funds this year. The Executive have agreed that the voluntary and community sector should be able to bid for resources from the children's fund and will be consulting on the arrangements soon.

Mrs Courtney: The Minister has almost confirmed the answer to my question. Will no further allocation be made from the children's fund or the Executive programme funds without consultation with the community and voluntary sector?

Mr Durkan: I am happy to confirm that there will be no further allocations from the children's fund without such consultations with the community and voluntary sector. That decision was reached following discussions with the major agencies that deal with children. The Executive are currently considering what arrangements should be introduced to enable the community and voluntary sector to bid directly for some of these funds, and we hope to consult on proposals and arrangements shortly.

Budget

6. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to advise on what actions he has taken to ensure wider consultation on the Budget process.

(AQO 113/01)

Mr Durkan: I made a statement to the Assembly on the Executive's position report on 19 June 2001. That set out a detailed timetable for the 2002-03 Budget process, including consultation arrangements leading to an Assembly vote in December.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and my Department have also circulated the position report to all consultees on our respective Departments' equality scheme lists. A further formal round of consultation will take place in the autumn on the Executive's proposals for the Programme for Government and the Budget, which on present plans will be announced to the Assembly next week.

3.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister tell us when the first meeting of the PPP and PFI review team will take place, as this appears to be an increasingly important element of our budgetary planning?

Mr Durkan: A high-level working group has been established to undertake the review of public-private partnerships in accordance with the objectives set out in the Programme for Government earlier this year. The first meeting of this group, which should include representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors and the trade unions, will take place on 26 September 2001. It is planned that the group will conclude its deliberations by February 2002. The broad composition of the group and its remit are consistent with the open approach taken to budgetary matters.

Government Purchasing Agency

7. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the financial value of contracts negotiated by the Government Purchasing Agency in the last financial year by Department, Next Steps agencies and non-departmental public bodies. (AQO 67/01)

Mr Durkan: Due to the extent of detail needed to respond to the question, I have prepared a table that sets out the value of contracts awarded by the Government Purchasing Agency on behalf of Departments, agencies and non-departmental public bodies. A copy of the table has been placed in the Assembly Library, and a copy has been sent to the Member. The largest entry, at £58 million, is for contracts from which all Departments call.

Mr C Murphy: I appreciate that there was a great amount of detail and that perhaps a written question would have been better.

Given the substantial spending power of the Government Purchasing Agency, will the Minister give a commitment that that spending power will be used to help achieve the social and economic targets in the Programme for Government?

Mr Durkan: I confirm that that is my intention and the intention of the Executive, as shown in the commitment to the Programme for Government. I am in difficulty about how much more to say in response to this question without anticipating a subsequent question that will touch on the procurement review — and there will be consultation on proposals arising from that review. All Members will see that we are trying to reflect the considerations of the Member as well as trying to ensure that we guarantee better value for money.

Procurement Review

8. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what progress has been made in the procurement review. (AQO 116/01)

Mr Durkan: The review implementation team has completed its work and presented its report. The Executive have agreed that the report should be released for public consultation and its public recommendations subjected to an equality impact assessment. The consultation period will last until 30 November. The Executive will then take final decisions with the benefit of the findings of the public consultation and the equality impact assessment. In the meantime, the Executive have decided that preparatory work should commence on the establishment of the procurement board and recruitment of the director for the central procurement body.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Minister say again when the procurement review will be going out for consultation, as I did not hear him the last time, and will he say if there are any innovative suggestions in the report that will help to achieve the wider social and economic objectives of the Assembly Executive?

Mr Durkan: The Executive approved the publication of the document for consultation at their meeting last

week. The document will be issued forthwith, and the consultation period will run until 30 November.

The team has made recommendations on furthering social, economic, and environmental objectives within procurement policy. Those recommendations include the initiation of a pilot scheme aimed at using public procurement contracts to assist unemployed people into work. The review team made 70 recommendations, on which the Executive would welcome comments.

Aggregates Tax

9. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the progress made in achieving a derogation of the impending aggregates tax.

(AQO 26/01)

Mr Durkan: Last month, I met with representatives of the Quarry Products Association. They expressed concerns about the impact of the aggregates levy. My office is currently liaising with the Financial Secretary's office in the Treasury to arrange a meeting to discuss the adverse impact of the levy in Northern Ireland. Discussions between the Treasury and the Northern Ireland Administration continue at an official level, and the Northern Ireland Departments continue to liaise with each other on this important matter.

Mr McHugh: I welcome the Minister's answer and his comments on an issue that is particularly important to people in the North. The drafters have overlooked an inherent flaw in the legislation. Will the Minister comment on the fact that jobs and products will migrate south of the border from Fermanagh and Tyrone, making this legislation impossible to implement?

Mr Durkan: I have no wish to offer any arguments against some of the observations the Member has made. As a regional administration we are making the case that this tax does not meet the basic test of good taxation. Several factors applying to this region have not been properly taken into account, which means that this tax will have an adverse economic impact and a potentially perverse environmental impact.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that if this tax were to be implemented in the way currently being proposed, many quarries and quarry product manufacturers along the border could go out of business in the same way as the petrol filling stations have done over the past three or four years? Does he have a view on the recent comments of the European Commission official who said that he would like to see the United Kingdom reduce taxes that greatly distort trade along land borders?

Mr Durkan: The Administration are aware that the impact of the tax is not going to be useful or helpful. It will bear down particularly heavily on areas close to

the border. That is an issue that we will continue to try to make clear to the Treasury. If there are any other counsels that can prevail with the Treasury, we would be happy to see them do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker: As Mr Leslie, Mr Poots and Mr Maskey are not present to table their questions, we will move to the next item of business. Time is up.

TITANIC QUARTER LEASES

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the report of the Regional Development Committee's Inquiry (1/01) into Belfast Harbour Commissioners' allocation and variation of leases and connected transactions within the Harbour Estate and the extent to which they have served the public interest.

I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly in what I consider is an important debate on the Regional Development Committee's report on the Titanic Quarter leases. Let me say from the outset that this is a timely reminder of the need for public or semi-public bodies to be sensitive to public interest and, particularly, to the need for transparency in their business activities.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who gave evidence to the Committee for Regional Development during the course of its inquiry. In particular, I thank officials from the Department for Regional Development, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Harland & Wolff for their co-operation throughout. The Committee also received written submissions from interested bodies, for which it is grateful.

Before I outline the Committee's key findings, I will explain briefly why it considered this inquiry necessary. Following the announcement on 7 February 2001 by Harland & Wolff that Harland & Wolff Properties Ltd and Titanic Quarter Ltd had been purchased by Fred Olsen Energy, the Committee for Regional Development wrote to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners registering its concern about the lease arrangements. On 20 March an Ulster Television 'Insight' programme made several allegations about a secret deal being struck between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Harland & Wolff. The Committee for Regional Development viewed these allegations very seriously. As a result, I, as Chairperson, wrote to the Harbour Commissioners seeking clarification on a number of points, in particular on the terms of this agreement and what additional revenue would be received by the Harbour Commissioners, who strenuously refuted the allegations.

Despite receiving some correspondence from the Harbour Commissioners, some important questions remained unanswered. As a consequence, and given the continued uncertainty around this matter, the Committee formally announced on 3 April 2001 that it would hold an inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the signing of the Titanic Quarter development agreement.

For the record, the intention to hold this inquiry was agreed unanimously by the Committee for Regional Development. Members recognised the social and economic importance of the Port of Belfast to all

people in Northern Ireland. Members were also reminded that the Port of Belfast is publicly-owned land and that the Harbour Commissioners, as public appointees, are entrusted with the stewardship of the port and its lands to promote the maintenance, improvement and efficient operation of Belfast harbour. The Assembly, therefore, has a clear duty to safeguard the public interest and, in turn, expects those entrusted with the management of Belfast port to ensure public accountability and transparency in any transactions involving its future development.

I will now summarise the key findings of the Committee's inquiry into the Titanic Quarter leases. On the public availability of Titanic Quarter development plans, and based on the evidence provided to the Committee, the Committee concluded that all key facts about the negotiations and signing of the Titanic Quarter agreement were not in the public domain. While giving evidence to the Committee, an official from the Department for Regional Development stated that the Department was not aware of all the details, including the signing of the agreement on 20 December 2000. The Department was not aware that the agreement involved the consolidation of several leases into one and that leases would be allocated to developers on a site-by-site basis for periods of between 125 and 250 years. The Department had been informed that negotiations had been classed as commercial in confidence.

The Committee was also concerned that, despite an approach from the Department to the Harbour Commissioners on 7 February 2001 with regard to the details of the agreement, the Harbour Commissioners were somewhat dilatory in responding to the Department's request, taking approximately five weeks to do so.

4.00 pm

It appears from the available evidence that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners became aware of their public accountability responsibilities only when the UTV 'Insight' programme was broadcast. The Committee for Regional Development concluded that had it not been for that television programme, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners might not have been so forthcoming in informing public representatives of their activities relating to the Titanic Quarter agreement.

During the inquiry, the Committee learned that while Belfast Harbour Commissioners and Harland & Wolff were negotiating the Titanic Quarter lease, the commissioners were also in discussion with the Department for Regional Development about a memorandum of understanding. The purpose of that memorandum was to provide the Department with greater involvement and consultation in any new leases or disposal of lands in the Belfast port, pending the introduction of the power of direction relating to the development of such lands.

Several key areas, including the Titanic Quarter, were excluded from the memorandum. There was a difference of opinion between the Department and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners as to who had requested those exclusions. After careful consideration of the evidence, the Committee concluded that it could not see any benefit for the Department in its requesting exclusions from the memorandum of understanding. The purpose of the agreement was to facilitate the Department's monitoring of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' activities in areas of major public interest, such as the Titanic Quarter. The Committee therefore concluded that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners could have been more open in their dealings and could have displayed greater public accountability.

In their evidence to the Committee for Regional Development, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners quoted commercial confidentiality as the reason why they did not inform the Department about the Titanic Quarter deal. They stated that Harland & Wolff had requested confidentiality. That, the commissioners stated, was a key factor in the amount of information that they made available.

The Belfast Harbour Commissioners confirmed Harland & Wolff's request for confidentiality in a letter dated 26 March 2001 to myself as Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development. The commissioners also informed the Minister for Regional Development of Harland & Wolff's request at a meeting on 22 March 2001.

However, Harland & Wolff stated that it was not opposed to making a public statement after the signing of the deal on 20 December 2000. Its representatives explained that there had been no pre-determined or conscious effort by Harland & Wolff to keep the details of the deal secret. To Harland & Wolff, the Titanic Quarter deal was primarily about enabling it to continue with its core business of shipbuilding. At the signing of the agreement, Harland & Wolff acknowledged that its representative had casually mentioned that he did not think that a press release was needed. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners agreed with that.

As further evidence to support its claims of not being involved in a secret deal, Harland & Wolff highlighted the statement by Fred Olsen Energy ASA to the Oslo Stock Exchange on 31 January 2001, which openly referred to the Titanic Quarter deal.

The Committee for Regional Development accepts that it is possible that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners might have misconstrued the comments of Harland & Wolff's representative at the meeting on 20 December 2001. However, the Committee believes that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners should have been proactive in seeking to publicise the deal in the interests of public openness and accountability, as well as the significant

potential benefits that the deal would bring to the Northern Ireland economy.

It is important that the Assembly acknowledges the good work that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners have done over the years to ensure the commercial viability of the Port of Belfast, continually seeking to improve performance and profitability. I would not like anything that I say to take away from that achievement. I speak for everyone by recognising the economic importance of Belfast port and its lands to all the people of Northern Ireland. Apart from European funding, the Port of Belfast has never received public finance.

The Committee's concerns have focused on the level of public accountability of the Titanic Quarter transactions. It has not questioned the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' ability to manage a profitable and commercially viable port. However, the Committee and the Assembly are anxious to ensure that those entrusted with such a large public asset are aware of their need to consult all those with an interest in how that public asset is managed and developed.

During the time it has taken to bring this report to the Assembly, I am aware that a memorandum of understanding has been signed between the Department for Regional Development and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The commissioners have voluntarily and willingly signed this agreement, which now includes the Titanic Quarter area. This memorandum of understanding will ensure increased public accountability and scrutiny. The other recommendations of the Committee are to be implemented, and I am assured that similar problems can be avoided in the future.

It is important to bring this to Members' attention. In paragraph 52 of the report it says:

"The Committee acknowledges that devolution has afforded locally elected representatives increased opportunities to examine more carefully those tasked with safeguarding the public interest. In many ways this process is at an embryonic stage, whereby many are still adapting to the more direct involvement of the Government and the Assembly and the increased scrutiny and accountability which this inevitably brings to the decision making process. Indeed this increased accountability goes to the heart of this inquiry. However there appears to still exist a perception among many within key public appointments that given their breadth of experience, knowledge and expertise in a particular area, they are best placed to protect the public interest without reference to the democratically elected representatives or institutions."

In many ways, that sums up what this report is about, and I commend it to the Assembly. This inquiry has served an important public purpose, which is to sensitise those in public roles and in the public sector to the need for accountability and transparency.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development has ably covered the key points in the report. The

inquiry has cleared the air and improved relations between the Department, the Port of Belfast and the Assembly Committee. The report shows that Committees can be effective watchdogs. There is evidence, and not just from this inquiry, that some Departments and public bodies are using the commercial in confidence label to hide detail from public gaze.

The message that should be sent as a result of this report is that any public organisation, or any organisation receiving public funds, can expect enquiry into its affairs by the public representatives in the Assembly who have a responsibility to protect the public interest. Hiding behind the commercial in confidence label, except where it is legitimate so to do, should not be an option. I too commend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Hay: It is difficult to know where to start with this debate. I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development that the Port of Belfast has been a success story. It is important that we, as public representatives, acknowledge that success and congratulate the people involved.

The Port of Belfast has been widely debated for years, as have many of the issues surrounding it. As long ago as 1997 we had reports from the Minister then responsible, Lord Dubs, on its privatisation. After devolution, on 29 November 1999, the Committee for Regional Development was given the task of looking at various matters in connection with the port. There were several options, and it is no secret that the Committee was heavily in favour of option D. This recommended the retention of the Port of Belfast as a trust port with extended powers. The Committee Chairperson referred to the memorandum of understanding, which is included in that.

The Committee became annoyed, to put it mildly, that, despite the memorandum of understanding having been discussed between the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the Department for Regional Development, three weeks prior to the publication of its findings on the future of the port Harland & Wolff announced on 7 February 2001 that Harland & Wolff Properties Ltd had been bought by Fred Olsen Energy.

That created major problems for the Committee as well as for the Department and the Minister. The Committee wrote to the Harbour Commissioners registering its concern about the lease arrangements and requesting additional information on the announcement, because there had been a major shift on what had been agreed to concerning the leases and lease agreements.

Titanic Quarter is an important development for Belfast and for the future structure and investment of the Port of Belfast, but it is also important for the future economic life of Northern Ireland as a whole, and that should be said publicly.

The problem was that the Committee found it difficult to get answers to several questions. For example, why did it take almost five weeks for the Harbour Commissioners to give us the relevant information? We found it difficult to get the commissioners to clarify some points, and even the Department found it difficult to get to the nub of the situation.

It was only after an Ulster Television (UTV) programme, on 20 March, that a fire was lit under the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. Had that programme not been screened, we would not have got the response that we needed from them. After the programme, a mountain of information came to the Department, the Minister and the Committee. The UTV programme certainly made the Harbour Commissioners more aware of their public responsibilities and accountability.

4.15 pm

It is a tragedy that it took a UTV programme for the Committee members to get answers to the questions that we had been asking for five weeks. After the programme, the commissioners sought meetings with the Committee and with the Minister to reassure us all that everything that they had done was out in the open and that they had nothing to hide. Had the Committee got a response to its points much sooner, it would not have considered the situation to be as serious as it did.

Given those circumstances, it was right that the Committee decided to hold its inquiry. At the outset of that inquiry, the Chairperson was correct to say that it was not a witch-hunt, nor were the Belfast Harbour Commissioners or the Department on trial. The inquiry tried to get to the nub of the situation and of the secrecy surrounding the decision to develop the Titanic Quarter. It sought to find out why the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, and Harland & Wolff, did not keep the Minister informed.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to the issue of commercial confidence. However, when such a change affecting the lands at Titanic Quarter was being mooted, and when the commissioners knew that serious changes were to be made to the leases, they should at least have informed the Minister privately as to what they might be signing. Those were the issues of concern to the Committee.

We have all learned lessons from this. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners certainly realise that the Assembly and the Committee for Regional Development have laid down a marker. Irrespective of whether they felt, even after the signing on 20 December, that they could not say anything publicly about the matter, the Committee felt that the reasons given by the commissioners for not putting information into the public domain were not justified.

I hope, now that the memorandum of understanding between the Harbour Commissioners and the Department has been signed, that we will all move on from here.

The Port of Belfast has a huge part to play in the economic life of the city and of Northern Ireland as a whole. As members of the Regional Development Committee, as Assembly Members, and as public representatives, all we want is to make sure that the Port of Belfast succeeds in the future. I hope that we have all learned lessons from something that could have been avoided had there been greater accountability from people who should have known better.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee report is comprehensive, and the Chairperson has outlined the essential issues and the sequence of events that gave the Committee cause for concern when it called for the inquiry and during the evidence sessions.

Belfast port is a trust port, as are most of those in the North. Belfast Harbour Commissioners, as the port authority, are required to ensure the maintenance and effective operation of the Port of Belfast and to ensure that it is managed in the best interests of the public and other stakeholders.

The ports are an essential asset; they facilitate economic development in the entire region, and are therefore of significant public interest. However, as they are currently constituted, trust ports are not accountable to Government; they are autonomous. Therein lies the problem — bodies that exist to serve the public interest are not accountable to the public or to the Government.

The Regional Development Committee was tasked in November 1999 to look at the options for the future of Belfast port and others. It gave its response to the Minister at the end of February 2001. The Committee met several times with officials from the Department, the Minister and representatives from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The subject of discussion on those occasions was the future operation of the ports. In regard to the Port of Belfast, discussions focused on the potential use and development of non-port land and the means of ensuring its future viability and competitiveness.

The proposed memorandum of understanding between the Department and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners also formed part of the discussions, as did legislation that would enable the Department to direct the Belfast Harbour Commissioners in future business decisions in regard to the port.

During the discussions concerning the future of non-port lands, the Department for Regional Development — and therefore the Minister — and the Committee were not aware of the detail of agreement in relation to

the future leases of the non-port land of Belfast port. We were discussing the future of the port while unbeknown to us arrangements were being made that would have a significant impact on the future use of non-port land.

That was not an example of accountability or transparency, in spite of the fact that Belfast Harbour Commissioners claimed to have fully informed the Department for Regional Development about the planned development of the Titanic Quarter.

I therefore commend the report's recommendations, particularly the recommendation that legislation be fast-tracked to give the Department the power of direction over key business activities of Belfast port.

I commend the memorandum of understanding, which will outline the responsibilities of each port authority and its accountability to the Department. I also commend the increased number of local representatives on harbour authorities.

The report's recommendations will ensure that the trust ports will remain viable and competitive. It will also ensure that the authorities are publicly accountable and that the ports are managed and operated in such a way that they serve the public interest. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I am not a member of the Committee for Regional Development, but I was a member of the Ad Hoc Committee that the Assembly established to deal with the privatisation. For many years, I have taken a deep interest in the operation of the Port of Belfast and other ports in Northern Ireland.

I share the concerns about the lack of openness in the way in which deals were done. However, I welcome the fact that there is now a memorandum of understanding between the commissioners and the Department for Regional Development. I also welcome the proposal that four locally elected representatives should serve on the board and that a representative from the Department for Regional Development will attend the board meetings.

Despite our reservations about the way in which the deal was done, we must look forward. The Titanic Quarter is one of the prime waterfront locations of Europe. I echo what William Hay said: it is of major significance to Belfast and the whole of Northern Ireland. We must acknowledge that when we consider the development of the site. There are many interested parties that must be involved in the development of the site. They include the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, Harland & Wolff — through Titanic Quarter Ltd — Belfast City Council, the Laganside Corporation, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment and others.

Members know that I have spoken with enthusiasm about the idea that Belfast should be the European City of Culture in 2008. The Titanic Quarter provides major opportunities to create the sort of developments that would reflect the city's position. Various draft development plans have been put forward over the years. We must get it right. The area should be developed as a major tourist and cultural location for Northern Ireland — from the Odyssey Arena to the slipways where the Titanic was built.

There is significant international interest in the development of the site. I remind Members of the impact of, for example, the development of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. That city was facing serious deprivation because of the decline of its industries, but it was revitalised. I see enormous potential.

I also welcome the fact that, as Mr McFarland said, the air has now been cleared.

4.30 pm

It is important for all the partners who have an interest in this area, and for the Assembly, to move forward so that the Titanic Quarter can realise its full potential, not only for the citizens of Belfast but for all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Bradley: The Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee spoke about the difficulties the Department had in obtaining information from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. The Committee had to cope with the same level of confusion. Since I joined the Committee in January 2000, very few meetings have gone by without some reference to the Port of Belfast or the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the jigsaw that is known as the Titanic Quarter leases.

My first impression was that many of those who were called to give evidence to the Committee, particularly people called to give evidence about the Titanic Quarter leases, were brief in their answers to questions and certainly did not volunteer any additional information. I can only attribute that to commercial confidentiality and perhaps to the degree of uncertainty that surrounded, and continues to surround, the future of the Committee and the Assembly. If a devolved Administration did not exist, the chances of any significant information regarding the Port of Belfast and the Titanic Quarter leases making its way into the public domain would be nil.

There was much confusion in the early stages of the inquiry. To this day, I doubt whether anyone could write a factual book on the subject. I agree with the statement in the report that the detailed written evidence given by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners about the development of the Titanic Quarter area provided what could be considered a breakthrough in the Committee's investigations. It certainly gave members a better insight into what had happened.

As the Chairperson has already said, there is a suggestion that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners have been successful in helping to make the Port of Belfast a commercial success, from which the economy of Northern Ireland has benefited. During the inquiry, the Committee was concerned about the lack of openness and transparency of the enterprise. Therefore, the statement by the Belfast Harbour Commissioners that they will undertake to examine their public accountability is welcomed.

Having referred to such matters as information in the public domain, accountability and commercial confidentiality, I welcome the Minister's view on the recommendations on page 5 of the report. Although that issue might be slightly removed from the Titanic Quarter saga, it has a similar significance. I am not deviating from the matter in hand; I am availing of an opportunity. Indeed, my question relates to section 52 of the report. What level of confidentiality is expected from locally elected representatives who will serve on the boards of trust ports? How much information should they present to the councils of which they are members? I apologise if I deviate slightly, but in the event of the Assembly not meeting for some time, and as those representatives will take up their positions, it is important to know what information we can expect to get back from them.

I am grateful to the Chairperson of the Committee, Alban Maginness, and his Deputy Chairperson, Alan McFarland. I am also grateful to the Committee Clerk and the Assistant Clerk for their guidance and expertise as we made our way through the mountain of paperwork and publications that related to the Port of Belfast and the Titanic Quarter leases. Now I can get rid of that four-foot-high pile of paper in my front room.

Mr S Wilson: I congratulate the Regional Development Committee on the work that has been done on what to some people might seem an esoteric topic, but is in fact an important issue. We are dealing with a body that has control over the largest swathe of development land in Belfast. The major area of expansion for the city lies in the harbour estate. But we are also dealing with a body that for years has dealt secretly with the development of that part of the city. From the first day that the Assembly was operational, Members have been expressing concern about what is happening in the harbour estate.

I am not a member of the Committee, but I read the Committee report with great interest. I only wish that I had been on the Committee, having read through some of the question-and-answer sessions. As Sean Neeson said, we went through the same tooth-pulling process for months with the Harbour Commissioners, officials from the Department for Regional Development and the previous direct rule Minister, Lord Dubs. I can

understand the frustration that Members must have felt as they tried to elicit responses and information.

The Harbour Commissioners should never have been under any illusion about public interest in their plans for land that is not port related. It was well highlighted by the Ad Hoc Committee before devolution. It was reinforced post-devolution, and there were debates in the Assembly about the future of the port. Various options were put forward — from the sale of the port to keeping it under public ownership, with additional powers.

The concern at the heart of those discussions was what would happen to the hundreds of acres of land in the port, which, at that stage, remained undeveloped. Some of the land was held onto by Harland & Wolff in long-term leases, but could only be used for ship-building unless variations were sought on those leases.

The Harbour Commissioners must have known that if those leases were to be changed, a plethora of public representatives from all parties would want to know what was going to happen to them.

Yet, despite entering into variation agreements with Harland & Wolff, the Harbour Commissioners did not inform the Minister. Six days before the agreement was finally signed, they had a meeting with the Deputy Chairperson, and they did not inform him. Five days before, they met with the Committee and did not inform its members. The departmental official who gave evidence found out about the variation agreements in January, when someone from the Industrial Development Board mentioned it to him. If nothing else, the Committee has done a good job to obtain that kind of information.

I note with interest what Mr Cushnahan said to the Committee on page 68 of the report:

“...when we met the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson on 14 December, I had no knowledge that we should even have had a transaction completed on 20 December.....I had no idea that we should have completed the agreement that week”.

Within about half a page he is telling another member of the Committee that

“the board finally agreed on 28 November 2000”

— three weeks before 20 December to give Mr Irwin the go-ahead to deal with the “finer points of the transaction”.

They cannot say that they had no idea that they were close to agreement when the board of the Harbour Commissioners had given permission for an official in the Harbour Commission to agree the final details two or three weeks beforehand.

Once the agreement was made, knowing the degree of public concern, surely the Minister, the Chairperson, or the Deputy Chairperson, who had even gone down

to see the Harbour Commissioners about the matter, should have been informed out of courtesy. It should not have been the case that somebody from the IDB happened to mention it to the official at a meeting.

I must say that part of the blame rests with the Department. Departmental officials appear to have been of the view that what happened in the Belfast Harbour Commission had nothing to do with them. They always hid behind their statutory obligations.

I will quote from evidence given by a departmental official. When asked if there was detailed evidence from the board to the Department in relation to the timing and authorisation of the lease he answered no. This is amazing. Here was an organisation that did not have the courtesy to inform the Department, and we get departmental officials coming along and making excuses for them. His answer was

“No, but the board was under no particular statutory obligation to share such information with us”,

and more significantly,

“we were under no statutory obligation to seek it.”

Later, he went on to say

“In my dealings with BHC over the years I have been conscious that they are an independent, autonomous, statutory body, independent of the Government and over which the Department for Regional Development has no control.”

That may well have been the case as far as the law was concerned, but the Department — and I remember having many gruelling meetings with departmental officials — was under no illusion. They knew that public representatives, not just in Belfast but wider afield, were concerned about what Belfast Harbour Commissioners got up to in relation to non-port lands. However, we get this type of laissez-faire attitude from the Department. It is little wonder that the Harbour Commissioners felt that they could treat the Minister, the Committee and the Assembly with contempt.

When we look at some of the excuses they gave for keeping the whole deal secret, we find it gets even murkier. On one hand the Harbour Commissioners wrote to the Committee Chairperson indicating that the reason for keeping the deal secret was that Harland & Wolff had asked them to maintain confidentiality. It is a pity that they did not get their story straight with Harland & Wolff. When Sir David Fell gave evidence he said that he was conscious of the letter concerned. When asked if he agreed with it, he said that he did not. In fact, as far as Harland & Wolff were concerned, there was no request for confidentiality: its representatives had been asked if they thought a press release was necessary and they had said they did not think so.

First, they said that they could not tell us when they came to the Committee because they did not know that the deal was going to get done — five days later —

even though the board had authorised an official to sort out the finer details of the deal. Secondly, they said that they could not tell us because they were asked to keep the deal confidential by Harland & Wolff; and Harland & Wolff, in as straight terms as it possibly could, said that that was not true.

This issue is of great public importance, and the background to it is very clear. One of the options was that the non-port-related land should be removed from the control of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners — that is how strongly the Assembly felt about it. There almost seemed to be an indecent haste to sign up as much non-port-related land as possible in case, at some stage, the Assembly decided it was going to remove land from the control of the Belfast Harbour Commission.

4.45 pm

That is the real reason for the secrecy and the haste in this matter. The report makes recommendations on public accountability, and I hope that the Minister will act quickly on those to increase the number of public representatives on the board of Belfast Harbour Commissioners. There must be a breath of fresh air and a breath of accountability through the doors of the Harbour Commissioners' office.

A yearly update on activities in the harbour must be instigated. In their evidence on the Titanic Quarter, the Harbour Commissioners said that there would be no public money. I know that this is not solely the Minister's remit, but I ask him to check that.

On page 65 of the report Mr McFarland asked whether they were anticipating Government grants in the evaluation — or indeed for the project. The reply was that as far as the Harbour Commissioners were concerned, the Titanic Quarter development would have to stand alone.

The Social Development Committee looked at the report on Laganside. To my surprise, one thing being considered was the extension of the road for Laganside into the Titanic Quarter. The only reason for doing so would be to use public money for the infrastructure of the Titanic Quarter. I hope that the Minister will press the Belfast Harbour Commissioners to find out whether the evidence that they gave to the Committee less than four months ago is now out of date, or whether they knew then that the information was incorrect.

This is a good example of the Assembly's ability to scrutinise the darker recesses of some of the activities of non-accountable bodies in Northern Ireland. Such an important area of the city should not be under the control of a non-accountable body. The past practice of concealing things must not be allowed to continue, and the Committee's recommendations will enable us to move towards much greater accountability.

Mr Byrne: As a Member of the Regional Development Committee, I commend the report to the House. The Committee was concerned during its deliberations in February to hear through a public press release that a deal had been done on the Titanic Quarter. The Committee had been working on the proposal as a recommendation to the Department.

The Committee's inquiry was a good exercise in scrutiny. Thirty years of direct rule allowed Belfast Harbour Commissioners to operate almost as an independent economic statelet, covering almost 2,000 acres near the city of Belfast.

In carrying out its inquiry, the Committee held meetings with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the Air and Sea Ports Division of the Department, and it did get answers to the fair and honest questions that it asked. The Committee was always concerned about the public interest in the economic development of the port.

There was always a suspicion on the part of Committee members that the full hand was not being revealed to us prior to the inquiry. Lessons have been learnt and put into effect through the new memorandum of understanding. As Mr Sammy Wilson said earlier, there must be much greater public accountability in regard to the operation of a trust port commission. It is not good enough to say that commercial confidentiality should prevent a publicly elected body such as the Assembly or the Minister from obtaining a full disclosure of negotiations and related facts, particularly when the asset in question is owned by the public. The Belfast Harbour Commissioners are trustees acting on behalf of the public.

I agree, however, that until now the Department should have been more active in ensuring stronger and closer collaboration, through its Air and Sea Ports Division, with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. I am also conscious that the non-port land included the important industrial complex of Harland & Wolff Shipbuilding and Heavy Industries Ltd, which has been very important to the city of Belfast. It would appear that there was a massive change in the leases because of financial difficulty pertaining to the shipyard. I am aware of the importance of jobs and the economic viability of that enterprise; therefore I understand that a change of leases was needed to facilitate the ongoing economic operation of the shipyard. It is to be hoped that lessons have been learnt. The new memorandum of understanding will greatly increase the understanding of the House, and any future Minister, of the operation of bodies such as trust ports.

It is good that the inquiry took place, and I pay tribute to the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson for the effective way in which it was conducted. Every

Committee member acted in the best interests of the public; that is our duty.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): As Minister for Regional Development, with responsibility for ports policy in Northern Ireland, I very much welcome the publication today of the Committee's report following the inquiry into the Titanic Quarter leases. In noting the Committee's conclusions and recommendations, there is much in the report with which I agree. Obviously, I will want to consider carefully each of the report's recommendations, and I intend to respond to the Committee on these in due course. However, I can say straight away that none of the recommendations surprises me. Many stem from discussions that I have had with the Committee for many months. In general, therefore, I regard them as a reasonable and sensible set of recommendations.

In welcoming the report, I congratulate the Committee, particularly the Chairperson, on the way in which the public inquiry was conducted. It was a necessary and worthwhile exercise, and I am confident that lessons for the future will have been learnt. As the report acknowledges, a memorandum of understanding has already been concluded between Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the Department for Regional Development. This will ensure that the Department will be notified and consulted before there can be any material change in the use of any lands in the harbour estate, or prior to their disposal.

A copy of the memorandum of understanding that came into effect on 1 August 2001 has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Belfast Harbour Commissioners entered this agreement voluntarily, but, as I made clear in an earlier statement, it remains my intention to advance suitable legislative proposals soon, in the form of a reserved power of general direction to underpin the agreement. As a consequence of the completion of this agreement, elected representatives can be assured that the public interest will be fully safeguarded in all future land transactions affecting the harbour.

However, as I explained in my announcement of 3 May this year, this is only one of a series of measures that the Department intends to implement with the aim of achieving greater public accountability in the trust port sector. They include promoting legislation to increase the number of district council representatives on each board, developing a code of practice for trust ports, and the attendance — as appropriate — of a senior Department for Regional Development official at future board meetings.

Several Members raised the issue of public accountability and the level of confidentiality that would be required of local elected representatives on the boards

of trust ports, including Belfast port. A public representative who is a member of the board will be bound by the same commercial confidentiality as other members of the board. There should be no distinction whatsoever with regard to the level of confidentiality.

I listened with care to the Members who said that the Department ought to have been more active, and I shall point out to Members the series of recommendations that were announced in early May. I am not content simply to increase the number of elected representatives in the trust ports, although for many years there has been an elected representative from Belfast City Council on the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. However, as Members know, I am deliberating the increase, and I note that the Committee has recommended that it should be increased to four in the case of Belfast. As I said earlier, I shall consider that and respond.

The publication of the Committee's report, the introduction of the memorandum of understanding and the other package of measures to improve public accountability mark a new beginning in the relationship between Belfast Harbour Commissioners, other trust ports and elected representatives. For my part, I consider the controversy surrounding the Titanic Quarter lease, concluded by Belfast Harbour Commissioners late last year, to be now behind us. We are entering a new era. I have made that clear in my discussions with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, and they have responded positively. It is agreed that we are now entering an era where we can expect better understanding of our mutual roles and responsibilities, and in which increased commercial freedom will be — and must be — balanced against improved public accountability.

As the Committee's report points out, an earlier take-note motion on the future of the Port of Belfast was withdrawn immediately before the inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the Titanic Quarter development agreement was launched. This was unfortunate, as the Committee and I were, and remain, in complete agreement on the way forward for the port. I reiterate my conclusion that the port should remain in the public sector as a trust port. Like similar ports, it should be given wider commercial powers and greater financial freedom to allow it to compete better in the future.

5.00 pm

At the same time, as I have already mentioned, steps will be taken to improve the public accountability of all Northern Ireland's trust ports. Publication of the report, coming after my earlier statement, marks the end of the debate on the future of the port. It means that Belfast Harbour Commissioners and port users can now plan the future development of the harbour with greater confidence and certainty.

I encourage the commissioners to seek to build on the port's proud record of commercial success, while ensuring that the Assembly, and elected representatives in general, are kept fully informed of any development plans. We all have a vital role in ensuring that the public interest is safeguarded.

If there are any other issues that I have inadvertently not responded to in the debate, I will read Hansard and respond to individual Members concerned.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Neeson is correct in saying that the air has now been cleared. Lessons have been learned, and the report and inquiry have been important in achieving that.

I agree with the substance of what Mr Sammy Wilson said, though I might not have used his colourful language. Over the years, a degree of mist has surrounded the activities of Belfast Harbour Commissioners. I hope that that mist will now disappear. It occurred to me that given the DUP's policy of rotation, Mr Sammy Wilson might end up as Minister for Regional Development. I wonder what might happen if he were to become Minister? However, it was only a mischievous thought. Strike that from the record.

Mr Sammy Wilson was correct to bring to the attention of the Assembly that what we are talking about is a vast swathe of very valuable non-port land — not just Titanic Quarter, but other land as well. It must be remembered that all of this happened in the context of consideration by the Assembly and the Regional Development Committee of the forfeiture, or removal, of land from Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

The idea of the power of direction was developed as an alternative to forfeiture. As an aid to the development of the concept of the power of direction, and pending legislation, we agreed the memorandum of understanding, which is an interim measure to allow a degree of public control, albeit on a voluntary basis, over the

disposal of such lands. It was within that context that all of this occurred. It is no wonder that public representatives were concerned. Mr Wilson was quite right to remind us of that dimension.

I agree with Mr Byrne that it has been a good exercise in scrutiny by the Assembly. The report has been of value not only because it deals with a particular issue, but because it sends a message to all civil servants and officials in public bodies that they must be accountable and transparent in their activities. I agree with Mr Bradley and also with the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr McFarland, that public accountability has been the kernel of the inquiry. Public bodies should be accountable to the Assembly; we cannot over-emphasise that.

I thank everybody who contributed to the debate. I accept what Mr McNamee said about the report's recommendations. The recommendations are important and, if implemented — I accept the Minister's assurance that most of them will be — will help to safeguard the public interest. I thank the Minister for Regional Development for his contribution and for his acceptance of the report. I know that there are certain recommendations that he has not accepted in full, but I know that he will, none the less, consider them. That is indicative of the good working relationship that the Committee has had with the Minister. We will build upon that relationship, as we address issues such as the future of the Port of Belfast.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the report of the Regional Development Committee's Inquiry (1/01) into Belfast Harbour Commissioners' allocation and variation of leases and connected transactions within the Harbour Estate and the extent to which they have served the public interest.

Adjourned at 5.09 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 18 September 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

CRYPTOSPORIDIOSIS

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Regional Development that he wishes to make a statement on the cryptosporidium contamination of the Dunore Point water supply, which occurred in the spring of this year.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make this statement. First, I would like to express my sympathy to those who were affected by the cryptosporidiosis outbreak. I know how distressing that was for them and for their families. I regard the protection of the public water supply as my highest priority. The public should be confident that the water is safe to drink.

Information about cryptosporidium and its effects is in the public domain, and I have made Members aware of that in previous statements to the Assembly. However, for Members' information, I shall recap on the nature of cryptosporidium and the measures being taken by the Water Service to minimise the risk of its entering the water supply. I shall also outline the history of the cryptosporidiosis outbreak in the spring that led to the identification of the Dunore Point water supply as its probable source. An investigation into the contamination of the Dunore Point water supply was carried out by a team led by Prof Adrian Long of Queen's University. I shall provide details of that investigation to the House and set out the steps that the Water Service is taking to implement Prof Long's recommendations.

Cryptosporidiosis is a diarrhoeal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called cryptosporidium.

In a healthy person the illness usually clears up by itself, but this may take a week or more. People who have problems with their immune system, including those with HIV infection or AIDS, those receiving chemotherapy treatment for cancer, and transplant patients, are more at risk of serious or prolonged illness.

Cryptosporidium is present in the environment at low levels at all times. There are several sources of infection, such as contact with infected animals, contaminated food, foreign travel and person-to-person spread. It can also be spread through the public water supply.

Following outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis in Great Britain, the Government appointed an expert group to advise on measures to protect the public against cryptosporidium in drinking water. The group was initially chaired by Sir John Badenoch and then by Prof Ian Bouchier. It reported in 1990, 1995 and 1998 and made many recommendations on measures to mitigate the risk of cryptosporidium entering water supplies. These recommendations were all adopted by the Water Service and are being implemented.

Measures already taken include: carrying out cryptosporidium risk assessments at all 59 water supply sources; rigorous cryptosporidium sampling and testing programmes; and the development of effective protocol arrangements with the medical authorities and the drinking water inspector. High priority is being given to the provision and upgrading of water treatment works to ensure effective barriers to cryptosporidium, involving expenditure of £140 million over the next five years. The replacement of the Mourne and Lagmore conduits to prevent ingress has involved expenditure of £40 million.

On 13 April 2001 Dr Morgan, consultant in communicable disease control with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, informed the Water Service of an increase in clinically diagnosed cryptosporidiosis in the community of the central Belfast area.

The Water Service immediately initiated a wide series of precautionary measures. These included: instigating category 1 major incident procedures with incident management teams being set up at divisional level and at head office; taking the Woodburn conduit out of service and carrying out a CCTV survey of it for signs of possible ingress of untreated water; the redistribution of water from various sources to compensate for the removal of the conduit; the introduction of 24-hour continuous sampling; the intensification of leakage repairs in the area to conserve water supplies; establishing formal lines of communication with the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, and providing additional customer call-handling arrangements.

Dr Morgan convened a meeting of the outbreak control team on Monday 16 April. The team comprised officials from the Water Service, the Eastern Health and Social Services Board and Belfast City Council. Water samples indicated that the level of cryptosporidium present in the water was low and well within national standards. Having reviewed the available information, Dr Morgan considered the water safe to use and to drink. The outbreak control team met on six occasions

between 19 April and 8 May, reviewing the situation constantly.

By 19 April geographic mapping of cases by the Water Service had identified Dunore Point water supply area as a possible common link. Over the weekend of 21 to 22 April investigations concentrated on the Dunore Point treatment works. These revealed that a defect to the site drainage system may have allowed the ingress of a small quantity of contaminated water along a cable duct to the outlet of slow sand filters. The cable duct was immediately sealed and repairs to the site drainage system were undertaken, which ensured that no further ingress of contaminated water could occur. A significant concentration of cryptosporidium oocysts was also detected in the septic tank located at the treatment works.

The outbreak control team considered that the defective sewer had been the most likely source of the outbreak. On 23 May Dr Morgan issued a press statement confirming that cases of cryptosporidiosis had returned to the usual seasonal level and declaring the outbreak to be over.

Three hundred and six cases of cryptosporidiosis were notified during the outbreak in the Eastern and Northern Health Board areas. The normal investigation into the cryptosporidiosis outbreak by the outbreak control team is underway, and its report is due later this year. The Water Service is assisting fully with this investigation.

On 27 April, I commissioned an independent investigation into the cause of the contamination of the water supply at Dunore Point. The investigation was led by Prof Adrian Long of Queen's University, Belfast. Prof Long was assisted by Randal Scott, the Northern Ireland drinking water inspector, Harry Thompson, the technical director of the Water Service, and Dr Pauline Mackinnon, lecturer in environmental engineering at Queen's University, Belfast. Prof Long's report was recently presented to me, and it is clear that the team's investigation has been detailed and comprehensive. I thank Prof Long and his team for the thoroughness and promptness of the investigation.

The team considered a number of possible sources of contamination and concluded that the most likely source was dilute sewage, which was transmitted via the cable ducts to the outlet channels of the slow sand filters. However, the report indicated that for this to have happened, a combination of a number of factors was required. These factors include the contamination of the sewer with cryptosporidium; leakage from the sewer; leakage from a water main in the vicinity of the leaking sewer, which acted as a carrier for the sewage; blockage of the drainage outlet from the cable ducts, and openings between cable ducts and filter outlets left unsealed.

Prof Long's report stresses that if any one of the factors had not occurred, it is unlikely that contamination would have resulted. Nevertheless, I accept that, apart from the contamination of the sewer with cryptosporidium, each of the factors could have been prevented.

The report concludes that the Water Service staff acted promptly and professionally when the results of the cryptosporidium tests showed higher than anticipated values in the water supply. I endorse this conclusion, and I thank all the Water Service staff involved for their hard work, professionalism and dedication.

The report makes a number of recommendations to reduce the risk of further cryptosporidium contamination of the treated water at Dunore Point and other comparable works. These include changes to the infrastructure; procedures for the operation, maintenance and monitoring of treatment works; procedures for personnel at treatment works; design issues; the replacement of pipes and conduits vulnerable to ingress, and the implementation of similar reviews for other treatment works.

A copy of the report has been placed in the Assembly Library and is available to Members. An executive summary has been distributed to members of the Committee for Regional Development.

In conclusion, the Water Service prepared an action plan to implement the recommendations at Dunore Point and other similar treatment works. I stress to Members the seriousness with which I regard this incident and assure them that the implementation of Prof Long's recommendations is underway — this is being treated as a top priority by the Water Service. Substantial progress has already been made in implementing the recommendations at Dunore Point, and target dates have been set for implementation at other installations.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for his comprehensive report on the cryptosporidium contamination of the water supply at Dunore Point. I express the sympathy of the Committee for Regional Development to those who were adversely affected by the outbreak.

The Minister outlined five failings in the system related to Dunmore Point. A combination of factors could have contributed to the contamination. Although I understand the substance of Prof Long's report and accept that a combination of factors was involved, it is a poor reflection on the Water Service that these factors existed and contributed to the outbreak of cryptosporidiosis.

The Water Service is to be congratulated for dealing with the outbreak promptly.

Mr Speaker: I urge the Chairperson to ask his question.

Mr A Maginness: I understand the recommendations that have been made and their implementation, but can the Minister assure us that there will not be another outbreak at that location? It is worrying that the situation arose, and the public demands an assurance that it will not occur again.

10.45 am

Mr Campbell: I thank the Committee Chairperson for his question and his comments about the professionalism of the Water Service. He asks for an assurance, but the nature of this problem is such that it is virtually impossible to give a categorical assurance that there will be no further outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis, given that low levels of cryptosporidium exist all the time.

I have no hesitation in giving an assurance that every possible step is being taken to ensure that the possibility of future outbreaks is minimised. All the recommendations from Prof Long's report have been, or are being, implemented. I hope and expect that that will minimise any future outbreak in so far as it is possible to do so. The wholesomeness of the public water supply is a top priority, and the public should be able to have confidence in its drinking water supply.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr McFarland): I thank the Minister for his statement. However, I am concerned, because I recall that after the two outbreaks in 2000 on the Mourne and Lagmore conduits we were assured that the Water Service had checked everything. Similarly, it was stated that in so far as it was possible to determine, given the ambient level of cryptosporidium, everything had been solved. I am concerned that several problems were not solved at that time. I am aware of the overall cost of replacing entire systems, but the report has made certain recommendations; what will it cost to implement them?

Mr Campbell: I repeat that attempts are being made to ensure that outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis are kept to a minimum. It is difficult, because cryptosporidium is in the water supply at low levels throughout the year, and at certain times it occurs at higher levels.

I assure the Deputy Chairperson that the Water Service is doing all that it can to ensure that continuous efforts are made and measures put in place so that the public can have confidence in the water supply.

A range of recommendations is being implemented. Some are short-term measures and do not have significant resource implications, but others have substantial resource implications. I refer the Member to the replacement of the Mourne and Lagmore conduits. Those alone cost £40 million. The upgrading of water treatment works will make for a more effective barrier to cryptosporidium,

but, as I said in my statement, that will cost £140 million over the next five years. It will be a costly exercise, but those measures must be put in place. I will apply for every possible resource to ensure public confidence in the water supply.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement, but I am sure that he will forgive me if I say that it is a case of *déjà vu*. This is beginning to become something of an annual event; exactly a year ago the Minister gave a similar report, following the outbreak in my constituency and bordering areas.

Does the Minister agree that the entire infrastructure and supply of water, and also the sewerage infrastructure, is crumbling into disrepair, and that that is the major cause of these outbreaks? Today's report deals with Dunore Point, but there have also been outbreaks in Silent Valley, the Poleglass reservoir, the Northern Service reservoir and Lagmore conduit. Where will it end? Whose water will be next?

Does the Minister agree that cryptosporidiosis should now become a notifiable disease, because of the difficulties and potential difficulties for the elderly and those suffering from the illnesses that he already mentioned? Does he agree that the Department is failing in its duty to the general public to provide a wholesome water supply?

Mr Campbell: I will answer the final question first. I do not accept that the Department is failing in its duty. If the Member peruses the statement, he will see the lengths to which the Department is going to ensure continued public confidence in the water supply.

The substance of the Member's questions brings us to the nub of the problem. For about 30 years, we have had a continuous cycle of underinvestment in water treatment works and in the provision of a public water supply. The events of the past two or three years are indicative of that underinvestment. I do not want to mislead the Member or the House by saying that all cryptosporidium outbreaks occurred because of underinvestment, but there is no doubt that a substantial majority of them did.

For that very reason, I have made continuous bids to increase the amount of money available for the Water Service to put effective barriers to cryptosporidium in place, as well as the other benefits that water treatments bring. I welcome Mr Close's support for that, and I hope that if the House votes for moneys in the near future, the Water Service will receive additional funding.

Mr Speaker: Mr Close asked a question about notifiable disease status. That is not an area of responsibility for the Minister for Regional Development. However, the Member may wish to put the question to the Minister who has responsibility for disease notification.

Mr O'Neill: I too welcome the Minister's statement. The open and honest approach goes some way to reassure the public about the causes of this outbreak, and I thank him for that. Is it not then incumbent on the Minister to apply the same standards of openness to the other outbreaks? I refer in particular to the outbreak resulting from the Silent Valley issue. It was made quite clear in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board's report that a deficiency in the infrastructure in the Saintfield area led to that ingress. Does the Minister agree that it is totally unjust that the ban on grazing for the Mourne farmers is allowed to continue? Those poor farmers were subject to a savage and punitive situation during the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. Is it not unjust that they should suffer doubly because of miscalculation and inefficient infrastructure? It is not their fault.

Mr Campbell: The Member raised the Silent Valley issue previously mentioned by others. He knows that I have responded to oral and written questions on this and have met a delegation of farmers. I sympathise with their plight. However, given the circumstances and the advice to me from the Water Service and the medical authorities, I had no alternative but to take the actions that I took. I hope for and expect Mr O'Neill's support to obtain sufficient resources to enable the speedy replacement of the Mourne conduit. That would assist the farmers, whose position we both support, to return to their grazing lands.

Mr J Wilson: Like others, I thank the Minister for the openness and honesty of his statement and for his warning that these matters should be taken very seriously. However, is he really surprised that people in Northern Ireland, having consumed some of our water, become ill from time to time?

In my constituency, the Six Mile Water pours human waste, toiletries, bathroom and personal hygiene items into Lough Neagh every day. I can give Members a more graphic description should it be required. I can only assume that if that is happening on the Six Mile Water, it also happens on the Moyola, the Upper Bann and the Ballinderry rivers.

Is the Minister aware that an officer of the Ulster Angling Federation was recently taken to Dunore Point on the lough shore? He tossed a pebble into the water and it did not sink. What he saw there was pure gunge.

To bring the Minister up to date, is he aware that reports are reaching the angling fraternity and the local press that Lough Neagh is now throwing up dead dollaghan trout on the water surface? Is he really surprised that people are becoming ill after drinking water?

Mr Campbell: There is no doubt that from time to time in several rivers in Northern Ireland there are items that make the provision of a clean water supply more difficult. I will investigate the status of the Six Mile

Water and other rivers and write to the Member when I receive a report on it. The Member also referred to Dunore Point on Lough Neagh.

I will have those checked, and I will write to the Member when I receive the information.

11.00 am

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (BEST VALUE) BILL

Second Stage

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA19/00) be agreed.

The Bill will remove the statutory requirement for the compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) of selected services and in the interests of council residents and district ratepayers establish in its place a new framework of best value.

Few Members will mourn the passing of CCT. When I was a district councillor, I had no great love for CCT, which seemed at times to place too much emphasis on costs rather than on quality of services. CCT did, however, bring to local government a useful focus on value for money in the delivery of key services. It was, therefore, a policy that had the interests of residents and ratepayers at heart. Under best value, I am keen to promote greater transparency and accountability in the use of council resources and in the provision of local services to council residents and ratepayers. The Bill is an essential step towards achieving those objectives — it is a Bill for local people.

“Best value” is, of course, an expression that is not yet familiar to most residents and ratepayers in Northern Ireland’s 26 council areas. However, the Bill is highly relevant to the local issues that impinge on the everyday lives of the people whom Assembly Members and district councillors represent. It seeks to promote quality services for council residents at a price that local district ratepayers are prepared to pay. It does not simply pursue the lowest cost option. Unlike CCT, the Local Government (Best Value) Bill will require district councils to review all of their services in consultation with local people and to seek areas for improvement in the quality of service and in value for money.

Best value is not a new concept for local government in Northern Ireland. In 1998, all 26 district councils agreed to implement best value voluntarily in advance of primary legislation. A joint departmental local government steering group was set up to oversee the implementation, and key tasks were assigned to a number of joint working groups chaired by district council chief executives. My Department also introduced subordinate legislation to defer the further implementation of CCT while the best value initiative was being progressed.

Some might ask why we need the Bill. There are two main reasons. First, the requirement for CCT has merely been deferred by subordinate legislation; it

remains on the statute book. Legal advice is that it cannot be further deferred in that way. That means that the CCT obligation becomes effective again on 1 April 2002, unless it is repealed before that date. Secondly, experience to date of the voluntary implementation of best value indicates that a statutory framework for best value is essential if we are to deliver the transparency, accountability and consistency that council residents and ratepayers deserve.

While councils have, as expected, taken the opportunity to stand down CCT, they have not yet fully implemented some key aspects of best value and have called for further detailed guidance to ensure that there is an effective and consistent approach. That strongly suggests that a statutory framework is the best way of promoting the interests of local people with regard to quality and value for money in council services.

I say that without rancour towards councils, which I regard as having filled the democratic gap in Northern Ireland during 30 years of direct rule. Members may argue that the best value framework might be too prescriptive and bureaucratic. They may also contend that councils should be given the scope and flexibility to seek continuous improvement on their own terms. Such views have merit. Those points were raised with me when I discussed an earlier, much more detailed and prescriptive draft Bill with the Environment Committee.

I reflected carefully on those points, and I have substantially altered the draft Bill. However, I have done that without prejudice to the sensitive principle that council residents and ratepayers are entitled to transparency, accountability and consistency in the delivery of council services. People are entitled to be given a say in the determination of council priorities for the area in which they live. People are entitled to know how their council is performing and to have the opportunity to contribute to its plans.

Ratepayers are also entitled to an assurance that their money is being well spent and that every effort is being made to provide quality services. Such an assurance can be provided only after a robust, independent scrutiny of council activity. The Local Government (Best Value) Bill makes provision for delivery on all of those counts. At the same time, I have gone to some length to ensure that the proposed statutory framework is not over-prescriptive. Moreover, I assured the Environment Committee that I would avoid over-prescription in the implementation of the framework. I repeat that assurance to the House today, because it is an important one.

Current best value procedures allow for different approaches to suit local circumstances. For example, at present councils can determine the means by which they engage local people in consultation, and, through local targets and performance indicators, they can

demonstrate to the residents and ratepayers how they are performing year on year. The implementation guidance in the Bill will allow for appropriate local variation. Inevitably, any new framework will involve time, effort and resources — best value is no exception.

I am committed to taking all genuine opportunities to streamline the process. However, the proposed framework should instil some consistency of approach, enabling councils to learn from one another, while improving transparency and accountability for residents and ratepayers. That should prevent unnecessary duplication of effort, while promoting continuous improvement through meaningful benchmarking.

I do not deny that, during the consultation process, significant reservations were expressed by the local government sector. In particular, there was a genuine concern that my Department would use subordinate legislation to establish a framework that would place more emphasis on process than on outcomes. It was feared that that would stifle innovation and flexibility of approach. I have made it clear that I am opposed to such an approach.

The Bill makes provision for a robust framework that will allow for the sensitive and practical development of the best value concept. Emphasis will be placed on the use of departmental circulars for setting out the operational requirements of best value, rather than subordinate legislation, as previously proposed. That will allow us to continue and strengthen our partnership with local government to develop further guidance. I propose to establish a joint working group to develop the necessary guidance on implementation. That will make best use of the expertise of local government representatives and officials, to the benefit of the 26 district councils, their residents and ratepayers.

The Bill now comprises 11 clauses, as opposed to the 19 that were proposed at consultation stage. Clause 1 describes the best value duty and applies it to all district councils in Northern Ireland. The clause sets out a requirement that councils should systematically review all their functions and prepare plans to address any deficiencies. Councils will be required to consult widely with their communities, and that will give people more influence over council priorities for their area. Clause 2 empowers the Department to issue guidance to councils on how the duty of best value is to be discharged. Councils have requested such guidance, on the understanding that they will have input into its development. As I have said, I am committed to such engagement.

Clauses 3 and 4 deal with the arrangements for the audit of best value. That will give local people, the Department and the Assembly the assurance that council activities are subject to independent scrutiny. The Bill will allow the local government auditor to undertake an audit of every council's performance improvement

plans and to report on whether they are consistent with the legislation and any guidance issued by the Department. Other provisions will enable the auditor to examine all aspects of a council's approach to best value in more detail. On completion of an audit, the auditor will produce a report of his or her findings. Any such report will highlight areas of concern and make recommendations for either the council or the Department to act on.

Clause 5 outlines councils' responsibilities following receipt of an auditor's report. If the report contains recommendations, a council will be required to prepare a statement outlining its views on those recommendations and saying, in appropriate circumstances, how and when it proposes to address the issues raised. Such statements will be forwarded to the Department and will be included in the council's next performance improvement plan.

Significantly, councils will be required to publish an auditor's report, thereby improving transparency for local people. Such reports will be valuable sources of information for local residents and ratepayers as well as for councillors, council staff and the Department. The provision for independent scrutiny and accountability checks will enable the Department, councils and the local government auditor to work together on promoting the delivery of quality local services.

Clause 6 deals with non-commercial considerations. Article 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 specifies matters that councils should not take into account when awarding council contracts. However, in certain circumstances, it is possible that some of those matters may be deemed relevant to procurement objectives. The clause, therefore, gives the Department powers, subject to Assembly approval, to specify, through subordinate legislation, matters that are no longer deemed to be non-commercial. We would, of course, ensure that any such proposal to use those powers would take account of the procurement review being undertaken by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Clause 7 makes provision for my Department to disapply a council's statutory obligations under best value, either for individual councils or for local government as a whole. That power would be exercisable through subordinate legislation. At this stage, I do not envisage any circumstances in which that power would be used, so its inclusion is for reasons of contingency.

Clause 8 is simply an interpretation of key references in the Bill.

Clause 9 lists the changes to primary legislation necessitated by the Bill. The main change will be the repeal of Part II of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, which makes provision for compulsory competitive tendering.

I would like to emphasise two points. First, it is crucial that we make progress with the Local Government (Best Value) Bill if we are to avoid the reinstatement by default of compulsory competitive tendering as a statutory obligation for 2002-03. I believe that there is consensus on that, although it undoubtedly creates pressure on the Assembly and my Department, given our tight schedule.

Secondly, Members will have noted my recurring reference to the need for transparency, accountability and consistency, in the interests of council residents and ratepayers. I make no apologies for that deliberate repetition. When I was first appointed Minister of the Environment, I was still a councillor. However, when I became conscious that my appointment gave rise to potential conflicts of interest, I took steps to avoid those conflicts. The mere possibility of potential conflicts of interest eventually led me to resign my seat on Fermanagh District Council.

About 60 of my fellow MLAs retain a dual mandate as councillors and Assembly Members. It is perfectly in order that they do so. However, that dual mandate undoubtedly carries with it an added responsibility. The Assembly must assure the public that the framework created for local government is transparent, accountable and subject to independent scrutiny. In particular, we must reassure council residents and ratepayers that the legislative powers of the Assembly are not being used to deny them that transparency, accountability and independent scrutiny.

The challenge is to create a balanced framework that is proportionate and practicable, but is also sufficiently robust to ensure that the legitimate needs of ratepayers and residents are met. I believe that the Bill does strike the necessary balance, and I commend it to the Assembly.

11.15 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Rev Dr William McCrea): I thank the Minister for his speech this morning. It is true that many members of my Committee are also members of district councils, and they declared that at the time.

As Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I wish to register with Members and also the Minister, a number of concerns that the Committee still has about the Bill. On 6 April, the Committee formally responded to the Department's best value consultation document. We questioned not only the timing of the Bill but the need for it to be so detailed and prescriptive. At that time, the Department was proposing a 21-clause Bill as opposed to an 11-clause Bill, and I acknowledge that the Minister has taken some of our concerns into consideration.

We carefully considered the policy memorandum and saw the purpose of the Bill. Members of my Committee objected to few of the stated purposes including the

repeal of the existing provision for compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). Few councils are sad to see the demise of CCT. The Bill will also give councils a duty to make arrangements for continuous improvements in all their functions — who would not want that? The question is whether it should be done in a compulsory way, through the Bill, or voluntarily, as is already happening.

The Committee has recommended a two-clause Bill, which would repeal CCT and simply put a best value general duty on councils to seek continuous improvements. I respect the fact that the Minister has made changes to the initial draft brought to my Committee. It seems that this Bill is less prescriptive, particularly on the audit of best value plans and reviews, and places more emphasis on the use of departmental circulars and consultation than on subordinate legislation. It drops clauses on best value inspections, costs recovery via prosecutions and performance improvement plans. It puts a duty on councils to seek best value and to make arrangements for continuous improvement. That is better than the original statement about securing continuous improvement.

The Committee wrote to the 26 district councils in January and March. We heard directly from representatives of three councils, the local government auditor, the Association for Public Service Excellence and, of course, our Minister of the Environment and his senior officials. Several of the councils questioned the need for legislation, saying that they had been voluntarily operating best value for two years. It was acknowledged by many, inside and outside the Department, that that had been successful.

The councils also questioned the timing of the introduction of best value legislation, given the pending review of public administration in Northern Ireland. To date, Members have heard much talk about this review, but little has been done about it. Councils also argued that the best value framework used in Great Britain was not applicable to Northern Ireland district councils, which have more limited roles and budgets.

The Committee, therefore, sees merit in extending the non-statutory approach to implementing best value, as currently happens in Scotland. That would allow us time to develop and strengthen the partnership and improve communications between local government and central Government. It would also allow councils time to develop good practice and improve transparency, accountability and value for money, which are key components of councils' procurement and service delivery.

Who would deny the importance of improved transparency? Who would not want accountability or value for money? As ratepayers, we certainly desire those,

but is the Minister's approach — to race ahead with the legislation — the appropriate one?

Improved transparency, accountability and value for money are essential, and that applies as much to the Department and its activities as to the district councils and theirs. The Executive contribute to the Bill, and they consider accountability in local government to be in need of improvement to provide more transparency for ratepayers and those who rely on council services. However, that could also be said about the Executive. My Committee discussed the 11-clause Bill. We had serious reservations about it, but we undertook to scrutinise it rigorously, clause by clause, at Committee Stage and report in full to the Assembly.

We noted the Department's letter of 22 August, which said that, at the meeting between local government and departmental officials, it was unanimously agreed that, unlike compulsory competitive tendering, best value offered district councils the opportunity to improve quality services. It also said that the revised draft legislation was endorsed unanimously as an acceptable basis for developing best value. Can the Minister confirm that that is correct? Did the district councils ask whether that statement referred to local government throughout Northern Ireland or just to the limited number of officials who happened to be at the meeting? How will the Bill address my concerns? Will the Minister explain why extending the non-statutory approach to implementing best value is not a viable option?

Mr A Doherty: This is an important Bill, and we need to get it right, for it reaches the heart of what politics — local and national, should be about — quality of life.

I look from three perspectives. First, the perspective of the SDLP, which, from its beginning, has worked to build the partnerships and communities — social, economic and political — that are essential to the achievement of that quality of life. Secondly, in 24 years as a district councillor, I have promoted the importance of partnerships as the best method of giving best value. Good councillors of every persuasion, despite their differences, have been united in their commitment to giving good service and good value to their constituents, making a major contribution to keeping Northern Ireland from sinking into the abyss that still opens up before us. Thirdly, I speak as a member of the Environment Committee, which is charged with giving serious consideration to the points that will be made during the debate and to the responses of the Minister and his Department. There are still many small-print points that must be examined.

I have some general questions: why the hurry; why only local government; why not the Department itself; why not Big Brother — central Government? Why impose this on councils that may soon be abolished or, God forbid, subsumed into a few supercouncils? The

reasons given by the Department in support of the revised Bill are worthy of close scrutiny.

The Bill is

“to make provision imposing on district councils requirements relating to economy, efficiency and effectiveness; and for connected purposes”.

The requirements relating to economy, efficiency and effectiveness are admirable and acceptable, depending on how they will be imposed. They concentrate on the processes, which might effect a limited sort of best value. We hope that the need for councils to provide best value services that take account of the human needs of the community, council workers and other stakeholders are covered under the last three words, “for connected purposes”.

In its response to the draft Bill, the SDLP made that point, with regard to the absence of an equality impact assessment and the fact that both new targeting social need and equality considerations should be taken into account in local government procurement. I am not sure that the revised Bill has taken up those points.

We can readily accept the assurance of the central management branch that best value offers district councils the opportunity to provide quality services with an emphasis on public consultation and with transparency, accountability and value for money as key components in procurement and service delivery. To help councils, the Department may

“issue guidance to councils as to the carrying out of their functions”.

That is in clause 2(1). Obviously, councils will, at times, need guidance, but what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. It is surely in order to suggest that, before it issues its guidelines, the Department should consult the councils and other stakeholders fully. I take on board the Minister's words this morning about discussions with councils.

That is just one suggestion of the many that, I am sure, will be made during the debate and the Committee Stage. District councils are already heavily and voluntarily engaged in seeking to provide best value in all their services. Before the Bill becomes law, we must be satisfied that, as an Assembly officer said, the statutory framework for best value is

“essential if we are to deliver the transparency, accountability and consistency to which council residents and ratepayers are entitled.”

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to give a broad welcome to the concept and contents of the Bill, while expressing some concerns that can be more properly dealt with in detail in Committee, if we ever get that far. The Bill will require district councils to make arrangements for continuous improvement in all their functions. It is designed to replace compulsory competitive tendering and is a

recognition that CCT was too rigid and, on occasions, prevented councils from acting in the best interests of their communities. In other words, it was a failed and counterproductive concept.

Services and contracts will be judged not just on cost but on the balance of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Obviously, that is to be welcomed, because it allows local government services and functions to be carried out in a manner that encourages the targeting of social need and embraces human rights and equality considerations.

11.30 am

I welcome the changes that have been made to the Bill since its original drafting. Many of the concerns expressed by the Environment Committee and by district councils have been taken into account. I welcome and acknowledge the responsiveness of the Minister and his advisers to those concerns. The Bill is now less prescriptive, particularly on the auditing of best value plans and reviews. It places more emphasis on the use of departmental circulars and consultation, rather than on subordinate legislation. It has dropped best value inspections and cost recovery via prosecutions and the section on performance improvement plans. It now provides a duty of best value that requires councils to make arrangements for continuous improvement, rather than to secure continuous improvement.

However, I remain to be convinced that we require back-to-back repeal of CCT and the introduction of best value on a statutory basis now. The Committee Chairperson comprehensively and scrupulously outlined the general view of the Committee on that matter. I note that the Scottish Parliament has extended the non-statutory implementation of best value. Best value should encourage the continued development of partnerships with the community, voluntary and private sectors, where this adds to the overall efficiency, effectiveness, and economy of services. Best value practices should encourage the sharing of resources and information in appropriate cross-border partnerships.

It is vital that best value practice does not become too mechanistic. It is vital that it be accompanied by a culture of workplace partnership and be related to human rights and equality issues — as I said earlier. It is my firm conviction that local government reform will set the context for local authorities' powers and their limitations. It does not seem to be sensible, prudent, or even logical, to impose additional restrictions and structures in advance of this reform, given that local authorities are already implementing best value policies on a voluntary, non-statutory basis. It would be more appropriate to await the outcome of this reform before considering the legislative framework that may be required to foster local government practice in a spirit of the culture of best value.

CCT legislation needs to be rescinded. However, the introduction of a detailed legislative scheme for best value should be deferred until local government reforms are being introduced. Until then, local authorities should continue to implement best value policies on a partnership and co-operative basis, and the legislative timetabling should reflect this flexible and phased approach. Go raibh mile maith agat.

Mr Ford: The Minister, in outlining his proposals, told the House that there were two reasons why we required the Bill. The first was to get rid of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT); the second was because we need a statutory framework for best value. The first reason is self-evident, and it is not questioned by anyone in the Chamber. CCT has been an unmitigated disaster in its implementation in Northern Ireland. The very modest financial savings by district councils have been more than matched by consultants' fees and staff time lost through pressures. However, the sweeping statement that we require a statutory framework for best value has not been spelt out in any detail. No reason has been adduced as to why a statutory framework is required.

Can the Minister tell us why the Scots can manage for two more years without a statutory basis for best value, yet for our councils there is apparently an urgent requirement for back-to-back legislation to introduce statutory best value? It should be borne in mind that district councils in Northern Ireland account for less than 5% of all public expenditure and that they are in a completely different situation from that of the unitary authorities in Scotland, which have far greater powers.

The reaction of councillors, in giving the proposals a general welcome, has also been cited. The Committee Chairperson has queried the numbers and the format involved in that. I suspect that district councillors who have not had the pleasure of being elected to the Assembly still think that the consultation process is as it has been for the last 30 years. They think that a consultation document is issued; district councils and others comment on it; the Civil Service ignores the comments; and an Order in Council goes through Westminster at midnight without any regard for what has been said.

It would be an interesting exercise to remind district councillors that it is the Assembly that legislates and not Westminster — at least for another week anyway. On issues requiring consultation, they should know that there are open minds in the Assembly that will listen to the evidence — not closed minds that will slavishly follow whatever is being done in London, Edinburgh or Cardiff.

There is no doubt that the Minister has outlined some significant points that need to be taken into account. We need much more transparency and accountability. We need to give local residents and ratepayers a say in

how matters are dealt with in their districts. What the Minister proposes, however, is that the district auditor, who has functions in the field of accounts, should be able to report on other matters. An auditor, with his accounting background, may be qualified to judge matters of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. However, will the Minister explain how an auditor can judge when a swimming pool should be open, whether a district council should spend money on a children's playground, or whether additional recycling centres should be maintained? Those are political issues on which councillors are entitled to set political priorities. They are not issues to be tied up purely on the basis of an auditor's examination of best value.

It is clear by the reaction to the draft Bill that was put before the Committee that this is a frightened rethink on the part of the Department and the Executive. Speaking as a Member of the Opposition, and given today's reaction from leading figures in the DUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin, I am not surprised that the Executive are running scared. If members of their parties sit in the Chamber and query the legislative plans that the Executive put before us, they clearly have a great deal to be frightened about. It has been highlighted, for example, that the best value regime is now somewhat less prescriptive because we will no longer depend on subordinate legislation but on departmental circulars.

Will the Minister explain how the Committee for the Environment will scrutinise the Executive's proposals, which will come out in the form of a departmental circular? Will we have a full opportunity to discuss them? Will they be laid before the House as subordinate legislation would be? If not, we shall end up with a best value regime that is equally prescriptive but not subject to democratic scrutiny in the Assembly.

If we are to talk about transparency and accountability, the Executive must clearly explain to the Assembly what is happening to the review of public administration. This issue is one of directing best value to councils alone. Where is the rest of the quango state? Where are all the agencies that look after what would be council functions if we were in England, Wales or Scotland? We cannot simply compare a body such as Moyle District Council with Glasgow City Council, Cardiff City Council or a London borough council. The population is minute by comparison, and the range of functions is totally restrictive. What we still have, although there are modest changes in the way that best value is to be administered, is the best value regime being introduced in England. That regime is being applied to a completely different set of circumstances in Northern Ireland.

The Department's original proposals were like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. We now have a heavy single-handed club hammer to crack a nut. My Colleagues and I shall seek to design a suitable nut-

cracker, both in Committee and when the Bill comes back to the Chamber, rather than use what the Government have suggested.

Mr S Wilson: I endorse many of the remarks that have been made about the necessity to drive the legislation through as quickly as the Minister has suggested. I suspect that one of the reasons behind driving through quickly is that it will provide the Minister with an excuse for not including many of the concerns that people have, and many of the legitimate amendments that should be made to the legislation. It strikes me as odd that we have to rush the Bill through in Northern Ireland, when voluntary best value could be extended in Scotland for a period of time.

I have served in local government for a long time, therefore I am not against local government being forced, and legislation being introduced, to ensure that ratepayers get good value for money.

Many Members who have served on councils know that value for money is important because ratepayers are increasingly asking questions about the delivery, cost, quality and nature of services. Let nobody run away with the idea that asking for the legislation to be delayed is an excuse for not wanting value for money at local government level. Serious questions need to be raised about the legislation. However, I suspect that the impetus being applied by the Department will drive the legislation through.

I wish to deal with two aspects of the legislation; one aspect is included in the legislation and the second is not. First, the Minister spoke about the need to make allowances for local variations. He referred to clause 2 (Best value guidance, performance indicators and standards) and said that he would establish a joint working group to make best use of the knowledge at local government level. The working group would advise the Department as to what should be contained in guidance.

Looking at the record of the Minister and of the Department to date, I doubt very much if anyone will pay any attention to the working group. As mentioned earlier by Mr Ford, one change in the new legislation is that it will not allow for indicators to vary between councils. Allowance was made for that in the original legislation. The working group that was set up to look at the indicators recommended that there should be different indicators for different councils, given the diverse nature of some councils. One example is street cleaning in Belfast. It is unfair to impose an indicator of cost-per-head-of-population for street cleaning on a city that has so many daily visitors, whether they be tourists or workers. It does not make sense to apply the same indicator to Belfast as to a rural town that does not have the same numbers of visitors and therefore does not have the same street-cleaning problems.

The original intention was to allow variations in indicators between councils. However, the Minister has removed that allowance, despite the fact that it was recommended by a working group that was made up of practitioners at local government level. If that is an example of how he intends to heed the views of local practitioners or the people who he says have knowledge of local government, we should be sceptical about his promise.

When the Environment Committee goes through the legislation clause by clause, I hope members will re-examine clause 2(4) and ensure that the words

“different performance indicators or standards may be specified for different councils”

are reinstated. It is logical to include those words in the legislation. Having worked in local government, I know that if something is measured, it is likely to be done. I am in favour of indicators. Problems arise when a bad indicator is set and resources are pushed towards meeting that indicator; the exercise is futile and wasteful and does not give good value for money.

My second point relates to something that is absent from the legislation here but is included in the legislation for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999 allows the Department to confer additional powers on councils so that they can enact best value. Those additional powers might change the way in which councils do things or they might allow councils to enter into partnerships. That is important.

11.45 am

Six pilot studies were carried out before best value legislation was introduced, and 75% of them showed that the authorities believed that partnership was important in their approach to best value. The team reported that partnerships enabled innovation in service delivery and made more effective use of existing resources.

Despite the evidence from the pilot studies in England, the Minister has dismissed the inclusion of any clause enabling him to give additional powers to councils to let them have partnership arrangements if it was believed that they would lead to a more effective delivery of services. The Minister has made a number of arguments. He wrote to the Committee Chairperson with the usual “I am committed to broader powers for local government, et cetera, et cetera.” However, the first argument was that this legislation must go through. One reason why the Department wishes the legislation to go through is that it will allow the Department to avoid having to look at whether or not to give those additional powers to local authorities.

During my time in local government, I learned that the local government branch of the Department of the Environment wants very little to do with local govern-

ment; it certainly does not want local government to have too much power. I suspect that there is an element of in-house fighting going on.

The Minister did not believe that the councils were large enough to benefit from partnerships. However, the joining of three bodies — the councils that joined together to look at waste management — has shown that it is possible for partnerships to be effective.

As long ago as 1997 — I remember this because I was involved through Belfast City Council — Lord Dubs promised to look at the possibility of allowing councils to enter into partnerships for economic development purposes. Yet, here we are four years later, and nothing has been done about that. Lord Dubs has gone; there is a new Minister; and we are still getting the same promises.

For the Minister to say that he is looking at ways of enhancing the powers of local government but that consultation will be required is an excuse. The Local Government Act 1999 allows for scrutiny when a council asks for those extra powers, and that means that the process does not need to be delayed any further.

The Minister says that he does not believe that partnerships are critical to the early success of best value. That is bizarre considering that 75% of the councils involved in the initial pilot studies said that that was the case. Surely the Minister has to give cognisance to the evidence from local government where best value has been practised and partnerships have been used.

The Minister should respond to the first position adopted by the Committee, that the legislation should not be pushed through. There is no need for haste.

If the Department insists that the legislation come before the Assembly, it could be voted down. If that does not happen, then it is important that the legislation be amended to change clause 2 to allow individual performance indicators for different councils. Belfast could have a performance indicator that is the same as those used in medium-sized cities in other parts of the UK. That would be reasonable.

A clause should be inserted to allow additional powers to be given to individual or groups of local authorities. Additional powers are believed to lead to a more efficient use of resources when entering into partnership with other bodies or with the private sector. This would lead to a council’s achieving best value objectives.

Unlike the situation under direct rule, we can look at flaws in the legislation. This is the view that has come from the practitioners, the people who have to implement the legislation. The Minister ought to use the evidence that is coming from the Environment Committee, local government and Members of the

Assembly to see the folly contained in the Bill as it presently stands and remedy it.

Mr O'Neill: The thought of getting rid of compulsory competitive tendering is wonderful to me. The deprecation that the policy has wreaked on councils and the delivery of public services is sufficient to encourage me to support the legislation.

I am convinced that the concept of best value, if not always its practice, emphasises, reinforces and values public service. This is something that was vilified by previous Administrations in England and led to the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering.

Public service is, and could be in the future, excellent. However I am amazed at the approach, not just by the Minister and his Department, but by the entire Executive towards best value. Why does it apply only to councils? If we look at the concept of best value and at the statistics that the Assembly Research and Library Service can provide, we see that the estimated net expenditure by councils in 2000-01 amounted to £275 million, out of a total Northern Ireland public expenditure of £9.9 billion. This is approximately 2.8%, even lower than the figure of 5% that Mr Ford referred to.

There are 148 other public bodies operating in Northern Ireland that are run by 2,000 appointees. There are 46 executive non-departmental public bodies and 32 National Health Service bodies with an expenditure of £5.5 billion, approximately 56% of public expenditure. Nothing is being done about best value in that sector. Why should Departments escape the discipline and rigour of best value? They are responsible for the rest of the expenditure. If we look at best value and its introduction into the Administration in Northern Ireland, 2.8% of that expenditure is hardly exciting.

I am not a member of the Environment Committee, so there are a number of points that I would like the Committee and the Department to examine. First, on page 1 of the Bill, clause 1(1) (The duty of best value) refers to the three Es — economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Although there are differences between local government in Britain and in Northern Ireland, we can learn from the experience of the operation of best value there.

Economy, efficiency and effectiveness are good things, but they apply principally to finance. There is little emphasis on the human element, or on delivery to the population. Now, instead of three Es, we talk about five Es: economy, efficiency, effectiveness, equality, and environment. This is often referred to as the well-being factor, as it addresses the well-being of the community and not just the monetary aspect of best value. I would like to see that emphasis included in the amended legislation.

Mr Wilson referred to clause 2(1) of the Bill. The introduction to that clause reads

“The Department may issue guidance to councils as to the carrying out of their functions under this Act.”

Although it is hinted at, nowhere does it actually say that there should be consultation with the people involved. An amendment should be included to emphasise that the Department may issue the guidelines as to carrying out of their functions under the Act, “following full and detailed consultation and agreement with all stakeholders”. I am suggesting an emphasis on the well-being factor. It would not be a big job for the Department to discover who its stakeholders are — they are councils, community groups and various other people. Departments could quickly investigate that through an audit.

Mr S Wilson: I agree with the Member’s point. Clause 2(5) states

“Before specifying performance indicators or standards, the Departments shall consult —

- (a) persons appearing to it to represent councils; and
- (b) such other persons (if any) as it thinks fit.”

How would you see that being strengthened?

Mr O'Neill: I was referring to clause 2(1). Mr Wilson is referring to a clause that is specifically on performance indicators. Consultation should apply to the whole operation of the introduction of best value.

In addition, I refer to clause 3(4)(b), where there is a requirement for inspection in circumstances indicated in the Act. It would be sensible, fair and wise to have a specified date for the inspection to be carried out. Such a date could be chosen to allow local authorities time to compile a full annual report.

A date such as the end of June would give councils an opportunity to compile that report and help people adjust to the requirements of the Act.

12.00

Finally, I refer to section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999, which Mr S Wilson has already mentioned. I emphasise again that the experience in Britain has been good. In fact, I understand that Nick Raynsford has agreed for work to be done on that sector to improve the regulations under section 16. The well-being concept and partnerships have been highlighted. Mr S Wilson made the arguments very well, and I do not need to reiterate them. Among the regulations is a new power to provide indemnities to members and officers involved in partnerships and external bodies.

While we have had bad experiences here, the ravages of compulsory competitive tendering in England have produced some frightful cases. I read recently about an employee who has five pensions because he was

shoved around from one private contractor to another. He has lost all the stability and security that he had as a council employee.

In addition to the partnership emphasis, section 16 helps to ensure that employees are safeguarded and that their benefits and job standards are not lost or interfered with through any of the partnerships or public-private deals that might be made. It is, and should be, an area of great concern to us as we embark on a best value approach. We should learn from what has happened in England in that regard and be very wary of the damage that could be done to individuals.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): I thank the Members who contributed to the debate. There is, undoubtedly, a keen interest in this matter. Members have dwelt upon the issue and looked into it, and it is right and proper that it should be debated thoroughly. The responses mirror the genuine interest shown in the earlier consultation process, which sought to deliver best value in the interests of council residents and district ratepayers.

I have listened to the debate carefully and I will try to reply to as many points as possible in the time available. My officials will, in any case, scrutinise Hansard, and I will write to those Members who raised issues that require further clarification.

Rev William McCrea asked why we need legislation if councils have already introduced best value voluntarily. First, the requirement for compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) has merely been deferred using subordinate legislation that remains on the statute book and cannot be deferred further. That means that the CCT obligation becomes effective again on 1 April 2002 unless the legislation is repealed before that date. Secondly, experience of voluntary implementation of best value to date indicates that a statutory framework is essential if we are to deliver transparency, accountability and consistency.

Should best value legislation be deferred pending the review of local government? In accordance with the Programme for Government, the Executive are committed to a full review of public administration, including the administration of local and public services. I have been pushing for that for quite a while but other events have taken over. However, best value principles apply irrespective of the structure and responsibilities of local government. I therefore see no need to defer the introduction of best value legislation on those grounds.

Why the urgency with the Local Government (Best Value) Bill? Why does the Minister not simply defer it? That approach has been used in Scotland, where a moratorium has been placed on CCT pending the development of appropriate best value legislation. However, it is not possible in Northern Ireland, where a different legislative framework exists. The Depart-

ment has already used subordinate legislation to defer the implementation of CCT, but it is still enshrined in primary legislation. Legal advice indicates that further deferral in this way is not viable.

Should the Bill deal with the repeal of CCT alone, leaving the framework of best value to be formulated by the Department and local government at a later date? That is a good question; indeed, there were several good questions. The clear objective underpinning best value is that it is a policy designed with the interests of residents and ratepayers at heart. If we are to deliver the transparency and accountability, which local people deserve, while ensuring consistency of approach, experience to date of voluntary implementation of best value indicates that the framework needs to be clearly defined in legislation. That is vitally important. As drafted, the Bill would allow local people to have their say on the levels and standards of service provision in their areas.

Rev William McCrea also asked if all councils were happy with the redrafting of the Bill. The draft Bill has been circulated to all councils, and they have not advised me of any particular problems. That does not surprise me, as the redrafted Bill addresses their key concerns.

Mr Doherty asked why the Bill did not apply to Government Departments. I contend that central Government already operates under a value-for-money or best value framework. Elements of that include a Government accounting manual and accompanying financial regulations; a requirement to operate resource accounting and budgeting; a detailed Programme for Government incorporating departmental public service agreements, corporate and business plans, internal scrutiny and Northern Ireland Audit Office scrutiny, and the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly. I assure the Member that we are very well scrutinised.

Mr Doherty also asked if best value would concern process at the expense of outcome. That issue was highlighted during the consultation process, and I am anxious to ensure that it will not occur. At the same time, councils expressed a need for guidance concerning best value.

Mr Doherty wanted to know why the Department had not conducted an equality impact assessment of draft best value legislation. My officials have closely screened the proposed policy and have identified no issues of concern on equality grounds. A decision not to undertake a full equality impact assessment was ratified with the Equality Commission. Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, councils are required to produce equality schemes for approval by the Equality Commission. Councils will therefore have a legal obligation to operate best value within the parameters of their approved schemes.

Mr McLaughlin referred to support for the partnership approach. I have already advised his party that we have delayed the introduction of this legislation pending local government reform. Mr Ford asked why we need a statutory framework for CCT, and why we do not adopt the Scottish approach. I referred earlier to the Scottish approach and to our legal difficulties. Is it true to say that the Department has ignored the concerns of councils and the Environment Committee in bringing forward the draft Bill? I assure the Member that that is definitely not the case — we do not do business like that. We want to work with people and we co-operate with people. I refute any suggestion that my staff override any Department or area. The draft legislation was subject to an extended consultation process. My officials and I met the Environment Committee to discuss the draft proposals. That approach proved most useful and led me to instruct my officials to redraft the legislation and address many of the concerns expressed at that time. In particular, there was a genuine concern that my Department would use subordinate legislation to establish a framework that placed more emphasis on process than on outcomes. We have examined that issue and dealt with it; we do not want to override anyone's responsibility.

Mr Sammy Wilson made a number of points. He referred to individual performance indicators, which are not appropriate to all councils. He asked why councils do not have the freedom to set their own performance indicators. I see clear merits in having a set of four indicators, which are used by all councils, instilling some consistency across local government. However, I recognise that individual performance indicators will not be equally relevant to each council. No indicator, taken in isolation, can accurately measure the performance of a council. We need benchmarks, and that is why we seek them. I therefore expect councils to supplement cross-council indicators with local indicators, which they will develop themselves to reflect local circumstances. The joint use of cross-council and local indicators should prove an effective means of summarising council performance.

Mr Sammy Wilson also asked whether the Department would genuinely listen to local government when producing guidance. I have assured the Assembly that the Department collaborates with the Environment Committee and all relevant agencies and groups to ensure that we are working together for the common good.

I emphasise that my record shows that my officials have worked positively with council officials and I refute the suggestion that we are not working in co-operation with others or discussing matters with them.

Great Britain's legislation gives the Secretary of State the power to amend or remove the legislative barriers to achieving best value. Mr Sammy Wilson asked why those powers were not replicated in the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. As in Great Britain, certain

legislative barriers to best value might become apparent over time. Any legislation that could impede the full implementation of best value would need to be examined and discussed, in the first instance, with the appropriate Department. If a decision were reached to change existing provision the relevant Department would be responsible for any amending legislation, which would be channelled through the normal legislative process.

Mr Sammy Wilson asked about economic development powers, a matter that has been referred to many times in my years as a councillor. The issue has cross-cutting implications for many Departments; it will be addressed in due course through interdepartmental discussion. However, the matter should not be allowed to delay the progress of the important task of establishing a sound framework for best value.

Mr O'Neill welcomed the demise of CCT, and asked whether the statutes of guidance would be subject to consultation. I have responded to that point and his question on whether we could draw on the English experience.

I assure the House that I do not wish to be over-prescriptive in regard to best value. I recognise that best value touches all aspects of local services; none is more important than the well-being of local communities. I have every confidence that councils will continue to address that issue within the best value framework.

As the Minister responsible for local government in Northern Ireland, I consider it my duty to further promote transparency and accountability in the use of council resources and the provision of local services. In bringing the Local Government (Best Value) Bill to the Assembly, I sought to achieve that objective. I listened carefully, therefore, to all of the representations, and I thanked everyone who contributed to the consultation process. It is true that concerns were expressed about the labour-intensive nature of best value and about the apparent emphasis on procedures rather than outcomes.

Rev Dr William McCrea: In the light of today's debate, the Minister and the Department of the Environment should realise that if they press ahead with the Bill there will be great difficulty in getting it passed by the House. As Chairperson of the Environment Committee, I ask the Minister to reflect calmly on today's debate and to consider the appropriate way forward.

Mr Foster: If the Bill were delayed now, it would be too late to get rid of CCT by next April; therefore, we would be under contract for another three or four years. I appreciate the points and concerns expressed. I want the Bill to proceed. I am not trying to push something through against anyone's will. However, while some negative points have been made, not everybody has said that they do not want the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. Members are concerned and have questioned some points, but, in the main, they welcome the Bill. I would not therefore give way on that point.

Many people support the provision of greater guidance to help streamline processes, provided that allowance is made to accommodate the diversity of circumstances among councils. There was uniform agreement that CCT should be replaced, with greater emphasis on quality service delivery rather than the lowest-cost option.

12.15 pm

It was also widely recognised that in order to achieve quality services a framework for best value — which I still contend is necessary — must be developed to engage local people in meaningful consultation. I have fully considered all of these matters; we need a common statutory framework to ensure that people in different council areas have equal opportunity to participate in local services provision and to obtain quality local services. Again, such a framework must be transparent, consistent and accountable to ratepayers and users of local public services. The framework should provide a basis for local people and councils to work in partnership with each other. The framework has to be workable and proportionate to the requirements and circumstances of district councils. That is why I have made provision in the Bill for my Department to develop further guidance on partnership with local government. The guidance should benefit councils in their implementation of best value by providing the necessary consistency of approach and enabling councils to learn from one another. It is important that we have benchmarks and that we learn from one another.

In the Local Government (Best Value) Bill I have responded to the representations made to me. I firmly believe that the Bill makes provision for the framework that I described. The Bill is proportionate to the needs of local government in Northern Ireland and, at the same time, it addresses the needs of residents and ratepayers, giving them the assurances that they require. The Bill needs to proceed, and, although I understand everything that was said, I know that not everyone is against the Bill because we have discussed and co-ordinated the matter across the realm. I commend the Local Government (Best Value) Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA Bill 19/00) be agreed.

Mr Speaker: I am conscious that efficiency was a topic of the last debate, and the House has been particularly efficient in dealing with this morning's business. In so doing, it has earned itself a longer lunch. The House will now rise and is suspended until 2.00pm, when it will resume with the motion on hospital waiting lists.

The sitting was suspended at 12.18pm.

On resuming (Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

HOSPITAL WAITING LISTS

Mr McGrady: I beg to move

That this Assembly views with concern the ever-increasing waiting lists for medical and hospital treatment in our local health services, and requires immediate action to remedy this unacceptable and growing problem.

One of the most urgent issues facing the Assembly, which acts on behalf of the community, is the spiralling increase in waiting lists for medical and hospital treatment and the consequential increase in waiting lists for all types of health care, including community care.

I — and, no doubt, others — will quote many statistics today. Behind those statistics is a huge amount of human suffering and misery. Waiting for surgical appointments means additional suffering, and that should be and can be avoided. In some cases, waiting leads to premature death, and society should strive with all its might to eradicate death and suffering. That is what health care is all about.

There are continual stories and statistics in the press about the rise in waiting lists. In September 2000, we were told that the waiting lists in Northern Ireland were the longest in the UK. In November, we were told that one of the reasons that the waiting lists were extended was that one plastic surgeon in the Royal Victoria Hospital could not be replaced. As a consequence, waiting time for plastic surgery increased to two years for elective surgery. Such is the fragility of the current system.

As the Minister said at Question Time yesterday, the quarterly figure for ordinary and day-case admissions stands at a massive 54,246 — and that includes elective and non-elective admissions. In the quarter from March to June of this year, the waiting list increased by 2,251 — a 4.3% increase. Examined from a different angle, the figure for those ordinary and day-case admissions from June 2000 to June 2001 rocketed by a massive 4,728, to 54,246.

Last Tuesday, a news item referred to Northern Ireland's chronic nursing shortage, which has caused the closure of 55 beds in the Royal Victoria Hospital and has doubtless contributed to the waiting list. The issue is not simply the number of surgical procedures performed, it concerns capital back-up, existing facilities and time.

For example, according to the Eastern Health and Social Services Council, 93 patients in Northern Ireland

waited more than seven days for emergency repair to hip fractures. Medical guidelines state that the waiting time for such treatment should be no more than 24 hours. Yet, not just one or two people, but 93 people waited seven days for treatment.

The Acute Hospitals Review Group has published the most up-to-date, analytical, independent report into the issue, and it is entirely divorced from departmental figures. Indeed, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety appointed that review group, which provided startling statistics about hospital and medical waiting lists in June 2001. On page 20, at paragraph 3.9, it states:

“Northern Ireland has the longest per capita hospital waiting lists in the UK. In March 2000 there were over 47,000 people waiting for elective treatment, an increase of nearly 11,000 compared to March 1996. More significantly, there has been a huge increase in waiting *times*, with the number of patients waiting 18 months or more for treatment increasing from 632 in March 1996 to 5,200 in March 2000.”

The Hayes report refers to the rising numbers on waiting lists for outpatient departments:

“the number of people recorded as waiting for an outpatient appointment has increased significantly from 59,000 in March 1996 to over 102,000 in March 2000.”

Yesterday, the Minister told the House that that figure had risen to 128,438. Should we not be anxious about those figures? There is something wrong with a society that cannot focus on such a massive failure to provide normal public health care. The report continues:

“Of these patients, the number waiting six months or more for an appointment has increased from 7,300 to over 26,700.”

Those are frightening figures. Supplementary material to the Minister’s oral answers, available in the Assembly Library, shows that 498 people are waiting for cardiac bypass surgery in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area; of those, 63 have been waiting for six to eight months. There is a waiting list of 1,385 people for hernia operations; of those, 810 have been waiting, in much discomfort, for more than two months. There is a waiting list of 638 people for knee replacement operations; of those, 118 have waited for six to eight months.

Considering the size of the population and the number of hospitals in Northern Ireland, the average waiting time for specific operations such as cataract removal, heart bypass surgery, hernia repair and knee replacements is longer than in England, Scotland or Wales.

The despair engendered by such a long waiting list is obvious, and I see it in my constituency surgery. It increases day by day. A Rostrevor constituent has been on the urgent cardiac bypass list for 13 months. Another constituent, from Downpatrick, has been waiting for over two years for quadruple bypass surgery. Recently, a consultant told him that surgical slots had been

reduced by 50%. The average waiting time for cardiac bypass surgery is two years. Earlier this year, I visited an elderly woman in Mayobridge who has a chronic hip condition and has been waiting for over two years for a hip replacement. An Annalong constituent has been waiting for a lung transplant for two years, even though he has a donor who has been medically approved. The consultant cannot give him a date for the transplant surgery because he has been given no surgical slots for September. We are talking about human suffering.

Mr McCartney: Is the Member aware that elective orthopaedic surgery in the Ulster Hospital was suspended entirely because of lack of operating time, lack of surgeons and lack of available funding?

Mr McGrady: I have concentrated on my constituency, but every Member could tell horrific stories of unnecessary human suffering.

Since the introduction of devolution, there has been a concentration on deficits, underfunding and the need for adequate capital revenue expenditure on health. Substantive additional allocations have been made. I am grateful to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for finding the time to be present at today’s debate. I ask her to respond to the growing problem of waiting lists. She may say that the problem could be solved by additional financial investment in the health service, despite the fact that there has been substantial additional funding. The amounts were £3 million last year and £8 million this year. We are entitled to ask how the additional money has been used and managed, and what changes to the waiting lists have been brought about by it.

At Question Time yesterday, the Minister again identified under-resourcing and overall capacity problems as the main factors contributing to the lengthening waiting lists. Have the Minister’s officials sought, or thought about, other ways of improving the position? For example, has consideration been given — I am not making a political point — to further cross-border co-operation? Hospital waiting lists in the Republic of Ireland have decreased in the past year. A news report that I saw in April showed that waiting lists in the Republic of Ireland had decreased by 9,000 patients. That means that there is a capacity there that we should be able to buy into.

What consideration have the Minister and the Department given to the reversal of the political dogma of centralisation? Why not decentralise surgical procedures and use hospitals in the more rural areas — or not so rural areas — where surgical expertise still exists, before it is lost altogether? On 11 September, the Minister referred to the work already undertaken to address the waiting list problems. What was the outcome of the ‘Framework for Action on Waiting Lists’, policy that was announced last autumn? What significant changes

have taken place in the past 10 months? In a press release of the same date — I am sorry to quote her, but she is the authority on, and has responsibility for, our health care — she said that:

“the only long-term solution is money.”

As a layperson, I disagree with that analysis. Certainly, extra money is essential, and it must be provided. However, is the money given to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — especially that given specifically for reducing waiting lists — managed effectively? The Minister should examine such issues, instead of simply saying that money is the solution to everything.

The lack of resources has been referred to by the Minister, by the Assembly’s Health Committee on 2 July, and by the Eastern Health and Social Services Council on 12 September. However, the debate about the lack of resources should not detract from the need for the Department to manage the current health budget more professionally and to deploy resources more effectively than at present. Some trusts are allowed to run up deficits while those that manage budgets properly suffer as a consequence. Residents in those trust areas have a diminished health service.

It is also interesting to note what Dr Hayes and his committee said about waiting lists:

“While undoubtedly there is a need for a substantial injection of funding, it is of even greater importance that existing resources are used as effectively as possible.”

The report also states:

“It is difficult to argue for additional resources for hospital and community health services against other national and regional priorities if we cannot also demonstrate that existing resources are being used to the best effect by generally accepted levels of comparison.”

I must emphasise that point. An independent report is saying that there must be a clear demonstration that existing funding is being used effectively.

2.15 pm

The Hayes team demonstrated that spending on acute services in Northern Ireland was higher than in any other region in the British Isles, apart from Scotland in this particular instance. Another study of comparative waiting times for elective surgery demonstrated that the problem of lengthy waiting times had not even been targeted in Northern Ireland and that an initiative to tackle the problem was urgently required. The report also stated that Northern Ireland had more acute beds and staff per capita than many regions of England. Up to 10% or 15% of acute beds could be unavailable due to bed blocking caused by their use as follow-on accommodation for patients waiting to be transferred from residential to community care.

The time is now ripe for the Department to address urgently the problem of hospital waiting lists. It is clear from recent newspaper coverage, questions posed in the Assembly, and contributions made this morning and on the radio that people are anxious about what is happening to their health service. Everyone has experienced in some way the dire consequences of extended waiting lists. The problem is creating unnecessary pain and suffering for many in our community. I submit the motion to the Assembly for its consideration; we should not allow that situation to continue.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the large number of Members who have asked to speak, and the high level of interest in the matter, Members should limit their contributions to five minutes.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): I could not possibly cover the main points in five minutes, but I understand the restriction. I congratulate Mr McGrady on bringing such an important motion to the House, and I thank the Minister for her presence.

Mr McGrady mentioned waiting lists and waiting times. Waiting times are a far more accurate means of measuring delay in the delivery of health care. People — in some cases, those with cancer — can wait long periods before getting an appointment with a consultant. We are all aware of the importance of early diagnosis and proper treatment, a massive subject in Northern Ireland today. I therefore draw the Minister’s attention to waiting times, as opposed to waiting lists.

Some things are being done, and I appreciate that money has been spent and that several projects are under way. For example, lower back pain, one of the most common cases for referral in the primary care sector, can be caused by muscular problems rather than secondary cancer. Next month, a clinic will open at Musgrave Park Hospital at which physiotherapists will play a key role — and rightly so. Doctors in the Eastern Board area can refer patients to the clinic, rather than to an orthopaedic surgeon. Unfortunately, I do not have enough time to elaborate on that point.

Similarly, if there is the slightest chance that a patient’s chest pain is caused by problems with a coronary artery there must be a diagnosis and, if necessary, treatment. However, a good deal of chest pain is caused by other factors. The Royal Hospital Group has, therefore, set up a clinic to which a patient can be sent if his doctor concludes that he is unlikely to be suffering from ischaemic heart disease. Skin cancer is another common illness in Northern Ireland, and a clinic at Belfast City Hospital treats patients affected by that disease.

I appreciate that the Minister has made a bid for £122 million for next year. However, the Health Committee fears that, if the full allocation is not made, the waiting lists will get worse. That point needs to be

addressed by the Executive. Elderly people who live at home but who require residential care or increased packages of care are affected by waiting lists. Massive waiting lists also affect the professions allied to medicine, including occupational therapists, chiropodists, and speech and language therapists.

Trusts will have to overspend dramatically, because boards and fundholders cannot provide enough funding to cover demand. Unsurprisingly, elective procedures will be the first to be affected, and there will be an obvious impact on waiting lists. For every pound that is now spent on the National Health Service in England, the equivalent in Northern Ireland is 75p.

On 31 July in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board area alone, there were approximately 22,000 people on waiting lists for elective surgery. Of those, 3,600 had been on the lists for longer than the charter time limit.

Orthopaedic surgery is a major problem in Northern Ireland. The elective orthopaedic service at Musgrave Park Hospital is reaching a crisis, and patients are now waiting for up to three years for some operations. Even waiting for an outpatient appointment to see a specialist orthopaedic surgeon can take up to three years. The current fracture crisis has caused the Department and area boards to concentrate on trauma problems. Although that is necessary, the elective service has been allowed to deteriorate, storing up a crisis in waiting times. Musgrave Park Hospital has been asked to help in operations on trauma cases, which the hospital has been able to do without cancelling other operations.

There is a massive problem; orthopaedic surgery could be the subject of a debate on its own. As Mr McGrady mentioned, people with fractured femurs at Craigavon Area Hospital and Antrim Hospital have had to wait for a week; 24 hours is the stipulated waiting time.

What can we do about it? I will not talk about finances; I accept that we need more money, but there is more to it than that. It is important how the resources are used. In her statement on 11 September, the Minister said:

“the increases [in waiting lists] highlight the fact that, without major new investment, our hospital and community care services simply cannot cope with the present, growing levels of demand.”

We agree with that. The Minister also said:

“all boards and trusts are working on measures at the moment to improve efficiencies in the system.”

For goodness' sake, let us look at the system. That is where the problems are. There are 19 trusts for a population the size of Greater Birmingham — I say that with respect to the Minister. We must look at the trusts. If Sir Reg Empey can merge LEDU and IDB without waiting for a review of public administration, there is no reason why we cannot examine the whole structure of the Health Service. Primary care can be talked about another day.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank Dr Hendron for his understanding of the time constraints. Fifteen Members have asked to speak, and we want to allow them all the opportunity to do so.

Dr Adamson: I also thank Mr McGrady for bringing this motion before the House; as he said, it is extremely important. The agreement of the Department of Health in England to allow health authorities there to commission services from other European countries was prompted by a ruling by the European Court of Justice. It stated that patients facing an “undue delay” in treatment in their country should seek earlier treatment in other European countries. That means that the door is now open for a significant reduction in the waiting lists in England for cardiac surgery, hip and knee replacements, cataract surgery and an increasing variety of other elective procedures. The decision of the Secretary of State to allow individuals to make their own arrangements to be treated in Europe at the expense of the National Health Service may also, I hope, prevent the development of a massive bureaucratic network to facilitate that extension of the service.

Mr McGrady and Dr Hendron have shown that, as most of the progressive countries in the European Union operate without waiting lists, it would not be hard to prove “undue delay” in Northern Ireland. We have the worst waiting lists of any of the four countries of the United Kingdom, yet fundholders in Northern Ireland have shown that it is possible to buy cost-effective services in England and Scotland, despite their own waiting list problems. Patients generally show a willingness to travel rather than wait indefinitely for treatment, and the quality of clinical outcomes is at least equivalent to the quality of service achieved locally. Some health boards have used the facilities of the Blackrock Clinic in Dublin with similar success.

People in Northern Ireland are entitled to treatment equal to that available in other parts of the United Kingdom. Some people feel that when resources move away it undermines the ability to provide quality services in Northern Ireland. Reliable, guaranteed funding is needed so that we can retain staff with the required skills and ensure that those skills are kept up to date. On the other hand, some feel that a lack of competition creates complacency. Cardiac surgical services have had guaranteed resources. However, the standard of performance is clearly damaging patients in our Province. There is probably an element of truth in both those arguments. The fundamental aim of the Health Service should be to meet the needs of the population, and we are not doing that at present. Action must be taken both in the short and longer terms.

In the rest of the National Health Service there has been a considerable injection of cash as part of the modernisation process. The NHS plans to achieve parity with European health funding over the next five years. However, the Health Service in Northern Ireland

has been demonstrably unable to attract similar injections of cash. We have, therefore, been given an opportunity to redress the balance in a way that would benefit patients immensely. We must always remember that if treatment were more timely, there would be fewer lost working days and benefit claims, and that would be a positive boost to the local economy.

In the longer term, we can consider how to handle existing resources and any increase that we might receive. Like many of my medical colleagues, I believe that using services from other EU countries is an interesting idea and takes us away from the parochial thinking that affects so much of life in Northern Ireland. Are we not all Europeans now? Can we not show the rest of the community that we are equal to the task?

Mr Berry: I commend Mr McGrady for tabling the motion. It has given us an opportunity to highlight the serious problem of waiting lists.

The whole Health Service in Northern Ireland is in disarray. Regrettably, it does not seem to be dealing with the problem of waiting lists. We listened to Mr McGrady talk about his constituents, who have been waiting for operations for over two years. The Chairman of the Health Committee was just warming to the subject of what is needed to deal with the problem.

The waiting lists will get worse if sufficient funding is not found. It is regrettable that the Department's bid for an extra £122 million for next year has no guarantee of being met. It will merely maintain the status quo. Not only is funding needed but, as the Chairman of the Health Committee said we must examine the whole structure of the Health Service. It is disgraceful that there are 19 trusts and four boards. The problem with the Health Service in Northern Ireland is that there are far too many chiefs and too much bureaucracy. Our constituents are not being treated fairly.

In Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital 42 patients were waiting in the accident and emergency departments. Over two thirds were waiting for a bed to become available before they could be admitted to a hospital ward. Patients were waiting in the corridors. I went to Craigavon Area Hospital the other night at 10.30 to speak to a constituent who had been waiting for over a week for an operation and was still lying on a bed in the corridor. Her privacy had been taken away. It was ridiculous. That hospital was like something in a Third- World country. It is not just Craigavon Area Hospital; it is a Province-wide problem. The situation should be dealt with. It is distressing for patients and their families. Patients' charter standards are not being met, and urgent action is required from the Minister.

2.30 pm

We need more consultants, nurses and medical staff. If that need is not met, there will be severe problems

ahead. In 1998, we had a document entitled 'Fit for the Future'. It recommended that we abolish boards and merge the trusts. Then we had 'Fit for the Future — A New Approach', which advocated merging trusts and increasing the role of general practitioners. Then we had a document titled 'Putting It Right'. The next thing at our door was the Hayes report, which contains a lot of recommendations. The Hayes report says that from now until 2010 we will need 400 more consultants, which will cost £40 million per annum; 250 more general practitioners, which will cost another £25 million; and 2,300 additional nurses — an increase of 20% — which will cost £60 million per annum.

There is no way in which we can meet such costs, and we can start to deal with the problem only if we have more funding. We must call upon the Chancellor of the Exchequer to examine the funding of the Health Service in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt about it — we are underfunded. That must be addressed, so that the Department can deal with the problems it faces. The Department has a responsibility to the people of Northern Ireland, especially those who are waiting for surgery. Health Service structures must be examined immediately, so that there is less bureaucracy and more work is done for all patients in Northern Ireland, no matter what their postcode is.

It is distressing to walk into hospitals in a so-called modern society and see people lying on beds in corridors. One lady waited for heart surgery for over a year. During that time, she suffered another heart attack and had to go through the whole system again, just because she was on a waiting list for over a year.

I commend all the staff of the Health Service, especially the nurses and doctors in hospitals throughout this country. They are being mentally and physically affected by these problems. I support this motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, but I disagree with Mr McGrady's view about finance. This is a matter of finance. Any consultant, doctor, nurse or hospital executive will say that. There is no doubt that the health services in this part of Ireland are underfunded. Research tells us that the north of Ireland is losing the battle for increased investment in personal health services. We know that there has been an increase of 12% in Scotland as against 7.2% here. In England, £1 billion has been invested in the improvement of primary care because of new initiatives announced last year by the British Government. There is a disparity between the funding of the Health Service here and the Health Services in England, Scotland, Wales and the rest of Ireland.

Waiting lists, as we all know, do not happen by accident. Nurses, doctors and consultants are not happy to see people waiting in corridors for a bed or to be

examined or operated on. They are there to ease pain and suffering. They do not want to see that happening in any hospital in this part of Ireland.

The problem goes back to the underfunding of the Health Service in the north of Ireland. It comes down to what is available to cover scarce resources. I was on the phone this morning to a rheumatology consultant. Hundreds of people are waiting for a new drug, at a cost of £700 per month, to ease their pain, but there is no money for that drug. There are people suffering from certain forms of leukaemia who require a drug that eases their pain and helps prolong their life. It costs £100,000 a year to ease the suffering of one person.

It is a question of finance. Doctors and other staff in the hospital services are also under pressure. They are trying to decide how the money should be allocated. It is unfair that that extra burden should be placed on them. We need to know how much money is needed. Mr Berry said that about £60 million per annum would be required if all the elements of the Hayes report were to be implemented, and he said that we would never get that amount of money. However, if we are serious about health, we must be serious about finding the money to alleviate the suffering.

This is a matter not just for the Minister of Health, but for the whole Executive. If the Assembly is saying that the Health Service is underfunded, we should approach the members of our parties who are on the Executive and put the case to them. We should ask them to exercise their influence to find the moneys that are so desperately needed.

Many things in life, including home and family, come down to finance. Finance is the big factor in the problems that confront the Health Service. Doctors, nurses and professionals are trying their best with limited resources and, we must find the money to ensure that the suffering is alleviated, if not obliterated.

Mr McCarthy: Health should be our number one priority. Someone who does not enjoy good health cannot wholeheartedly enjoy life. It is up to those of us who, thank God, enjoy good health and are in a position to provide a good comprehensive Health Service to enable everyone in the community to be as free as possible from unnecessary pain, anxiety or suffering, and thus live and contribute to society for many years in good or, at least, reasonable health.

The rot in the National Health Service and the increasing waiting lists started some years ago when the Thatcher Tory Government presided over a massive reduction in funding and training, and it has continued to this day. We used to call the Tory Government uncaring and they certainly deserved that title. I hope that those years are now behind us. We were promised a modern, quality Health Service by the new Labour Government — that has yet to be achieved.

Waiting lists and times are getting worse. “Trolley time” and “armchair time” are new expressions, but they are also getting worse and are totally unacceptable. Behind every figure on a waiting list is a human being who is not in good health and is quite possibly in pain, probably severe pain. That could and should be preventable. I have listened to constituents crying for help to get off waiting lists. They have been on those lists for far too long, and in many cases they are convinced that they are being overlooked, forgotten or just not considered to be as important as other patients because they are senior citizens. It is a shame that any official or consultant would discriminate against a patient because of his or her age. The Assembly has offered its support to senior citizens, not only in health care but in other areas that contribute to better health. Elderly patients must never be overlooked or abandoned, and they cannot be expected to remain on a waiting list for any longer than is necessary. Waiting times for patients affect young and old, and there are signs that the waiting lists will continue to increase across the spectrum unless radical action is taken immediately.

There are all sorts of reasons for the situation. The Assembly must tackle the inherited problems. The Health Minister has acknowledged that underfunding has taken place over the years, and Members must give her credit for what she has achieved. However, she must do more. Eight million pounds was found to tackle the waiting list problem. That is welcome, but much more is required. That is why the Alliance Party calls for tax-varying powers for the Assembly. We must have the money as well as the power to make a difference to people’s lives.

The Executive must be convinced of the need for considerable extra funding to reduce waiting times and waiting lists. Every effort must be made to ensure that funds are not squandered and that fat-cat handouts are stopped. The public must also help by attending appointments on time and by not making fraudulent prescription claims. Those measures would add money to the Health Service’s coffers. The total cessation of paramilitary attacks — which are on the increase — would also help the already over-stretched resources and cut back on waiting times. Those acts of barbarism require emergency treatment that uses resources that would otherwise be used to cut down waiting times.

Even with Mr Blair’s return to power, the Health Service continues to fail. Recently, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has sent patients to other European countries for treatment in its efforts to reduce the waiting lists. That is far from ideal, but I suspect that many patients would be happy to do that if the alternative were to remain at home in pain.

Today may be the last Assembly sitting. On behalf of suffering patients on waiting lists and everybody in Northern Ireland who might be on a waiting list in the

future, I appeal to the Minister to do what the Assembly wants to do — continue the business for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Boyd: Most Members have direct knowledge of the issue of hospital waiting lists, because of the number of constituents affected. It is unacceptable that waiting lists should continue to grow. There are over 54,000 people on waiting lists for treatment and operations, and that brings with it a lot of pain and misery. Northern Ireland has the longest waiting lists in the United Kingdom, and the additional £13 million allocated in the past 12 months to address the problem has had little impact on halting the trend. Waiting lists have increased by 5,000 in the past 12 months, and the situation will deteriorate further in the coming winter months.

Fractures are a huge problem, made worse by the daily paramilitary beatings and shootings that create an enormous strain on vital health resources. Many people bury their heads in the sand and hide from the problem. The Government's patient's charter states that patients will receive treatment within 48 hours of admission, compared with the 24-hour target for the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite that, in the past four months, over 1,000 fracture patients have had to wait more than 96 hours for treatment.

The Royal Victoria Hospital, which is the only facility for cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland, was recently forced to cancel heart operations because of a shortage of beds. That is scandalous. People stay longer in hospital because of the lack of resources for a full care-in-the-community programme. That creates a shortage of hospital beds, and we have horrendous examples of patients sleeping on trolleys and in corridors. Doctors and nurses work a horrendous number of additional hours.

A vital meals-on-wheels service in Carrickfergus may have to cease because of lack of funding. That will result in greater demand for home helps, a service that is already under severe pressure. Despite all of that, many health trust chief executives continue to enjoy huge and unjustified annual pay rises, sometimes up to 27%. Do we need all those boards and trusts?

2.45 pm

Waiting lists for occupational therapy visits are at crisis level. Disabled people are particularly affected, and many have been waiting for months, even years, for grants to carry out essential repairs and improvements to their properties. My local Housing Executive office has told me that money for such much needed work is available but is not being taken up because of occupational therapy waiting lists. That is not a criticism of occupational therapists; it is the exact opposite. I know occupational therapists who are working additional hours without pay to help those in need of their services.

The University of Ulster at Jordanstown made the foolish decision to deny a young person, who attained two As and one C at A level, a place on an occupational therapy course, because she did not get three Bs. She has been able to attend the same course in Edinburgh. There is a possibility that that student and many others will complete their studies in other parts of the United Kingdom and get employment outside Northern Ireland. That situation is illogical. Our occupational therapy lists are critical, and we must aim to keep our young people and their much-needed skills here.

There are no rheumatology services for patients in the Northern Board area, and those awaiting diagnosis are sent to Belfast, which has a waiting list of up to 16 months. That is unacceptable. The hospital waiting list crisis graphically illustrates the folly of those who naively believed that the Assembly would be the answer to all our problems. Despite the additional resources, the waiting list situation is continuing to deteriorate. The Assembly has failed the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: The problem with waiting lists in the Health Service is not new. People are concerned that the lists are growing, while little is done at strategic level to deal with them. I am sure that every Member knows someone who is waiting for an operation or some other surgical procedure. Those with the least need will probably be taken first, but that will only massage the waiting times.

There appears to be a severe problem with orthopaedic procedures. We often hear horrific stories of people waiting days for treatment for broken limbs. The main reason for that is the shortage of beds. The problem is particularly acute in winter, but it is with us at all times of the year. Many surgical beds are taken up by medical emergencies for which there is also inadequate provision. That must be dealt with immediately.

There are difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff, particularly nursing staff in intensive care units. Many major operations could be carried out if suitably qualified staff were available. The main obstacle to recruiting and retaining staff is the poor pay that they receive for the responsibilities that they shoulder. Compared with staff in other countries that recognise the importance and skill of the profession, our nursing staff are shamefully treated and poorly paid. I ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to push for a significant increase in pay for our nursing staff at a time when the pay review body is taking evidence on the subject. We have a dedicated workforce in the Health Service, but we cannot expect people to work for gratitude alone. Hospitals must be well staffed if we are to have a responsive service.

It has been stated that in Northern Ireland we have the longest waiting lists in the UK, but significant strides forward have been made in the area of cardiac operations.

That has been possible because the boards have purchased services from the mainland. HCI International Health Centre in Glasgow has carried out many cardiac and hip operations under contract for the Western Board. Most of the patients that I spoke to journeyed to Glasgow, and they gave good reports of their experience and the care that they received. I do not advocate that as a long-term remedy, but if we can see shorter lists and a healthier population as a result of such initiatives, we must provide funding to achieve those aims.

In the past 10 years, we have seen the rolling closure of small hospitals across the Province. The beds that were lost were not replaced by the larger 'golden six' hospitals. Many of those beds were for long-term care and minor operations, which took pressure off the larger centres and provided step-down care. If that system were adopted, we would see critical care places released more swiftly, and more people would ultimately be treated. Those spaces would come at less cost to the Health Service, because they would not require the same level of medical supervision and expertise as the larger centres.

We must place the subject at the top of our agenda. Our system must ensure that we have more bed spaces, manned by well-paid and motivated personnel, to ensure that the Health Service can treat more people with appropriate, adequately resourced step-down care. In the long term, it would be cost effective, creating savings in other areas of the health budget.

In the meantime, we must purchase more high quality care from other providers, if necessary. We must not remain at the bottom of the league. We often hear the cry that certain people are second-class citizens. I ask the Minister to ensure that we do not have a second-class Health Service in Northern Ireland.

Ms McWilliams: As this is one of the last debates before suspension — although there are days yet to play for — I would like to record my concern about what happened during Question Time yesterday, when it appeared OK to beat up the Minister and hold her solely responsible for the Health Service budget. The problem will be resolved only when the Executive sit down this Thursday and make funding available not only for this area, but to address the serious issues that come up every day. The facts are well known, because of the media coverage and because Members have asked question after question.

I was disappointed. Where is the collective responsibility for the Health Service in Northern Ireland? Either the members of the Executive begin to get to grips with the issue and agree that Northern Ireland's Health Service is of concern to all of them, or they leave Minister de Brún on her own to face the Question Time wrath of Members from other parties who feel that that is the way to get the budget increased. Members of other parties represented on the Executive should

take the opportunity between now and Thursday to tell their Ministers what they said at Question Time — that they would like to see an increase in the budget.

The demand for £122 million has been put forward as an urgent requirement. As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am concerned that we will not get £122 million. We will simply go on having this debate. If the budget increase is as urgent as Members are suggesting, it should be the number one priority for Thursday's meeting. Then we could argue whether the Executive are truly functioning or not. Certainly, having witnessed yesterday's responses to Members' concerns about waiting lists, I feel that the Executive's sense of collective responsibility leaves a lot to be desired.

There are three issues. There is the issue of how Northern Ireland is faring compared to the rest of Britain, with regard to funding. It is not just about money, it is also about management and what was once called manpower, but is now called human resources. I have mentioned funding. It is extremely important for the Minister to tell us whether, with the available funding, it is realistic to think about getting the numbers down from 54,000 to 48,000, or anywhere close to the target of 39,000. If that remains a realistic target, how soon will it be met?

Other things happened that were out of the Minister's control, such as the use of single-use instruments in tonsillectomies, which caused waiting lists to go up. Can the Minister tell us about anything else that resulted in targets not being met? Is there another explanation? There may be other explanations; but if it is not about funding alone, we need to know what other things must be factored in. Are sickness levels increasing, or is it that the longer people stay on the waiting lists, the sicker they become and the longer they take to recover? Hence, the waiting list cycle goes on. From calls made today, and on other occasions, to the Royal Victoria Hospital, I know that our regional centre is in danger of collapsing.

Theatres are cancelling operations, and a cancellation culture exists in Northern Ireland's regional centre, where people from across the Province have urgent operations. There are two reasons for that, and a strategy must be put in place. One reason is that there are not enough anaesthetists. The trainee anaesthetists who used to want to work in the Royal after they completed their training no longer want to do so and do not stay to become consultants. The second reason is that there are insufficient intensive care beds. When will there be a framework, and when will the human resource strategy be in place?

Mr McCartney: I totally endorse Mr McGrady's motion. However, I listened with a degree of political astonishment to Ms McWilliams's remarks —

Ms McWilliams: For the first time in his life.

Mr McCartney: I listened to her remarks about the beating up of Ministers. I have made that point since the Assembly began: there is no collective responsibility. The Executive cannot control individual Ministers, who act as warlords in their respective Ministries, and in those circumstances they become the objects of collective criticism and attack rather than of collective support. I am surprised that that astonishes Monica McWilliams — *[Interruption]*.

Members went through a long catalogue of deficiencies in the Health Service, but we must look at the root causes. Many Members are cheerleaders for devolution. Devolution was supposed to bring more sensitive, accountable and effective government. Yet, under devolution, standards of the health care in Northern Ireland are falling below even the indifferent standards of the National Health Service in the rest of the United Kingdom. Devolution was never properly financed from the start. Those who negotiated the Belfast Agreement were so busy with purely political and constitutional matters that they never directed their mind to the price that they ought to have demanded from central Government for taking on the responsibilities of devolved government. Devolution has enabled central Government to distance themselves from the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland. The block grant controlled by the British Exchequer simply leaves the devolved Government to divide an inadequate cake, the size of which is determined by others.

3.00 pm

The reply to our complaints of disparity of service with the mainland will be: "How you allocate your money among competing priorities is a matter for you, not us." However, some economies and some reforms may be made. Dr Hendron and others have pointed out the need for drastic reform in the bureaucratic organisation of the Health Service and the vast amount of money that could be saved by severely pruning bureaucratic expenses, not only in salaries but in the provision of facilities that are available.

I also mention something that was taken up by a number of contributors. I shall indulge, if I may, in a bit of "beating-up" of the Minister responsible. The Minister responsible is from Sinn Féin, a party that Prime Ministers have said is inextricably linked with the IRA. The treatment of victims of the IRA and its counterparts in the so-called Loyalist organisations eats up an enormous amount of money. Every year, huge amounts of money, particularly in orthopaedics, are paid out to treat the victims of IRA and Loyalist terror, yet we have a Minister who is also given the duty of attempting to economise. For their own purposes, Central Government are willing to lay out up to £200 million on the bloody Sunday inquiry, and perhaps another

£50 million to £100 million on some of the additional inquiries that are being called for. That money and other money could be used for Unionist patients, Nationalist patients and all other patients in Northern Ireland.

If we want to get the Health Service right; if we want to get our priorities right; if we really care about the welfare, economic well-being, health, and education of the people of Northern Ireland, we will have to return to real democracy, instead of a partnership between a terrible form of democracy and terrorism.

Mr Davis: A previous speaker mentioned that this subject has been visited many times. The topic of waiting lists has been raised in the Assembly since the Executive took office. All Members have grave concerns.

It must be accepted that the Minister cannot be blamed for a historical problem that has been with us since direct rule. However, the Minister should remember the sign on President Truman's desk, which stated: "The buck stops here". Waiting lists are now the Minister's ultimate responsibility, and it is up to her to provide a solution.

Last week we were told that waiting lists were at their highest level ever. That is not acceptable in a society that should pride itself on the care of those who are in ill health and who face long periods of pain and discomfort because the structures are not in place to treat them. In March 2000, over 47,000 people were awaiting elective treatment — an increase of more than 11,000 in the four years from 1996. Only last week the Minister confirmed that the figure had risen to over 54,000 by the end of June 2001 — an increase of 4.3% since March.

There has also been a huge increase in waiting times. Between 1966 and 2000, the numbers waiting for treatment for 18 months or more increased from 632 to 5,200.

The Minister has set targets for the reduction and elimination of those unacceptable figures. That is to be welcomed, but there is currently no clear indication that those targets can and will be met.

In many cases, the elderly are suffering. They are the greatest users of health care resources. That is the nature of the problem, and it will always be so. However, it is unfair that those who have been the backbone of society in the past are now suffering because of the problems of the present. The long wait to deal with matters such as cataracts and joint replacement is a scandal that must be addressed quickly.

Northern Ireland is short of specialist surgeons in orthopaedics and neurology, and the departure of even one surgeon from these specialities can cause a crisis. Over the years, the system has received additional money, but the position does not appear to have been greatly improved. It was reported in May that there was a delay of nine months even to get on to the

waiting list in some specialities. It was also reported that there was a wait of nearly two years for what are described as non-emergency operations. All of that reflects badly on the current system.

Much of the problem is historical. The drive by the Conservative Government towards market economics in all aspects of society — especially in health — was ill-judged and ill-thought-out nonsense. We are paying for that folly now because we have a system that was introduced with cost-cutting priorities rather than health care factors in mind.

There has been a problem with the number of medical staff, and the long lead-in periods required for training new staff have not helped. These matters, and others, will take time to sort out. Demand for health care will always be on the increase. People are living longer, and their health care costs increase as they grow older. The birth rate is falling, and that, along with other factors, means that the costs will fall upon the narrow band of those in employment.

We must look closely at the entire health care system. It is notable that in some European countries almost twice as much of the gross domestic product is spent on health care than is spent in the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland is tied to United Kingdom spending levels, but the Minister must find the means, regardless of those financial restraints, to deal with an urgent and growing problem. Pressure is mounting on the system, and the limited projected spending increases per head of the population to the end of this decade will only exacerbate the situation, with Northern Ireland falling further behind comparable United Kingdom regions.

I support the motion. I have no doubt that this issue will be a recurring theme for a long time to come.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion and congratulate my Colleague Mr McGrady for proposing it.

Members have already spoken about the dramatic increase in waiting lists that may have cost people their lives. Figures recently released by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety confirm that increase. A comparison of the quarter ending June 2001 with the quarter ending March 2001 shows that the total number of patients waiting has increased by 4.3%. Over the year, comparing the end of June 2001 with the end of June 2000, the total number waiting has increased by 9.5%. Over the past year, therefore, the total number of people waiting for a hospital bed has increased by almost 10%. More than 54,000 people are waiting for treatment. That is not good enough.

We must ask how many people have suffered or have died while waiting to undergo treatment. How many family members' lives have been affected while patients wait for vital surgery? I appreciate the fact that the

Minister of Health, Bairbre de Brún, is in the House today. There is an onus on her to explain the reasons for these appalling figures and the high rise in waiting times.

I accept that the growth in the numbers awaiting elective procedures must be seen in the light of the overall increase in pressure on our hospitals. However, only last week the chairman of the Western Health and Social Services Board stated that the staff at Altnagelvin Hospital are near breaking point as they push themselves to retain high standards of service with inadequate resources. That is repeated in hospitals throughout the Province. There is no point in attempting to reduce waiting lists at the expense of the health of doctors, nurses and health professionals, who are stretched to the limit.

The Minister states that work is already underway to address the problem of waiting lists. Although I accept that that is the case, waiting lists will never be reduced without adequate resources. There is no point in appointing extra consultants in specialist areas, such as orthopaedics, if the resources are not in place to employ staff such as theatre and intensive care nurses, orderlies and other professionals who are necessary to provide back-up. At present, there are many examples in our hospitals of consultants being appointed as a cosmetic exercise because of public pressure. As other members of staff are not available, and theatre space is at a premium, consultants already in post must hand over operating sessions to allow the new employee to work. That is not acceptable. To make such appointments only fools the public and does not help the situation. The Minister must be made aware of that.

I agree that there has been historic underfunding in the Health Service. However, if we are ever going to make a serious attempt to cut waiting lists for elective surgery we must listen to the staff who are continually under pressure. They are the same people who are expected to work long hours because, for example, they have to cover sick leave. More money must be found to pay for extra staff. There is no point in a hospital owning a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanner or a computerised axial tomography (CAT) scanner if the staff are only available during office hours — 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. Hospitals need to provide a 24-hour service — emergencies occur at all times.

In the Royal Group of Hospitals we can see the serious consequences of not having back-up resources. Cardiac operations have been cancelled because there have not been enough intensive care beds. A complete re-evaluation of the system must be undertaken. I support what my Colleague, Dr Hendron, said about changing the management structures. We must look seriously at that issue.

Our waiting lists are currently the worst in the United Kingdom. We must make a concerted effort to ensure

that the next quarter's report shows considerable improvement on the most recent one.

Mrs I Robinson: It is with great concern and a degree of frustration that we find ourselves debating this important issue. The fact that the topic of waiting lists for elective surgery has reached the Chamber should illustrate the serious nature of the issue and the urgent need for action. On quarterly and annual comparisons, inpatient waiting lists have increased by 4.3% and 9.5% respectively. The total number of people on the waiting list has increased by 2,251 since March 2001.

Rather than witness an increase in the quality of service, the past few years have seen the NHS and health care provision undermined and reduced. The figures released in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's monitoring returns are cause for grave concern. The number of people waiting for inpatient and outpatient treatment in Northern Ireland has increased considerably. They have not only risen since the last quarter; in comparison to this time last year, in some cases, they have increased dramatically.

One of the most worrying aspects is the number of patients who are termed "excess waiters". There are people who are seeking inpatient treatment and have been waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery and 18 months or more for other specialist treatment. The increase of 15.8% for that group since last year is alarming.

It is particularly worrying that the Eastern Health and Social Services Board is responsible for 60% of the inpatients who are waiting for treatment, and a staggering 78% of those who are classed as "excess waiters". Of course, statistics are always susceptible to being twisted and massaged to suit one's own point of view. In this case, however, the figures do not require any artificial enhancement.

3.15 pm

The statistics prove that this issue must surely be addressed. The doctors, nurses and other staff servicing the NHS are under serious pressure, and we must pay tribute to all those who are doing their best to carry out their duties.

However, it is obvious that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has failed to address the problem. It is now time for the Department to look seriously at the considerable problems that exist. The published figures show that, without an increase in the financial support given to the NHS by the Government, the service will eventually have more people waiting for treatment than are actually receiving treatment. If the necessary and resolute action to address the problem is not taken now, the service will continue to deteriorate.

Therefore, it is essential that sufficient funds are provided so that local services can meet demands for surgery. We must do all in our power to maximise what health care provision we have left.

I am sure that most, if not all, MLA's receive a heavy mailbag of letters from their constituents every day imploring us to use our good offices to enable loved ones to get appointments with consultants. Worst of all, we often receive complaints outlining how loved ones would still be alive if they had been able to access services in time.

It is an utter disgrace that, to date, we do not even have the money in place to start the building of the new cancer hospital at the Belfast City Hospital site — especially when we consider that cancer is our number one killer, claiming more victims than strokes or chest and heart illnesses. Meanwhile, Belvoir Park Hospital has to cope with huge waiting lists and run-down hospital equipment. Unless we take the bull by the horns and dismantle the four boards and 19 trusts, this top-heavy structure will use up much-needed revenue.

The NHS needs additional, financial assistance. This Administration, like all new Administrations, takes the easy option of blaming the previous incumbents for the failures and inadequacies of the system. In Northern Ireland, the message is that any shortcomings are due to previous direct rule from Westminster. It is only a matter of time before this bluff is uncovered. Three years have passed, and we have still not addressed the problem of bureaucracy, much less any other problems. I support the motion.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We all agree that waiting lists have escalated over the last number of years. This trend started about 30 years ago. We need to rectify that situation. No one can stand over the long waiting lists or waiting times.

We reject the Hayes review as it has failed to deal with the problem sufficiently. It has failed to deliver any new or imaginative thinking in relation to hospitals or acute care facilities — particularly in rural areas.

However, we also have to examine the root of the problem. Like Iris Robinson, I would like to see a restructuring of the boards, but the Hayes review does not address that problem. Replacing four boards with three, or 19 trusts with a greater or fewer number of trusts will not solve the problem of bureaucracy in the system.

I agree with Mrs Robinson that each Administration blames the previous one. However, we can clearly point the finger of blame at the last Conservative Administration, which many Unionists propped up. That Administration ran down the entire Health Service over many years. There are Unionist MPs in the Chamber today who stood by over the last 30 years and allowed the

Health Service to be run down by Margaret Thatcher and others in the Conservative Administration. It is quite clear as to when we fell into this rut; and we have a right to point the finger at those who are to blame.

Research also shows that other European countries, particularly the Twenty-six Counties, have reduced the problem of waiting by putting enough money in place to ensure a proper service. While all parties in the Chamber agree that we need to reduce waiting lists, we also need to agree that one of the ways to do that is to provide adequate funding for the service. We need to ensure that we have a proper service in the future. It cannot be done by people pointing to cancer services, hospitals and other services and saying that the proper money has not been put in. The money can only come from the Chamber and from the block grant — it cannot come from anywhere else.

We have missed out on opportunities under the present British Administration. They have made announcements on health every time they needed a perk for an election or for some other issue. They have put large amounts of money into the Health Service in England to eradicate problems there, but we have not got our fair share of that money. The Barnett formula has failed to deliver and failed to follow need in this particular situation. We have not got a fair share of the distribution of the money. While Mr Durkan announced a 7.2% increase in the health budget last year, in Scotland it was 12%. In England, £1 billion was invested to improve primary care. That is money being allocated for a particular reason, and if we had received our fair share we would have at least had an extra £35 million to put into the Health Service.

We need to put our money where our mouths are. The test here is whether the Executive have a collective decision-making process. Where will all the parties actually stand when the Minister of Finance and Personnel asks where they want to allocate money to? It is recognised by most parties that an injection of money is required by the Health Service. We need a collective voice today. We want the Health Service to be a priority in order to get the bulk of this year's Budget. We want to ensure that the Health Service can provide the proper health care facility that we all want and that we all talk about. We have to meet the needs of that service, and it will only happen if we have a collective decision in the Chamber and in the Executive.

We can lay the blame and pass the buck, but at the end of the day the buck will stop at the Executive and the Assembly. The Assembly needs to be satisfied with the budgets when they come here to be approved. The Committees scrutinising the whole process need to be satisfied that enough money is going into the Health Service to allow the Minister to deal with the problem. We also need to be able to trace that money. I accept that there are certain question marks over where

the money allocated to the boards and trusts ends up. I hope that the Assembly gives a very clear message to the Minister of Finance and Personnel that we want to prioritise health in the new Budget.

Mr Savage: There can be no doubt that a waiting list crisis exists in the Health Service. Only yesterday, in answer to a question from my Colleague, the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mrs Carson), the Minister told the House, in a document deposited in the Library, that the Southern Health and Social Services Board had a waiting list of 228 for hernia operations, with 32 people waiting more than a year. I noted that 5 patients had been waiting more than two years. With mounting disbelief I went on to read that, across the Province, 26 people had been waiting for a hernia operation for more than two years.

I mention hernia operations because, as the Minister knows, I am currently dealing with such an issue for a lady constituent from Lurgan who has been waiting for more than two years. I suppose she is one of the Minister's statistics. She was placed on a waiting list in October 1998 and is still waiting, with no date for the operation having been set. In fact, her consultant informs me that she is still fourteenth on the list. This lady is more than a statistic. She is suffering daily discomfort and pain, to the extent that her quality of life is severely curtailed. That is the reality of waiting lists — pain and suffering.

Further searching of the Minister's document showed that approximately 20 people had waited for more than two years for knee replacement operations, and some of the figures that were supplied yesterday, including those for heart bypass operations, were provisional. That word may be appropriate for the Minister, but it is not appropriate in a written answer to an Assembly question about a major public service. Such data should be readily available because it enables the public to judge the service they are paying for.

I urge the Minister to give serious consideration to a suggestion by my colleague, Dr Adamson, that patients who have waited for a long time be treated in European hospitals. That happens in Great Britain, where patients are transferred to France and Belgium, and it is no more expensive than treating them here.

Insufficient capacity causes long waiting lists. Hospitals in Europe have more capacity, so why not transfer long-wait patients there for treatment? After all, we are all Europeans, so why not give people the choice of going to Europe or, if they prefer, wait here on the long list.

The Minister's paper also shows that people in Northern Ireland have a significantly longer average waiting time than people in England and Scotland in two out of four key areas. In Northern Ireland the average wait for a cataract removal is 227 days, compared with

119 days in Scotland. In Northern Ireland someone needing a knee replacement operation has a waiting time of 234 days, compared with 105 days in Scotland.

There appears to be a serious shortfall in specialisms, and I ask the Minister when and how that will be addressed. It gives me no pleasure to point that out, because I have nothing but the highest regard for the doctors and nurses who are so dedicated to our Health Service. However, the Assembly has a right to demand a better performance from our Minister when addressing the glaring issue of hospital waiting lists.

She has been in office for approximately three years, and that is just a little longer than a constituent of mine has been waiting for her operation. However, a further extension of the accident and emergency unit in Craigavon Area Hospital will open soon, and I give the Minister credit for that. It will help to alleviate some of the problems confronting that area.

I know the Minister takes the problem very seriously, but if something is not done to alleviate the situation, it will get out of hand altogether. I support the motion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There are two further Members to speak, and I ask both to curtail their contributions to two minutes.

Ms Hanna: I support the motion. The statistics are depressing. The headline rate of increase is accelerating. The three months up to June saw an increase of more than 47% of the yearly increase. If the rate of increase continues unchecked, there could be a waiting list of more than 64,000 by June 2002. The last quarter did not include the winter pressures.

The only qualitative criterion for determining whether a patient needs an operation is an assessment of clinical need. The emphasis on waiting lists distorts clinical priorities, and the pressure on acute hospitals to meet heart targets means that there has been undue emphasis on performing larger numbers of routine operations at the expense of patients who need longer, more complex and ultimately more serious operations.

Doctors with outpatients waiting for investigations such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans, possibly to diagnose serious illnesses, have to resort to admitting patients into acute beds to move them up the waiting list, and that compounds the problem.

We do not live in a perfect world. If a quantitative benchmark is to be used, the length of time that a patient is on a list is a better measurement than the number of patients on a list.

3.30 pm

The situation is not just drifting; it is out of control. On 11 September the Minister said that she was very concerned at the growth in the number of patients awaiting admission. I am sure that she is, but, with

respect, she is paid to do much more than that. She went on to say that the basic problems are money, lack of investment and past underfunding. Nobody will disagree with that.

We want to know what specific proposals the Minister has put to her Executive colleagues. We need details, chapter and verse. We need to know what monitoring is taking place to ensure that the actions outlined in the framework for action on waiting lists are being implemented and monitored. If we do not know what is being measured, we do not know what actions are effective. The Minister is in a difficult position. She has a complex portfolio —

Mr Shannon: In my constituency there is one of the largest hospitals in Northern Ireland — the Ulster Hospital. It has repeatedly been in the news over the length of time that people have had to wait before getting medical attention or a necessary operation. A source told me just last week that the waiting time for emergency theatre treatment was three days. If someone required a bone pinned or a wound stitched, they would have to wait more than 72 hours.

I would expect the sort of scenes that patients described to me last week to have come from a war film or a Dickens novel. There were people waiting on trolleys and in corridors, and some critical surgeries were taking place in the wards alongside other patients. This situation is not only deplorable, but also deadly dangerous. Infections are rife in wards, with methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus being a killer disease that affects every hospital in the United Kingdom. The carrying-out of procedures in wards where an infection that attacks open wounds is present is unbelievable, but we can understand how desperate doctors are to administer the aid that they are trained to give.

Many people, including myself, are further angered because the Minister and the Department do not seem to know how to spend money or time wisely. We were recently told in an article that the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust was to receive an investment of £20 million, yet the lists keep getting longer.

I was made aware yesterday of a new scheme operating in the trust area. A social worker's assistant delivered folders to each person claiming disability living allowance. The folders contained five sections, and every time a home help, social worker or health visitor pays a call to a client, they must write the purpose of the visit on the folders. Two things have been highlighted by that: first, the money spent on the folders, dividers, paper and, not least, the petrol; and secondly that a member of staff was specifically sent out to do that job. It is a waste of money.

Much money is wasted annually on the administrative side of the Department of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety. The old Newtownards Hospital is a prime example, having had many of its wards, such as the Thomas Bailie ward, turned into offices. It was converted both physically, with bricks and mortar, and also decoratively. The bill was staggering. I suggest that some of the money spent on the decor should be spent on reducing hospital waiting lists.

Ms de Brún: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé buíoch den Uasal Mac Bhraidaigh as an rún tábhachtach seo a chur síos ar chlár. Phléigh díospóireacht an lae inniu le hábhar atá ina chúis mhór inní do mhórán daoine.

Chuir mé suim, agus mé ag éisteacht go cúramach, sna pointí a rinne an tUasal Mac Bhraidaigh agus Comhaltáí eile. Is ionann cuid mhaith de na tuairimí a nochtadh agus mo chuid tuairimí féin: is cás liom daoine tinne ag fanacht ar feadh tréimhse fada le cóireáil; is cás liom na brúnna atá ag dul i méid ar ár ngéarsheirbhísí — agus ar ár seirbhísí pobail; is cás liom ár bhfoireann, a leanann leo ag cur seirbhís ghairmiúil ar fáil.

Amhail Comhaltáí, ba mhaith liom seirbhísí ardchaighdeání soghluaiste a chur in áit; seirbhísí a bhéas ar fáil dóibh sin a bhfuil siad de dhíth orthu — nuair a bhéas siad de dhíth orthu.

Mar sin, cad é atá ag teacht idir sinn agus an chomhaisling seo?

Is eol domh go bhfuil os cionn 54,000 duine ag fanacht le hobráidí otharlainne anois. Tá inní ar mhórán acu faoin mhéid ama a ghlacfas sé go gcóireáilfear iad.

Chuir sé gliondar orm an oiread sin Comhaltáí a chluinstin agus iad ag iarraidh níos mó airgead mar mheán praiticiúil le cinntiú go ndírítear seirbhísí mar is ceart le freastal ar riachtanais ár bpobail. Is eochaireilimint í, leoga, infhaighteacht maoinithe shásúil i liostaí feithimh a laghdú.

I am grateful to Mr McGrady for tabling this important motion. Today's debate has covered an issue of deep concern to many people in our community.

I have listened carefully and with great interest to the points made by Mr McGrady and other Members. Many of the views expressed echo my own thoughts: thoughts about the unacceptability of sick people waiting for a long time for treatment; thoughts about the increasing pressures on our acute and community services; and thoughts about our staff, who continue to provide a professional service. I am grateful to Members for stressing the value they place on health service staff.

Like other Members, I listen to constituents who value our health and social services and feel betrayed when these services are not readily available to meet their needs. I too have spoken to constituents who have to wait, often in pain or distress, for a hospital operation, or support at home. I also share Members'

desires to put in place high-quality and responsive services that will be available to support those who need them, when they need them.

What are the obstacles to achieving this shared vision? More than 54,000 people are now waiting for operations, and many are worried about how long it will be before they are treated. Members have rightly spoken about the level of human suffering that lies behind the statistics. I was particularly glad to hear so many Members calling for better resources as a practical means of ensuring that services are adequately geared to provide the level of service necessary to meet the needs of our community. The availability of adequate funding is a key element in reducing waiting lists, although as I stated yesterday, and state again today, there is an allied question of management, which we will also address.

Although this debate is focused on waiting lists, the underlying problems are much broader. Waiting lists are in some ways like a barometer registering the overall levels of pressure on our health and social services. The current high waiting lists reflect both the pressures on our services' overall capacity and a continuing growth in emergency admissions. It is not easy to find a single cause for this. One factor is undoubtedly our ageing population; another factor may be advances in medicine that offer new therapies for previously untreatable conditions. This makes it likely that people can avail of services that were not previously available.

However, this year in the Eastern Health and Social Services Board, medical activity in hospitals has increased by 9%. Increases of this magnitude are difficult to meet, and year-round trolley waits are becoming a fact of life in too many hospitals. The system is simply running too close to full capacity. Increased waiting lists are one symptom of a service that was grossly underfunded in the past. It will take some time, and a great deal of money, to address that problem. I am glad to see that Members have recognised this and made references to the effect that small, or temporary, changes in staffing levels or capacity in any given speciality can have. I am also grateful for their comments regarding historic funding decisions.

Members have also drawn attention to the situation beyond our hospitals. That is of equal concern. People, many of them elderly, are waiting at home for the support needed to maintain their independence and quality of life. Without prompt and appropriate assistance, some of these people will end up in hospital. There will be a delay in returning people to the community after hospital care because the services are not in place to support them, and that is equally worrying.

Since becoming Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety I have brought this situation to the

attention of the Assembly and sought its support in tackling the underlying problems that face health and social services. Since December 1999 the Executive have found some additional funding for these vital services. However, in order to turn the corner, a sustained increase in funding over a number of years is required. The service faces some difficult choices this year. The additional resources in this year's Budget fall far short of the bids that I submitted, as a number of Members, particularly those on the Health and Social Services Committee, have drawn out.

To make a lasting impact on waiting lists we must address the issue of capacity in hospital and community services. Given the current financial climate, I am greatly concerned — and I note that Committee members share that concern — that I will not receive the level of resources needed to bring about improvements. The situation will worsen without these resources. I am aware that the Health Service can do, and is doing, a great deal to cut waste and to operate with maximum efficiency. I support such action.

Last September I issued a comprehensive framework for action on waiting lists to improve the process. That was the first long-term strategic approach to dealing with waiting lists here. Previous reductions in waiting lists were not sustained because recurrent investment was not forthcoming. I want a sustained programme of action over a number of years to deliver long-term improvements. We need that sustained and long-term action, supported by recurrent resources, to boost service capacity and to reduce waiting lists.

I have put in place the necessary framework, but there is still a long way to go. I am glad to say that it has been possible to allocate some additional funding to reduce waiting lists. In the current year, for instance, I have been able to allocate an extra £3 million for specific action on waiting lists. In addition, last year's non-recurrent allocation of £5 million was made recurrent, thus increasing to £8 million the total additional resources available for action on waiting lists this year.

Following the June monitoring round, I also made available to the service an extra several million pounds to strengthen community infrastructure and services. Although that money is welcome, the service needs more overall investment if it is to meet the demands placed on it. Those demands have been clearly illustrated by the very graphic personal stories that Members have today related on behalf of their constituents.

To make the required impact on waiting lists and waiting times, we must address the shortage of acute hospital capacity, particularly at peak periods. We must also deal with the under-resourcing of community care services. Against that backdrop, however, there are some rays of hope. Boards and trusts are implementing a wide range of measures to improve the management

of hospital admissions and discharges. Every board has devised a comprehensive action plan to address necessary measures, and a great deal of work is being done.

For example, an additional 60 ophthalmology patients have been treated as day cases in the Mater Hospital — patients who would otherwise have had to wait for treatment elsewhere. More than 200 patients have been treated in ward 8 of the Royal Victoria Hospital under an initiative by which the ward is used as an elective surgery ward for six months per year and as an emergency admissions ward for the rest of the year.

Many hundreds of people have been offered the opportunity to receive their treatment at a more distant hospital rather than continue to wait. The Eastern Health and Social Services Board has contacted 300 people on long waiting lists to offer them early treatment at Downe Hospital.

Additional cardiac surgery operations have been provided for patients who have agreed to travel to Glasgow rather than wait for treatment locally. A new angiography facility due to open soon at Altnagelvin Hospital will increase overall capacity for diagnostic testing of that nature and will help to reduce waiting times. Mobile MRI scanners operating from several locations have reduced waiting lists. I have also allocated additional funding for new supernumerary nursing posts in cardiac intensive care to support the existing staff, and to allow more nurses to get the specialised training that is needed. That will help to increase bed capacity and the number of operations carried out.

Some Members commented on the structures and organisation of the Health Service and the forthcoming review of public administration; they mentioned that those matters were dealt with by the Acute Hospitals Review Group. As Members know, I have issued a report, and consultation on it will last until 31 October. That consultation will provide the initial information and reaction that will help me to formulate proposals, which I will then discuss with my Executive Colleagues. I encourage Members, and all those with an interest in health and social services, to respond to the consultation.

Members commented on the need for overall efficiency in the service. Despite the fact that since the early 1980s the equivalent of £190 million, in today's terms, has been removed from the Health Service's baseline budget, it has treated almost 10% more patients in the last five years. During that time, there has been a 27% increase in the number of community care packages. In addition, the service plans to achieve savings of £12 million by the end of 2002-03 through a range of improvements, including a review of acute sector performance, improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of prescribing, improved waiting list

management, improved bed management and further rationalisation of the Health Service estate.

3.45 pm

We heard about difficulties specifically in relation to our ageing population. Kieran McCarthy was worried about discrimination on age grounds. I fully accept that there must be no discrimination on the grounds of age, gender or any other such factor. All of our services are covered by equality legislation. That means that we are bound in law to ensure that all patients are treated fairly, and that is what I would expect to happen.

Eddie McGrady talked about co-operation with the South, and I am very keen to encourage the services in the North and the South to work together. I hope that the work already undertaken by CAWT (Co-operation and Working Together for Health Gain and Well-being in Border Areas) can be built upon.

Dr Adamson and some other Members asked about the use of services in other countries. I am happy, in principle, to draw on services available elsewhere in the interests of our patients. We already make very good use of services in Glasgow, London, Dublin and other centres, as part of the overall services available to patients. There is, as Dr Adamson pointed out, the issue of how that draws money into the overall financial resources available elsewhere as opposed to here. However, we want to establish an appropriate balance and to ensure that the services that people need are accessible and readily available.

Eddie McGrady talked about decentralising services to make capacity available. I am very committed to using all of our capacity to its fullest effect. That is evidenced by the increased use of hospitals such as Lagan Valley Hospital to help tackle waiting lists in hospitals such as Craigavon Area Hospital. We are also now making better use of day facilities at South Tyrone Hospital with ophthalmology cases receiving treatment there. I am conscious of the difficulty of the availability of expert staff, and we need to be careful to avoid creating staffing problems in other centres.

A range of specific measures has been introduced to deal with the difficulties in fracture services. The Royal Group of Hospitals Trust and the Green Park Healthcare Trust have put on additional theatre lists. Additional day cases have been taken at the Ulster Hospital. Fracture lists at the Royal Victoria Hospital have been protected, and I am monitoring the situation very closely. There is a shortage of orthopaedic surgeons both here and in the overall NHS, and we are taking steps to increase the number of trainees in the speciality, although that will obviously take time. We have also recently dealt with a difficulty relating to the number of theatre nurses.

I was very grateful to Monica McWilliams for the points that she raised about collective responsibility. It was a very thoughtful contribution, which we need to keep in mind. Prof McWilliams also asked whether 39,000 is a realistic target, and I believe that it is not unless there is a substantial recurring investment in service capacity and in staff. I have repeatedly emphasised that reducing waiting lists will require a sustained effort over a number of years.

Carmel Hanna told the House that 47% of the rise occurred in the last quarter. Both she and Monica McWilliams talked about the last quarter and the factors involved. Some 60% of the increase in the last quarter — therefore some 60% the figure that Carmel Hanna told us was such a large part of the overall figure — was in the ear, nose and throat speciality. That increase can therefore largely be explained by the delays in some operations due to the directive to use single-use instruments for tonsillectomies. There were also some delays caused by the absence of key consultancy staff through illness, and others as a result of patients being transferred to the Causeway Hospital. Those last two factors were temporary and should be overcome quickly — the former less so.

Outpatient waiting lists increased due to an apparent across-the-board surge in numbers being referred to outpatient services.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms de Brún: I recognise these difficulties. When I issued the 'Framework for Action on Waiting Lists' last year, I said that only long-term focused management action, coupled with new investment in the service, would improve the waiting list situation.

I have set a long-term programme of work in motion to ensure that the Health Service makes the best use of what it has and that efficiency is improved where possible. I look to the Assembly and my ministerial Colleagues to recognise the pressing need and to agree to put in place the funding necessary to ensure that health and community services are adequately resourced so that we can meet the challenges facing us in the years ahead.

Mr McGrady: I thank all Members who participated in the debate, and particularly the Minister for the time that she has given to this problem and the detailed response that she gave in the past 16 minutes. She will undoubtedly agree that it will take some time for the lay person to digest all that she has said, and I am sure she will understand that I do not have the capacity to reply to all aspects of her response.

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

The main thrusts of the motion enable the Assembly to consider its collective concerns, and its view that

immediate action is required. Those are the two important themes — Members' concerns about representing community concerns, and their concerted action with, it is hoped, the Departments to bring about an improvement in the situation.

There were 15 valuable contributions made this afternoon, and it is impossible for me to reply to them all as the Minister has done. However, they had some common themes. The matter of additional funding arose in many contributions. The structures through which the Health Service delivers were strongly criticised for being ineffectual and inefficient. There was an underlying theme that no matter how much money is thrown at the problem, it will not change unless the Assembly does something urgent and dramatic. No Member said that, but that is the feeling one got from many of the contributions.

Many Members also referred to the enormous debt of gratitude owed to the medical fraternity, nursing and ancillary staff. Not only do they deserve credit for what they are doing, but they should be doubly credited for doing it under conditions that we have allowed to be imposed upon them.

Ultimately it is the patients who suffer the prolonged and unnecessary pain that I referred to in my introductory remarks. Sometimes that pain can lead to premature death, and that is what Members must strive to avoid.

I have three pages of notes that I intended to use for my response, but I have given up the prospect of doing so. However, I will nail a remark that was made by Ms McWilliams. I did not come here to bash, or gang up on, the Minister. I came here because my representative role gives me the responsibility of articulating people's concerns. I doubly resent Ms McWilliams's insinuation because, metaphorically speaking, she waded in in her pinstripe wellingtons to a debate to which she had not heard the introduction. The thrust of my introduction was not to bash the Minister. The thrust of my introduction was that finances are needed and we must ensure that that need is properly addressed. In addition, I would point out that the "delicate flower" of ministerial responsibility can well defend herself.

Undoubtedly the crisis with hospital and medical waiting lists is not solely about money, and I have said that time after time. Mismanagement of resources has been endemic for a long time, not just during the past three years but for longer than that. I have asked the Minister to address that problem.

In the Assembly on 17 October 2000, Minister Durkan, speaking about the Budget, said:

"In the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the budget will grow by over £150 million (or 7.2%) to some £2.3 billion. Within this total, over £1.16 billion will be available for hospital and community health services, and £460 million will be available for personal social services.

Additional provision is also being made to address winter pressures and waiting lists, while family health services show an increase in funding of over 8%."

Even with the additional money, we still have a spiralling waiting list. We must find out if the cause is inefficient spending, misallocation or a lack of funds. I doubt if it is a lack of funds.

In November 2000, an extra £17 million — £5 million of which was carried over — was allocated to the health services. In January this year £14.5 million was given to the health services. In February 2001, £18 million of additional spending was injected into the health services. These are vast amounts of money. The figure of £18 million had been analysed by the Department of Finance and Personnel and by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as being required. If the Departments made an assessment of what was required, they got it. Where are the funds going? Why are they not having the desired effect? It is important to remember that a further £8 million has been allocated for this year, specifically to reduce waiting lists.

Seven months have passed since the interdepartmental consultation study and review of the consequences of trust deficiencies were put in place. What progress has been made? Is it near completion, and have any conclusions been reached? These are urgent matters that require urgent answers.

There is an absence of decision making. We have consultation fatigue; we have "paralysis by analysis". No decisions have been made, and everything is under review. However, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not alone in being in this situation. Reviews are being conducted in almost every Department, and reviews of reviews. It goes on and on.

Decisions are needed about primary care, acute care and the administrative structure of the health services. There is almost universal agreement today that there are too many trusts — 19 for a population the size of Birmingham. The situation is ludicrous, and we cannot wait for reviews of public administration.

There is a lack of co-ordination. Why is Northern Ireland the only part of these isles that has not carried out an audit on the reasons for the waiting lists? An audit could tell us what factors are contributing to the waiting lists, and also whether money is being spent wisely or if a bucketful more money is needed. At least we would know what is happening.

I will finish on a parochial note. Last night in my home town five patients were lying all night in the corridors of the Downe Hospital. That is the epitome. Endemic centralisation should be reversed rapidly, and we should make use of what already exists and enhance it. Surely that is the way forward.

I am not here on a bashing exercise, nor am I here on a political platform. I am here, along with my Assembly Colleagues, to say that the Minister, fortunately or unfortunately, has responsibility for the health services. We look to her to address these issues. We plead with her, and we will back her in any way we can, to ensure that the waiting lists that are literally killing people are reduced as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly views with concern the ever-increasing waiting lists for medical and hospital treatment in our local health services, and requires immediate action to remedy this unacceptable and growing problem.

4.00 pm

PARAMILITARY ACTIVITY

Mr P Robinson: I beg to move

That this Assembly deplores the ongoing catalogue of paramilitary activity particularly from groups which are allegedly on ceasefire and which claim to accept the premise that only those committed to the use of exclusively peaceful and democratic means can participate in government in Northern Ireland; and further determines it is inconsistent and intolerable that any party associated with active terrorism continues to hold Executive positions.

I am mindful that this is possibly the last debate on the last day — at least before suspension, perhaps even for all time — of the Assembly. None the less, it is vital that the issue be dealt with before the close of business of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Assembly has been dogged by the issue since its inception, which is no small part of the reason why it faces its present problems.

I consider it a reasonably effortless task to show the Assembly that each of the main paramilitary organisations has violated the terms of its ceasefire. My task is even simpler, because I do not confine myself to their definition of a ceasefire. Rather, I will use the definition that is set down in law — namely, that parties associated with paramilitary groups and all others must show that they are committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. There are still some in this community — even after all these years — who refuse to face the reality of the violence in our midst. They still hold on to the illusion of a peace process, shutting their eyes to the violence that surrounds them. When they are pushed to come to terms with breaches of the ceasefires, we hear the hypocritical cant that “it’s better than it was 10 years ago”. It follows that we are to be grateful to the terrorists for adjusting the nature and level of their terrorism. Setting for a lower level of terrorism may have led to an improvement on the streets, but that does not amount to peace, nor does it justify providing seats in Government for those who are still actively engaged in terrorism.

There are others who — almost convincingly — advise us that we are coming out of a long and sustained period of violence and that we cannot expect an unblemished record in those circumstances. They tell us that terrorism is in its death throes. That is nonsense; we must look at what is happening. We must face the fact that terrorism in Northern Ireland is cranking up — it is not winding down. Moreover, there are those at the head of Government and of policing who refuse to point the finger at the paramilitary organisations involved. They tell us that the act was probably carried out by dissident groups; they tell us that the police are still investigating the incident; they tell us that we have to consider it in the round; and they tell us that it may be the activity of mavericks, not sanctioned by the

organisations themselves. Almost any excuse is made for such terrorist activity.

For some in the political world, the highest legal standard of proof and evidence is required before an organisation can be blamed for anything. Yet, it seems that they do not require the same high legal standard for infractions perpetrated by “the other side”. I suspect that even an admission from the terrorist organisations would not cause those people to act as if those organisations had been in breach.

There are some in this community who, when their colleagues carry out their terrorist activities — in violation of the declared ceasefires of those organisations — and are arrested, demand a higher legal standard of proof and evidence. Indeed, those people demand more human rights for the terrorists than the terrorists themselves accord when they wear balaclavas and meet their victims in the backstreets of Belfast and other cities and towns in Northern Ireland. That is the reality.

Some things become obvious when we look at the breaches of the ceasefires and the catalogue of incidents. The first is that the failure of the exclusion mechanism has given the IRA the message that it can — literally — get away with murder. The failure to hold Sinn Féin/IRA to account and to remove it from government has shown that there are parties in the House that are afraid of the consequences of the safeguards that they signed up to in the Belfast Agreement.

Events have also shown that the legislation was not only ineffective, but incomplete. Members had an instrument with which to punish Sinn Féin/IRA, had they chosen to use it. However, there was no mechanism to deal with parties that were not in government if the paramilitary group with which they were associated breached its ceasefire, especially if they were not in the Assembly itself.

Because of the higher standard required for participation in government, the failure to deal with Sinn Féin/IRA has been the central problem. The SDLP, and even the Ulster Unionist Party, must take the rap. Both parties have failed to vote on the violations of the IRA ceasefire during all the years of this Assembly. The greatest difficulty — particularly for Ulster Unionists — is that they went through the referendum telling the people of Northern Ireland that they had the issue covered and that, no matter what Sinn Féin/IRA might do, they would get it thrown out of the Executive, if it turned to violence. Moreover, they convinced some people in Northern Ireland that they had a belt-and-braces provision. If the SDLP did not answer the call and fulfil an explicit commitment in the agreement by throwing Sinn Féin out, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party had a letter from the Prime Minister.

The letter said that if those measures proved to be ineffective, the Prime Minister would propose some

changes. Many of us said that the letter meant only that such changes would be proposed to co-signatories to the agreement. If two of the parties to the agreement had already refused to comply, it was unlikely that they would agree with any proposal that the Prime Minister might make. The weakness of the Ulster Unionist Party is that it has never actually triggered that mechanism. The party never voted to exclude Sinn Féin and thereby test the Prime Minister on whether he would propose a provision that would ensure that those who were engaged in violence would be excluded from government.

Why has there been no action against Sinn Féin/IRA? Is the case for exclusion marginal? Is there a shortage of evidence? That is not the case.

First, the loyalist paramilitaries, who receive less attention in the House on this issue, because they are not in government have indisputably breached their ceasefires. That was seen most graphically and tragically when the two organisations went to war with each other. Hundreds of so-called punishment shootings and beatings have been carried out by both Loyalist paramilitary groups. Given the frequency and the geographical pattern of the attacks and the co-ordination required, all one’s intelligence, judgement and senses would have to be suspended for one to believe that the ongoing attacks on Roman Catholic homes with pipe bombs and other missiles were the work of anything other than a major Loyalist paramilitary group. Equally, the bomb left in Ballycastle could not conceivably be the work of anyone other than a member of one of those paramilitary organisations. Those attacks must be condemned without any verbal or mental reservation.

It is a sick irony that the groups responsible were among the most enthusiastic advocates of the so-called peace process and the Belfast Agreement. That the behaviour of Loyalist paramilitary groups does not directly impact on the functioning of government has meant that they are under less scrutiny and, I suggest, less pressure than their violent acts deserve.

What should we make of the behaviour of Sinn Féin/IRA? They have representatives in government and are bound by the terms of the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to employ exclusively democratic and peaceful means of effecting change. They broke their first ceasefire and re-engaged in a campaign of bombing and shooting, murder and carnage. Even while signing up to the Belfast Agreement, they were involved in the planning of the massive bomb attack on London. That shows their sincerity.

Since the reinstatement of their ceasefire on 20 July 1997, the IRA has been responsible for 170 so-called punishment shootings and 250 paramilitary beatings. In July 1997, the IRA was involved in the preparation of a major robbery in the Republic of Ireland. Provos were arrested while staking out the Allied Irish Bank

headquarters in Dublin. In January 1998, the IRA murdered a well-known Loyalist, Jim Guiney. He was gunned down in his carpet shop in Dunmurry. In February 1998, the IRA murdered 38-year-old Loyalist Robert Dougan, again in Dunmurry. In February 1998, the IRA, using its DAAD cover name, murdered Brendan Campbell. They claimed that he was a leading drug dealer. In July 1998, 33-year-old Andrew Kearney from New Lodge in north Belfast was shot by the IRA. After the shooting, they jammed the lifts, and he bled to death. It transpired that Mr Kearney had been shot because he had got the better of a local IRA hero in a fight.

In January 1999, author and former IRA man turned informer Eamon Collins was beaten to death by the IRA in Newry, County Down. In May 1999, the IRA murdered Brendan 'Speedy' Fegan. They again justified their action by claiming that he was a leading drugs dealer. They shot him dead in a bar in Newry. In June 1999, the IRA murdered Paul Downey. Once again, they claimed that he had been a prominent drugs dealer. In June 1999, Martin McGartland, an RUC agent who infiltrated the IRA, narrowly escaped with his life after being shot in Whitley Bay, Northumbria, by IRA members. I have a copy of a letter sent to Mr McGartland by Northumbria police. It shows that they had arrested Henry Fitzsimmons and Scott Gary Monaghan, two well known Provisional IRA members, and that they were regarded as responsible for the attempt to kill Martin McGartland. However, even with all of that evidence, the Secretary of State considered that in the round there had been no breach of the IRA ceasefire or the terms of the Belfast Agreement.

4.15 pm

In July 1999, the IRA abducted and murdered Charles Bennett, a New Lodge man. Also in July, the men arrested, and convicted in connection with the importation of arms from Florida were shown to be members of the Provisional IRA. It was proven that that activity was sanctioned at the highest level of the Provisional IRA. I will come back to that issue in my winding-up speech. Clearly, those men were members of the Provisional IRA. On the Noraid Internet site, they are described as IRA prisoners in an American jail. An article in 'GQ' magazine shows clearly the links between the Provisional IRA and those who were arrested, and asserts that they were part of an IRA gun running escapade. It is interesting that that activity was being planned at the same time as the organisation's representatives were sitting down with Senator George Mitchell and telling him how sincere they were about trying to achieve progress on decommissioning. While they were telling the senator that they were serious about decommissioning, they were importing guns from the United States to increase their stockpile of weaponry.

In August 1999, the IRA deported five men from Dungannon and one from Belfast for what they judged to be antisocial behaviour. I suppose that they consider

their murdering and gunrunning to be civil and convivial. In October 2000, the IRA murdered Real IRA man, Joe O'Connor, in Ballymurphy, west Belfast. In April 2001, the IRA used the usual excuse of drug dealing to justify murdering Christopher O'Kane in Londonderry. In May 2001, the IRA again murdered someone who, it claimed, was a drug dealer. The victim, that time, was Paul Daly from Belfast. He was shot in front of his family.

In April 2001, Londonderry man, Gerald McFadden, from Rathlin Gardens in the Creggan estate was charged after he was found to have personal details of senior RUC officers. He has since been convicted of that offence. That demonstrates that the IRA was engaged in the targeting of RUC officers and that, once again, it was in contravention of the explicit requirement to use only peaceful and democratic means. In June 2001, the Provisional IRA raided Belfast docks and stole about £4 million. Also in June 2001, the IRA raided the house of an arms dealer in Athlone, County Westmeath. The attackers threatened him, tied up his wife and children, and stole over 100 shotguns, rifles and a quantity of ammunition.

In August 2001 came Colombia, another effort by the Provisional IRA to secure the peace process. I will deal with that issue in my winding-up speech. That was an added embarrassment for Sinn Féin, because all three men involved had party connections. According to the Government of their friend, Fidel Castro — to whom Mr Adams is soon going out to talk — one of the men, Connolly, was the accredited representative of Sinn Féin in Cuba and, no doubt, in South America. I have said James Monaghan was on the brigade staff at the headquarters of the Provisional IRA. He is their well-known chief engineer and bomb maker. Such an individual would not have been a freelancer; he was on a mission sanctioned by the so-called Army Council of the Provisional IRA. They tried to tell us that those boys were really on holiday. I can think of more attractive places in which to holiday than the malaria-stricken jungles, where the opportunities for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to kidnap or kill must be greater than anywhere else in the world. Clearly, the Provisional IRA, at the very highest level, sanctioned that mission.

I cannot say anything about the arrest of IRA leader, Eddie Copeland, in north Belfast, as the matter is before the courts. I could have spoken of many other IRA failures to maintain its ceasefire. One wonders, after hearing that catalogue of events, what the IRA must do before the House imposes sanctions on Sinn Féin/IRA. I hope, in what may be the last act before the suspension of the Assembly, that the House will not again dodge the issue and that it will support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: One amendment to the motion has been selected and has been published in the

Marshallled List of Amendments. Many Members have expressed a wish to speak, so I must limit Mr Attwood to 10 minutes and all other Members to five minutes.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after “activity” and insert

“and calls on all parties who profess to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means to unequivocally repudiate any and all such violence and to call on all paramilitary groups to give real effect to the decommissioning provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.”

If we — and certain illegal organisations — so choose, the events of the past summer can enable us to deal conclusively with illegal weapons on this island. If some fail to choose that option, they will be failing to acknowledge and accept the impact of the still unfolding events of recent days in the United States, Latin America, Ireland and in the communities that we represent. If some fail to choose that option, they will miss the beat of the people of this part of the world. They will also miss the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to events in other parts of the world. Decommissioning would confirm that we are moving beyond conflict at a time when others seem to be moving towards greater conflict.

All of us have, or should have, real concerns about the conduct of more than one, or indeed all, of the illegal paramilitary groups that are still active on this island. The attitude of some inside and outside the Chamber to illegal organisations now and in the past has been informed by their worst fears. That is a valid and genuine perspective, but it is one that paramilitary organisations and their advocates dismiss with the ritual recitation that “the guns are silent”. That is not always the case, and that is not their only obligation. If the worst has been done to someone’s family or community by an illegal organisation, their fears will inform their judgements about the nature and intentions of that organisation. If evidence exists that discredits that organisation’s claims, mistrust will prosper. That is not to give succour to leaders who alarm their communities or constituencies; I say that to acknowledge the real anxiety in those communities about their future on an island that is changing enormously but which contains illegal organisations which, they feel, have not changed enough.

There are others inside and outside the Chamber who have experienced the realisation of their worst fears in the years of violent conflict and who have consciously sought to allow their judgements about illegal organisations to be informed a little more by their best hopes. Others have attempted to understand the transition that those organisations and those associated with them have tried to make from unambiguous support for armed struggle to exclusively peaceful and democratic means of conducting political affairs. That is a difficult political and moral line to walk. It becomes longer and more

difficult to walk when evidence emerges that organisations have acted in a way that is contrary to a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means of conducting political affairs. That is the context for those of us who have expressed and maintained confidence in the ceasefires of various organisations.

Contexts and politics change. Today the context is the unfolding events of recent weeks and months, set against the backdrop of the uncertain and difficult years since the Good Friday Agreement. The new context and the continuing doubts about, and dangers to, the agreement now require a further response. If illegal organisations do not acknowledge the impact of recent threats and terror in the North on our political situation, or the mistrust arising from events in Latin America, or the parallels and consequences of attacks on commercial, civilian and military targets at home or abroad, recently or in the past, they will contribute to an environment wherein the worst fears can gather and the best intentions can fracture.

To rehearse tired and tested responses to the need to put weapons verifiably and completely beyond use, without appreciating the changed and changing local and international environment and the extent of the investment in the Good Friday Agreement, is to ignore unfolding events. If any political party professing commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means fails to repudiate unequivocally violence, it contributes to the environment wherein worst fears inform, not merely the judgement of political leaders, but the judgement of the wider community.

There has been ambiguity about sectarian attacks and evasiveness about events in Latin America. There have been parades with ranks of people in balaclavas and articulation of the grievances of one community, coupled with silence about the grievances of the other. None of that aids the resolution of the issue of illegal weapons, nor does saying — rightly — that our best response to events in America is to make our agreement work, while failing to recognise that illegal organisations and their past or present conspiracies and actions, at home or abroad, are at the heart of the threat to that agreement.

The UDA and UFF ceasefire does not exist in any meaningful way. The six UDA and UFF commanders are not likely to meet and declare their ceasefire over, but in at least half of their command areas, and in more than half of their areas of influence, the ceasefire has been breached — and that breach is systemic, to borrow the words of the Secretary of State. The situation requires both political and security responses. First, the UDA should be made aware that in the event of its ceasefire being redesignated, all its command areas will be affected. Secondly, the full weight of the law should be brought to bear on those persons — on licence or not — involved in threat or terror, particularly those

directing the operations of the UDA and the UFF. The police must be — and be seen to be — more interventionist in bringing the full force of the law to bear on those carrying out activities that are anti-Catholic, anti-Nationalist, anti-agreement and anti-change.

Yesterday, with regard to the IRA ceasefire, John Hume said:

“Given the current international atmospheres, could I say directly to Sinn Féin please do all that you have to do now and all that you actually can do by taking the necessary actions to ensure that all weapons are put completely beyond use”.

That was a request to respond to the particular circumstances of this week. It should be heeded. The IRA will make a monumental error of judgement if it concludes that if it hunkers down and keeps its head down, events will pass it by, and people will return to it on more tolerable terms than might otherwise be the case. The IRA will commit a further error of judgement if it concludes that its engagement with the de Chastelain commission is an adequate or convincing response to that requirement.

4.30 pm

Although the media and the political leadership has its doubts, and the world sees the issue of terror more single-mindedly than before, the IRA may think that that will pass and that people will support the movement again. It may conclude that such isolation will be much as it was in the past: the IRA has been there, done that, survived it and come back stronger. If that is what the IRA concludes, it will have misread the shifts on this island and elsewhere. The sooner that that is recognised, the better it will be for the agreement, for all our citizens and for all of us who are responding creatively and purposefully to the unfolding events in a world that is smaller, more intimate and more familiar — but also more vulnerable — than at any time in history.

Some will refer to a series of real or alleged breaches of the Good Friday Agreement and failures of implementation to explain why weapons have not been put completely and verifiably beyond use. The Unionist political leadership will be blamed for its failure to lead. There is some truth in that, but it ignores the wider unease in pro-agreement unionism about the IRA's intentions.

Mr Trimble: When he moved the motion, Mr Robinson made it clear that it was directed against all paramilitaries, and I was glad to hear his condemnation of Loyalist violence. Although there are reasons to focus on the Republican movement's activities, this side of the House should make its condemnation of Loyalist violence clear.

The motion refers to a commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means, which is one of the fundamental principles of the agreement. Two words

that are used in the motion are also significant: “inconsistent” and “intolerant”. It is asserted that violent activity is inconsistent with a commitment to peaceful means and to holding office. The motion is absolutely right in principle.

I made it clear in my first speech to the Assembly in July 1998 that those who signed up to the agreement and its implementation would give people the opportunity to change. I shall not quote everything that I said, but I recall that I said that if people had a past it did not mean that they could not have a future. However, they were required to demonstrate change. I have returned to that point many times since, most recently in December 2000, when I said that there could not be a moral vacuum at the heart of the process.

We are engaged in a transition, and in the course of that transition we will hold people to the promises that they have made. I have held the Republican movement to its promises, and it was because Republicans failed to implement their promises that I imposed sanctions on them, first by preventing their attendance at North/South Ministerial Council meetings, and secondly by triggering the present crisis through my resignation.

The Ulster Unionist Party has been clear about the principles. We have given people opportunities, but opportunities are also a challenge. I say to the Republican movement as firmly as I can that there has been a litany of Republican activities over the past few years, as Mr Robinson laboriously set out, culminating in what did happen and what may have happened in Colombia. Those events, the Republican movement's reaction to them and its failure to deal with them have destroyed its credibility. That does not mean that the situation is irretrievable. However, for the situation to be retrieved, the Republican movement must move urgently to rebuild that credibility. It must do that now, quickly and convincingly.

It would be intolerable for the present situation to continue indefinitely — indeed, it will not. As Mr Robinson noted, this might well be the last time that we debate this issue in the Assembly. It may well be that, come this weekend, the Sinn Féin Ministers will be turned out of office. Unfortunately, others will suffer the same fate. If that happens, it will not be because of this motion, or because of any posturing — it will happen because of the actions that my Colleagues and I have taken. Also, to be fair, it will happen because Tony Blair did effect change. Reference was made to his promise to propose change. He went further; he made changes, and they will take effect this weekend unless certain things are done by Republicans.

The amendment is worthy of consideration. It challenges paramilitaries to give real effect to the decommissioning provisions of the agreement. I welcome the amendment because it is important that that

challenge be put. Consequently, my Colleagues and I will support the amendment. If the amendment fails, we will support the original motion. At this stage, it is important that we concentrate on what has to be done and what people should do — even if there is not that much prospect of its happening. As a result of that, other action will be taken in the next few days and weeks.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. In the Good Friday Agreement, all parties reaffirmed their commitment to

“the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations.”

They also confirmed their intention to

“continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and to use any influence they might have to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years following endorsement in referendums North and South of the agreement and in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement”.

I repeat:

“in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement.”

That is the agreement that Sinn Féin is wedded to. Sinn Féin is absolutely committed to resolving our conflict by democratic and peaceful means. There is a collective responsibility on all parties to the agreement to resolve the issues, and Sinn Féin has told the Governments and other parties to go back and read the agreement. I note the telling omission of any recognition of this salient reality from the amendment, so I remind the SDLP of that fact once again. Of course, Mr Trimble has constantly misrepresented the agreement on this matter. It is of particular regret that the SDLP, by this ill-conceived amendment, has today given credence to that — perhaps inadvertently, perhaps because it is still reacting to recent election results, or because it is preoccupied with internal party matters.

This year, Loyalists have carried out over 200 bomb attacks on Catholic homes, businesses and churches. Loyalists have shot dead two young men in recent weeks and have created a blockade to prevent Catholic primary school children from going to school in north Belfast. Last weekend, Loyalist murder gangs again attempted to kill Catholics. If the process is to succeed, the two Governments and all the parties that signed the agreement must defend the agreement. It is the template for dealing with the matters that still need to be resolved as part of the conflict resolution process, including the issue of arms.

Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement the British Government are committed to delivering on several key issues, including the creation of a representative policing service that is fully accountable for its actions and free from partisan, political control, a fair and impartial system of justice, effective structures to safeguard human rights, economic, social, cultural and

political equality and the demilitarisation of our society. They have not delivered on those.

Sinn Féin has a vision for the future that goes beyond present difficulties. That means facing up to rejectionists, sceptics and cynics in the British political establishment as well as rejectionist Unionism. It means facing up to the reality that the paramilitary threat to the process comes from Loyalist, Unionist guns.

We have a significant common responsibility. We were elected to provide leadership that would represent the diversity of our society. We are leaders with a mandate to lead our community out of conflict and into a new and more democratic political dispensation. When we signed the Good Friday Agreement, we accepted that there were matters on which we could not, at that point in our history, reach agreement. We accepted pragmatically that we should either take the necessary time to develop sufficient mutual trust to move forward or that independent bodies should be set up to deal with such matters. That proposition is as valid now as it was in May 1998, when it received powerful endorsement from the people of Ireland. The motion was tabled by a party that failed the test of commitment to democratic dialogue during the negotiations. It would be unfair to accuse the DUP of having lost the plot with regard to the peace process — it was clearly always out of its depth.

I see no value in following the DUP agenda. It knows that the motion cannot achieve its objectives, because it has no effect on policy and no binding authority. Its only purpose is to harden hearts that were already too hard. It is a divisive motion that reflects only the sad vision of its authors. The DUP will, no doubt, refuse to discuss the sectarian attacks on Catholic schoolchildren on the streets of Ardoyne. We can see members of the DUP standing shoulder to shoulder with the UDA in Glenbryn, as they did in Harryville, in order to promote and prolong sectarian tensions and violence.

The SDLP’s amendment, much like its arguments on post-Nationalism or its decision to cave into Unionist and British demands on policing boards, demonstrates clearly why Sinn Féin is now the largest Nationalist party. The amendment abandons the collective responsibility spelt out in the Good Friday Agreement and refuses to acknowledge that, in May 2000, we agreed on the need for consistency in the agreement. We agreed a route out of our divisions. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Neeson: My party also submitted an amendment, but it will support the SDLP’s amendment. Once again, the institutions are under threat, and we must ask ourselves why. The answer lies in the refusal by paramilitaries — Republican and Loyalist — to put illegal arms verifiably beyond use. I ask paramilitaries whether their armed struggles have been ended or merely suspended.

Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries must answer that question.

Is the Good Friday Agreement a means to an end or is it a settlement that secured the support of the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? Unfortunately, paramilitarism is still with us. There are those who want to control territory and achieve their own selfish ends with bullets to the arms and legs and severe beatings with pickaxes.

There are those who carry out murders and bomb attacks because of their blatant hatred of their fellow citizens. There is clear evidence that those who are officially on ceasefire have been involved in serious violence, including murder and murder attempts. They include the IRA, UDA, UFF, UVF and LVF. It now appears to be acceptable for Protestants to murder Protestants and for Catholics to murder Catholics. It seems to have become acceptable.

The reaction to last week's carnage in the United States demonstrates the democratic world's total abhorrence of international terrorism. Is it any wonder that the vast majority of Members treat with contempt the excuses for the presence of three Irish Republicans in Colombia? That cannot be dismissed as the dying embers of paramilitarism. Loyalist and Republican paramilitarism has been allowed to become institutionalised in Northern Ireland. Is it not ironic that the police have now become the targets of Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland?

4.45 pm

The DUP's motives in tabling this motion are questionable, especially as DUP members have shared platforms with Loyalist paramilitaries and have also been present at Loyalist memorials. Such scenes have been captured by cameras on many occasions. Are they democrats, or do they want to stand shoulder to shoulder with those who have been involved in some of the worst atrocities in Northern Ireland? Time is running out; it is now time for the paramilitaries on all sides to deliver their illegal arms and weapons. That was what was agreed in the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Roche: The events of the past week have highlighted a principle that is fundamental to democracy — there must be a clear separation between democracy and terrorism. That means that no political party associated with terrorism should be permitted into any form of government that purports to be democratic. That principle must be applied equally to Sinn Féin and to parties in the Assembly that represent so-called Loyalist terrorist organisations, although my comments will be primarily directed at Sinn Féin.

What is the true political character of Sinn Féin? That question can be easily answered using the party's publications and statements. Sinn Féin is committed to

the Armalite and the ballot box. There are three fundamental features of the Armalite-and-ballot-box strategy. The first is that the political activity of Sinn Féin in the context of that strategy can never be construed as a renunciation of violence. In fact, it is a form of political activity that is meant to support and legitimise violence. The second point is that this Armalite-and-ballot-box strategy is not a localised strategy; it is a strategy that links into a global network of international terrorism. It is beyond dispute that the IRA has long established links and connections with Basque terrorists in Spain, the Palestine Liberation Organisation in the Middle East and the FARC terrorists in Colombia. The international network of terror to which the IRA is connected is supported by a number of rogue states, particularly — in the case of the IRA — by Libya, which supplied it with a huge arsenal of arms in the 1980s. Those arms have been kept secure by the IRA in the Republic of Ireland, where the authorities have never been able to find them.

The political activity of Sinn Féin, the political wing of this so-called Republican movement, is again linked into that network of international terrorism. For example, Amyee Hernandez, the spokesperson for Fidel Castro, said on 17 August that Niall Connolly, now in a Colombian jail, was the official representative of Sinn Féin in Cuba.

The question that we must ask in assessing the true character of this party, and therefore its suitability for involvement in any democratic institution, is what is it that cements its connection with international terrorism? The answer is anti-capitalism, fanaticism and a hatred of the United States, which was manifest in the 'Republican News' on 12 September, the day after the appalling acts of terrorism in the United States. An article in 'Republican News' actually asserted that the United States was itself responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent people in the Middle East and Colombia. It was precisely that hatred that motivated those who drove the planes into the two towers and the Pentagon.

That strategy is absolutely incompatible with democracy. The relationship between democracy and terror is a one-way relationship. Terrorism corrupts democracy. The whole so-called peace process and the institutions are based on the opposite assumption that, somehow or other, the democratic process could democratise terrorism. That was the assumption, and the best possible reading that can be given of the UUP leader's concessions to Nationalism. However, Mr Trimble now knows that he was wrong and that there is no integrity despite what he has just said, in this movement, which is inextricably wedded to violence. The refusal to decommission arms is the litmus test of that.

It was not only Mr Trimble who operated under the false apprehension that, somehow or other, democracy could democratise terrorism. The whole process was

sustained by the soon-to-be ex-leader of the SDLP. Anyone who has a heart for democracy in Northern Ireland will be delighted that this man is, I hope, beginning his exit from the political stage.

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

Ms Morrice: I support the amendment. There is no question but that we must address the unacceptable level of paramilitary activity, be it Republican or Loyalist. At the same time, we must encourage people to remain committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. As David Trimble has said, we must encourage people to adopt those means.

In Northern Ireland we have a special understanding of what has happened in the United States. We must use that understanding as an opportunity to move our own peace process forward. Every one of us has a responsibility to do that, and that includes using our influence to urge the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons. We should use our influence to combat sectarianism and bigotry at all levels of society. For example, we should get a police force that is representative of our communities. I urge all the relevant parties to respond positively to the Secretary of State's call to nominate to the Policing Board. We need a well-resourced, highly motivated police service to tackle lawlessness.

We must also confront the problems of sectarianism and sectarian violence. We are still living with them. We have not tackled them, and it is our responsibility to do so. Political leadership is essential. We must never forget that the politics of division at leadership level leads to division at street level, so it is important that we, as politicians, act responsibly in word and deed. There is nothing to be gained by using this Chamber for political point scoring. We need to be involved now in collective, inclusive negotiations.

The South Africans suggested that if the chemistry does not work between parties or personalities, we should find personalities between whom the chemistry will work, personalities who will find understanding, so that there will be a new dynamic in the process. Above all, we want to continue to encourage people to remain committed to the peace process. That is essential. In his opening remarks, Mr Peter Robinson said that we were settling for a lower level of terrorism. That is not the case. We are moving out of conflict. That is what the peace process is about. We have come far, but what we need now is political stability. We cannot afford instability. We cannot afford a political vacuum. Not so long ago, we were held up as an example of how mediation can help to resolve conflict. We must continue to show the world that it can be done. We can work problems out through meaningful engagement and dialogue. We were getting there; we are getting there.

We have the means, in the Good Friday Agreement, to live peacefully together. We must fully implement

that agreement. If we let it go, we let hope go. We must never do that. That is why I look forward to seeing every Member back in the Chamber, if not next week, then sometime very soon.

Mr McCartney: The hypocrisy of David Trimble is truly mind-boggling. He condemns the UVF and the UDA — they do need some condemning — but he used them to get the capacity to sign the Belfast Agreement. He was photographed flanked by them, among his supporters. He also used their votes to be elected to the office of First Minister. They were useful then.

From the beginning, my party has said that there must be no truck of any kind and no political intercourse with the representatives of terror, whether they be Sinn Féin, the UDA, the UVF or others. The purpose of the Belfast Agreement was never the creation of a democratic political settlement. It was about resolving the conflict between the British state and violent Republican terrorism, in order to protect the British mainland from a bombing campaign. It was cynical, but that was the purpose. That is why all Members of the Assembly must know that breaches of the ceasefires by Sinn Féin/IRA, the UDA or the UVF, no matter how blatant they are, will never be determined as such by the Secretary of State. The ceasefires are necessary to keep Sinn Féin/IRA in the process. Without ceasefires the process is not worth a penny candle, from the British political point of view.

It is necessary for Sinn Féin/IRA to retain its weaponry, because that is the accelerant that ensures that the British Government, fearful of attacks on the mainland, adhere to a policy of movement to a united Ireland. The British Government will never find that any of those terrorist groups is in breach of its ceasefire. In fact, they are so cynical that they dismiss murders such as that of Charles Bennett by the IRA as matters, as one NIO civil servant put it, of internal housekeeping.

The Assembly must face the fact that these terrorist groups have no place in any assembly or institution of democratic government. Sinn Féin/IRA never signed up to the decommissioning of weaponry. Sinn Féin made it plain in the 24 hours before the agreement was signed that it would walk if that requirement were made. Mr Trimble knew that, but he went on and signed a meaningless agreement, an agreement that he knew would enable Sinn Féin/IRA to remain within this allegedly democratic process.

5.00 pm

The time has now come for everyone to face up to its failure.

A lot of sentimental expressions and the voicing of almost totally meaningless, lofty sentiments, such as those repeatedly expressed by Jane Morrice, will take us nowhere. The harsh reality of what happened in

New York was a lesson learnt from the IRA. The IRA was capable of bringing a world democracy, with the fourth largest economy, to a policy of abject appeasement to protect itself. Why should Osama bin Laden and others not follow its example? Such people have no place in any form of democratic institution. That also applies to those murderous people, whose political representatives are not here today, from the Loyalist section of terrorism, who are persecuting the Catholic community — their representatives should not be in any form of democratic institution.

I support the motion.

Mr Hilditch: I too support the motion, and I thank the proposer for bringing the matter to the Floor. It is unacceptable that any party associated with active terrorism should continue to hold Executive positions. It might be helpful if some Members from the Ulster Unionist Party who have still to speak could enlighten us and elaborate on the comments of Mr Trimble with regard to what exactly the Prime Minister, Mr Blair, has done to bring this matter to a conclusion.

I quote from page 3 of the Policing Plan for Northern Ireland 1999-2000:

“While most paramilitary organisations are on ceasefire, they retain a capacity for sustained violence” —

and —

“Racketeering and paramilitary assaults remain a scourge in a civilised society, while the increasing fear of the influence of drugs, particularly in the youth culture, is a growing cause of anxiety.”

That is evidence that while the Secretary of State chooses to ignore blatant breaches of the so-called ceasefire, the Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, in his policing priorities, quite clearly sees the activities of paramilitary groups allegedly on ceasefire as a major threat to public order and a source of public concern. Indeed, the plan, under the heading of “Protecting the Community from Terrorism and Alleged Criminal Activity”, lists one of its main objectives as being:

“to counter the terrorist threat on behalf of the community and bring to justice those responsible for terrorist crime.”

The Chief Constable’s report for 2000-01 states that

“Paramilitary activity persists, even by mainstream terrorist organisations. These organisations, although they continue to adhere to their definition of a cessation of military operations, have continued to engage in a whole range of criminality. They still retain their weapons and thus the capacity to kill, injure and terrorise. The people of Northern Ireland have endured enough of this malevolence over the past 30 years and it serves no cause whatsoever except the evil purposes that these individuals and groups seek to pursue for their own wicked and selfish reasons.”

Members will no doubt have picked up on the reference to mainstream terrorist organisations and the cessation of military operations, which points clearly

to IRA/Sinn Féin — Members of this House by day and also members of a terrorist organisation continuing to engage in a whole range of criminality.

Punishment attacks have continued to increase, and the intensity of the attacks continues to shock and leave the community feeling violated. The number of so-called paramilitary-style punishment attacks has increased by 145 in 2000-01 when compared to the previous year. These range from kneecappings to elbows, wrists and ankles being shot to a bloody pulp. People are beaten with hurley sticks and baseball bats studded with nails, and with iron bars and bricks. This is the kind of justice that Sinn Féin/IRA offers the people of Northern Ireland. It speaks of human rights, equality and justice and offers kangaroo courts as an alternative.

The Belfast Agreement has become no more than a political cover for terrorist godfathers carrying out their dastardly deeds on a daily basis. But is it really good enough to expect law-abiding citizens to suffer the indignity of having to endure a terrorist in the Executive of the Assembly and his cohorts on the Floor of the House as part of the Government here at Stormont? They orchestrate a policy of ethnic cleansing in north Belfast, similar to the one that we have endured in the border counties over the last 30 years. This is the democracy that Sinn Féin/IRA has to offer the Protestant people of Northern Ireland.

Sinn Féin/IRA is here under false pretences. It believes that it has an entitlement to places in the Government of Northern Ireland and at the same time an entitlement to wage war upon its citizens and to terrorise, racketeer, carry out punishment beatings, control drug lords and pollute our young people.

How can any right-thinking person believe that the presence of such a group in the Assembly can be an asset to the community? It is to the Assembly’s shame that it has remained for so long, but it has been tried and found wanting. It has been exposed by the gunrunning incident in Florida, by the Colombian escapade and by its connections with Middle East and north African terrorists.

A journalist for the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ wrote

“when the men who had done terrible things to their fellow citizens were streaming through the rusty turnstiles outside the Maze Prison the Secretary of State, then Peter Mandelson, said it was a bitter pill for people to swallow”.

Today the pill has generated bitterness; that is proof of the pudding. The Chief Constable has voiced his concerns. The increased number of attacks by paramilitary groups on cessation speaks for itself as does the determination of IRA/Sinn Féin to hold on to its weapons.

The ethnic cleansing of areas such as Whitewell, West Circular, Ainsworth Avenue, Glenbryn, Twaddell Avenue, Oldpark, the lower Shankill, the Newtownards

Road and the Albertbridge Road were all orchestrated by Sinn Féin/IRA in an attempt to force further concessions on decommissioning. That shows that street agitation is more important to Sinn Féin/IRA than anything the Assembly will ever decide.

The facts speak for themselves. Sinn Féin/IRA is here under false pretences and has not been committed to exclusively peaceful means.

Dr Farren: At the Lammas Fair in Ballycastle a few weeks ago a crude but massive car bomb was diffused. Had it not been diffused it is likely that a tremendous fire would have swept through the crowded, narrow streets of the town and that Ballycastle would have experienced a tragedy proportionate to the horrific events witnessed in New York last week. Ballycastle was spared that prospect, but those who planned, constructed and placed that car bomb were as contemptuous of human life as those who planned and executed the horrific events in the United States.

The Ballycastle bomb was claimed by a group calling itself the Red Hand Defenders. This bomb was another in a long list of incidents that have taken place across north and south Antrim, east Derry and elsewhere over the past year. In north Antrim the targets have mainly been premises associated with the Catholic Church, the GAA and the Nationalist community. In south Antrim two young men were brutally murdered; one was on his way to work, and one was walking the street with his friends. In east Antrim my party Colleagues, among many others, have come under frequent attack in their homes. North Belfast has witnessed violence and tension leading to the obscenity of a picket attempting to deny young children access to their school.

To that list can be added the many so-called punishment beatings meted out by people with no mandate and in total disregard for any norms of justice. Some of those incidents are motivated by nothing more sophisticated than sectarian hatred. The planning and execution of many other incidents suggest that those involved are politically motivated to undermine the Good Friday Agreement.

While much of the violence that I have mentioned is perpetrated by Loyalists, so-called Republicans have also been responsible for violence, including murder, and they cannot hide from their responsibility for that. If the Assembly's claims to uphold democratic values are to be meaningful — and a majority here also claim to uphold the principles of the Good Friday Agreement — Members have no option but to condemn all such violence and oppose, without equivocation, those responsible for it.

As Members know, we are once more at the brink with crucial decisions being made that could affect the future of the institutions and the agreement. Underlying the decisions that need to be made is the choice

between a peaceful and democratic way forward and the instability that feeds and makes room for paramilitary violence. The obligation on Members is to ensure that democracy and the will of the people prevail. That does not require, as some suggest, miracles.

Instead it requires a persistent and determined commitment to achieve the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement and to use, where necessary, all our influence to convince others to do likewise. To do otherwise is to betray the democratically expressed will of the Irish people, North and South, who voted in favour of the agreement. In the achievement of those objectives it cannot be accepted that decommissioning should await the implementation of everything else in the agreement.

It was intended that, through the commitments to exclusively democratic and peaceful political means contained in the Good Friday Agreement, decommissioning would be achieved within two years. Further commitments and developments made since then restored hope that decommissioning would be achieved this year.

Paramilitaries, notably the IRA, pledged to work positively and progressively with the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. However, their continued failure to progress decommissioning is eroding the mutual confidence that is essential to the full implementation of the agreement.

Now that the world is coming together to defend the principles of our democratic way of life, it is beyond time that we in Ireland, North and South, made it clear that all traces of paramilitary terror must be removed, not just elsewhere, but in our own country. This would allow our people to enjoy the peace and political stability promised in the agreement. I support the amendment.

Mr Foster: The motion should not have come before the House. It is born out of the failure by Loyalist and Republican paramilitary groups to fulfil the promises they made to the people of Northern Ireland when their representatives signed the Belfast Agreement. They have failed miserably.

The agreement committed those groups holding illegal arms to decommission them by May 2000. When the deadline passed, further talks were held and the groups were given an extension until June 2001. Those were not Unionist deadlines; they were commitments entered into by the political representatives of terrorism in this country. As a result of that failure, parties that are committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means have found themselves at a great political disadvantage.

The political representatives of the IRA have sought to remain in the Executive, and to govern the people of Northern Ireland while retaining the means to coerce those people with the force of arms and the threat of injury or death. Sinn Féin/IRA has continued to use

the threat of Republicanism based on physical force to squeeze further concessions from the Government on issues such as policing. Meanwhile, the other democratic parties have had to rely solely on the democratic mandate that they achieved at the ballot box. The situation is inconsistent with democratic principles and is unsustainable.

The IRA claims that its guns have been silent — tell that to the families of the young people who have been abducted and shot by the punishment squads, and the families of those who have been murdered. If it is not the Provisional IRA, who else is abducting and attacking young people in Republican areas? I doubt that the SDLP has acquired a military wing. I have no doubt that if it were the work of Loyalists or the security forces, the Sinn Féin leadership would be the first to run to the media and call for an inquiry into human rights abuses.

The Sinn Féin leadership has been quick to apportion blame to the UDA after the recent spate of pipe bombings in north Belfast. However, it has been less vocal in its assessment of the perpetrators of the numerous kneecappings that have been carried out in west Belfast. The silence of leading Sinn Féin figures, including, ironically, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Education, and their failure to unequivocally condemn these attacks on young people has been as deafening as it has been telling. Actions speak louder than words.

Let no one doubt my stance on Loyalist violence: whether it be by pipe bombs, blast bombs, sectarian shootings or punishment shootings, I condemn it wholeheartedly. These attacks, like their perpetrators, have no place in a civilised society and should cease immediately.

The Unionist community wants no part of Loyalist violence and, time after time, it has demonstrated that by rejecting at the ballot box those Loyalist parties linked to terrorist groups. Sadly, this has not been the case with regard to Sinn Féin/IRA. Anyone has the right to sit in an Assembly, provided they have been properly elected, but their inclusion in Government is a different matter.

Governments require a higher standard of probity from their Ministers. Ministers must govern in the interests of all the people. An Executive therefore should not include Ministers who support terror in any way, or who give encouragement to those who seek to retain the capacity to inflict terror.

5.15 pm

We have suffered from terrorism for a long time. The United States has suffered in the last week. Terror at any level is terror — it is destructive. I say again that no party should remain in Government while retaining

the means to coerce its people by force of arms and threat of injury or death. That is totally incompatible with democratic principles — it is fascism.

The only people in Northern Ireland who should hold weapons are the forces of the state and those properly licensed by the state within a legal framework of due process. Only then can the safety of the citizen be secured.

How long can some alleged politicians continue to remain politically dishonest, circumventing the whole democratic system? There is an enlightening saying ‘Tell me whom you associate with, and I will tell you who you are’. Does it ring true? Are we being told something? I am convinced that we are. I support the amended motion.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How could any decent person take the motion seriously, given the track record of the party proposing it? That party talks the most about democracy and peace, but it practices them least. That party’s very origins are steeped in bigotry, sectarianism and anti-Catholic fundamentalism. That party’s members have literally got away with murder. That party, over the years, has nodded and winked its way to power on the back of Loyalist paramilitary activity. That party said no to the Good Friday Agreement.

It is well known in political life in the Six Counties that violence channelled through Loyalist paramilitary activity has been used by Unionist politicians to bolster their position and pressurise their opponents. They have not had to accept the practical and moral responsibility for, or the consequences of, the actions of their paramilitary comrades.

Since the inception of this state, when moves were made to undermine the Unionist ascendancy, or when there was any hint that Protestant and Catholic people might come together as human beings, the heavy hand and the big mouths of the party that proposed the motion were there to ensure that it did not happen.

Unionists in or out of Government have used state forces — the RUC and the UDR — and Loyalist mobs to terrorise, bully and intimidate their way to power. The Nationalist community paid the price for this co-operative arrangement.

The righteous brothers on the opposite benches who proposed the motion have no problems with cosyng up to their paramilitary friends when it suits them. We saw it in Glenbryn recently, and we saw it in Harryville. The DUP were cosyng up to the UDA. The common theme of this cosy relationship is to stir up sectarian hatred and violence against Catholics. What do we see while they are cosyng up to the UDA? The hearts of Protestant communities are being ripped apart by drugs.

We have all seen members of the DUP marching on many occasions with the UDA and UVF. This was not only to demonstrate unity of purpose, but also to signal to the British Government that unofficial armies have always supported their position as politicians. Loyalist paramilitaries are the muscle behind Unionist rhetoric. Yet the Member who proposed the motion can prattle on about exclusively peaceful and democratic means. He can produce all the statistics he wants, while his party members stand on platforms with the LVF. They elect deputy mayors who share platforms with masked gunmen showing off their firing skills. The Nationalist community sees these people for what they are — the Afrikaners of the Six Counties.

The blatant hypocrisy of the DUP is matched only by their ineptitude as politicians who cannot detach from their paramilitary allies because they might blow the whistle on their extra-political-curriculum activities. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has a right to be heard.

Mrs Nelis: It would be more fitting if the DUP demonstrated to the Chamber its commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. The difficulty is that the DUP is not, and never has been, a democratic constitutional party. In 1966, the then Ulster Unionist Prime Minister, Terence O'Neill, told the House of Commons that the UVF had been involved in the Malvern Street murder of a young Catholic — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: They were also important officials in the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee, chaired by Dr Paisley. The proposer of the motion began his political career and commitment to constitutional politics by joining the Lagan Valley unit of the Ulster Protestant Volunteers. Members who are old enough may recall that both groups were involved in the explosions in 1969 that precipitated Terence O'Neill's downfall. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs Nelis: They joined with Ulster Vanguard to form the United Ulster Unionist Council to destroy the Sunningdale Agreement.

And who can forget Ulster Resistance? While the leadership of the DUP was drilling on the top of mountains, waving firearms certificates, militant members of the organisation were importing guns into the North from South Africa. When they were caught in Paris, the leader of the party went to bail them out. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Mrs Nelis, your time is up.

Mrs Nelis: Perhaps John Reid will not only examine the status of Loyalist ceasefires —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Nelis, your time is up.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and oppose the amendment. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members on both sides have a right to be heard.

Mr Shannon: Once again, the Assembly has returned to the recurring problem of paramilitary activity. Many of us wonder if we will ever come to a day when the word “paramilitary” will be put beyond use.

Last week, we all watched in horror as terrorists flew passenger jets into prominent buildings in the United States. We in Northern Ireland felt all the old feelings of the past 30 years flooding upon us: the heartache, the fear, the panic and — very clearly and honestly — the anger. Sinn Féin/IRA added insult to injury by declaring in the Assembly its heartfelt sympathy for acts of terrorism, when it has participated in the deaths of many residents of this country by committing terrorist attacks.

Sinn Féin spoke of its sorrow at such losses and condemned those who carried out the attacks. That sentiment rang a little false for me and for many others, as it is well known that Middle Eastern extremists have been allies of the IRA for over 20 years. Perhaps Sinn Féin/IRA is trying to distance itself from the Middle East and its extremists to ensure that it will receive the mighty American dollar, or perhaps there has been a falling out amongst this den of killers.

Sinn Féin has tried to tell us that the three men recently arrested in Bogota are not in any way connected to it, yet there are photographs in newspapers of those men participating in Sinn Féin party activities. Of course, rumour has it that they actually got lost. They were looking for the Bogside and ended up in Bogota.

Perhaps Sinn Féin is using the Nazi doctrine that if you tell a lie often enough, people will think that it is the truth, but it will not work this time. In south Lebanon, Irish passports belonging to known terrorists were found in a training camp for wannabe terrorists. It is somewhat disturbing to hear Sinn Féin's president say that he and his party are totally committed to the peace process while his colleagues in the IRA are having up-to-date training in warfare in foreign lands.

Sinn Féin has forged links with Cuba — a country not known for its high regard for democracy, and with even less regard for basic human rights. Mr Adams intends to visit Cuba shortly. I do not see Mr Adams and his Colleagues staying at home to get the IRA to put its arsenal of weapons beyond use. That would be time better spent. Sinn Féin has been very quiet on that

subject since the IRA pulled out of the de Chastelain commission.

Sinn Féin/IRA has been quiet about its organisation. Last week they sent me, and I presume many others, the numbers of alleged Loyalist attacks. It is uncanny that it always remembers Loyalist attacks, but it seems to forget those committed by Nationalists. I condemn all attacks, irrespective of who commits them.

In tandem with the silent Sinn Féin is the incompetent British Government. To my horror, and to that of many others, Mr Blair said on Sunday night past that the world had to learn what motivates terrorism. After 30 years of terrorism here, Tony Blair is still trying to work it out.

That brought two questions to my mind. First, did Prime Minister Blair not learn anything from the Northern Ireland Office or from the members of Special Branch, who put their lives on the line for his Government? Secondly, he has put convicted terrorists in Government positions. Why not ask them what motivates them and their abhorrent friends, the Middle East extremists?

Why is the British Government not like the American Government? Why is it not righteously angry with the terrorists? Why will it not pay any costs or go to any length in the pursuit of justice? Police officers' families have waited in vain to find out who killed their loved ones. At least one widow in my constituency went to her grave without knowing who was responsible for her husband's murder. The Government has also made it possible that this killer will never be brought to justice because terrorists are in Government and negotiating the type of peace this country will have.

This week there have been several gun attacks, and pipe bombs were found. Paramilitary activists judge young people, who are beaten, shot and evicted from their country by organisations who feel that they are the real police forces. Who are these people to tell us and our children how to live? What is more shameful is that youths who come to the attention of the IRA are told to report to Connolly House, the headquarters of Sinn Féin, to hear what their punishments will be. Sinn Féin said that it was committed to democracy, yet it allows an illegal and tyrannical organisation to mete out summary justice to the people of Northern Ireland.

Paramilitary activity and international terrorism are the same in this country, and we need to stop them. For 30 years we have been at war against Nationalist violence in the name of politics. Police, soldiers and civilians have been killed and maimed while trying to live their lives in a democratic fashion. The people of Omagh, for example, still seek the trial of their aggressors in a court of law. Those who take part in violence, or condone it in any way, should not be part of a democratic process.

Mr O'Connor: I am amazed at the hypocrisy of the DUP. We heard Mr Hilditch, whose constituency is East Antrim, talking about what is going on in north Belfast. In the 1970s, over 400 children attended a Catholic school in Greenisland. When it closed in 1997, there were 27 children. Mr Hilditch talks about ethnic cleansing in north Belfast. What is that if it is not ethnic cleansing?

The DUP has always had an ambivalence about dealing with terrorists — the sharing of a platform with Billy Wright has been mentioned. The inspection of men with balaclavas on a beach in Portrush in 1985 by Coleraine aldermen was talked about also. Those things are true, and no one can claim to be able to end terrorism having given it so much succour for so long.

Terrorists are active throughout Northern Ireland. They inflict huge suffering on all our people. My home has been attacked on several occasions. Less than a week after my colleague was elected to Larne Borough Council, his home was pipe-bombed. That was his welcome to politics, Northern Ireland-style. The problem is that the UDA in Larne operates an equal opportunities policy — it recruits young Catholics as well.

We need to decommission all those organisations. I agree that terrorism is linked to drug-dealing. We were all horrified by the events in America last week, which prompted President Bush to say that he would hunt down evil-doers worldwide. We have in our country evil-doers associated with the Shankill bomb, McGurk's Bar, Enniskillen, Loughinisland, Greysteel, Omagh — and the list goes on. We are not in an ideal world. Terrorism must be stopped by political means and a better future given to the people in this country who have suffered so much for so long.

In my first speech to the Assembly, I quoted Martin Luther King. He said:

"We are not where we want to be, but thank God we are not where we used to be."

We no longer bury 80 or 100 coffins a year, leaving hundreds and thousands of grieving widows and orphans. There are murders and punishment beatings, but 10 years ago a punishment beating or shooting would not have merited four lines on page 10 of 'The Irish News'.

We have moved forward. We must make politics work. This weekend will tell whether we will. I appeal to those with influence, in light of world opinion and the international groundswell of public opinion against all forms of terror, to give peace a chance. Do what you can to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland do not suffer for another 30 years what they have suffered for the last 30 years.

Each of us is duty bound to try to do something about that. I appeal to all those with influence to use it to ensure that we create the peaceful society that everyone in this country wants.

5.30 pm

Mr Weir: The Assembly met last week rightly to express its condolences to the victims of the terrorist outrage in America and to condemn international terrorism. It met against the backdrop of many nations' leaders committing themselves to the fight against international terrorism. Like Jim Shannon, I listened with a degree of incredulity to the remarks of our Prime Minister, given his record against terrorism. Despite that, many of us in the Chamber are committed to the fight against international terrorism.

However, if we are to begin that fight, we should do so in our own backyard in Northern Ireland. That is where we must make the change. The motion rightly condemns all paramilitary activity, Loyalist and Republican. I join with many ordinary, decent Nationalists who look with incredulity at the extent to which the Government have been prepared to turn a blind eye to Loyalist violence. It seems that no matter what they do, the Government are still prepared to declare that the ceasefires of all mainstream paramilitary organisations are intact. It is almost as if the only thing that would constitute a breach of a ceasefire is a nuclear strike on part of Northern Ireland. Even then, presumably, the Government would say that it was really the work of dissidents and not mainstream paramilitaries.

In the next few days, people should bear in mind the Government's record on defining ceasefires when they give us the usual assurances about policing: changes will only occur when the security situation allows it.

It is right that there is no moral difference between the bombings last week in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania and the bombing of Canary Wharf. There is also no moral difference between those murders and a murder in an isolated farmhouse or a deserted city centre alleyway. Such murders are often forgotten. We must highlight those people who are committed to democracy and a peaceful way forward.

The events in New York last week and those here are not linked simply because there is a moral equivalence between them, but because terrorism is international. The Republican movement has been linked with various organisations across the world such as extreme nationalist terrorists in Europe, Islamic fundamentalists in the Middle East and drug dealers or Marxists in South and Central America. The Cuban regime has declared that one of the men arrested in Colombia was Sinn Féin's representative in Cuba.

The Cuban authorities are probably best able to judge who Sinn Féin's representatives to Cuba are. However, the reaction of Sinn Féin has been like some latter-day Manuel from 'Fawlty Towers' — they know nothing of these people. They say that they have never met these people.

We must bring a degree of credibility to the debate. We must say that the demand for decommissioning goes beyond the agreement — it is a moral imperative. You cannot be in government if you have arms at your beck and call. However, you also cannot be in government if you have a private mafia, police force or vigilante organisation at your back. The paramilitary organisations have all of these things, and they make it unacceptable for any of those organisations to be in government.

Worthy sentiments are expressed in the SDLP amendment. However, the days of the Assembly relying purely on worthy sentiments are long past. The failure of the SDLP to commit itself to excluding these organisations means that, sadly, the amendment detracts from the original motion, rather than adding to it. Members can tell us as often as they like that we must encourage people into the democratic fold, but under a policy of carrot and stick there has been concession after concession. There has been a constant diet of carrots in this peace process. It is time put away the carrot and bring out the stick with regard to terrorism. I urge people to take cognisance of what has happened in the past few days; to draw a distinct line between terrorism and democracy, and to support the motion.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and the amendment. On reading the motion I was struck with the thought that the DUP should change its name to "the Party of Déjà Vu". Nothing changes in that party — it is always the same. It has no political realism and no reality, just stagnation. It has the same old story and history that it has had for the last 50 years — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: The DUP is a party that has consulted, and continues to consult, Loyalist paramilitaries. In particular, it consults with those Loyalist paramilitaries who are presently engaged in attacking Nationalists throughout the Six Counties. The DUP has connived with, and continues to connive with, those Loyalist paramilitaries who are murdering and attempting to murder Nationalists throughout the Six Counties. And yet they, who sleep in the same bed as the Loyalist paramilitaries, come here with a motion that condemns paramilitary activity. The political hypocrisy of the DUP was amply demonstrated last Thursday — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: The political hypocrisy of the DUP was amply demonstrated last Thursday. It trooped out that door when Gerry Adams got up to speak and trooped back in again to listen to the political representative of Loyalist paramilitarism. What message did that send out to the Nationalist population? The crude and stark message that it sent was that it is OK to — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Everyone is entitled to be heard.

Mr J Kelly: The crude message they sent out last Thursday was that it is OK to murder taigs. That is what that party is at. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr J Kelly: Let us, and let the general body of Unionism, make no mistake about it — there is a viable connection between those Loyalist paramilitaries who are presently trying to murder Catholics and the DUP in its drive to destabilise the political institutions. That message should go out to the Ulster Unionist Party. The DUP's only interest is in destabilising the political institutions. Its sole interest is to further split Unionism and become its predominant voice. Were that to happen, it would be a sad day for Ireland, particularly for this part of Ireland.

If the DUP could exclude Sinn Féin from this establishment, it would consider it a victory. Let me remind the DUP that Sinn Féin has a mandate that is equal to, and perhaps better than, its mandate. That political mandate will not be denied. As I said — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It is very difficult to hear Mr Kelly.

Mr J Kelly: With the DUP we experience déjà vu and yet more déjà vu. Take the party back 50 years; that is where it belongs and that is where its political history lies. It does not lie within the context of the present political establishment.

David Trimble said that if my community has a past, it can have a future. Likewise, we could say to David Trimble that if his community has a past, it too could have a future. If our goal is to build new political structures that take responsibility for all the people in this part of the island — and the rest of the island — in our terms we are going about it the right away.

I say this to David Trimble: we have all contested elections under the same criteria. The results may not have been to the liking of some parties, but that is democracy. Although we signed the Good Friday Agreement, it is obvious that we are not yet ready to place trust in each other. We must ask if we still trust ourselves.

Mr Attwood: My colleagues and I find it profoundly ironic that Gerry Adams could not wait to rush to the microphone yesterday to praise John Hume, yet today in the Chamber, Mitchel McLaughlin could not wait to damn John Hume's values and vision, which are incorporated in the amendment.

The irony of the comments made 24 hours ago, and the inconsistencies of the argument made in the Chamber today, expose the lack of confidence that currently infects the Republican leadership and Sinn Féin. Rather than acknowledge views firmly held and stated, Mitchel

McLaughlin tried to demean the contributions of the SDLP by saying that our judgement was influenced and upset by election results or internal party matters. Anyone who reduces a criticism of other contributions to that level reveals a lack of confidence and a lack of certainty in addressing the arguments inherent in the motion and the amendment.

It is significant that in all Sinn Féin's contributions, which singularly concerned the DUP, there was no acknowledgement of the wider international context, nor was there any acknowledgement of the Latin American context. The only point of substance made was that there was a collective responsibility to bring about the disarmament of illegal groups. That collective responsibility appears to include all of us, but to exclude Sinn Féin. That is the message that comes across. I see that Mrs Nelis is nodding vigorously.

5.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Attwood, you must direct your comments to the Chair.

Mr Attwood: I have only one comment to make about Mrs Nelis's speech. I ask her to take a pen to her speech and replace the words "Loyalist paramilitary" with "Republican paramilitary", and "Unionist politician" with "Republican politician". She should then give it to Mr Robinson to use as his response to this debate. Everything said by Mrs Nelis could have been said by Mr Robinson with the change of two words only; such is the mirror image at the parties at that end of the Chamber.

Mr Trimble rightly said that the SDLP amendment concentrated on what has to be done. We also outlined that in our response to the Weston Park document. The SDLP singularly outlined a political strategy to get us from Weston Park, through suspension, to the full implementation of the agreement. There must be a new beginning for policing of the citizens and communities of the North. We must ensure that we have a bill of rights that is expansive and inclusive — a charter of rights on the island and a joint committee of the human rights commissions, North and South, to bring about the wider enforcement of human rights on the island. We must restructure our criminal justice system through the criminal justice review. We must address inequality and terror in the national and, belatedly, in the international context. There is also a wider strategy that we need to address, if not in the coming days then in the coming weeks. In the words of Mr Trimble, we must ensure that we concentrate on what has to be done, rather than, as some have done in this debate, on what has been done in the past.

I want to go back to some of the comments that I made about putting weapons verifiably beyond use. Although this might not be a fertile environment for new arguments to get Republicans to address the issue

of putting weapons beyond use, I want to try to do so. I do so somewhat cautiously, because I am trying to put those of us who are from a non-Unionist background — from a Nationalist and an all-Ireland background, a background that wishes to share the life of the rest of the island — into the shoes of people from the Unionist tradition. That is something that people from Sinn Féin signally failed to do this afternoon just as, I have to say, the people from the Unionist tradition signally failed to put themselves in the shoes of Republicans.

I want to see the issue of weapons as Unionists see it. I might be wrong, but none the less I want to try. Nationalists and, particularly, Republicans must understand that Unionist unease about the issue of weapons comes from a number of sources — not just from the Unionist leadership. It comes from a much wider range of sources. The unease is shared by Unionist people who, before and since the ceasefires, have spent long hours encouraging those within their own community who doubted the thinking and intentions of the Republican leadership to move beyond their fears. If we do not address the fears of those who have tried to interpret to Unionists what Republicans are trying to bring about by the ceasefire, and acknowledge that they are beginning to lose confidence, we are not dealing with the issue of putting weapons beyond use.

It is time to acknowledge that Unionist unease is common among people who assess issues using standards of both word and deed, and for whom the concept of putting weapons verifiably and completely beyond use must produce real results. That unease is shared by Unionist people, who have been traumatised by threat and who are adjusting to radical change. They are looking for certainty, as they accept the uncertainties of being a minority on the island of Ireland. The IRA should acknowledge all that, and all the paramilitary organisations should acknowledge that it is time to give real effect to the decommissioning provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Peter Robinson may be proved right. This may be the last time that we will debate the issue in the House. I hope that he is wrong. Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries must get decommissioning right, and get it right now. Peter Weir's strategy was exclusion and the stick. We dissent from both exclusion and the stick. Political conflict is resolved by political means and if we go back to exclusion on the one hand and a stick on the other, we go back in history.

The opportunity that is beginning to open up should be exploited and we must resolve all outstanding issues relating to the Good Friday Agreement. A different mindset is beginning to develop on this island and around the world. That mindset is saying that we have travelled far with those who use threat and terror, but we are not going to travel any further. By hanging on

firmly to the consequences, implications and requirements of the Good Friday Agreement, we can work out a political strategy that will resolve the outstanding issues and will not see us retreating to the failed policies of exclusion and the stick.

Mr P Robinson: In my winding-up speech, I will deal with two further issues, namely the Florida gunrunning by the Provisional IRA and its exploits in Colombia, important aspects of the IRA's international terrorist activity. Before doing so, however, I must respond directly to the mover of the amendment, who decries Mr Weir's recommendation of the use of exclusion and the stick. Presumably, he is recommending inclusion and the carrot, and therefore I must question the SDLP's ability to sign up to the section of the Belfast Agreement that appears ostensibly, to offer the stick of excluding any organisation or party that does not commit itself to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

The SDLP tells us that the agreement should be fully implemented. But it does not want that section to be implemented, because it does not want to use the stick. There is nothing that Sinn Féin/IRA could do that would cause the SDLP to use the stick and exclude. Even if the IRA took the nuclear option, the SDLP would still piously tell us that we should go for inclusive politics and try to encourage people into the democratic process.

There is nothing wrong with the wording of the amendment. It is just weaker and less effective than the motion, and the purpose of deleting elements from the motion is to weaken it in order to avoid saying that organisations that are not committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means should be excluded. That is the purpose of the amendment, as demonstrated by the attack on Mr Weir's remarks.

Now we know where the SDLP stands. Perhaps we are not surprised that that has consistently been its position over the years. What I cannot understand is why the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is going to support the amendment. By supporting the amendment, the UUP will be going for a weaker version, letting Sinn Féin off the hook. That can be the only outcome if that party's members follow their leader into the lobbies and support the SDLP's avoidance amendment.

The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party beat his chest in the Assembly and told us how he had called Sinn Féin/IRA to account. He even had the audacity to say that because of his actions Sinn Féin/IRA would be put out of office. He seems to be blind to the fact that it was because of his actions that Sinn Féin/IRA is in office in the first place. Then he boasted that, having put Sinn Féin/IRA into office, he had taken some action to call it to account.

There was an article in 'GQ' magazine about the Florida gunrunning. A detailed investigation of the events in Florida was carried out. Siobhan Browne said:

"I kept quiet and they destroyed me. If I had said what I knew, if I had testified at the trial about the things I'm going to tell you now, the boys would have got it much worse and the Good Friday agreement — the sham that it was — would be over."

Later in the article, there is clear evidence that the writer of the report has come to conclusions about the so-called Good Friday Agreement. The report says that it is now starting to appear that in his rush to depict himself as the peacemaker in Northern Ireland, President Clinton delivered an inherently flawed, if not flat-out fraudulent treaty. Again, the article says that the Florida attorney, Richard Scrugs, had an ironclad case. He had surveillance photos, a confession from Bluestein, a copy of the wish list, mail and gun receipts, DNA evidence, fingerprints and fibre linking Claxton and Mullen to the packages. Thanks to assistance from Scotland Yard, Scrugs also had intelligence files on Claxton, Smyth and Mullen's IRA/Sinn Féin activities.

Is it any wonder that they were convicted and that Judge Wilkie Ferguson, passing sentence, criticised the sentencing guidelines approved by Congress, saying that they made it impossible for him to impose a longer sentence? He went on to say that if a person could get a life sentence for possessing \$400 worth of cocaine, this kind of offence ought to carry the death penalty. Yet, the Assembly was not prepared to take any action over something that a Florida judge thought was worthy of the death penalty.

In the same article, Unionist Ken Maginnis is inclined to give Sinn Féin the benefit of the doubt. He said that with an operation as big as that of the IRA, it would probably take time to reel in gunrunning operations set up before the Good Friday Agreement. The article goes on to say that Mr Maginnis was ignoring the fact that Claxton and Mullen arrived in the United States on 22 January 1999, a full eight months after the agreement was signed. It also makes clear the role of President Clinton and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in attempting to cover up the activities of the Provisional IRA in the United States, lest it do harm to the so-called peace process.

Some of the Sinn Féin Members who spoke in the debate were very uneasy, wriggling in panic. Some of them went into an incomprehensible rant. Mr John Kelly, almost foaming at the mouth, talked about Sinn Féin's mandate being greater than the DUP's. Where are the Sinn Féin Members of the European Parliament? How many Members of Parliament do they have, as opposed to the DUP? How many Assembly Members do they have, as opposed to the DUP? How many councillors do they have compared to the DUP? He should go back to the record books and learn for

himself that Sinn Féin does not have the mandate that he seems to think it has.

6.00 pm

Mr McLaughlin gave us a pious homily on the peace process. He, incidentally, thinks that people go with false passports on their holidays to Colombia. Although he has never been in Castlereagh Holding Centre — he is one of the IRA's draft dodgers — he had a similar experience, during his 'Newsnight' interview, when he was clearly embarrassed by the position that he was being asked to defend.

He had the audacity to try to link the Democratic Unionist Party with events in north Belfast. I want to commend my Colleague, Nigel Dodds, for the sterling efforts that he and other constitutional politicians in the area have made to overcome the problems in north Belfast and to repair the damage done to community relations there. The Sinn Féin position is "if we say it, it is true". Whether the facts are absent or whether they contradict it, Sinn Féin is quite prepared to peddle a lie in order to cover its embarrassment. It kicks up as much dust as it can to conceal its embarrassment.

The Provisional IRA was clearly involved in international terrorism, training, and experimenting in bomb making in Colombia. It was involved at the highest level; its chief engineer was involved. The sanction of the IRA Army Council was needed; an IRA Army Council that has three Sinn Féin Assembly Members on it — the leader of the party, Gerry Adams, the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, and Pat Doherty, the former head of southern command of the IRA. All three of them were involved in the decision to send people to Colombia to take part in international terrorism and to bring death and destruction to the cities in Colombia; just as they brought death and destruction — and still do — to the streets of Northern Ireland.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly proceeded to a Division.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order. Is it in order for a Member to enter the Chamber when the Doors are secured?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will secure the Doors in four minutes.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 54; Noes 35

AYES

Ian Adamson, Billy Armstrong, Alex Attwood, Roy Beggs, Billy Bell, Eileen Bell, Esmond Birnie, P J Bradley, Joe Byrne, Joan Carson, Seamus Close, Fred Cobain, Robert Coulter, Annie Courtney, John Dallat, Duncan Shipley Dalton, Ivan Davis, Arthur Doherty, Mark Durkan, Reg Empey, Sean Farren, John Fee, David Ford, Sam Foster,

Tommy Gallagher, John Gorman, Tom Hamilton, Carmel Hanna, Joe Hendron, Derek Hussey, Danny Kennedy, James Leslie, Patricia Lewsley, Alban Maginness, Seamus Mallon, Kieran McCarthy, David McClarty, Alasdair McDonnell, Alan McFarland, Michael McGimpsey, Eddie McGrady, Eugene McMenamin, Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Sean Neeson, Dermot Nesbitt, Danny O'Connor, Eamonn O'Neill, Ken Robinson, Brid Rodgers, George Savage, John Taylor, David Trimble, Jim Wilson.

NOES

Paul Berry, Norman Boyd, Gregory Campbell, Mervyn Carrick, Wilson Clyde, Nigel Dodds, Oliver Gibson, William Hay, David Hilditch, Roger Hutchinson, Gardiner Kane, John Kelly, Robert McCartney, William McCrea, Barry McElduff, Gerry McHugh, Mitchel McLaughlin, Pat McNamee, Francie Molloy, Maurice

Morrow, Mary Nelis, Dara O'Hagan, Ian Paisley Jnr, Ian R K Paisley, Edwin Poots, Iris Robinson, Mark Robinson, Peter Robinson, Patrick Roche, Jim Shannon, Denis Watson, Peter Weir, Jim Wells, Cedric Wilson, Sammy Wilson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

6.15 pm

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly deplores the ongoing catalogue of paramilitary activity and calls on all parties who profess to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means to unequivocally repudiate any and all such violence and to call on all paramilitary groups to give real effect to the decommissioning provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Adjourned at 6.18 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 24 September 2001

The Assembly met at noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Environment Sectoral Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on the environment, which was held on Friday 15 June 2001 in Dromad, County Louth.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): Following nomination by the former First and Deputy First Ministers, Mr Durkan and I attended the fourth North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting on the environment. The Irish Government were represented by Mr Dan Wallace TD, Minister of State at the Department of the Environment and Local Government. Mr Wallace chaired the meeting. The statement has been approved by Mr Durkan and is also made on his behalf.

The meeting began with a review of the progress of the joint working group on water quality, which was established to consider water quality strategies for the Erne and Foyle catchments and the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive.

A primary objective of the Directive is to harmonise approaches to water management across EU member states. The water quality working group has been examining a number of technical issues related to that objective. A technical advisory group has been established to provide advice and support to the working group.

The technical advisory group's priority tasks will include the development of an agreed characterisation system, or typology, for surface waters, and the development of a map of North/South shared river basins to assist the process of identifying appropriate international river basin districts. To assist the group with the latter task, the Council endorsed a number of principles on the development of proposals for the delineation of international river basin districts in Ireland.

The Council received a report on the tendering for a jointly funded contract to develop an interactive web site of current environmental research. The tendering process followed Government procurement procedures and was overseen by the Northern Ireland Government Purchasing Agency. The Council noted the outcome of the tendering process and agreed that the Environment and Heritage Service and the Environmental Protection Agency should award the contract to a Belfast-based company, Infinet Design. The Council looked forward to viewing a prototype of the web site at a subsequent meeting.

The Council was updated on the substantial existing co-operation between North and South on a range of new technology for monitoring issues. Areas brought to the Council's attention included remote sensing, fish stock assessment and on-site monitoring. Dr Eon O'Mongain of Spectral Signatures Ltd made a short presentation to the Council on airborne remote sensing for water quality monitoring. This sophisticated technology has been used in recent years for lake monitoring in the North and in the South. The Council recognised the long-term nature of the work and agreed that further progress reports should be provided as significant developments occur.

The Council noted the proposals on land cover mapping and key databases. On the first of these areas, the Council received a short presentation from Mr Robin Fuller, of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, relating to the technology used in developing these complex maps and the associated benefits of capturing the information. The Council approved the planning work on a sample cross-border area for comparison of the respective land cover maps.

In relation to key databases, a small working group has been set up to test the compatibility of the environmental databases, North and South. This will be done using water quality data. The working group will carry out some benchmarking of other environmental organisations to explore how the data, once captured, can best be presented for the ease of users, particularly the public.

The Council noted that progress on taking forward the scoping study on the environmental impacts of agriculture had been slower than anticipated. This was due to the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, which had necessarily been the focus of attention and effort of the agricultural authorities North and South. The Council did, however, approve the preliminary methodology for taking forward the scoping study when conditions permit. Under this methodology the study will be conducted as a six-month desk analysis to be carried out by two postgraduate students, one from each jurisdiction, under the overall direction of a steering group on which the relevant Environment and Agriculture Departments and agencies will be represented.

The steering group will be co-chaired by the two Environment Departments.

The Council then turned its attention to waste management. It agreed that there is scope for a co-operative approach to the development of markets for secondary materials and recyclates on the island and that officials should work together to bring forward formal proposals for a structured approach to the establishment of a joint market development programme. It was also agreed that, should an appropriate opportunity present itself, the Environment Ministers would jointly examine and evaluate a successful recycling and market development programme abroad. The Council agreed that officials should give consideration to a cross-border proposal to encourage community-based recycling.

The Council noted the success of the recovery scheme for farm plastics operated by the Irish Farm Films Producers' Group in the Republic of Ireland. The Council agreed that the Department of the Environment, in discussion with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, would consider the desirability of a complementary initiative in Northern Ireland.

Finally, the Council considered and agreed the text of a joint communiqué to be issued after the meeting. A copy has been placed in the Assembly Library. The Council agreed that the next sectoral meeting on the environment will take place in Northern Ireland in October 2001.

The Chairperson of the Environment Committee (Rev Dr William McCrea): The Minister stated that the meeting related to the progress of joint North/South programmes on waste management. I find that interesting. At the last meeting of the Environment Committee, Thursday 20 September, the three regional groups in Northern Ireland — the one in the north-west is of a cross-border nature — said that there was poor co-operation between them and the Minister's Department. We were told that £1 million of the £3.5 million allocated and made available this year was to be handed back.

Will the Minister tell us why progress on that important issue has been so slow in Northern Ireland? Why has none of the money been spent to date, when it seems that even more of that £3.5 million could be surrendered before the year is out? How much did the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting cost the Northern Ireland exchequer?

Mr Foster: I do not agree entirely with the Member's statements, because progress has been made, even though it has been slow. Reasonable progress has been made in implementing the waste strategy since its publication in March 2000. For example, district councils submitted their provisional waste management plans to my Department in June 2001. Those plans have been reviewed, and they will be developed further by

district councils prior to full public consultation early next year.

Moreover, the Waste Management Advisory Board has been established to assist with the strategy's implementation; policy guidance on planning and waste management has been issued for public consultation; further guidance on the best practicable environmental option has been published; three detailed waste status studies have been completed to assist the development of waste management plans; proposals for new regulations for duty of care will be published for consultation in the next few weeks; and a consultation paper on new waste management licensing regulations should be published by 31 March 2002.

The £3.5 million budget for this financial year was dependent on the completion and adoption of the waste management plans and was intended for their implementation. The recent transfer of £1 million to other important areas of public expenditure, to which the Member referred, does not mean that there is a lesser requirement for extensive financial support for waste management. That simply reflects the need for expenditure to be properly planned and focused. Prior to the completion of the plans, the Department listened to the views of district councils and the Waste Management Advisory Board on immediate expenditure needs.

In this financial year the Department will invest £400,000 in the UK-wide waste resource action programme; it will complete £400,000 of data studies; and it will invest £500,000 in the initial public awareness and education programme, which will occur in tandem with the public consultation of district council plans.

At present, a sum of £130,000 is reserved to provide further financial assistance to district councils to complete their waste management plans and to support pilot schemes such as additional recycling and composting mills for households.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Environment Committee (Ms Hanna): I welcome the Minister's statement and the joint approach to a market development programme. In view of the urgency with which it must be done, will the Minister make it a priority to examine best practice in successful recycling and market development programmes in tandem with the consultation, education and culture change that is required to implement our waste management strategy?

Mr Foster: I assure the Member that my Department will do all in its power to encourage people and to ensure that the educational message is put across. Much depends on the district councils working through the management plans and issues themselves. However, I assure the Member that the Department will be there to help.

Mrs Carson: I welcome the Minister's report of the sectoral meeting. In the past there has been a lack of co-operation in attempts to deal with the Erne system's problems. I do not like to hark back to that issue, but what progress has the working group made on water quality in the Erne catchment in particular? The zebra mussels make life difficult for the tourist industry in the bay area at Kesh, where waterskiers and boats are already having problems. Furthermore, I have come across a peculiar word in environmental circles — CORINE. Perhaps that is the name of a strange woman. Will the Minister explain the meaning of the word?

12.15 pm

Mr Foster: CORINE is not a strange woman. The acronym stands for the "co-ordination of information on the environment" and is a European land cover mapping project. A land cover map records in detail the extent and type of land, including forest, wetland, farm land and coastal areas; information that is valuable to environmental planners, regulators, agriculturalists and conservationists. Northern Ireland is included in the more detailed UK land cover 2000 map, which will integrate the collection of data on land cover across the UK.

Zebra mussels are a major problem in Northern Ireland, many parts of Europe and also North America. They first appeared in the Erne system in 1996. It is impossible to remove zebra mussels once they have become established, although they tend to reach a natural limit in waterways. That is why the emphasis must be on prevention rather than cure.

In the spring, my Department launched a publicity campaign to educate the public, particularly boat owners, anglers and those engaged in water sports, about the mussel problem. Their help is needed to prevent the spread of zebra mussels to unaffected waters. The campaign, which included the issue of information leaflets, alerted those groups to the danger of transporting zebra mussels to unaffected waters. It received good coverage in the local media and explained how boats and equipment can be cleansed by steam cleaning. Once zebra mussels are there, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to remove them. The mussels must be controlled, and I urge people to pay attention to any advice given because they will create many problems in our waters if they are not dealt with.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the all-Ireland dimension of the Minister's statement. It is a common sense provision on the water quality of the island as a whole. We can, and should, establish an island-wide monitoring and recording process. We should, without delay, explore the most common best practice in Europe.

I also welcome the co-operation on recycling and waste management. Up until now, the focus has mostly been on waste disposal methods rather than on reuse and

recycling. Will the Minister ensure that priority will be given in any educational programme to those matters?

Mr Foster: As far as I am concerned, I deal with cross-border issues because there are two separate Administrations working together for mutual benefit. It is important to realise that.

The water quality working group has made good progress and is now focusing on implementing the Water Framework Directive, which requires cross-border co-operation for shared waterways. It is long-term planning work, and the aim is to achieve good water quality status for all waterways by 2015.

A North/South technical advisory group now supports the working group because the Directive sets water quality standards across a range of scientific and conservation fronts. The technical work builds on previous consultancy work carried out in the mid-1990s on water quality management strategies for the Foyle and Erne waterway systems. That was reviewed under the working group's direction earlier this year.

We are there to help and to educate where we can. The cross-border issue accepts and acknowledges that we are two separate jurisdictions.

Mr Leslie: I am interested in the Minister's statement, and particularly his last point. The Minister emphasises the identification of international river basin districts. I am sure the Minister will agree that for something to be international it has to involve the interests of at least two countries. Will he also agree that the willingness of the Dublin Government to acknowledge that international dimension on the island of Ireland has come about as a direct consequence of the change in their Constitution that stemmed from the Belfast Agreement?

Will the Minister further agree that that change is a welcome recognition of reality as opposed to the observance of aspirations that we had for 70 years and that, irrespective of what might happen to the Belfast Agreement or any further change to that Constitution, it is permanent?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Leslie, you are coming very close to being ruled out of order, but I will let the Minister respond.

Mr Foster: I refer to my response to an earlier question. I participate on the basis that the two separate and distinct Administrations reflect separate and distinct jurisdictions, but they can and should co-operate where that can deliver genuine mutual benefit. The environment sector's agenda passes that test by concentrating on practical measures rather than on symbolic gestures. I welcome the acknowledgement by the Republic of Ireland that we are a separate jurisdiction. My opposite number, Mr Noel Dempsey, and I work very well together, and co-operation is excellent.

The Water Framework Directive requires member states to identify cross-border waterways as international river basin districts and to co-operate on their water quality management.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the further information in his answers.

On the problem of general refuse and waste management, does the Minister agree that a critical mass is required for the economic and effective recycling of waste and the possible creation of energy from it? Does he agree that an all-Ireland approach is required? The matter has been talked about for more than a decade, but there has been no real progress in quantum recycling and the production of energy. Will he put at the top of his agenda for the next North/South environmental meeting the need for a common approach to recycling and the critical mass required for it? It cannot be done piecemeal. For example, the nine councils around Belfast are at present trying to introduce a scheme for the recycling of tyres. Does the Minister agree that that needs to be done on a much larger all-island basis? It should not involve only tyres, but all domestic and other waste.

Mr Foster: There is no doubt that we are keen to co-operate on recycling and to facilitate it where possible. The waste management strategy, in promoting recycling, sets a target for district councils to recycle or compost 25% of household waste by 2005. That will entail a significant increase on present recycling levels by councils in Northern Ireland, currently estimated to be around 5%.

Key to the success of any recycling programme is the co-ordination of systems to recover materials and the development of markets for their use. I am pleased that my Department will provide financial support for the development of new markets and will assist councils to implement their waste management plans, particularly in respect of recycling.

All district councils now belong to one of three sub-regional groups which are examining the establishment of a network of waste management facilities, including provision for recycling. Cross-border co-operation will come into that and will provide the economies of scale necessary to make investment in recycling and recovery facilities viable. The smaller scale is not viable. A larger market will be provided for products made from recycled materials.

Mr Gibson: In view of the reprocessing of farm plastics, which are an obscenity in the countryside, what efforts have been made to implement the European Directive that says that the polluter should pay? What efforts are being made to persuade the takeaway industry and farm suppliers to find suitable alternatives that are not too expensive, but stop the countryside from being polluted with plastic bags and sheeting?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that I gave Mr Leslie a degree of licence on this matter. Questions should relate to the ministerial statement, and I am afraid that some Members are straying from it. However, the Minister may wish to comment.

Mr Foster: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for his point. The negative impact of all sorts of packaging, including plastic bags, has long been a matter of general concern. The EC Directive 94/62/EC 1994 on packaging and packaging waste was specifically designed to bring about a reduction in the use of packaging by placing recycling and recovery obligations on businesses that are involved in the making or filling of packaging or in the sale of packaged goods. Several of the larger supermarket chains including Tesco and Sainsbury's are now using multi-trip bags such as Tesco's "bag for life". More recently, companies have been investigating the extent to which biodegradable bags might meet the requirements.

Agricultural plastic is not a controlled waste. Therefore it is exempt from waste legislation. That is likely to change in the near future when agricultural waste becomes a controlled waste under the terms of the proposed controlled waste regulations for Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland has introduced new regulations that govern the collection and recycling of waste farm plastics. Producers and suppliers of farm wrap must register, operate a deposit scheme of £200 per tonne and collect farm plastics for recycling or recovery. In conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, my Department is looking at the necessary primary powers to introduce a similar scheme in Northern Ireland and the feasibility of setting up voluntary collection schemes.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Have the waste management schemes that were put forward by the three different regions been accepted, or are the Departments sticking to their rejection of them because they do not cover a long enough period? I understand that the schemes cover a five-year period, and the Department is looking for a 20-year period that would include incineration.

Mr Foster: We are trying to co-operate where we can. Areas that we feel are not as they should be have been returned for further discussion and assessment. We need to ensure that we get it right, but the onus rests on the respective groups in the district council areas. However, we will look at the difficulties, assess them and refer them back to the district councils.

Mr Savage: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is long overdue. I am glad to see that the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are coming together regarding waste management.

Can the Minister outline what costs are likely to be associated with the office of the environmental research register and its use?

Mr Foster: The winners of the tender competition to develop a web site for the joint register were Infinet Design from Belfast at a cost of £31,350. Work on the register has begun. The cost will be shared by both jurisdictions. A prototype will be available by the end of this year. Access to the register will be through its own web site, the web sites of the two agencies and through the sites of partner organisations that have contributed research information to it.

Currently the register contains information about environmental protection research that was carried out by the Environment and Heritage Service and the Environmental Protection Agency. Work is under way to add research about nature conservation. It is planned to add information from academic institutions and the private and commercial sectors where available.

It is important that that information be shared, because that will help researchers and sponsors to avoid duplicating effort and cost, to identify new areas for research, to find partners for collaboration, and to identify potential sources of funding.

12.30 pm

Mr O'Connor: I will return to an issue raised by Mr McGrady. Is there potential on an all-Ireland basis for thermal recycling, which breaks down waste into gas, minerals and metals? The problem with recycling, as the Minister knows, is that there is no demand for much of the recycled materials. How do we create the demand?

I note that officials are working together to make formal proposals for these joint strategies. When will those proposals be put forward?

Mr Foster: We are working consistently on the matter that the Member raises, and we will continue to do so. The waste management strategy allows for cross-border co-operation as part of the district-council-based management plans. The market here is not large enough for such a system, so we are proceeding on an all-Ireland basis. Any cross-border co-operation will need to comply with both the waste management strategy and the UK management plan for exports and imports of waste. The UK plan is currently under review and is likely to allow cross-border imports and exports of waste where there are sound economic and environmental reasons for doing so and where the activity is included in each district council's waste management plan. We are working on that matter and we will co-operate.

Mr Hussey: I welcome, in particular, the reference to waste management. The Minister will be aware of all the methodologies that are being employed in this field, such as reduction at source, reuse, recycling and,

as Mr O'Connor mentioned, demand creation. Whichever method is used, there will still be residual waste. Did the North/ South Ministerial Council consider creating energy from waste?

Mr Foster: All options will be considered. It is important that we consider anything that might be useful. I assure the Member that we will look into that issue.

Mr Byrne: I support North/South waste management collaboration and the Minister's efforts to improve river water quality in the Erne and Foyle systems. Does the Minister agree that the Foyle basin and its associated tributaries — the Finn in Donegal and the Derg, the Mourne and the Strule in Tyrone — are vital to drainage and fishing? Would the Minister support a comprehensive study of fish stocks and fish stock management in the Foyle system to protect the environmental and economic potential of the counties of Donegal, Derry and Tyrone?

Mr Foster: We are co-operating with the authorities across the border, and we will take into account what the Member has said. The Water Framework Directive aims to improve water quality through the management of complete river catchments. There is an important issue there. The Directive requires member states to agree water quality management plans for cross-border waterways, which are known as international river basin districts.

The Water Framework Directive was adopted by the EU on 22 December 2000 and must be incorporated into Northern Ireland legislation by 2003. In order to achieve good water quality status, water quality management plans for all river basin districts must be prepared by 2009 and implemented by 2015. The plans will then be reviewed, as it is a continuous process. It is an important plan, which we are working on.

Mr Beggs: Mentioned in the communiqué is a co-operative approach to developing markets for secondary materials and recyclates. Were the landfill tax and the proposed aggregates tax, which is distorting the quarry industry in the border regions, mentioned in the Minister's discussions?

Given the Chancellor's decision to impose that tax on Northern Ireland, has there been any discussion about the need for the imposition of a similar tax in the South, which would remove that distortion and provide a fair playing field for Northern Ireland industry?

Mr Foster: There has been no in-depth discussion about the aggregates tax, but I am aware that it creates a great problem in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Quarry Owners Association has approached me about the matter. It is a big environmental issue, and I know how difficult it will be for quarry owners in this jurisdiction. It is important that we examine this touchy and difficult issue, because there could be disastrous consequences for local quarry owners.

**ASSEMBLY:
ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND
INVESTMENT COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Armstrong shall replace Mr Duncan Shipley Dalton on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. —
[Mr J Wilson]

**INTERDEPARTMENTAL
WORKING GROUP**

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to establish an interdepartmental working group to make recommendations on the removal of paramilitary flags, emblems and graffiti from public property.

The University of Ulster will this week publish a report entitled 'Spaces of Fear'. It demonstrates the paradox that exists in our society: although much progress has been made as a result of the Belfast Agreement, bigotry, sectarianism and segregation have increased rather than decreased. We should be alarmed by those findings.

There has been a marked increase in the amount of graffiti and the number of paramilitary flags — sometimes on lamp posts along arterial routes — murals, kerbstone painting and monuments in virtually every housing estate in Northern Ireland. They are the physical manifestation of sectarianism and segregation in our society and a sign that paramilitary groups have entire areas in their sights.

I shall not argue about which flags are intimidatory and which are not; opinions on that will differ. I refer to Republican, Loyalist and other potentially racist graffiti. I do not intend to attack anyone's national flag, nor do I want to argue about when a mural is offensive and when it is artistic. Most of us can see the artistic talent in many of the works on gable walls. However, murals depicting guns and which bear the initials of paramilitary organisations are deplorable.

Flags, murals and kerbstone painting cause considerable offence to many. Those emblems mark out territory and send out a message that certain parts of our country are the exclusive preserve of one side and that, by implication, others are unwelcome. The threats and intimidation behind the emblems are clear and are unacceptable. Furthermore, some murals celebrate the most brutal killings of the troubles, and cause immense offence to victims. That is totally unacceptable.

An important point is that such displays are not merely offensive to the perceived minority — they are offensive to those in the majority who reject the implication that these flags symbolise good community relations. Many decent people who like to put a flag on their property at certain times of the year, and for specific reasons, find these practices offensive and wish that they did not happen at all. These emblems pose a major challenge to the cause of preserving a common civic space across Northern Ireland.

Tattered flags left flying at the end of every summer and through the worst of our winters are nothing but an eyesore, regardless of their colours or origin. What

must tourists and potential investors think when they see our society divided up in this way? It is certain that properties are devalued as a result of these unwanted items being foisted upon them, and that too concerns owners.

There is a great sense of powerlessness and frustration across the community that the problem has gone unchallenged. Individuals are afraid to act or speak out, because they risk being threatened or intimidated — they might get a brick, petrol or pipe bomb through their window. People are scared to complain to the police or to take legal action based on equality legislation. Under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, arguments can be made that public authorities have a duty to maintain neutral, non-discriminatory public space. However, those laws are of little use if people or public authorities are afraid to take action. In Britain, or elsewhere, if racist flags and murals causing substantial offence and damage to good racial relations are put up on public property, people can be sure that the authorities will act swiftly to remove them. Here the authorities simply do not act. Either they point to inadequacies in civil or criminal law or simply pass the buck. If you phone the police to complain about the young lads — and, in some cases, the not so young — putting up flags, they will advise you to ignore them. Taking them down may result in the erection of even more. That is simply not good enough.

The erection of a flag can be construed as an action likely to lead to a breach of the peace. However, the police will only act when flags are being erected in areas perceived to be of the other side of the community. Indeed, you are more likely to be arrested for taking down a flag. If you phone the Department of the Environment, the Roads Service or the Housing Executive to complain, they will usually say that they are powerless to act, because more will go up. Alternatively, they point to the dangers posed to their staff. Also, to date, councils have no power to intervene. Worse is the number of anecdotal stories of agencies advising concerned callers to raise the matter with the local paramilitary leader. That merely increases the control of paramilitaries in certain areas and reinforces the division of society.

There are no easy answers to the problem, but we should recognise that there is a serious problem, and face up to it rather than run away from it. Many of our Departments, particularly the Department of the Environment, the Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development, have public property affected by this problem. However, time after time, when asked questions about this, Ministers have said that they are powerless or have passed the buck.

I suggest that the Executive create an interdepartmental working group to discuss the matter, to guide public

bodies and to co-ordinate an appropriate response. The group should work in liaison with the police, consider how the existing criminal and civil law could be better enforced and highlight what legislative changes could be made by the Assembly.

Everyone in the House should support the motion. It simply calls on us to show leadership on the issue and perform our duty by examining the problem and trying to find solutions. I ask for Members' support.

12.45 pm

Mr A Maginness: It is said that evil triumphs when good men do nothing. The particular evil of paramilitary displays, whether they be flags, emblems or murals, will continue to triumph in our society if we, as good men in positions of responsibility in the Assembly, fail to act against it. I welcome the motion. Kieran McCarthy has done a great service by bringing the matter to the attention of the House. He has described accurately the situation that obtains in our society.

It is a continuing problem. Many people are deeply offended and outraged that paramilitary organisations continue to put flags and emblems on public property. Paramilitary displays and emblems are threatening and intimidatory no matter which side they come from. They deter inward investment in the areas of our community that need it most. They also deter the development of tourism. We are aware of the situation in many of our coastal towns that normally attract greater numbers of tourists. The presence of paramilitary flags, murals, and displays has a significant adverse effect on visitors to those areas.

Flags and emblems create a paramilitary culture in many parts of our towns, villages and housing estates. Unfortunately, they have become the norm. Young people are growing up in a culture in which paramilitary displays are seen as a part of ordinary life — that cannot be right. It cannot be right, by any democratic standard, that we, as legislators, should continue to tolerate such a situation. It corrupts the people who live in those areas and the children who grow up in such an environment.

There has been an extraordinary growth in the number of paramilitary displays on both sides of the sectarian divide in the past few years. We require effective measures to counteract that growth. Flags and emblems create the appearance a fiefdom controlled by a paramilitary organisation. They help to reaffirm sectarian divisions. Paramilitary displays are grossly offensive to ordinary people who live in areas polluted by them. Many do not want such displays and want us to condemn their use. However, people will not support us, because they feel intimidated and cowed by the might of those who have imposed offensive displays on their communities.

Paramilitary displays are offensive not only to those who live in the affected areas, but to people who work in, travel through, or visit the areas. Many people are affected. In principle, it is wrong to impose the burden of testing opinion on residents of affected housing estates, because they are not in a position to freely exercise their rights.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that there can be a solution to the problem that he has outlined? In South Down, a local community association wrote to every resident in a certain — in this case, Loyalist — estate, asking them for their views on paramilitary flags. A confidential response was sent back to a post office box address. The responses showed that the overwhelming majority of residents in the estate — the Langley Road estate in Ballynahinch — was opposed to the flying of paramilitary flags. Is that not a way forward without opportunity for intimidation?

Mr A Maginness: I accept Mr Wells's point. That is a good scheme, and I am aware of it. It was carried out in an effective way that removed the chances of intimidation of the local community by paramilitaries. I accept that there are effective ways of doing that.

I want, however, to reaffirm the general principle that it is wrong to place on people an unfair burden that they, alone, have to discharge. It is wrong in principle to allow something as fundamentally offensive to democracy as paramilitary displays to remain in any public place.

I disagree with Kieran McCarthy's comments on national flags. That issue must be handled sensitively, but national flags, although not used as paramilitary displays, are used in an overtly sectarian manner. I would have thought that Mr McCarthy's motion could have encompassed that factor. Although the motion is limited to paramilitary displays, that aspect of the problem should also be addressed by the interdepartmental working group if the motion is accepted by the Assembly.

There is a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness among those in our community who see these offensive displays everyday. We, as legislators and people in authority, must take effective action. *Prima facie*, the interference by anyone other than a lawful authority in relation to public property would, in my view, be unlawful. I would have thought that, even now, the public authorities and the police have at least some residual power to deal with this problem. The paralysis of public authorities, and of the police, in regard to this problem, which has been evident over the past number of years, highlights the need for the Assembly to introduce, as expeditiously as possible and as a top priority, legislation to deal with the problem. There must be practical and effective legislation to outlaw paramilitary displays in public areas. Such legislation

should be the objective of the interdepartmental working group. That will be the only effective means of dealing with this evil. As I said at the beginning, evil triumphs when good men do nothing. We, as good men representing the public good, should act and do so quickly.

Mr Hay: I am not opposed to the principle of the motion, but problems exist in regard to the fixing of paramilitary flags, no matter where they are displayed in the Province. First, it is all very well for us to sit as public representatives in the Assembly, to agree to the motion, and to pass whatever laws we want, but, at the end of the day, we are still asking people in the community to go out and remove these flags.

That is undoubtedly the nub of the issue. When that happens we have continuous and daily threats. In many, if not all, of the district councils across the Province, this issue has been discussed over the years, and the problem has grown.

A solution must come from within the community where it occurs. If it were tackled in the wrong way, many people, particularly paramilitaries, would see that as a challenge. As a result, more flags might go up, rather than come down. In my area of Foyle, we have managed to resolve the issue in some areas where the public have come together and worked on a solution for the removal of the flags.

Flags, especially those of paramilitary organisations, threaten the entire community. They are often regarded as a sign that an area is being targeted or controlled. Paramilitaries feel that the more flags they put up, the more of an area they control. However, that is often not the case. The community would quietly disagree with the flying of flags outside their homes.

The problem has to be addressed without creating another problem. In two areas of my constituency we have been reasonably successful in removing all flags through hard work with the community to collectively resolve the issue. We could pass legislation in the Assembly, and we could discuss it at local authority level, but, at the end of the day, somebody somewhere — the RUC or, perhaps, personnel from the Department for Regional Development — would have to remove the flags. Employees in my constituency have often been threatened, some seriously. One person had to leave the area after he attempted to remove flags. The solution to all of these issues lies in the local community.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Member agree that the approach by the authorities is sometimes not even-handed? When Loyalists removed tricolours in parts of Ballymena, they were arrested and taken to court. There is a perception in the Loyalist community that Republicans are not arrested when they take down Loyalist posters or signs. Is it not important that the police are even-handed in their approach to this? If

people break the law, they should be seen to be prosecuted.

Mr Hay: I will take on board the hon Member's comments about getting that balance. There is a feeling that often the authorities have not got the balance right. There are people who put up paramilitary flags, or flags of any nature, and who try to get them as close as they can to either a Nationalist area or a Unionist area. In some areas of my constituency, tricolours fly so close to a Protestant area that it is clear that they were only put up to create problems from the neighbouring community.

1.00 pm

The only reason for putting up those flags was to try to get a reaction from the Protestant community. It is good that that community did not react, because the Republican movement has, over the years, tried to get a reaction from that Protestant estate. During the summer, it decided that, everything else having failed, it would try to put up a few tricolours. The Protestant estate was very restrained and did not react.

Flags have been a problem for 30 years. This issue will not be resolved over the next number of months, or even years. It is a major problem for both communities, and it is on the increase. Unfortunately, there are occasions on which public representatives make a bad situation worse.

There is a way to tackle and resolve this issue. The only way in which it can be genuinely resolved is if communities say that enough is enough and are no longer prepared to allow people to come into their areas to put up paramilitary flags and then leave those areas feeling under threat. When Government agencies and others drive through those areas, it can appear that the UDA, the UVF or the IRA controls them. In many instances, that is not the case.

I am not, in principle, opposed to the setting up of a working group. However, I do not know what that working group would recommend on the removal of flags. It would be a miracle, because if we got that right, we would probably get everything else right here. In any case, I do not know how the working group could enforce its recommendations, and if the recommendations could not be enforced, the group would have failed. My party is not against the motion in principle; the difficulty is in its delivery on the ground.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Aontaím le focail an mholtóra — leis an chuid is mó acu ar a laghad. Níl mé i gcoinne an rúin é féin, ach tá ceist agam ar an mholtóir: conas is féidir leis an ghrúpa seo an fhadhb a réiteach?

I agree with much of what Mr McCarthy has said about flags, emblems and graffiti, whether they are of a paramilitary nature or not. I tend to agree with Mr

Hay's approach. Why does Mr McCarthy think that the establishment of an interdepartmental working group will solve the problem? He and others referred to the introduction of legislation. We have legislation that makes it an offence to deface public property. The Departments have the capacity to remove objects of any nature from their property, be it road signs, telephone or electricity poles, or the gables of Housing Executive properties. More legislation will not necessarily address the problem.

The issue of graffiti certainly needs to be addressed. The Department for Regional Development is responsible for removing graffiti from road signs, direction signs and hazard signs. I note that the Minister is here. Perhaps he will comment on the costs to the Department of dealing with graffiti.

There are legitimate uses of flags and emblems to celebrate cultural identity, cultural expression or an event, and there are murals that are visually attractive and not offensive to anybody. However, there is no doubt that in the work place, in schools and places of education, in places of worship and in mixed communities where people have different cultural or religious identities, flags and emblems are uncomfortably intimidating.

I have had many discussions with Roads Service and Housing Executive officials and with community groups on the ways and means of dealing with problems such as graffiti and flags. The only way that they can be effectively addressed is by involving the community groups in the areas where the problem occurs. Legislation and policing will not solve the issues of graffiti, flags or emblems.

I ask the proposer of this motion what benefit he sees in establishing this group and how he sees legislation being effective. For any group to be productive, it would need to be working on the street with the communities involved, with a community approach, and enabling them to have a more constructive and attractive expression of their culture. I am not opposed to the motion, but I question the effectiveness of simply establishing an interdepartmental group to deal with the issue. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCartney: Last week, during the debate on Holy Cross Primary School, I was at pains to mention that in recent years the Northern Ireland community has become more divided, bitter, angry and violent than it has ever been in the past.

In the past few days a university report has been published on the divisions in the community of Northern Ireland. It confirms in the most graphic way that over the past seven years — a period, incidentally, covered by the so-called peace process — divisions in the community and a sense of bitterness, exclusion and fear have multiplied enormously. The percentage

of people from one community who will not enter, even by car, areas perceived as belonging to the other community was very revealing. The figure was enormously high. Many Protestants and Unionists will not enter communities perceived as being Nationalist-dominated, and Nationalists who for years have done their shopping in areas perceived as being predominantly Protestant and Unionist will no longer enter those areas. The community has been completely and totally divided.

Among the features of the division are the signs and symbols that the extremist paramilitary groups have decided to impose on communities as indicating that they control those areas and those communities. Because they control those communities through fear and violence, members of the opposite community who might be recognised as such will not enter them. Members of the communities that suffer under this symbolism are terrified of a brutal reaction to protests that they do not subscribe to the views that these symbols are intended to convey.

The Assembly is fond of telling the world at large and the community in Northern Ireland about the benefits that devolution has conferred upon it. However, all the signs of the much-vaunted peace process and the investigations carried out by community relations bodies and academic investigations, such as the one I referred to, confirm that that is not the case. The opposite is the truth.

In 1995, when I was elected MP for North Down, the Kilcooley estate, a large housing estate in Bangor, was virtually free, if not totally free, from all paramilitary symbolism. In the past five or six years the main thoroughfare through that estate has had every kerbstone painted red, white and blue. On the gable walls of those houses, which can be seen from Bangor's Circular Road, there are massive Loyalist paramilitary productions proclaiming UVF or UDA brigades and lauding the importance of, and the dedication to, the Union of those groups.

I have no doubt that such symbolism is replicated throughout many Nationalist areas. One may ask why that has been permitted. I have made such enquiries to the RUC and the Department of the Environment in the Bangor area. All sorts of reasons are given, but the most important reason is that lives might be lost or personal injury might be suffered if attempts were made to remove paramilitary symbols, which would be replaced instantly.

I agree with the sentiments of the motion. If it lay in my power, or in the power of the Assembly or the Executive, to remove effectively, efficiently and permanently all paramilitary symbolism and flags, I would endorse it wholeheartedly. However, the fundamental problem is much deeper than one that may be cured by

an interdepartmental committee that makes proclamations or invokes legislation about how the problem should be dealt with.

Since the process began — and this is why the problem exists — both Governments, under cover of arriving at a political settlement, have in fact arrived at a process of conflict resolution between the British state, which nominally has authority for the Assembly, and the representatives of violent Republican terrorists and their counterparts in the Protestant/Unionist community. It is necessary to include the latter because if they are excluded — and politically the UDA has been excluded by the electorate — they feel free to carry on with their paramilitary activities, thus threatening the Nationalist community, as they are attempting to do at present. The Nationalist community and its so-called representatives in the IRA would then react, and the whole structure would come tumbling down. It was for that reason that a policy of appeasing both sets of terrorists was allowed.

An academic group, which I think was from the University of Ulster, compiled a report on policy in Northern Ireland. That group also made it clear that it believed that the Government were deliberately frustrating the principles of the Belfast Agreement by adopting a softly, softly attitude towards terrorists. This softly, softly attitude towards terrorism is reflected in the attitude to alleged breaches of the ceasefire.

1.15 pm

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

It seems that Republicans can murder, maim, mutilate and destroy within their own communities to keep them under control. Nationalists and Republicans murdering Nationalists, Republicans and Catholics does not amount to a violation of the ceasefire, and it is the same with their counterparts in the Loyalist organisations — and it seems at present that they are even more active in brutalising their community. They are creating Republican and so-called Loyalist areas where the rule of law does not run, where these groups can dominate the communities and behave in whatever way they wish.

For the sake of preserving the agreement, for the sake of alleging that ceasefires exist which do not, the Government have been prepared to tolerate this. Why have the Government tolerated criminality? Until last Tuesday week it was necessary to preserve a policy of protecting the mainland by appeasing terrorism in Northern Ireland, and so we have the manifestations of the control which the Governments, both North and South, have permitted.

We have the manifestations of the control in the flags, emblems, graffiti and gable wall proclamations that these are areas where the rule of law does not run,

where Republican IRA terrorists and so-called Loyalist paramilitaries manifestly control and declare that control through flags and emblems. The Government do not wish to do anything about it.

We are told that we should propose legislation, but as Mr Hay said, who will enforce the legislation? What if the enforcement of that legislation brings about open conflict with these groups? What if they shoot members of the security forces or murder members of the Department of the Environment who are carrying out this work? Instantly that would bring to a head a confrontation with those whom these symbols represent. That could threaten the policy that, up to now, has been one of deplorable appeasement by the British Government, encouraged by the Irish Government, which permit dumps of weaponry to remain on their soil in contravention of their Constitution.

There is no point in trying to deal with the symptoms of a disease, a political disease that is endemic in this community, without considering the underlying causes. If we deal with the rash without dealing with the cause of the rash it will perhaps manifest itself in another more virulent and violent form.

We do not need another commission or body to deal with these sectarian manifestations. Jane Morrice suggested a commission on sectarianism. Everyone here knows the causes of sectarianism, and the only people who would be qualified, in the view of that august party, to be members of that commission would be members of that party. No doubt they would be offering themselves for membership of the commission as most suitable and most qualified by their simon-pure protestations — because they do little else. Just like many other commissions, it would sit, it would talk, it would piffle and prognosticate, and it would not be able to produce any answer.

I agree entirely with the sentiments of the motion. Alban Maginness introduced another element: what is a sectarian emblem or symbol? Is it the Union flag? Is it the tricolour? Those emblems would not come within the terms of Mr McCarthy's motion.

Let us look into the matter a little deeper. Four or five years ago the great principle that everyone was looking for was equality of esteem. At that time there was a difficulty about the national anthem being played at Queen's University. I remember that the SDLP Member Bríd Rodgers, who is now a Minister, said that Queen Elizabeth was not her queen and that the symbols of British authority in Northern Ireland were not her symbols. Her President was the President of the Republic of Ireland. People are entitled to espouse that viewpoint. However, if one of the fundamental pillars upon which the Assembly and the Executive is erected is the principle of consent — that until a majority of the people of Northern Ireland consent to

be ruled otherwise than from the United Kingdom — the United Kingdom will be the sovereign power and Northern Ireland will remain part of the United Kingdom. Therefore the Union flag is the flag of Northern Ireland.

I have never been a flag flapper. I have never been in favour of using the Union Jack as a means of demonstrating any form of triumphalism or superiority over the Nationalist community. I deplore the use of the national flag for such a purpose. However, we are at the stage of becoming a stateless people. We are not allowed any emblems that indicate the political identity of the state. There are problems about flying the Union flag over this Building; and greater problems about flying it over the Departments of certain Ministers. It must be realised that the problem of symbols identified most acutely with the paramilitaries is only an extreme example of a divided community. That community is daily becoming even more divided by the policies of central Government.

I am in favour of the sentiment and objective of the motion. However, I have profound reservations. Passing laws, whether by the Assembly — or by the Medes and the Persians — is useless unless such laws are enforceable and can be delivered. We will have this problem until there is a real willingness in the community to tell the men of violence in both communities that they have no place here. No committee, body or commission will be able to offer any remedy or panacea for that difficulty.

Mr O'Connor: I support the motion. The situation is that some Northern Ireland Housing Executive estates, whether Republican or Loyalist, are bedecked with flags and pictures of gunmen, which I find grossly offensive. It does not matter whether they are Republican or Loyalist gunmen. There are problems in my town of Larne. I agree partly with what the Member for Foyle (Mr Hay) said about community participation. Unfortunately, in some of those estates, the tail is wagging the dog. It does not apply only to estates in which there is a mixed community; in predominantly Protestant and Unionist estates, there are people who find it grossly offensive to have paramilitary flags flying, and I have no doubt that that feeling is replicated in the Nationalist community. However, people are too afraid to say or do anything. Should we subject those people to life under such conditions? Do we let the tail wag the dog by kowtowing to the people who are putting up the flags and asking them which flags we can take down?

I agree with my Colleague, Alban Maginness, who said that there was a need for legislation. The current legislation is, at best, woolly, and it is not enforced. When the law is enforced, the people involved get no more than a slap on the wrist, because putting up flags counts only as behaviour that is likely to cause a breach of the peace. It is much more than that: such

people are telling their community that they are the bosses — the school yard bullies — and that local people must do as they are told, or face the consequences. We need an effective deterrent, and the punishment should fit the crime. Intimidation is not being dealt with seriously. Crimes involving intimidation on religious or racial grounds must be dealt with more severely.

Public authorities have a duty to try to promote good relations. We have talked about flags on street lights or murals on the gables of Housing Executive houses. In my town, there are two gables side by side. One has a mural showing the Battle of the Somme, and I do not find it remotely offensive. The other mural portrays two gunmen in a military stance, and underneath are written the letters “UFF”: I find that offensive.

There may be such a thing as a cultural mural, but a line must be drawn. We must decide where culture ends and paramilitary culture begins. We must define what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Anything that advocates the use of illegal arms or illegal force is unacceptable. Would a true Irishman who respected the tricolour or a true Unionist who respected the Union flag paint their flag on the streets for the dogs to run over? I do not believe so. People who respect their flag should use it when it is appropriate to do so.

Mr McCarthy said that some people liked to fly the Union flag from their home at certain times of the year; that is a matter for them. I am talking about the estates that are decked out in paramilitary regalia. The communities need help to get the people who are doing it off their backs. As Mr McCartney said, there has been a certain appeasement of such people. The Secretary of State has been ambivalent about admitting that both sides have broken their ceasefire.

I accept that, but how do we make progress? How do we prevent people from being intimidated? How can that cloud be removed from over their heads?

1.30 pm

Legislation may be the answer. I take on board Mr Hay's and Mr McCartney's points about the need to be able to enforce any legislation. People have previously tried to paint over murals, only to be told that they must leave the area or they will get a bullet through the head; they have been genuinely frightened. The Housing Executive, as a result of one such incident, is very reluctant — and understandably so — to send anyone back to that estate to take the necessary and appropriate action. However, there are other solutions, perhaps in conjunction with the police. One option is that undercover policemen paint over graffiti and arrest those who threaten them.

There has been talk of an irresistible force and an immovable object. It has also been said that the more

graffiti is removed the more will appear, but it must be removed every time it goes up, and those who keep putting it up must be prosecuted. In that way we can try to create a better environment for all citizens.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Another six Members wish to speak. Will you bring your remarks to an end? A seven-minute limit on succeeding Members will be imposed.

Mr O'Connor: Members of an interdepartmental working group may know the problems on the ground and may be able to make solid recommendations. On that basis, I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the proposal in principle, but I also urge caution on circumstances that could arise as a result of it. It is important to address the issues that Mr McCarthy raised. I understand that the Department is keen to support the proposal, but some matters must be taken on board. Mr O'Connor spoke of the fear in the community. While that is true, not everyone is afraid of what is put up on walls.

Some murals are very acceptable, for example, those commemorating World War I, to which many people, as members of the Royal British Legion, can relate. Much of the community thinks that those murals are acceptable. A clear distinction must be made between what is acceptable and what is not.

I also urge caution on the interdepartmental working group. Will the Government body be able to enforce its recommendations? Will it be able to suggest how they should be enforced? Perhaps Mr McCarthy will address that. It is all very well to ask for changes, but we must address where such changes will occur and who will be responsible.

In one incident on the Ards peninsula this year, obscene graffiti was put up. The RUC and Ards Borough Council were quite happy to remove it. The graffiti appeared in the countryside, where there were only three or four households that might feel directly endangered or threatened by it. The graffiti was dealt with immediately because all residents in the immediate area were opposed to it.

That was a simple situation. It happened in a country area and the small number of residents involved all agreed on the action to be taken.

Should the recommendation be, for example, that the graffiti, or emblems be removed, it should be noted that in 30 years of terrorism the enemies of our country have occasionally booby-trapped flags and emblems and that security forces personnel have lost limbs or their lives in trying to deal with them. Caution is most certainly needed in this regard.

When flags are removed, new ones are undoubtedly put up. Has anything been achieved by removing some

and allowing others to replace them? We should perhaps look at the problem at every level. At last week's meeting of Ards Borough Council, its chief technical services officer gave councillors a cautionary note on the removal of graffiti. He endorsed the council's decision, but was concerned about the safety of his staff in implementing the proposals. Such concern also applies to the Housing Executive and the Department of the Environment. Personnel must be given protection. It must also be ensured that, should such a decision be taken, personnel can remove those articles.

Who will enforce decisions about the removal of emblems or graffiti? Who will police them? Who will ensure that staff are safe and are not threatened or endangered when carrying out the work?

We need a group which can work in its own community. It is not fair for decisions to be made for the whole Province. In conjunction with the RUC, and staff employed by the Housing Executive, local councils and the Roads Service, a community should decide what should be removed. Those issues must be addressed at community level, not by the criteria of a Government body.

We must make sure that staff are safe and that the community has an input into the process.

Mr A Maginness: What happens where a community shows its support for paramilitary displays? Alternatively, what happens if, because of intimidation and fear, it is incapable of freely expressing its view on those matters? Is there not a danger that a community could be unable to act freely in certain circumstances? What happens then?

Mr Shannon: Every case must be dealt with on its own merit; it is always difficult to give a general answer. We who live in communities have our ears to the ground and a fair idea of community thinking. There is a way forward, but it must be community-based, and it must come from people on the ground. Let them decide.

Mr O'Neill: Considerable ground has already been covered, and Members have dealt adequately with the fact that the motion asks for the removal of paramilitary flags. There was discussion on the use — or, perhaps more accurately, the abuse — of national flags. Flags have a very long history and are generally regarded as emblems to be treated with respect and pride.

Unfortunately, in our society, they are used to taunt the other side. Hence, people with respect or pride for their flag — national or otherwise — would not leave it up a pole to fade into tatters. To do otherwise is not a show of respect or pride; it is taunting. That is part of our problem. It is a manifestation of the divisions in our society. It was here — with all due respect to Mr McCartney — before the agreement, and it has been

here since. In fact, the agreement states that symbols and emblems should be

“used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division.”

That should be the benchmark for any work that we do.

The motion extends from flags to emblems and graffiti on public property. There are many different types of emblems including, as experienced in Down district recently, the erection of monuments on council property without permission from a planning authority, the local community or an elected politician. That type of activity — and Down District Council is not the only council to suffer from it — has many sources. It raises a big issue about equality and what our work in the Assembly has achieved with the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission in determining how people can live and operate in a society that is free from threat or alienation.

These issues result, as has been well illustrated by Members, in the virtual ghettoisation of an area. In most areas it is a small minority in the estate, town or village that achieves it. Should we not, therefore, support the majority in those towns, villages and communities, and give them a way of emphasising and achieving what they want in their own area?

Alban Maginness referred tellingly to the economic effect, particularly in areas that depend on tourism. When people see these things in a particular area, they feel alienated. That means that any attempt to promote a tourist industry in that area is faulted from the start. Everybody is disadvantaged, both those who want it and those who do not.

Danny O'Connor said that we need to help to get those people off the backs of the rest of the community. Mr McCartney poured scorn on the idea of a commission. However, since he mentioned it, why not look at something that can intervene in the community and help people by giving them the guidance and confidence to work together to solve these problems? As a result of Mr McCarthy's motion, an inter-party group may come up with suggestions about how these things could be done to strengthen communities. It could carry out independent surveys of views and get the community to feel confident enough to deal with the issues.

1.45 pm

Legislation is important. However, in some cases, when implemented directly, it can be a very difficult and blunt object, as my council knows from recent experience. Legislation is not the whole answer. However, legislation combined with the creation of opportunity for people to engage fully with what happens in their communities might be better than a legislative approach alone.

The implementation of existing regulations and legislation is very important. The Department of the Environment, particularly in the past, has received a lot of criticism. The police, councils and the Housing Executive have been criticised today for not fully implementing legislation. As Members have said, the people on the ground have a difficult job in dealing with the issue. They could be putting themselves and their families at risk, and we should never forget that. There is all the more reason, therefore, for an independent commission that could intervene and deal with the issues to rid our country of this blight.

Mr Wells: It is clear that many Members are still confused about the roles of the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development. When the Department for Regional Development opens a new by-pass, the Minister is reported on the front page of all the newspapers as claiming responsibility. However, when his Department refuses to grit roads, everyone blames the Department of the Environment. Unless emblems are on a listed building, a planning service headquarters, or a divisional — *[Interruption]*.

Mr O'Neill: I was not referring to the present arrangement. The Department of the Environment has received much criticism in the past, as the record shows.

Mr Wells: I was referring to another contributor, who blamed the Department of the Environment for things that it was not responsible for. I do not oppose the motion, but I wonder what it will achieve. I am glad that Mr McCarthy has drawn a distinction, as I do, between the flags of this country — the Union flag and the Ulster flag — and paramilitary flags. It is traditional for people to fly the Union and Ulster flags during the marching season. The flags are put up on private homes, and many arches across the country bear flags. That is part of our tradition, which has prevailed in this part of the United Kingdom for many years. I would not support anything that would prevent people from flying those flags or depicting their traditions in years to come. However, everyone must accept that there is a problem with paramilitary flags. That is a problem in the community and it cannot be solved easily.

In my constituency of South Down we have tackled the difficulty of establishing the community's point of view. If a representative of the Department for Regional Development or the Housing Executive were to knock on people's doors to ask what they thought about the display of paramilitary flags, people would be very reluctant to give their opinions. In the Langley Road estate in Ballynahinch, every resident received a questionnaire that was stamped to make sure that it could not be photocopied and misused. A pre-paid envelope was provided, addressed to a post office box

number in Ballynahinch. An independent panel opened the questionnaires, and the process was overseen by church leaders in the community.

The questionnaire provided the first, very clear opinion poll on the display of paramilitary flags in Ballynahinch. The majority of people who live on the Langley Road estate are opposed to the display of UDA and UVF flags there. Perhaps for the first time, officials from the Department for Regional Development and the Housing Executive, who are asked to deal with the situation, know that they have overwhelming community support for what they are doing. Such questionnaires might be the way forward in dealing with the problem. The community is perfectly happy with the display of Union and Ulster flags and wishes that to continue.

The logical outcome of Mr McCarthy's proposal is that a working party be set up, and proposals made to deal with the problem. However, unless Mr McCarthy takes down the flags himself, the ordinary staff of the relevant Government agency will become the "storm troopers". Roads Service or Housing Executive officials will be expected to go into areas and remove flags or cover up murals.

We know from experience what will happen. We watched with horror the news reports of the three Northern Ireland Electricity officials who were sent to Crossmaglen to disconnect the electricity supply of an individual who was abusing the metering system. Two suffered horrific injuries while carrying out what was a legitimate task. One was absent from work for a considerable time. In east Antrim, another member of staff received serious threats after he was sent to disconnect an electricity supply that was being illegally used.

These employees live and work in the same areas where they would be expected to remove flags or cover up murals. It is totally unreasonable to ask them to carry out such work without the support of the community. If they were brave enough to do so, the flags, murals and kerbstone paintings would be replaced within a day of their removal. The proposal will not work if we ask people to remove murals and graffiti without community support. There is nothing wrong with the concept of Mr McCarthy's proposal, but it will not achieve its intended objective.

Mr O'Neill rightly said that not only is it impossible to stop people in the Province from putting up paramilitary flags or painting kerbstones, but that in his town — and I applaud the stand that he has taken on the issue — a full-scale monument to Republicans has been erected without planning permission and without the landowner's consent. There was nothing within present law to prevent the monument from being erected. An injunction was served on a Member

of the Assembly restraining him from any further work on the monument. What happened next? Individuals not named on the injunction completed the work. People face enormous difficulties in trying to prevent such activity from taking place.

In Kilcoo, which is in my own constituency of South Down, Northern Ireland Electricity and British Telecom poles are being used to display pictures of dead hunger strikers. The pictures have been displayed for many months and have not been taken down. If an ordinary Roads Service employee were to take those down in somewhere like Kilcoo, he could be signing his own death warrant, because of the threats and intimidation that he would receive.

It is a difficult problem. I do not believe that any party will vote against Mr McCarthy's proposal, but if he thinks that the proposed group will solve the problem, he is wrong. I will be interested to hear in his summation speech how he believes the working group — when it is formed — will implement, and gain community support for, its recommendations. Only when we solve the problem of lack of community support will we be able to implement any recommendations of the working party.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion and I congratulate Mr McCarthy. People are waiting for the Assembly to do something about the issue.

Flags, emblems and graffiti are being used as psychological weapons to impose fear on our communities. Toleration of the problem is leading to greater ghettoisation and social alienation. The erection of flags and emblems in an estate pertaining to a majority of householders causes the minority living there to feel a "chill factor". It is an uncomfortable environment for them, and very often they leave, thereby leading to greater ghettoisation. It is deplorable.

People want the Assembly and the district councils to tackle the issue. Many business owners are aggrieved and angry at how their image and their competitiveness is weakened when flags are erected or graffiti sprayed on or near their premises.

Road signs are being defaced and bus shelters destroyed. This is adding to that "chill factor" and generally makes people feel uncomfortable. Many of the graffiti and paramilitary emblems are obscene and threatening to visitors or those going to an area to work.

I have made representation to the public authorities and tried to get obscene and paramilitary-related graffiti removed. In the past my own council, Omagh District Council, along with the Housing Executive, had a contract with a private company to remove graffiti. I know that two drivers were severely intimidated — indeed, they were psychologically ostracised when they went to a pub for a drink. That sort of intimidation must be

deplored. The Assembly has to send out a clear message that it does not tolerate that sort of behaviour or activity.

There are many examples of this. Reference has been made to employees of the Housing Executive, Northern Ireland Electricity and the Roads Service who have tried to remove graffiti under instruction from their management. Many felt that they were shunned or fingered. That is another gross example of intimidation.

We must start sending out a message. Are we for or against intimidation, or are we ambivalent towards the intimidation of public service workers when we ask them to go out and keep our environment clear of such obscene graffiti? I support the motion and congratulate Mr McCarthy on tabling it. The public wants to see a clear message coming from the Assembly. It is dangerous for us to create any default options on this.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to respond to the motion. I do so, not because it is the sole preserve or even a prime responsibility of my Department — far from it — but because my Department has, over several years, had to face the brunt of this manifestation of our community divisions.

The problems of paramilitary flag flying and graffiti, including the unwanted painting of kerbstones, are tangible symptoms of a more serious and chronic disease. We should be all too aware of the difficulties affecting community life and community relations in Northern Ireland. The trauma, the hurt and the resultant mistrust are deeply embedded running sores caused, in no small measure, by decades of terrorist strangulation of normal life and society. Overcoming the divisions that those sores leave cannot be quickly or easily accomplished.

While it is important that we can all speak here in relative agreement about the need to tackle these problems on a broad front, we should not delude ourselves. No one should be deceived into believing that there is a quick fix or that the establishment of an interdepartmental working group will be a panacea for these ills. Nonetheless, I welcome today's debate as an important and very necessary step forward.

We all have a responsibility to tackle these issues. Individuals cannot be compelled to live and work together in harmony, nor can they be compelled to express themselves in ways dictated by others. Reconciliation and the construction of good community relations can only work when people make a conscious effort for themselves. Constructive approaches to tackle the root problems of this issue have to be low-key and sensitively handled if they are to be sustainable.

2.00 pm

There have been successes. I know of groups which, with the support of local people, have tackled the issue

of flags and have achieved consensus. In some areas, mixed groups of community representatives now remove offending flags as they appear. Importantly, those representatives have the support of the local community to do so. I cannot pretend, however, that that will serve as a model for all areas. Many different approaches will be required and doubtless not all will succeed at first.

The harnessing of broad community support is the key to success. The Roads Service has found that without the near unanimous support of local residents, the removal of flags and graffiti from its property is often nugatory and can lead to a proliferation of material, sometimes more offensive or permanent in nature. Sometimes the personnel who are tasked with the removal work are intimidated.

The Roads Service wants to respond positively to that problem, but there are contentious and sensitive issues to be considered. In particular, there is a duty of care to staff and contractors, and their safety must be taken into account. Several Members have referred to incidents where staff have been threatened and, on occasion, physically assaulted.

There is also the unavoidable question of resources. Undertaking the removal of offensive flags and graffiti is labour intensive, and a heavy opportunity cost must be considered against other priority road responsibilities. Taking that into account, the Roads Service's current policy — I have stated it frequently in the House — is to remove any flags or graffiti on its property that are deemed to be a danger to road users. In other instances where specific complaints are received, but where there is no perceived danger to road users, it gauges community reaction on the likely success of attempts to remove the flags or graffiti. Advice is sought from the RUC, local elected representatives and local community representatives. I stress, however, that there is no legislative requirement for the Roads Service to remove such materials.

I want to respond to several issues raised by Members. Mr McCarthy, in moving the motion, distinguished between paramilitary flags and flags that are not deemed to be offensive. That is helpful, and the interdepartmental working group should be able to use it as a basis for progress.

Alban Maginness said — and I can see his reason for doing so — that in some instances the displays of paramilitary flags can be deemed a threat to democracy. I can understand that. I will resist the inclination to ask why the representatives of paramilitaries being in Government cannot be deemed such a threat to democracy. I will leave that for another debate.

Mr Hay mentioned the need for consensus, and that need was reiterated by many Members. Mr Hay spoke about areas in Londonderry where that has been achieved. In my opening remarks, I stressed the importance of

achieving consensus, as that is likely to lead to a permanent resolution of the difficulty.

Other Members spoke about the costs of removal. Mr McCartney said that devolution was partly to blame for the worsening divisions. I will leave others to pass comment on that.

Mr O'Connor and others distinguished between cultural and paramilitary murals, which was helpful.

Several Members referred to the problems that we face in removing murals: threats and sometimes physical violence ensue. Mr Byrne made a useful comment when he stated that we must declare where we stand on that intimidation. I would hope and expect the House to be decidedly against intimidation. I referred to recent instances in which Department for Regional Development Roads Service employees had been threatened, as the issue concerns Roads Service property. On one occasion an employee was physically attacked. The problem is an ongoing one, and I hope that whatever the findings of the interdepartmental working group, serious consideration will be given to the welfare of staff. I must give that high priority.

Public representatives' comments are almost always useful in attempts to resolve problems. However, public representatives have occasionally made matters worse by intervening in sensitive discussions on the removal of paramilitary displays. That has served to exacerbate problems in certain areas. Fortunately, that has not happened often.

I reiterate what I said earlier: we all have responsibilities to tackle this divisive issue. We must be able to ensure that pride in the community and business confidence be restored to those areas most affected by the blight. Responsibility for that lies not only with various Departments, but with local councils, the Housing Executive, the RUC and community groups. Perhaps most importantly, responsibility lies with the terrorists who seed and feed the proliferation of the flags and graffiti that plague our communities and that keep the sores of conflict and division open and unhealed. I repeat that no quick fix is available. I call on all to play their part in tackling the issue and in wresting the strangling grip from terrorists in order to restore normality to our society.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the constructive contributions to the debate from every Member, and particularly that of the Minister for Regional Development. I do not know why the problem has fallen so much on his shoulders because other Ministers have responsibilities — those who are involved in housing, the Department of the Environment and so forth. Mr Campbell has defended his Department well, for which we are grateful.

Many points have been covered. Alban Maginness mentioned national flags. I said that we were not

concerned with the national flag. The national flag must be respected at all times.

Mr Ervine: Does that include the occasion on which Alban Maginness removed the flag of our nation from the Lord Mayor's parlour when he became Lord Mayor of Belfast? That showed some respect for the national flag.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for his contribution. Mr Maginness may respond to that, as I cannot answer on his behalf. We are discussing paramilitary trappings, flags, monuments and so forth today.

I congratulate Mr Hay and Mr Campbell, who represent the constituencies of Foyle and East Londonderry respectively. They seem to be more advanced than Members from this part of Northern Ireland — not only in this instance, but on other occasions. I mean that seriously. I can think of other occasions on which a lead has been taken from a Member from those areas. Those Members should keep that up, and perhaps what they say will filter through to the rest of Northern Ireland.

Mr Hay said it was about community. Of course it is about community, and we must bring the communities with us. We all acknowledge that Northern Ireland suffers, and has suffered for a long time, from the “them and us” attitude. That has been nurtured by various people for their own ends. We must try to get away from that and bring people to work with each other rather than pull against each other.

Mr McNamee referred to respect for different cultures. People are entitled to the culture of their choice, and respect must be given to that. The people who have that respect must, in turn, respect other people's culture. That is very important.

In Mr McCartney's lively contribution — I do not know how long he took, but it certainly was quite a while — he talked about the segregation on housing estates in his constituency. That is wrong and must be condemned. However, it is the situation that people find themselves in. The Assembly and elected representatives should be doing all in their power to encourage people to live side by side wherever they choose, regardless of where they worship on a Sunday, if they worship anywhere. We should be hammering that point. Unfortunately, Mr McCartney is not in the Chamber at present. However, we are talking primarily about paramilitary flags and emblems. A Member specifically talked about the offensive graffiti showing guys standing around wearing combat jackets, carrying guns and holding a list of the organisations that have been guilty of the most heinous crimes. How can someone who has suffered at the hands of those people pass by each day and look up at a flag that portrays the organisation that was responsible for the murder of his loved one? That is the whole ethos of this debate.

Jim Shannon and the Minister talked about the fear involved. Other Members talked about the fear of enforcement and how flags can be removed. It is a major problem. We cannot walk away from it. We must educate the people to know that these things are wrong. Any workman or woman asked to remove these flags is fearful.

Eamonn O'Neill and Jim Wells from South Down quite rightly referred to the problem of monuments. Monuments have been erected in that area without planning permission. If I wanted to build a structure, I would have to seek planning permission, not only from the Planning Service but also from the person who owned the land. Congratulations to Jim Wells on the outcome of his survey. The survey was carried out in an area with which I am not familiar, but if that is what the people there want, that is a way forward.

We are all in this together, and we must help each other. We are debating very sensitive issues. So far nothing, or relatively nothing, has been done, or has been seen to be done, to overcome the problem. If the Assembly accepts the motion, Members can genuinely tackle this blot on the landscape. Let us work together to bring about a better environment for all in Northern Ireland. Bring our communities with us, and, as Joe Byrne has said, let us send out a strong message from the Assembly that we will set up this interdepartmental group. There is no guarantee that we will overcome the problem, but at least we will have tried, with the co-operation of all the Departments in the Executive, to tackle it. I hope we will see a better future for all in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to establish an interdepartmental working group to make recommendations on the removal of paramilitary flags, emblems and graffiti from public property.

The sitting was suspended at 2.17 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Due to a long-standing engagement in the later part of this week, I will be unable to be in the Chamber tomorrow. I shall be in Parliament Buildings in the first part of the morning, but unable to be in the Chamber with you.

Oral Answers to Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Poverty and Social Alienation

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the Executive's role in formulating a policy to combat poverty and social alienation in deprived areas. (AQO134/01)

Sir Reg Empey: In the Programme for Government, we made clear our commitment to the creation of a cohesive, inclusive and just society and to tackling the problem of poverty. We are working to tackle the problems of deprived areas through our New TSN policy, objectively identifying the areas that are most deprived and focusing our resources and efforts on addressing their needs.

The Programme for Government highlighted the action that we would take to regenerate disadvantaged urban and rural areas. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has published her strategy for rural development and the Minister for Social Development has initiated consultation on his urban regeneration strategy.

Mr Byrne: I appreciate the Executive's efforts in this regard. Does the Minister accept that voluntary organisations, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army and others, do wonderful work to help the many needy people in our community? There is a need for strong Government action to tackle poverty and social alienation in the ghettoised estates in deprived urban areas.

Sir Reg Empey: Like the Member, I want to express appreciation of the good work that is carried out by the many voluntary organisations that assist deprived communities. Much of what we have today would not be there had it not been for the steadfast service that such organisations have given over the years, when there was little hope in those communities.

When we published our Programme for Government in March, we promised to "identify the most deprived urban areas and to deliver a co-ordinated response to the social and other needs of people living in them, including problems of weak community infrastructure, and the problems caused by the effects of the conflict." Capacity building is under way in local communities to enable people to help themselves. It is not a matter of pushing aid down from the top but of giving people in those deprived communities the skills and abilities necessary to allow them to help themselves. That is happening in many areas, but there is a long way to go.

The new draft Programme for Government shows that we will implement strategies to renew deprived communities, including a north Belfast regeneration initiative supported by URBAN II and other practical measures to address economic and social problems in west Belfast.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Gibson): The Queen's University of Belfast published research last week that showed that three groups had been alienated and excluded from society. Those groups were the Protestant community, farmers and women. Members of those groups in west Tyrone feel especially isolated and alienated. What will the Minister do to ensure that such alienation is addressed during the next funding period?

Sir Reg Empey: We all know that our rural community is recovering from the trauma of foot-and-mouth disease. We know that that community has suffered greatly because of BSE and other health scares. It has also suffered from changes in the market structure that have brought the profitability of many units into question.

My Colleague, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, has produced proposals which will go some way towards assisting farmers. At the moment a major conference is taking place in Belfast which is addressing some of the concerns of rural communities.

The Member referred also to the Protestant community and women, and there is no doubt that there is evidence that those groups are in difficulty. North Belfast is one area where those difficulties have been focused upon. My Department has endeavoured to address the problem in west Belfast with its two distinct communities by establishing task forces which cover the whole area. For example, one is focused on the Shankill area.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is currently looking at the north Belfast situation to see what mechanisms can be created there. The Member will know that his Colleague is engaged in that exercise. The combination of the efforts of these Departments will provide us with the correct mechanisms for addressing the disconnection from mainstream society felt by these groups. It is our objective and consistent with the Programme for Government to address this.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister give a commitment that the Government's procurement policy will be one of the measures used to assist in combating poverty and social alienation?

Sir Reg Empey: A consultation paper will be issued on behalf of my Colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, on procurement policy. People will then be able to give their views on procurement issues. The practice has been that when the Government or any state organisation purchase goods or services they do

so on the basis of best value. Some people argue that there are different ways of achieving that. That paper will be issued shortly to enable everyone in the House, including Committees, to put their views forward for the Executive's consideration.

Human Rights Commission

2. **Mr McGrady** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline what recent discussions it has held with the Human Rights Commission; and to make a statement. (AQO130/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Our officials last met the Human Rights Commissioner on 24 May 2001 to discuss proposals for establishing a commissioner for children. We will be seeking further meetings to discuss the Bill of Rights and other matters of relevance to the devolved Administration.

Mr McGrady: Does the Deputy First Minister agree with me that the powers of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) fall short of what is required for the United Nations standard? The commission submitted a report to the Secretary of State as long ago as February 2001 and has yet to receive a response. There is an urgent need to strengthen the investigative power of the NIHRC. Will the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister undertake to ask the Secretary of State to respond with a view to enhancing the powers of the commission?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has not jointly made representations to the Secretary of State about the review of the effectiveness of the NIHRC. I have, however, personally made clear to the Secretary of State the need to ensure that the powers of the NIHRC should be brought into line with those of the South of Ireland. This will help to ensure compliance with the Paris Principles of the United Nations.

I have also made clear my views that the NIHRC is a vital new institution deriving from the Good Friday Agreement and worthy of proper powers and support.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Following on from the Minister's statement of his dissatisfaction with the NIHRC, will he go further and take up the case for proper representation for representatives of all the community on the commission?

It seems strange that the two largest Unionist parties have no members on the commission. That is contrary to the law, which states that the commission should reflect all people in the community. Will the Minister assure us that the commission will represent us as the law says — not only in powers, but also in personnel? It comes as no surprise that my party is not represented, but I am surprised that the Ulster Unionist Party is not.

The NIO knows the religion of my people, and it despises it and discriminates against it.

Mr Speaker: Order. We ought to let the Minister respond.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I thank the Member for his question. As he is aware, our Office has no role in making appointments to the commission. Appointments are a matter solely for the Secretary of State. I am not aware of the requirement to appoint members of any party to this, or to any other, commission. I note the Member's comments, and I believe that the Secretary of State will exercise proper judgement in ensuring the effective and dynamic operation of the commission.

Mr Dalton: Will the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister indicate that they will press the Secretary of State and the Human Rights Commission to put more effort into ensuring that the commission focuses on the biggest human rights abusers, namely the paramilitary organisations? The commission must do all that it can to ensure that the paramilitary organisations, which abuse the human rights of the children and people of Northern Ireland daily, will be subject to investigation.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: At the heart of the Member's question is the way in which a society that abhors paramilitary activity strengthens the institutions and strengthens the Human Rights Commission as part of the Good Friday Agreement.

There is a strong case to be made for the Secretary of State and all elected representatives to ensure that they strengthen that which is good in our society. As a result, paramilitary groups' negative and destructive qualities will gradually become more ineffective, they will have less hold on our community and the positive elements will be able to lead in all sections. That is the greatest contribution that we can make.

Holy Cross Primary School

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the progress made on Executive action to overcome the problems arising from the demonstrations against the Holy Cross Primary school children. (AQO156/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Executive continue to work closely with the NIO to promote dialogue, to resolve the dispute and to tackle the broad range of overarching social, economic and community issues both now and in the longer term. We have appointed a senior official to liaise between the Executive and local community representatives. The official is based in the area to ensure accessibility to the local community.

We have also established a liaison group of senior officials, which involves the relevant Executive Depart-

ments and the NIO. As a first step, the group has been asked to identify the issues that need to be addressed and to report back to the Executive. We look forward to receiving the group's report in the near future.

Mr Dallat: Although I welcome the appointment of the official and the liaison group, I appeal for urgency. Will the Minister tell me when the Executive will receive the first report? Will he consider a similar approach for other areas that have been the target of regular pipe-bomb attacks, such as Coleraine, Larne, Ballymena and other locations?

Sir Reg Empey: The Executive received a report at last Thursday's meeting, and they will continue to receive regular updates.

The senior liaison official is engaged in an extensive round of meetings with community and elected representatives. The senior liaison official reports back to the liaison group, which meets frequently. This work will continue as a matter of urgency, but it is important to recognise that many of the overarching problems experienced by all sections of that community are deep-seated and will require an ongoing, concerted and co-ordinated effort to resolve them. The events of the weekend are testimony to that.

2.45 pm

There is tension and violence at a number of interface areas throughout the Province. As in north Belfast, the key resolution is dialogue at a local level. We will do all that we can to support efforts by local communities to resolve their differences. Indeed, in the joint statement that Mr Mallon and I issued with the Secretary of State, we said that our short-term objective was to establish a mechanism in that area to facilitate dialogue, which should be the model for other areas. That key area has also been addressed by the ongoing review of community relations policy, which is closely related. We look forward to accelerating the review to give us the necessary means to respond.

Mr Watson: While recognising the difficulties in north Belfast, will the Minister agree that Portadown has suffered similar difficulties over a much longer period? In May 2001, 57 RUC officers were injured while protecting junior Orangemen from attack by Nationalists on the Garvaghy Road. Will he offer similar resources to the Portadown area to help with community tensions there?

Sir Reg Empey: I agree with the hon Member. I am sure that all sides of the House were appalled at the vicious attacks on young boys, and on the police officers who tried to protect them, during their parade. The then First Minister exhausted a huge amount of time trying to secure a settlement to the Drumcree dispute, and I commend him for his efforts.

If there is local support for an initiative led by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, we will certainly do all that we can to reach a settlement and to improve community relations in the Portadown area. Forums have been suggested. We are prepared to do anything we can to help that community and that area.

It is no surprise that the Member asked that question because of the common issues. It is inevitable that people will look at the implications of the north Belfast situation for other areas. Indeed, we anticipated such a response when we explored the north Belfast initiative. We will be very happy to consider any proposals that are made to us.

Mr Speaker: I urge all Members and Ministers to be as concise as possible. We are making quite heavy weather of getting through the questions.

Mr Ervine: Will the Minister concur that fear and manipulation lie at the core of the difficulties of life on the interface? Will he also concur that guarantees are effectively required from each community that one will not attack the other?

Sir Reg Empey: Fear is rampaging around all interface areas. Indeed, the Member knows that such an example exists in our own constituency. The threat is very clear. As long as people are frightened, as many communities are, their areas will experience withdrawal from community involvement and those areas will be handed over to violent people. However, those situations are being manipulated — there is no point in sweeping it under the carpet. People see an opportunity and they are shamelessly exploiting it to the severe detriment of our entire community.

Programme for Government

4. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what plans there are to develop public service agreements within the revised Programme for Government. (AQO149/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Our first Programme for Government in March included for the first time public service agreements (PSAs) for each Department. That represented a good start in setting out what the Executive were seeking to achieve from the resources available, but we recognised that the PSAs needed some further work and we are committed to that. One way in which we have sought to improve PSAs has been to place greater focus on the key outputs we wish to achieve and to locate details of actions to deliver the targets in the public service delivery agreements currently being developed.

The revised PSAs will be published as part of the draft Programme for Government. Everyone will be

delighted to hear that the documents will be shorter and will be focused on main targets. The PSAs demonstrate the Executive's commitment to greater openness and accountability, and they will support the delivery of the priorities and commitments set out in the draft Programme for Government.

Mr O'Neill: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's assurance on the publication of the PSAs. Does he accept that there is a great need for openness and transparency and that we cannot be too careful about ensuring that it is present in the delivery of services by the Government and its agencies?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I agree that accessibility, accountability and responsive administration are essential. The Executive remain committed to achieving that. The PSAs will be presented to the Assembly in draft later today, together with the draft Programme for Government. They will demonstrate our commitment to greater openness and accountability. However, as an Executive, we wish to go further than that. We plan to publish, after the end of each financial year, a report on progress against the commitments in the Programme for Government and the PSAs. This approach will allow the Assembly and the public to measure our progress on the commitments we undertook to deliver. We are also in the process of developing new service delivery agreements for every Department, and those will be published. They will link the highest level targets in PSAs with actions, targets and budgets for improving service delivery. They will also include a strong focus on meeting the needs of customers.

North/South Meetings

5. **Mr Fee** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline the planned schedule of North/South meetings up to the end of 2001.

(AQO151/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Arrangements have been made for six North/South Ministerial Council meetings before the end of the year to cover seven of the agreed sectors. Discussions continue with the relevant Departments to schedule meetings for the remaining five sectors: transport; special EU programmes; language; and Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights. It is anticipated that meetings will be scheduled in the near future and held before the end of the year.

Discussions also continue on the arrangements for the next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council, which will take place in Armagh.

Mr Fee: I am disappointed that regular meetings across all sectors have not been achieved. Will the Minister confirm that within strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement there is an imperative for sectoral meetings with each side represented by the appropriate

Minister? Where that cannot be achieved, an appropriate format for meetings to consider institutional or cross-sectoral issues should be found so that outstanding matters can be resolved.

Sir Reg Empey: Whatever else can be said, there have been approximately 34 sectoral meetings, as well as plenary meetings of North/South institutions. The Member will be well aware of the background to that issue. Substantial progress has been made.

There should be no difficulty with these issues, but not all of those who are participants in the agreement have adhered to it. That has cast a shadow over it. Nevertheless, the institutions are functioning, meetings are taking place and progress is being made. I wish that as much progress was being made on the outstanding matter of disarmament as has been made on the North/South bodies.

Mrs Nelis: A LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister's office intend to continue to illegally exclude Sinn Féin Ministers Bairbre de Brún and Martin McGuinness from the North/South Ministerial Council meetings? The court ruling agreed that the Ministers were upholding the Good Friday Agreement.

Sir Reg Empey: I am always pleased to hear the Member put her faith in British justice. However, the agreement cannot be cherry-picked. It has a number of components that must be implemented, and the fact is that some people are in default of their obligations and, inevitably, a price must be paid for that.

Mr McClarty: I note the Minister's response to the last question. Can he confirm that he will not nominate Sinn Féin Ministers to attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings while that party fails to fulfil all its obligations under the Good Friday Agreement?

Sir Reg Empey: The Belfast Agreement cannot be cherry-picked. There is a clear obligation on all parties to demonstrate their commitment to the use of exclusively peaceful and democratic means while in pursuit of their political objectives. The Belfast Agreement imposes an obligation on parties to achieve decommissioning. That is particularly true of paramilitary-related parties such as Sinn Féin. Several months ago, the then First Minister wrote to the two Sinn Féin Ministers to ask for information on what they had done, or were doing, to secure decommissioning. Mr Trimble is still awaiting that information. That does not encourage me to believe that such persons are suitable for nomination to such meetings.

Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels

6. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the

cost of issuing invitations and associated arrangements in respect of the proposed opening of the Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels. (AQO126/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The total identifiable cost for the official opening of the Northern Ireland Executive's office in Brussels was £214·24. In the interests of precision, the breakdown shows that the cost of printing invitations and envelopes was £197·07 and the cost of postage was £15·28 from Brussels and £1·89 from Belfast.

Unfortunately, the official opening of the office in Brussels was postponed to keep the diaries of Ministers clear at that time. It is expected that an alternative date, later in the year, for the official opening will be agreed. The office has been fully operational since the end of May.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the Deputy First Minister's answer, and the personal statement made on an earlier date by the acting First Minister. Does the Deputy First Minister agree that there must not be any party political association with the office? Does he agree that it would be best to relaunch the office as a shop window to Northern Ireland, similar to the Scotland House? It should not be a window on the Executive, which has demonstrated that it is not the best example of what is happening in Northern Ireland. Rather than handcuffing the office to the political developments in Northern Ireland, we should handcuff it to the wider socio-economic advantages that Northern Ireland offers people who come to the Province.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The objective is that the office will be of help to the Executive — as we have told the MEPs and Assembly Members — in presenting and protecting the interests of Northern Ireland in Brussels.

3.00 pm

I have no doubt that the operation of this office will be helpful in many instances. It will alert people to what is or might be available in the European system, and it will ensure that Northern Ireland gets its full and proper share of benefits from that system. The office cannot be a drop-in centre for any political party — I am adamant about that. However, it is the type of office that should develop relationships with all elected representatives and ensure that it gives the help that is required.

Mr Speaker: Mr Armstrong, you may put your question, but you will only be able to get a written answer.

Mr Armstrong: How regularly does the Brussels office meet and consult with the three Northern Irish MEPs?

Mr Speaker: I must ask the Minister to reply in writing, because the time for questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is up.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Equality Schemes

1. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what checks and balances have been put in place to ensure local councils apply their equality schemes fairly in relation to the provision of leisure facilities. (AQO157/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): Equality schemes for district councils are not within the remit of my Department and I am not aware of any checks or balances that are in place to ensure that local councils apply their equality schemes fairly in relation to the provision of leisure facilities.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that the provision of leisure facilities on a fair and equitable basis is fundamental to a new society based on equality? Would it not be prudent for him to ensure that the huge cash payments to local councils are properly monitored to ensure that they are fairly distributed in the field of leisure facilities, according to need? Will the Minister consider my concerns?

Mr McGimpsey: As I said, equality schemes are not within the remit of my Department. It is important to say that councils are regarded as public bodies. The public sector equality duty contained in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires that a public authority

“in carrying out all its functions relating to Northern Ireland have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity”

and

“regard to the desirability of promoting good relations”.

If Mr Dallat or any Member has concerns regarding a council, they should take that up with the council concerned. If anyone has reason for complaint, the Equality Commission is the body responsible for equality schemes.

Mr Gibson: In the last round of funding, west Tyrone received 49% of available money for GAA, which is a sectarian leisure pursuit, and 4% for football, which is a cross-community pursuit. What checks and balances has the Minister put in place to ensure that that is corrected and that such blatant discrimination does not reoccur in this round of funding?

Mr McGimpsey: I did not know that Mr Gibson was going to ask that question, so I do not know the detail of those figures. I repeat my previous answer: all public bodies, including the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, which is the funding body with responsibility for sporting activity, are required, under the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to adhere to their

equality statements. The Equality Commission is responsible for making sure that public bodies do that.

If Mr Gibson has examples of cases where discrimination has occurred, he must take them to the Sports Council for Northern Ireland and the Equality Commission. If he wishes, he may also bring those cases to me and my Department to allow me to look into the matter further. That is a very serious accusation.

I must make the point that funding can only be given after applications have come forward, and there is often a disparity in the applications. That is not the whole answer, and it is not the simple answer. If Members have suspicions, they should write to myself and to the bodies concerned.

European Football Championship

2. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any contacts he has had with the Scottish Executive to discuss the possibility of jointly hosting the European football championship in 2008.

(AQO141/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There has been no formal contact at ministerial level, but informal contact has been taking place at official level. I understand that the Scottish Football Association (SFA) has been considering making a bid to host the European football championships in 2008. Some preliminary work has been done, which has indicated that a bid by the SFA would be feasible. However, no decision as to whether to submit a bid can be taken until the Union des Associations Européennes de Football (UEFA) criteria for hosting the championships are published. Those criteria will determine whether the facilities needed require a joint bid, but even if that were the case, there is no expectation at this stage that Northern Ireland would be involved.

Mr Poots: I understand that the SFA has approached the Welsh Football Association and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) regarding a joint bid. Will the Irish Football Association (IFA), in conjunction with the Minister, use this as an opportunity to promote Northern Ireland, which is better placed logistically to accommodate a joint bid with Scotland? It would give us the opportunity to develop a new stadium, which the Province badly needs.

Mr McGimpsey: I am unaware of approaches made to either the Welsh Football Association or the FAI. The IFA is the body concerned with football in Northern Ireland, and, therefore, that which has any possibility of making a joint bid with the SFA. Under the current criteria, UEFA require six stadia with capacities of 30,000, one of which must be able to hold 50,000. I understand that the SFA can proceed with its bid because it has the infrastructure in place

and does not need help from anyone. Should the criteria change from six stadia to eight or 10, Scotland might have to look to Wales, the Irish Republic or Northern Ireland.

There is no stadium in Northern Ireland that comes close to the requirement of 30,000 seats. The biggest is Windsor Park, which, I believe, can hold 12,000. If the IFA were to go forward with Scotland, and were awarded the bid, with support from the Government and this House, there would be time to redevelop Windsor Park or to build a new stadium with 30,000 seats or more. However, that is only speculation at the minute, and I cannot react to speculation.

Mr Boyd: Does the Minister agree that for Northern Ireland to be considered — and I fully support that sentiment — our existing national soccer stadium, Windsor Park, and all other Irish League grounds require funding for essential repairs and improvements?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer Mr Boyd to the previous answer regarding facilities. We should not assume that Northern Ireland is a joint bidder with the SFA. The SFA is waiting to find out if the criteria change, and, if they do, how it addresses that is its own matter. I agree that there is a need to upgrade a stadium here in order to meet international standards. Windsor Park currently does not meet them.

Mr B Hutchinson: The Minister has answered my question.

Mr Speaker: Would that all Members were prepared to act in that way when Ministers have answered their questions.

Sign Language

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what developments have been made in the recognition and promotion of sign language. (AQO147/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Officials in my Department have met with the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID) and the British Deaf Association to identify priority issues for British and Irish sign language users. Interpreting services emerged as a key concern. My officials have been in contact with officials in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Education, the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and the Department for Education and Employment.

They have also met with colleagues in the Disability Advisory Service of the Department for Employment and Learning and have raised the matter with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. My Department will convene a working party of interested

individuals and organisations to explore further issues of importance to sign language users.

Ms Lewsley: Can the Minister tell us how many times the working group, which the Programme for Government was supposed to set up, has met? Will it meet its December deadline to deliver the policy that it was set up to deliver?

Mr McGimpsey: The working party has yet to meet. That meeting will take place this year, sometime in the near future. The prospective membership will include the British Deaf Association, the RNID and other bodies that I mentioned earlier. The working party is provided for in the Programme for Government. We anticipate being able to fulfil our obligations under the programme. I cannot add anything, other than to repeat the background to the current situation, and to mention again the research strategy that we have undertaken over the past 18 months.

Motor Sport

4. **Mr Paisley Jnr** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline progress on the development of a purpose built motor sport centre for Northern Ireland. (AQO127/01)

7. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide an update on the report 'Motor Sports in Northern Ireland - the Future'. (AQO133/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I shall take questions 4 and 7 together.

On my behalf, the Sports Council for Northern Ireland commissioned International Motorsports Ltd to undertake a study to review the current state of the Province's existing short circuits, and to determine the demand, viability and feasibility of establishing a regional motor sport facility. Following the report's publication in August, the Sports Council has engaged in a consultation process to gauge the response of the key partners to the report. An initial consultation with governing bodies of the related sports revealed that there was an overriding need to consider the principal recommendations in the context of a newly developed strategic plan for all motor sport activities — namely cars, on- and off-road motorcycling and karts.

In response, the Sports Council has agreed to facilitate a strategic planning process for two- and four-wheeled sports. A working group is currently being established to advance the strategic plan. The group will comprise representatives of all motor sport governing bodies, local authority recreation departments and Government Departments, and will draw upon expert advisors. In the course of the planning process, it is anticipated that the strategic plan will be completed by the start of

2002. The Sports Council will then advise me on how best to deal with the issue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Although I welcome that the Minister has had the initiative to commission a report, not everyone will agree with its conclusions, as many gaps have been identified.

What is the Minister's view on the Aghadowey short circuit, which was mentioned in the report? He knows that Bishopscourt and Kirkistown have been identified as potentially good training beds for short circuit riders. However, the other courses in Northern Ireland would then face becoming run down, or even possible closure. Given that Bishopscourt is for sale — it faces many planning problems, and is far away from major roads and a major hospital — and given that Aghadowey is located close to those facilities, will the Minister look at the possibility of developing a training ground short circuit for Northern Ireland at Aghadowey? Is he prepared to assist that club — and, indeed, any club that seeks his support — in making an application to the Foundation for Sports and the Arts or to the lottery fund to help it realise its goal of providing better motor sport facilities for the Province?

Mr McGimpsey: Mr Paisley is aware of how this process evolved — and it has been an evolving process. It began with work for the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland on the eight road circuits for motorbikes, and how we made those circuits safer.

3.15 pm

As an adjunct, we looked at the four existing short circuits. Following on from that, we looked at the possibility of a new, purpose-built motorsport facility for the region. Those are the three steps, and each one is still very much in play. Recommendations have been made. For example, the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland task force report has resulted in the allocation by my Department of resources and support for safety work on various circuits. Money has been spent on Dundrod and the North West 200, and funding has been earmarked for Carrowdore and Tandragee. Cookstown has also benefited.

We looked at the four short circuits, one of which is Aghadowey. Around £2.3 million was needed to upgrade the circuits to an acceptable standard. The regional motorsport facility would cost between £20 million to £30 million. This is purely a report, and it is now a matter for the various motorsport organisations to determine what part of the report — all of it, some of it, or none of it — they wish to go forward with.

With regard to Aghadowey, the recommendation was to apply to two circuits as an economic imperative. However, if you spend £20 million to £30 million on a brand new motorsport facility can you then justify having four short circuits upgraded at a cost of £2.3

million each, which will take business away from it? The Member has pointed to competition and the difficulties at Bishopscourt.

I am willing to progress all initiatives and give what support I can, as regards applications for lottery and Sports Council funding. However, the process is still underway and the strategic review of the various motorsports will determine what they see as their priorities. My job, through the Sports Council, will be to support them rather than dictate what they should be doing for their sport.

Mr Neeson: Is the Minister aware of a proposal to develop a major multi-faceted motorsport facility at Kilroot in the Carrickfergus area? Does he agree that that is probably one of the best strategically placed proposals before his Department at present? In what way would his Department be prepared to assist such a project?

Mr McGimpsey: I am well aware of the Kilroot proposal — indeed, Mr Neeson brought it to my attention some time ago. I must point out that there are proposals in other areas as well. I am prepared to give support, but I must first hear the plan for the future from the motorsports organisations. That is where the strategic plan, which they are currently working on, comes in. They should report by the end of this year or early next year, and then we will know better.

I do not know whether they will express an option on this proposal, and I cannot predict exactly what they are going to say. As I said in response to the previous question, it is a matter for the motorsport organisations to strategise the way forward for their sport. It will then be a matter for the Sports Council to give them support, and for me to give the Sports Council the support that it requires. In this way, we will all see the sport develop in the way that we want.

Mr Shannon: Has the Minister read the International Motor Sport Ltd (IMS) report on motorsports in Northern Ireland and does he agree with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's expressed opinion of total support for road racing in Northern Ireland? A purpose built motorsport centre for Northern Ireland cannot cater for road racing.

Mr McGimpsey: It is self-evident that road racing is different from short circuit racing. I have said in the past that road racing is a sport that, for whatever reason, people from this country appear to be very good at — we excel at it. It is also a highly dangerous sport. That is one reason why my Department has managed to obtain resources to devote to road racing circuits. We have been successful in providing support to Cookstown, mid-Antrim, the North West 200, and giving a money commitment to Tandragee and Carrowdore.

That is the situation at present. The sport has to determine how it will go forward. Members are aware — for example, Mr Shannon has written to me about the Carrowdore race — of the requirement under the safety scheme that roads be closed for practice the previous day. That causes conflict with residents who are prepared to accept closed roads for one day, but not for two. Those are issues for the clubs and the local communities to consider, because the clubs can only sustain their events with the support of the local communities.

Regional Museums

5. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what resources are being allocated to support the role of district councils as developers and providers of regional museums, particularly in Newry and Armagh. (AQO150/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Support is provided on a number of fronts. I am, as the Member will know, looking at the question of support for the local museums sector in the context of the local museums and heritage review. At present, the Northern Ireland Museums Council is the main channel for central Government support to regional and local museums, including those in Newry and Armagh, through its grants programme and its role in providing training and guidance on improving standards, both in visitor services and the management of collections.

Recognising the importance of close working relationships with local government, my Department has established a cultural forum to bring together district councils and a range of other relevant public bodies. The forum has provided direct assistance to district councils in preparing cultural strategies in the context of local integrated plans.

Mr Fee: I understand, in the context of the review, that district councils are to have an enhanced role in the provision and development of regional museums. However, does the Minister agree that that is difficult when resources are so splintered? The Northern Ireland Museums Council is a very small source of funding for many of the museums, and the Heritage Lottery Fund, Co-operation Ireland, the Millennium Fund and various other sources have helped to develop the network. Is it not time to have a more coherent funding policy, not just for local regional museums but for other such institutions in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not disagree with Mr Fee's sentiments. However, there are approximately 400 local museums and heritage centres in Northern Ireland, and we cannot fund them all. In addition, the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland, which runs the main museum campuses — Cultra, Omagh, Stranmillis and Armagh — has a funding stream of over £10 million. We are bidding constantly to have that uplifted, because it is running at a deficit.

It is a matter of determining resources and priorities. One way forward is through the cultural forum, which aims to encourage local authorities to develop local strategies that promote the cultural well-being of an area and its people to enable the sharing of good practice and to monitor and evaluate local strategies. The Northern Ireland Museums Council provides a small element of grant support, but, more importantly, it provides expertise and help with the preservation, assembly, presentation and marketing of small, though often important, exhibits.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee (Mrs Nelis): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline any developments or plans by his Department in regard to the reopening of the Navan Fort heritage centre?

Mr McGimpsey: The problem at Navan has been well rehearsed. It is owned by a board of trustees, which has appointed a board of directors to run the centre for it. It is not in the ownership, or under the control, of the Department. We have made strenuous efforts in the past months to ensure continuity and, since the centre's closure, to ensure that it reopens.

I am confident that the Navan Fort heritage centre will reopen. Navan Fort is an archaeological exhibit of enormous importance. It is one of the most important artefacts on the island of Ireland and, therefore, access to it needs to be restored and enhanced.

The trustees currently, through their board of directors, have advertised for expressions of interest. When they are in a position to give us further information, they will do so. I will be happy to write to Mrs Nelis on the latest position when I hear what the developments are. There has been interest from some bodies and if some of that comes to fruition it will enhance the Navan experience for the visitor and make an important contribution to our cultural life.

Mr Hilditch: Is the Minister aware of the difficulties facing Carrickfergus Borough Council in securing a contract with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board? It could stop progress in establishing in the town a museum for the mid-Antrim region — a scheme that we are confident will obtain lottery funding soon. If he is not aware of the difficulties would he investigate them?

Mr McGimpsey: The Northern Ireland Tourist Board is the responsibility of another Department and I cannot answer for it. I will enquire about Carrickfergus and the situation there. I will write to Mr Hilditch in due course.

Ancient and Royal Heritage of Ulster and of Ireland

6. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the steps he is taking to promote

the ancient and royal heritage of Ulster and of Ireland, particularly concerning the British imperium and the fundamental rights of the Brytenwalda. (AQO125/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Bretwalda — or Brytenwalda as they are less commonly known — were Saxon kings who claimed, and were acknowledged to be, over-kings of the southern English kingdoms. They had no formal connection with Ireland. The British imperium refers to the concept of the Bretwalda having the right to rule not only over their own local areas but also, by extension, to have influence over a much wider area. As part of its major programme, The People's Story, national museums and galleries in Northern Ireland are dealing with all aspects of the history of Ulster and of Ireland. This brief includes the ancient Ulster kings and the relationship, where such existed, between Ireland and the British monarchy to the present day. The Making of Ireland is a display sub-programme of The People's Story. Its object is to communicate The People's Story through a major long term exhibition that will deal with the evolution of the landscape and environment and development of industry. Nevertheless the Bretwalda does not appear to be appropriate to The People's Story and therefore does not form part of the programme.

Dr Adamson: My reading of the Brytenwalda is that it was also the right of the old Pictish or Cruthin kings to rule not only in Scotland but in Ireland. Are there any plans in the Columba initiative to bring this fact to the fore?

Mr McGimpsey: Without wishing to develop an academic argument in the Chamber, my understanding is that Bretwalda relates specifically to the Heptarchy, which were the seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England and were not in that respect a part of either Pictish or Celtic life. That would be the official academic interpretation of Bretwalda. However, I am happy to raise the issue of the initiative that Dr Adamson has referred to, because it could be that there is another side to the story that we could all benefit from if it is retold.

Mr Speaker: I have received no requests from any other Members to query the questions from Dr Adamson nor the answers from the Minister.

European City of Culture

8. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what progress has been made in formulating the application for Belfast to be the European City of Culture for 2008. (AQO132/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Belfast City Council is responsible for pursuing the bid to be European City of Culture 2008. In June 2000, the council established what is now an independent company limited by guarantee. The company, Imagine Belfast 2008, has been set up with

the support of my Department to develop Belfast's bid, and I have secured £500,000 to help with the preparation of the bid. The company brings together key partners from the public and private sectors and the aim is to prepare an inclusive bid that will reflect a broad and creative interpretation of culture. To date, Imagine Belfast 2008 has delivered a large number of presentations and briefings to individuals, groups and organisations to raise awareness, gather ideas and encourage creative thinking in regard to the bid. A significant bank of ideas has now been amassed and the content of the bid will cover four core areas: culture and arts, design and environment, community and society, and media and entertainment.

As the bid is drawn together over the next six months, Imagine Belfast 2008 is planning a series of demonstration projects to promote awareness of the bid and to ensure that when it is submitted it is the result of a creative process that has widespread support. MLAs may wish to know that, on 13 November in Parliament Buildings, I will be hosting a presentation on Belfast's bid to become the European Capital of Culture. I pay tribute to the work undertaken so far and hope that it leads to a successful result.

3.30 pm

Mr McCarthy: Does the threat from the Minister's party to withdraw from the Executive in the near future and potentially collapse the Assembly not seriously jeopardise —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is not only out of time; he is also out of order. The answer to that question is not the responsibility of the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. It is well wide of the original question by the Member.

Local Museums and Heritage Review

9. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his assessment of the Local Museums and Heritage Review document; and to make a statement. (AQO129/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Member will be aware that my Department and that of my ministerial Colleague, Mr Foster, commissioned the Local Museums and Heritage Review. The report of the review steering group was distributed at the beginning of July. Officials from both Departments are preparing a draft response to the report, and we propose to consult widely on the response when it has been completed. I am conscious that the response will not be available —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister's time is up. Can the balance of the Minister's answer be provided to Mr McGrady in the form of a written answer? I regret that

the time is up and that Mr McGrady is not able to ask a supplementary question.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Regional Status

1. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the progress in having regional status applied to beef exports since May 2001. (AQO142/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Since May 2001, I have kept the EU political situation regarding BSE under review to assess whether the climate is right to rekindle our case with the EU. One of the cornerstones of our case is the low incidence of BSE in Northern Ireland. Since May, we have been engaged in a number of surveys of different categories of cattle with the aim of verifying the true incidence of the disease in them. Those surveys are still in the early stages, but the initial results are encouraging. However, it is likely to be a few months before comparative results are available in the rest of the EU. Until they are available, it is unlikely that we will be able to persuade other EU countries of the strength of our case. As I have said on a number of occasions to the Assembly, I remain fully committed to having the export ban in Northern Ireland relaxed, and I will raise the case as soon as the conditions are right.

Mr Poots: We often hear that everyone should have equality in Europe, so it seems strange to farmers here, where there is a much lower incidence of BSE than in the Republic of Ireland, Portugal and other EU countries, that Northern Ireland is still not allowed to export beef. Clearly the iron was not struck when it was hot last year, and we do not want to make the same mistake this year. We want to see progress made on this issue, and we want to know what the Minister is doing to make progress.

Ms Rodgers: I thought that I had explained that, but I will reiterate it. As the Member is aware, since I became Minister I have worked hard to get low-incidence status for Northern Ireland. However, I have no control over events in Europe, and events have worked to my disadvantage and to the disadvantage of the industry. Because of the panic in Europe over the incidence of BSE in various European countries some time ago, I was advised by the commissioner, and others in Europe, that it would be better not to press the case at that time. I explained that to the House. At present, since there is a screening operation going on across Europe, there is no possibility of the European Union considering our case until the exact figures and the results of our

screening tests are known. That will not be until the end of the year, as it will take six months to do the necessary screening. At that point the other European countries will have finished their screening, and it will then be possible to make a comparison to see where we stand. Those matters are not within my influence to change. As soon as the time is right, and as soon as we have a good case to make, I will be making it.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

2. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her proposals for the protection of rare breeds of cattle, pigs and poultry in the event of a further outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. (AQO123/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department stands ready, in the event of any further outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland, to reactivate the measures it took earlier this year. These are designed to protect all susceptible species, and by their very nature they protect rare breeds of cattle and pigs. However, if the disease were to manifest itself in or near a rare breed herd, I would have to take the advice of my Chief Veterinary Officer as to what action needed to be taken with that herd to prevent the wider spread of the disease. That might include slaughter.

Mr Savage: There are other diseases, such as TB and brucellosis. Should there be another outbreak of any such diseases, rare breeds of animals will need protection. What action will the Department take to ensure that these animals do not become endangered species?

Ms Rodgers: I have to be guided by veterinary advice. My priority is the prevention of the spread of foot-and-mouth disease to a wider area of Northern Ireland. I accept the concerns that the Member has expressed in respect of rare breeds, but I cannot deal with hypothetical questions. I hope that we will not be put in that position. I ask everyone to do everything in their power to ensure, by taking all precautions, that we do not go back to that position. It is a matter of taking the advice of the vets at the time.

Mr Kane: Will the Minister comment on the likely impact of the declaration of Europe's highest court that the French import ban on United Kingdom beef is illegal?

The Speaker: It appears that the Minister is as puzzled as I am as to the connection between the supplementary question and the original question. I leave it to the Minister.

Ms Rodgers: Will the Member repeat the question? I do not think that it has anything to do with the matter in hand.

The Speaker: That was my view as well, and I did hear it. I will ask the Member to repeat his question, so that it can be considered again.

Mr Kane: Will the Minister comment on the likely impact of the declaration of Europe's highest court that the French import ban on United Kingdom beef is illegal?

Ms Rodgers: That matter is for the European Commission, not for me.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In regard to further outbreaks, the present compensation situation is that there is more profit return to farmers from foot-and-mouth disease than there is from ordinary farming methods. Is it possible that that could contribute to further outbreaks here, or that it contributed to the recent outbreaks in Britain?

Ms Rodgers: I am baffled by the suggestion that there is more profit for farmers in further outbreaks. It is my understanding that the outbreak hurt very much the farming community, the agriculture industry and the wider world. The question is not particularly relevant, nor is it rational.

Rural Development Strategy

3. **Mr McMenamin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when she expects to publish the rural development strategy. (AQO138/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Northern Ireland rural development programme strategy for 2001-06 was published on 1 September 2000. The strategy aims to build on the good work done under the 1994-99 rural development programme and to provide a flexible framework that can support a wide range of rural regeneration opportunities.

The implementation of the strategy will be supported by the European Union through the Building Sustainable Prosperity programme, Peace II and LEADER+. The strategy has been developed following extensive consultation with rural interests.

Mr McMenamin: Can the Minister tell us what the strategy will do?

Ms Rodgers: The strategy aims to build on the good work done under the previous rural development programme 1994-99 and to provide a flexible framework that can support a wide range of rural regeneration opportunities. Key elements of the strategy will include capacity building, which is the strengthening of the fabric of rural communities, sectoral development projects and programmes, local regeneration projects and programmes, micro-business development and natural resource tourism. Those are the main elements in the strategy, and we will also be targeting, in particular, groups such as women, the unemployed and farm

families. There are four focus groups — I cannot remember what the fourth one is.

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the Minister could respond in writing with respect to the fourth group.

Ms Rodgers: I will.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I recognise that the Minister has had many difficulties during the past months with foot- and-mouth disease and also with the BSE crisis. Will the Minister not agree with me that if we are going to have rural development and a revolution in the rural society, we must find a way whereby people in the farming community can exit from farming and those who wish to commence farming could enter the farming community. If that issue is not tackled, we cannot expect a regeneration of the rural community.

Ms Rodgers: Mr Paisley may know that I am aware of the need for restructuring of the industry, and I hope to have next week the report of the vision group that I set up when I became Minister. We will be consulting on that. I do not yet know what is in it, but there may be proposals for restructuring.

I had commissioned a study of the impact of early retirement and new entrant schemes in other countries of Europe. However, the results of that consultation, which was based on a desk study, were inconclusive. Since then I have commissioned wider research, which is being undertaken by Queen's University, Belfast and University College Dublin. This will give me information upon which I can make a judgement as to the feasibility of an early retirement scheme or a new entrant scheme. I am also interested to see what the vision group has to say about restructuring of the industry. I take Dr Paisley's point entirely.

Rural Proofing

4. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the rural proofing of Government policy. (AQO143/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Executive Colleagues and I remain fully committed to the principle of rural proofing — the process whereby all the interests and aspirations of those people living in the rural area of Northern Ireland will be fully taken into account in the development of policies across the whole range of Executive responsibility.

Because of the need to divert resources to address the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks, progress on rural proofing has been slower than I would have liked. I hope to be in a position to put specific proposals to my Executive Colleagues shortly. In the meantime, arrangements to recruit a rural-proofing co-ordinator in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are well advanced, and I anticipate that the post will

be filled very soon. Moreover, since the advent of devolution, my officials have been members of many interdepartmental groups and committees and have ensured that the rural and agricultural perspective has not been overlooked.

Mr Neeson: Bearing in mind the increasing levels of poverty in the countryside, will the Minister make greater efforts with the Executive, particularly with regard to the Programme for Government, to ensure that rural proofing becomes a priority? Does the Minister agree that much greater emphasis needs to be put on access to hospitals and public transport in rural areas?

Ms Rodgers: Yes, I entirely agree. The reason for introducing the concept of rural proofing in the last Programme for Government was to ensure that the rural communities were not disadvantaged as they have been by lack of transport and difficulty of access to hospitals and other facilities.

It is hoped that the process to implement rural proofing will be in place as soon as possible. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will be able to proceed when an official is appointed. I shall put my proposals to the Executive very soon.

I accept Mr Neeson's point that rural communities must be considered when departmental policies are being decided.

3.45 pm

Mr Beggs: Has the Minister made a rural proofing assessment on the current pre-school funding criteria, which favour large groups or nursery groups that rarely exist in the rural community? Does the Minister agree that an education policy that removes all funding from a rural community has not been satisfactorily rural-proofed? Is the Minister concerned when groups that have recently received glowing inspection reports from the Department of Education, and that have sustainable numbers for 2002-03, may close because of a shortfall of one pupil in the immediate pre-school year?

Ms Rodgers: I have not yet signed off on the rural proofing policy, therefore I cannot do what the Member has asked. However, I accept what he has said. The issues that he has raised are the responsibility of the Department of Education; until then my Department signs off on the rural proofing policy. For reasons beyond my control, the Department's rural proofing policy has not yet been put in place.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister agree that rural proofing has not only become a throwaway phrase but also a throwaway concept? It has been thrown away. Rural proofing has not been implemented since its introduction in the Assembly through the Programme for Government. That is not a failure of the Minister's Department but of the Executive, which failed to get

together to agree a rural proofing strategy to bring farmers and the rural community together. Will the Minister fully commit to rural-proofing and ensure that the Executive deliver on one of their key promises.

Ms Rodgers: I have already explained the reasons for the delay to the House, which were beyond my control. It would be helpful if the Member could persuade his party Colleagues to join the Executive so that all Ministers could get together to decide policies. They could sit around a table and ask questions rather than correspond through papers. It would be more useful if all Ministers could get together to discuss those issues.

Silent Valley: Ban on Grazing

5. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what discussions have taken place with the Minister for Regional Development concerning the termination of the ban on grazing rights of farmers in the Silent Valley area; and to make a statement. (AQO128/01)

Ms Rodgers: I discussed that with the Minister for Regional Development in February. We agreed that our Departments would work together to explore ways to reduce the impact of the Silent Valley grazing ban on local farmers. The outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease shortly thereafter required the full attention of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and even though my officials have met with officials from the Department for Regional Development it has not been possible to conclude the consideration of the Silent Valley position. When that is done I intend to meet with the Minister for Regional Development to review the position and to discuss the way forward.

Mr McGrady: The grazing ban imposed on 114 farmers in the Silent Valley and the lack of available grazing land has placed them at an extreme disadvantage, particularly at a time when farmers are suffering from the effects of foot-and-mouth disease. Does the Minister agree that such a ban has an enormous impact on local farmers and that the ban should be removed? Will the Minister have urgent talks with the Minister for Regional Development and impress upon him the economic consequences of that ban on those 114 farmers and on the local community? The matter must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Ms Rodgers: I agree with Mr McGrady that there is little doubt that the grazing ban has put the farmers concerned at a disadvantage since they have been obliged to make alternative arrangements for both the land itself and the feeding. The impact of this varies according to individual circumstances.

I cannot comment on the possible removal of the ban, as that decision rests with the Minister for Regional

Development, other than to say that we all recognise that the ban was imposed because of the risk to public health, a consideration that is paramount when its removal is being considered. I plan to have a meeting with the Minister as soon as possible. My officials have been in discussions, and this will take place as soon as it is practical.

Forestry Strategy

6. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when she hopes to bring forward the new forestry strategy. (AQO136/01)

Ms Rodgers: Following informal consultation I intend, by spring 2002, to publish a formal paper outlining proposals for the future of forestry.

Mr Byrne: In my constituency of West Tyrone, the Castlederg/Drumquin area had a lot of land used for forestation some years ago. Will the Minister try to ensure that more resources will be earmarked for forestry development in such areas, and can she say what areas the new strategy will cover?

Ms Rodgers: I cannot deal with individual areas at this point. It is for people to make proposals. Regarding the areas to be covered, forests influence many areas of our lives, including climate change, the economy, the environment and the opportunity for recreational and other activities. Forests occupy only a small part of Northern Ireland, and a policy will focus on the areas that are of most importance to us.

As a guiding principle, we should try to get as much value out of the existing forests as possible to get an acceptable return on the investment of our parents' generation. However, at the same time we should make proper provision to hand on an adequate area of forest to meet the needs of our children.

The review will address fundamental questions, including the amount of forestry we need, where a new forest should be planted, and what kind of forest we should plant as existing forests are replaced. We have to determine how we want to achieve this and how we will pay for it.

Mr Shannon: Will the Minister confirm that her Department will make the same strategy available to all of Northern Ireland — I think specifically of my constituency of Strangford? The Minister spoke about new forests being planted. Will the farmers and landowners in the Strangford area also be able to take advantage of this new forestry strategy?

Ms Rodgers: As I have said, the review will address all the questions, including that which has been raised by the Member. It will address where forests should be planted and what kind of forests they should be. At this point I cannot comment on any specific part of

Northern Ireland. Their location will be determined by what is best for the future of the industry, and I cannot say anything more at this stage.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

7. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for an inquiry into foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO145/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have already announced my intention to hold an investigation in Northern Ireland, and I am considering the best way to do so. There are to be three inquiries in Great Britain, and we will take account of what they have to say.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for her response, but I am afraid that it does not take us much further forward from the position that we were in some weeks ago.

The Minister has stated that three internal inquiries are proposed by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in Great Britain. The Minister is well aware that they do not have the confidence of the agriculture community there, as they will be internal, closed inquiries.

Will the Minister assure us that the Northern Ireland inquiry will be independent, open, accountable and that it will fully cover the issues? Those issues include how foot-and-mouth disease was dealt with here; how it arrived in the first place, with particular reference to port controls; and how we will ensure that foot-and-mouth disease does not get to Northern Ireland again, even should it recur in Great Britain.

Ms Rodgers: The Member will accept that, in dealing with the foot-and-mouth epidemic, I have tried to be as open and as accessible as possible, and I intend to continue on that vein. The investigation will be as open as possible. It will look at all aspects of the disease and how it entered Northern Ireland. It will involve consultation with the public and the industry, and it will welcome all contributors.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for her reply and for the openness and transparency of the report. Will the inquiry take the Republic of Ireland's position into account?

Ms Rodgers: I am still considering what form the investigation will take, but it will have to cover factors such as how the disease occurred in Northern Ireland, how we handled the outbreak, and what lessons can be learned from our experience. Any investigation will have to take account of the circumstances in the Republic of Ireland, as well as in Great Britain. I have discussed the matter with Joe Walsh, and my officials have been in touch with their counterparts in the

Republic of Ireland. I expect that we will be making an input into their investigations and vice versa.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement concerning the openness and accountability of the inquiry. I would press the Minister on a point that Mr Ford raised. Surely the independence of the inquiry will give it credibility?

Ms Rodgers: I have not come to any conclusion on the make up of the inquiry. It would not make much sense to have an internal departmental investigation. I take the Member's point. I will make my intentions clear to the Assembly and to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development when I come to a decision.

Marketing of Beef

8. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her assessment regarding the current marketing advantages, if any, that beef produced in the Republic of Ireland has over beef produced in the UK. (AQO140/01)

Ms Rodgers: Beef produced in the Republic of Ireland is currently available for sale on the GB market at a lower price than comparable beef produced in the UK. It is marketed and labelled as Irish beef and provides the consumer with a choice against beef produced in the UK or from other countries. UK-produced beef accounts for the largest proportion of beef on sale.

Mr Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can beef from Northern Ireland be labelled as Irish beef?

Ms Rodgers: Under the compulsory beef labelling rules, which came into effect throughout the EU on 1 December 2000, beef can only be labelled as "Irish" if the animal from which it was derived was born, reared and slaughtered in the Republic of Ireland. Non-compulsory additional details may be included on labels, provided that the information is not misleading and that the terms used have been approved by my Department and are capable of verification by an independent verifier. Terms such as "Produce of Northern Ireland", "Sourced in Northern Ireland", and "Northern Irish Reared" have been approved by my Department. It is a matter for the industry to decide on the basis of its own marketing strategies.

Mr Speaker: Mr Close does not appear to be in the Chamber.

Rural Recovery Strategy

10. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans for a rural recovery strategy to assist the rural community of west Tyrone. (AQO124/01)

Mr Rodgers: I assume that the Member is thinking about the specific issue of recovery from the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. I confirm that my officials are fully engaged with colleagues from other Departments within the forum of the economic impact task force under the chairmanship of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

4.00 pm

My Department continues to monitor the economic impact of foot-and-mouth disease. We provide support and advice to farmers and rural communities, with the aim of promoting the long-term sustainability of businesses and communities affected by foot-and-mouth disease. In addition, the Department ensures that community regeneration and capacity building continues to respond to the needs of all communities, including those affected by foot-and-mouth disease. The new rural development programme will be launched shortly, and I am confident that it will also make a valuable contribution to the rural economy.

Mr Gibson: When the proposed rural recovery programme strategy is published, will there be a consultation period so that people will have the opportunity to make suggestions, amendments and improvements?

Ms Rodgers: It was not the fault of the Member speaking, but I could not hear the question. It might be because of the acoustics in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: It is the fault of Members, because they are not speaking out clearly. Members do not have much difficulty hearing what I say, and there are several Members in the far corner whom we have no difficulty hearing — they are always clear. Members who are asking questions of Ministers must be clear and forthright and put their heads back and their shoulders forward.

Mr Gibson: When the proposed rural recovery programme strategy is published, will there be a consultation period so that people will have the opportunity to make suggestions, amendments and improvements?

Ms Rodgers: There will be consultation on the rural development programme, which will be launched soon.

Vision Group

11. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when she expects the vision group to report and the estimated length of the consultation period. (AQO139/01)

Ms Rodgers: I expect to receive the vision group's report on 4 October. I will then begin an appropriate consultation period of at least three months. The consultation will include a conference, to which all the major stakeholders will be invited. Once the consultation period ends, I will issue an action plan.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister's time is up. The Minister should make the balance of her answer directly to the Member, who will not have an opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Parliament Buildings: Provision for People with Disabilities

1. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Assembly Commission to give an update on plans to provide access to services and facilities for people with disabilities in Parliament Buildings. (AQO148/01)

Rev Robert Coulter: Since the Member last asked the question, on 22 January 2001, several measures have been implemented. Inside Parliament Buildings, portable induction loops have been installed at the east, west and main entrance reception desks, the post office, the gift shop, the basement and visitors' restaurants and the Library. Two additional portable induction loops are available for meetings. Four text phones are being installed to enable profoundly deaf people to make contact with the Northern Ireland Assembly. A hearing helper education pack, which includes six receivers with headphones, is available for use by Assembly tour guides to assist visitors who have hearing difficulties.

An extensive staff training programme on deaf and hard-of-hearing awareness and signing communication tactics has been completed. It will enable staff who deal with members of the public to communicate effectively. Doorkeepers have been given fire warden training, with particular emphasis on dealing with visitors who have varying degrees of ability.

The appointed health and safety specialist has proposed an extensive list of projects to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

The Assembly Commission is considering the following programme of works: provision of disabled access at the front of the Building and in the reception area; improvements to the facilities in the basement restaurant; fixed induction loop systems in the Long Gallery, Senate Chamber and Committee rooms to assist persons with hearing difficulties; improvements to signage and visibility at staircases; improvements to passenger lifts; improved access to the basement restaurant; and chairlifts to the staircases leading to the Public Galleries of the Assembly Chamber.

It is hoped that the programme of works will be approved and implemented over a 12-to-18-month period. The Building will then be as fully equipped as possible, given its listed status, to meet the needs of both visitors and staff with disabilities. The Assembly

Commission is very aware of its responsibilities to ensure that all users of the Building, whether they be able-bodied or have some form of disability, have access to all parts of Parliament Buildings. Finally, I emphasise that the Assembly Commission is mindful that the third tranche of duties under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 come into force in 2004.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the improvements that have already taken place. I would like some more detail on the timescale for outstanding issues, particularly access. While there is an induction loop system in the shop, it is still not accessible, either from the front or side doors, for anybody who is physically disabled. What is the timescale for that and what, if any, further training will be given to staff?

Rev Robert Coulter: The Commission is very keen to continue with the work. I cannot give a timescale at present, but I will write to the Member when I have consulted with the officials.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I welcome the efforts made by the Commission, but perhaps the Commission's representative will bear in mind the accommodation of Committees. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, of which I am Chairperson, has met for more hours than any other Committee. The Committee is unable to meet this Friday, and no room with the necessary facilities is available to allow the Committee to meet on Thursday. Will the Member take that back to the Commission and look at the arrangements for when a Committee wants to change its meeting for just one day because of certain business that all members of the Committee have to attend to?

Rev Robert Coulter: I will take it back to the Commission, which continues to consider the accommodation requirements in the Building. The issue will be discussed at an early date.

Mr Speaker: There are no further questions to the Commission.

DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT 2002-03

Sir Reg Empey: In accordance with paragraph 20 of strand 1 of the Belfast Agreement, the Executive agreed a draft Programme for Government on 20 September, incorporating the draft Budget agreed at the same meeting. We are therefore laying the programme before the Assembly for scrutiny, and for future approval after examination by the Committees.

Today's statement also represents the start of a consultation process on those specific proposals, and continues the wider consultation begun on 18 June 2001 when the position report on developing the Programme for Government and the Budget was presented to the Assembly.

The Programme for Government therefore sets the context for our budgetary decisions and for the development of the Budget which will be presented to the Assembly tomorrow by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We all desire a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society. The Programme for Government is the Executive's assessment of what must be done to achieve that vision. We have to start from our current position, which involves many challenges.

In many aspects of life in Northern Ireland, however, there is also much of a positive nature to report. Our economic performance as a region, for example, has been much stronger over recent years. Several key indicators, including employment, manufacturing output and unemployment, perform consistently well. Our unemployment levels are no longer high in comparison with many other areas. Our short-term unemployment is down to the UK average, which in itself is well below the EU average. A few years ago few would have predicted that Northern Ireland would become one of Europe's low unemployment regions, but that is now the case.

We have reason to be proud of our education system. A higher than ever proportion of our young people achieved very good GCSE and A-level results, and the proportion of young people leaving school or college with no qualification is now lower than it is in England. We can also boast a higher rate of participation in third-level education than that in most other parts of the United Kingdom.

Parts of our infrastructure, such as ports, airports and telecommunications, are also of good quality, although more can — and should — be done.

We still face, however, a wide range of social, economic and environmental challenges. Many of them are already well known. Long-term unemployment is declining more slowly than we would like. Wage

levels are still lower than in most other regions of the UK, and too many outside the labour force are neither in work nor regard themselves as unemployed.

Despite good progress over recent years in developing high-tech industry, we remain overdependent and reliant on traditional sectors and on the public sector. After decades of underinvestment in our economic infrastructure we need to accelerate the pace of improvement. I will say some significant things about that later.

In addition, our rural economy faces severe problems. Those have been evident for several years but have been exaggerated in the past year by the impact of foot-and-mouth disease. While we have been fortunate in having only four isolated cases, we cannot relax our guard, particularly while outbreaks continue in Great Britain. We have to turn to the challenge of creating a new, broader base for the rural economy.

We are not bowed down by those challenges. We all know the range and nature of the problems, and we know that we have to face up to these realities. However, we know now that by working together we can — and do — make a real difference.

It was with these challenges in mind that the Executive revisited the five broad priorities endorsed by the Assembly in March: growing as a community; working for a healthier people; investing in education and skills; securing a competitive economy, and developing North/South, east/west and international relations. Our conclusion was that they remain valid and that they should continue to set the direction for its work.

We have, however, made several important changes to the document we now present to the Assembly. We have, for example, worked to redefine many of the sub-priorities that support our five priorities and have introduced some new sub-priorities — for example, on children, accident prevention and culture and the arts — to reflect work, both new and ongoing.

We have published new draft public service agreements for each Department. Those now incorporate a stronger focus on high-level targets and performance, giving an improved sense of what each Department is working to achieve in the services it provides to the public.

4.15 pm

The draft programme contains fewer specific actions than the first Programme for Government did. These actions will build on — not replace — the commitments we have already pledged to deliver. However, all of the more than 250 actions set out in the first programme remain valid and relevant. Work is continuing to ensure that all of them are delivered; an annex in today's report shows the current state of progress.

The Executive's priorities are set out in the draft programme. We want to secure a dynamic and competitive economy that creates opportunities for everyone in a wide range of sectors with many more skilled jobs in the new knowledge-based economy. We are making good progress. Industrial output is 22% above the level it was three years ago when the Belfast Agreement was signed. In comparison, output in Great Britain is below its level of three years ago. More than 90% of the new jobs promoted by the IDB in the past year were in the high-tech and knowledge-intensive sectors of telecommunications, electronics and international traded services.

The draft Programme for Government recognises the ever-present challenge of global competition and the current more difficult economic climate that is beginning to impact on us here. Our economy has stood up well to the difficulties of recent years, but we all recognise that these difficulties are multiplying.

Our response will be in three areas. First, we will continue to work to increase investment in knowledge and create the environment in which firms can compete more effectively. Invest Northern Ireland will spearhead work on key aspects of that task. The chairperson and shadow board have been appointed and the appointment of its chief executive is due next month. We will also maintain our focus on innovation and research and development through the Northern Ireland R&D and innovation strategy by working to stimulate private sector investment, developing local industrial design capacity and harnessing research and support strengths in our universities and further education colleges.

Secondly, we need to reverse the deterioration in the quality and reliability of our infrastructure that is the result of years of underinvestment. The provision of infrastructure services such as public transport, roads, water and sewerage are essential for the economic and social well-being of our economy. Hence, we will ensure that our infrastructure supports economic growth, and we will tackle the deficiencies that we identified in the draft programme with purpose and vigour.

The programme includes important proposals for realising our aim. Last Friday, I announced that the Executive had decided that two major gas pipeline projects would receive Government support up to a maximum of £38 million over the next six years. The Irish Government will make a contribution of up to IR£10 million towards that total. The pipelines to the north-west and the south will bring North Sea gas to more than three quarters of our population and businesses and they will protect the security of supply by providing a second link to Great Britain via the Republic. This national resource will potentially be available to most people in Northern Ireland, just as it is to people in the rest of the UK.

In addition, the draft programme undertakes to support transport by addressing improvement to strategic routes including the important trans-European network route from Larne through Belfast to the border near Newry. I am also pleased to announce that the Executive have allocated £40 million to the project. That includes funds to complete the dualling scheme for the A8 road to Larne, the dualling of the Newry section of the proposed Newry to Dundalk road and a significant contribution to the upgrading of the Westlink that the Minister for Regional Development announced last week.

This major investment will strengthen the competitiveness of the ports of Belfast and Larne and will help to improve the integration of our economy with those of our neighbours in Great Britain and in the Republic.

Thirdly, the programme focuses on developing key skills to meet the needs of our economy and on creating higher vocational programmes that will focus on education and training programmes and on getting more people with the right skills into employment. The task force on employability will have a key role working alongside Government Departments and the skills task force. We are indebted to Dr Farren and his Colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning for their efforts in that area.

We are also committed to regenerating the rural economy and to enabling the agrifood sector to respond to the challenges presented by changing consumer demands and increasing competition. Despite a slight recovery in agricultural income in 2000, incomes remain historically low. That is mainly as a result of the weak euro and low world prices. This year has been particularly difficult, mainly because of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Great Britain, which also hit the tourism and hospitality industries. Therefore we shall develop an action plan for the strategic development of the agrifood industry over the next decade and for stimulating alternative sources of employment in the countryside, such as tourism.

Much of our vision can only be delivered by the private sector — it knows its businesses. The private sector has the task of creating competitive firms. However, Government can support that approach; we can create the economic environment, supported by a good-quality infrastructure. Therefore our vision is of a true private- public partnership for driving change. The same partnership is envisaged for the rural economy, for which we must also form a new basis. We must help the rural population to develop new skills and opportunities to sustain their way of life and to sustain the countryside that we value so much.

With regard to resources, the draft Programme for Government has informed and shaped our budgetary proposals; these will be presented separately to the Assembly. However, it is important to bear in mind the

context of our current budgetary situation. Our financial allocations for 2002-03 are finite. As the Treasury is not conducting a national spending review this year, the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit remains fixed. It is against that background that we have developed the draft programme.

However, the indicative Budget for 2002-03 reflects a substantial rise in public spending — over 3% above the general rate of inflation; it is also above the rate of wage increases in the public sector. That builds on the 5.5% increase above general inflation this year. Given the problems facing many public services, the growth is welcome. However, it falls short of the amounts necessary to meet all expectations.

In many areas, notably in the Health Service, it is clear that there is real and sustained growth in the demand for services. The trend in pay and price increases also tends to exceed the general rate of inflation. These are challenges that the Executive must face when it allocates resources. The reviews of needs and effectiveness that are being undertaken across a series of major spending programmes will help to guide us towards an optimum allocation of resources in future.

We are also examining the Barnett formula. It is only fair that expenditure in the United Kingdom is distributed in relation to need. The present Barnett formula clearly acts against that principle by generating a convergence in per capita spending across the UK. However, it is essential that we ensure, and are seen to ensure, that our resources are used to the best effect in our policy priorities.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel is engaged in an exercise to ensure that the question of the Barnett formula is drawn to the attention of Treasury Colleagues. He is conscious of the need to ensure that where we have a genuine need and demand that is greater than that which exists in other areas, it is reflected in the resources that are given to Northern Ireland by the Treasury.

I have outlined the context in which we have undertaken the review and rolling forward of the Executive Programme for Government. Mr Séamus Mallon will now outline in more detail the content of the remainder of the programme.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Sir Reg Empey has set out the backdrop against which we have developed the Programme for Government. I wish to add to his assessment. In particular, I want to highlight the progress we have made, along with some of the key commitments we have given, especially under the priorities 'Growing as a Community', 'Working for a Healthier People' and 'Developing North/South, East/West and International Relations'. Finally, I want to outline the arrangements for consultation.

The Programme for Government represents a contract involving the Executive, the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland, mapping out a new, agreed direction. It demonstrates how we can work together — across parties, across Departments and with other organisations and Administrations — to make a positive difference to the lives of everyone in Northern Ireland. It represents the essence of the purpose of devolution. It should be the focus of our discussions, debates and actions. The extent to which the Programme for Government is overshadowed by other disputes and problems is a measure of the failure to implement the agreement properly.

Cohesion, inclusion and justice are themes which underpin the implementation of all our programmes and policies. Our vision is of a just society, where everyone enjoys equality of opportunity, and where we, as an Administration, actively promote equality of opportunity and adhere to international standards of human rights.

The past year has, of course, been a difficult one for the Executive. We have struggled with instability and, at times, with seemingly overwhelming political problems — problems that had to be faced but which have inevitably drawn us away from much-needed work on economic and social policies.

At the same time, we have continued the work of building up the new institutions in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland. The Executive have sought to work together, but have faced the problem of the non-attendance of two Ministers. While they have sought to limit the Executive's role in providing funds for their policies and programmes, we have been successful in ensuring that the Executive's views and decisions are taken account of, whether in relation to free transport, the future of the ports or the roads programme.

However, despite those problems our commitment is unchanged. We must start with high ideals, with vision, and then throw ourselves into the hard work. We must be realistic and learn how to work together. I believe that as an Administration we are finding our way through.

I will set out some of our key areas of activity. The Programme for Government commits us to tackling unjust discrimination through strong leadership, coupled with effective legislation where necessary. We have already launched the process of consultation on a Single Equality Bill, which will harmonise anti-discrimination law and extend it into new categories, including age.

At the same time, we realise that we have to improve community relations. We plan to put a cross-cutting strategy in place to deal with sectarian and racial intimidation manifested in conflict in interface areas, sectarian graffiti and unauthorised flag flying. Those are the most difficult, sensitive and intractable issues,

revealing and worsening the deep and painful divisions in our society. We must tackle them.

4.30 pm

We will continue to forge ahead with the needs of victims. In 2002 we plan to appoint a commissioner for children and initiate the development of a 10-year strategy for children and young people. We will step up dialogue with organisations representing older people to better identify their changing needs and consider better ways to tailor and deliver our services to them. We particularly welcome input from the Assembly on this. Let it be creative, robust and unremitting. We also welcome input from other interested bodies on this issue. We are increasing training and employment support for people with disabilities, and have established a fund in support of ethnic minority voluntary organisations.

Poverty continues to blight the lives of individuals and whole communities. Eighteen per cent of children under 16 live in homes that are in receipt of income support. Poor people are disadvantaged in many ways. They get sick more often and die younger than those who are better off. The life expectancy of a member of the Travelling community is almost 20 years less than that of someone in the settled community. They may have difficulty accessing services that others take for granted. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to do well at school. Through our New TSN action plans and policy we have established powerful systems to change policies and programmes, and help us build a more equal society, focusing on efforts and resources to address the inequalities of our poorest people.

For many the best route out of poverty is a job with a decent wage. That is why our New TSN policy has a particular focus on tackling unemployment and increasing employability. We have now established the task force on employability and long-term unemployment under the leadership of the Minister for Employment and Learning. It is particularly concerned with the problems of people who have been out of work for a year or more and with geographic and community differentials in unemployment. The programme also includes a commitment to help ex-prisoners overcome barriers to reintegration.

In 'Working for a Healthier People' the draft programme recognises that a wide range of factors influences health. Since our first programme was published we have made important progress in building a cross-departmental approach to improving the health of our people through the 'Investing for Health' process, which will result in setting a higher number of level targets for health improvement.

We also recognise the need to promote public safety and have set out the steps we have taken to reduce accidents at home, on the roads and in the workforce.

Accidents are the single greatest cause of death in children under five. The impact is felt most among those who are disadvantaged. Every year around 150 people are killed on our roads, and another 12,000 injured. Work-related deaths are two and a half times the national average. In our draft programme we commit ourselves to taking action across Departments and with other bodies to reduce these figures.

We will also maintain our efforts to contain waiting lists, address workforce shortages and increase the intake of student nurses. We have initiated consultation on the Hayes report on acute hospitals, and expect to take decisions by the end of next year on the future of our acute hospital services. In many areas, but especially in health, there is a real and sustained growth in demand for services. Given scarce resources, legitimate public expectations cannot always be met.

That will be a major concern for the Executive in the coming years. We will continue to focus on ensuring high-quality education for all, and we have made important progress in laying the necessary foundations at pre-school and primary school levels. We are on our way to delivering our promise that we will provide one year of free pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it.

By April 2002 there will be places for at least 86% of those children. The draft programme commits us to bringing forward proposals for the future structure of post-primary education, which will be informed by the responses to the consultation exercise that is currently under way. We are determined to continue our work to help those in work to update and improve their education and skills.

That challenge is great, because 19% of the existing workforce have few or no formal qualifications, and 24% of our adult population perform at the lowest levels of literacy. In the agreement unique structures were established to provide a new basis for relationships within the island of Ireland, the United Kingdom and east/west. It is essential for the sake of the agreement that all of those structures be allowed to work.

In delivering the Programme for Government we must look beyond the boundaries of Northern Ireland. The development of the global economy, the influence of the European Union and the global nature of many policy issues, such as the environment, which in essence know no boundaries, require us to work on a broader front if we are to deliver government that makes a difference.

Our fifth priority is therefore to build around the need to shape a society that will develop relationships and interact successfully and effectively with its neighbours on this island, throughout Britain, with other nations in Europe, North America and further afield. We have made good progress in many areas by

building on the structures agreed in the Good Friday Agreement. For example, co-operation within the United Kingdom, within this island and between the islands following the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease proved enormously effective in helping us to control the situation.

We have made progress with the establishment of the six implementation bodies. Tourism Ireland Limited and InterTradeIreland contribute to employment here. Important strategic decisions on energy and communication have been taken outside the implementation bodies, and we will benefit from enhanced cross-border co-operation.

We have agreed a new structural funds programme with the European Commission and established a dedicated office in Brussels. We are committed to raising the positive profile of Northern Ireland in Europe, and we will initiate a programme of events designed to promote a positive international image of Northern Ireland. Our draft Programme for Government also recognises that the Executive's priorities cannot be delivered by Departments working in isolation, so we remain committed to working together.

The programme also commits us to working more effectively to improve services and to ensure value for money. We will continue to monitor progress, with quarterly reports being made available to the Assembly. The majority of actions are on target for completion, and slippage has been reported in just 30 out of the 250.

Public service agreements and new service delivery agreements will open the work of Departments up to further scrutiny. E-government will also be used to improve services. We will continue to look for ways of working more effectively across Departments and policy areas. Joined-up government is vital, not for the sake of it but to make a difference to people's lives.

With the children's fund come proposals for a commissioner for children with interdepartmental groups such as those in public health. With interdepartmental work under way on sustainable development, and a task force on employability, we are already moving in that direction.

The new Executive programme funds have also consolidated our work to promote a cross-border approach to problem solving. We plan to make further allocations from these in the coming weeks. As I have recognised, if we are to achieve the challenges of the Programme for Government, we cannot do it alone. One of the key roles that the Assembly will play will be through its careful scrutiny in Committee of our plans and proposals as set out in the draft Programme for Government. This programme will also give opportunities for debate in the Chamber on both the Programme for Government and the Budget. The debates are likely to take place in October and November. On a personal level, it is the type of opportunity that the Assembly

will, and should, take to ensure that the views of Assembly Members are known and that the Programme for Government is a programme not just for the Executive but also for the Assembly and the people it serves.

Today's statement is also the start of a wider process of consultation. We will circulate the draft Programme for Government widely among our social partners in business, trade unions and the voluntary and community sectors, and we will make it available to other interested individuals and groups. We will also use several mechanisms, including seminars involving key stakeholders, to encourage discussion and debate on our proposals and on the extent to which they can help promote equality of opportunity and good relations.

Recognising the links between our policy proposals and decisions on financial allocations, this process will allow both the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget proposals to be considered together. It is important that the Executive receive responses to the consultation to help inform decisions to be taken later this year. We have no doubt that Members will play their part, as they have done in the past, by looking carefully and constructively at this draft programme and letting us have their views. We hope too that Members will encourage their constituents to become more involved and communicative in the process of discussion.

In conclusion, the process of agreeing the Programme for Government and the draft Budget that will support its implementation has not been easy. With limited resources we have had to make many difficult decisions. The crucial thing is that the decisions — difficult though they may be — are being made by elected and locally accountable politicians. It is a responsibility, a duty and a privilege that we should not easily throw away. We commend the Programme for Government to the Assembly.

Mr B Bell: I welcome the statements by the acting First and Deputy First Ministers. I am particularly pleased with the programme in the areas of health and education. I am also pleased that the roads problem has been taken into account — the flyovers and underpasses on the motorway and the road between Newry and Dundalk — because that will have a huge effect on our economic development. I welcome the statement in principle. However, there is one aspect of the Programme for Government that I thought was important when it was first developed last year — the review of public administration.

4.45 pm

Neither Minister mentioned it in his statement today. Has it been forgotten about, or has progress been made? I am concerned about the position regarding local government. Many councils in Northern Ireland do not know what the future holds for them and therefore

cannot plan ahead. I would like clarification on this point.

Sir Reg Empey: The Executive decided some time ago that a review of all public services, including local government, would be appropriate. A major part of that review concerns the Health Service. The Hayes report put forward significant proposals and it is one of the component parts that will be fed into this process.

I am familiar with the Member's concerns regarding local government, and I am aware of the uncertainties that any period of change brings about. In the past few months, the Minister of the Environment has raised the issue with his Executive Colleagues. He is anxious to proceed. However, we are trying to take all parts of the public service into account and we cannot do that on a piecemeal basis. Members continuously urge us to ensure joined-up government.

The advent of devolution creates a changed set of circumstances within which many of the public services are administered. The most obvious are the health and education services, which have been running without devolution since March 1972. Local government dates from a similar period. Things have moved on. With devolution now in place, it is appropriate that this review proceeds. Some work has already been done by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister regarding the themes and scope of the review. It has not been forgotten, and we will pursue it as quickly as possible.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the statement on the draft Programme for Government. What will the programme do to address the needs of children and older people?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The Executive recognise the need to provide services that address the needs of older people and there are benefits to older people across the range of policy areas contained in the programme, through improved government service, social security, health care, transport and housing. In the programme we have highlighted the Executive's wish to receive views on the appropriate approach to services for older people. In section 2.8 we have set out the main actions for achieving sub-priority 6 — and there are other policies relevant to the needs of older people elsewhere in the document. We will discuss the best way to develop our policies with representatives of older people, and we are keen to take views on this issue.

The test of any society is how it deals with people on its fringes — the very young, the aged and those who are marginalised. I am confident that the debate, especially in relation to young people and the elderly, will show evidence of concern that will be translated into the type of action that is needed.

We have a new sub-priority focusing on the protection of children's rights, meeting children's needs and

including children's voices. We are also consulting on the proposals for a children's commissioner, and we have established the children's fund as one of the five Executive programmes. Through that, significant investment has been made to improve our services. Some of our work will include the voluntary sector, and we are involving it closely in the development of the fund. We also plan to bring forward a 10-year strategy for children and young people, taking account of the role of parents and families. It will also examine the score for achieving a more joined-up approach in the Executive to children's issues.

I repeat that the consultation that will take place, the deliberation in Committees, the debates in the Assembly and the way in which we approach these matters will be the acid test of whether there will be something different about this Administration, something different that is good, creative and positive — or will we just be administrators?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I do not welcome this Programme for Government because we had a Programme for Government that made about 200 promises, not many of which have been fulfilled. That can be examined. Ten pieces of legislation have been passed since the start of devolution. Today, when the Executive are in a crisis about who should be Members of the Executive, one of the major parties of the Executive has declared through its leader that it will seek to expel some of them. That has all been forgotten. There has been no mention of the difficult position that we are in. However, an attack has been launched on the two Ministers from the Democratic Unionist Party who do not attend the Executive. Those are the problems. DUP Members have no mandate from the people who elected them to attend the Executive, and I have more respect for the mandate that I received than others in the House have for their mandate. They think that they can break it when it suits them.

It ill becomes us, in the present state of play in Northern Ireland, to have this Programme for Government and to pick out one party only, when we have a party in the Executive that is linked to IRA/Sinn Féin.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can the Member bring his question to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister? This is an opportunity for questions.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I will. I have many questions — *[Interruption]*.

The man who said that is just an idiot or a fool. That is all he is.

When they condemn one party, they should turn their minds to another party. And that party, what is it doing? It is holding on to the arms and terrorising the community. I have a lot of questions to put to the Minister.

I want to ask him why he left out the victims. Do they not matter to him? Prisoners — oh yes, they will do much for them. However, the poor victims of the prisoners are not mentioned. What about the fact that we are meeting under an economic blight because of terrorism? Did the Government, before they wrote all these papers, not consider that the economic situation had changed? Have they not heard about what happened in America and the economic results? Have they not heard about our own Stock Exchange?

Mr Speaker: I must bring the Member to a close. He has been on his feet for three minutes. He has asked some questions, and I must give the representative of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister an opportunity to respond.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I have one question.

Mr Speaker: Please be brief.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Why is there no promise in all of this to implement one recommendation that came from the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee? Not one recommendation is to be fulfilled in this programme.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member's first point about little progress being made is simply incorrect. When we brought out the first Programme for Government, it was the first time that an attempt had ever been made here to marry policy aspirations to a Budget. In this draft, we are trying to refine that process even further.

This is a draft programme. It will go to Committees, including the hon Member's Committee, where he and his Colleagues will have the opportunity to scrutinise it. Over the years, neither he nor I nor anyone else in the House has had the chance to do that. Something was pushed in front of us, and that was it. The Member and his Colleagues will be able to scrutinise this, it will be debated when we come back, and we will ratify the final version. There is a consultation process in place. Mr Mallon said that he was looking forward to hearing comments from Members. We welcome comments from Members.

It is simply not true that victims have been ignored. When I was taking questions two weeks ago today, I specifically answered a question about victims. I indicated the substantial amounts of public money that are correctly being made available to deal with victims, including £6.7 million from Peace II that is specifically for victims and cannot be interfered with by any other interest. Denis Haughey and Dermot Nesbitt are in negotiation with the Northern Ireland Office over a block of money. We have set up liaison groups between our two Departments to ensure that the needs of victims are dealt with.

The consultation paper on the victims' strategy was issued on 7 August. The consultation period will last

until 9 November. In implementing the victims' strategy, the Executive will take appropriate steps to ensure that service delivery is improved. Not all the changes will require financial solutions. In some cases, a change to existing work practices may be all that is required.

The Member also made a comment about the situation in America. My office is fully aware, even this morning, of what is happening as a result of that situation. I can assure the Member that we are doing all we can with those firms that we know to be affected. We are in a global economy, and what happens in another place affects us. We are very aware that there will be pain in our economy as a direct result of what has happened in America, and we are trying to assess the situation. This morning I instructed officials to arrange a meeting for this Thursday of all the key people in my Department and its agencies. We will assess the situation with regard to the impact on our economy.

In the matter of membership of the Executive, the Member will know my view. I made it clear this morning in a broadcast. I am acutely aware that parts of the Belfast Agreement have not been acted on. The Member has to realise that while criticising those people in the Republican movement who, in my view, have not implemented their part of the Agreement, he must not assume that his Colleagues, who seek to have their cake and eat it, can be free from criticism either.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft — [*Interruption*].

Mr Speaker: Order.

5.00 pm

Mr C Murphy: I welcome the draft Programme for Government, which is more realistic this year, now that we have had a year's experience. However, the targets in the section on health could prove to be aspirational, unless sufficient priority is given to the Health Service and resources allocated accordingly.

I welcome the language used in the section on targeting social need and the intention to put in place measures that will focus efforts and resources on addressing the inequalities that our poorest people face. That is a fine aspiration, but what proportion of resources do the Executive intend to allocate to achieving the targeting social need objectives?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The New TSN policy aims to tackle social need and promote social inclusion. It applies to policies and programmes involving all Departments and to all parts of the Programme for Government. It cannot be effective if it is seen as a pot of money for doling out in that way. That would mean that it would not be sufficiently comprehensive to stretch across all Departments and across the Programme for Government.

We have published New TSN action plans showing how Departments are redirecting efforts and resources towards those in greatest need. Those are being updated. We will ensure that those plans are fully implemented, and we will publish annual progress reports. New TSN has a particular focus on increasing employability and tackling unemployment. In 2002, we will consider the recommendations of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment to see how we can strengthen our work in those areas.

The element of New TSN which deals with promoting social inclusion involves Departments working together to improve the circumstances of those who are most at risk of social exclusion. We recently consulted on the issues to be tackled, and new initiatives will begin in 2002. We will evaluate New TSN in 2002, and the results will be fed into our work on the policy. I agree with the Member that the programme cannot deliver quantifiable, measurable results within a specific period. It must be fed into the Administration at every level in every Department and into every policy or implementation document, so that we go to the root of the problem, rather than just gloss over the top.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the decision made last week about the funding of the extension of the natural gas pipeline to other parts of Northern Ireland. It is an issue of great personal interest, and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee worked with the Minister to bring it about. It shows clearly the benefits of devolution to the people of Northern Ireland.

Deep divisions persist in Northern Ireland, and that can be seen only too clearly on the streets. To what extent was the principle of sharing — rather than separation — incorporated into the Programme for Government, to help create the sort of shared and integrated society that we all want?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank the Member for his comments about the gas pipeline project. I thank Mr Neeson for the work that he has done as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and as a public representative. He has promoted the natural gas pipeline for many years; he is not a recent convert. He has made a significant contribution and I appreciate his efforts.

The natural gas pipeline provides a basic piece of infrastructure that was missing. One cannot exaggerate what it will do and it would be wrong to do so, but it is important to have the necessary infrastructure in place.

Mr Neeson made a point about a shared and integrated society. One of the mechanisms at the disposal of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is the community relations unit. We have witnessed the necessity to become involved in a recent dispute. As the Member may be aware, an exchange took place at Question Time about that.

The Executive have considered the measures to tackle the deep and painful divisions in Northern Ireland's society. Mr Mallon said that one fault line is the difference between people who have skills, education and resources and those who do not. The draft Programme for Government contains policies that are designed to address those issues.

The draft Programme for Government's proposals reflect and build on the actions in the previous programme. By 2002, it is hoped that a cross-departmental strategy will be developed to promote community relations and that that will lead to improvements in community relations. Actions aimed at promoting integrated education, the concept of citizenship among children and young people, and respect and support for culture and linguistic diversity have also been proposed.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has proposed a review of the community relations unit, because the limited resources that the Office has at its disposal mean that its ability to intervene is less than it would like. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has proposed that that review be carried out to see whether it is possible to re-organise or to provide further resources to enable it to respond and to anticipate some of the problems that lead to and exaggerate divisions.

Ms McWilliams: I welcome the draft Programme for Government and the statements from Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon. However, I note that 30 of the 250 actions still leave some cause for concern because of slippage and timescale problems. Given that the Assembly will have some slippage and timescale problems over the next six weeks, is the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister concerned about the failure to meet any of those actions? How does that failure impact on the draft Programme for Government?

Do Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon agree that the timescale for the reorganisation of the hospitals — by December 2002 — is too lengthy? Would it not have been better to have attempted to synchronise that timescale with that for primary care, which is set at April 2002? One will impact on the other.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The timescale for the reorganisation of the hospitals may be too long. However, the reason for that will become clear when one looks at the budgetary considerations and the factors that will be involved in the decision-making process. There will have to be extensive deliberations and consultation by the Executive — not only in their consideration, but in the Assembly and in the community. I am not sure whether there is a way to cut time out of it, but I hope that there is. I would like to think that there would be a unanimity that does not grow on trees in Northern Ireland, but I doubt it. However, I want to assure the House — in a loose way — that if it is seen

that things can be done more quickly, they will be done so.

As for the 250 actions, the broader question as to whether timescales have affected those, and the wider problems; of course the uncertainty is damaging. There is no doubt that the political uncertainty in regard to the institutions has had an effect on the Administration and on the Executive, and will have a continuing effect.

When we were preparing for questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister this morning, it struck me that there might not be another such Question Time, if one is to believe the huffing and puffing that one hears. I do not know whether that will be the case, but I know that it is difficult to maintain a collective focus to ensure the delivery of the actions required. The Member is right; it is having an effect. However, while there is some slippage — I think it is in nearly 30 areas — other areas have developed quickly. We should be looking at how those have been delivered, while at the same time retaining the resolve to catch up with the 30 that have not been properly delivered.

Mr Speaker: Whatever the situation may be as far as the institutions are concerned, Standing Orders are clear about the time limits for today. There is one hour for questions, and a substantial number of Members still wish to put questions. I therefore ask everyone to be as efficient as possible in putting their questions and answering them, and we will deal with as many as possible within the limits that Standing Orders give us.

Mr Hamilton: I served as a teacher for 25 years, so I particularly welcome the continuing commitment to the improvement of levels of education. However, the statement highlighted the ongoing problem of literacy in our society as a whole. What measures are proposed in the draft Programme for Government to deal with that?

Sir Reg Empey: The hon Member draws attention to a serious problem. As Mr Mallon pointed out in his opening remarks, 24% of adults in Northern Ireland have some degree of difficulty with reading, writing or numeracy. That is a staggering statistic.

Through the Department for Employment and Learning, the Executive have received detailed advice from the basic skills unit. Using this advice and taking account of developments elsewhere in the UK and Europe, including the Republic, we will develop a detailed strategy and action plan that will be subject to extensive consultation by the end of this year.

The key elements include new basic standards in the curriculum; raising the esteem and improving the standards of basic skill tutors through a new professional qualification; challenging targets for improving basic skill levels; a strategy for co-ordinating activity across Government; and the engagement of the education

training community, trade unions and employers in tackling this key issue.

We are aware of the extent of the problem, and we are taking action to improve the low levels of adult literacy and numeracy. That lies at the heart of improving economic competitiveness; it is impossible for people to advance personally and improve their social development without it.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Ministers for the comprehensive and complex development of the Programme for Government, although it will require further study with the programme in one hand and the proposed draft Budget in the other.

5.15 pm

Under the chapter heading 'Working for a Healthier People' the draft Programme for Government states

"We will work to contain waiting lists at current levels..."

That refers to hospital waiting lists. Last Tuesday's debate showed that there is great concern in the community about waiting lists — they are not being contained. Since the basic structure review will not take place until the end of 2002, or perhaps not until the end of 2003, there is an immediate concern about how efficiency will be implemented and about how the minor restructuring can take place. The only other option is unlimited finance, and that is not open to us. What new measures do the Ministers intend to take to reduce the appalling escalation in the waiting lists, as it is affecting every family in the community?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: When we think of waiting lists we tend to think of people waiting to get into hospital or waiting for treatment. However, people, especially the elderly, must also wait to get out of hospital and back into their homes. It is easy to upbraid a Minister for not making provision for waiting lists or provision for the elderly or for young people when one knows that the money is not available. We must recognise that.

I am sure that many new medical techniques and ideas are being developed. However, one element will not change: without the money we shall not be able to pay for them. If we prioritise these things — and they should be priorities — we shall have to de-prioritise other things. That is not of much help to the Member; he knows that I am not an expert in these matters. Only by making enough money available can we begin to deal with the health of our community.

Thus ends my popularity in the Executive.

Mr Poots: I am not sure whether this question goes to the huffer or the puffer. I welcome the commitment to adopting a strategy for children and the consultation that is to take place next spring. When is the strategy likely to be in place?

Section 7.3 sub-priority 1 of the draft Programme for Government states

“We will modernise government and make it more open and accessible for the public.”

Under that sub-priority you say that

“We have set a target for all departments to make 25% of their key services available electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2005”.

The Prime Minister said that 25% of all services would be available electronically by 2002 and 100% of all services by 2005. Why is there a difference?

When will the review of public administration get off the ground? It has been talked about for some time. I understand that there is not even agreement on the terms of reference.

Sir Reg Empey: On 28 August 2001 Mr Mallon and I launched a publicity campaign for the consultation document ‘Protecting Children’s Rights — A Consultation paper on a Children’s Commissioner for Northern Ireland’, and we look forward to hearing responses to that document. It is an innovative step that could have national implications, because there could be changes to criminal law as a result of it. That would be a matter for the Secretary of State. Mr Mallon and I have discussed the matter with the Secretary of State and with officials, and we hope that after the consultation, proposals will be brought forward that will advance the issue.

A Children’s Commissioner for Wales has been appointed. However, in the light of the feedback that we will receive, we hope that we will be in advance of many areas. We know that Sweden and other countries have had children’s representatives for some time, but we will be well ahead of most of our colleagues.

With regard to e-government, we have developed a corporate strategic framework that provides the foundation for the co-ordination of the delivery of Government services electronically, taking into account such issues as social inclusion and freedom of information. We will implement corporate IT standards, facilitate work between Departments and better enable the delivery of electronic services. I hope that that is also happening at local authority level. No doubt the Member will be leading the way in the borough of Lisburn as we progress. We have set a target for all Departments to make 25% of their key services available electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2005. We will monitor progress towards achieving that target.

The Executive are already committed to the review of public administration. As I said previously, my Colleague, Mr Foster, has specific responsibility for local government, and he is already working on it. The review will take place, although we are aware that there are uncertainties within the local government system, and we would like to move rapidly towards its resolution.

I am hopeful that we will have the terms of reference finalised as the year progresses. However, I point out to the Member that, as the recent review of the hospitals by Dr Hayes shows, the administration of health services are a part of all of this, as is the huge area of education and its administration. We are anxious to ensure that this is an integrated review, not a piecemeal one. It is better to get the concept right than to get it quickly.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the two Ministers for delivering the draft report on behalf of the Executive. It is a good document containing much information. Many questions will come out of it, and I am sure that the Committees will be dealing with it in their various ways.

Have the Executive adopted the recommendations of the Finance and Personnel Committee in relation to public-private partnerships (PPPs)? I refer not just to the equality impact that the document mentions on page 131, but to the other recommendations in regard to contracts and the best use of public money in building new schools or hospitals under PPPs. The Committee carried out an extensive consultation on PPPs, and I hope that the Executive will include it in their consultation.

What additional money is being put specifically into targeting the cross-departmental themes in the Programme for Government? To return to the issue of the Health Service, and taking a rural area west of the Bann, it is clear that if it takes until December 2002 to implement a new acute services plan, there will be longer waiting lists and a larger problem, but fewer hospitals to deal with it. We need to rebalance services now to ensure that some of those hospitals are still viable by December 2002. The local government review is awaited with anticipation, but we should move away from expensive reviews on everything and spend the money on practical action on the ground.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I thank the Member for his questions, of which I have identified at least four. I will start with the last one on the local government review. It is not a local government review, but a review of administration in general. It is a mistake to look at it as simply a review of local government. We have committed ourselves to that review, and we hope that it will be done thoroughly — not at great expense, but so that we get it right. I agree with the essence of what the Member says. Very often, reviews go on forever, resulting in glossy documents that often have no substance, and which are often wrong. I prefer to get it right rather than to get it glossy.

The Member also mentioned acute hospital provision west of the Bann. I am not competent, nor do I have any authority, to make any judgement, but it is clear that the sooner consultations are over and informed decisions can be made, the better. We will all try to

ensure that that will be done as speedily as possible. Cross-cutting themes are a budgetary matter. I will ensure that that is dealt with tomorrow and that the information is made available.

To answer the Member's first question, in line with the commitment made in last year's programme, a review of public-private partnerships (PPPs) and private finance initiatives (PFIs) has been established. The group, jointly chaired by the Economic Policy Unit (EPU) and the Department of Finance and Personnel, will meet for the first time on Wednesday. It plans to conclude its work by February 2002. The group, which will be widely drawn from the private sector and will have a representative from the social partnership, will explore the policy, the economic and social issues behind the policy and the opportunities to use private finance in all major services.

The group will develop the equality impact assessment in line with the explicit commitment in the Programme for Government to carry it out. In carrying forward that work, the group will also take account of the detailed report on the issue, which was rightly produced by the Committee for Finance and Personnel. That report usefully set out many of the key issues that must be considered and collected a wide range of views on the complex matter. I thank the Committee for initiating that investigation and report and for making the report available to us.

Places on the working group have also been offered to the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Their answer is awaited. It is sincerely hoped that they will join the group, because we will then get the most comprehensive view of what may be possible as a result of the consultation.

Mr McClarty: I also welcome the respective statements of the acting First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister, particularly the parts that relate to the economy. With the deterioration in the world economy, are the Ministers confident that the new Programme for Government does enough to ensure that the economic progress that we have experienced in recent years will continue?

Sir Reg Empey: The Programme for Government contains a section on securing a competitive economy. As I said in my opening remarks, there has been remarkable progress in recent years. Northern Ireland is no longer regarded as the sick economy that it once was, with high levels of unemployment, many leaving these shores because of the lack of jobs, and being well behind in a range of areas.

However, we cannot be complacent, because there is still an overemphasis on traditional businesses, which leaves us vulnerable to world and market trends. It would be unrealistic to believe that any programme could entirely shelter businesses from the effects of the global

downturn. The hon Member, who is on the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, knows the difficulties that are being experienced in the telecommunications sector and others as a result of that downturn, and that was the situation before the events of the week before last. As I said earlier, it is too soon to assess the full impact of those events, but we will be meeting the Department and the agencies later this week to make what assessment we can and to see what steps, if any, can be taken.

5.30 pm

The Member will be fully aware of the measures we are taking, including the creation of Invest Northern Ireland, to ensure that we have the most effective mechanism possible at our disposal to secure maximum economic growth.

Mr O'Neill: There is much to be welcomed in the statement from both Ministers. For many years I have had an interest in the construction of a dual carriageway on the Newry section of the Newry to Dundalk road, and I am glad to see that that is getting up the scale.

The document refers to the crisis we recently experienced. Will the Minister tell us, in the simplest terms possible, how the Programme for Government addresses the crisis in agriculture?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Simply, or simplistically, we have to recognise that the world of farming has changed. It has been changed by forces unconnected with the recent problems with foot-and-mouth disease, but rather on account of how agriculture is changing throughout the world. It is crucial that we recognise that and devise a means whereby rural communities retain the role that they have always played.

During the foot-and-mouth disease crisis all sectors and all sections of Government worked together carefully and successfully to deal with the real problems for farmers and businesses in the affected rural areas. We appreciate that the regeneration of the rural economy is a much longer-term issue and concerns deep-rooted problems. In the Programme for Government, we set out our intention to develop an action plan for the strategic development of the agrifood industry for the next decade.

You might well ask — and so might I — what that means. Surely, if we are honest, we must look beyond the words, and towards what it will take to sustain farming as an industry, to sustain the type of farming that exists in the North of Ireland. We must look not to the type of farming we would wish it to be, or that exists in Norfolk or in other parts of the world, but the type of farming that exists here. We must look at how we can tie that in to the agrifood industry.

The plan for that will arise out of the results of the exercise on the vision for the future of the agrifood

industry that has been carried out over the last year by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. We await that with interest.

How do we help farmers and the wider industry to produce food that people around the world will trust and buy? How do we achieve the relaxation of beef export restrictions? We must do that as soon as possible in 2002-03.

How do we sell it abroad in not very propitious circumstances? The Member asked for simplicity. It would be a start if we were all to ensure that we bought Irish beef. Are we perhaps more partial to Danish or Argentinian produce, or are we serious about sustaining our own rural community?

We cannot regard rural Northern Ireland as a community based on farming and settlement. It is not that type of society. Farming is part of the settlement of the towns and villages. The agro-industries are part of the development of commerce in Northern Ireland. The vision for the future of the agrifood industry will therefore be crucial, because it cannot be considered in isolation from rural life and the farming industry as a whole.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Other Members have welcomed the draft Programme for Government and commented on how much is in it for them. As the Chairperson of the Environment Committee, I listened carefully to the statements of both the acting First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister and they made virtually no reference to the environment or any related issue. There were 19 pages and 35 minutes of speech. Where exactly did the environment come into it? I looked carefully at the 144-page document and found that scant reference is made to the environment. The environment is supposed to be a key theme running through the current Programme for Government. How can the acting First and Deputy First Ministers expect my Committee to believe that they are treating environmental issues as important?

In the previous speech, sustainable development was mentioned repeatedly. It is not even mentioned in the 19 pages and 35 minutes of speech. I know that the Ministers are running quickly through this 144-page document. However, I remember their summary. I believe that the Department of the Environment was the only Department that did not get a mention in the 35-minute speech. Waste management — one of the biggest problems that we face — got two lines in the 144-page document. The protection of our built heritage is a major problem; it was not mentioned in either of the speeches or in the document. We are facing a planning crisis. Many areas do not have an area plan. Again, that was not mentioned.

Mr Mallon said that we must start with high ideals and vision. As far as the environment is concerned, they mean nothing at all.

Sir Reg Empey: Mr Mallon mentioned this. Today we are presenting the draft Programme for Government. If the Member turns to page 92 of the document, he will see that there are some 15 targets set for his Department — *[Interruption]*.

The Member and his Committee will have the opportunity to comment on the proposal. That is the purpose of it. It comes back to the Assembly. The Programme for Government contained a commitment to publish proposals for a sustainable development strategy by June 2001. It was not possible to publish the proposals by that date. However, the sustainable development strategy will be published in November 2001. It will involve widespread consultation to encourage a debate on sustainable development, including indicators by which progress in sustainable development can be measured.

The Minister will consider the comments made during that consultation and intends to publish the sustainable development strategy by October next year. As the Member is aware, that will include reducing, recycling and disposing of the waste that the community generates. Those will remain priorities for the Executive. The Member will also know that councils must be assisted in implementing the sustainable arrangements for the provision of an integrated network of waste facilities through their group waste management plans. When we attempted to put our proposals forward we ran into difficulties with another division of the Department of the Environment with regard to planning. Perhaps the Member will find something in the draft programme that he can get his teeth into when it reaches Committee Stage.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. However, considering that local government is at the forefront when it comes to putting a waste management strategy in place, can the Minister tell us what cross-cutting actions are taking place at local government level to deliver a substantial waste management strategy? Where is the response in the draft programme to the EU integrated product policy or the EU draft sixth environmental action programme?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I will be honest with the Member — I am not an expert on waste management.

Ms McWilliams: We could do with an expert on waste management in the Assembly.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I resisted the temptation even to consider such a matter.

The Member asked a very important question, but I will refer it to those who can answer it properly. I will make sure that the Member gets a full and proper answer rather than a glossed-over one from me now. His question, which means something, will get an answer, which means something, because we know how dear waste management is to his heart and to his mind. I

would not like the Member to go without the expert advice that I will ensure he gets from those who are in an expert position to give it.

Mr Hussey: I thank the acting First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister for the statement. Like others, I welcome the plans for action in the draft programme which I hope will be carried out. The Ministers said that three quarters of the population will have access to natural gas — obviously, a quarter of the population will not. I am concerned about the lack of action planned to tackle the deteriorating rural infrastructure. As the acting First and Deputy First Ministers said, they must deal with those at the fringes. I realise that such action requires funds, so what steps are being taken to deal with the deficiencies of the Barnett formula to ensure that the resources available reflect Northern Ireland's genuine needs and will enable this draft Programme for Government to be delivered?

Sir Reg Empey: It is fortunate that our Colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, is here, since he is responsible for this important issue. The Executive have major concerns, which are acknowledged in the draft programme. We are looking carefully at the operation of the Barnett formula to see if it can provide a fair allocation of resources. We have not concluded work on that, but we know that, because of the way in which the formula operates, we are unable to keep pace with the rates of increase in spending in England on programmes such as health and education, which are crucial. We hope to have formed a view on the appropriateness of the formula later this year. We have nothing to fear from any examination of the Barnett formula. However, we must continue to argue the case for a better and fairer formula — and a coherent Programme for Government is an important building block in the process of putting our case to the Treasury.

5.45 pm

I am conscious that the Member's constituency may not have the gas infrastructure, but the Department aims to ensure that other infrastructural elements, such as telephones, will be available to his constituents.

Mr Speaker: Several Members who wished to ask questions did not have the chance to do so. It is regrettable, but it is not the first time that that has happened, particularly when dealing with statements of such substance. The House must be grateful for Ministers' preparedness to make statements on matters of importance in the Chamber. However, there may be other ways of dealing with substantial statements such as the Programme for Government. My office would be happy to assist the Executive and the Assembly to explore whether, in some cases, there might be a way of ensuring that more Members who wished to put down questions, or explore matters, had an opportunity to do so.

Mr O'Neill: On a point of order. During the debate on setting up an interdepartmental working group the DUP Member for South Down, Mr Jim Wells, made a comment about the people in the parish of Kilcoo. I ask you to examine his remarks when you have the benefit of Hansard and any other advice you may receive. In my opinion, it appears that he impugned the reputation of those people. Indeed, he even suggested that it was risky to one's life to pass through the area. Subject to correction — as I did not quite pick up what his exact words were — I think this could be unparliamentary language. Would you examine this issue for me?

Mr Speaker: I was not in the Chair at the time, so I did not hear the remarks. However, I will peruse Hansard and will respond, in the Chamber if it is appropriate, but if not, directly to the Member himself.

Adjourned at 5.47pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 25 September 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

DRAFT BUDGET 2002-03

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on the draft Budget for the year 2002-03.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is customary for a copy of a Minister's statement to be available to Members on arrival at the Chamber. Unfortunately, Mr Durkan's statement has not been made available to Members at this point —

Ms Lewsley: It is available outside the Chamber.

Mr Kennedy: It arrived at a very late stage. The statement has not been made available to some Members in the Chamber, and I ask that the matter be taken up with the Business Office to ensure that this does not happen again.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The normal procedure is for the statement to be left at the Door for Members, which is exactly what happened today.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): With permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Executive's public spending plans for 2002-03. I understand that the statement has been put in Members' pigeonholes and that it is available outside the Chamber. I do not know exactly when it was left outside, but I shall follow up the matter given the understandable concern that has been expressed.

In accordance with paragraph 20 of strand one of the Belfast Agreement, the Executive agreed a draft Programme for Government, which incorporated an agreed Budget at its meeting on 20 September. In line with section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I today lay the Budget before the Assembly for scrutiny and approval, after examination and debate in Committee and in the Chamber.

I wish to emphasise that the proposals that I announce today are made on behalf of the Executive as a whole. Following intense and serious discussions we have drawn together spending plans for all our services. Each Minister who attended the Executive has participated in thoughtful and constructive discussion on the public services that we oversee.

We are aware of the pressures that affect all Departments. We have a shared responsibility for the judgements that we have formed on the balance between competing demands and priorities. Therefore we must share the credit, and be prepared to share the criticism, from the implications of our plans.

All Ministers must deal with their own issues. They work within plans set by the Executive, and they should receive our support as they uphold and implement what we have agreed. I am grateful for assurances from those Ministers who have engaged in the discussions that they will uphold the conclusions reached. The clarity of the agreement that we have reached shows what can be achieved in our unique form of multiparty Administration.

I have also had useful bilateral talks with the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development, who have both indicated their support for some of the proposals I present today.

My main purpose is to begin the important stage of consultation on the spending plans for next year. In response to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report from last December, the Executive have fulfilled their commitment to bring forward Budget proposals immediately after the summer recess. That is in order to maximise the opportunity for the Assembly to fulfil its scrutiny role, as envisaged in the Belfast Agreement and in section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

When I presented the position report to the Assembly on 19 June 2001 on behalf of the Executive, I made it clear that the report was evidence of the Executive's commitment to engage in meaningful consultation and to provide an opportunity for debate and comment in the Assembly and more widely on the issues. Many have availed themselves of the opportunity, and I am grateful to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the attention they have paid to this issue. The Committee's commentary on the position report has been helpful, and there has been extensive commentary from other Committees. Beyond the Assembly, we have received many important comments from social partner organisations and from other interested parties. I am grateful for the thoughtful input that they have provided.

The spending plans that I shall outline have been designed to deliver the priorities and actions in the revised Programme for Government, which was presented to the Assembly yesterday by Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon. The Programme for Government has

set the context for our budgetary decisions. The draft Budget's development has been influenced by the Executive's proposals on our policy priorities and programmes that are set out in the draft Programme for Government. This year we have further strengthened the link between policy making and financial planning, which ensures that our policies drive our expenditure and not vice versa.

We have been able to confirm and refine our actions and targets, as explained in the statement on the Programme for Government. In a few cases, due to prevailing constraints and other pressures, it has been necessary to defer planned actions. The Executive have agreed that if the resource position improves, first consideration will be given to fulfilling Programme for Government commitments that have been deferred.

The draft Budget covers the second year of the period covered by the 2000 spending review. From the longer-term perspective, since the comprehensive spending review in 1998 there has been a period of rapid growth in public spending. Our departmental expenditure limit allocation, as set by the Treasury, shows a rise in public expenditure in 2002-03 of 5.8%, or around 3% more than general inflation. However, I recognise that many of the costs that affect public services are rising at a faster rate than general inflation. The allocations for 2002-03 build on the 5.5% real terms increase in 2001-02, which has allowed Departments to initiate the work started on the Programme for Government priorities.

It is important to stress that we cannot expect spending to continue to rise at such a substantial rate for much longer. Objectively and against the historic trend, the public spending context, at least in the context of the Barnett formula, is now "as good as it gets".

Given the problems faced by many public services, we can conclude that the rapid growth is necessary but that it falls short in that it does not match expectations for the delivery of services. That applies, in particular, to health spending, in regard to which it is increasingly clear that even the high rates of increase applied in England, which we cannot afford to match, leave serious needs unmet. As a result of the demand for public services, substantial bids have been made by Departments. Those needs are real and they need to be addressed.

The Barnett formula dominates the overall arrangements for determining public spending levels for our services. As there was no spending review in Whitehall this year, there are no new Barnett consequential for 2002-03, other than the small amounts added in the Chancellor's Budget in March. The Barnett formula results in less growth of our spending power than England's, and that is apparent in issues that we have had to address in preparing the draft Budget.

The Executive remain determined to seek improvements to our position with regard to the Barnett formula. We need to seek change to help us seize the unique opportunities provided by devolution and the Good Friday Agreement. We must also address the backlog of underinvestment in infrastructure and the difficulties in funding for health, education, transport and other services that we have inherited; equivalent services in England are now being addressed with large amounts of money.

However, we must not overlook the most obvious point: the amount spent per person in Northern Ireland is much higher than in England. We need to recognise that the Treasury will point out areas in which our spending is high and that it will argue that we must reprioritise. I feel strongly that we must reprioritise in response to our own views and values, not in response to Treasury constraints. That is what the Programme for Government and the Budget are all about. However, we must be aware of the areas in which relatively high spending weakens our case for help with our most acute difficulties.

Proportionately, we raise much less revenue than in England, and we fund water and sewerage services from our departmental expenditure limit. The Assembly should note that if we were to raise rate revenue and water charges roughly to their equivalent pattern in England, we would have approximately £300 million of additional spending power for public services. Even if we make allowance for the greater level of social deprivation in Northern Ireland, our low rate revenue still makes it difficult to argue for additional money from the Treasury.

In last year's spending review we set indicative figures for 2002-03 and 2003-04 that showed how the money might be allocated to services, subject to review this year. That accounted for all our spending power, except for the Executive programme funds.

In approaching the Budget, the Executive could simply have confirmed the indicative allocations set last year. We could have allocated the additional £19.3 million available from the Chancellor's March Budget, and the £23.5 million available as a result of reduced requirements of Departments, which was derived mainly from additional receipts and further expected proceeds from the sale of Housing Executive property. That would have meant that the majority of the bids lodged by Departments, and summarised in the position report, would have been ruled out. Departments would have had to readjust priorities to cover new costs and forgo the developments implied by their other bids.

10.45 am

However, we have looked at the more general needs and demands that services face and at the scope for better use of the available spending power. We looked

seriously at the option of some redistribution within the indicative figures that had been set last year. Although, in the final package of proposals, only one Department receives less than the previous indicative allocations, we did consider the possibility of wider reallocations.

We also took careful note of the points that have been made about the levels of reallocation that have applied in all our monitoring rounds so far, and the high levels of end of year flexibility. We are aware that if the balance of loading between programmes is not right at the start of the year, that will exacerbate the problem of underspending. Moreover, it is more difficult to explain the need to raise money from the rates if that money is not being fully drawn down by our programmes. It would seem odd for the scope and extent of our changes in a full Budget round to be on a smaller scale than most monitoring rounds.

In considering those issues, we came to the view that health, education and roads were among the services that face the most acute difficulties, and they would have to be given a degree of priority. That does not give those functions pre-eminence in the Programme for Government, but simply recognises that, in the context of the draft Budget, they presented the most clear-cut cases for some increase in the indicative figures that we had determined last year. The key difficulty was to find ways to address those priorities without simply shifting the difficulty to another sector.

We cannot allocate resources beyond our departmental expenditure limit, but we can look at the prospects for future room to manoeuvre. We have concluded that we can, without undue risk, allocate around £48 million of spending power to be carried forward into 2002-03, based on anticipated underspending this year. We are confident that it will be possible to manage resources in the next few monitoring rounds and through 2002-03, and to make good that assumption.

As a last resort, we have agreed that if the pattern changes and we have insufficient underspend to confirm the assumptions that we make today, we could draw on the provision held in the Executive programme funds. That means that we have a firm basis for additional allocations now, because the Executive programme funds provide security against the risks that affect our decisions.

However, neither the infrastructure fund nor the children's fund will be included in that arrangement. We want to give particular priority to addressing the region's strategic infrastructure, and it is important that we have the Executive programme funds available to fund more long-term developments, such as those announced last Friday and yesterday. We also want to protect the children's fund because, as well as being intrinsically important, it is about to be the subject of a major consultation.

To use the £48 million in that way is not a cost-free option; it puts some limits on our scope to meet the pressures that may arise this year. However, I am confident that we have acted to manage resources as effectively as possible at the draft Budget stage by reducing the extent of reallocation necessary in monitoring rounds.

To use the £48 million and the additional money from the March Budget, and by recycling the reduced requirements from Departments, the total available for allocation is £92.6 million. That also includes a small reduction — £1.8 million — from the indicative allocation for the Department for Social Development. Of that, £13 million is required to deal with our proposed approach to the regional rate for 2002-03.

Therefore, the approach that I have described allowed us to meet a total of £79.6 million of the spending pressures in 2002-03 over and above the indicative figures. That is a much better scenario than had seemed likely in June, when the position report was published. However, all Departments will still have to act to absorb substantial additional costs that cannot be covered by additional spending power. That is not surprising or exceptional, but the norm for the management of public spending.

In reaching our decisions, the Executive examined a number of possible means to secure additional spending power. We focused on the need to control the level of spending on departmental running costs. All Departments will be required to examine how they can reprioritise to ensure that spending is focused where it is most needed — on public services.

We need to recognise that spending on departmental running costs includes some services provided directly by Departments. Therefore, an across-the-board cut in departmental running costs would be unhelpful. We also need to ensure that Departments can address the Assembly's needs, give proper account to its Committees and meet their obligations under the agreement. The Executive will consider the issue further before the revised Budget is prepared.

We shall also continue to examine the scope for additional asset sales or other measures that would allow us to release more resources for services. We shall seek further information from Departments on that, and it would be helpful if all Committees would include examination of the issue in their discussions with Departments.

The draft Budget is not so much about increases to plans, but about how best to use the resources available. It is not about ordering up more, but about getting our priorities in order. That applies to the full range of services and also to each Department's programme. We should not focus on bids for more, but on how we can get more from what we have. There are no free

choices, but we can make real choices based on the values and principles that we wish to uphold. Making a difference does not depend only on having more money to spend. We can and should break further away from the patterns that we have inherited.

We have to be prepared for some allocations to go down as well as up. To get the most from public spending will mean that there is more to the process than sharing out additional money. We must focus more on what is being achieved and delivered. As we develop the public service agreements, as published in the draft Programme for Government yesterday, the outputs and outcomes can and must come to mean more to us than the amounts of money or the percentage increases in spending on programmes. That was what we wanted to achieve in the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, and we need to ask Departments to engage in that with increasing realism.

I urge all the Committees to focus their attention not so much on what may have happened to bids that Departments lodged, but on what will be achieved through the Departments' programmes. We need to work on the money that is there — as in the Executive's proposals — and not on the money that we cannot allocate. It may be helpful in some cases for Committees to follow through with scrutiny of areas that have been questioned in the Public Accounts Committee's hearings and reports, so that the spending plans can benefit from the detailed work already completed by that Committee.

In making choices, we need to focus spending on where the best advantage can be gained, or on where the needs are most acute. That means facing up to the fact that some spending is less essential and less beneficial. Benefits and effects can be indirect and long term, and, at times, we need to insist on resources being secured for long-term investment, even at the cost of short-term convenience.

We must focus on the evidence and make better informed decisions on the allocations for each Department for the benefit of the community and without regard for the party identity of the Minister concerned. It is important that that is seen by all as the dominant issue for consideration by the Assembly. Prioritisation will be the theme of the work that needs to be done between now and December.

In finalising the draft Budget proposals, the Executive have considered the views expressed by the Assembly on a range of issues. The Executive propose that the additional resources available should be used as explained in the Budget document and in the table attached to my statement. To outline the picture of the Executive's Budget proposals, I will comment on the position for each Department in turn and set out briefly the changes to the indicative allocations that the Executive agreed last December.

The Executive programme funds are a key element of the Executive's determination to ensure that spending plans are adjusted from previous patterns and spent in line with the Executive's strategic priorities as is set out in the Programme for Government. They are also designed to promote cross-cutting working, in which proposals and initiatives can be proposed for consideration by an appropriate group of Ministers working together.

We believe that the special allocations from the funds managed and approved at Executive level will make a real difference from previous patterns of expenditure. Because some spending power has been placed in those new funds, it follows that the amounts shown for Departments in the draft Budget will understate the final spending power that will be available to functions in due course. I ask the Committees to bear that in mind when considering the proposals.

Negotiations on the new round of structural funds have now been completed for the Peace II and building sustainable prosperity programmes, and for the equal community initiative. The negotiations for the remaining community initiatives — INTERREG, URBAN and LEADER — are nearing completion. The detailed arrangements required under the programmes are nearly ready, and it is expected that bids for funding will be invited across the range of measures in the near future.

The allocations to functions and Departments in the Budget reflect the Departments' responsibilities as implementing and accountable bodies for measures within the various structural funds operational programmes. The figures in the summary and the departmental tables illustrate the scope of the new programmes and how they complement the Executive's own programmes. That helps to highlight the special contribution made to the region by European programmes, especially the unique assistance from the EU programme for peace and reconciliation. It is proposed that the new Executive programme fund for social inclusion and community regeneration will be managed alongside elements of the structural funds, and the community initiatives in particular, to maximise co-operation between the Executive, district councils and the European Union.

I will now turn to the main features of the departmental allocations. The allocation proposed for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is some £204 million. Following the foot-and-mouth disease crisis, the Executive wish to see how best to secure the future of the rural economy and the communities that depend on it. In particular, we will, over the coming months, examine the conclusions of the rural visioning exercise.

The allocation for 2002-03 includes an additional £2.2 million for a greatly enhanced programme of BSE testing of animals to meet EU requirements. That is in

line with the Executive's priority to attain a low BSE incidence status so that our farmers can regain access to export markets.

11.00 am

Further provision has been made available to take forward the scrapie eradication programme, and provision for animal disease compensation is being aligned more accurately with need. Funding has been made available to maintain the beef quality initiative and take forward the Agenda 2000 reforms and the cod recovery plan. The Budget also provides for an increase of £300,000 in support of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission — one of the North/South implementation bodies.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure faces some cost pressures in respect of museums and in completing the establishment of the Department with its particular and distinctive role. The proposals include a significant boost in expenditure compared to 2001-02, especially for museums and libraries. The plans also provide appropriate provision for the operational costs of the languages body and Waterways Ireland. The proposed allocations will also cover the cost of the staffing necessary to allow the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to meet its wide-ranging portfolio of responsibilities.

The Budget proposals for the Department of Education support the Executive's priority of investing in education and skills. Planned allocations will promote a substantial programme of support for the school sector, the youth service and community relations activities. That represents a significant improvement on the indicative plans announced last December, although the proposals will still call for a careful prioritisation of activities in the education programme.

The Budget plans will enable the Department to continue the drive to improve standards and promote excellence across the whole of the school sector, to achieve targets on GCSE and A level attainment levels and literacy and numeracy levels, and to reduce the number of pupils identified as poor attendees. The resources provided will protect classroom provision and initiatives that are key to assisting vulnerable groups.

Resources are included for ongoing initiatives to improve schools that are underperforming and to provide all schools with information and communication facilities that will increase access to new learning opportunities and learning materials.

The Budget proposals for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment represent a slight decrease in spending compared with this year. The amounts required for support to industry and enterprise are difficult to predict at the budgetary planning stage, and those allocated for 2002-03 reflect the recent trend

while taking account of evolving policies in lower grant rates and alternative types of support. The Executive remain sensitive to the possible need for significant investment, should some particular need or opportunity arise.

It is not yet clear what effect the expected economic slowdown will have, and it is intended that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will keep the matter under review and report at the earliest opportunity should changing circumstances reduce the budget needed in 2002-03. In setting this allocation, the Executive remain confident that the Department will still be able to meet its main Programme for Government priorities and public service agreement targets.

It is also important to note that the Budget provision does not take into account possible major infrastructure projects such as the recently announced natural gas pipelines and the provision of broadband telecommunications in Northern Ireland. Those will fall to be considered for support from the Executive programme funds. It is expected that the grant for the gas pipelines will come mainly from the Budgets for 2003-04 to 2005-06, so it is not a matter for the Budget for 2002-03.

The budget for the Department of Finance and Personnel will support the Executive's drive to provide modern and efficient public services. The resources provided will enable the Department to provide advice and assistance to the Executive and the Assembly, helping them to manage the public expenditure system and decide how to allocate scarce resources adequately to finance Northern Ireland's public services. The Department will also provide a range of central services to other Departments and complete major reviews of rating policy; public procurement policies; the arrangements for promotion and recruitment to the Senior Civil Service; accommodation policy; and the scope for the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs.

The Department for Employment and Learning's allocation will enable the planned expansion of student support schemes to continue and allow the delivery of other higher and further education services to be maintained at current levels. Changing needs and patterns of demand have led to a planned reduction in employment programmes, but levels of service to individuals will be secured. The additions made will support the Programme for Government priority of investing in education and skills and its supporting actions to broaden access to higher and further education and employment opportunities. An extra £30.4 million is included in the Budget plans to provide for the expansion of further and higher education places, and to broaden access to these places through revised student support measures, which target those on low incomes and those who need additional support because of their age or need for childcare support. The Department will also seek to raise attainment levels.

The employment programme will continue to provide a full range of services to companies and individuals to promote economic growth and help increase the number of accessible employment opportunities. Helping people to move from welfare to work; encouraging lifelong learning through individual learning accounts and other measures; and improving attainment levels within the Jobskills programme will all remain priorities.

The largest programme within our departmental expenditure limit is the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The proposals make provision for an increase of 8.1% in 2001-02. This reflects the Executive's commitment to developing the service to meet the needs of our population, although this includes a technical change of £19 million from the social security budget, so the effective increase is 7.3%.

In our discussions in the Executive there was recognition of the significant demands on the Health Service. The Health Service needs increases of 7% or 8% simply to maintain standards of care due to the cost structure of the service. Such increases are afforded in England, yet no one would say that their provision is adequate for the needs of the community. However, there is increasing evidence that provision here is falling behind that available in England.

We should not allow the complexity and range of issues that we face in the Budget to obscure the central fact that we have to find ways to provide adequately for the Health Service. This is probably the largest Budget issue that we face now and in the coming spending review. Change and hard choices lie ahead to make sure that the service's structure, organisation and management serve the public interest.

I was struck by the consensus that it is right that we should increase the relative amount we spend on health and provide substantial resources in the Budget now. Our plans will enable the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to maintain the existing level of services; respond to the increasing demands of an ageing population; and address the rising costs of modern medicine. However, it must be understood that we do not have all we need to allow the Department to implement all of its planned service developments. It is impossible to find sufficient additional resources to cover all of the Department's pay and price pressures.

The Executive were advised that a consequence of the proposed allocation for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would be the deferral of the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly. It would also be necessary to re-deploy the savings in fundholding administration, which we had planned would support the management costs of the proposed local health and social care groups and other Programme for Government commitments. The Executive found that it was not possible to provide adequately for other

services, set an appropriate rate of increase and avoid these deferrals. This shows clearly the nature of the difficult decisions that faced the Executive.

On a more positive note, the spending plans will allow continued support for smaller hospitals and cover the cost of the temporary transfer of services to other hospitals pending the outcome of the Hayes review. Provision is also included for the continuation of essential service commitments to address winter pressures and waiting lists.

Planned allocations will maintain the improvements in personal social services, including community care, children's services, Sure Start and residential childcare places. Provision will also be available to address care for people with severe mental illnesses and learning disabilities.

I again emphasise that many aspects of health programmes will be eligible to be financed under the Executive programme funds, and thus there is scope for these allocations to be increased.

Planned expenditure by the Department of the Environment will enable the Department to continue its programme of work on waste management and the control of pollution to help ensure that Northern Ireland meets the EU Directives on waste management for which extra provision was made in the 2000 Budget. Additional funds are being made available in this Budget to help advance work in this area and in transport regulation where the Department has also to ensure compliance with EU regulations. Additional provision was also made in 2001-02 for road safety in response to the alarming accident levels on our roads. The Budget maintains an enhanced level of investment in that area to enable this important work to continue.

The 2000 Budget provided an increase of around 25% for planning services in 2001-02 to help meet growth in demand; this enhanced level of service will continue to be supported in 2002-03. Provision has also been made for local government services to fully meet the costs of the de-rating policy to district councils and to provide for resource grants to less-well-off councils, though it has not been possible to increase this in line with inflation this year.

The spending plans for the Department for Regional Development will sustain the investment programme for public transport, which shows a 36% increase over 2001-02, reflecting the major investment needed following the decisions on rail safety last year. This reflects the Executive's commitment to improve and modernise Northern Ireland's infrastructure. The plans also include provision for free travel for the elderly, following on from the allocations made for 2001-02 in February.

Key to this is the need to invest in structural maintenance of our road network, which is a vital asset that

has suffered from a lack of investment in the past. The Executive have agreed that this deterioration must be arrested and have made provision to help maintain current levels of investment. We will also continue to press the Chancellor to exempt Northern Ireland from the aggregates tax, because that will increase the negative environmental impact of quarrying and put a large number of jobs at risk in that sector of our economy.

The Department for Regional Development will continue to invest in the development of the water and sewerage infrastructure to ensure that European quality standards on drinking water and waste water discharges can be met. The 2001 Budget confirms continued capital funding for 2002-03 at the enhanced level that has been built up over the past few years.

11.15 am

The allocation made to the Department for Social Development will cover the administration of social security benefits, child support, housing, urban regeneration and community development. Those resources will enable the Department's Social Security Agency to provide services to high standards of accuracy and to implement the welfare reform and modernisation programme in line with its public service agreement (PSA) targets.

After a successful pilot, and in conjunction with the Department for Employment and Learning, a single service will be rolled out, and a new joint jobseeker's allowance process will be introduced. Customer satisfaction levels will be maintained, and measures to reduce fraud will continue. The resources will also allow the continuation of a substantial programme to promote measurable improvements to housing. Specific actions will be taken to reduce fuel poverty; to ensure that the Northern Ireland housing stock is maintained to the recommended standards of fitness and to build new homes that are accessible to people on low incomes.

An active programme of urban regeneration and community development will continue. A new neighbourhood renewal strategy will be developed, and community support plans for all district council areas will be introduced.

The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will receive a modest increase in provision, which will be used to fund key research on equality and policy effectiveness and the expansion of several existing programmes. The plans will enable the Office to continue to provide effective support to the Executive and to develop and implement actions relating to anti-discrimination law, improving community relations, a children's strategy and the effective implementation of New Targeting Social Need (TSN) policy. Representative offices will be maintained in Brussels and Washington.

Finally, the Budget proposals also include appropriate provision for the Assembly, enabling the development of the services planned by the Assembly Commission and building on the good work that has already started. Provision for the smaller Departments will cover the administrative costs of the independent Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints and the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG).

Those are the main features of the spending proposals. The plans are also supported not only by the Treasury allocation for Northern Ireland but revenue from the regional rate. That revenue represents only about 6% of our spending power. I doubt whether it will be dealt with in 6% of the time that we spend on considering the Budget. I ask all Members to keep the issue in perspective.

The Finance and Personnel Committee concluded in its report that any increase in the regional rate for 2002-03 should be linked to the rate of inflation. If we had taken that approach we would have had to use all the additional money that we received in the March Budget. We received that money as a result of a boost to the health and education budgets. It would be difficult to explain to the Treasury and, more importantly, to patients and pupils that we had diverted our share of that money to ease the position on rates.

The Executive have decided to repeat the increases of 7% in the domestic regional rate and 3.3% in the non-domestic regional rate, which they agreed and which were endorsed by the Assembly for this year. Our plans are based firmly on the conclusion that the increases will be necessary to sustain the spending levels on public services that I propose today and to show that we are looking to ratepayers to contribute a share to the growing costs of public services. Given that the standard rate of inflation is insufficient to meet the cost of services, it is impossible to make it the going rate for revenue. Although the cost of services will rise by 7% — and our total departmental expenditure limit will rise by 5.8% — under these proposals, the total income from rates will increase by only 4.8%.

That reflects the need to hold the business rate as close as possible to the rate of inflation, as it is not out of line with the position in England. The combined effect of the lower increases agreed last February for 2001-02 and these proposals is that we will forgo £13 million of revenue.

It is estimated that the proposed rates increase will cost the average ratepayer about 29p a week. People in comparable circumstances elsewhere pay several pounds a week more than ratepayers here. Rate revenue is also substantially supplemented from housing benefit, which comes from annually managed expenditure outside the

departmental expenditure limit. That not only ensures that the rates do not lead to hardship for those most in need, but also means additional income for the regional economy. Lower rates would mean that we would get less from the Treasury.

The Executive have agreed that it would be inappropriate to make major changes on the rating issue before the review of rating policy is completed. A consultation paper is being prepared that will provide fuller analysis of how our position compares with other regions and the options for change. A serious debate on those issues is needed. It should take place as soon as possible, outside the immediate Budget context, and inform our future plans alongside the spending review next year.

Last year, I said that agreement on the Programme for Government and the Budget represented a very important step in the evolution of the new institutions. That is no less true now. This draft Budget marks a further step in breaking away from pre-devolution patterns and priorities. I hope that it will prepare the way for a much more fundamental review of priorities in the forthcoming spending review next year. Indeed, it is a sign of our growing economic maturity that we have been able to work together as an Executive in a tighter financial context, while having full regard for the broad range of responsibilities of all Departments and the services that are provided for all people in the community.

In its report on the Budget last year, the Committee for Finance and Personnel urged that in future the presentation of the draft Budget should take place as soon after the summer recess as possible. I agreed that that would be the best way to ensure that the Assembly and Committees have as much time as possible to scrutinise the Budget. I am pleased that at least an extra two weeks have been secured for Assembly scrutiny, in addition to the consultation that has already taken place on the position report.

I therefore look forward to the Assembly's scrutiny, in Committees, of our spending plans and proposals as set out in the draft Budget, and particularly the role of the Committee for Finance and Personnel in drawing together and facilitating the consultation. As Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon said yesterday, this process will also include opportunities for debate in the Chamber on the Programme for Government and the Budget. Those are likely to take place in October or November.

Today's statement is also the start of a wider consultation process. The draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget will be widely circulated among our social partners in business, trade unions and the voluntary and community sectors and will also be made available to other interested individuals and groups. I commend the Budget proposals to the Assembly and invite all Members to consider them carefully. I look forward to working with the Assembly to complete the

process of settling next year's spending plans in December. We will then increasingly see that we can make a difference for the better and deliver the benefits of devolution.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is one hour for questions. I remind Members that this is not a time for discussion of the content of any particular part of the Budget. It is a time for questions.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): I welcome the Minister's very detailed Budget statement and, in particular, his action to address the Committee's concerns last year on the timing of the scrutiny process. The extra time available can be well used.

In the allocations, the Minister referred twice to the Executive programme funds. I was somewhat concerned that he was, in effect, treating those as a provision against uncertainty rather than as ring-fenced items in their own right.

I also note that in his later remarks on the Executive programme funds he referred to the importance of cross-cutting. However, cross-cutting was not particularly apparent in the allocations that he announced. Can the Minister therefore comment on the extent to which the Executive programme funds will be ring-fenced and on the strictness of the cross-cutting criteria that he intends to apply?

Mr Durkan: Mr Deputy Speaker, you observed that this hour is for questions; unfortunately, it is also for answers.

The Budget has addressed departmental spending plans. The Executive programme funds are used more specifically to bring forward cross-cutting ideas and suggestions. Several Departments are leading cross-cutting initiatives such as the public health strategy, the task force on unemployability and work by the Department for Social Development. We should not therefore ignore the fact that some of the spending allocated to Departments will support cross-cutting activity. Obviously, other Departments should use their expenditure to support their own engagement and involvement in cross-cutting activities.

With regard to further evidence of the cross-cutting approach, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Executive have agreed the draft Budget. Ministers, who are conscious of their own pressures and the needs of those sectors which depend on their departmental budgets, have also been able to take account of the pressures and needs facing the broad range of Departments.

The supreme cross-cutting activity has been the ability to deliver the draft Budget. I could also make the observation that many of the exchanges in relation to it have been both cross and cutting, but we have still emerged with an agreed draft Budget.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Minister's statement and the increases in the departmental budgets. Can the Minister confirm that the children's fund will be protected? When will allocations be made from the fund?

Mr Durkan: I am happy to confirm that the children's fund and the infrastructure fund are not counted in the amounts of money that may be treated or regarded as security for the projected carry forward. That does not mean that those other Executive programme funds are jeopardised. We have a fair degree of confidence in our assumption that the money will become available in monitoring rounds. Indeed, some money has already been held over, as Members will know if they recall my statement in respect of the June monitoring round.

We felt that it was important to remove the children's fund from any part of that equation because of its intrinsic value and because it will be the subject of a major consultation exercise on how best the community and voluntary sectors should access it. Next year we will have the feedback from the consultation exercise, and there will be no further tranche of allocations from the children's fund until then.

11.30 am

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): The Minister emphasised that the budget for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development would be boosted by almost £9 million by the EU peace and reconciliation programme. He is aware that an international conference on agriculture is taking place in Belfast. Last night, I spoke with Commissioner Byrne. He pointed out that there is additional money in European coffers that could be made available. However, that must be matched with money from the Treasury. The Minister is aware that the farming community wishes to see the creation of a retirement programme. According to the Commissioner, there is money available for that from Europe. Will the Minister start a study to see how much matching money could be obtained from Europe, if the other money were available? Every possible penny should be brought to Northern Ireland from Europe.

Mr Durkan: Northern Ireland should optimise any possibility of public expenditure support. That is why we need to make the case for a stronger future allocation for Northern Ireland to the Treasury. I work on the premise that, if European money is available for us, we should pursue and explore that possibility.

We must remember that we cannot make our own bids to the EU for the funding; that can only happen in a UK context. That is not within my immediate remit, as is reflected in today's Budget consideration about the departmental expenditure limit. The other money falls into annually-managed expenditure. However, as

the Member raised the issue, I am sure that both my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will look at it to see if, based on the Commissioner's insights, there are some possibilities that have not occurred to us. However, I do not believe that that is something that will be distinctively available to us as a region or something that will be directly amenable to intervention by my Department.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the draft Budget and the Minister's statement. I commend the Minister and his Executive Colleagues for the strenuous efforts that they have made to square the circle of the lack of public finance and to meet the needs of our community. It is important to acknowledge that the Minister has focused attention on the serious pressures that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety faces. He also dealt significantly with the Barnett formula.

What proper and vigorous steps are the Executive taking to address the issue of the Barnett formula, given that we have all acknowledged that that formula has serious disadvantages for our community?

Mr Durkan: I agree with the main thrust of the Member's point and recognise the pressures that exist. Those pressures are not only on the Health Service's budget, but they are particularly acute there. That is reflected in so many comments that are made in the Chamber and elsewhere.

The 2000 spending review highlighted the problems with the Barnett formula in funding the devolved territories.

Following the full introduction of resource accounting and budgeting during the 2002 spending review, the Executive will continue to seek changes to the Barnett formula. We shall also press for recognition of the level of need in Northern Ireland and the structural differences between the public sector here and that in Great Britain.

The problem that we face with the Barnett formula is not simply a matter of whether the formula used to allocate funding adequately reflects our need; it is also that, under resource accounting and budgeting, capital charges and depreciation costs will move from annually-managed expenditure into the departmental expenditure limit. We have a much broader capital asset base than England; under that system road services will be funded from within the departmental expenditure limit. That is not the case in England where many of the roads are the responsibility of local authorities.

Unlike what happens across the water, our capital charges and depreciation costs for water and sewerage assets will also be covered by our departmental expenditure limit. The difficulty that we already face is that the Barnett formula gives us nothing for water and

sewerage — we must fund those from our departmental expenditure limit. That problem will be compounded, and several issues must be addressed. However, there are also many strong retorts and challenges for us to face. We will not get a free run at the rickety wheel when it comes to challenging the Barnett formula.

Mr Close: Does the Minister agree that, when saying that health must be our number one priority, we must show that that is true in both word and deed? Does he agree that words such as “scandalous”, “unfair” and “insufficient” jump out at us after only a glance at newspapers of recent days? Cancer sufferers are let down by delays; there are delays in coronary care; and hospitals are short of 14 orthopaedic surgeons. Such shortages have been brought about by underfunding and must be corrected. Does the Minister agree that, instead of holding money in Executive programme funds to provide security against shortfalls, it should be used now to ensure that this nation is in a good state of health?

Mr Durkan: I acknowledge the strength of the Member’s views. I fully concur with him about the pressures on the Health Service, and the Executive have recognised that. With regard to making changes to the indicative allocations that were made last year, we have rightly paid particular attention to health, schools and roads. I do not disguise the fact that we need to provide more funding for health services, but we can only do that by providing money that would otherwise go to other programmes. We can also raise additional revenue through the rates. Everyone must reflect on the genuine priority that we attach to such things when deciding what steps we are prepared to take to find the necessary money.

With regard to the Executive programme funds, we expect to be able to find money carried over from monitoring rounds this year to take into next year’s spending, and we will use some of that to fund health services above the indicative allocations. Money is not sitting idle. In the unlikely event of our not being able to achieve the predicted carry-over amounts, we shall use Executive programme funds to cover some of the existing pressures. We do not believe that that situation will arise, and so we will be in a position to proceed with allocations from the Executive programme funds between now and the revised Budget. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be in a strong position to bid effectively for those funds.

Departments will be bidding for Executive programme funds in order to achieve, among other things, service improvements and service developments, which possibly include some of the areas that the Member has mentioned.

Ms Morrice: I welcome the draft Budget and particularly the increase in finance for health and education. I hope that the Minister will include

ring-fenced funding for road safety in the larger amount available for roads.

I am disappointed that there has not been greater emphasis placed on community relations and, in particular, the need to combat sectarianism. Given the events that have taken place in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland, the Executive and the Minister should focus greater funding on combating sectarianism. What funding will be made available to deal with that matter?

Mr Durkan: The expenditure for roads is included in the Department for Regional Development’s budget, and road safety expenditure is included in the Department of the Environment’s budget. That reflects a budgetary increase of 16.6% — the amount was increased last year and has been increased again this year. We all understand the reasons for that increase given the scale of loss of life on our roads, an issue that many Members raised.

Some of the funding for community relations activity falls within the budget of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and we want to maintain that level of funding. Some of the additional expenditure in the Department of Education will also fund work on community relations.

It is impossible to give every programme area the same high percentage increase. We have been able to — or have had to — give high increases to some areas due to compelling pressures or unavoidable liabilities. People must bear in mind that to make the difficult decisions about prioritisation we, as an Executive, are not reflecting only our natural preferences. We are reflecting what we believe to be the best decisions that can be made, based on matching our resources to our responsibilities.

Mr J Wilson: I welcome the Minister’s statement. Thankfully, it appears to contain less gobbledegook than many other statements on financial matters. I share his view that the serious staffing issues in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure must be addressed.

I am concerned about the Minister’s opinion on the question of infrastructure. Is he satisfied that the draft Budget makes appropriate provision to correct the wrongs of years of direct rule through investment in clean water provision and the effective treatment of waste water, so that Northern Ireland’s lakes, rivers and streams do not become part of the sewerage system?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his compliment about the lack of gobbledegook in my statement — although I will probably now proceed to indulge in some.

As an Executive, we have realised — and it has been mentioned in the Chamber — that we have a huge infrastructure deficit in certain areas. We have tried to meet that deficit with last year’s and this year’s

allocations to, for example, the Department for Regional Development. We have sustained the necessary and planned increases in respect of water services and water and sewage treatment.

11.45 am

There are many pressing issues in that area, just as there are in roads and in other areas that people might term “the soft infrastructure”, with regard to key facilities in health and education. One reason why we have provided the infrastructure fund as part of the Executive programme funds was to allow us to bring more distinctive attention to bear in those areas. We need to ensure that we get the most out of the investment that we make. We need to ensure that we meet standards that our own people and those in the EU would expect. I reflected in my statement that those were relevant and pressing considerations in the decisions that we have made.

I would like to make the point that water and sewerage services must be funded out of the total block grant — out of our departmental expenditure. We receive nothing in the Barnett formula for water and sewerage, because they are not part of public expenditure across the water. In circumstances in which we receive no Barnett allocation, the fact that we have been able to maintain the increased spending reflects some credit on the Executive. However, that in turn adds to the pressure in other programme areas, and people should bear in mind that important point in relation to revenue-raising and rates.

Dr Hendron: I congratulate the Minister on his statement. I apologise for missing the earlier part — I was opening a conference by Nexus on sexual child abuse. In that regard, I notice in the statement that the children’s fund is to be protected.

My question is along the same lines as Mr Close’s remarks. Although I appreciate that the Treasury allocation and the regional rate provide the funding, I want to talk about how that funding is used. I accept that all Ministers, including the Health Minister, have done their best to obtain the funding for their Departments. However, it is absolutely ridiculous that Northern Ireland, with a population the size of Greater Birmingham, has four health boards and 19 trusts. Year in and year out we complain about the shortage of funds, yet we do not look directly at those structures. I accept that the Executive intend to have a review of public administration, and that point has been made many times. I want to know whether Ministers, if they so wish — and not necessarily with the agreement of the rest of the Executive — can look at structures in their Department, just as Sir Reg Empey was able to merge LEDU and IDB. That is vitally important in the context of health.

Mr Durkan: I had better acknowledge the Member’s question rather than thank him for it — a little outburst of honesty from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

The Hayes report, although it concentrated particularly on acute hospital services, also made a number of observations and recommendations in respect of broader health services and management structures. The Minister has already indicated that the report will be subject to a fuller consultation and, in turn, subject to full consideration by the Executive. Some of the issues raised by the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety arise in that context. He rightly identifies that the Executive are to undertake a wider review of public administration. All Ministers are free and able to look at various arrangements in their Departments. However, it would not make sense, in the context of a broader review, for Ministers to go on radical solo runs and to alter the nature of structures in circumstances in which congruent changes do not happen elsewhere in public administration.

That is part of joined-up government, but the issues identified by the Committee Chairperson have been previously recognised by the Minister, and the Executive are aware of them.

Mr Dodds: There are fewer Members in the Chamber today than on this occasion last year. I hope that that will not be repeated at the SDLP conference, or the Minister will have to address a smaller audience than previous leaders.

Will the Minister tell us the increase, in figures and percentages, for the North/South implementation bodies and for the North/South Ministerial Council? That was the subject of some debate in last year’s Budget.

The announcement of the deferral of the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly will cause great disappointment, especially as that is to proceed in Scotland. Does the Minister acknowledge that the proposal received unanimous support in the House? It has been widely welcomed. Will the Minister undertake to review the subject?

There will also be disappointment about the decision to retain the above-inflation rate increase for domestic ratepayers, which is double the rate of inflation. Will the Minister also take the opportunity to look at that? I can almost anticipate his answer. We can go into more detail on those issues later, in Committee and elsewhere.

I ask the Minister to look at those issues, particularly free nursing care, which affects the elderly in our community across the board.

Mr Durkan: Like other Members of the Executive, I fully appreciate the importance of achieving free nursing care. For that reason, we allocated £3 million in last year’s Budget to introduce it. However, it could not be introduced, for legislative and other reasons, so

further commitments of approximately £6 million were made in the indicative allocations in next year's Budget. That is the baseline. That money will not now be adequate to cover the cost of free nursing care because of changing patterns of demand and other pressures, but it has not been withdrawn from the Health Service budget.

Members may recall that the Executive have agreed that, should any further money become available to ease our planning position for next year, first consideration will be given to any Programme for Government commitments that have been deferred. Members' comments about that particular commitment will be reflected and remembered by the Executive. Members are welcome to help to identify any other means to obtain additional resources.

The provisions to meet next year's legal obligations regarding the North/South implementation bodies are as follows: Waterways Ireland will receive £3 million; the North/South Language Body will receive £3.6 million; the Food Safety Promotion Board will receive £1.5 million; the Trade and Business Development Body will receive £3 million; the Special EU Programmes Body will receive £800,000; and the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission will receive £900,000.

The percentage increases are: 17% for Waterways Ireland; 6% for the North/South Language Body; 3.4% for the Trade and Business Development Body; 2.1% for the Food Safety Promotion Board; 47.5% for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission; and 31.6% for the Special EU Programmes Body.

That reflects the fact that some of the spending, particularly in relation to providing secretarial support for the new Northern Ireland Regional Partnership Board, falls fully to the northern Administration and is not shared.

Mr Cobain: I want to ask the Minister for some clarification on a number of points. In yesterday's debate on the draft Programme for Government, we were told that housing unfitness in Housing Executive houses would be reduced in the next two years and that all Housing Executive houses would be kept to a recommended standard. In the draft Budget, the finance directed to the Housing Executive is to be cut yet again. Will the Minister explain the relationship between the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget, and where the money is to be made available?

Funding for the urban regeneration and community development programmes has been cut again this year. With regard to the Executive programme funds, the social inclusion/community regeneration fund is £34 million, yet the Department for Social Development gets £400,000 out of £33.5 million. The Minister keeps emphasising that each of those budgets contains a

percentage to target social need. Will he explain how we will achieve that on an ever-reducing Budget?

Mr Durkan: I remind Members that the Department for Social Development is getting an increase of 8.6% in the draft Budget. That includes an increase of 3.2% in the total housing budget. The Budget provides around £290 million for housing support by the Department, excluding house sales; that is an increase of 7%. However, total expenditure on housing also depends on the level of rental income that the Housing Executive receives from its tenants.

Taking that and other factors into account, the actual amount available for housing is over £630 million, based on the present estimate for the level of rental income. That level of provision will enable the Department to continue its capital investment programme in new housing, to maintain and renovate existing properties and to ensure compliance with fitness standards.

Members may wish to go back and check the various bids that were made previously on the Executive programme funds. Those bids informed the allocations that have been made and that have been reflected here. Further allocations are to be made from the Executive programme funds for next year. I am aware, and I can anticipate, that there will be some strong bids from the Department for Social Development, possibly in conjunction with other Departments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I want to take this opportunity to welcome the additional resources for our Department, particularly for the museum service. I welcome the fact that Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) will now be able to proceed with some of the work that it must do.

The Committee will be concerned about the arts sector. We are all preparing for Belfast's bid to be European City of Culture 2008. We shall be concerned that there is no additional identification for that area, particularly given some of the capital requests that are around.

On a more general issue, will the Minister confirm that the work of all the Departments to identify resources that can be redeployed against the priorities of the Programme for Government, and consequently against the real needs of the people, will continue?

12.00

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chairman of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for that. It should not be forgotten that arts fared well last year. There was an increase of £1.4 million in 2001-02 as compared with 2000-01. That has been carried forward to this year. It should also be remembered that the arts figures do not take account of possible assistance that I have every reason to believe the Department of Culture, Arts and

Leisure will be seeking from the Executive programme funds for at least one of the matters that the Member raised.

The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive will not stop Departments from trying to re-prioritise and examine whether or not their plans make the best use of the resources available. Any decisions taken must be consistent with the Executive's overall strategy and the Programme for Government.

I hope that the fact that the Chairman of the Committee has raised this question means that it will be the focus of the Committee's attention. That is important, because it is easy for all of us to focus on the bids that have not been met and chase after them when the money is not available to meet them. We need to make sure, not just that we know what has happened to bids, but that we know what is happening to planning.

Mr Poots: We heard yesterday about the Programme for Government and the review of public administration, and Dr Hendron has already raised that issue. Where is the finance for the review of public administration? I understand that it is going to take £2 million, but I do not see that in the Budget.

We were also told yesterday that we were to have a children's commissioner in place by June. Leaving aside the funding for the children's strategy, which is a separate issue, where is the finance for a children's commissioner?

In the funding for victims, a bid for £500,000 was submitted and that was granted. A marker bid for a further £750,000 was lodged. How much additional funding has been included in the draft Budget, and how much will actually translate into practical support for the victims?

The Civic Forum seems to have done well out of this Budget: it is getting an increase of £200,000 over its current £300,000. That has been noted.

Mr Durkan: Most of the issues that the Member asked about fall into the budget for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and that will see a modest increase.

The Executive are trying to address the needs of victims through a variety of methods. A consultation document on a victims strategy was published on 6 August. Further decisions and developments depend on the outcome of that. The Executive have contributed £1.67 million to the Peace II victims measures. That will address victims' needs in a variety of ways. In addition, £500,000 from the social inclusion Executive programme fund will be available to the Victims Unit this year, and in each of the next two years. Ongoing discussions continue with the Northern Ireland Office, as overlapping and converging interests are involved.

The increase for the Civic Forum represents the additional provision required to meet the full-year costs of the forum operating with its own stand-alone secretariat. Additional resources have also been made available to the Strategic Issues Unit in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, which has responsibility for major strategic cross-cutting matters such as the review of public administration and freedom of information policy.

Mrs Courtney: I congratulate the Minister and his team on the statement. Does the Minister agree that the process of prioritisation and re-prioritisation is a crucial part of being in Government? Will he confirm that his ministerial colleagues were involved in — and agreed to — the decisions to make available additional resources for health, education and the roads?

Mr Durkan: We were able to achieve adjustments from the indicative allocations that were agreed last year, and the fact that, in making those adjustments, we focused our attention on health, schools and roads shows that ministerial colleagues recognise the importance of investing in those services and funding those programmes.

It must be said, however, that Ministers have pressures on their own budgets, and they are responsible for services that face many difficulties. In some cases, those pressures are felt by the community and by the customer; in other cases, they arise from pressing contractual obligations or from infraction of EU regulations. Despite those pressures, we were able to recognise general priorities.

We must continue to examine our priorities. We must ask whether we are getting as much as we can out of the money that we spend and whether we need to do more. That task is not just part of the job of Government; it is part of the scrutiny role performed by the Assembly and its Committees.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Carrick): I thank the Minister for his Budget statement and note his reference to the need for Committees to prioritise.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I trust that the Minister is aware of the need for an improvement in levels of literacy and numeracy. The poor levels of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland received considerable attention in yesterday's statement on the Programme for Government and in questions to Ministers. The figures for the lowest category of literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland are three times those for Sweden.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Carrick, we heard all of this yesterday. You must ask a question.

Mr Carrick: I will ask a question. Cross-departmental action is needed, along with sufficient funding, to

implement the strategy devised by the Department for Employment and Learning. Some 250,000 people in Northern Ireland are performing at the lowest levels. What financial resources will the Minister direct towards improving that totally unacceptable situation? How much is available for potential Executive programme fund bids in the current year, next year and 2003-04? What are the criteria for assessing the bids, which will, no doubt, exceed the funds available?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his questions, but I will not be able to answer them all. It is not that I do not have answers available, but I do not want to take up time that could be used for other questions.

Annual allocations have previously reflected the priorities needed in literacy and numeracy, as shown by the figures identified by Mr Carrick. The budget for the Department for Employment and Learning includes further funding for the further education sector, and it is in the further education provisions that the Department for Employment and Learning will be carrying forward its work in relation to literacy and numeracy. Obviously, the Member can continue to bring that matter forward.

The amounts of money for the Executive programme funds are as previously published. The Department of Finance and Personnel recognises that there is an outside chance that some of the money that we plan to allocate for next year might have to be absorbed to cover some of the projected carry-over. I do not believe that that will happen. The Department will make allocations in the Executive programme funds between now and the revised Budget, and it has not changed the figures for each year from those published previously.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's Budget statement and congratulate him on the emphasis he has put on priority assessment of the quantum spending of each Department. Given that the Barnett formula is a factor which limits resources for Northern Ireland, what other ways are being explored to find more funding — particularly for infrastructure investment?

Will it ever be possible for Members to see Treasury figures regarding fiscal revenue receipts from this region, so that the Assembly can have a fuller appraisal of Northern Ireland's public finance position?

Mr Durkan: I do not know if it will ever be possible for Members to see those Treasury figures.

We are determined to address the issue of the Barnett formula, and we do have to press for the changes necessary to secure a fair allocation of resources for services here. That must be based on an objective assessment of our needs. As Mr Byrne stated, we need to try to maximise the resources available from other sources. That must include adopting more effective procurement policies and leveraging in funds from the

private sector through, for instance, public-private partnerships (PPP) where appropriate.

We also need to continue to find more efficient ways of working across Government, and there is a particular need to reduce the costs of administration. If we succeed in doing that, more money will be released for services and constructive investment.

We must also look at the arrangements for maximising return from our assets. That means ensuring the disposal of those that are no longer required, when that is possible. We must also take a strategic approach to addressing those issues through the Programme for Government. We need to ensure that our determination to find more money for services applies as much to the scrutiny and consideration of our spending plans as it does to the bids and submissions that we make to the Treasury.

Mr Hilditch: When developing a Programme for Government and the Budget for 2002-03 the Executive listed "Growing as a Community" as one of their priorities. However, one section of the community — its senior citizens — continues to be the victim of cutbacks. Members have already heard Mr Dodds describe the health care situation. What resources could be made available to redress the voids created by the loss of community agencies, such as Y Services, which provided external and internal works at homes, and the virtual removal of the meals-on-wheels service in many constituencies? Will additional resources be made available to enhance the quality of life for senior citizens?

12.15 pm

Mr Durkan: Free nursing care is not something that was available and is now being cut; we were trying to provide it, and it was previously budgeted for. The amount previously budgeted for free nursing care has not been enough to enable us to provide it in next year's Budget because of other pressures and other patterns of need. Those pressures and patterns of need also relate to the elderly population.

It is not a case of moving money out of elderly care and into another area. We are not moving money out of the health and social services baseline. The Budget contains improved provisions that will help older people. Free transport is provided for the elderly, and some of the spending on measures to counter fuel poverty will, in many cases, be going to the homes of older people and those whose homes are older and less fuel efficient.

In many cases the range of services falls to non-departmental public bodies such as health and social services trusts. Personal social services are seeing an uplift of 12.1% in the draft Budget proposals, and much of the rising demand and pressure in personal social services relates to the elderly population.

Rev Dr William McCrea: The red warning light flashed yesterday when the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister made a 35-minute speech containing nothing about the Department of the Environment.

Is the Minister aware of a statement on the Budget issued today by Mr Foster? He points out that the Executive's allocation cuts £2 million from the resources grant payable to those district councils with the weakest rate bases. The weakest councils will find in the resource grant that they have to carry out their work with £2 million removed from their budget. Can the Minister tell us how those weakest councils will make up the deficit?

Is this not a form of taxation on the weakest, through the back door? Mr Foster's statement shows that the reason for this cut is to work towards compliance with EU legislation on waste management. The £2 million will be taken from the weakest in respect of waste management and will be given to the strongest. Where is the justice in that? How will the deficit be made up by those councils?

Mr Durkan: I drew attention to this subject in the Budget statement, although I do not believe that the Member was present.

The Department of the Environment has an uplift of 8.1%, contrary to a suggestion implicit in the Member's opening remarks. As far as local government services are concerned, the grant to councils is not something that we can increase with the rate of inflation. That is what the Environment Minister advised the Executive. The Minister has made a statement to that effect.

The Executive and I dealt with a range of bids and pressures from the Department of the Environment and other Departments. Provision is being made for a 1.2% increase in local government services, and it is recognised that that does not match inflation. There is an overall 8.1% increase in that Department's budget. I look forward to reading the conclusions of the Committee for the Environment, in the light of earlier questions about Committees wishing to explore issues of re-prioritisation.

NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Dr Birnie: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes, in the context of the development of a Bill of Rights, that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has failed to discharge its remit, as given to it by the Belfast Agreement 1998, in its various contributions to the debate on developing human rights in Northern Ireland.

This motion questions whether the Commission has kept within its remit. It is not a motion about whether human rights are, to quote from the old book '1066 and All That', "A Good Thing". Human rights are a good thing, but they require careful definition. The Belfast Agreement said that the Commission was to be

"invited to consult and to advise on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland".

Note that the agreement said "advise and consult on the scope". It did not say "campaign and dictate".

The critical point in today's debate is whether the Commission has kept within that remit, especially in the booklet 'Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland' published earlier this month. I believe that it has not. By definition, human rights apply to human beings, so it is not self-evident that a human being in Belfast should be afforded more or less protection than a counterpart in, say, Birmingham or Berlin. At the very least, the Commission needs to have done much more to establish its case. I will address three ways in which Northern Ireland's "particular circumstances" might be argued to be relevant, and evaluate the Commission's response.

First is the constitutional question. In other parts of western and eastern Europe there are also disputes about the national identity of various territories. Significantly, the European-wide Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has enshrined the principle that national frontiers should stand, given consent and self-determination. Our Commission, the official human rights body, has pointedly, but unsurprisingly — given its own intellectual descent from the Committee on the Administration of Justice — declared neutrality on the constitutional position. Is it proper for an official human rights body to enshrine such neutrality? No.

Secondly, the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland should include the awful death toll consequent from terrorism over the past 32 years. In pro rata terms, it is equivalent to New York City suffering 20,000 fatalities, or three World Trade Centre atrocities. Using the "cost of the troubles" figures, of the 3,593 people who were killed between 1969 and February 1998, 56% died as a result of Republican group action,

27% at the hands of Loyalists and 382, or 11%, as a consequence of state action.

Undoubtedly, almost all the latter cases were legitimate self-defence. However, so far, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) has given privileged consideration to the perceived victims of state action as opposed to the greater numbers of victims of paramilitary abuse. Regrettably, they are again following the pattern set by the Committee for the Administration of Justice (CAJ). Persons with a CAJ background continue to have a disproportionate representation on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC).

On page 46 of the September 2001 document 'Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland' the commission argues that search-and-seizure operations should not be used in the future, as they allegedly have been in the past, to harass certain sections of the community. No proof beyond the anecdotal is provided for their assertion of guilt.

In chapter 18, on the enforcement of any bill of rights, it refers to "human rights violations" rather than to violations and abuses. This seems to imply a sole focus on perceived state-led violations of rights. To date, the commission has added little or nothing to the most basic of rights — the right to life. It has leaned too far towards protecting the rights of those terrorists who in the past — and in the present — have taken innocent life.

The third way in which the NIHRC claims to be reflecting particular circumstances is with respect to social and economic deprivation in Northern Ireland. Every Member of the Assembly should be concerned about such deprivation — low wages, unfit housing, sickness rates, lack of basic numeracy and literacy, et cetera. We should all strive for improvement, as was said in the Budget debate. However, Northern Ireland is no longer uniquely deprived. Other parts of the United Kingdom, for example Wales, share similar gross domestic product (GDP) per capita levels, wage rates and illiteracy rates. Yet no one has credibly suggested supplementary rights to the European Commission on Human Rights in those cases.

Whatever the noble intent of most socio-economic rights, their realisation is crucially dependent on increased economic resources or public spending. Therefore, they may not be justiciable. In other words, they cannot be created by waving the magic wand of a court decision. They need public spending resources, voted for politically, through the Assembly.

In short, the commission has acted outside its remit, as defined in the Belfast Agreement. In this, as in everything else, we are arguing for full implementation — no more, no less. The commission, unconvincingly, tries to use section 69(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to trump the agreement on page 14 of the September

document. It interpreted its assigned task, to promote awareness of human rights, in the wider scope of promoting the human-rights culture. This matters because human rights can be a powerful ideology. It has almost become a secular religion, constituting as it does a novel, and sometimes disturbing, use of language and a way of prescribing how people should behave.

I will go through some of the commission's detailed policy proposals in the lengthy September 2001 document. On page 21 it recommends proportional representation for Westminster elections. On page 22 it suggests removing the debarment of the mentally ill from election candidacy and the reduction of the voting age to 16 or 17.

Page 33 refers, incongruously, to a right to positive action. It is unclear whether that implies positive discrimination and, therefore, the absurd right to be discriminated against in certain circumstances. The commission has previously endorsed the fifty-fifty policing quota of the Patten report.

12.30 pm

Pages 37 and 89 refer to "access to sexual reproductive healthcare". What does that mean in practice? Could it be a back door to introducing abortion on demand in Northern Ireland? Page 60 refers to equality for "long-term domestic partnerships" relative to traditional marriage. Page 76 recommends that education be conditioned to inculcate support for the ideology of human rights. Presumably, the commission's own interpretation of rights — and interpretations vary — would be the authorised version in schools.

That very extensive list — and much more can be found in the document — reminds me of Jeremy Bentham's dismissal of the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen as "imaginary rights, a bastard brood of monsters". In short, there is an attempt to achieve massive social engineering to reconstruct the totality of Northern Ireland, as though it were a blank sheet and to forget about the wishes of the majority. What role in the process is left for the Assembly or for the sovereign Westminster Parliament? Not very much.

In Northern Ireland, certain interest groups have stirred up extraordinary expectations of the perceived improvements that could be delivered by a bill of rights, particularly with respect to the social and economic position. Those with such expectations are almost bound to be disappointed. That is politically worrying and indeed cruel. One indicator of the commission's rather grand view of its remit — indeed, its global reach far beyond this Province — is the commentary last week by the chief commissioner of the NIHRC, who was quoted in the press on 20 September. He criticised the American President, no less, for his choice of language to describe the attacks on Manhattan and Washington.

Every Member should pause before endorsing the commission's maximalist interpretation of human rights. A maximalist human rights culture is in danger of eclipsing this institution. Under direct rule, limited democratic accountability lasted for too long. The intervention of a massive bill of rights into all areas of policy-making would imply that judges would have decision-making powers that would otherwise rightly rest with this democratically accountable body.

In summary, we do not criticise human rights per se; rather, we criticise the way in which the commission has so far chosen to interpret them. Speaking in the House of Commons on the first day of the second world war, 3 September 1939, Winston Churchill said that that war was necessary in order to "establish, on impregnable rocks, the rights of the individual". Rights are worth protecting — a lesson that, in these weeks, is being learned once again on an international level.

The problem with the commission's document, and, indeed, its record to date, is that it combines undue protection for those who are the ultimate enemies of liberty, with the pursuit of other rights that are both undefinable and undeliverable. I therefore urge support for the motion.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "Commission" and insert

"has been hindered in discharging its remit due to limits on its powers and resources but congratulates the Commission on its substantial contributions to the debate on and in developing human rights in Northern Ireland."

The proposer of the motion said that he was not criticising human rights per se. I welcome that, because the alternative would be grotesque. I cannot, however, welcome much else that he said.

Dr Birnie said that the bill of rights proposals do not refer to the right of self-determination or to the principle of consent. That is rightly so, because, as he knows, those issues are already exhaustively and extensively addressed in the Good Friday Agreement, in the amendments to the Irish Constitution, *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, arising from the Good Friday Agreement and in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Legislative and statutory guarantees already recognise the Irish people's right to self-determination and to the principle of consent. Given that there are constitutional guarantees in law and in practice, it would be highly improper if, in a bill of rights, we should then create a Constitution in regard to those issues.

I suggest that Dr Birnie's wish to see those principles addressed reveals his lack of confidence in that for which the Irish people voted and which was endorsed by the British Parliament, the Irish Parliament and the Irish people in the referendum and in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. There is every reason to be confident in relation to the constitutional position of the North,

and there is no further reason to put into a bill of rights that which is already secured and guaranteed elsewhere in the British and Irish states.

Dr Birnie quoted the Good Friday Agreement, which says that the bill of rights should

"reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland".

In that regard, he then criticised the fact that the bill of rights outlines proposals in respect of economic and social guarantees. Are we not saying that in Northern Ireland there are particular circumstances that extend to economic and social issues? Should people who suffer economic and social disadvantage — whatever their background — not have the protection of the law and the benefit of good practice when it comes to improving their conditions?

The proposed bill of rights says that, given that the communities of the North have a common need and a common agenda in regard to economic and social guarantees and protections, these should be protected and enhanced. Dr Birnie, however, says that there should not be recognition of the particular inequalities, needs, disadvantages and requirements of both our communities as regards economic and social welfare.

Rather than saying that the bill of rights proposals should not guarantee economic and social rights, I suggest that in a society which is emerging from conflict and based around difference in that conflict, we should actively seek opportunities to promote common agendas and common needs. The bill of rights enables that to be addressed.

Dr Birnie also said that the issue of victims was inadequately addressed and that the needs of the victims of non-state abuses have not been addressed in the various interventions of the Human Rights Commission since its formation three years ago.

That is an inaccurate representation of what the Human Rights Commission has done. Those who can use the Internet — that does not include me — should download the submissions and casework of the Human Rights Commission from the past three years. It runs to three pages and covers 80 or 90 separate activities. When that material is analysed, it shows that the proposer's conclusion does not stand against the evidence. The evidence confirms that the Human Rights Commission has attempted to cover every aspect of life in Northern Ireland's communities in an effort to address and identify human rights issues. The commission's work is as exhaustive and expansive as its limited powers and resources allow.

I have no doubt that the proposer believes that, when it comes to interventions in court cases in Northern Ireland, there is a tendency for the Human Rights Commission not to address non-state abuses. There have been only 20 instances in three years in

which the Human Rights Commission has sought to intervene, under its limited powers, in cases arising from killings and the use of violence in the North. In those instances, the cases tended to involve state killings rather than non-state killings, but the Human Rights Commission will also intervene in court cases relating to the activities of non-state organisations. The best evidence for that is that the commission intervened in the inquest into the deaths in Omagh. After the greatest atrocity committed against human life and standards in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, at the invitation of the Coroner for Greater Belfast, intervened on behalf of the families of the Omagh victims to assert their right to see the evidence that the RUC made available to the inquest. In that case, the Human Rights Commission intervened to ensure that the rights of the victims of a non-state organisation were protected and enhanced. There is no more eloquent and powerful evidence of the commission's readiness to intervene — without fear or favour and regardless of whether someone has been the victim of state or non-state violence — on behalf of citizens in the North.

If the proposer of the motion wants to talk about the Human Rights Commission and the bill of rights and about how they protect the victims in Northern Ireland, he should consider that evidence and see that they are impartial.

Dr Birnie: The Member placed great emphasis on the Omagh case. Will he concede that the Human Rights Commission attempted to prevent the broadcasting of the BBC 'Panorama' programme, against the apparent wishes of the families of the victims of that atrocity?

Mr Attwood: The point is that it is difficult to balance the rights of victims, the right to privacy, the right to information and all the other relevant rights. The intervention of a body such as the Human Rights Commission can be open to a certain interpretation by one side or the other.

12.45 pm

The fact that the Human Rights Commission intervened to try to restrain what the BBC might publish, and to ensure that victims and their families had more information than they might otherwise have received, confirms its best intentions rather than the Member's worst fears. By intervening in that way, the Human Rights Commission confirmed its good faith, good intentions, good standards and good values. Its intervention was not evidence of partiality and unfairness, as the Member concludes. Dr Birnie's point confirms my point rather than disproving it.

I will deal with some issues that were not addressed by the proponent of the motion. Rather than damn the Human Rights Commission, I praise it and would try to enhance it. Rather than claim that the bill of rights

does not meet the standards that Dr Birnie says would be appropriate, we must try to enable the commission to meet the standards that would enable it to provide all the citizens of the North with the fullest possible protection and enforcement of human rights.

It is a matter for regret that Dr Birnie did not take the opportunity to address issues identified by the Human Rights Commission in its response to the Secretary of State's review of its powers and resources, which were authorised by the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I would be more convinced by the proponent's comments if he had dealt with the wider agenda of trying to strengthen the Human Rights Commission with the powers and resources needed to identify and address all human rights issues in the North. That is what we have tried to do in our amendment.

At the moment, according to the Human Rights Commission, it does not have the powers and resources that it needs to enable it to do all that it would like to do. Its restricted powers and limited budget have prevented the commission from carrying out the extensive consultation on the bill of rights that it wished to do. It was unable to organise event training in preparation for the implementation of the Human Rights Act 1998 in October 2000; nor was it able to create a presence outside Belfast. It was unable to employ as many staff as it needed to deal with research, investigations, legislation, policy and educational development.

The Human Rights Commission has a limited budget of £750,000, which is 10 times less than the Equality Commission's funding, and the same amount that the RUC spends on 10 hours of activities in one year. Rather than condemn it for what it has produced, we should try to enhance it by giving it the powers and moneys that it requires. That is particularly relevant at the moment, because we are on the threshold of a new beginning for policing. The Patten Report said that human rights should be at the core of a new beginning for policing. The Human Rights Commission has a statutory function to ensure that human rights legislation is complied with and that that compliance is witnessed throughout Northern Ireland. If it is starved of its resources, it will be starved of the ability to give life to the new beginning for policing.

The Government might be about to announce the independent members of the Police Board. Is it not, therefore, appropriate to enable the policing board to carry out its functions and to give the Human Rights Commission the moneys needed to enable it to perform its statutory role of assisting the Police Board to fulfil its human rights requirements? The Republic of Ireland set up its statutory Human Rights Commission only a matter of weeks ago. Is it not time to upgrade the funding of the Human Rights Commission in the North to enable it to work with the commission in the South? That would enable them to build the joint

programme of work and create the charter of rights, which are envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement, and which would be applicable to the citizens, political parties and the Governments on this island.

Is it not time to enhance the moneys of the Human Rights Commission in the North to enable it to work with its sister body in the South and ensure human rights compliance through a chartered bill of rights on this island? Is it not time to give the Human Rights Commission additional moneys so that the problems identified whereby the commission cannot adequately intervene on behalf of a third party in various court proceedings on this island can be addressed? The commission should be able to intervene so that people appearing before a court can benefit from the help of a statutory agency in preparing their case, and the court could also benefit from the expertise of the Human Rights Commission when a hearing is scheduled. In that way, rather than deny and diminish the role of the Human Rights Commission in the North, we can enable it and enhance its powers.

I make these points because as Frank Wright, an academic at Queen's University, once said, "when conflicts are fully developed, they revolve around issues of law, order and justice". Our experiences on this island in the last 30 years confirm that the conflict has always revolved around issues of law, order and justice. That is why those issues are put centre-stage in the Good Friday Agreement: that is why reports were commissioned on policing and on criminal justice; and that is why the agreement provided for the creation of the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Police Ombudsman and the Prisoners' Release Commission. To fully resolve the conflict that has revolved around issues of law, order and justice, we put mechanisms in place to address those issues, including the Human Rights Commission.

Why is that significant, not just for us, but internationally? When Mary Robinson was here in December 1999, she said that countries around the world, particularly those emerging from conflicts, were most interested in the Good Friday Agreement because of its human rights provisions. People around the world could easily and quickly identify with those provisions. If we can get our human rights mechanisms right — if they function properly and defend the rights of citizens and communities in the North — then we will provide an example of conflict resolution to other communities and other countries that are emerging from conflict. If we can get our bill of rights and our Human Rights Commission right, then we will be a candle in the darkness that is about to invade the world order.

Mr Poots: I support the motion. Not surprisingly, I cannot support the amendment that has been put down in the name of Mr Attwood and Ms Lewsley. The issue of human rights is fundamental — the establishment of

good human rights is something we should all support. However, the role played by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has diminished the human rights issue in Northern Ireland. It has led many people to reflect that those who speak for human rights issues are speaking on behalf of criminals, terrorists, and people who do not wish goodwill to others in our country.

Often, those who represent the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission seem more interested in the rights of criminals and terrorists than in the rights of ordinary individuals. When the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was set up, Mo Mowlam gave it the kiss of death by her appointment of the board. Two SDLP members were appointed. It comes as no surprise that the SDLP are leading the fight today in defending the commission — *[Interruption]*.

Mr A Maginness: Can the Member tell me who were the two members of the SDLP?

Mr Poots: Mrs Hegarty was one member. I do not have a note of the names with me, but another member of the SDLP was appointed at that time.

Mr A Maginness: No member of the SDLP was appointed to the Human Rights Commission.

That is fact. Ms Hegarty was not a member of the SDLP at the time of her appointment. She had left the SDLP several years before her appointment. I assume the other person to whom the Member refers is Mr Donnelly. He was an SDLP councillor back in the early 70s and is no longer a member of the party. He was not a member of the SDLP at the time of his appointment.

Mr Poots: I accept that you can leave the SDLP. You might not be able to leave the IRA just as easily, but you can leave the SDLP. Nevertheless, the fact that they had membership of the SDLP made their political allegiances quite clear.

The Human Rights Commission did not have representatives from the Unionist community, nor did it have people who had previously been members of either of the main Unionist parties. In fact, some people of good standing in the community, who had a good legal background and who were well placed to take positions on the Human Rights Commission, were refused places. I understand that as resignations from the Human Rights Commission have taken place, the current Secretary of State, and the previous Secretary of State, sought to remedy that situation. However, because people felt that the credibility of the Human Rights Commission was at a low ebb, they wanted to take no part in it.

It has failed to gain the confidence of the Unionist community by its actions. For example, it has given support to the Finucane, Hamill and Rosemary Nelson cases but has failed to give support to the cases of Billy Wright, Superintendents Buchanan and Breen or

Lord Justice Gibson. The Commission also did a critical analysis on the use of plastic bullets but did not seem to take much account of those people who were in the line of fire and had to use plastic bullets. It did not appear to give much credence to the fact that people's lives were being put at risk by petrol and acid bombs, bricks and even live bullets being fired at them, yet it is very critical of the use of plastic bullets by the RUC.

It complains about a lack of resources — the commission has some £750,000 — yet it clearly spent a great deal of money on the document 'Enhancing the Rights of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in Northern Ireland'. This is a fairly extensive document — a document that was not published without a great deal of cost. I have to say that some of the proposals in the document are extremely offensive. For example, it reckons that the Blood Transfusion Service's ban on men who have engaged in anal sex, from donating blood — one of several categories of exclusion from blood donation — to be discrimination. The commission believes that it is a human right for homosexuals to be able to give blood. I say that it is a human right for people receiving blood to know that they are getting clean blood — blood that has not been contaminated with the HIV virus. I believe that it is essentially wrong to be claiming, on the one hand, to be protecting one person's human rights but, on the other, to be attacking the human rights of other individuals.

Often when we see the case being put for one individual's human rights, it actually undermines the human rights of another individual. I noted that its 'Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland' mentions language rights. This document says that everyone has the right to communicate with any public body through an interpreter, translator or facilitator. If we were to go down that road, with the Department for Regional Development having somebody in every office who could translate into Gaelic and into Ulster-Scots, and if every school, hospital and Housing Executive office in Northern Ireland were to have a translator, how much would it cost? What are the cost implications of many of the recommendations of the Human Rights Commission? If such costs were to be met, how many more people would be waiting for hip operations or cardiac surgery? How many more people would be discriminated against because too few houses were being built in their area?

The proposals of the Human Rights Commission, in many cases, are not costed. It claims that people are being discriminated against, but if the commission's proposals were to be implemented, many more people would be discriminated against.

1.00 pm

Mr Attwood defended the Human Rights Commission by reference to its support for the victims of the

Omagh bomb. When representatives of the Human Rights Commission were before the Committee of the Centre, I asked what its views were on two particular victims of the Omagh bomb, the twin children who were murdered while still within their mother's womb, seven months into her pregnancy. They did not have a view on that. They could not express a view on it.

Mr Attwood is therefore defending a Human Rights Commission that will not defend the human rights of unborn children. It could not admit that the rights of two unborn children were destroyed by the Real IRA. What sort of Human Rights Commission is that? The children were healthy in their mother's womb, but because they did not happen to have been two months older, they were deemed not to have any human rights.

In relation to paramilitary organisations the Human Rights Commission has not done enough work. There have been 323 human rights abuses by these organisations, on all sides, in the last year, but I have heard no hue and cry from the commission about that, nor has it produced an extensive document on the matter. The commission has also neglected other issues, such as third-party planning appeals. It seems to have concentrated its efforts on what it would see as pro-prisoner, pro-terrorist and pro-Nationalist programmes. It has not done the work it should have been doing. It has not established faith among the Unionist community, and I do not believe it has established faith within the broader community who find terrorist and criminal acts offensive.

The Human Rights Commission has been on trial for the past three years. The funding it has received has been on a trial basis. Having been tried, it has been found wanting. I cannot therefore support Mr Attwood's analysis and amendment, because the Human Rights Commission has failed — and failed miserably.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Business Committee for giving up some of its time to allow this debate to continue. We will adjourn now until 2.00 pm when a number of Members wish to speak. We will have to ration time then.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, am I right in saying that when we return, time will be rationed, but that time overall was not rationed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We were using the same indicative times that you are aware of.

Mr Ervine: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, it is inordinately unfair that a Member who is not the proposer or, indeed, not the proposer of an amendment was allowed an unlimited time, which means that other Members will have less when they return.

Mr Deputy Speaker: He was allowed on the basis that he is a member of the Committee of the Centre. We will adjourn now until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 1.04 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Many Members have indicated that they wish to speak, and for that reason I shall limit each Member to five minutes.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I oppose the motion and support the amendment. The motion should be seen for what it is — another attempt by Unionists to undermine the Good Friday Agreement. They want to purge, in the words of Sylvia Hermon, that section on rights, safeguards and equality to which they signed up to and now do not like. The words “rights” and “equality” are alien to the Unionist mindset, but the agreement and the Act put human rights at the centre of political, social and economic change on this island.

The Human Rights Commission has been given the specific task of ensuring that that happens. Part of the task is to advise the British Government on a bill of rights, complementary and additional to the Human Rights Commission, which will reflect the particular circumstances of the North. After 18 months and six-county-wide consultations with the commission, the UUP has suddenly discovered that all sorts of people, precisely 67% of Protestants and 88% of Catholics, think that the bill of rights it is not only a good idea, but is essential.

Unionism has never recognised, let alone reflected on, the particular circumstances of the North and the construction of a state whose very existence depended on division, inequality and the abuse of human rights. It is precisely because of that, and to address the human rights deficit, that Sinn Féin argued strongly that the sections on rights, safeguards and equality should ensure that the causes of conflict were prioritised and addressed.

All parties that signed up to the agreement accepted that and affirmed their commitment to mutual respect. However, the party that tabled today’s motion has done absolutely nothing to confirm its commitment to mutual respect and parity of esteem. It has never acknowledged the right to self-determination, the only human right for which an explicit formulation was agreed in the Good Friday Agreement, which was supported in referendums North and South. The motion is about trying to change the agreement and the composition of the Human Rights Commission because it does not suit the narrow Unionist agenda. It is an example of a party on the run: on the run from the DUP; on the run from the Human Rights Commission; and on the run from the agreement to which it signed up.

It is even out of step with its own people. They want a bill of rights, and they wish to contribute to it, judging

by the e-mails that we have received. On 8 May, David Trimble, in one of his more lucid periods, said that the core principles of human rights and equality are woven into the fabric of the agreement and reflected in the Programme for Government. However, how do Unionists make progress on those core principles? They attack the Human Rights Commission for carrying out its remit as laid down in the agreement.

Yesterday, the media treated us to the unsavoury situation of two parties, the DUP and the UUP, scratching around for signatures for a motion to exclude democratically elected representatives in order to bring down the Assembly. The UUP has the audacity to censure the Human Rights Commission. One can see that it may feel the need to defend its junior Minister, Dermot Nesbitt, after his outrageous outburst at the launch of the consultation document ‘Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland’.

The attack on the commission and the outright rejection of the consultation document was not lost on the audience, which greeted his outburst with a stunned silence. Nor was it lost on them that the Minister was using the occasion to advance his narrow-minded, bigoted, party political position on a bill of rights before it had even got off the ground. I would suggest that he resign, but he is going to anyway.

This is not the first time that Unionism has dismissed efforts to enact a bill of rights here. When the late Sheelagh Murnaghan tried to do so in the 1960s, her efforts were stonewalled by the same Unionist mindset that is on display here. In retrospect, those Unionists might reflect that, had they placed a bill of rights on the political agenda then, this society might have been spared 30 years of conflict. There are many things in the draft document that Sinn Féin will challenge, but, overall, the draft pursues a liberal Unionist agenda. It is clear from the motion that the Unionists, not content with the British Government’s efforts to neutralise the commission through lack of powers and resources, want to put the commission and the agreement out of business. I oppose the motion.

Mrs E Bell: I oppose the motion and support the amendment. There are several reasons for my opposition, but chief among them is my belief that the motion is pointless and out of time. My Colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party have expressed concern and reservation that the Human Rights Commission has exceeded its authority. They fear that the consultation document is too broad and that it covers rights that are not particular to Northern Ireland. The Human Rights Commission clearly sets out its remit and its approach to fulfilling that.

In the document, the commission quotes extensively from the Good Friday Agreement. It then goes on to

explain various interpretations of Northern Ireland's particular circumstances drawing, as appropriate, on international instruments and experience. It further states that the interpretation of the Bill should be based on human dignity, equality and freedom, without any threat to rights adequately protected by law.

After reading the consultation document, I can only commend the commission for its frankness. The Human Rights Commission does not claim to have the final answer for what is meant in paragraph 4 of the Good Friday Agreement about exclusive Northern Ireland rights. Instead, it explicitly asks for the opinions and reasoning of all people in Northern Ireland. The first three questions that it poses are an attempt to have us, the people of Northern Ireland, help define its remit.

It is only right that Members of the Assembly would have concerns and disagree with what the commission has set forth in its entirety. However, it is no surprise that those are the types of opinions that the commission wishes to hear. Members should be more effective in lobbying the Human Rights Commission about the ways in which it believes that it has exceeded its remit and by holding this debate today. Fortunately, they can do both. The ad hoc human rights consortium that supports a fully inclusive debate on a bill of rights is an example of effective lobbying. The consortium consists of representatives from over 50 voluntary and community groups.

'Making a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland' is merely a consultative document that can be changed, and more than likely it will be changed, perhaps as a result of this debate. However, I am, on the whole, pleased with its contents. Historically, the Alliance Party has supported a bill of rights, and I am pleased that it supports the concept of proportional representation, which ensures everyone's right to participate in government. For a long time, we have advocated that such a bill incorporate international standards, which the document does.

Initially, my party was wary that the commission would interpret its remit too narrowly and focus exclusively on group rights. I am pleased that that has not happened. I agree with the reasoning to support the inclusion of a section on children's rights and of strongly worded statements on women's rights. I am sure that the proponents of the motion will argue that neither children nor women are unique to Northern Ireland, but I counter that with the point that, although they are not unique, they have suffered under our unique circumstances. For too long their rights, not to mention the rights of ethnic minorities, have been at the bottom of every agenda.

We need a strong bill of rights to address those past wrongs and to protect the needs of all communities. I oppose the motion for those reasons. The document is

for consultation; it is not set in stone. The commission is seeking our advice, as well as the advice of many others in the Province. It acknowledges its remit and explains how and why it has interpreted it. In the document, the commission says that the final delivery of an effective bill of rights is the concern of everyone interested in the search for long-term peace and stability in Northern Ireland — the two Governments, the political parties, civil society and all the people of Northern Ireland.

Finally, many of the rights may seem universal and may have a particular bearing here. Now is the time to try to improve those rights for all in Northern Ireland, and not only those in the two perceived communities. I support the amendment.

Mr Ervine: Dr Birnie began by assuring us of his belief in human rights. He felt the need to repeat that, so he finished off by assuring us of his commitment to human rights. What came in between was a right-wing rant — right wing in its attitude to economics and economic opportunity, and right wing generally. It will be interesting to see whether the Ulster Unionist Party is the broad church that we are told that it is — Genghis Khan elements early, and perhaps a few Joe Stalin elements later. However, it seems that we may not see that. I have seen this before. It may not have been to do with human rights; it may have been to do with socialism or with how economics might be dealt with differently in society. The death knell for that was sectarianism and a refusal to believe that if you were Unionist or Protestant that was anything to do with you. It was a Catholic and Republican matter; it was not a matter for ordinary citizens.

"Reds under the bed" — and I am not accusing Dr Birnie of saying that — have been alive and well in society for a very long time. I can remember people who are now Members of this House branding people as "reds under the bed" because they advocated something that was different from the style and nature of what they had lived under for so long.

Dr Birnie went through the booklet produced by the commission and made arguments. Rather than deal with those, let me tell him something of which he may or may not be aware. I have had the luxury — dubious as it may be — of sitting in Committee Rooms here, and I have heard members of the Human Rights Commission being interrogated with abject hostility by representatives of the Unionist community on all kinds of issues. To pick up the document and show your hostility to it does not tell the whole truth. There are Members present who have been on those Committees and who know that. There was abject bitterness and hostility because somehow those people were seen to be defending terrorists and sticking their noses in where they did not belong.

Perhaps we should take ownership of an element that would assist our institutions to function more practically. In the words of Edwin Poots, the Unionist community has had no ownership of this. Why has it had no ownership? What are we afraid of? Are we afraid to defend a human being's right? Are Protestants and Unionists not human beings? What is there to be frightened about? That is a sign of the insecurity that permeates our society, an insecurity that is not in the first instance proffered to us by our enemy. It is proffered to us often in the first instance by our leadership: be afraid of this; be afraid of that; be afraid of the dark. It will be difficult to see a human rights system here that works properly, because I do not imagine that a sterling job can be done by the commission, given the pathetic amount of money that it has been allocated.

2.15 pm

It seems that all Prods are clairvoyant — and there is never any good news. They are afraid of the dark and rather than switch on the light — take ownership of something and be part of it, so that it would be the way that they wanted it to be — they run away from it. That is what is happening today. The refusal to allow or encourage the Unionist community to take ownership of the Human Rights Commission makes it difficult for all of us to sell the concept of human rights.

A Member from one of the parties — he is not in the Chamber now — once said that there should be no such thing as human rights legislation in Northern Ireland. Perhaps, he reflects more accurately the feelings of Members on those Benches. We shall hear some strange stuff in the next half-hour about how people think that they are so decent as regards human rights.

Ms McWilliams: I am also concerned about some earlier comments. Mr Edwin Poots's remarks about giving blood reminded me what giving blood was all about. Members who gave blood here last year will know that people give it because they know that, some day, someone will need it — not because they expect to get it back automatically. Perhaps that also applies to human rights. To have proper regard for human rights means that we should enshrine in law something from which we may not necessarily benefit, but which other people — Unionist or Nationalist — need. That is a better way to talk about giving blood than the disgraceful comments made by the Member for Lagan Valley about the rights of gays and lesbians.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Ms McWilliams: I will not give way. The Member had an opportunity to clarify his point after he made it. It is shameful that a Member should make such a comment.

The speech made by the mover of the motion made me despair. He calls himself an economist, while arguing

that Northern Ireland is doing so well that we no longer have to concern ourselves with our deprivation and poverty rates, because they are coming into line with those in the rest of the United Kingdom. Reports produced by agencies such as the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) repeatedly state that, given the proportion of children in the Northern Ireland population, our poverty rates far exceed those elsewhere. Did we not hear Sir Reg Empey refer to that yesterday when he introduced the draft Programme for Government? We must take account of the fact that we have fallen so far behind. It is good for us to enshrine rights that deal with economic and social deprivation.

Dr Birnie may have received the same faxes as I did from Save the Children, from the Multicultural Resource Centre, from Barnardo's, from Women in Politics and from Amnesty International. All those organisations expressed concern about the idea that we should have anything to fear from the wide-ranging consultation carried out by the Human Rights Commission, and they restated their support for the commission. Despite a lack of resources, the Human Rights Commission had to encourage other organisations to set up their own discussions on human rights. It welcomed that opportunity. For some reason, Dr Birnie said that it was not good for the Human Rights Commission to be involved in campaigning and debating and that its role was purely consultative. Does it not enrich our civic life to have a commission involved in campaigning for and debating a bill of rights?

These are good days for Northern Ireland — despite the depressing and distressing scenes that one sees on the streets. In the future, Members will be able to tell their children — if not their grandchildren — that they were involved when the country was drawing up a bill of rights. How many people in history have had that wonderful opportunity? However, Members are denying that opportunity to the communities and are saying that the Human Rights Commission should not have bothered campaigning and debating something as important as the rights of a country's people.

Dr Birnie also said that the commission stirs up extraordinary expectations. We have had an extraordinary past, and it is little wonder that people have raised themselves to have a vision of a different future. They will not be disappointed. If people have been involved in the discussions and take ownership of those discussions, they know that it will be a win-win situation. They know that they will have to give something when the bill of rights is decided.

Did those Members who criticised so loudly make submissions during the previous consultation, and do they intend to do so following the current round?

Mr McCartney: The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission was doomed from the moment the basic

human rights of Unionists were denied in the selection and appointment of its members. Excellently qualified candidates with no Unionist political associations, senior solicitors in mixed partnerships and university lecturers of consummate intelligence were set aside for others of questionable competence.

For Ulster Unionists to complain that the Human Rights Commission has failed to discharge its remit under the agreement is another example of pro-agreement selective amnesia, which affects so many of those who negotiated and signed it. The commission's mandate and remit clearly states that its duty is to constitute a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. That is similar to the Ulster Unionists' attitude to Patten: when the outcome does not suit them they deny that they granted the remit that brought about the mischief.

It is pointless to complain about the job that the commission has made of its remit when the basic fault is the existence of the remit. A bill of rights for Northern Ireland means provincial human rights for Northern Ireland that do not apply to our fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The concept of provincial human rights violates two basic principles. First, there is the equality of citizenship. The rights and duties of all citizens in the United Kingdom should be equal. Secondly, human rights are universal. Their very claim to special privilege in law is that they apply to all human beings, and across all provincial and national boundaries. Universality is the fundamental basis of human rights.

The proposals set out in the commission's draft bill of rights would move Northern Ireland further out of the United Kingdom than it already is, and that outcome should have been foreseen by those in the Ulster Unionist Party who negotiated and signed the Belfast Agreement. The fact that they did not foresee that means that they stand condemned as incompetent negotiators.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and other non-statutory bodies who work in the same field have a case to answer, because their efforts to protect human rights almost exclusively focus on the state, in all its aspects, as the primary source of human rights violations.

Woolly-minded liberals draw no distinction between competing human rights. They draw no distinction between the right to silence and the right to life. Those groups have taken what some might unkindly characterise as the human rights industry and almost completely failed to respond to the growing trend in the real world of citizens' human rights being violated by non-state bodies. The Home Secretary, Mr Blunkett, recently said that human rights will have to take second place to the security of life and the security of the state. The commission has almost entirely ignored the violation

of human rights by non-state bodies — paramilitaries and their increasing band of criminal auxiliaries. That state of affairs might be characterised as the privatisation of human rights violations.

It is little short of a scandal that the commission and others have little to say about, and devote a small proportion of their resources to doing something about, the punishment beatings, intimidation, extortion, robberies and organised fraud conducted by paramilitary groups — some of whose frontmen and frontwomen sit in the Assembly and enjoy Executive office.

I listened to a farrago of bitterness and a myopic view of the commission's report from Mrs Nelis. She represents a party that is inextricably linked to a paramilitary organisation that has committed some of the most inhuman, horrible and outrageous violations of human rights, yet she has the brass neck to come here and lecture other citizens who belong to democratic parties about how they should behave.

The Human Rights Commission should start to address the real issues. Those are the violations of the most fundamental human rights: the right to live; the right to bring up children in peace; and the right to have personal integrity from violent personal injury.

Mr Dalton: I support the motion put forward by my Colleague Dr Birnie, not because I am opposed to human rights — as suggested by one Sinn Féin Member — and not because Unionism is afraid of human rights. I have had an interest in human rights for many years. I studied the subject at university, and I continue to maintain an interest.

I am a firm believer in human rights. I believe in equal political and civil rights for all citizens in the United Kingdom, throughout the European Union and the world. I want to see those rights protected. However, I am concerned that the new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has not been doing that. It has not been fulfilling its remit. Instead, it has tried to create some kind of social engineering document in order to put forward a '60s-style socialist view of society. The commission wants to try to impose that view on the rest of us and take away the decisions that we are supposed to make about political life from political instruments such as the Assembly.

I support the right of women to choose whether to have an abortion, and I support the right to same-sex marriage. However, those issues should not be contained in a bill of rights. They are political issues. They are issues on which one makes a political decision in the political institutions that we have set up. They are issues for us to argue, not to be laid down in a bill of rights to be discussed and ruled on by courts. That is not the appropriate way with which to deal with those issues. They are not the subjects of fundamental human rights; they are political decisions.

In some ways I would like to distance myself from the remarks that Mr Poots made, as I am uncomfortable with them, but, at the same time, he reflected a view that is held in the Unionist community. The Human Rights Commission has singularly failed to promote an awareness of human rights culture and of human rights in the Unionist community. As Mr McCartney said, that happened because the then Secretary of State took no regard of her legal duty to appoint a commission that fully reflected the community, and instead appointed from within the human rights lobby or industry.

That is a great shame and has been the disaster that has underpinned much of what the Human Rights Commission has tried to do since — and this is where I disagree with Mr McCartney. The remit that was given to the commission in the Belfast Agreement was not to draw up a bill of rights, but

“to consult and advise on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights, to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland.”

Its job is to advise and consult on supplementary rights. Although the European Convention has not been incorporated, its remedies are available to UK citizens through the Human Rights Act 1998. That was probably one of the major pieces of legislation to go through Westminster since the European Communities Act 1972. It represents a significant change in the way in which the legal system in the United Kingdom will operate. It has an effect on Northern Ireland and has done so since October 2000.

Whenever the Human Rights Commission thinks it is relevant, it will mention the Human Rights Act 1998, but it does not look at the Act. It does not take account of the effect that the 1998 Act has had, and instead runs off to produce a completely separate document.

2.30 pm

The Human Rights Commission was supposed to ask what extra rights and protections were necessary to meet Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. The answer to that question could be that no additional rights to those in the European Convention are needed. The commission could have concluded that the European Convention on Human Rights was sufficient to protect the political and civil rights of Northern Ireland people as part of the United Kingdom, and through the protections offered to them by the 1998 Act. The commission did not do that. It said that it had been given a remit to produce a bill of rights and that that is what it would do. It produced an astounding, incredible document that has no precedent in international law.

My other concern is that, in producing the document, the commission has significantly alienated the Unionist community. Instead of being able to embrace human rights culture and look at human rights as offering

protection for the Unionist culture, the Unionist community has been alienated by the commission's course of action. What is the commission doing about the difficult issues, such as the right to assemble? Human rights are not about protecting the rights that one particularly favours; it is about protecting all rights, which include those on difficult issues with which one may not agree. If someone wishes to produce fascist or racist work he has a right to do that, and that right should be defended. I may not agree with such people but their right to express their opinions has to be protected. That is also true when it comes to the right to peaceful assembly. The commission has simply invented rights to try and oppose what should be protected.

Ms Lewsley: I support the amendment. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which derives its mandate from the Good Friday Agreement, is fundamentally important. Without the commission, the agreement's vision of a new beginning for Northern Ireland based on human rights for all cannot be realised.

It is all the more regrettable that the commission has not been given the budget and powers commensurate with its importance under the agreement. The SDLP welcomes recent improvements in the commission's budget but regrets the time that that has taken and the detrimental effect that that has had on the commission's ability to engage with wider civic society on the bill of rights. Our party also regrets the lack of powers given to the Human Rights Commission.

The commission recently reviewed its powers and effectiveness, and made detailed recommendations to the Secretary of State. However, the review makes for sad reading. It shows that, in the past two years, the Northern Ireland Office and criminal justice agencies have been able to stymie the commission's investigations through non-co-operation. It also shows how the commission has been powerless in the face of such obstruction, despite assurances at Westminster by the then Secretary of State, MoMowlam, that legislation would provide for full co-operation. Those assurances have not been honoured. That is why the SDLP has called for the commission's powers to be greatly enhanced. We have made it clear that the commission should enjoy the same extensive powers as those enjoyed by the Irish Human Rights Commission. Nothing less will bring our commission into line with the principles on the status and functioning of national institutions for protection and promotion of human rights known as the Paris Principles. Nothing less will do.

The SDLP has proposed an amendment to the motion to highlight the commission's lack of powers and to call for those defects to be remedied. The Secretary of State has been considering a review of the commission's powers, but he has not responded yet. We await his acceptance of the commission's recommendations.

Despite all of this, the Human Rights Commission has discharged its mandate admirably. That can be clearly seen in the bill of rights.

The Good Friday Agreement states that the commission must consult and advise on the scope of defining rights supplementary to the European Convention on Human Rights. The commission is doing that. It has consulted; it has produced draft advice; and it is consulting on that advice. The agreement says that the commission should draw on “international instruments and experience.” It has done so by examining countless international instruments. The agreement also says that the commission should

“reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland”.

It has accomplished that by laying emphasis on economic and social rights. Those rights can form the basis of a common agenda that can heal the divisions in Northern Ireland.

If there is one thing that the commission has not done, it is to make sufficiently strong provision for parity of esteem, and just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos and aspirations of both communities. The SDLP considers that a fundamental issue, because it is fundamental to the agreement itself. We would have wished for clearer provision for that matter, in order to reflect the agreement better. To base the rights on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities is not enough. The agreement, itself an international instrument, goes further by guaranteeing the equal treatment of both communities’ aspirations, as opposed to merely their cultural identities.

The higher protection of rights given by the agreement deserves clearer recognition. However, this is just a consultation paper. It is no surprise that we, or any other party, should comment on it. It does not mean that the Human Rights Commission has not carried out its duties under the agreement.

It is regrettable that Unionist politicians have engaged in a negative debate on the commission. That is based on a complete misunderstanding of the issues. For example, I have heard complaints that some Unionists believe that the principle of consent should be included in the bill of rights —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please draw your remarks to a close.

Ms Lewsley: A bill of rights is just that — a bill of rights. I support the amendment.

Mr S Wilson: I support the motion.

Many people will find it odd that the Ulster Unionist Party complained last week about the Patten Report. It said that its members on the board would not be bound by Patten and the police legislation, because it was not what they understood would be in the agreement. At

the start of the week, the UUP drew up a motion, which has yet to be put before the House, to exclude Sinn Féin, because it had been conned on the issue of letting terrorists into Government with their guns. Today the party tells us that it has been conned about the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. To get it wrong once is bad, twice is disastrous, but a third time is criminal.

Those people said that they had negotiated a good agreement, and they sold it to the people of Northern Ireland on that basis. Today’s motion, which we shall be supporting, is a sad indictment of the job that was done when the Belfast Agreement was signed.

Those who oppose the motion have not dealt with the essence of the complaints that were made. Instead, they have pointed the finger and implied that anyone who supports the motion is against human rights.

I listened to David Ervine’s remarks. All his attention was directed at the Unionist Benches. I did not stay to listen to the regular rant from Mary Nelis, but I can guess what she said about human rights. The organisation with which she is identified is totally immersed in a culture of denial of human rights. However, the House did not hear one word about that hypocrisy from David Ervine. All his ire was directed at those who support the motion.

Given the commission’s remit and membership, did anyone really expect anything more than a liberal-left, politically correct, Nationalist-driven agenda? As one commentator remarked, the commission was Mo Mowlam’s parting two fingers to the Unionist community. According to a parliamentary answer, six members of the commission were members of the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ), a Nationalist front organisation. What else can be expected from that? We have seen its actions here.

The Human Rights Commission has become the voice of the villain. Its representatives appeared before the Assembly to talk about extra powers for the police to investigate the financial irregularities of criminals. Without even having seen the code of practice — the commission admitted that it had not seen it — they recommended that it needed changing to protect the criminal.

There have been complaints about the commission’s lack of money. However, there was no lack of money when it came to protecting the Omagh bombers. The commission has taken two cases to court. One action sought to protect the identities of the Omagh bombers from being broadcast on ‘Panorama’. The other case went to the High Court to enhance the powers of the commission and allow it to intervene in third-party cases.

What we have seen from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which the document shows, is a

desire to extend its powers. For example, if someone complains that a hospital or school closure impinges on his or her human rights, the commission wants the power to take such a case to court and for the judge to overrule decisions made by elected Members of the Assembly. In fact, at a recent meeting to discuss extra powers, the commission wanted powers to enter properties, seize documents, and so on. It wanted to become another Special Branch, only with more powers. It is right not to give the commission extra powers. The one way to put a rein on the commission is to use an economic stranglehold and not give it any more money.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We must question the reason behind the motion and its timing, given that the consultation process on the bill of rights is ongoing. The consultation process, which was launched in March 2000, has seen 11 different pamphlets distributed. Nine independent advisory groups were set up, 400 educators were trained, and educational videos and manuals were produced. The commission invited independent speakers, who included the president of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. A total of 230 submissions have been received, and 22 public meetings have taken place.

Given all that, why did the Ulster Unionist Party not raise its concerns and contribute to that process?

Dr Birnie: Will the Member give way?

Dr O'Hagan: No, I have only five minutes.

It makes one wonder whether Unionists are using the motion not only to attack the commission, but to renegotiate the Good Friday Agreement and to produce a commission that they can influence.

The Good Friday Agreement envisaged a far-reaching bill of rights that extended protection beyond the two communities to cover all communities, including ethnic minorities. It was to cover rights that would reflect and address the North of Ireland's particular circumstances. Those rights include socio-economic rights, children's rights, the rights of the elderly and women's rights. Furthermore, it was to be a free-standing bill of rights that built on, and went further than, international instruments. It is pertinent to ask just what Unionists are afraid of. Human rights are not about Nationalist or Unionist rights; they are about the rights of every single individual in this society.

The amendment, which my party is supporting, states that the commission has been hindered in discharging its remit due to limits on its powers and resources. That is absolutely correct. It has been stated here — in a different way, of course — that the commission is not representative. Yes, it is not representative. Catholics, women and Nationalists are under-represented, and there are no representatives from the ethnic minorities, from people with disabilities or from the gay and

lesbian community — in fact, from all the groups covered by section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The draft bill of rights produced by the commission does not go far enough. It fails, for example, to recognise specifically the rights of political ex-prisoners. The British Government failed to fund the Human Rights Commission adequately at an early stage. The commission has been unable to function effectively because it has been undermined from the start by lack of resources and by the failure of the British Government to give it the necessary powers, such as those of subpoena and discovery.

2.45 pm

The commission was further curtailed by Lord Justice Carswell's finding that it did not have the powers to intervene in cases as a third party, or *amicus curiae*. The British Government have failed to legislate to give those powers to the Human Rights Commission, powers similar to those held by other non-governmental organisations. Indeed, the commission is not governed by the Paris Principles, the guidelines followed by all human rights organisations throughout the world.

The Secretary of State has still not acted on the commission's report of February 2001 despite that report's recommendations on the changes required to improve its effectiveness.

Much more needs to be done in the field of human rights, particularly regarding the representativeness of the Human Rights Commission. However, we must applaud the commission's work so far, despite its inadequacies and lack of resources.

Most of Mr Poots comments were disgraceful, but those concerning blood donations, in particular, were shameful to the House. It was an attack on people who suffer from AIDS, haemophilia and hepatitis. Unfortunately, that is indicative of the backward thinking among so many people in this society.

Mr Armstrong: Everyone is entitled to human rights, but things have to be fair and equal. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has failed to propose recommendations in line with its remit. The Belfast Agreement charged the commission with advising and consulting with the UK Government on additional human rights, which could be introduced by law to further safeguard the identity and ethos of both communities.

The commission has done its bit in keeping open the constitutional debate by mentioning Northern Ireland's competing and equally legitimate aspirations. The commission has been set up by the British Government and must provide society with equal human rights for all people in Northern Ireland in the context of the United Kingdom. The consultation document mentions self-determination, but not the principle of consent, which was endorsed under the Belfast Agreement.

The bill of rights aims to promote mutual tolerance and respect among all sections of the community. However, the commission fails to be pragmatic about the reality. A bill of rights will not remove the main threat to human rights that prevails in our society — that posed by Sinn Féin/IRA, which still holds on to arms.

The report also deals with the rights of young people. The House will know that the main threat to them comes from bully boys whose actions are directed by paramilitary organisations. The commission fails to mention that. Our young people need to be adequately protected by law from punishment beatings and from drug pushers.

Regarding the issue of job equality, the best person should get the job. We must safeguard an employer's right to choose the type of person that he wants to employ. That is not sufficiently recognised by the bill of rights' recommendations.

The document spent much time stressing past crimes of the state in dealing with terrorist violence. However, a vital omission from the document is that the state has a legitimate monopoly in the use of force. That principle defines a state. Safeguards must be adhered to. However, the state's hands must not be tied in discharging its legitimate function of ensuring law and order.

The Human Rights Commission has not safeguarded the culture of the majority of the population. It is now politically incorrect for people of my culture to celebrate or express beliefs. That was not addressed. Human rights are weak on that issue.

The Human Rights Commission has proven to be spineless, with a false view of our world. Our world is not ideal, and it is futile to think that the commission can create a perfect society. It has failed to adopt a balanced approach to the establishment of human rights. It has undermined many valuable traditional institutions in our society, which include the sanctity of marriage. Its view is contrary to the distinct nature of Northern Ireland's society. Therefore the commission has ignored its remit and offered a series of proposals that would offend most people in Northern Ireland.

I realise that the rights of the minority should be protected. However, in its efforts to please the minority, the commission has forgotten about the majority.

Mr A Maginness: Even by the House's standards, this has been one of the most dispiriting and disappointing debates to date. I hope to enliven it and raise the standard a little bit. I was deeply depressed by the speeches from the Unionist Benches. David Ervine went to the heart of the issue: the Unionist parties, and sadly the Ulster Unionist Party in particular, seem to have no confidence in human rights. They seem to have a negative reaction to human rights. They see it as the preserve of the Nationalist, Republican or Catholic

community — something that does not belong to them.

However, that is not reflected in the community. I refer, in particular, to the Protestant community. Some 215 organisations ranging from Age Concern to the Tullyalley Community Association contributed to the Human Rights Commission's deliberations. Those organisations reflect a wide spectrum of Northern Ireland society. Ordinary people in the Unionist or Protestant community have a belief in human rights and have confidence in the Human Rights Commission. I cannot understand why a party that is committed to the Good Friday Agreement cannot embrace the concept of human rights and support the body that has been set up to advance human rights in Northern Ireland.

I am told that the Human Rights Commission has gone outside its terms of reference. The terms state, as Mr McCartney — and I notice he never stays to the end of the debate — rightly said, that

“the new Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will be invited to consult and to advise on the scope for defining, in Westminster legislation, rights supplementary to those in the European Convention on Human Rights, to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland, drawing as appropriate on international instruments and experience. These additional rights to reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem, and — taken together with the ECHR — to constitute a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland.”

I cannot see how the commission has gone outside its terms of reference. The Human Rights Commission has faithfully discharged its duty under its terms of reference. It has produced a draft bill of human rights for people's considerations. It is a consultative document; there is nothing here that the document says must be included in the bill of rights. The Human Rights Commission is providing its own suggestions, as well as those from a wide range of organisations and people in the community.

What is wrong with that? How can that offend anybody in the Chamber, Unionist or Nationalist? The Human Rights Commission has discharged its duties very well on a budget of £750,000, which is chicken feed in comparison to the figures that other public organisations funded by the Northern Ireland Office receive. The Police Ombudsman and other organisations receive much more than that. The commission is strapped for funds, and it needs additional funding. Its funding should be between £1.5 million and £2 million per year. If the commission were given that sort of funding, it could discharge its duties much better. The Human Rights Commission rightly pointed out that it is underfunded and that it does not have sufficient powers. Its powers and its independence do not reflect the Paris Principles, which are internationally recognised as the minimum requirements.

One of the many weird criticisms that Dr Birnie made of the commission was that it had a maximalist approach to human rights. Why would it not take that approach? If it had a minimalist approach to human rights, it would be failing in its duty.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is a non-transferable matter, so I must limit my response to the facts. The commission is required to consult with and advise the Secretary of State on the scope for a bill of rights. The consultation document published on 4 September 2001 forms the commission's initial advice to the Secretary of State. It will provide its final advice to the Secretary of State when the consultation process has ended. The Secretary of State will decide whether the commission has fulfilled its remit. I have listened carefully and noted the range of views expressed.

Several important matters have been raised, and I have no doubt that the Secretary of State and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission will consider those remarks carefully.

The Executive have yet to consider whether they will make a response to the bill of rights, but if they do, they will consider carefully the views that have been expressed.

With regard to the allegations made about the composition of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 states that the Secretary of State must

“as far as practicable secure that the commissioners, as a group, are representative of the community in Northern Ireland.”

The Secretary of State is responsible for the appointment of the 52 members of the commission; the Executive do not have a role in that.

Mr Attwood: Some comments have been made about the membership of the Human Rights Commission. Whatever we think about how representative the commission's membership is, the comments that were made were, at the very least, unfortunate and, at the very worst, potentially dangerous. Will the Deputy Speaker consult Hansard to examine the comments made by Mr Poots when he referred to the “pro-prisoner, pro-terrorist and pro-Nationalist” activities of the Human Rights Commission? The word “pro-terrorist”, in particular, puts members of public bodies in the North — in this case, members of the Human Rights Commission — at risk. I request that the Deputy Speaker review that matter.

3.00 pm

Someone on the other Benches somewhat generously referred to Mrs Nelis's comments as a rant. Mrs Nelis said

“that rights and equality are alien words to the mindset of Unionism”.

Regardless of my thoughts on the motion, or what is happening in Unionism, to portray Unionists as having a mindset alien to rights and equality does not inform the debate. Rather, it gives an insight into the mind of the person who would say such a thing and suggests to me that that person is pathological in her attitude towards another community in the North. That attitude is manifest in the failure of both Sinn Féin Members who spoke today to accept the invitation from the Unionist Members to comment on abuses of human rights that emanate from the Republican movement and community. Their silence and lack of response on that reveals much about those who criticise the Unionist approach to human rights, a criticism which, in many ways, I share.

Mr McCartney stated that the Human Rights Commission

“has almost entirely ignored the violation of human rights by non-state bodies”.

Mr McCartney almost entirely ignored the activities of the Human Rights Commission. As well as its intervention on behalf of the Omagh families, it made submissions to the Ad Hoc Committee on the draft Proceeds of Crime Bill 2001 and expressed views on the proposed Financial Investigations (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, both of which are attempts to purge our community of the effects of organised crime. It has made comments to the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the relocation of victims of paramilitary intimidation. It has contributed to the International Council on Human Rights Policy report on human-rights approaches to armed groups. The portrayal of the Human Rights Commission as a body that entirely ignores non-state abuses is contradicted by many of its activities.

Duncan Shipley Dalton said that there was no need to go beyond the Human Rights Act 1998, which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law. That view may be valid. However, that was not the mandate given to the Human Rights Commission. Page 16, paragraph 4, of the Good Friday Agreement explicitly says that the commission should consider

“rights supplementary to those of the European Convention on Human rights, to reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland”.

It then adds

“These additional rights to reflect the principles of mutual respect for the identity and ethos of both communities and parity of esteem”.

That explicitly goes beyond the European Convention on Human Rights. Given that the Good Friday Agreement gives a mandate to move beyond the European

Convention on Human Rights, the commission is quite right to do so.

The implementation of human rights in the North is an opportunity, not a threat. We hear from the Unionist Benches that it is considered a threat, not an opportunity. The Unionists should heed what Monica McWilliams said about the growing volume of opinion in the North and heed too those who are articulating the need for human rights — the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, Save the Children, Women into Politics, Amnesty International, the Multi-Cultural Resource Centre (Northern Ireland) and the many organisations that gave submissions during the consultation process on a bill of rights. They are representative of the Northern Ireland community. Many of their members may also be Unionists, Nationalists, Loyalists or Republicans, but they all can see that the new civic religion in our society, and in many societies around the world, is the issue of human rights. They are embracing them, and it is time for us to do the same.

Dr Birnie: I would like to thank all who participated in the debate, especially the junior Minister, who had the difficult task of speaking about something for which he does not have responsibility.

As time is tight, I will not attempt a point-by-point rebuttal, tempting though it would be. However, the second Sinn Féin Member to speak, Dr O'Hagan, implied that my party had failed to make a submission to the commission. If you look at page 154 of the document you will see that we are listed there.

In listening to some of the comments this afternoon, particularly from those Members speaking against the motion or, indeed, in favour of the amendment, I rather think that some such persons were adopting a position similar to that adopted by a former British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ken Clarke. In 1993, he urged Members of Parliament to vote for the Maastricht Treaty, but he then went on to admit, quite candidly, that he had never read the document. We have read this document, and in it, and, indeed, in what has been said this afternoon, we have not found evidence that the commission would have lacked, or would now lack, resources if it had stuck to its defined remit as stated in the Belfast Agreement.

We have not heard evidence to counter the crucial point that many social and economic rights, desirable though they may be as objectives, cannot be justiciable. Poverty cannot be abolished by a decision in court. It needs public spending, a sound economic policy and a productive economy — all very important items — but it cannot be solved by a human rights document. That is not, to use Mr Ervine's allegation, a piece of so-called right-wing rant. It is a sound philosophical argument, supported internationally by many commentators on human rights.

Has the Human Rights Commission gone beyond the agreement? Yes, it has. It is condemned out of its own mouth. On page 14 of the September document, the commission says

“In so far as a narrow interpretation of paragraph 4” —

that is of the section in the agreement —

“might be thought to rule out the recommendation of certain rights, the Commission is satisfied that it can properly rely on its general power under section 69(3)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998”.

It therefore argues, to my mind not convincingly, that it cannot simply rely on the agreement — it relies on the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That is clearly a case of going beyond the agreement. I repeat what I said — we are not against rights per se; we simply want full implementation of the agreement in this regard, as in others.

I listened closely to Mr Attwood's summing-up speech. In closing, he got very euphoric and referred to the rights agenda as “the civic religion”. At least we agreed on that, as I referred to it as “a secular religion”. Let us put it to the test. If this really is what the people of Northern Ireland want, let it be tested by a referendum. However, I note that there is a suggestion that the bill of rights should not be approved by a referendum, although, to be fair, I have not heard that from the commission. I heard it from other lobby groups. I suspect the reason for it is that they know a majority of people in Northern Ireland would not vote for many of the suggestions within such a document as this.

I support the motion, and, contrary to some rumours that I have been hearing over lunchtime, I hope that we will move rapidly to a vote on it rather than have a so-called stay of execution for perhaps six days. The matter is sufficiently important to be voted on now, on its own merits, without resort to a procedural fig leaf.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Birnie has pre-empted my next comments. I wish to inform Members that a petition of concern has been tabled in respect of this motion. Under Standing Order 27, no vote may therefore be held until at least one day has passed. Standing Order 27 states that

“A Petition of Concern in respect of any matter shall be in the form of a notice signed by at least 30 Members presented to the Speaker. No vote may be held on a matter which is the subject of a Petition of Concern until at least one day after the Petition of Concern has been presented.”

I understand that the Business Committee considered this matter at its meeting today. In accordance with its decision, the vote on the matter before Members will be taken during the plenary session on Monday 1 October at the commencement of private Member's business. Copies of the petition are available in the Business Office for Members who wish to inspect it.

FUEL POVERTY

Mr Ford: I beg to move

That this Assembly encourages the Regulator General for Electricity and Gas to contribute to the eradication of fuel poverty by increasing the energy efficiency levy to £5.00 per customer, creating £3.6 million to tackle fuel poverty.

This motion will have more immediate practical effect on the citizens of Northern Ireland than the one we have just debated, so I trust Members will move quickly to a vote. For those who have not been subject to the effective and competent lobbying which many of us have experienced during recent weeks, I will explain the workings of the energy efficiency levy. For many it is something that gets lost in our electricity bills.

The levy is funded from electricity bills at the rate of £2 per consumer. To date, it has achieved £3.4 million, which has been used towards addressing energy efficiency and fuel poverty matters. It has been calculated to produce benefits of around £29 million for the neediest in society, which is an effective rate of return, given what happens in most areas of Government expenditure. Two thirds of the expenditure has been directly targeted towards the fuel poor and has probably achieved a reduction in the region of 137 kilotonnes of carbon.

In Northern Ireland there are around 170,000 households that suffer from fuel poverty. It is a major issue, and there is much to be done. We have evidence that the regulator wishes to increase the levy, subject to political support. That support should be registered today in the Assembly. The regulator proposes that the levy be increased to £5 per annum for each consumer, which amounts to less than 6p each per week. This is not a significant sum for an individual, and the benefits have already been proven.

The extra £2 million that might be raised will be targeted towards perhaps as many as 80% of the fuel poor, which could save in excess of £20 million, and perhaps as much as £22 million, per annum. This is a significant amount of money.

Although I am a mere Opposition Back-Bencher, I must remind the Members of the four largest parties of their commitments to the Programme for Government. This will help to meet UK national targets on fuel poverty and cut greenhouse gases. In Great Britain the levy is £1.80, rather than our £2. An immediate increase to £3.60 has been proposed, with a further phased increase to £4.80. An increase to £5 might follow. The effect on consumers will be minimal compared to the benefits.

Suggestions have been made about how what is a good scheme could be improved. The idea is that more money should be channelled towards total fuel poverty schemes. We have seen examples of small ACE schemes in the past, which carried out limited insulation

work. Some grants were available, but there was a piecemeal approach. The concept of dealing with every aspect of a household's fuel poverty, from insulation to improving heating sources, must be realised to ensure that those in need benefit from the scheme.

There is a need to improve existing structures. There are too many small schemes which, no matter how willing their workers, do not have the benefits of economies of scale and cannot work across the client groups.

3.15 pm

If we could improve the management of schemes, we would, doubtless, see even more benefit. The Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG) must take a lead in discussions about how to monitor the effectiveness of schemes and improve the use of the energy efficiency levy. Already, there is a payback that amounts to nine times the original expenditure. Neighbourhood Energy Action and other groups estimate that there could be a further increase and suggest that we could improve existing schemes and produce additional resources.

Some Members expressed concern about the content of the motion, and an amendment has been proposed. Members feel that there is a problem with the existing scheme because there is a flat-rate charge. There is a strong argument that anything that is, in effect, a tax ought to be progressive, so that those who can afford it pay more, and those who cannot afford it pay less. However, we must recognise the reality of the current scheme. The money is collected by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE). Each consumer pays the same levy, regardless of ability to pay, and there is no administration charge for raising the money; given that we are all likely to criticise NIE later on, we should at least record that fact. We must ensure that the money that is raised is used for its intended purposes.

It has been argued that if we pass the motion, we will let the Executive off the hook, since the Executive have to fund such schemes. The Executive fund other related areas of work — for example, through the Housing Executive budget — and I do not oppose the idea of an increase in the budget given to the Housing Executive to improve the services that it provides. We are working with limited resources, but an increase in the levy would provide additional money for the Department of Finance and Personnel.

It is also argued that if the motion were to be passed, we would let NIE off the hook. I could engage cheerfully in happy populism, telling everyone about what a dreadful bunch of wicked capitalists NIE are, and about how they got the industry cheap and take too much money. However, there is no mechanism — short of primary legislation, which might well be struck down by human rights legislation — through which the Assembly could enforce such a levy. The existing

energy efficiency levy can be increased, and, instead of demanding pie in the sky, we should find a realistic way in which to improve the scheme.

I discussed the amendment with the proposer. I am not sure whether the Ulster Hospital is wired up to receive Assembly television; if it is, Jim Wells will be watching and criticising me. I send him my good wishes. The amendment, which differs from what Mr Wells and I discussed last week, could wreck the existing scheme. I do not believe that that was Jim Wells's intention, and I do not believe that that should be the intention of the House.

If Members wish to table a further motion relating to NIE's profits and how they might be applied for the public good, they should put it before the House, and we can discuss its merits. However, we should not wreck the current scheme just to make a political point about our concerns about NIE.

When the regulator gave evidence to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, he said that he was looking for a lead from the Assembly on the energy efficiency levy. In GB there is a similar levy which is about to be significantly increased from £1.80 to £4.80 in two stages. We should give the lead that Mr McIlldoon has asked for. We should match the GB picture by increasing our levy from £2 to £5. We should pass the motion unamended and then look at further ways of improving the situation of the 170,000 households that still need our help.

Mr Deputy Speaker: One amendment to the motion has been selected and has been published in the Marshalled List.

Mr Dodds: Unfortunately Mr Jim Wells who was to propose the amendment is unable to be here. As most Members are aware, he was taken suddenly ill this morning. I am sure that the House will be glad to know that he is making good progress, though he is going to have some tests done. I am sure that everyone will join with me in sending our best wishes to him for a speedy recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We convey the best wishes of the House to Mr Wells.

Mr Dodds: I also apologise that I was delayed and missed the first part of Mr Ford's remarks.

Mr Kennedy: The Member missed nothing.

Mr Dodds: I am told that I did not miss anything terribly important. I was attending a meeting of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting at which we were trying to wring more money out of the tight-fisted Finance Minister.

Mr S Wilson: Did the Committee succeed?

Mr Dodds: We have not yet succeeded; we are going back for the second round shortly.

I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after "poverty" and insert:

"by entering into negotiations with Northern Ireland Electricity to obtain additional funding equivalent to the amount which would be generated by the proposed increase in the energy efficiency levy to £5.00 per customer."

I listened carefully to the points made by the mover of the motion. Indeed, he succeeded in putting forward most of the arguments against his motion. He disposed of the arguments with varying degrees of success, although I do not feel he did so convincingly. All in the House will agree that fuel poverty is an extremely important issue. That is the first thing that must be said.

The Department for Social Development and the Housing Executive, as the home energy conservation authority, have a programme in place to tackle the issue of fuel poverty. We have debated this issue on previous occasions, and we are well aware of the fact that 170,000 households in the community suffer from fuel poverty. We are also aware that it has been estimated that upwards of 600 people each year are dying as a result. That is a deplorable situation. Therefore the issue of fuel poverty is crucial, and we must address it. It is simply intolerable that 600 people are dying each year in Northern Ireland from cold-related illnesses.

We, the consumers across the Province, are currently paying the highest prices for electricity anywhere in Europe. When NIE announced a few months ago that it was increasing electricity prices by about 9%, there was rightly outrage across the House in all quarters about the swingeing increases in electricity tariffs. Having already been subjected to high increases and already paying the highest prices in Europe, our consumers are being faced once again with a massive increase.

Some of the reasons behind our high electricity prices are undoubtedly to do with the way in which the electricity industry was sold off. There are problems with the generators' long-term contracts. Various ways have been suggested in which that can be addressed. Consumers here are already paying high rates, and this morning the Minister of Finance and Personnel offered no relief on that score as once again rates are to go up by double the rate of inflation. Next year electricity prices are going up by three times the rate of inflation. Those issues must be borne in mind.

Time and again reference has been made to the fact that people who receive social security benefits can obtain relief. There are many people who do not fall into that category: those who make just enough money to not fall into any qualification for benefit. They are always hit hardest when it comes to increases.

It is right that we should be trying to increase the amount of money going into the programmes to deal with fuel poverty. However, there is concern across the House about going back to the customers and telling them that they should pay an extra 150%, — albeit phased in — in the energy efficiency levy, to cover the cost of putting more money into eradicating fuel poverty.

Is there not a case for encouraging the regulator to talk to Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE)? It may not be possible to require NIE to pay this money. If that is the case, it is something that we should be looking at. It is incumbent on us, as public representatives, to say that a company with the profits that NIE is making — over £90 million this year — should be asked to contribute towards this programme, in the light of the high prices that are already being charged to consumers and households in Northern Ireland. If it is not prepared to do that, then we should address the issues again.

To say that the onus will be put on the hard-pressed consumer to put up this amount of money is unfair. The revenue is not being raised from the appropriate section of the community. NIE has generated massive profits, and it has a responsibility to eradicate fuel poverty. That is not to say that the company has not done anything about this. It has worked with the Office for the Regulation of Electricity and Gas (OFREG) and others to try to improve the situation. However, to target consumers to raise this money is, as Mr Ford said, in effect putting another tax on consumers. It is unfair to go back to those consumers and ask them for the money to pay for these programmes. That takes the responsibility away from those who are better equipped to pay.

We could come to the House and say that it would be a good idea to increase pensions in Northern Ireland; that pensioners across the Province deserve more per person, per family, or per couple. Would it be acceptable for anyone in this House to stand up and agree, and levy an extra tax on pensioners to pay for it? That is effectively what we would be doing. “Pay a bit more and you will see the benefits. It will go back into your pockets another way.” That is unfair, and it is not the right approach.

We should ask the regulator to go to NIE and see if there is a way in which this money can go into schemes to eradicate fuel poverty. We all agree with that, but not with taxing already hard-pressed households and families in Northern Ireland who are already paying the highest prices for electricity anywhere in Europe.

Mr McClarty: I support the motion. I oppose the amendment on the grounds that Northern Ireland Electricity is unlikely to support any voluntary additional funding equivalent to the amount that would be generated by the proposed levy increase. NIE is a

private company, and it would be unrealistic to expect it to set aside money towards the eradication of what is essentially a problem for Government.

3.30 pm

Mr Wells and Mr Dodds have together tagged the levy increase and the additional voluntary funding by NIE. Therefore I cannot support the amendment. The proposed amendment sounds very good in theory, but it would be unrealistic in practice. It is better to get half a loaf as a consequence of the proposed motion than to have no bread, which would be the effect of the proposed amendment. The bottom line is that I support an increase in the levy, with no conditions attached.

Fuel poverty is one of Northern Ireland’s hidden disgraces. Most people are probably unaware that the problem even exists. We take for granted the warmth of our homes, without recognising that many thousands of elderly folk and families with a low income have to spend the winter months wrapped up in layers of clothing, and suffering the physical effects of damp and cold. How often do we assume that poverty is something that we see on the streets and that it does not exist for people who have a roof over their heads? That is not the case.

Poverty, particularly fuel poverty, is an all too frequent reality for over 170,000 households in Northern Ireland. It is a reality that must be addressed. Low income levels and high energy costs combine with limited access to energy-efficient fuels to create a cyclic cocktail of fuel poverty for far too many people in the Province. Those factors contribute to the proportionately higher levels of fuel poverty that exist here, by comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom.

The situation is far from satisfactory. The current energy efficiency levy, which is £2 per customer, raises £1.4 million per annum and is used to develop energy efficiency and fuel poverty strategies. To date, £3.4 million has been used in that way. Of that, £2.2 million, or 65%, has been directly targeted at fuel-poor customers. That is all to be commended, but it does not go far enough to eradicate the ingrained poverty trap that is experienced by so many families.

The time has come to explore the possibility of an increase in the levy, and I am sure that most warm people would support a small rise in it. Any additional revenue raised as a result of the levy increase must be efficiently targeted at helping the fuel poor. An increase in the levy to £5 per customer would raise an estimated total of £3.4 million per annum. I contend that the vast bulk of that capital should be directed at energy efficiency and financial support programmes aimed at those in greatest need. The tangible benefits of increasing the levy from £2 to £5 per customer would demonstrate the Executive’s commitment to the

eradication of fuel poverty as outlined in the Programme for Government.

If the Executive are serious about the eradication of fuel poverty, they could go even further than merely stating their aim of intent. It would take approximately £50 million to eradicate fuel poverty in the Province. To increase the levy to £5 per customer would raise an additional £2 million towards this aim. It is worth remembering that at the proposed rate of return it will still take 25 years to stamp out fuel poverty in the Province.

The Executive, however, could help to eradicate fuel poverty much faster, by signalling their support for the setting aside of moneys specifically to tackle the problem. Rather than seek support from NIE as outlined in the amendment, the Executive could signal to the community its appreciation of the extent of the problem and its willingness to take tangible financial steps towards relieving the difficulty faced by so many in the community.

Mr S Wilson: Has the Member not just made the most pertinent point in regard to the issue? If we pass to NIE the responsibility for financing the eradication of fuel poverty, we let the Executive off the hook. They would be able to wash their hands of the matter and say that the responsibility for financing rests with NIE.

Mr McClarty: I agree with some of what Sammy Wilson said, but one cannot force a private company such as NIE to give money towards eradicating fuel poverty. The onus should be on the Executive to help eradicate fuel poverty.

I support the motion, because additional funding, if created, will augment and complement statutory funding and have a significant impact on the battle against fuel poverty. The onus is on the Assembly, and the Executive in particular, to help break the cycle of fuel poverty that so many households in Northern Ireland experience. The situation will get worse unless Members act now to deliver hope to those senior citizens and families who face another winter in the war to keep warm.

Mr O'Connor: I too support the motion. It is unacceptable that there are old people and poor people in this country sitting with their coats on during the winter because they cannot afford to light their fires. We are not living in the Dark Ages; this is the twenty-first century. The Assembly must look at how it can eradicate the problem of fuel poverty. Guidelines state that people who have to spend more than 10% of their income on necessary fuel for heating, lighting or appliances suffer from fuel poverty. That includes many people in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind its high levels of unemployment.

I agree with some of what Mr Dodds said in moving the amendment. People in this country are already

strapped for cash, and they are paying the highest energy prices anywhere in Europe. That is a legacy that we inherited from Mrs Thatcher, and it must be addressed.

Mr McClarty said that the Executive needed to look at this issue. I see that the Minister for Social Development is in the Chamber, and I thank him for his presence. I know that he shares Members' concerns about fuel poverty and that he has taken steps through the Domestic Energy Efficiency Scheme (DEES) to try and assist with the problem.

Unlike Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland does not have any targets in place for reducing fuel poverty. The National Assembly for Wales is aiming to reduce fuel poverty in 15 years, and the Scottish Parliament is trying to do so within 10 years. The people of Northern Ireland need to know where they stand and what the Assembly is going to do for them.

There will always be pressures on finance, especially in the Department for Social Development. However, I urge the Minister to make the case for Executive programme funds to target this worthwhile issue. Fuel poverty affects people throughout Northern Ireland, regardless of their religion or background. The problem seems to be worse in rural areas, where higher numbers of people appear to be suffering from fuel poverty.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: We have heard the argument that one can tell the old-age pensioners that they will pay £5 more, but one cannot negotiate with a company that has somewhere in the region of £96 million in the kitty at the end of the year. Surely the Assembly should have the power to reason with that company and point that out to it. If it slaps us in the face and says "No", then the Assembly has legislative authority to go back to the company and do it.

Let nobody think that they can hide from this big issue. If a £5 energy efficiency levy is imposed on everyone, those who are just above the poverty line will have to pay it, and those below the poverty line will also have to pay it. Why put a levy on the people that need help?

Mr O'Connor: There already is a levy. The precedent has been set; it is £2 at present. We are suggesting an increase of 6p a week, which would not buy one a slice of pan loaf.

We must consider how to deal with this matter. For every pound that is raised, approximately £10 is saved. If £2 million were raised to provide people with low-energy light bulbs, the savings to those people would be approximately £20 million. That would allow them greater flexibility to spend their money on food and on other essentials rather than being obliged to spend it on heating. People should not be forced to choose between heating and eating. An increase of 6p

a week would give the most vulnerable a tenfold return as they could afford extra energy-efficient appliances, such as light bulbs.

It is only a drop in the ocean, and we are only tinkering at the edges. It must be mainstreamed. We spoke about targeting social need; who better to target than the most vulnerable? We must think of the savings to the Health Service. Mr McClarty said that there are 170,000 fuel-poor homes in Northern Ireland. How many people develop pneumonia, asthma, influenza and other stress-related illnesses because they live in cold, damp homes? Tackling fuel poverty could save the Health Service money, because fewer people would get sick.

I urge the Minister to reconsider a system that allows landlords to claim housing benefit for houses that are damp and unfit. Landlords should be obliged to repair houses before any housing benefit is paid. People can get a statutory notice from a district council served on a house that is damp or full of mould. They then approach the Department for Social Development with a begging bowl for a grant to subsidise what is in effect a business. People are entitled to a decent standard of living; no one should have to live in such conditions.

We must educate the most vulnerable in how to use their energy efficiently. Education is a great way forward. People have elaborate heating systems that they do not know how to use, so they are not getting maximum efficiency from them. Such programmes must be developed.

Yesterday Mr Empey said that he was committed to targeting social exclusion. The most vulnerable people in our society will benefit from what Mr Ford has proposed.

I accept that it is a stealth tax, but an extra 6p a week can generate benefits for some of our neediest people, and I welcome it. It does not, however, detract from the Executive's responsibility in this area.

3.45 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Everyone in the House will agree that this is a crisis, and we must approach the problem with a crisis attitude. Mr O'Connor spoke about sixpence, but to people living in poverty sixpence is a large sum of money. This £5 is added to the rate. Everyone paying for electricity in Northern Ireland is paying more than people do anywhere else in Europe. NIE is pulling in millions, yet it tells us to place the burden on the poor consumer. I do not accept that. People who have enough money would be quite happy to give £5 a year. However, there are people who do not have enough money, and I want to have those people eliminated from paying this charge. I was told that that would be impossible. The £5 taken from those poor people will be sore on them. If it is only

sixpence per week, it would be peanuts to the people who bring in a profit of £96 million.

We are getting this the wrong way round. We cannot say to NIE that we want it to pay up, but as reasonable people we can state the problem in relation to this levy. We can say to NIE that with the gains it receives from its consumers it should do the honourable thing and tell us how much of a contribution it is going to make. That is a reasonable thing to do. If NIE says that it will give nothing, we will know the nature of the brute and who it is looking after — the people who have invested in its companies in order to receive higher dividends. NIE is not looking after the consumers. It would be immoral for NIE to take that attitude, and I do not think it will do so. As I understand it from the proposer of the motion, NIE has made some contribution to this situation. Why can we not ask NIE to make a greater contribution? Why should we not aim to have fuel poverty eliminated in five years' time rather than 10 years' time? The only way we can do that is to exert pressure on the organisation that has the money. And it has that money because higher rates are being charged in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in Europe.

The Executive and Sir Reg Empey cannot escape either; they should be putting their money where their mouth is. Sir Reg Empey said that he will target the needy, but instead the poorest people have to join this scheme and pay the tariff. It is a tax, and it is not morally defensible. The people of Northern Ireland would be outraged to think that instead of our going to NIE to ask for help, others want us to jump in and impose the levy immediately. I was told that if it were not done immediately, it would not be voted through. In conscience neither my Colleagues nor I could support this motion. We are not recommending that this scheme should stop. What we are saying is: go to the people who have the money and see what they can give us. If they do not give us the money, we will have to take other steps. Members have the power to do this. I was told that we would have to legislate. What is wrong with legislation? Are we not called here to legislate? That is not a problem. It will not take long to consult with NIE.

That can be carried out, we can look at the results, and we can then return to the outlook that NIE is prepared to make money from the people of Northern Ireland — both the poor and the rich — but that it is unprepared to help when there is a problem. I would like the problem to be solved in one year rather than in 10. However, we could at least halve the proposed time to five years; that would be a better proposition.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Although I agree with the spirit of the amendment and the reasoning behind it — it is clear that NIE has made massive profits from consumers in the North of Ireland — the

practical outcome of the amendment will be to hinder the creation of a levy and the proper eradication of fuel poverty. For that reason only, I cannot support the amendment. However, I hope that a similar motion will be tabled in the future.

People in the Chamber will recognise that my Colleagues in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment are in the middle of an inquiry into energy and, in particular, into the higher price of electricity in the North of Ireland. An issue that arises frequently is the generation contracts that were negotiated at the time of privatisation in 1992 and 1993. Those contracts are largely responsible for the high electricity prices in the North of Ireland; they are the highest in Europe. The people who benefit most from high prices are the shareholders of NIE, most of whom do not even live in the North of Ireland.

At the time of privatisation, the British Treasury received twice the price per megawatt of generation capacity from the North of Ireland as it did from Britain. The power stations were sold for £352 million. The contracts are not competitive. Companies are paid an availability payment in addition to the full cost of the fuel that they use to generate electricity. The cost of generation is 60% of the final cost of electricity. That cost is passed on to the consumers in their fuel bills.

The costs of refurbishment programmes at power stations are also often passed on to the consumers. Ballylumford was sold to British Gas and operated by its subsidiary, Premier Power Ltd, on the condition that a pipeline from Scotland to the Six Counties be created and that the station be converted to gas with EU grant aid. The Ballylumford contract has been renegotiated, but the result of that is that the customers will have to pay for the new deal until the year 2012. AES Corporation, an American multinational company, owns Kilroot and Belfast West power stations. In 2000, AES made a net income worldwide of US\$658 million.

It is clear to those examining the issue and to members of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee that the generation contracts will inhibit the introduction of full competition. There is a real risk that low-income consumers, who are unattractive to new companies entering the market, will be left to pay an increased share of the generation costs.

Although I support the motion, it represents only one part of the equation in tackling fuel poverty. In addition, the electricity regulator should be given full powers to regulate the generation companies, including ensuring full competition and the end of unfair contracts. Until those unfair contracts are renegotiated or done away with, we will not be able to tackle fuel poverty seriously.

However, the increased levy would be a first step and would go some way toward alleviating fuel poverty. While it proposes an increase of £5 per customer per

year, which would raise a total of £3.4 million per annum, it is also expected to save customers £22.5 million per annum. That would be money well spent and would, in the long term, benefit electricity consumers.

If the motion is passed — and I sincerely hope that it will be — the system needs to operate in a fully transparent, open and accountable manner. We must ensure that every single penny of that £5 customer levy goes toward eradicating fuel poverty. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Morrice: I find myself falling between two stools in this debate. Standing between the DUP and the Alliance Party is not a very comfortable place to be — I am between a rock and a hard place. I have listened with a great deal of interest. I have had both the motion and the amendment in my head, and I wanted to hear the arguments on both sides and to be convinced of the right way. That is what is so valuable about debating in the Chamber. While I agree that there should be an increase in the levy, I do not agree that those in fuel poverty should have to pay an additional increase.

I was impressed by Mr Dodds's and Dr Paisley's arguments that the issue should be brought into the context of Northern Ireland. It is very difficult to ask consumers — industrial as well as private consumers — to pay more for their electricity. The rise may be only 6p per week, but that is 6p per week on top of the highest electricity prices in Europe, if not the world. It is a mountain that is perhaps too high to climb.

This must be looked at much more imaginatively. It has been argued that nobody can force Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) to act, as it is a privatised company, but we must look at how it has been done elsewhere. I understand, although I have no details on it, that a windfall tax on privatised utilities is in operation in England. When profits rise above a fixed level — *[Interruption]*. You say that it is as high as £96 million. Companies are taxed on that amount, and the tax then goes into the fuel poverty programmes. That would, of course, need new legislation, a stage that we have not yet reached. However, surely the Assembly could do something more imaginative to help those in fuel poverty without taxing them further.

It was said that 170,000 households were affected by fuel poverty, including pensioners and those on low incomes. Statistics have already been quoted about people who have died from the cold as a result of having to choose between heating and eating.

4.00 pm

The point was made that people who endure fuel poverty are more likely to use coal than electricity for heating. Is that not the case? They pay an increased levy on electricity bills, but the price of coal, which they use to heat their homes, stays the same.

Mr O'Connor: Will the Member accept that there is non-manual heating, usually in either ground-floor flats or small two-bedroom bungalows in which disabled or elderly people live? That is generally Economy 7, but it is definitely not economical.

Ms Morrice: I thank Mr O'Connor for making that point. Dr O'Hagan raised the issue of the increase. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has listened to the regulator, Douglas McIldoon, and his call for an increase in this levy. The Committee supports that, but it has major reservations. He said, for example, that it is proposed to ring-fence the increase at 80% for the fuel poor. That is not enough. If that is to happen it must be 100%. Guarantees must be given that not only 100% goes back to the fuel poor, but that somehow every single one of those 170,000 fuel-poor households benefits. At the moment I am not certain of that guarantee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Will the Member not also keep in mind that that levy was very low when it came in, but it is now going up and up? How much will it rise? Will we have another rise next year? It is going up rapidly. It started at £1, and now it is going up to £5.

A Member: And £7.50 is the projected amount.

Ms Morrice: That is a concern. It puts an added burden on the consumer. I underscore the point that 6p per week — an increase of £3 per year — may be very little for those in the House to contemplate, but if we suffered as the fuel poor suffer, especially in winter, such an added burden would possibly be too much to bear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, we have completed the first round of speakers from each political party, and because of the numbers who wish to speak I must, unfortunately, ask you to limit your speeches to five minutes.

Mr Cobain: I am not going to get into arguments about NIE. The moral responsibility to tackle fuel poverty lies in the Chamber, not elsewhere. Everyone knows, and the points have been made, that we are dealing with the most deprived people in society. The Minister of Finance and Personnel said this morning that most of his Budgets are directed towards those who live in need. The fuel poor are such people.

Six hundred people die each year of cold-related illnesses. It is a moral responsibility for the House and the Executive to cure that problem. We may get assistance from NIE, which is fine, but the moral responsibility lies with the Assembly and with the Executive. Between £40 million and £50 million is needed to eradicate the situation. Those are capital programmes, not revenue programmes, and once spent they do not need to be spent again. That cannot be done overnight; it will take five or six years.

The Minister has introduced the domestic energy efficiency scheme, which has been very important. However, the number of people who can apply for that is limited, as he is restricted by the amount of money the Executive have given him.

If we really want to eradicate fuel poverty we need to do it through an Executive programme. There are no short cuts. NIE might get £1 million or £2 million per year. That would make some difference, but not much. If the House is really intent on removing fuel poverty, it can be achieved in the Budget. We can insist that, in the next six or seven years, the Executive programme funds provide an additional £4 million or £5 million per year for the Minister, and in five or six years from now fuel poverty will be eradicated. It is as simple as that.

Every Member has said how moved he or she is by people who endure fuel poverty before going on to appeal to a private company to eradicate it. However, responsibility does not lie with the private sector or the public one. The House should decide, and make it known, that Members will no longer tolerate people having to endure fuel poverty. We should instruct the person responsible to bring forward a scheme to allow the Minister for Social Development to have the necessary money to eradicate it. It will not be eradicated next year or the year after that; it will take five or six years because of the number of people involved. That should be the end of the argument.

Mr O'Neill: I am glad that the fuel poverty issue has been brought to the House. What must strike us is that we are divided only on how to eradicate it. Members agree that something must be done. It is conceivable that had the mover of the amendment joined with the mover of the substantive motion, both subjects could have been debated simultaneously. That would have been in the best interests of all the people whom we want to help.

The SDLP waxed and waned about the best approach to adopt. As our social development spokesperson said, we came down in support of the motion. That was partly because of the structure of the efficiency levy. We realised that overriding the levy as a way to raise funds to combat fuel poverty might damage the mechanism. We must be conscious of that. If we ignore or avoid that mechanism, we could damage its future use.

Ian Paisley referred to a second concern of the SDLP. He wondered why we do not ask NIE for more money. The motion asks the regulator to move on that. It is his job to approach NIE to ask for more money and for a reasonable level of increases in people's bills. He has been doing that with some success for a while. We should encourage him.

The SDLP feels that it should support the substantive motion because it will provide us with a means to

solve the fuel poverty problem. Some people said that the levy is rising — the phrase used was “going up and up”. That is inaccurate; there have been only two increases. However, if the levy is increasing, it is because it needs to address the increasing problem of fuel poverty. That problem is not disappearing, so we must address it. The levy is increasing to help those people in the most need. One cannot have it both ways. People cannot be asked to contribute in order to cure the problem. The problem must be tackled, and money must be spent on it.

It is important for us to be sure that any extra funds that are raised go directly to those who need them. The SDLP is concerned about whether the real fuel poor have been identified.

Particular attention is, by necessity, paid to pensioners, who are at risk because of health problems and a lack of funds. However, why is no provision made for disabled people, who are often housebound and reliant on benefits? What about single parents, large families and, in some cases, students? A broadly accepted definition of fuel poverty is the need to spend 10% of one's disposable income on fuel costs. Many people, however, must choose between paying for food and heat. People often choose heat. That is why there are vulnerable people who get sick, and that is the reason for the figures that we have heard today.

Those with greater heating needs — those who spend more time at home — are most at risk. Ironically, those who are claiming benefits, are disabled or are in receipt of pensions are the people who receive bigger bills. Those people have the lowest disposable incomes. That creates the fuel poverty trap, which we must address.

Mr M Robinson: I would like to begin by saying that I welcome the fact that the widespread problem of fuel poverty is being addressed, but I have great difficulty with the charge, which will once again fall on the purse of the customer. The levy currently stands at £2 per customer, with National Energy Action (NEA) now advocating an increase of 150%, which would raise the levy to £5 per customer, in the hope that £3.4million can be raised for energy efficiency and the eventual eradication of fuel poverty.

My difficulty stems from the fact that, once again, the extra charge will fall on the customer. Why should the customer pay for the scheme, when NIE's profits for the year 1999-2000 were £96.1 million? What is the problem with diverting £3.4 million from this profit margin to eradicate fuel poverty? Would it make a great difference to reduce the profit margin to £92.7 million from £96.1 million? It appears that the profits are bypassing the customer and being directed, once again, into the pockets of the so-called fat cats.

The main difficulty is that the market for gas and electricity in Northern Ireland is relatively small, which means that NIE does not have any direct competition. That has led to high charges. I must point out that Northern Ireland has higher levels of fuel poverty than mainland Britain. NIE continues to pass any extra costs on to the customer, which contradicts its aim to reduce fuel prices in Northern Ireland. NIE has supposedly been working hard over the past four years to reduce electricity prices in Northern Ireland, yet here we stand in 2001, debating an increase in the customer levy.

The most vulnerable in our society are the people who would be classified as the fuel poor. Those who fall into this category are lone parents, the unemployed, Housing Executive tenants, low-income families and the elderly. It is hard to believe that there are over 170,000 households that suffer from fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. That is why I feel that it is of extreme importance to be absolutely sure that the cost does not fall on every NIE customer, regardless of status. The system must not only be fair and inclusive, but must also be seen to be fair and inclusive, with the most needy as the beneficiaries. It is, therefore, important that those who would be classified as the fuel poor will incur no extra cost. Therefore, I state that I would fully support any scheme that aims to tackle fuel poverty, as long as those who are considered to be the fuel poor do not pay the highest price.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I commend the motion. It prescribes a measure that can contribute to the eradication of fuel poverty. Many Members have said that fuel poverty effects approximately 170,000 households in the Six Counties. It is a particular problem in rural areas, where there are high levels of unfit housing, properties are widespread and isolated, and dwellings tend to be larger and mostly in the private- rented or owner-occupied sectors.

4.15 pm

I welcome the proposal to create an extra £3.6 million, and it should be created as a matter of urgency. Many Members have reminded the Executive of their responsibility — and that responsibility is additional to, not in place of, the Executive's normal responsibilities.

A partial solution has been suggested, which we should embrace. It requires political support and will. I agree that the additional revenue generated must be directed towards the fuel poor. Ultimately, it is a matter of people's health and of improving the quality of their lives — not least those who are most vulnerable, needy and disadvantaged. It is a matter of saving people from ill health, misery, cold and, in many cases, death.

I will not speak for much longer. As Mr O'Neill said, the debate has been constructive. I welcome the

unusual engagement of the DUP — its contribution has also been constructive.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to engage in this debate on energy, as the issue has been a bee in my bonnet for some time. There is so much more to the issue, and we are dipping — in an almost one-dimensional fashion — into a massive issue for the entire community; so much so that it cuts across all Departments, although the main responsibility lies with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

At the core of the motion are some serious facts that we often ignore. Brief mention has been made of the fact that electricity prices are much too high and that those prices are being driven by a rip-off. As somebody once said, Dick Turpin wore a mask. The rip-off of 1992 was much more effective than anything that Dick Turpin ever did. The price of electricity in Northern Ireland was effectively doubled. Contracts were put in place that allowed the price of electricity to be doubled for 20 years so that the Chancellor of the Exchequer could double what he charged those who were buying out the generating stations. That ensured a good return for the Chancellor and solid, guaranteed profits for the power station owners and shareholders.

Ultimately, it sold all electricity users in Northern Ireland — from the very poor to the very wealthy — into a 20-year bondage that is extremely difficult to escape from. However, we must escape from it, and there is an onus on the Assembly, the Executive, the Departments and the Government to do everything in their power to break the cartel and free us from bondage.

Everything in relation to energy in Northern Ireland flows from those contracts. The prices of other energy sources are pulled up or down — and in this case pulled up high — by those contracts. Due to the history of the Northern Ireland Electricity Board — subsequently NIE and now Viridian — our energy market is, by and large, supply-driven, and little or no consideration is given to the consumers. By consumers, I mean everyone from the big industrial user down to the householders who cannot afford to heat their homes.

There is absolutely no motivation within that plethora of energy policy to cut energy use, to improve conservation efforts, or to develop any renewable or alternative sources. The main thrust of our energy policy is to ensure that the generators get rid of as much electricity as possible and charge as much as possible for it. NIE then comes in, distributes the electricity and works that system. The more electricity NIE can pump through its system, the more money it gets. Therefore, there is an aversion to conservation, saving energy, and discovering alternative sources of energy.

The cost of electricity generation has fallen considerably over the past 10 years because of greater efficiencies in generation costs. However, the benefits all go

towards the bottom line — the profits of the company or companies involved. I received a letter today from an industrial user who complained that the price of electricity has gone up by 31% in the past 14 months. The prices compared very unfavourably to those in England and Scotland.

Another serious consideration for me, which I do not believe has been touched on already, is that householders cannot afford to keep their homes warm, and we have every right to emphasise that fact. The big industrial users often have enough muscle and clout to ensure special deals — and I do not blame them for using that clout. As the market starts to become deregulated they will have the option to work for a cheaper price within their contracts. However, the net effect will be that the poor, the dispossessed and those who cannot afford to heat their homes will make up for that subsidy. If the large electricity users get a price cut, the price for the small users will rise by 5% or by 10%.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a conclusion.

Dr McDonnell: I am sorry. I thought I had more time. There are 170,000 households that endure fuel poverty — 28% of the people. I could run through many more issues but I will leave it there. We need to take the issue seriously. We have made a start on it today.

Mr Shannon: I support the amendment. The DUP takes the matter very seriously; that is why we proposed the amendment. Many constituents have spoken to me about the issue, and they have expressed concern that the energy efficiency levy has been raised to £5. Although there may not be much difference in the opinions of people in the Chamber as regards the motion and the amendment, it really comes down to who should pay for the increased levy.

The people who will suffer will be those who pay the tax increase. I call it that because many of us feel that it is a tax disguised as a levy. Senior citizens can least afford to pay it, and they have come to our advice centres to tell us that. They have stated that they are unhappy with the levy, not because it is a big charge in itself, but because, over the year, it cumulatively takes away their income. Our responsibility as elected representatives is to ensure that senior citizens and those who fall into the category of enduring fuel poverty can pay. It is unfair that they should be asked to pay that levy.

Everyone agrees that to try to eradicate fuel poverty is a worthwhile goal, and that is what we are aiming for. All of the parties are committed to it. We want to see fuel poverty being eradicated. Our amendment provides a method to try to address the levy charge. It is unfair that those who can least afford to pay the levy should shoulder a portion of costs, and that is why we

have put forward the amendment. We have the highest electricity charges in the UK — indeed, in Europe. To insist that the consumers, our constituents, should have to pay that levy is unfair; many would say that it is immoral.

NIE's profits are already over £90 million and rising. Do Members not agree that a portion of NIE profits could, and should, be used to reduce the energy efficiency levy? Last week, when I spoke to NIE officials about the matter, they insisted that, although their proposed increase is £5, they could not guarantee that the charge would not end up being equal to the current charge on the mainland, which is £7·50.

Is that the thin edge of the wedge? Will the increase be £7·50 next year? Where will the charges end? Should not the party that can afford to cover the increase in costs take responsibility for it? The increase, which started at £1 and could end up at £7·50, is just the latest chapter. We are all committed to the eradication of fuel poverty and to helping those who need it most.

The Housing Executive has already introduced a policy to help its tenants, and that programme is well advanced. Mr Cobain suggested that the Assembly and the Executive make a contribution. That contribution, combined with the existing levy charge and a voluntary contribution from NIE, would yield sufficient money to address the issue. It is only fair that NIE should contribute some of its large profit to eradicate fuel poverty.

NIE has received exorbitant profits, which have been paid for by the consumer, including those in the grip of fuel poverty. The levy to address fuel poverty, as proposed in the motion, will apply only to those who can least afford to pay it. The amended motion would provide a means to address the issue to everyone's satisfaction. We all feel that something must be done. Let the financial responsibility fall on the shoulders of those who can afford it. Those who can least afford to pay should not be charged. The DUP amendment would protect those who cannot afford to pay the levy. I support the amendment.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the increase in the levy and the benefits that it could achieve. However, there needs to be greater transparency in the administration of the levy; we should be able to see how the proceeds from it are spent. The funds that are raised should be used to lift people out of fuel poverty rather than deliver piecemeal measures that merely reduce the problem slightly.

In tandem with the Programme for Government, our first and foremost task is to end poverty, especially fuel poverty. We must ensure that the cold, misery and ill health experienced in many households during the long, cold winter months are ended for good.

NEA is a charity that campaigns for solutions to fuel poverty, including heating and insulation problems that are suffered by people on low incomes. With the support of the Energy Saving Trust, the NEA seeks support from elected representatives to help bring about an increase in energy levels and to create more funds to tackle fuel poverty.

Over 170,000 households in Northern Ireland suffer from fuel poverty. Lower income levels, combined with a lack of access to energy efficient fuel and the high cost of energy, contribute to higher levels of fuel poverty than in Britain. Fuel poverty damages houses, causing dampness, condensation, mould growth, disrepair and unfit conditions. Fuel poverty exists in parts of Belfast, but, for the large part, rural areas experience it. It also damages health, causing asthma, heart disease, pneumonia, influenza and stress, and it leads to more than 700 deaths every year.

4.30 pm

Fuel-poor and energy-inefficient dwellings release harmful emissions that damage the environment. To increase the levy to £5 will provide an annual carbon saving of 81,000 tonnes and energy savings of 32 gigawatt hours, which in turn will improve the environment. I support the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I too support the motion. Fuel poverty could be defined as the inability to afford sufficient heating for a home. The reasons for that vary, but ultimately those who cannot afford sufficient heating are not helped by information campaigns. They simply cannot afford the cost. An income-based analysis can also mislead, because people who work and with limited income may be forced to continue to pay for fuel at the expense of other necessities, such as food and clothing.

The fuel poverty trap contains those who spend more than 10% of their disposable income on fuel costs. Because domestic electricity prices offer little or no elasticity, it logically follows that the less income a person has, the more he will spend proportionally on fuel. The most recent changes, such as the abolition of standing charges, offer nothing to those who have little or no choice in their fuel consumption, while central subsidy to NIE has benefited industrial users. In addition, those social groups that are most at risk of fuel poverty are those who spend more time in the home — those with higher needs such as people with young families, pensioners and the disabled.

We also have property-based analyses, which can help to determine the causes of inefficient fuel use. There are sets of funding available for energy efficient measures, such as insulation, but that falls far short of what is really needed if we are going to approach the problem seriously.

Regional climate variations are not currently considered when fuel needs are being addressed. The seven-day rule which triggers retrospective payments to select recipients of income support is viewed by many as a deliberate attempt to reduce such payments. It is reasonable to expect that people at this stage in Northern Ireland's socio-economic development should not have to deny themselves sufficient heat. It has been stated already that there are 600 deaths a year due to hypothermia, and many people's medical problems are exacerbated by a lack of heating in their homes. It has also been said that more than 170,000 households endure fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. Lower income levels combined with a lack of access to energy-efficient fuels and high energy costs contribute proportionally to higher levels of fuel poverty than in Britain.

The Northern Ireland Executive have committed themselves to the eradication of fuel poverty. This morning the Minister of Finance and Personnel said in his draft Budget statement that

“specific actions will be taken to reduce fuel poverty”.

The energy efficiency levy is currently £2 per consumer. That raises £1.4 million per year. The amendment suggests that we approach NIE and ask it to make funding available. My party, in most instances, would say that that is the right way to advance. In this instance, we accept that NIE has not shown much commitment over the years. It did have an energy needs programme a few years ago, and, at that stage, it did improve energy for pig farmers, community buildings and some pensioners. That was a good first step, but it was not built on. If it had been, we would not be here considering increasing the levy from £2 to £5 per customer.

The proposed increase would raise a total of £3.6 million per year and earn £2 million each year to help with energy efficiency and fuel poverty. It is proposed to direct that increase to the fuel poor — that is 80% — to help to meet Government commitments in the Programme for Government and the UK fuel poverty strategy. Mick Murphy quoted from the NEA. The Energy Saving Trust also supports the increased levy, and because of that we support it.

NEA in Northern Ireland has said that it supports the increase of the levy on the basis that it would create

“a source of significant additional funding to complement statutory funding for fuel poverty programmes. The levy can play a significant role in the eradication of fuel poverty, ensuring that the cold, misery and ill health experienced by so many vulnerable households during colder months is ended for good.”

It is for such reasons that I support the motion.

Rev Dr William McCrea: I thank Mr Ford for raising the subject in the House, and I accept his sincerity in doing so. None the less, I support the amendment,

which proposes a better way forward, although I think that there is a better way forward still.

There is a fuel poverty crisis, and many people are in tremendous need, which no one denies. We must resolve the crisis urgently, which no one denies either. Moral responsibility does not lie with the ordinary consumer. Unfortunately, the change proposed in the motion would place a moral responsibility on the ordinary consumer, who already faces exorbitant electricity costs.

Some Members may not have been in the Chamber this morning when the Minister of Finance and Personnel spoke. This is the second tax increase to be discussed today. In the Minister's presentation of the draft Budget, he said that £2 million had been withdrawn from councils. To make up that £2 million, people will have to pay higher rates. That was slipped in before Members realised that it was being done.

Higher taxes have already been levied in the draft Budget. The extra money that we are discussing now is on top of the other rise that we heard about earlier, which will affect 16 of the weakest councils. Several Members sit on those councils, and they will soon get a wake-up call. It is not just a matter of a few pence a week; the tax comes on top of the other tax that has already been slipped in.

Moral responsibility does not rest with the ordinary consumer, nor is it necessarily the responsibility of NIE, although NIE is in a better position to pay and has the necessary profits to do so. Where does the responsibility lie? It lies with the Assembly, not with the others on whom we are trying to put it. We say piously that we are trying to act in everyone's best interests, but the best solution could be a tripartite one, involving customers, NIE — if it wants to prove its good faith in the matter — and the Assembly. The Assembly should put its money where its mouth is. If we achieve genuine unanimity on the matter, we can table an amendment to the draft Budget.

It will be interesting to see how sincere everyone is on this important issue. Do we impose a further tax on the ordinary consumer, many of whom are caught in the poverty trap?

There is a poverty trap. Those who are above the level of income regarded as the poverty line have to pay for everything. Those are the people who will be paying again. I suggest to the Assembly that a wake-up call is needed to the fact that we have already heard recommendations for a tax to be slipped in. Here now is a second tax. That is not the way forward. Let us have good faith from everyone. Let us have a tripartite approach, so that we can see it done in five years' time rather than in 10.

Mr Dodds: As almost everyone has indicated, this has been a useful and constructive debate. All the

contributions have dealt with the subject in a relevant way. As Dr McCrea has mentioned, we all agree on the objectives. There is no difference among us in our desire to deal with the difficult problem of fuel poverty.

The Minister for Social Development has sat through most, if not all, of the debate, and he will have taken that on board. He has programmes in place, which include a new domestic energy efficiency scheme, to try to push forward the eradication of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. We all agree that the more money that can be put into that scheme the better.

Ms Morrice summed up the problem when she highlighted that we are asking the fuel poor to pay for the increase. Some people have talked about a figure of 6p per week. I have looked through a press release from NIE from last January on the subject of the 9% increase in electricity prices. A favourite trick, when you want to disguise the magnitude of an increase, is to bring it down to what is described as “the cost of a newspaper”. NIE put the price rise for a typical customer at about 60p per week, saying that all the customer was being asked to pay was the price of a newspaper per day. However, that amounts to £182.50 a year. When you put everything together, all those pence per day add up to a substantial amount of money.

Dr McCrea has already referred to today’s announcement of a 7% increase in the rates, and now we are back looking for more from Northern Ireland’s consumers, householders and families. Dr Paisley mentioned that that levy has increased substantially. Only two years ago the levy stood at £1. It was then proposed in 1999 that it should rise to £1.50 and then to £2 in the 2000-01 financial year. We are now being told that it should increase this year by another 150%.

Let us get this into perspective. The levy has increased in two to three years by 500%. Where will it end? It is a handy little device to extract money to pay for things. We will deal with the issue that was rightly highlighted in the previous speech, and by Mr Cobain, about where the real responsibility lies. It is a useful device to extract money to pay for schemes that are rightly the Executive’s responsibility.

We have already seen how this has been massively exploited. Nobody disagrees with the objectives to which the money is put; on this occasion it is the method by which the money is being raised, to which we object.

A point was raised about the money being spent on fuel poverty programmes. In an NIE press release dated 25 September, rushed out today, we are told that 80% of the money raised through the levy is spent on fuel poverty programmes and that the remaining 20% is spent on schemes for business and pump-priming new energy efficiency initiatives.

It may have been Ms Morrice who asked why it should not all go towards fuel poverty programmes. We now find that 20% is being spent on schemes for business.

Not all businesses are making rich pickings, but a few are making a profit. However, the Assembly is told that 20% of the money that has been raised through the energy efficiency levy is going to business schemes. That must be addressed.

4.45 pm

I am amazed at some of the contributions from Members who claim to be of a social democratic disposition — and I do not mean the SDLP. I am talking about Members who generally take a left-of-centre or socialist viewpoint — Members who would usually be the first on their feet to decry anything that went against the socialist principles.

Members are not only concerned with the objectives of the expenditure, they are concerned about how money is raised. The energy efficiency levy is a flat-rate tax on everybody. It is not progressive taxation; it is regressive taxation. The great argument against the poll tax, for instance, was that it would bear harvest from those least able to pay it. That is what Members are being asked to approve. The energy efficiency levy applies to the richest and the poorest people in Northern Ireland. They pay the same. How can anyone who claims to have socialist or social democratic principles agree with that? How can they go into the Lobby to vote for that?

Rev Dr William McCrea: We will soon see.

Mr Dodds: Members will see whether or not they are prepared to do that. For reasons of fairness and social equality the payment of the levy should be based on a consumer’s means. However, Members are asking the fuel poor to contribute the same as the best-off in Northern Ireland, which is wrong.

The Assembly should ask NIE what it can do to help eradicate fuel poverty. One Member from the SDLP said that there was no point in asking NIE for assistance because it had not done much for consumers. That is an argument for going back to NIE and trying again. The Assembly should put pressure on NIE; it should not give up and say “They’ll not do anything, so let’s put the burden on the hard-pressed consumers and charge them all, no matter whether they can pay or not.”

However, as was previously stated, responsibility for this matter lies with the Executive. When we discuss the Budget, Members will be able to table amendments to it. Then we will see whether Members are prepared to look at ways to amend the Budget to deal with the necessary expenditure. In advance of that, however, the House is faced with a proposal to levy the consumers — the customers, the families of Northern Ireland —

at the same rate regardless of their ability to pay. The House should resist that proposal.

I mentioned the increase in the pension. Is someone seriously suggesting that one way to prevent the shortfall in housing budgets, which was raised this morning, is to levy the tenants an extra 10p per week to pay for more efficient maintenance programmes from which all tenants would benefit? Would any Member stand in the Chamber and seriously suggest that that is the proper approach to take?

The proper approach is to put it up to the Executive. That is right, and when we come to the Budget, that is something that Members will address. Should the burden be placed on consumers, or should NIE be asked to fulfil its responsibilities and be pressurised into making a contribution? That is the question before the House, and if we fail, it will be dealt with in the Budget. We may well fail.

We know that we cannot force NIE to make a contribution: it is a private company. However, it is doing pretty well because of, as a number of Members have stated, the way in which it got its hands on the industry. Effectively, the Northern Ireland taxpayers were robbed.

We have had a good debate that has dealt with the issues. It is unfair and morally wrong to impose a flat-rate tax on the people who are least able to pay. Let us hesitate before we do that, and let us approach NIE. We will, of course, address the issue when we come to the Budget.

Mr Ford: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It is a novel experience to wind up a debate in which there was to be significant disagreement about an amendment substance. The content of almost every speech has been the same, and there has been a unanimous feeling of concern for those people who are least well off in society. Many suggestions have been made as to how to provide the best method of support for them. The problem is that we disagree as to what the best method is. Mr O'Neill was first to say that we clearly agree on the ends but disagree on the means.

A huge range of opinions have been voiced about how we should deal with the issue. We started off with a blunt statement from Mr McClarty, who was the first to ask whether NIE would be prepared to pay. That is the crux of the matter.

We had a number of contributions from members of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Dr O'Hagan, Dr McDonnell and Ms Morrice raised issues regarding the ongoing inquiry and the total solution to the problems in that area.

Dr O'Hagan said the motion was one part of the equation; I do not suggest that it forms the entire equation. The motion, as it stands, is a large part of what we want.

In an interesting exchange with Dr Paisley, Mr O'Connor highlighted the fact that for every £1 the pensioner pays £10 is returned in benefits. He is wrong. The tax is levied at a flat rate. However, the benefits are paid disproportionately — they go to those who are most in need. The tax is not regressive in the way that the poll tax was. With the poll tax, everyone paid the same flat rate, and there were variable benefits. On this occasion the benefits are clearly targeted at those most in need. Therefore, the overall package of benefits is in the ratio of 9:1 or 10:1, but the ratio, as regards benefits for those who are most in need, is significantly better. That is why much of what has been said in support of the amendment falls down. The benefits are paid disproportionately.

Mr O'Neill and Mick Murphy asked whether we were really identifying the fuel poor. In my opening statement I said that we need to work to improve the scheme and ensure that there is proper openness and accountability. There is willingness on behalf of those who work under the existing levy to ensure that is the case.

When we come to consider the amendment it seems to me that we are faced with a variety of questions that centre on a number of themes. Dr Paisley asked what is wrong with legislation. Mark Robinson asked where the problem lay in directing money from NIE to the scheme. The answer is that that depends on legislation, and, as we know, that that takes time. We have not established a record for speedy legislation in the House. I understand that we shall only have one day of business next week. There does not seem to be much business coming from the Executive. Perhaps we will see some improvement in coming weeks, and more business will come forward.

If we wait for primary legislation to solve the problem, we need to look at what we shall do during the two, three or four years before Ministers get round to producing such legislation.

I agree entirely with Dr McCrea on one point: that the best solution would be tripartite. We should look at making use of the existing levy, as well as a contribution from NIE and action by the Executive and by Ministers in relation to how the Budget is put to the House and voted on. What is the balance, and what can be done quickly?

Mr Dodds started off by saying that I had presented the case against my motion very fairly and knocked down most of the substantive points. I return the compliment by saying that both of us have understood the other's position but have not agreed as to where we will reach that point. We all know what the social objectives are; they have been emphasised.

Those who support the amendment talk about the costs and compare the levy to the increased charges

paid by customers to NIE, which, those Members say, inflate its coffers. The levy is not going to the coffers of NIE. Mr Shannon was wrong when he said that the increase was an NIE increase. It is not; it is the increase of Douglas McIlldoon, the regulator. Although it is collected by NIE, it is not NIE's responsibility. We should give NIE neither the credit nor the blame.

The levy in Great Britain will shortly rise to £3·60 and then to £4·80 — the £7·50 figure is not in the offing, either in Great Britain or in Northern Ireland at the present time.

I have outlined the benefits, which will work out at nine or 10 times the expenditure. What money raised by general taxation as a result of the action of the Assembly ever produces a nine- or 10-times benefit, or even more than that, for those most in need?

We have other options, such as Ms Morrice's suggestion of a windfall tax or some form of levy on, or voluntary contribution from, NIE. On the day that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Industry presents a Bill to impose that levy I shall be happy to read it, but there is no sign of that, and it is not contained in the Programme for Government. We should accept that that will not arrive in the timescale that we need this year.

We shall see what further amendments may be made to Executive funding by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I am not holding my breath to see a significant and major change to the Budget. That is why we need to work on the basis of the levy. That is what is available, and we can act on it now, at the same time as other matters are progressing.

My concern is that the amendment as it is couched will not achieve our aim. Had the amendment proposed to add more or less the words "to put pressure on NIE" to the end of the motion, we could have unanimously agreed. However, the wording of the amendment, as an alternative and not an addition, could potentially damage the existing levy system, whereas the motion reinforces the levy system and allows the option for further action. It affords Members the opportunity to bring forward whatever further proposals they wish and it encourages what is clearly the will of the House: to put further pressure on NIE. It also allows the possibility of legislation.

The Assembly has been asked by Mr McIlldoon to give a lead to the entire community on the levy. We can only do that by supporting the motion unamended, which I urge the House to do.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 23; Noes 31

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Armstrong, Mr Berry, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Mr Leslie, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr M Robinson, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir.

NOES

Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mrs E Bell, Dr Birnie, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Cobain, Mrs Courtney, Mr Davis, Mr A Doherty, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Dr Hendron, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mr McGrady, Mr McNamee, Mr M Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr Tierney, Mr Trimble.

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 31; Noes 23

AYES

Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mrs E Bell, Dr Birnie, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Cobain, Mrs Courtney, Mr Davis, Mr A Doherty, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mr McGrady, Mr McNamee, Mr M Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr Tierney, Mr Trimble.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Armstrong, Mr Berry, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Mr Leslie, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mr M Robinson, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly encourages the Regulator General for Electricity and Gas to contribute to the eradication of fuel poverty by increasing the energy efficiency levy to £5·00 per customer, creating £3·6 million to tackle fuel poverty.

5.15 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn — [*Mr Deputy Speaker*]

TRAFFIC DEMANDS IN NORTH-EAST NEWRY

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members leaving the Chamber should do so quietly, so that we can proceed.

(*Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair*)

Mr Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to bring to the attention of the Minister for Regional Development the ongoing traffic congestion on the northern periphery of Newry and the inevitably worsening situation as the development of the area continues. I welcome the Minister's presence in the Chamber to listen to the concerns that I will raise on behalf of the residents of the area and the thousands of road users who commute daily through this part of Newry, and I thank him for his attendance.

The traffic chaos in the area is due to a lack of forward planning. My earliest memory of the Drumcashlane/Carneyhaugh district is one of cattle grazing on the pasture lands that lay on both sides of the main Rathfriland to Newry road just outside Newry. At that time, there were about 20 detached dwellings on Rathfriland Road and Upper Damolly Road. Similarly, there were no more than 20 homes on Ashgrove Road. The infrastructure serving those properties and the then volume of through traffic was comprised of three through routes — Rathfriland Road, Upper Damolly Road and Ashgrove Road. Changes gradually came about as the area began to expand and the demand for housing increased. Initially the change was slow, but it took off when the Newry and Mourne area plan 1984-99 came into being.

In order to present a true picture of the ongoing developments, I will detail the number of dwellings in each of the developments that make up the area in question. There are 85 in Annsville, 65 in Ardfreelin, 35 in Ashbrook Mews, 26 in Ashfield Avenue, 46 in Ashgrove Park, 52 in Ashgrove Road, 37 in Beechmount Park, 15 in Castleowen, 19 in Cedar Grove, 60 in Cherrywood Grove, 77 in Chestnut Grove, 35 in Cloverdale, 33 in Drumcashel Villas, 32 in Elmwood Park, 31 in Kenard Villas, 33 in Upper Damolly Road, 43 in Willow Grove, and 27 in the section of Rathfriland Road that covers the area. Also, a building site that could accommodate an additional 150 dwellings is currently being cleared on land that fronts on to Upper Damolly Road.

Added to those figures is the comparatively new Rathfriland Road Industrial Estate. That development includes the premises of one of the largest timber merchants in the area and the busy Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency centre. There are also haulage yards, a caravan sales compound, small factories, purpose-built

office accommodation, retail outlets and a major filling station/supermarket nearby — all of which front on to Rathfriland Road.

There are now three large schools in the Ashgrove area: Newry High School with approximately 550 pupils; Sacred Heart Grammar School with 880 pupils; and St Ronan's Primary School with 408 pupils. There are proposals for another large, 800-pupil grammar school to be built in the area. It is not necessary for me to describe the traffic mayhem caused each day in this confined area as 2,000 or more children, the residents of over 700 dwellings and thousands of motorists go — or attempt to go — about their daily business.

As I said at the beginning, I attribute this traffic confusion in the area to the lack of forward planning. The Minister, interested parties and those in officialdom will best understand what I mean when I tell them that not one metre of new through road has been provided in the area for over a century. The same through roads that I mentioned earlier remain the only ones in this densely populated area.

To say that this is unacceptable is to put it mildly. I therefore call on the Minister for Regional Development to immediately implement a feasibility study of the area, with a view to not only resolving the current problems but to considering the future needs of the area as it continues to develop. In anticipation that my request will not fall upon deaf ears, I, as a mere layman — but one with an in-depth local knowledge — propose to the Minister that the requested study should start by investigating the ring road potential of the Damolly Road. If a modern, improved route could be facilitated to link the Ashtree roundabout on the Rathfriland Road with the main Newry to Belfast dual carriageway, and an improved Upper Damolly Road brought to meet the suggested ring road, then many of the short-term problems would at least be lessened.

I call for the feasibility study in the full knowledge that the Minister is inundated with requests for new roads in and around every town and village. However, I am confident that the outcome of a Newry-north study would result in the Minister recognising that he has a clear-cut obligation to deal with the ever-growing traffic problems in the area.

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to add my support to Mr Bradley's call for an urgent study to be carried out by the Minister's Department. I too welcome the Minister's attendance today — his presence shows he attaches some importance to the issue.

I am aware, from my constituents in that area, of the chaos that road users experience at the junctions on the Rathfriland Road, Upper Damolly Road and Ashgrove Road, particularly at peak times. Those roads are important routes into, and through, Newry for many commuters. The sheer frustration that they experience

leaves them almost exhausted before they even start a day's work.

Over the years, various schemes have been introduced in an effort to reduce the chaos. However, none has been successful in eradicating the problem. I hope that the Minister's officials will urgently attend to the matter. Such action would receive considerable local support, particularly from the local authority, Newry and Mourne District Council, of which Mr Bradley and I are members. The council has sought, on numerous occasions, to resolve the issue at local level with Roads Service officials. We have no criticisms of those officials "on the ground", but more lateral thinking is required to produce an acceptable solution that will meet the needs of the people whose daily lives are disrupted by the traffic problems, particularly at peak times.

I hope that the Minister will take on board some of the suggestions and that he will initiate a study that will take a long-term view of the road network needs of the area. I hope that once the consultation process is completed, the Minister will act swiftly to carry out its proposals.

Many of the ad hoc improvements that have been made look unsightly. We have, to some extent, created barriers and roadblocks in an area of high-quality housing, and that has done nothing to improve its general layout. If improvements are to be carried out, we must consider that it is not enough to simply hammer spikes into the road. Local householders, who pay taxes and considerable rates, are entitled to take pride in their properties, and to have improvements carried out in a manner that they find acceptable.

5.30 pm

I hope that the Minister will take these under consideration. As an indication of his commitment, perhaps he could arrange for officials to look at some of the more unsightly ones to see if action can be taken to improve them.

I am happy to agree with Mr Bradley.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I also agree with Mr Bradley and Mr Kennedy.

The road around Rathfriland is gridlocked, and one must experience it early in the morning and in the afternoon to appreciate the mayhem. It affects not only local residents but also commuters from Belfast to Newry and Dublin and vice versa. I must leave very early in the morning to get through Newry.

Motorists in this area are frustrated and bad-tempered at the lack of road structure. The blame lies firmly with absentee Ministers who neglected infrastructure here for many years. Now that we have our own Minister, I hope that he will take on board some of the

concerns that were voiced and will try to get a feasibility study started immediately. I recognise that money is a problem, but I ask him to make this a priority. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Newry, like many other towns in Northern Ireland that have experienced considerable growth and vitality, suffers from traffic difficulties at certain locations and at certain times of the day. We are all familiar with the traffic problems of the morning peak period — the so-called school run.

The area in question lies between the A1 Newry to Belfast road to the west and the A25 Newry to Rathfriland road to the east. Approximately 16,500 vehicles a day use the A1, while 12,000 use the A25. There is cross-movement of traffic between the A1 and A25 through the townland of Carneyhough via the Upper Damolly Road, which carries approximately 5,000 vehicles a day. In the past, traffic also used shortcuts through residential roads. The area is primarily residential and has two main schools at Ashgrove Avenue. Additional housing is also planned on land that was zoned in the 1984-99 area plan. The Newry area plan forms the framework for the orderly development of the area.

My Department has been working on several fronts to help to solve traffic problems in the area. To confine traffic to the main route, which is the Upper Damolly Road through the residential area, the Roads Service made the Control of Traffic (Newry) Order (Northern Ireland) 2000 to prohibit the use of three residential roads by through traffic. This scheme involved extensive consultation and a public inquiry, which was held in June 2000.

The Department has accepted the inspector's main recommendations. Three residential roads will be permanently stopped up. The junction of Upper Damolly Road with the Rathfriland Road will be improved and signalised. The signals will be in place early next year, and will incorporate a pedestrian phase to cater for the growing number of schoolchildren in the area.

Another scheme that will have a positive impact on the area is the improvement of the road network at Trevor Hill, which forms the junction of the Belfast Road with the Rathfriland Road. The Department has commenced work to increase the road capacity of the two roundabouts in the area. That work should be completed by December this year.

Following a request from Newry and Mourne District Council, my Department intends to consider the provision of traffic-calming measures, and the extension of the 30 mph speed limit, on the Rathfriland Road. Although there has already been some residential development in accordance with the existing area plan, each planning application is considered on its merits in relation to the

impact on the local road network. Alterations are requested if the development is considered to have a significant impact. Road improvements, for example on the Damolly Road, have been made a condition of planning approval. Work has commenced on the preparation of the Newry and Banbridge area plan. The Roads Service will play an important part in the area's future development.

The Department will continue to assess all new development planned for the area and will ensure that it is carried out without having an adverse effect on the existing road network. We will continue our plans to carry out improvements at the Upper Damolly Road/Rathfriland Road junction, and at the junction of the Belfast and Rathfriland Roads. In line with current

policy and criteria, we will consider traffic-calming measures and will continue to assess changing needs.

In response to issues raised by Members, I want to stress the importance of my concluding remarks. Mr Bradley and other Members asked me to consider the possibility of a feasibility study of the area. I have outlined some of the measures that are being worked on, or will conclude, in the near future. As a result of today's debate, I will ask my officials to revisit the area to see if there is anything further we can do in addition to the measures that are currently being put in place and which should be operational within two to three months.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

ASSEMBLY: SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

Monday 1 October 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MARTIN O'HAGAN

Ms Rodgers: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Assembly will be aware that in Lurgan this weekend we witnessed the brutal murder of a member of the press, the journalist Martin O'Hagan. I propose that, as the central democratic institution in Northern Ireland, the Assembly be suspended for half an hour as a mark of respect and as an expression of our sympathy and horror over what has happened. This was an attack not just on a human being and on a family, but on the basic and fundamental democratic right to free speech and to freedom of expression.

Mr Speaker: The Assembly does not normally suspend without discussion through the usual channels, unless there is a threat or actual disorder in the Chamber. There is no doubt, however, that this event was particularly repugnant. We try to live in a democratic society, and this was a clear attack on it. Perhaps there is no group of people closer to us than members of the press, except perhaps other Members of the House and members of staff.

Martin O'Hagan was undoubtedly known to most if not all Members of the Assembly. However, to suspend at this time and show the cameras simply an empty House, and for people to busy themselves with other things would not, perhaps, be the right thing to do. It might be better if Members were to stand in their places and show the people of Northern Ireland a House united in reflection on the life, the work and the devotion to duty of Mr O'Hagan. It would also be a reflection on the tragedy for his wife and his family circle. The House should stand together in defiant repugnance of this awful event.

In response to the point of order, I ask the House to stand together in silent reflection for two minutes on the murder of Mr Martin O'Hagan.

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Mr Speaker: It is difficult to turn our minds to more ordinary responsibilities, but it is our duty to do so.

Resolved:

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 1 October 2001.— [*Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.*]

AEROSPACE INDUSTRY

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on the consequences that the terrorist attacks in the United States are having on the aerospace industry.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): A copy of my statement will be available shortly. I apologise for its not being available now, but I am sure that Members can appreciate that its contents are continuously changing. I hope that it will be circulated shortly.

As we meet today, Northern Ireland is facing, by any standards, its stiffest economic test in over a decade. We are not, of course, immune to world conditions, and we cannot be insulated against the chill of recessions. However, we are not entirely helpless; there are measures that we can take to help minimise the impact. We can and must fight back. We cannot single-handedly reverse international trends, but we can use our influence to apply the brakes as world markets talk themselves into a tailspin.

In just six days, Northern Ireland has been dealt a number of severe blows, and more bleak economic news is likely. The livelihoods of thousands of people, through no fault of their own, are threatened by terrorism. Even before the appalling events of 11 September, all indicators pointed to troubled waters ahead. What happened in New York, Washington and Pittsburgh catapulted us into an economic crisis.

Those who plotted and planned the dreadful attack on the United States also calculated the effects that their actions would have on world markets. Not only were they determined to cause colossal loss of life, but they were fixed on exploiting the mayhem that they would cause. They wanted to kill on an unimaginable scale and, in the ensuing uncertainty and chaos, profit from their murderous acts and force markets into free fall. That way, the free world would be dealt a double blow.

Since 11 September, we have held our breath, knowing that Northern Ireland would not escape unscathed but hoping that the tidal wave would inflict minimal damage on our economy. We saw the fallout last week.

The first company affected was Bombardier Aerospace, then it was British Airways, followed on Friday by Aer Lingus. Aircraft manufacturers and airlines have been the first to suffer. At its bleakest, the crisis could cause the loss of more than 2,200 well-paid jobs. The families involved will be traumatised, and the local economy will be shaken. Hundreds more who work in downstream businesses are waiting to see how they will be affected.

If the downward momentum is not arrested, the number of economic casualties will grow. We must seek ways of averting further decline, as well as ways of cushioning the blow. There is a world of difference between realistic assessment and self-fulfilling gloom; between slow-down and full-blown global recession. No one can deny the extent of the difficulties, but I see little point in talking our way into a doomsday scenario. Instead of queuing up to join the legions of pessimists, we should explore ways of getting off the treadmill of despondency. Instead of rushing to the lifeboats, we should set about reinvigorating the global economy. Instead of doing the work of the terrorists, we should have as our local, national and international objective the protection of the democratic way of life and the defeat of the madmen who would destroy it.

In the first instance, a co-ordinated global response to the economic difficulties and a similarly co-ordinated approach to creating the conditions for future growth will be required. Northern Ireland's role in the global economy is limited. There is little that we can do in isolation. Our immediate task is to ensure that we take whatever steps we can to protect the local economy and assist our companies to remain competitive in an uncertain environment.

We must also ensure that Northern Ireland is positioned to take advantage of the inevitable global economic rebound. We are all deeply concerned about the situation and will seek to provide the positive leadership that the community has a right to expect. As an integral part of the United Kingdom and of the European Union, we will press for an early response to the current economic situation.

The management of Bombardier Aerospace has assured me of the group's total commitment to its Northern Ireland operations and of its intention to resume recruitment when the global airline business recovers confidence. In my discussions with the local management, I was told that the fate of some of the 1,100 jobs in the second tranche of redundancies depended on the situation in the market in the new year. We must hope that the downturn in the aerospace industry is short-lived. However, most analysts expect the current problems to stretch well into the second half of next year, so we must be prepared for the long haul.

Bombardier Aerospace is deeply rooted in Northern Ireland and has invested over £1 billion here since

1989. The sites here are now an integral part of Bombardier Aerospace, which is heavily dependent on the sophisticated components that they continue to provide for virtually all its aircraft programmes. The group will require the expertise and facilities in Belfast and other parts of the Province when a decision is taken to ramp up production.

12.15 pm

Bombardier Aerospace is the world's third-biggest commercial aircraft manufacturer and makes an immense contribution to the local economy. It is our biggest private sector employer and our biggest inward investor. That continues to be a very substantial endorsement of Northern Ireland as an aerospace manufacturing centre of excellence.

It should be remembered that the company's Northern Ireland operation, Bombardier Shorts, has faced setbacks in the past. The most serious was the loss of 1,500 jobs with the collapse of Fokker. It reinvented itself and emerged from the turmoil to become more competitive and to achieve even greater success. New products were identified and orders secured to replace the Fokker business. It met a massive challenge then, and prospered. Over the past year, for example, the company recruited 1,500 people as part of a £50 million growth plan across all its factories. I am confident, therefore, that Bombardier Shorts will overcome this current setback and will continue to play a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland economy for many years to come.

Members will be aware that I contacted the Prime Minister immediately after being briefed by Bombardier Shorts management about the company's plans and their likely impact on local communities in Belfast, Newtownabbey, Dunmurry and Newtownards and on their many suppliers across Northern Ireland. I expressed my concern to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, Patricia Hewitt, about the situation facing Northern Ireland, and I pressed for a meaningful UK-wide response. I emphasised that the loss of over 2,000 jobs to the Northern Ireland economy would be the equivalent of a loss of up to 70,000 jobs in Great Britain.

I urged the Government, working in conjunction with other national leaders, to ensure that interventions currently being considered for the airline industry be extended to the aerospace industry. Political input will be necessary if an appropriate response is to be developed and delivered. To improve cash flow, I have suggested the deferment of the payments of launch-aid assistance by the aerospace industry next year. I have also pressed the Government to assist with "soft" financing to help airlines purchase aircraft and kick-start demand. I believe that those measures would help to ease the pressures on the company, and I await a response from the Government.

Members will know that a number of UK airlines and aerospace companies are also experiencing acute difficulties as a result of the global economic downturn, as is shown by the very regrettable decision by British Airways — one of the best known names in aviation — to withdraw from the London Heathrow-to-Belfast route. The Department for Regional Development is making forceful representations to the company and the Government on a decision that will impact adversely on perceptions of Northern Ireland, particularly in North America.

It is still too early to assess the full impact on Northern Ireland of the Bombardier Aerospace announcement and how its employees and the local communities in Belfast, Dunmurry, Newtownards and Newtownabbey will be affected. However, the company has indicated that the job cuts will be spread across all its plants. The IDB is maintaining close contact with the company and will develop a programme, with the Department for Employment and Learning, to assist those who will lose their jobs. I have agreed with my Executive Colleagues, Dr Seán Farren, the Minister for Employment and Learning, and Maurice Morrow, the Minister for Social Development, to develop a co-ordinated inter-departmental approach.

Overall, the company spends in excess of £40 million annually with suppliers in Northern Ireland and in the Republic. Our aim will be to devise a safety net for those facing redundancy, helping them to explore alternative employment and/or reskilling opportunities.

My Department and its agencies, in particular the IDB and LEDU, together with the Training and Employment Agency, are examining the steps that they may be able to take, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium, to assist and safeguard employment in the many smaller companies in this important sector.

Aerospace has been one of our most dynamic, technology-led and export-focused industrial sectors. Upwards of 2,000 people are employed in aerospace companies other than Bombardier Shorts. Many of those firms have also widened their business to supply other aerospace companies such as Airbus, BAE Systems, TRW Lucas and Astrium. I draw encouragement, therefore, from the visit to Northern Ireland last week of senior managers from Airbus and other European aerospace companies. That is part of an ongoing programme of contacts that will, in time, lead to worthwhile business.

Clearly, the local aerospace industry has now developed a solid base and is particularly well-placed to achieve accelerated growth over the longer term. However, having endured the pain and adverse economic consequences of local terrorism for more than 30 years, it was a real blow to sustain such direct damage from global terrorism, all the more so since it comes at a time when we have been striving to build a platform that will provide political, social and economic stability.

The economy is still fundamentally strong. It has, after all, survived 30 years of upheaval and tragedy. We will face a tough year. It will be difficult to maintain the levels of inward investment achieved in recent years, and we will have to review our overall strategy to take account of the current problems. However, we have experienced and surmounted severe difficulties in the past.

Looking at the wider economy, we can draw confidence from the significant improvements in productivity, employment and exports over the past decade. Northern Ireland is now better placed to meet the current, very challenging, economic situation. Increasing productivity has been a feature of recent economic performance. The statistics indicate a consistent and strong growth in overall competitiveness. However, we are currently in uncharted waters. This will be an extremely difficult year.

The statistics show that the local economy is now more resilient and adaptable than ever before. Northern Ireland's high rate of business survival after 36 months — 76.2%, compared with the UK average of 61% — owes much to the support that LEDU provides. Additionally, LEDU will assist some of those facing redundancy to consider starting their own enterprises.

We must continue to focus resources on the entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity that will enable Northern Ireland to come through the global upheaval with as little damage to the fundamentals of the local economy as possible. The reshaping of IDB, LEDU and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit into a single agency, Invest Northern Ireland, which is currently underway, will provide a much sharper focus, increase flexibility, and strengthen Northern Ireland's competitive edge in the target technology-led sectors that will drive the global economy forward.

I assure those people most directly affected that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and all Departments, will do everything possible to help them find alternative employment opportunities. We look to Assembly Members for their continued support for the measures we shall take to protect the local economy.

It is most regrettable that we find ourselves in this situation, but when we hear about challenging terrorism on a worldwide basis, there will have to be a worldwide response in order to protect economies from the inevitable consequences of downturn. I hope that significant attention will shortly be paid by our own Government, the European Union, and the developed world to ensuring that confidence is restored and passengers are encouraged to travel by air once again. In that way, the spiral that we are at risk of entering would be checked and reversed.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Neeson): I agree with the Minister that we should not join the band of the prophets of doom. However, by the same token, there is no room for complacency in the difficult days

that lie ahead. I agree that there is a need for an inter-departmental approach to the issue. Since they took office, the Minister and Dr Farren have worked very closely together on the issue. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment will address the issue when it meets this Wednesday. Does the Minister agree that there is a need for the Assembly to work collectively to face the challenge that lies ahead, and that we now need to ensure that we build on the strength of our indigenous industries.

Sir Reg Empey: I said that there would be an inter-departmental response, and there will be.

I was hoping that by providing Members with an opportunity to discuss these problems at an early stage we would get a collective response. We must understand that Northern Ireland — as a small regional economy — is limited in what it can do. However, we are not powerless.

The lack of demand for aircraft has been precipitated by an act of terrorism and there has been a dramatic drop-off in the number of people using aircraft. To encourage people back will require responses from Governments and from national leaders — it will require a collective international effort. The Government in London have a role to play, and that is why I approached the Prime Minister as soon as the news had broken.

As the Deputy Chairperson knows, small businesses are the backbone of Northern Ireland's economy and it is inevitable that concentration on that sector is vital. As far as the immediate issue is concerned, some measures can be taken to help companies such as Bombardier Shorts. Those measures will ease cash flow and, more importantly, stimulate demand for their products. Although demand for products has been strong and orders have not been cancelled, people are not in a position to take delivery of them — and that is the problem. That is the unique nature of this situation, and it not only applies to Bombardier Shorts but to other companies in Northern Ireland.

The problem is not the cancellation of orders; it is that companies have suddenly been confronted by a huge drop in cash flow and have not had time to plan for the consequences. There must be a twin-track approach and one of the key issues must be the stimulation of demand, which can only happen when people are prepared to return to using aircraft.

Mr J Wilson: I thank the Minister for bringing his concerns to the House. Northern Ireland has been told to expect approximately 2,500 job losses as a result of the terrorist attacks on 11 September. Belfast International Airport is a major casualty, with British Airways's decision to withdraw from the Heathrow route followed by Aer Lingus's announcement on Friday.

Does the Minister agree that many of the decisions taken in corporate boardrooms are being based on little more than panic caused by worldwide speculation that we are heading for war and a global recession? Does he agree that the announcements are attempts to engage in hasty housekeeping to pre-empt an economic downturn?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware of the concerns that Mr Wilson and other Members have about the situation at Belfast International Airport. There are two things coming into play. Many people believe that part of the reason for the decisions that are being made does not stem from 11 September, but, in fact, is more deep-seated and goes back further. There may be an element of truth in that. However, irrespective of the reason, we are confronted with two difficult decisions.

While the number of routes from Northern Ireland to London has increased in the past couple of years, it is nevertheless significant that a national carrier has suddenly chosen not to use that route. It is significant because of the international connections that one can get through a major international airline. I am sure that the Member is aware that there has been speculation over the Heathrow- to-Belfast route for a number of years, and that recent events and changes of policy by some airlines using the airport have probably precipitated the decisions.

12.30 pm

The situation is less clear with regard to the Aer Lingus decision, as that company is having to reshape its entire operation because of the economic effect of the huge drop in the number of people flying the north Atlantic, Aer Lingus's most profitable route. Any trading company has legal responsibilities, and I have pointed out to the Irish authorities the impact of that decision. Mr Mallon and I will be writing to British Airways and to Aer Lingus in this regard.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for bringing this serious economic downturn to the attention of the Assembly so promptly. I also commend him for his initiative in asking the Exchequer for additional funding and for the proposed interdepartmental grouping which will assist the industries and individuals affected.

Will the Minister agree that job loss and lack of income will affect many communities throughout the North, other than those he has mentioned? In particular, will he address the plight of B/E Aerospace; a manufacturer of aircraft furnishings in Kilkeel, whose workload has plummeted as a consequence of the problems of the airline industry? The decline in employment in that company is as significant to the rural community of Kilkeel as that of Bombardier Shorts is to Belfast. I seek the Minister's assurance that the financial, retraining and administrative assistance that he has outlined for

Bombardier will also apply to B/E Aerospace as a matter of urgency.

Sir Reg Empey: I am acutely aware of the situation at the Kilkeel factory and have already met with its senior executives. IDB officials have already met with the company, and we are in discussion with them. The company is liaising with its parent company in Connecticut; we will keep in close contact to see how we can help. The plant in Kilkeel is a very large employer, relatively and locally, so that anything that happens to that company will have a major impact on the local community. I have no doubt that should the need arise, my Colleague Dr Farren and my Department will supply the same help to that company as we would to Bombardier Shorts.

Mr P Robinson: I thank the Minister for taking the first opportunity he could to make a statement on the issue and for the early briefing he provided to me on matters relating to Bombardier Shorts.

The Minister said in his statement that this situation arises out of an international problem — it is a global trend. We would be deceiving ourselves in thinking that our regional Assembly can have any major impact on future job losses in this area. Everything will depend on confidence in the airline industry. Many of Bombardier Shorts' problems do not result from cancelled orders, but from deferred deliveries because the financial sector has not got the bottle to put its money forward. The key to averting further job losses at Bombardier Shorts is therefore for the Minister and his Colleagues to convince Her Majesty's Government to advance financial guarantees for a limited period, until the financial world is prepared to take up the packages and resources that would be the norm.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct in saying that this is a global issue and that Governments must put forward ideas to assist firms and to create the correct international circumstances in which the aerospace industry can recover. I have been attempting to do that. Although we have a small regional economy, we can still put forward ideas. We are presenting to the Government ideas that are designed to assist the cash flow problems of the companies that are affected here and to deal with confidence and international demand. Not only can those matters be directly affected by financial institutions, they must be led by Governments. That will have to be done internationally, with the involvement of the European Union, the United States of America and our own Government.

There are several areas in which Governments can assist to protect the cash flow of companies that are directly affected. It would be supremely ironic if, given the campaign that has been launched against terrorism, terrorists were to succeed in destroying the economic

infrastructure of many of the countries that are ostensibly waging war against them.

Our duty is to do what we can not only to alleviate the short-term problems of the individual who is affected by the loss of his or her job but to put forward ideas to help to reconstruct demand for our products.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We all share the Minister's concern about the economic downturn, and he warned us of a strong likelihood of further bleak economic news. Although the problem of job losses will be a priority, will the Minister ensure that jobs are spread throughout the North of Ireland, and that the active targeting of areas of social need will not stop in these bad economic times?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that the effect of significant job losses is not confined to the communities near a plant, and Mr McGrady made that point. There are four Bombardier Shorts plants in Northern Ireland, but the employees at each plant come from a broad surrounding area. Our economic objectives are to ensure that as much economic activity as possible is generated in New TSN areas. My Department is committed to meeting its targets for New TSN, and it did so in the last financial year. However, we are in uncharted waters. We cannot instruct companies where to go. We can guide and encourage them and we can improve the skills of those who live in particular areas, but there are limitations. I assure the Member that my Department has not lost sight of those points. Where large numbers of people are losing jobs and revenue, no matter what part of Northern Ireland they live in, it will have a negative impact on everybody.

Mr Ervine: I welcome the Minister's statement. What type of support programmes will be made available to those affected by the economic crisis? Will he encourage his Department to assist workers by ensuring that at least as much money is spent on them as is spent on assisting companies, thus lessening the strain that economic downturn puts on the pockets of workers?

Finally, will he, conscious that the economic downturn was predicted before 11 September, encourage his Department to be a watchdog in case some businesses see America's problem as a business opportunity?

Mr Speaker: Before I call on the Minister to respond, I draw the House's attention to the fact that I have received notice that the Minister for Employment and Learning will be making a statement after the questions on this statement, and that statement may deal with some of the matters that the Member has raised.

Sir Reg Empey: I am grateful, Mr Speaker — I was about to say that Dr Farren will be addressing those issues. However, I will respond to Mr Ervine's point about being conscious of the downturn before 11 September. We were all acutely aware that there was

an undoubted downturn. However, we must ensure that applications from companies are judged on their economic merits and we will continue to do that.

On the issue of money that is spent on companies, nobody is naïve enough to believe that simply providing cash for a company is, in itself, a solution. The problem arose from an almost instantaneous lack of demand. As another Member for East Belfast, Mr P Robinson, pointed out, a deferment created the present crisis. That will not necessarily be the case with every company, but we are acutely aware that some people may take opportunities to do things that they would not normally get away with.

Ms Morrice: It is important to have economic leadership, and that has been shown this morning. In his statement, the Minister said that it will be difficult to maintain past levels of inward investment. That could be an important turning point for Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that it is more important to increase self-sufficiency in Northern Ireland's industrial base and local industry? There are three matters that must be addressed: first, the desperate need to make Northern Ireland self-sufficient in renewable energies such as wind; secondly, the need to promote industries such as textiles, ship building and food processing that Northern Ireland is good at and has a reputation for; and thirdly the need to support more local entrepreneurship. Does the Minister agree?

Sir Reg Empey: It was clear before 11 September that this financial year was going to be more difficult for inward investment than the last financial year. It can be seen from the deal flow that inward investment to the entire European Union and to the United Kingdom as a whole has dropped. Inevitably, inward investment to Northern Ireland will follow a similar pattern. That does not mean that we give up. We still need direct foreign investment because that broadens the base of our economy and we get skills, expertise and access to markets that we would not otherwise achieve. However, we must stimulate and assist local indigenous business as much as possible. I have often made it clear that we follow those twin tracks at all times.

The Member mentioned other issues that affect the economy — energy, the traditional sectors and support to local businesses. She is aware that we have been very active on the energy front and that there is much to do this year. I am acutely aware of the necessity to ensure that energy is competitively priced and that the supply is secure. On the latter point, the security of supply is rapidly improving. By the end of this year or the beginning of next, the supply will be even more secure with the opening of the Scottish interconnector.

As far as our own industries are concerned, we encourage the traditional sectors to become more competitive. The Member is well aware that the Kurt

Salmon report on textiles has been implemented. As a result, there have recently been some positive announcements.

We continue to support local businesses because a decline in inward investment often means a decline in local investment. We can continue to improve the economic infrastructure; recent decisions on gas and roads are examples of that.

All these problems must be dealt with across the board.

12.45 pm

Lord Kilclooney: The Minister will recall meeting my Colleague Tom Hamilton and me to discuss the problems of the Bombardier Shorts plant in Newtownards, as well as the overall employment situation in the borough of Ards.

Will the Minister confirm that he will do everything to facilitate further employment in the Ards borough area? Will he take note that we appreciate very much the support of Bombardier Shorts for Northern Ireland, not only in Newtownards but also in Belfast and in Castlereagh? It has provided thousands of jobs for people from our constituency.

It is regrettable that we have lost both British Airways and Aer Lingus. Does the Minister recall that not too long ago there were flights from Belfast only to Gatwick and Heathrow airports? Now we have flights to five London airports. There have been some advances. Other airlines now fly from Belfast International Airport to other London airports.

Can the Minister state whether there will be future problems for employment in industries connected with the aircraft industry in Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member will be aware that I have played what part I could to assist the borough of Ards in its difficulties, starting with the textile sector. A group set up with the local authority and my Department's agencies worked well and achieved considerable success. Several investments in the area have reversed the trend of recent years. However, there is no disguising the fact that one of those successes was increased employment in that area by Bombardier Shorts. Sadly, that gain could be temporarily lost.

There is now more choice of flights to London from Northern Ireland than there was a couple of years ago. Nevertheless, the loss of a national carrier, with its international connections, is very significant. We must acknowledge that that may not necessarily have been brought about by the events of 11 September but might have been in the pipeline for some time.

We have encouraged and have tried to grow clusters in several areas. The aerospace sector is one that we have been happy to see grow. A consortium of aerospace companies has been formed in Northern Ireland; it has

been very successful, going to air shows, attracting business and being aggressive in the marketplace. It has provided an increasing number of high-skill jobs. Approximately 2,000 people are employed in downstream companies, and we will see to what extent they will be affected.

Some of them have broadened their customer base and are not exclusively confined to one company such as Bombardier Shorts. Some of them have opened contacts in mainland Europe and are supplying manufacturers in other areas. Therefore the issue must be approached company by company; there is no single answer. However, I assure the Member that we are acutely aware of the issue, and we will contact the companies that seek assistance.

Mr McCartney: Although the Minister's prompt response is welcomed, the doleful contents of the statement are hardly an occasion for joy. In reply to the leader of the Alliance Party, the Minister said that although Northern Ireland is limited because it is a small regional economy, it is not entirely powerless.

Rather than giving us ideas — perhaps more properly described as suggestions — will the Minister tell us what he, the Assembly and the Executive can do? We should bear in mind that the beef and pig industries were not saved by the Assembly; the textile industry has been decimated; and heavy engineering, which Ms Morrice suggested should be resuscitated, is really on a temporary life-support system. Will the Minister please tell us, in concrete and definitive terms, what the Assembly is empowered to do? Members know that most of the effects of this downturn are outside the power of the Assembly; indeed, many of them are outside the power of central Government. It was suggested that the Minister should visit the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was unable to avert massive redundancies in his own constituency; what will he do for Northern Ireland?

Sir Reg Empey: One must strike a balance between saying "woe is me" and "it is someone else's problem — we can do nothing about it". Northern Ireland is a small regional economy. Due to globalisation and the fact that the corporations that we are dealing with operate on an intercontinental basis, what one can do is inevitably limited. There are several issues. For example, if the fallout of globalisation is the rationalisation of production units, a competition inevitably ensues between regions or countries over where the units will be based. We can have a direct influence on that.

There has been an international downturn in textiles. If the Assembly does nothing, that decline will accelerate. However, we have done something. We have a blueprint and we are working towards it. In the last few weeks, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has supported various amalgamations that will result

in stronger production units. They will have the competitive edge to survive, albeit on a smaller scale.

In the heavy engineering sector, one or two companies would undoubtedly be closed today had it not been for our institutions. That does not mean that the problem is solved, or that they will survive. Nevertheless, if they are open, there is a chance to improve them and to give them breathing space to compete.

There are indeed limits to what the Prime Minister can do. However, everybody plays a part. When a company operates in a particular region, it is influenced by the attitude of the people in that region. Companies are influenced by the attitude of the regional government and by what it offers. To put it bluntly, it is often an auction. We may not like that, but it is true.

We must decide, as a community, whether we shall be included and whether we shall be able to judge what is in our best interests with regard to the disbursement of public funds. It is better that we have that opportunity. If we had had no meaningful representation, and if we had left it to others to make the decisions for us, there would be many more empty holes in the ground than there are at present.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his statement and I regret the circumstances in which he has had to make it. As the Minister is aware, the north-west is trying to overcome job losses in the textile industry. Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd, formerly Molins Tobacco Machinery Ltd, is one of the key component suppliers for Bombardier Shorts in Belfast. There is concern that the downturn in business for Bombardier Shorts will have a knock-on effect on that company. Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd has managed to turn itself into a very competitive company over the years, through training and reskilling. Will the Minister assure me that any planned retraining or support will be made available to that company and to others in the north-west?

Sir Reg Empey: I am acutely aware that Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd is one of those downstream companies. That company found itself with no market, but it took the skills and the equipment that it possessed and reinvented itself. It acquired and achieved skill levels that had hitherto been absent in that area. There was no tradition of those skills in that area. I have visited the plant and seen the amount of effort that is put into what they do and the positive change that has taken place.

The situation that Molins Tobacco Machinery Ltd faced several years ago is similar to the present one. In such circumstances, local effort can result in long-term sustainability in an alternative market. However, the same criteria will apply to any company in the north-west that is affected as are applied to companies elsewhere. My Colleague Dr Farren will shortly make that clear.

There would be no difference in approach, although there may be a difference in scale. We must look at each case on its merits in order to see what steps should be taken. It is too early to tell what the downstream effects will be because we do not know how long the deferments and deliveries will take.

There may be other angles to consider. The type of aircraft that is in demand may change. There could be an increase in demand for corporate jet aircraft, rather than for the airliners that Bombardier Shorts make, as companies may feel more comfortable if their executives fly under their own control. The demand for the smaller regional airliner that Bombardier Shorts specialises in might be less damaged in the long term than that for the large intercontinental airliners. We do not yet know what the full effect of the crisis will be. Therefore, it is premature to write off any of the downstream suppliers. Both the skill base and the area in which those companies specialise are fundamentally sound. The issue is long-term survival.

Mr Wells: The Minister will not be surprised that I wish to raise the issue of B/E Aerospace in Kilkeel. As he is aware, I led a deputation of four vice-presidents from that company to meet the Minister on Friday evening. They emerged from the meeting heartened and encouraged by the positive response from IDB officials and yourself. Does the Minister accept that that company in Kilkeel is more exposed than others to any downturn in the domestic airline market in the United States? More than half of the company's production is for companies such as Northwest Airlines and American Airlines, both of which were directly affected by the terrible events of 11 September 2001. Does he accept that the loss of 320 jobs in Kilkeel would be a disaster for the town, and that it would be even more significant than the terrible loss of several thousand jobs in Belfast?

1.00 pm

Can he assure me that his officials will do everything in their power to support the suggested package, which may save Kilkeel from such an outcome? Will he also ensure that, if money for the aerospace industry is forthcoming from the Prime Minister, B/E Aerospace will receive funding from that package? The company is in a very difficult position.

Sir Reg Empey: I am acutely aware of the significance of B/E Aerospace to the community that Mr Wells represents. There is no doubt that the 320 jobs provided by the company in Kilkeel make a huge contribution to the local economy. I had a meeting with the company on Friday evening and they are seized of the urgency of the situation. There have been large-scale deferments on its order book — on a similar scale to Bombardier Shorts's.

The Member will understand that I cannot go into the details of the meeting, but I can assure him that no

effort will be spared should my Department be invited to assist in any corporate reorganisation that the company might propose. I assure him that we will make any response within a short space of time; my officials have already been instructed accordingly. We will make every effort to do what we can, because a lack of action could have tremendous consequences for the company.

Fundamentally, B/E Aerospace is an excellent company. It makes an excellent world-class product and, for a long time, it has followed the advice of Government agencies. It has moved upmarket and upgraded its skills; it is export-orientated and has achieved a worldwide reputation. All the fundamentals of the business are in place.

Some cynics might say that we are only minnows, that there is nothing that we can do, or that the Prime Minister cannot do certain things. However, the Lord helps those who help themselves. We can, and should, do something. Mr Wells has focused on one thing that we can do, and I assure him that should an opportunity arise to resolve the difficulties of the company, we will do everything possible.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement of concern in regard to the bleak economic outlook. He was correct to point out that the downturn existed before the tragic events of 11 September 2001 — those events accelerated and increased the downturn.

The Minister was right to chide John Taylor for his snide remarks about Aer Lingus — they were unfortunate and unwelcome in the circumstances. Will the Minister take the opportunity to encourage Belfast International Airport to take up the offer by Michael O'Leary of Ryanair to provide a service from the airport? In addition, what influence can he bring to bear to ensure that, despite our dismal economic future, the 1,000 jobs at the industrial centre on the Crumlin Road will be protected?

Sir Reg Empey: With regard to the latter point, Mr Mallon and I visited north Belfast this morning and will be having discussions with public representatives of the area later today. We are acutely aware of the severe damage that could be inflicted if the development of that complex were inhibited. We are dealing with that matter and I hope that we will have an opportunity to address many issues affecting that area.

There is a downturn, but it has not been a collapse hitherto. However, with this other matter coming on top of it, international markets and finance have a big role to play. Peter Robinson made a comment about financiers earlier. There is a lot of suspicion, and if people were following the stock market, they would have seen a very significant fall in prices the day before the incident took place. There appears to be growing evidence that some people connected with, or informed by, people close to those who carried out this

attack may very well have profited as a consequence. That is the sum indication of the scale and forces with which we are confronted: a mixture of natural downturn and the specific incidents that occurred on 11 September. I can assure the Member that we are very aware of that.

Regarding the international airport, it is entirely a matter for the airport to decide which airlines it negotiates with and attracts. The Department for Regional Development is responsible for airports. Naturally, from my Department's point of view and that of the tourist, the greater the choice, and the greater the ease of getting into and out of Northern Ireland, the better. We have already referred to the fact that you can now get to more airports in London than previously — the more the merrier. More access and competition helps consumers. However, I am in no position to suggest to the international airport how it should conduct its commercial negotiations.

Mr Savage: I concur with what most Members have said. This is the second major industry in Northern Ireland to be hit by a crisis not of its own making. I want to know what we, as an elected body, can do to help alleviate the problems. I know there is no short-term solution to this. However, what can we do to help in the long term?

Sir Reg Empey: There are a number of things. First, we can show that we are a region that understands international business and its needs and problems, and a region that can respond to and help its investors in the bad times as well as the good. There is no point in rolling out the red carpet for investors when things are going well if you are prepared to ignore them when things are difficult. This has to be done in a sensible way.

We also have the ability to influence policy decisions in London and Brussels. The Member referred to the difficulties that the agriculture industry has faced, again, through no fault of its own. Northern Ireland has fought back from a very difficult position in agriculture. We have dealt very effectively with foot-and-mouth disease so far, and I pay tribute to my Colleague, Bríd Rodgers, for that. It is a fact that we took a much more aggressive approach than our Government in London did. That is one of the reasons we have been able to suppress the worst effects of foot-and-mouth disease on our community so far. Similarly, other diseases have arisen through no fault of our own.

The Assembly can show that as a region we understand business; that we understand its problems and its advantages and are prepared to respond to them. We need to make suggestions to both our Government and the European Union. Often it is how individual policies are dealt with in the minutiae, in the small print, on a case-by-case basis, that defines our ability to come through difficulty as strongly as one could possibly hope to.

Mr Byrne: I commend the Minister for his statement, and I pay tribute to Bombardier Shorts for the employment that it has provided for many years. However, we must appreciate the strategic significance of Aldergrove as an international airport. Will the Minister consider meeting the management of the airport, along with the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to discuss how to guarantee it a viable future?

Sir Reg Empey: I cannot respond to that suggestion without consulting my colleagues. Belfast International Airport is part of a conglomerate that is involved in a takeover battle, in which significant commercial issues are at stake. It would not be Government policy to subsidise such an organisation. However, there are policy objectives that we wish to achieve, and I am prepared to consult my ministerial Colleagues in that regard.

Mrs I Robinson: Despite the fact that Northern Ireland has a workforce with many specialised skills, east Belfast and my constituency of Strangford, in particular, have sustained heavy job losses in shipbuilding, textiles, farming, fishing and, now, the aerospace industry.

The Minister rightly said that we should not join the chorus of doom and gloom. However, the employees and their families face an uncertain and gloomy future. Can the Minister be specific about the number of jobs — including those of subcontractors and suppliers — that will be lost due to the knock-on effect of the axing of the 2,200 jobs at Bombardier Shorts?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct to say that there have been a series of setbacks in that area over the past two years. Nonetheless, we have had some impact on the effects on the heavy engineering and textiles industries, and recovery is beginning to show.

The company has now given notice to 1,500 or 1,600 people. I do not know precisely where those jobs are, but the employees will be aware of the company's intentions. Sadly, when the news broke at the end of last week, all the families were under the sword of Damocles. Nobody knew which families would be affected. One can envisage the situation in those homes: people did not know whether they would be able to buy their children what they would like for Christmas, or whether they would have a job in the new year. The company has now identified the individuals affected and has embarked on a consultation process with the trade unions. I plan to meet the trade unions — tomorrow, I think — for a general discussion.

In addition to the 1,500 identified staff at Bombardier Shorts, approximately 300 subcontractors ceased operations on 21 September. There are also individuals on short-term contracts and other subcontractors, and that will bring the total to approximately 500 non-core employees directly affected by the decisions taken by Bombardier Aerospace. Other companies also have

difficulties. I am not at liberty to identify them now; it is too early.

1.15 pm

Bombardier Shorts feeds out much of its work to subcontractors. It is not yet clear whether it will repatriate some of that work to itself or whether it will go on reduced work programmes. We also must bear in mind that some companies in the aerospace industry have accumulated work from other sources and may therefore be able to switch within their own order books. That will be very much on a case-by-case basis.

We now have approximately 1,500 identified individuals who will be entering the consultation processes. They are core Bombardier Shorts workers. In addition, there are approximately 500 people who are either on short-term contracts or are subcontractors working for Shorts, some of whom have already had their contracts terminated. Around 300 of those 500 had their contracts terminated on 21 September. That is the most accurate information that I can give the Member at this stage.

Mr Kennedy: I welcome the Minister's strong commitment to the local economy and to those affected by the current crisis. On a more general issue, will the Minister undertake to reinforce the message to Her Majesty's Government, and the Prime Minister in particular, that international terrorism — be it Islamic or Irish — is not acceptable, and that that also includes groups of so-called freedom fighters? Will he also take the opportunity to condemn outright the anti-American rhetoric espoused by members of Sinn Féin and its mouthpieces?

Sir Reg Empey: I told the Member that I had last week written to the Prime Minister. I did so because of the recognition that this issue was on a scale that could not be confined to a local level. The Prime Minister and other world leaders are undertaking a campaign against terrorism, and measures have been taken in London designed to attack the financial base of some terrorist organisations. It would be hollow to do that and yet allow some of our key strategic industries to be destroyed by terrorism. That could happen if adequate demand is not quickly re-established. I am acutely aware of the necessity to re-establish demand.

I can assure the Member that I will be in touch with the Prime Minister's office over the next few days. I will also be in touch with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, who has a specific role in the provision of launch aid for aerospace projects and in encouraging the development of "soft" finance schemes to enable the airlines to buy products at reduced rates of interest. The creation of demand is the key.

On the second point, we are getting into false definitions. There is no difference, in my view, between what happened to the World Trade Centre and what

happened at Canary Wharf, for example, except in scale. There is no practical difference. People are talking about their freedom; this action is reducing the freedom of people to earn a living for their families. It is reducing the freedom of a community to live in peace and to prosper. Some of the mental and political contortions that people were able to do at the weekend were, therefore, perhaps nothing short of a condition needing the professional services that a person such as you could provide, Mr Speaker.

Dr McDonnell: I compliment the Minister on his statement. It is reassuring to know that we are, as far as is possible, on top of the situation. That is vitally important.

Part of my question, about the interest, management or political overlordship of the airports, has been asked by my Colleague, Joe Byrne. I am concerned about air traffic. While Short Bros plc and various other industries are being affected, it is tragic for those directly involved. The problem with the shutdown of airports or air connections is that everyone is affected, and our ability to generate alternative jobs is further restricted due to the lack of air access. While this may not be acute in the short term, in the long term it is much more damaging.

What process, if any, is in place to influence the loss of air connections from Belfast International Airport? Mr Byrne made a suggestion about a tripartite approach. Can the Minister detail his communications with British Airways and Aer Lingus? I am particularly concerned about the innovative transatlantic service of Aer Lingus. I am also concerned about British Airways, although we have other alternative routes to London that will pick up any spare capacity.

I am deeply concerned about the only transatlantic route we had. I am aware that when the Minister was a Belfast city councillor, the Aer Lingus connection was vital to American industrialists investing in Northern Ireland. Is there any possibly, through the North/South economic bodies or the Irish Government, of persuading Aer Lingus to hold on to that service for one or two days a week?

Sir Reg Empey: I am acutely aware of issues of air connection and access. As a region on the western edge of Europe, there are peripheral access difficulties. Economic factors are also at play. While airports are primarily a matter for the Department for Regional Development, I have a broad interest in their operation, particularly where tourism is concerned. I have received representations from Assembly Members about those airlines. The local Member of Parliament is involved, and meetings have been held. We have communicated with Belfast International Airport, and we are very concerned.

The transatlantic aspect is a unique feature of the Aer Lingus service, although the ability to use a British Airways service, and to book across the world, is another major consideration. On Friday afternoon, I expressed my concerns about the loss of the service to Mrs O'Rourke, the Minister in Dublin, and asked if that decision had been ratified. My understanding is that an assessment is being made of all the airline's routes. Aer Lingus is dependent on the profitability of the transatlantic routes, and the significant reduction in traffic is having huge cash flow implications. Each airline has to protect its future. I hope to have further discussions, and I was promised that the Minister would reply to me this week when matters become clearer.

The problem with British Airways is more profound. The Member will be aware that some have been expecting this decision.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

BOMBARDIER AEROSPACE SHORT BROS PLC

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): This statement is intended to complement the remarks that have been made by my Colleague, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who has outlined the severity of the announcement made by Bombardier Aerospace last week. The actual job losses are a cruel blow to the aerospace industry in Northern Ireland and to our local economy.

I look forward to the day – and I hope it will not be too far distant – when the aerospace industry will recover from its present problems and Bombardier Aerospace, no longer threatened by the present uncertainties, will continue creating the wealth and employment opportunities that have been a central feature of its contribution to the Northern Ireland economy.

Sir Reg Empey has demonstrated his commitment and resolve in tackling the issues facing the local economy as a result of the global instabilities. I assure the House that that resolve is shared by me, my Department and the entire Executive. I hope that our collective approach on this matter will send a very clear message that the devolved Government in Northern Ireland are committed to addressing such difficulties in a responsible, flexible and shared way. That is the cornerstone of good government, and I assure Members that the Executive are acting as one body on this important issue.

It is appropriate that we are united in our aim of assisting the company in every way open to us during this difficult period. We should be mindful of the impact of the redundancies on the lives of those people whose jobs are directly involved. For that reason, my Department has been proactively engaged with Shorts's management to ensure that we give full and comprehensive support to those who are losing their jobs.

For a number of years, Shorts has participated successfully in my Department's Bridge to Employment programme. The programme helps the long-term unemployed to undertake pre-employment training in ways tailored to the needs of particular employers. Through the programme, Bombardier Shorts has supported the recruitment and training of 500 people who were previously unemployed. This is an impressive figure, which demonstrates the contribution the company has made to our economy.

I am particularly concerned about the future of the 36 Bridge to Employment trainees who are currently with the company. I will be doing everything possible to help those trainees complete their training and find employment. I am particularly grateful to the Engineering Training Council for its expertise and knowledgeable

support in this matter. It is hoped that any trainees facing redundancy can be relocated with other employers.

To help support those people being made redundant, Shorts has set aside space in Interpoint for the establishment of a temporary jobcentre. However, the entire Jobcentre network will ensure that a service is available to all affected employees no matter where they live. The Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) is working with Shorts to ensure that a full range of advisory and support services are available to all who will be losing their jobs.

I recognise that financial issues will be a major concern for all workers affected. I am therefore very pleased that the strong partnership that has been developing in recent years between the T&EA and the Social Security Agency (SSA) is very much in evidence, and I am grateful to the Department for Social Development and its Minister for the support of his staff. SSA staff who are qualified to advise people on benefit entitlements will be working alongside people who can advise on alternative employment and training opportunities. There will also be advice on redundancy payment issues and — for those who may be interested — support and advice from LEDU on self-employment and business start-up issues. I am grateful to Sir Reg Empey for his Department's involvement and support.

As details emerge on the precise numbers, phasing and geographical location of the redundancies, my Department will take the lead in ensuring that the services that I have described are available to all.

1.30 pm

As Members may be aware, my Department is experienced in accommodating the needs and anxieties of people who have been either made redundant or who are threatened with that prospect. Most notably, a similar situation arose in Harland and Wolff last year, and we were able to provide a suitable response at that time similar to that which I have described above. We learned from that experience and we will ensure that all support that can be provided to Bombardier Shorts will be made available.

In conclusion, I assure Members, and all workers in Bombardier Shorts, whose future at this moment appears bleak, that I will be doing everything in my power to support and help those who are losing their employment. I am sure that Members will share my hopes that the present problems in the aerospace industry will be temporary and that it will not be too long before we see the re-emergence of Shorts, and of the many other companies associated with the aerospace industry, as strong, profitable enterprises creating good quality jobs for our people.

The Executive's response to the immediate needs of those being made redundant is a clear example —

albeit in circumstances that we could do without — of joined-up Government working in the best interests of all our citizens.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): The Committee for Employment and Learning shares the concerns of those sadly affected by these large-scale redundancies. As the Minister said, we can only hope that world aviation will rebound as it did after the Gulf War. We wish both Ministers, and all others involved, well in their response.

How successful was the task force that was set up in October 2000 to deal with redundancies at Harland and Wolff, and which is perhaps being seen as a model for the current response? As there is now to be a similar initiative, will anything be done differently on this occasion?

The Minister referred to people receiving training under the Bridge to Employment programme. Will he also attempt to ensure that people on modern apprenticeships with Bombardier Shorts can, as far as possible, complete their training?

Dr Farren: Although our research has not yet been concluded on the circumstances of employees at Harland and Wolff, we can show certain trends. For example, 67% of those who were laid off found alternative employment within six months; 9% are classed as economically inactive; and 1% returned to further education and training. It may be a positive indicator for the Bombardier Shorts workforce that less than one in four of those who were laid off at Harland and Wolff were without employment after six months.

The Member will appreciate that surveys are never 100% accurate in tracking everyone affected, so we are unable to paint the full picture. Nonetheless, the trends were positive ones. The general economic circumstances then were more positive than they are now. We may not be in quite such auspicious circumstances today. Nonetheless, the model applied by the Department for Employment and Learning has proven to be successful.

There are over 100 modern apprentices and they will also be given whatever assistance is possible. The Department must contact those who will be made redundant, establish their needs and work from there. The Department will be able to assure all workers — in whatever category — that its advice, information and direction on retraining, or information for those who want to enter self-employment, will be made available.

Mrs Courtney: I regret that Members must talk about redundancies on this scale. What services will the Department for Employment and Learning provide to employees who face such redundancies?

Dr Farren: In my statement I attempted to detail many of the more important forms of support that will

be available wherever redundancies occur. The Department will provide advice on vacancies and forms of training through local jobcentres. In conjunction with the Department for Social Development we will provide advice on redundancy payments, social security and welfare support.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, but I draw his attention to Kilkeel where there have already been lay-offs in the fishing industry and where the farming community is facing hardship due to the foot-and-mouth disease crisis. A crisis is now looming in the Kilkeel aerospace company, B/E Aerospace, which has trained its staff. What local retraining and job opportunities will be made available by the Department if there are to be job losses? Go raibh maith agat.

Dr Farren: It is impossible to be precise about the nature of the retraining because much of what is required has to be identified by those who are being made redundant. The Department is attempting to respond to the needs of each individual. We want to direct those redundant workers who wish to undergo a form of retraining to the training opportunities available in the network of further education colleges and private providers in the training sector.

Training needs must be identified, and staff in jobcentres are expert in doing that. They will be the workers' first point of contact and will provide the information, guidance and direction based on the individual's training needs.

Mr Neeson: I commend the Bridge to Employment programme, but in many ways it only deals with the tip of the iceberg. The serious job losses announced by Bombardier Shorts underline that. However, the Department for Employment and Learning has been active and successful in the institutes of further education in providing those courses and training for young people that reflect the needs of enterprise and industry. Will the Minister assure me that that sort of innovation will continue in his Department?

Dr Farren: The question highlights the high level of responsiveness that local Departments can make to situations that arise in local enterprises. It was suggested earlier that we can do very little. However, my Department has responded rapidly and flexibly to training needs in tandem with the higher and further education colleges. That demonstrates how we can meet the needs of overseas or indigenous investors. We can therefore inspire local enterprises with the confidence that support is available for decisions on further investment.

In outlining those initiatives, my officials, along with those from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and from the Department for Social Development, are demonstrating their flexibility, responsiveness,

and real and deep concern for the impact on the lives of the workers and their families.

Mrs Carson: The announcement is a dire blow for the Northern Ireland aerospace industry, as are the knock-on effects that it will have on the local economy.

Are Northern Ireland plants more vulnerable because they are engaged only in the manufacturing aspect of the industry, as technological and design developments are carried out in Canada? Will that trend be irreversible if the plants are closed? We risk losing a world-class workforce. How can the Minister retain these skills so that we can benefit from them in future when the industry experiences an upturn?

Dr Farren: The Member raises a worry that we all share when we consider the impact on local manufacturing of an international conglomerate such as Bombardier Shorts. The company may question its investment here in the longer term. The challenge is posed: can our Departments meet, in a flexible way, the needs of all the other enterprises in Northern Ireland that form part of multinationals? Can we assure investors that we can provide for their skills needs? We have been doing so with many companies, both those that are indigenous and those that form part of an international conglomerate. We have achieved that in many ways in the past two years, and, in my experience, we have done so to the considerable satisfaction of owners and investors.

We will continue to do that, because that is how we can demonstrate our desire to support investors. We have a capable and highly skilled workforce, and we work hard to ensure that it is as highly skilled as the new enterprises demand. Our efforts receive appreciation and acknowledgement from many sectors of management in the new enterprises, and I trust that that will continue. If it does, it will give confidence to potential investors that this is a place in which to locate their companies, whether local or overseas.

1.45 pm

Ms Lewsley: The speedy response to this crisis proves the strengths of the devolved institutions and inter-departmental working. I also pay tribute to Bombardier Shorts and to its commitment to its employees. It is to be hoped that after the Fokker crisis Bombardier Shorts will become more competitive and, at the same time, prepare for the orders that have been deferred and that may come back on track later.

The issues are redundancies and the lack of employment. Considering that almost 900 jobs will be lost before Christmas and that more than 400 jobs could be lost by subcontractors of Bombardier Shorts, how will the subcontractors be helped through the crisis?

Dr Farren: The response to the subcontractors will be the same as the response we are making to the

workers of Bombardier Shorts. Local jobcentres are prepared to provide the sort of advice to workers who have been made redundant that I have described. Sir Reg Empey's Department may provide other forms of support for contractors, and for industry in general, to alleviate the crises in which they may find themselves in the immediate future.

Responsiveness, flexibility and concern are being expressed across the Government here, and the workers and management appreciate that.

Mr Shannon: This is a difficult time for everyone, not least for those who may lose their jobs. I know that the Minister has been directly involved with the Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education, and he mentioned the Bridge to Employment scheme, which has been training people specifically for Bombardier Shorts. What will happen if these people are made redundant? How will the scheme be affected?

The Ards institute is already oversubscribed, and there are few places available for retraining schemes. With particular reference to that institute, will the Department ensure that retraining money and places are made available for those who may lose their jobs? What will be done for the subcontractors and workers from subsidiary companies?

Dr Farren: The Member must appreciate that we have not yet received details about the needs of workers who are likely to be made redundant. When that information becomes available and the jobcentres assess the needs, we will be able to help people to make decisions about the kind of assistance they need.

If they need training, we will direct them to the training that they believe could be beneficial and we will ensure that it is available. We have considerable experience, through the various forms of training support, to enable us to meet the challenges. The Engineering Training Council is assisting us in identifying possible alternative placements for those on the Bridge to Employment training programme so that opportunities can be provided to enable them to complete training and to obtain employment when the training has been completed.

The Bridge to Employment scheme is only one example of how Bombardier Shorts has been working with us to provide targeted training opportunities for the long-term unemployed. It is regrettable that those on the programme are unlikely, as it now seems, to find an outlet in Shorts for the skills that they are acquiring. Every assistance is being mobilised to ensure that vacancies elsewhere will be open to them.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I share the concerns of both Ministers about such large-scale redundancies at Bombardier Shorts. Those job losses could also affect my constituency of Foyle and the small enterprise of Maydown Precision Engi-

neering Ltd. Does the Minister have any evidence that that company will be affected, and does he have a rescue package for the small firm, given that the Foyle constituency has lost well over 3,000 jobs in recent years. Does the Minister have any indication of the number of indirect job losses that there may be? What precisely can LEDU do to assist small and medium-sized enterprises?

Mr Speaker: Before I call upon the Minister to respond, I must say that he is not necessarily responsible for LEDU. In fairness to the Minister, some of the Member's questions may have to be answered in writing by another Minister.

Dr Farren: We do not yet have precise information on the full impact, although we have more information about the likely impact on Bombardier Shorts than elsewhere. Until that information is available, we will be unable to take precise steps. Today, I am outlining our general approach, the initiative that we are taking with Bombardier Shorts on the temporary jobcentre at Interpoint and the nature of the support through information guidance that will be made available to workers who are made redundant.

I am sure that all Members hope that the impact elsewhere will be at the lowest possible level and that there will be no impact at all on Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd. If there is an impact, we will provide the necessary information, guidance and direction for those concerned. In the event of a recovery, we will provide the service in conjunction with management to ensure that any upturn can be adequately and effectively met with the skills required.

Mr Beggs: Research and development are important for maintaining long-term jobs in Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that such an instance reinforces the importance of long-term investment in research and development so that jobs are grown and sustained? Will this cause him to reassess the importance of research and development to our local economy?

Dr Farren: We are very conscious of the significance of research and development, whether in the aerospace industry or in any other. We have worked very hard with the universities and with IRTU in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that we maximise support for research and development.

With regard to the aerospace industry, the Member may be aware that Bombardier Shorts has invested significantly in facilities and personnel for research to be conducted in such places as Queen's University, Belfast. That is a statement of its commitment to the development of research and development in aerospace in Northern Ireland.

The Member may be assured of my Department's deep concern. We have reviewed the matter of research and

development, and a working party is determining how we, together with our universities and industry, can better support it. As a result of the NI Economic Council's report of last year, a co-ordinated approach is being adopted across the Government.

Dr Hendron: I thank Bombardier Shorts for all its work and interest in Northern Ireland over the years. My constituency of West Belfast is also affected.

We all understand the impact of redundancy on the lives of those whose jobs are directly affected. I appreciate that the Minister's Department has been engaged with management at Bombardier Shorts to ensure that full and comprehensive support can be given to those who will lose their jobs. Should a temporary jobcentre be set up in Shorts?

Dr Farren: In conjunction with Bombardier Shorts a temporary jobcentre is being established at Interpoint in the heart of the city. That will directly target the needs of those from Bombardier Shorts who become redundant. I must stress, however, that workers may not find the location convenient to plants at Newtownabbey or Dunmurry. It may be more convenient for them to use the services of staff at their local jobcentres: staff who will be just as competent and expert at dealing with their needs.

I trust that both the temporary centre and the existing network of jobcentres will provide an adequate response to the particular needs of those who seek the advice and services that are available.

SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD BILL

Consideration Stage

2.00 pm

Clause 1 (Additional powers to obtain information)

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Cobain): The Committee has some concerns about clause 1 and the obtaining of information. However, before addressing these concerns, I thank the Minister, his officials, Committee members and the Committee staff for their contributions to the production of the Committee's report.

Clause 1 amends and adds to the investigator's powers that are provided for in a number of sections in the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. Along with clauses 2, 3, 4 and 5, it deals with the broad issue of obtaining and sharing information.

The Committee is concerned with the wording of subsection (2)(c) and the implications that it might have for honest, ordinary people who are in receipt of benefit. The possibility of infringing human rights was raised in the course of our discussions. The Committee considers that the provisions of the subsection might be seen as giving investigating officers too much power to look at an individual's financial affairs, especially before clearly establishing whether there are any grounds for believing that there may be fraudulent activity. However, the Committee accepts that the Bill provides for a code of practice that staff would have to adhere to and that the code may well deal with the points raised by it. Nevertheless, the Committee believes that it would be helpful if the Minister gave some assurances to the House.

Can the Minister confirm that the powers of investigation will be used sensitively, and exercised only after careful consideration by senior managers? In cases with grounds for suspecting organised attempts at major fraud, will the use of these powers be monitored for the purpose of conducting a review of the workings of the code of practice within three years of its introduction, and will the findings of that review be reported to the Assembly?

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee Stage of the Bill was valuable, and a number of issues that concerned the Committee were raised. These concerns, as the Chairperson pointed out, are still present. I have spoken before, both in Committee meetings and in the House, about the difficulty of obtaining benefits. We have received numerous complaints from people in the Six Counties

about the way in which they are treated in social security offices. The criminalisation of people who are genuinely in need of benefits is widespread. We are now bringing in a Bill that will give the Department for Social Development more draconian powers to investigate individuals and the right to look at bank accounts with neither the permission of the person under investigation nor the need to notify them. That is absolutely disgraceful.

The entire system is geared to saving money. That may result in those who are the most vulnerable and in need being denied their entitlement to benefits — entitlement, not privilege — and there seems to be little that the Social Security Agency is prepared to do about it. Instead, we put thousands of pounds into investigating fraud, while many more thousands are not paid to those who are entitled to them. We talk about providing work for those who can do it and benefits for those who cannot, but in practice we do our best to deprive many people of the benefits that they are entitled to and need desperately.

The Committee saw the draft code of practice that was prepared on the basis of one that exists in England. Can the Minister assure me that the code of practice here will be drawn up locally and take our circumstances into consideration?

Unionist Members — and some others — seem to think that any deviation from legislation passed in London results in a weakening of the Union. The circumstances in Belfast, Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh are different from those in Birmingham and Manchester. We should not be afraid to draw up legislation to suit our needs, rather than running, lemming-like, to copy every piece of legislation passed in England. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr S Wilson: The comments made by the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee reflected accurately the views of the Committee. However, it should be recognised that the Committee did not feel that any amendments to clause 1 were necessary. Several Committee members, including myself, asked the Department's officials what they meant by the phrase "reasonable grounds". Despite what Members have said today, the Department is not being given carte blanche to plunder bank accounts or inquire into people's private affairs. In answer to a question that I posed, a departmental official made it clear that the phrase "reasonable grounds" meant that there must already be some evidence of fraud and that officials would have to examine utility bills and other information to prove that fraud was being committed.

The House must bear in mind the fact that £73 million is lost every year because of social security fraud. Most people who claim benefit are honest and are not trying to claim money to which they are not entitled. Therefore, it is incumbent on the Department

to deal with fraud, so that people who claim benefit are not all tarred with the same brush. The Social Security Fraud Bill makes provision for the Department to do that.

The Bill is parity legislation. It has been said that we should not slavishly follow what happens at Westminster, but we are the net recipients of some £3,000 million in benefit payments every year. I am sure that some Treasury officials would love us to break parity, so that they could deal with Northern Ireland locally. Benefit rates in Northern Ireland could then be adjusted, and new benefit rates would not apply here. Parity legislation protects benefit recipients.

The Committee considered the Bill in detail, and officials came along to answer our questions. We raised some concerns, and — rightly — we asked what certain parts of the Bill meant. The proof of how the Committee felt about the Bill can be found on page 8 of the report, in our conclusions and recommendations. We agreed unanimously — I emphasise that we were unanimous — that the clauses of the Bill should stand. Following our investigation, during which we received explanations and assurances from departmental officials, we agreed that the Bill was necessary if we were to stop money that could be used to deal with social problems going to people who are not entitled to it.

Mr O'Connor: I accept what Mr Wilson said about parity legislation. However, some of the legislation that covers Northern Ireland is completely different from that in the rest of the UK, particularly legislation that deals with human rights and equal opportunities. I expressed my concerns in Committee about the ability to delve into people's backgrounds on a whim. An official from the Department for Social Development told the Committee that the Department must carry out investigations, and that to pry into people's bank accounts, their private lives and their utility bills was a necessary part of that. There was no mention of a person's right to be treated as innocent until proven guilty. I have grave reservations about that aspect of the legislation. We accept that social security fraud occurs and that it must be eliminated. However, we hope that the Department shows as much resolve in ensuring that other errors are stamped out.

Last year, the Comptroller and Auditor General told us that Social Security Agency offices did not communicate with each other. When the Department received a form that stated that a claimant was in receipt of other benefits, employees did not check to find out if that was the case.

Departmental irregularities exist that account for many errors in the system. During the Committee Stage consideration of the report, I asked the departmental official about benefit uptake. He said that the Department had no money to spend on benefit uptake because it was

too busy chasing fraudsters. The shoe must be worn on both feet. If we are going to go after fraudsters —

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Connor: I am almost finished.

The official said that a code of practice would be introduced. However, I am not convinced that that code of practice will protect the individual. We would like the Department to do all that it can to pursue individuals who have committed fraud, but to invade an individual's privacy is not necessarily the right approach. Article 8 of schedule 1 to the Human Rights Act 1998 states that

"Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life".

The Article accepts that the state has the right to investigate wrongdoings, but can we decide if a person is guilty of wrongdoings on the basis of an anonymous, and perhaps malicious, phone call? We must take account of such issues and ensure that they are written into the code of practice before we give our full support to the Bill.

In accepting that this is parity legislation — and to some extent it is a done deal — perhaps the Westminster Government should take into account the Northern Ireland's special circumstances. Last year, Committees debated the issue of criminal assets recovery, but this legislation does not make provision to share information with any agency, were one to be established. I accept that it is parity legislation, although I support it with great reluctance.

Mr S Wilson: Will the Member give way? Is he giving way or sitting down?

Mr Speaker: Members must realise that this is not the Second Stage of the Bill, in which its principles can be debated. Members who wish to table amendments to the Bill should do so. Amendments are not necessarily tabled so that the House can divide and an amendment can be passed. They can be tabled as probing amendments in order to create a debate on the issue and to receive a ministerial response. The amendment can then be withdrawn, which is a perfectly proper way to proceed.

The opportunity to speak on the motion that the clause stand part of the Bill is proper in only two circumstances. One is to give the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee a technical opportunity to provide feedback. The other is in circumstances in which Members wish to vote against the motion that the clause stand part of the Bill, and thereby use it as a mechanism to wreck a Bill. It would be a device for wrecking a Bill, if Members wanted to do that.

2.15 pm

I urge Members not to treat this debate as a secondary debate, or as an opportunity to make specific points

that would be better made by tabling an amendment that could then be debated and receive a ministerial response. There would then be no need for the House to divide, because the Member could simply withdraw the amendment. That is the proper way to proceed. As yet the Assembly has not accumulated enough experience in legislation to be familiar with all the possibilities. I am simply drawing these opportunities to Members' attention for the future.

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

I thank the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, Mr Cobain, for his broad support of the Bill. I reiterate what I have said in the House on previous occasions, and place on record my appreciation of the constructive attitude that he has adopted throughout and the assistance he has given. I acknowledge the Committee's concern about aspects of the obtaining and sharing of information provisions in the Bill, and I hope to be able to allay those concerns.

First, the Committee has recommended that the Assembly should seek assurances that the operation of safeguards relating to the obtaining and sharing of information will be subject to rigorous management checks. I am happy to provide such assurances, and can confirm that my Department will ensure that only authorised officers may make requests for information under those powers, and that they have received full training in their correct application. The number of authorised officers will be strictly limited, and they will be located in the central unit of the Department's benefits investigation service. Authorised officers who obtain information from organisations in the public and private sectors are bound by law to observe confidentiality and security at all times.

The procedures to be followed are set out clearly in the code of practice, and will be subject to rigorous management checks to ensure that they are followed correctly. Any enquiry made without good reason could lead to disciplinary action against the officer concerned. The Department's internal audit team, which is independent and entirely separate from the investigative process, will provide an extra tier of assurance. They will audit procedures to ensure that all management checks are carried out thoroughly and regularly. Periodic reports will be provided to senior managers.

Secondly, in cases where there is only a believed intention to commit a benefit offence, the Committee has suggested that the powers of investigation should be exercised only in cases of suspected organised attempts at major fraud. A wide variety of frauds are perpetrated against the benefit system. These range from the person who does not tell the Department that he has started work, or who fails to declare savings or capital in a bank or building society, to the highly organised criminal gangs involved in counterfeiting or stealing instruments of payment and running false

identity frauds. The Department needs to be able to use the powers provided for in the Bill in all appropriate cases, not only in cases of organised major fraud. How the Department can use the powers is governed by a code of practice. The main requirement is that there should be reasonable grounds for suspecting that a person is committing a benefit offence or contravening social security legislation. In all cases, an authorised officer must be wholly satisfied that there is a convincing logical basis for suspecting fraud and that other, less intrusive, means have been considered and ruled out before making the decision to obtain information from a third party.

The confidentiality statement on claim forms for all benefits will clearly tell the claimants that information provided may be checked with third parties, including banks. Anyone expressing dissatisfaction about the way that an authorised officer has used the powers, or the unreasonableness of the authorised officer's actions when obtaining information, can make a complaint. The complaint procedure will be set out in the code of practice.

Members recognise the benefits of the long-established policy of parity. As people in Northern Ireland pay the same rates of income tax and national insurance contributions as those in Great Britain, they are entitled to enjoy the same rights and benefits as people in Great Britain. Parity, however, is a two-edged sword. Rights to benefits have to be matched by obligations to society. If it is right that we should enjoy the same rights and benefits as people in Great Britain, it is equally right that we should play our part in tackling the problem of benefit fraud. This is particularly so given, as I explained to the Assembly before, our dependence on subsidy from Great Britain to keep our social security system afloat. It would be patently wrong to deny my Department this useful tool in tackling fraud and to allow benefit fraud to continue when perpetrators in Great Britain can be investigated.

The Committee recommended that the code of practice should be reviewed within three years of its publication and the outcome reported to the Assembly. The Department will continually monitor the use of the powers, and benefit investigation services will report regularly to senior managers on the position. I assure Members that the Department will review the code of practice within three years and report the outcome to the Assembly.

Members have voiced some concerns. My Department is concerned about the uptake of benefits. It is important that people get the benefit they are entitled to, and my Department has committed resources to ensure that that happens. Fraud is not investigated simply because of a mysterious, miscellaneous or unknown phone call — it may be used as evidence, but it is not taken as the sole source for an investigation.

I thank Mr Sammy Wilson for his comments. He has been positive and sees exactly what we are trying to achieve through the legislation. Danny O'Connor voiced concerns about human rights. My Department is equally concerned, but we have adequately addressed that particular matter. The European Convention on Human Rights provides for instances where human rights have to be restricted, where such measures are necessary to deal with issues of public policy such as fraud.

I reassure the House and the Member that the matter has been dealt with. It is something that we are all concerned about, and it is not the intention, either wilfully or unknowingly, to infringe people's human rights. I acknowledge that people do have human rights. I also assure Mr O'Connor that my Department spends money on benefit uptake. He said that we were too busy investigating fraud and that we had neither the time nor the resources needed for benefit uptake. That is not the case. We put many resources into ensuring that people take up their benefits.

I have dealt with the code of practice, and I give the necessary assurance to the House as to the way forward.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage. The Bill now stands referred to the Speaker.

INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(3), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(5) be extended to 23 November 2001 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Industrial Development Bill (NIA Bill 18/00). — [Mr Neeson.]

Mr Speaker: There being less than five minutes until we interrupt for Question Time, I do not propose to proceed with the next item of business, which would be the votes on the amendment and the substantive motion on the Human Rights Commission which were debated last week. As there are likely to be votes requiring record, that would take around 20 minutes, thus delaying Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 2.26 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No.3 has been withdrawn.

Terrorist Attacks: Effects on Business in Northern Ireland

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the recent terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and the already evident onset of recession, to give his assessment as to whether the consequent volatility in world markets will have an adverse effect on business and industry in Northern Ireland. (AQO165/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): No country can insulate itself from world economic events. The global slowdown, together with the terrorist attacks in the United States, have already begun to adversely affect Northern Ireland's foreign direct investment, trade and tourism. However, trade with Great Britain, and the continued strength of public expenditure, will offer some protection against the slowdown. My Department is continuing its efforts to attract investment and to promote trade and tourism.

Mr K Robinson: What percentage of Northern Ireland's economic output does the Minister estimate to be dependent on foreign firms? What effect does he believe that the continuing political instability here is likely to have on existing and future inward investment? The loss of hundreds of high-skill jobs has been forecast by the local aerospace industry, and British Airways has announced plans to withdraw from the Belfast to Heathrow route. What strategies does the Minister intend to implement to deal with the consequences of those announcements, which have dealt a severe blow to the economy of Newtownabbey?

Sir Reg Empey: I am conscious of the impact of those events in the Member's constituency. That area, and other areas where Short Bros plc has bases, will be affected. Foreign companies in that category employ almost 70,000 people in Northern Ireland, which is a huge percentage of our workforce. At present, the United States and the Republic of Ireland are our principal employers. A total of 146 American firms operate in

Northern Ireland, and they employ more than 22,000 people. About 16,500 are employed by the 165 firms from the Republic of Ireland. At a glance, this shows roughly where the strength lies.

There is no doubt that if we are not careful we could severely disadvantage ourselves. The employees of Bombardier Shorts, for example, tend to be highly skilled; therefore, should it become necessary in the long term, they would find it easier to come by other jobs. However, it is unclear what the downstream effects will be. My Colleague, Dr Farren, said earlier that a more sober assessment could not be made until we have detailed knowledge of the figures.

Mr S Wilson: Does the Minister accept that it is not only international terrorism that has caused economic instability in Northern Ireland, but that our economy is affected by acts carried out by local terrorists? Does not the Minister find it disturbing that while the Government of the United States has been declaring war on terrorists, the US ambassador to Dublin attended this weekend the annual conference of IRA terrorists? Political representatives of several international terrorist groups, which the US Government have supposedly declared war on, had also been invited.

Sir Reg Empey: I said in an earlier response that I could make no distinction between an attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, an attack on Canary Wharf, or an attack on Great Victoria Street. There is no fundamental difference. The principle is exactly the same. There now appears to be an artificial differentiation between terrorism and international terrorism.

Terrorism is international by definition. The terrorist material used here for over 30 years originated outside Northern Ireland. A significant percentage of it came from the United States, and an even greater percentage was financed by donations from people in the United States. The Member referred to the conference in Dublin at the weekend; I look forward with interest to seeing how that circle is squared. One of the resolutions passed at that conference castigated the Government of the United States for its involvement in Colombia. I found that one very hard to figure out. I will be amazed if the diplomat concerned can square that with the President's onslaught on international terrorism. I will be interested in his response.

Electricity Prices

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the progress his Department has made on reducing electricity prices for domestic and business consumers. (AQO160/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department and the regulator are continuing to advance measures aimed at establishing the conditions for significant reductions in the price of

electricity. The principal focus is on introducing increased competition, consumer choice and liberalisation into the market, and on interconnection with other competitive markets.

Mr Byrne: The Minister's response is disappointing. We had a major debate on 6 November 2000, asking the authorities and the Executive to intervene in the contracts with NIE. Households in Northern Ireland enjoy 15% less home income than homes in Great Britain, but they pay 20% more for domestic energy. Will the Minister accept that the public is becoming fatigued as it waits for progress on this issue?

Sir Reg Empey: I accept that the public is becoming fatigued. The contracts that the Member referred to are legally binding documents, which were entered into freely by the then Government and by various companies. The regulator has tried, over a prolonged period, to deal with this matter by persuasion. We have managed to buy down a certain percentage of the contracts with the £40 million that was given to us by the Chancellor some years ago. That took place within the last couple of months.

Contracts are contracts. Companies will not give them up voluntarily. The alternative is a buyout, which is a hugely expensive exercise. It means, in effect, the floating of a public bond. We are examining that option very closely. We are getting professional help, and the Department of Finance and Personnel is also involved. Let us be under no illusion, however. These contracts were entered into in 1991, and getting out of them will be very expensive. I have always believed that until we tackle that issue — and we must — everything else will be minimised. I hope that when the time comes, and if the Assembly is given the opportunity to deal with the matter, we will have all-round support, because it is not going to be cheap.

Other measures are being taken. The Member will be aware that the cost of fuel affects the cost of energy. We have an inefficient system using old equipment from the 1960s and 1970s. A new, state-of-the-art, gas-fired power station is being built at Ballylumford, which will use less gas to generate the same amount of electricity.

As a result of decisions taken by the Executive the week before last, we should have a state-of-the-art power station at Coolkeeragh, which will also provide cheaper electricity per unit cost. From January 2002 we hope to operate the interconnection from Scotland, which will bring more competitively priced electricity onto the market. The regulator is also conducting reviews into the transmission side of NIE's activities, and I hope that a combination of all these factors will ensure reasonably priced electricity. I am acutely aware that they place Northern Ireland at a competitive disadvantage.

Mr Leslie: I listened to the Minister's answer with interest. In his initial response he mentioned that we had to get more competition into the market, and he has just elaborated on that. We also need more demand. It would be fairly straightforward to get competitive generation if we had an increase in demand. There may well be other fuels to be used in generation apart from those that he has mentioned.

Does the Minister anticipate a significant increase in demand to help him get out of this dilemma, and does he have any other sources of fuel in mind?

Sir Reg Empey: There are indications about what demand levels may be. Demand will not grow dramatically, and consequently — and especially if we run into any economic downturns — we will find it more difficult to get more competition into the market. When the interconnector comes on-stream in three or four months time we will have adequate generation capability. However, time marches on, and one of the power stations, Belfast West Power Station, is reaching the end of its useful life. Within the next year or so it may be dropping out of the system. There is also an application before me for another power station to be built at Kilroot in addition to the one already there.

Three sources of fuel come to mind. The first is the proposal to convert Kilroot power station to use Orimulsion, although that has significant environmental implications. The second involves the prospect of generating electricity using lignite, and the Member will be well aware of that in his own constituency. The third is the growth of renewable energy sources, particularly wind power. These three routes are still open to us, and I am conscious that there is a need for us not to be overdependent on one fuel; that has been our mistake in the past.

Gas Pipeline

4. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what progress has been made on the North/South gas pipeline, with specific reference to (a) the provision of pipeline infrastructure; (b) the linkages to towns en route; and (c) the work on Coolkeeragh combined cycle gas turbine power station.
(AQO162/01)

7. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he will make a statement on the extension of the natural gas pipeline to the north-west.
(AQO175/01)

Sir Reg Empey: I will take questions 4 and 7 together.

The Executive recently approved financial support for a Bord Gáis/Questar proposal for a gas transmission pipeline from Gormanstown, County Dublin, to Antrim, where it will connect with a pipeline to the north-west. The total grant package for this project will be up to

£38 million, of which the Irish Government will contribute IR£10 million. Any linkages to towns en route will be a matter for the private sector. Consent for the construction of a combined cycle gas turbine power station at Coolkeeragh has now been granted, as has planning permission for the project.

Mr Savage: After the initial period of capital investment, can the Minister estimate the effect that the North/ South gas pipeline is likely to have on the cost of power to industry, which is currently much higher here than in other parts of the UK?

Sir Reg Empey: There are a couple of issues involved. First, I am pleased with the Executive's decision because it offers choice. We are at a competitive disadvantage as most of our major competitors in the Republic, Great Britain or mainland Europe have access to natural gas. There are some industrial projects that would not have been possible otherwise, and, due to our high energy costs, the provision of natural gas to potential industrial users, not least in the Member's own constituency, will help their competitive advantage in the long term.

The Executive's decision creates the pipelines — the motorway — for the product to travel along. However, getting it to the towns and industrial users requires a further exercise, which the regulator will be shortly undertaking, to seek expressions of interest from people who wish to distribute the product into towns along the route.

2.45 pm

The contract for the pipeline will specify that pressure reduction stations must be located no less than 5km from town gates. That means that, as far as possible, the facilities will be available to most of the major towns on the route of the line. It will then be up to the private sector to come forward with proposals to distribute the gas to all users. Through that mechanism further competition will be possible and, as the market grows, costs should reduce.

Mr Neeson: I am sure the Minister realises that I submitted my question before the Executive made their decision — a decision that I, like other Members, warmly welcome. Now that the go-ahead has been given, have the Minister and the Department worked out a time scale for the progress of the project and particularly for the development of the new power station at Coolkeeragh?

Sir Reg Empey: I thank Mr Neeson for his continued support for the natural gas pipeline. I can give him details of some time scales. The Electricity Supply Board of Ireland, which will be the operator at Coolkeeragh, believes that it can be competitive provided it gets into the marketplace. The contract will require gas to be at the end of the pipe by late 2004. Shortly thereafter

Coolkeeragh will be able to generate electricity and sell it. Three quarters of its generating capacity will come on to the open market, and one quarter will probably be contracted. That will bring about 275 megawatts on to the open market.

Distribution of gas to the towns en route cannot take place before that because the infrastructure will not be there. However, the distribution will be market-led, and the regulator will seek interest from potential developers who wish to get a licence to distribute the gas. It will be up to the market to decide when that should be. The terms of a licence will be time specific, so people will not be permitted to get licences and not use them. Licences will be time limited to ensure that the fuel is distributed as widely and as quickly as possible.

Mr McMenamín: I welcome the recent initiative to bring gas to the north-west. However, it is vital that an area of high unemployment such as west Tyrone, which includes Omagh and my home town of Strabane, has an alternative source of energy to attract inward investment. I appreciate that one cannot pressurise a company to locate in any area, but if the proper energy infrastructure is not in place, that area will not be an attractive place for investment. Will the Minister assure the House that he and the Executive will do their utmost to extend the gas line to west Tyrone?

Sir Reg Empey: I am aware that there used to be a gas industry in the Strabane area. The infrastructure will not be too far from Strabane as it will be in the Londonderry area and move on to Letterkenny. Ultimately, it will be necessary for a company to come forward with a proposal to allow the distribution of the product. Several Members from West Tyrone have raised that matter, so I am aware of the situation.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment would like to see maximum distribution throughout Northern Ireland, but one must be realistic. It is an expensive infrastructure project, and there must be at least a minimum point of demand to make it feasible. However, the Department is aware of overarching issues such as TSN that will have to be taken into account, and we will be considering those in the area of telecommunications.

I am reluctant to give the Member an undertaking that cannot be delivered. I am, however, aware that he and other Members are anxious to see the product distributed as widely as possible throughout Northern Ireland. I share that anxiety, and we will have to see what operators come forward with and react accordingly.

Employment Opportunities: Down District Council Area

5. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he has taken to provide

employment opportunities in the Down District Council area. (AQO188/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department, through its agencies, is committed to supporting and developing business in the Down District Council area by encouraging new business start-ups, promoting jobs by inward investment and safeguarding existing jobs. LEDU is also working in partnership with the local council and enterprise agencies to develop enterprise business development initiatives.

Mr O'Neill: Like my Colleague Mr Byrne, I am disappointed that the Minister has not answered the question. Can he tell the House how many visits there have been to the Down District Council area by prospective employers over the past four months? What support will the Minister and his Department give to the private sector to provide office accommodation to attract office-based employment?

Sir Reg Empey: I cannot advise the Member of the number of visits that have taken place in the past four months; however, I will reply to him in writing. I can tell him that since April 1996 there have been 32 visits to the Down District Council area by potential investors. That information should be available to him as a member of the council.

It is not the normal practice of my Department to support the construction of office accommodation. Various planning issues are involved. There is also the secondary issue of whether IDB-owned land should be used for office accommodation, other than for ancillary offices for industrial work on an IDB/LEDU site. Building office accommodation would represent a significant departure from practice. There are, however, expressions of interest before the IDB for the use of certain IDB-owned sites in the Down District Council area. Those are receiving attention. The Department recently issued a development brief for the construction of a unit or units of approximately 15,000 square feet at Down Business Park, and we should have a response to that within the next few weeks.

Lord Kilclooney: In the Down District Council area, in Killyleagh and Saintfield in the Strangford constituency, there are many hundreds of people who have experience in the textile spinning industry. Sadly, we lost the spinning plant in Killyleagh. I am aware that incentives will vary according to the nature of a project. However, will the Minister, in principle, assure the people of Killyleagh and Saintfield and similar rural towns that there will be greater incentives to go to such towns rather than to the Greater Belfast area?

Sir Reg Empey: In the Programme for Government and in the New TSN proposals, large areas of Northern Ireland outside the Greater Belfast area are included. In the past year the IDB had a target of 75% of new

jobs delivered for TSN areas: it achieved 76%. That covered all of Northern Ireland.

There was significant lobbying about the situation in Killyleagh and Saintfield — not least from the Deputy Speaker and Members. Significant numbers of people in those areas found themselves victims of the huge downturn in the textile industry. The Department did not sit idly by. The Kurt Salmon report has been published, and we have adopted its recommendations. The industry has formed a small company to deliver that policy in conjunction with my Department. I am confident that, as the policy progresses, there will be an opportunity for restructuring and upskilling in the textile trades.

Killyleagh and Saintfield are not included in the New TSN area proposals, therefore, they do not receive the specific advantages that New TSN areas do. However, when this issue arose in the Ards and North Down boroughs, which were badly affected by textile cuts, the Department gave assurances that everything possible would be done to ensure that the areas received inward investment. That has certainly been achieved in the Ards area in the last two years.

Washington Economic Conference

6. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether the economic conference planned for Washington will take place in view of the terrible events in the United States of America on 11 September 2001. (AQO163/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The indications are that the summit will proceed as planned. The proposal to hold the business summit originated in the United States, where the private sector organiser is being supported by the Administration there. Our input is being co-ordinated by the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington on behalf of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. My officials in the IDB are working closely with the bureau and are in contact with the organisers about their plans.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Minister comment on proposals made by the United States Government for greater economic co-operation between the USA and the Republic of Ireland? Does he believe that we should institute mechanisms to take advantage of any likely trade benefits?

Sir Reg Empey: In June I visited the organisers of the proposed summit in Washington, and I have kept in regular contact with them since then. I met the American Secretary of Commerce, Mr Don Evans, and I have been in close contact with our bureau. IDB officials and our bureau have formed a team in Washington to maximise the advantages of this summit. It will focus on business, and several business people

have been invited. The response has been positive so far, but it is clear that events, not least those of 11 September, will have an impact.

People who I have talked to seem determined to ensure that the act of terrorism that took place should not be allowed to scupper the proposals. Any opportunity for Northern Ireland's small economy to be put on the world stage with key businesses from the Republic and the United States should not be missed. This is particularly so when the initiative is coming from the United States and they are sponsoring the event. No subsidy is involved; businesses are going there at their own expense. There has been a significant response, and the highest level of the American Administration is showing keen interest in the summit. Therefore, we should take any advantages it presents.

Cruise Belfast Initiative

8. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what discussions have taken place with Cruise Belfast Initiative concerning tourist promotion and marketing in Northern Ireland; and to make a statement. (AQO173/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and the Port of Belfast plan marketing activity for the Cruise Belfast Initiative. Levels of co-operation include international and dockside promotion.

Cruise Ireland, the marketing co-operative that promotes the island of Ireland as a premier cruise destination, supports that co-operation.

3.00 pm

Mr McGrady: Is the Minister aware of the increasing sense of frustration, bordering on anger, which has been inspired by the failure to date of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) to adequately promote the south-east area, including the Mourne, St Patrick's country and St Patrick's heritage, on an equal footing? Now, when tourism is in danger, will the Minister ensure that initiatives such as the Cruise Belfast initiative are better informed about the potential for tourism in the Mourne and St Patrick's country?

Sir Reg Empey: I am under no illusions about the attractions of St Patrick's country to potential visitors. However, the NITB has not been the primary driver in organising this particular initiative. The Belfast Visitor & Convention Bureau and other groups, including local authority organisations, were also involved. The project has a two-year lead-in period. There were 15 visits this year, compared with 7 in the previous year. The routes that the liners take are organised several years in advance. I understand that a lot of effort has gone into achieving that growth in visits.

I am personally persuaded that there is absolutely no reason why the St Patrick's area cannot benefit from that, but the NITB does not dictate which bus goes where. It offers a full range of information on what is available in each particular area. It is then up to a particular organisation to pick up on the ideas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up. If you have any further information for Mr McGrady, you will no doubt give it to him in writing.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mr Dallat, will receive a written response. Question 10, in the name of Ms Lewsley, has been transferred to the Minister of Education and will receive a written response.

University Students: Non-payment of Fees

1. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many students have been refused permission to sit examinations or refused results of examinations as a result of non-payment of fees or late payments of fees in each university. (AQO159/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): My Department does not formally hold this information, nor does it determine the policy and procedures followed by our universities. However, Queen's University indicates that, in the circumstances described, it does not refuse permission to sit examinations or refuse results of examinations. While the University of Ulster does not refuse students with outstanding debts permission to sit examinations, their results will not be forwarded to the board of examiners until their debts have been cleared. I also understand that the current number of students at the University of Ulster affected by that policy is 314 — 120 of whom are full-time — out of a total student population of 21,173.

Mrs Nelis: Does the Minister agree that, no matter how minimal the numbers are, those students who definitely cannot afford to pay the exorbitant tuition fees are very seriously affected by this matter? There have been cases, and I am prepared to forward information on this to the Minister, where students have been refused permission to sit examinations and resits. Students have been asked to pay a £100 administration fee — after paying tuition fees — and have still been refused permission to take resits.

Dr Farren: It may well be the case that individual students are experiencing the hardship referred to in the question. I am not aware of the individual circumstances of all of those affected. If there are matters that fall within my area of responsibility, I would certainly be anxious to hear from the Member and to attempt to

deal with them. I did stress that the policies, procedures and requirements are matters for the universities themselves. I assume that all students are made aware of those.

The Member will be aware that I have been very exercised by the financial circumstances of students. For that reason, I took the major step of reviewing those circumstances and the support available. I initiated considerable reform, much of which will take effect from the current academic year, which is just beginning. It will be fully implemented over the next few years, not least with respect to the introduction of student bursaries or grants — I note that the Member seems persistently to suggest that I have failed to address that matter.

Mr Byrne: Some students are in hardship situations and have not been able to meet their fee commitments. Is any consideration being given to putting in place hardship funds or other arrangements to meet the needs of students with such difficulties?

Dr Farren: Members will be aware that the universities do administer hardship funds. One of the measures that I have taken, as part of the review of student financial support, is to enhance the availability of funding for such hardship funds. Given my experience in one of our universities, I believe that sympathetic consideration is given to students who have genuine cases to make. I am aware that the hardship funds are drawn down to meet the unforeseen difficulties that are experienced by students.

Individual Learning Accounts

3. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) how many people have opened individual learning accounts; and (b) how many individual learning accounts have been used to date. (AQO181/01)

Dr Farren: At 17 September, a total of 65,225 individual learning accounts (ILAs) had been opened and 26,811 were in use.

Mr A Maginness: Does the Minister intend to review the level of incentives for students opening individual learning accounts?

Dr Farren: Given that ILAs only became operational in Northern Ireland a year ago, and because of the limited uptake in late 2000, reliable uptake and usage patterns will not emerge until the end of this year. It will be appropriate to address such questions at that time.

A user survey for the first six months has, however, revealed a very encouraging start. ILAs have clearly encouraged more people than anticipated — from all social and economic groups — to take up learning. Some of the key conclusions of the survey were that

92% of users had their learning expectations met or exceeded; 67% were female; 62% had not undertaken formal learning in the previous year; and 60% had taken IT courses.

What we would refer to as the deadweight — most likely those who would have taken courses regardless of the availability of support from an individual learning account — was about 31%. That compares with an estimated deadweight of between 45% and 50% in Britain.

We are witnessing an initiative that has met with considerable success. The scale of that success is such that it challenges directly the resource provision that was allocated to meet it. However, I hope that we shall be able to overcome some of the inherent problems and point to the introduction of individual learning accounts as an undoubted success in promoting adult and lifelong learning. Recent surveys have indicated that we have much ground to make up.

Mr Shannon: What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that providers of individual learning accounts who have dubious credentials do not benefit from public funds?

Dr Farren: I assure the Member that we do not deal with dubious providers, and if he has any information along those lines, I urge him to make it available to my officials, who will follow it up expeditiously. My Department is aware of its responsibilities, and providers are subject to appropriate evaluation of what they provide, the manner in which they provide it and the associated costs.

Mr Armstrong: What steps has the Minister taken to extend individual learning accounts to remote and rural areas, which the Moser Report highlighted as a facet of rural poverty?

Dr Farren: It is important to point out that individual learning accounts are available everywhere. Anyone anywhere can open an individual learning account. Individuals may have concerns about the availability of certain courses because of where they live. However, it has been a gratifying experience for me to note that community organisations are making strenuous efforts to contribute to the provision of adult learning opportunities, even in those areas that might be described as the more remote in our region.

I am aware, from visiting community centres in the Member's constituency and in many others, that individual learning accounts are provided in community centres in rural areas. I compliment the community organisations that are involved in working with their local further education colleges. It is tremendous to see the scale on which our adult population is becoming involved in the new learning opportunities that are being made available to it.

Review of Careers Education and Guidance

4. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his response to the review of careers education and guidance chaired by Prof Sean Fulton. (AQO169/01)

3.15 pm

Dr Farren: My Department and the Department of Education commissioned the review of careers education and guidance. Both Departments have received a preliminary report and have asked Prof Fulton, who chaired the group that carried out the review, to undertake some additional work before producing his final report. I am pleased to say that Prof Fulton has agreed and is already discharging his responsibilities in that regard.

Dr Birnie: The Minister will be aware that there was a review of careers guidance and education as recently as the mid-1990s. The fact that another review was necessary in 2000 might imply that the first had only a limited impact. Does the Minister agree that that was the case and, if so, what will be done this time to ensure that history does not repeat itself?

Dr Farren: The Member will appreciate that the first review was not my responsibility. There was a considerable demand for a review in the light of the changing and positive economic circumstances that were prevailing towards the end of the 1990s. In addition to the establishment of the skills task force, it was felt that such a review was required. We will make every effort to ensure that it meets our needs. I have every confidence in the work of Prof Fulton, and I am sure that his report will address some of the problems with careers education and advice. The review was urged upon us, not least by the Committee that the Member chairs. I hope that the report will be available before the end of the year and that action can be taken at the beginning of the coming year.

A Level Results

5. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what percentage of the intake of students into Northern Ireland higher education institutions have qualifications other than the traditional two or more A levels. (AQO166/01)

Dr Farren: It is not possible at this point to provide a figure from the most recent intake into our higher education institutions. However, data from 1999-2000 indicates that 36% of full-time and 96% of part-time entrants had qualifications other than two or more A levels or their equivalent.

Mr K Robinson: Given that the average intake of students with non-traditional qualifications in the UK as a whole is in excess of 30%, what does the Minister

propose to do to ensure that there is parity of esteem between the more academic route into higher education — A levels — and the general national vocational qualification (GNVQ) and national vocational qualification (NVQ)? What action will he take to ensure that universities monitor and maintain quality standards while seeking to avert any significant drop-out levels from students in this cohort who might find it difficult to adjust to the new surroundings?

Dr Farren: The percentages that I read out reveal a willingness and an openness, on the part of our higher education institutions, to consider and admit applicants with non-traditional qualifications, as we call them. As we open up access to further and higher education — and particularly higher education, which is the focus of the question — there is anxiety to ensure that selectors in higher education institutions give full consideration to non-traditional backgrounds. I know that the institutions are doing so from my direct contact with the universities.

I am aware, from correspondence to the Department, that there are sometimes concerns about certain individuals. However, generally the selectors show a healthy willingness to be open-minded. I welcome that. The Department encourages such open-mindedness and wants to take advantage of it.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is an increasing trend towards the provision of advanced vocational certificates in post-primary education. They are being provided in the Christian Brothers Grammar School in Omagh, which I attended, where courses in construction and the built environment are available for pupils aged 16 and above. Those courses are proving so popular that not all applicants can be accommodated. Will the Minister co-operate with his Colleague, Mr Martin McGuinness, the Minister of Education, to address the issue of accommodating those students who wish to access that route to higher education institutions? As Ken Robinson said, it is an issue of parity of esteem between the vocational and academic fields.

Dr Farren: There is willingness and a healthy openness on the part of the higher education institutions to consider students whose educational backgrounds are different from the traditional academic backgrounds that generally lead to higher education. The figures prove that the institutions are open-minded and will consider students from those backgrounds on the basis of merit.

That is a healthy practice. That is a route that many more of our young people — and, indeed, older people — should take. Ninety-six per cent of part-time students have qualifications other than A levels, which shows that there is a route into higher education other than the traditional one. Many people may not know that such routes exist.

Adult Learning

6. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the provisions currently available in Northern Ireland to facilitate adult learning. (AQO185/01)

Dr Farren: A wide range of adult learning provision is available. It is supported by my Department through courses at universities, the Open University, further education colleges, private training organisations and voluntary community bodies such as the Workers' Educational Association. The creation of the learndirect network has been a major new development in the field. I have had the pleasure of visiting and opening several of those centres in recent months.

Mr M Robinson: The Minister will be aware that in the draft Programme for Government it states that everyone must have access to opportunities for lifelong learning after their initial education. How will the Minister prioritise within his Department to ensure that everyone, irrespective of status and income, will have access to those educational opportunities?

Dr Farren: I have taken initiatives in order to provide a greater degree of financial support for full-time students in further and higher education. I have already mentioned individual learning accounts, which are now universally available for adults who wish to avail of lifelong learning opportunities through courses of short or long duration. We are moving more rapidly than the Member's question suggests to a situation where many more people will have the opportunity to avail of further and higher education. People avail of this opportunity not only for an initial qualification but as part of their lifelong learning.

Further Education Colleges: Funding

7. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to state what percentage of funding for Northern Ireland further education colleges derives from the private sector. (AQO168/01)

Dr Farren: In the 1999-2000 financial year, an average of 14.35% of funding for the Northern Ireland further education colleges derived from the private sector.

Mrs Carson: Given that the fostering of closer networks between the education colleges and local businesses is a key strategic goal for the sector, will the Minister undertake a strategic review of the further education sector as soon as possible?

Dr Farren: The Member may be aware that we constantly monitor provision in the further education sector. I have almost completed a round of visits to the colleges, and I have been impressed by what I have seen. Officials in the Department work constantly with the colleges, and we are moving towards an overall strategy.

We need not wait until we have a formal strategy on paper to be assured that the colleges make a significant contribution — locally and regionally — to economic regeneration, and do so in close contact with the business community.

Task force on employability and long-term unemployment

8. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the progress to date with the task force on employability and long-term unemployment.
(AQO179/01)

Dr Farren: To date, four meetings of the task force on employability and long-term unemployment have taken place. In addition, over 1,500 discussion documents have been issued, and a series of 26 engagement meetings is under way. The engagement meetings are with organisations from the business community, the trade union movement and the voluntary and community sector. Such organisations have an interest in employability and a role to play in devising the action plan that will come out of the work of the task force, so that we can reduce — I hope, eliminate — long-term unemployment.

Mr Gallagher: I welcome what the Minister said about wide-ranging consultation. With what organisations has the task force engaged?

Dr Farren: The task force has already met organisations such as the Business Alliance, which represents a number of employer's organisations, the trade unions, the voluntary and community sector under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), the board of the Training and Employment Agency, the New Deal task force, organisations representing disabled people, organisations representing minority ethnic communities, women's groups, the health trusts, the education sector — including a group of school principals, Business in the Community and the chief executives of the district councils. Further meetings have been arranged, and we hope to complete the series of engagement meetings by the end of this month. I remind Members that that is also the date by which submissions in response to our discussion document should be lodged with the Department.

Irish Language Vocational Training

9. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the scope of the review he has undertaken on the provision of Irish language vocational training.
(AQO177/01)

Dr Farren: In recent years, the number of children and young people in Irish-medium primary and secondary schools has grown.

3.30 pm

I welcome that, having experienced that form of primary and secondary education myself. Those young people are beginning to enter the labour market after compulsory education and will be seeking access to Irish-medium vocational education and training opportunities. I have therefore asked officials in my Department to undertake a policy review of provision for that group and to report to me as soon as possible. I expect officials to consult with Foras na Gaeilge, the Ultach Trust, Forbairt Feirste and other Irish language groups and to take account of the practice in the South and in Scotland and Wales, and possibly elsewhere.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his reply and welcome the review that he has undertaken. As with past reviews he is clearly breaking new ground in an effort to create new policy. In this case, he is attempting to mainstream respect for lesser-used languages into our national life — particularly for the Irish language, which is valued by so many in the North. What is the time scale for the review?

Dr Farren: My Department will write to interested parties in the next month and will consult widely on practice in the Republic, Great Britain and other parts of the European Union. It is my intention to have any new arrangements for the provision of Irish-medium vocational education and training in place for the academic year 2002-03.

Mr Beggs: Will the funding allocated to the Irish language body be used to develop such courses, or will he be drawing on the limited funds of his Department? How will he ensure that equality requirements are met and that English speakers will not be discriminated against by the potential reduction in courses that could be of service to them, and by the provision of courses that they will not be entitled to be educated through because they would not be able to understand them?

Dr Farren: I am sure that the Member appreciates that my Department, together with all Departments in our Administration, is statutorily, and morally, bound to observe all the equality requirements and to conform to the equality schemes that we have published. To do anything therefore that would result in discrimination would be totally contrary to those obligations, and we would find ourselves in very hot water. I assure the Member that there will be no initiatives taken that will have that effect. Our obligation is to address the requirements relating to equality and parity of esteem contained in the Good Friday Agreement.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Homelessness

1. **Mr O'Neill** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the action he has taken as a consequence

of the Assembly's resolution, on 16 January 2001, for greater provision to be made for people presenting themselves as homeless. (AQO187/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):

The Housing Executive is undertaking a review of its homelessness strategy. The review was launched on 24 September, and it will give everyone the opportunity to comment on what must be done and to identify any shortcomings, thus informing decisions on the degree of any increased provision that may be necessary.

Mr O'Neill: I thank the Minister for his reply and join with him in welcoming the document 'Homeless Strategy and Services Review'. It is a considerable contribution to the debate on homelessness, but it is an expensive option. We must look at the issue realistically if we are to tackle it realistically. Since the debate, the homeless figures have increased by 20%. Therefore we must act quickly.

According to the press release, the cost of the programme is estimated at £30 million over the next five years. Some of that can be met by internal redistribution, but, nevertheless, it will be a major commitment. Can the Minister give the House a commitment that he will find the necessary additional funding? Too often in the past the Housing Executive has been asked to do things without any additional funding. I ask the Minister for a commitment today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask the question?

Mr O'Neill: I have done so. I asked him for a commitment today to support the homeless strategy through a funding requirement.

Mr Morrow: I reassure the House that I will continue to make bids to tackle homelessness. However, we will be much better informed when we get the report; we will know the exact position. As the Member said, there is a problem and we are aware of it, but we want to go forward in an educated and constructive manner and tackle the difficulty to the best of our ability.

Social Deprivation

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to (a) increase the quantity of housing stock available for Protestants; and (b) upgrade current housing stock, given that social deprivation is a cross-community problem. (AQO158/01)

Mr Morrow: The Housing Executive, as the comprehensive housing authority, is responsible for assessing housing need. It has an excellent reputation for impartiality and fairness, both in developing programmes to meet identified need and in the allocation of individual properties. All social housing provided through public sector funding is programmed and allocated on housing

need, regardless of religion. In addition, both the Housing Executive and registered housing associations regularly upgrade their stock in line with their respective cyclical maintenance programmes.

Mr Hamilton: What action is the Minister taking to ensure that Unionist communities become more socially active and more aware of their social rights? How has he been encouraging them in this regard?

Mr Morrow: My Department and the Housing Executive, which has ultimate responsibility for housing, take particular care to ensure that no community is excluded. When I became Minister, I asserted that a good home is not a privilege; it is a basic human right. I intend, as long as I am here, to ensure to the best of my ability that everyone who is entitled to housing gets it, irrespective of where they come from. That applies to both communities. I am concerned about people who have been on a waiting list for a long time or who live in sub-standard housing. My Department and the Housing Executive are working to eradicate that. I assure the Member that we do not take that lightly.

Mr O'Connor: I welcome the Minister's comments. He will note that paragraph 3(22) of the report referred to by Mr O'Neill shows that twice as many Catholics as Protestants present themselves as homeless. It is stated in paragraph 3(45) that specific areas have been identified in which Catholic households must wait much longer than average in temporary accommodation. Paragraph 3(54) deals with those with disabilities. Will the Minister consider those points, especially that relating to provision for those with disabilities, who must wait twice as long to be rehoused?

Mr Morrow: I had difficulty in hearing the whole question. If I have not done, perhaps the Member will take me through any point that I miss.

I assure the Member and the House that the report will flag up all the issues. I assure the Member that we will take very seriously and give full consideration to provision for those with a disability. If that is not a full answer, I will look at Hansard, and I will respond to the Member in more detail.

Mr Shannon: Can the Minister — *[Interruption]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: To all other Members who want to speak on this subject: I will not call anyone after Mr Shannon, because those who have already put down a question should have priority.

Mr Shannon: With regard to the Minister's responses to both Members, can he say how many new-build houses are planned for each council area and how many are planned for renovation?

Mr Morrow: I cannot give the Member an answer for each council area. I can give him details about this year's plans.

There are 14,000 new dwellings planned for the current year. About 20% of them will be for special needs. For each of the next two years 1,200 are planned; these figures will be reviewed each year, taking into account the circumstances prevailing then. With regard to the upgrading of homes, it is hoped that 27,000 dwellings will be included as part of the maintenance and improvement scheme. In addition, grant aid will be given to 9,000 homes in the private sector. If that information is available for individual council areas I will ensure that the Member gets it.

Disability Living Allowance

3. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of disability living allowance awards in Northern Ireland for which deafness is the main disabling condition by (a) age; and (b) type of award, including care only component; mobility only component; and combined care and mobility components. (AQO182/01)

Mr Morrow: I have arranged for this information to be sent to the Member. However, the headline figures at 31 May 2001 show that 1,684 people were in receipt of disability living allowance for which deafness was the main disabling condition. Of that figure, 1,436 received the care and mobility components; 124 received only the care component, and 124 received only the mobility component.

Ms Lewsley: What is the Minister's Department doing to promote accessibility for deaf people to social security offices? What level of deaf awareness training is provided for staff and are there any plans to increase the level of such training?

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency (SSA) is committed to targeting social need. There are regular meetings with disability welfare groups in a continuing effort to promote awareness among the disabled, and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID) is among this group. The RNID also provided training for SSA staff in an effort to improve communication with customers with a hearing impairment. My Department is always looking at ways of improving the service and getting it to people who may be entitled to benefits. That includes the people that the Member has referred to.

Housing Benefit: Belvoir Estate

4. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of households in the Belvoir estate, Belfast, that are in receipt of housing benefit. (AQO186/01)

Mr Morrow: There are 423 households receiving housing benefit in the Belvoir estate. Of that figure, 404 are in the public-rented sector and 19 are in the

private-rented sector. The figures do not include housing benefit that might be paid to owner-occupiers whose claims are processed by the Rate Collection Agency.

Mr M Robinson: I thank the Minister for his reply. What percentage of Housing Executive tenants in the Belvoir area are receiving housing benefit, and can the Minister indicate how that compares with the rest of Northern Ireland?

Mr Morrow: There are 49% of tenants in the Belvoir area who are receiving housing benefit. Overall, 78% of Housing Executive tenants receive housing benefit. I hope that answers the question.

Social Problems: North Belfast

5. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what action he plans to undertake to alleviate the social problems that underpin the community tensions in north Belfast. (AQO164/01)

Mr Morrow: My Department is committed to alleviating the social problems affecting north Belfast, and it is already leading and participating in several initiatives. My Department is represented on the inter-departmental steering group established in response to the present difficulties; it is responsible for the north Belfast housing strategy, and it supports many programmes in the community and voluntary sector in north Belfast aimed at tackling social deprivation.

3.45 pm

Mr Cobain: Can the Minister tell the House when the housing programmes he announced for Glenbryn and Mountcollyer will be on site? Can he assure the House that the £133 million needed for the housing programme in north Belfast over the next seven years will be made available?

Mr Morrow: Let me reassure the Member and the House that I am totally committed to the north Belfast housing strategy. We have two communities and two sets of housing needs in north Belfast. On the one side there is a need for new houses to be built, and on the other the housing stock must be upgraded. Some people are living in houses whose standards fall far below what is recognised today as acceptable.

I can assure the Member that I will be making the necessary bids. He will know that we have a regeneration strategy in place in north Belfast. In the first year, we put £18 million into north Belfast, where there was previously nothing. That confirms our commitment to the north Belfast housing strategy and to tackling the awful deprivation and housing needs there.

Mr Agnew: What funding is available to tackle the serious social deprivation that exists in north Belfast?

Mr Morrow: As I said in my last reply, we are initiating a housing programme with a total investment of £133 million over seven years. I have also directed funding of £8.5 million from URBAN II, and I announced recently that we have invested money in order to kickstart the programme.

Many things are happening in north Belfast. The Belfast Regeneration Office has committed £1.14 million to community projects through its local teams' budget and an additional £614,000 through Action Plan to community and voluntary organisations working in the area.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give equal attention to communities in north Belfast that have not adopted violent methods to highlight their needs?

Mr Morrow: I do not respond to violence as a rule, and I never have. I do not know whether the implication of that question was that in some way I had. Any impartial observer who looks at the north Belfast housing strategy and regeneration programme will find that I have put forward a programme that will tackle housing need in both the Protestant and the Catholic communities. If anyone is in any doubt, he should study that strategy and see that what I am saying is correct. I have a commitment to housing and to ensuring that people live in good housing regardless of their community.

‘Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2000-01’

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment he has made of the recent publication entitled ‘Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2000-01’; and to make a statement. (AQO171/01)

Mr Morrow: The ‘Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2000-01’ document compiled by my Department provides important data, which helps to inform the debate on housing. The document demonstrates that private housing remains the dominant tenure in Northern Ireland and that the private market continues to be buoyant.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his reply and for his emphasis on the dominance of private housing. Will he confirm that of the 11,326 dwellings commenced during 2000-01, 92% were commissioned by the private sector, which includes private individuals and developers, but does not include housing associations?

In view of this, what action does the Minister propose to take to deal with the lack of social housing new build, and will the deficit in that sector be addressed through targeting social need and social inclusion strategies?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Morrow: I am totally committed to social housing for those who need it. However, we cannot ignore the facts, which show that 73% of homes are in private ownership. That does not in any way mean that I, my Department, the Housing Executive or the housing associations that now deal with the new build, will become complacent in tackling housing need. We have a responsibility to tackle housing need, and we will.

When the Assembly studies the bids that have been made and the money that has been put aside for housing, it will see that they demonstrate no lack of commitment on my part or on the part of the Department for Social Development, in the social housing sector in the year ahead. I assure the Member that I am not complacent. It is important that people in that sector are looked after. As far as I am concerned, they will be.

Mr Clyde: What is the Minister doing to assist those who wish to become homeowners?

Mr Morrow: Through its funding of the Northern Ireland Co-ownership Housing Association, the Department provides an opportunity for those on marginal incomes to purchase their own homes. The Housing Executive's house sale scheme also plays an important role in this. The Member should note that sales have increased considerably over the past 12 months. I hope that he is reassured that I am totally committed to assisting people to buy their own homes.

Mr Speaker: Planted questions are not always what they seem.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's commitment, not once but on two or three occasions, to provide houses where they are needed and for everyone in the community.

Can the Minister assure the House that they will be built in areas where they are needed? Can he also assure us that the people who need those houses will be given them rather than people from Timbuktu, as somebody suggested? Can the Minister give a commitment that the houses will be allocated to local people?

Mr Morrow: If Mr McCarthy can show me any applicants from Timbuktu, I will be interested in looking at them. I understand where he is coming from and the sincerity of his question. I want people to be provided with houses in their own communities, in their own areas, so that they do not have to move. I assure the Member that where there is a housing need, the Housing Executive and my Department will try, to the best of their ability, to meet that need. The Member can go home tonight content that that will happen.

Mr C Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With regard to helping people buy their own homes and addressing the housing need, the Minister

talked some time ago about a review into the circumstances of tenants who were not able to purchase their homes if they moved in when they were aged 60 or over. My information — and I am sure the same applies to other Members — is that those people still cannot purchase their homes. The Minister acknowledged some time ago that there were human rights implications in this. What is the current position of the review, and when will there be an outcome?

Mr Morrow: As has just been noted, there were human rights implications in this. That study is not complete. I will make available to the House the up-to-date position of the review. That is an ongoing matter, and it should come to fruition in the near future.

Mr Speaker: I do not see Mr Paisley Jnr in his place, so his question falls. That brings to an end questions to the Minister for Social Development.

PETITION OF CONCERN: NORTHERN IRELAND HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Mr Speaker: During the debate on the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission on Tuesday 25 September a valid petition of concern, signed by 30 Members, was lodged with the Business Office on the motion. In accordance with Standing Order 27, no vote could therefore be held until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee considered the matter that day and agreed that the vote be placed on the Order Paper for today. The Business Committee agreed that the vote on the amendment and the motion would take place today.

The effect of a petition of concern is to change the vote to a cross-community vote. This applies only to the motion. The vote on the amendment would therefore be carried — if it were carried — on a simple majority basis, but the vote on the motion, or the motion as amended, if the amendment were carried, will be on a cross-community basis.

I remind Members that this item of business was included solely for the purpose of conducting the vote, not to provide a further opportunity for debate.

Motion proposed [25 September]:

That this Assembly believes, in the context of the development of a Bill of Rights, that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has failed to discharge its remit, as given to it by the Belfast Agreement (1998), in its various contributions to the debate on developing human rights in Northern Ireland. — [*Dr Birnie.*]

Amendment proposed [25 September]: Delete all after “Commission” and insert

“has been hindered in discharging its remit due to limits on its powers and resources but congratulates the Commission on its substantial contributions to the debate on and in developing human rights in Northern Ireland.” — [*Mr Attwood.*]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 37; Noes 48

AYES

Mr Attwood, Mrs E Bell, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Ervine, Dr Farren, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Dr Hendron, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr Tierney.

NOES

Dr Adamson, Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Berry, Dr Birnie, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mrs Carson, Mr Clyde, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Foster, Mr Gibson, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Morrow, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr J Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

4.00 pm

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 48, Noes 39

AYES

Unionist:

Dr Adamson, Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Berry, Dr Birnie, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mrs Carson, Mr Clyde, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Foster, Mr Gibson, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Morrow, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr J Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr Tierney.

Unionist:

Mr Ervine, Mr B Hutchinson.

Other:

Mrs E Bell, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice, Mr Neeson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>87</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>48 (55.2%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>31</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0 (0.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>48 (96.0%)</i>

Main Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

4.15 pm

TOWNLAND NAMES

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on each Government Department to adopt a policy of using and promoting townland names in all Government correspondence and official documents.

In the late 1960s, major changes were made to the method by which our mainly rural and residential addresses were identified. The reason given was that our postal and delivery services were being modernised and computerised. The words “speed” and “efficiency” were used. Nobody could quarrel with those sentiments. However, with speed and efficiency there usually come casualties. In this case the casualty was our beautiful and historic townland names.

In many cases names, such as these in my constituency of Strangford, were dropped: Ballygraffan, Tullytramon, Ballyfinragh and Tullynacrew. I am certain that there were many more. I leave it to other Members to pronounce the names of townlands that were dropped from use in their own areas. I am aware that, at the time of the change, strong representations were made against the loss of our townland names — unfortunately, with little success.

The omission of these names must deprive many of the present generation and future generations of the knowledge of the rich history of many of these areas. Townland names often referred to an easily identifiable feature of the surrounding landscape; for example, “carrag” means “rock”, “tullagh” means “hill” and “bally” means “settlement of”. In my own place of origin, Ballycranbeg is “the townland of the small tree”, and the name of the neighbouring townland, Ballycranmore, means “big tree”. Ballycranmore survived the modernisation of the postal service; Ballycranbeg fell by the wayside.

However, I am happy to say that, with the help of our local council, we resurrected the name of Ballycranbeg around the hamlet there. Unfortunately, that cannot be done for every townland. As someone who cherishes our heritage — be it built, Christian or cultural — I consider the restoration and revival, as far as possible, of our townland names to be very important to our local history. We may have partially lost that history in the 1960s, but we now have an opportunity to rectify that. I consider the Assembly to be a means by which to bring that restoration about.

Earlier I used the words “speed” and “efficiency”. We have all benefited from speed and efficiency, because we receive letters and packages more quickly. We also benefit from good use of the postcode system. Perhaps

the Royal Mail could consider matching each townland name with a postcode. Indeed, last week the Royal Mail assured me that it has no objection to the inclusion of townland names in postal addresses and confirmed that that has always been its policy. Therefore, it is up to us to encourage the use of townland names in our addresses. The Royal Mail stresses the need for clear addressing, with particular emphasis on the postcode.

A lot of correspondence is sent out from Government Departments on a daily basis, perhaps even on a twice-daily basis. If the Departments included townland names in their addresses, the community would, in time, see the positive results of the initiative. The relevant information is easily accessible to Government Departments because townland names are clearly marked on Ordnance Survey maps. The electoral register indicates the townlands in which the various rural roads and communities are located.

I am also aware that local historical societies, of which there are many in Northern Ireland, including the Federation for Ulster Local Studies, the Ulster Place-Name Society and many other organisations, are very supportive of the motion. Concern has been expressed that the ‘Shaping our Future’ document, of which we are all aware, paid scant notice to the need to reintroduce our townland names. Perhaps even at this late stage, the authors of ‘Shaping our Future’ could be encouraged to use the townland names across Northern Ireland. If the Assembly and Government Departments can take the lead in restoring those names, I have no doubt that private businesses and individuals would soon follow. I ask Members to support the motion, and I appeal to our rural residents to use, and to encourage others to use, these names. If that happened, a little bit of our heritage would be restored and saved.

Mr Speaker: The House will be aware that the debate is limited to one hour. Since the start of the debate, several Members have requested a chance to speak, so I must restrict Members to five minutes each.

Mrs Carson: I commend the Members for bringing forward this motion, because the issue of townland names has always been dear to my heart. Townland names have been passed down from early days and are a wonderful store of information that is in danger of being totally lost. That is mainly due to the renaming of our roads willy-nilly by some desk-bound people, without thought or consideration for local opinions.

I have always welcomed the stance taken by Fermanagh District Council, and I wish that other councils in Northern Ireland would follow by retaining townland names. In the Tyrone area, where I live, we have a proliferation of the same names applied to roads leading to and from the village of Moy.

4.30 pm

All of those roads are called Moy Road. There is a Moy Road in Portadown; a Moy Road in Moy; a Moy

Road in Armagh; and a Moy Road in Dungannon. You can imagine the confusion that that leads to. The new designation was supposed to help, but instead it has led to great confusion, so most people began to use the townland names again.

I live on one of those Moy Roads and I find my mail going hither and thither along another Moy Road. I, in turn, was receiving mail intended for those who lived at the same house number on another Moy Road. I solved my problem by adding the townland name to my address. Thankfully, since then, there have been no more problems. I encourage people who are experiencing similar problems to start using the townland names again.

I will go back into the mists of time — not quite as far as the origin of townlands — to when I was a teacher. When my pupils and I undertook projects on the school’s area, I always encouraged the children to start their information searches by using the townland name. Much to my amusement, we always found that the townland name would have the same description as the original town. I remember having great amusement when I was teaching in a school called Annaghmore Primary School. When the children were starting their project I asked which of them had a big, mossy, springy field at the back of their house that they could jump up and down on. The pupils would say “Please Miss, have you been to our house?” I told them that I knew that information from the townland name, Annaghmore — “the big bog”.

I encourage all of our Departments, the councils and, in particular, the public, to use townland names. Townland names must be retained or we will lose much of our wonderful and picturesque heritage. I welcome the motion and have great pleasure in supporting it.

Mr McGrady: I commend Mr McCarthy and Mr Ford for putting the motion before the House.

There are about 10,000 townlands in Northern Ireland and they are a unique expression of our heritage — a heritage that is at our fingertips. That sense of identity and heritage has been lost due to things such as numbering vague roads that can be up to 15 miles long. Some townland names date back to the eighth century; they help us to recognise the topography and history of an area. It is sad that we have allowed the use of townland names to disappear from our areas — due to the great pressure put on councils by the Post Office for convenience of delivery.

Local district councils have the authority to determine the postal addresses in their areas — not the Assembly or the Government. Councils have failed to use that authority, with the notable and honourable exception of Fermanagh District Council, which resisted re-designation at the time.

I remember proposing a motion in my district asking that the townland names be retained with the number and road system suggested by the Post Office. The resolution was passed unanimously. However, that was the last we heard of it — some 12 years ago — and it seems that the council has not had time to get round to dealing with the issue again. Therefore although there was a willingness to do something about it, that willingness was not translated into action.

The re-designation that was almost imposed on us by the Post Office did not take place in England, Scotland or Wales, where there is a much greater dispersal of houses and towns. Fair play to the Post Office: it got away with it — but it was our fault that it did. We should try to restore the use of townland names as soon as possible because of the advent of the Assembly and the enormous amount of heritage the names represent. The entire legal documentation system is based on townlands and it is a very convenient way of identifying legal title as well as an area's history and heritage.

For practical purposes, that might suit the Post Office, but it will suit only the Post Office. On several occasions in my own area I have met ambulance drivers in distress, who asked me where such-and-such a house was on a certain road. I then had to ask them which end of the road they meant, because it is either 10 miles to the left or 10 miles to the right. If the driver does not know the townland, the house cannot be identified. The same applies to other emergency services. Townlands identify a very narrow locality. It is particularly helpful for emergency services to be able to go to a townland.

There is no good reason why we cannot have a combination that suits both postal delivery and lineal house numbering on long stretches of road. In my constituency, near where I live, a road runs from Strangford to Ardglass, a distance of some 10 miles. There are numerous townlands on the road, and unless one knows the sequence of house numbers, one cannot give people directions. If one starts from Downpatrick, one goes in one direction to Strangford and another to Ardglass, two entirely different directions. Unless one knows the townland, one cannot give people directions. That is one practical reason why townlands should be restored.

It should be borne in mind that it is already in our provenance to change that situation. We do not need legislation or statutory instruments because local councils can decide on correct postal addresses. I encourage the other 25 local councils to readopt the system that will protect our identity, our identity and our heritage. I pledge my full support for any public campaign that the Member initiates after approval by all parties in the House.

Mr Gibson:

“There’s Cavanamara and dark Derrymeen,
There’s Carrickatane and Munderrydoe,
With Strawletterdallan and Cavankilgreen
All dancing a jig with Cregganconroe.”

There are three essential reasons why townlands should be retained. First, there is a legal reason. Most of us live in or own property that is identified by its county, its barony and its townland. Legally, we should retain a townland system.

Secondly, there is an administrative reason. In the second and third centuries, when Christian sects from near the Sudan or southern Egypt started to trade along the Atlantic coastline, they introduced into Ushnagh Hill in Westmeath the idea of identifying areas and putting in boundaries. It is an ancient system of identifying a landmass by sheughs, burns, mountain tops or whatever. That was important when St Patrick and later saints started to build an ecclesiastical system of boundaries based on the existing townlands.

That idea has been developed in a modern administration. None of us can lift an electoral register without seeing areas whose building blocks are townlands. If one looks at a map of district electoral divisions and wards — even properties and electoral areas in the conurbations — they are often called by their old townland names.

It was a rush of blood by the Post Office 30 or 40 years ago that hailed the modern words “efficiency” and “rationalisation”. We must restore the integrity that supports the ecclesiastical boundaries and the legal system: there is no alternative when it comes to supporting the administrative electoral system. In other words, we must have measures that can keep, or adjust, the boundaries as time goes on. The building blocks for those measures are the townlands; therefore, we have every right to retain them.

Since Fermanagh resisted putting up road names — and Omagh Council still resists — may I suggest that for those of us who are forced to do so, the townland name should be placed above the road name. Funding should be made available for some good artistic stone work, so that passers-by can read the name of one townland on one side of a stone and another townland on the other.

We must re-identify the areas. In the last 30 years we have lost a generation of people who knew where the countryside boundaries were.

I appeal to Government Departments — who can readily change this — and to the other agencies that seem resistant to the introduction of townland names. These agencies are usually the quangos, the milk marketing boards and other bodies, which when asked to use the townland names will resist by saying, “If the man wants his cheque, the official name is such-and-such”. I want to end with the lines of the poem by W F

Marshall, and I will cut them short by simply saying that everyone has their own Fernaghandrum and Sanaghanroe. I support the motion.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfách leis an rún agus cuirim fáilte roimhe. Ba chóir don Tionól brú a chur ar gach Roinn Rialtais úsáid a bhaint as logainmneacha agus iad a chur chun cinn. Sílim go bhfuil sé oiriúnach ar fad bheith ag caint i nGaeilge ar an ábhar seo, mar tagann an chuid is mó de na logainmneacha ón teanga Ghaeilge í féin. Fiú sna leaganacha Béarla tá rian na Gaeilge le cluinstit. Leoga, cheap mé gur i nGaeilge a bhí an Teachta deireannach ag labhairt nuair a luaigh sé sraith de logainmneacha as Gaeilge. Mar a dúirt mé, tagann logainmneacha ar fud na tíre ón teanga Ghaeilge. Baineann logainmneacha le bunadh áite agus le stair áite agus le tírdhreach áite.

I welcome the motion. The use of Irish is particularly appropriate when speaking on the motion because the townland names come from the Irish language, although they have been somewhat anglicised. For a while I thought the last Member was speaking in Irish when he listed a series of townland names.

The townland name relates to the people of a place, particularly those in rural communities because they identify themselves by their townland — and they can be very clannish. If one tells them that they are from Cullaville, they will say that they are from Clonalig, because Clonalig is their townland. If one tells them that they are from Camlough, they will say that they are from Carrickcroppan.

4.45 pm

Townland names also describe the topography. A name can be a description of the local geographical feature of an area, be it the “dogs’ rock”, the “goats’ rock”, the “black rock” or the “Mass Rock”. It has a sense of community identity.

We live in an age of numbers. Often when one telephones someone to carry out a transaction, one must give one’s telephone number, national insurance number, tax reference number, credit card number and of course one’s postcode. Numbers are very impersonal; they have no character or sense of personal identity. It is somewhat dehumanising to reduce our titles and sense of identity to numbers.

There is a positive side to postcodes. I would not for one minute argue that BT35 7BZ is a more attractive way of describing the place where someone lives than Derramore. Nor is BT35 9BZ a more attractive way of describing Rathkeelan. In the South they do not use postcodes; they use the townland name, the nearest post office, the nearest town and the county. That can be ambiguous. We have an advantage in that the

postcode system is in place. There is no reason for the townland name’s not being incorporated. It does not create any problem for the postal service if a postcode is already on the letter. The house number and the post code identify where each house is to the postal workers.

The Rate Collection Agency already uses the townland name for each rated property. If people look at their rates bills, which is perhaps not the nicest thing to do — and we will not refer to Assembly policies on that matter — they will see that townland names are used. The Rate Collection Agency has the database available to implement the system. I welcome the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Bradley: I recall that there was a similar motion in Newry and Mourne District Council. It was passed and has been acted upon, and road names now carry the townland names. There is still room for improvement. I welcome the opportunity that Mr McCarthy and Mr Ford have given us today to bring this to a higher level. I am particularly pleased to see the junior Minister, a country boy, Mr Denis Haughey, here to deal with this, rather than a confused Minister from Leamington Spa or Finchley trying to understand what we are talking about.

Last week in the Adjournment debate, I referred to traffic congestion in Drumcashlane and Carneyhaugh. About 700 or 800 people live in those areas, and very few of them knew that they lived there. They are mainly housing estates with fancy titles and numbers, such as MrMcNamee referred to. For that reason alone, I deliberately chose to use the townland names to try to get a message home to the residents, and in particular to the young.

About two months ago, Conor Bradford referred one morning on the radio to the beautiful townland names. He intended to get back to it sometime. He was referring to one of my areas — the townland of Clontifleece. If he ever gets back to that I can refer him to Clontifleece, Attical, Derryogue, Drumbonniff, Deehommed, Knochanarney — I could go on for hours on nice townland names. I hope that this debate will move things further, because a degree of lip service has been paid to this matter for maybe 20 or 25 years. Now that we have the Assembly I hope that the motion will get support and be acted upon.

Mr Shannon: Wi the maist fek o fowk, tounlann steidnames michtna be mukkil o a threip for oor ain Assemleie — whaniver we see yins daein murther an shuitin up an doun oor raws an loanins. But the loss o steidnames is mair pruíf o the reddin oot o oor kintra fowkgates an heirskip.

To many people, townland names many not seem a serious issue to be debated in the Assembly when people have been murdered and gunned down in the

street. However, the disappearance of townland names is further evidence of the eradication of our local culture and history. We are becoming ever more merged into the vague European identity that has been forced on us by the European Union to the detriment of our local heritage that is slowly ebbing away. The issue is more relevant today than ever. The identification of nationality is a symbol used to define it, whether that be flags, language, currency or local place names.

Although there is a willingness to give our flags away, our language is also under threat. It is important that we try to retain some of the history of our country. The Government would rather have the easy-to-use postal codes that pigeon-hole us into BT19 or BT23. It is an easy and clinical way of identifying who lives where. Our tradition of townland names reached back to the sixteenth century; and townland names were a person's address, whether he knew how to write them or not. By the nineteenth century, townland names were part of how people defined themselves. They inscribed their townlands on their tombstones and entered their townland names under "nationality" when boarding ships to America and Australia.

The descendants of those people who left Ulster return to find the townlands that they have links to. They have letters and postcards with addresses on them, and some have maps and souvenirs, yet our own Government will not recognise the diverse and rich past of our country and its townland names.

The use of townland names is also a romantic link to the past and to the adventures of old. We do not say that Betsy Gray came from Newtownards BT23; rather we say that she came from Ballygrainey, close to the Six Road Ends. It is much more true to the storytelling culture of this land to use the townland names. The names of our townlands are truly ingenious and denote the long and varied history of different parts of this country.

My constituency has Viking, Scottish and English words mixed in with the Ulster names of the area. My constituency has over 2,700 townland names, and they are referred to daily. I have been in the houses of my older constituents who have regaled me with their local history. That is an important and untapped source of strength in these times of turmoil. The older people do not understand the removal of their past and the making of land into sub-lands of the nearest large town. For example, nearly every townland in Strangford has an address that ends in Newtownards BT23, et cetera.

We are trying to bring tourists here, and we are trying to promote our uniqueness to the rest of the UK. One of those differences has to be townland names like Ballylolly or Ballywhatticock. The use of townland names is essential to what we all believe is quint-essentially Northern Ireland.

Many poets use townland names in their poetry. Our most famous poet, Séamus Heaney, uses local names in his poetry, and I quote —

“So I say to myself Gweebarra
and its music hits off the place
like water hitting off granite.
I see the glittering sound.”

There are many more across the Province who, like Séamus Heaney, use the townland names. What would we leave our aspiring poets if we took away the townland names. The availability of unusual poetic names would be gone, and it is hard to find words that rhyme with BT19, BT23 or BT6. I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Molaimse an rún seo fosta. Baineann sé le logainmneacha atá stairiúil, traidisiúnta agus atá fíorthábhachtach ag daoine ar fud na hÉireann.

I commend the motion tabled by the Alliance Party Members for Strangford and South Antrim. I also welcome the emerging consensus around this crucial issue. Perhaps it is universal, but it is certainly an Irish characteristic to be proud of where one comes from and to have a real sense of place and belonging. Townlands are an ancient land unit. There are more than 64,000 of them in Ireland. They have existed through the ages, and some names have proved more durable and more resistant to so-called modernisation than others; but all are resonant with meaning, mystery and beauty.

Townland names provide a living link with the Irish language, and with our history. There are variations in spelling, local pronunciations, and translations that become unreliable. They speak of landscapes, topography, geographical features and clans. They speak of occupations and trades, animals and trees, churches, saints and ancient battlefields. They speak in colourful and descriptive language of beautiful-sounding place names, which give people a real sense of place.

Some speakers have traced the history of interference with townland names to the Post Office devices of the 1960s. Brian Friel's tragic play 'Translations' takes us back much further. It has a powerfully emotive theme, and is set in Donegal in the 1830s when the British Army's engineering corps carried out its famous ordnance survey of Ireland. It mapped and renamed the whole country to suit the agenda of faceless civil servants in far-off places with no local knowledge who wished to bin centuries of history and culture. It was vandalism of the most insidious kind. It was an example of cultural imperialism. The play explores the crisis of language in the context of a crisis in a family. Owen, the son of a hedge schoolmaster who taught Greek and Latin through Irish, returns from Dublin as a member of the engineering corps to map and rename areas in his native Donegal.

Reference has been made to Post Office attempts to do away with townland names in the name of modernisation, to assign names and numbers to country roads, and perhaps to incorporate the name of one townland into the name of the road. On the surface, that might have appeared to be positive. However, it wiped out other townland names in the process.

I am mindful that the townland name was the postal address, and if it were still so, as it is in County Fermanagh and elsewhere in Ireland, it would be more accurate for ambulance services and doctors who are attempting to reach people in their homes. Mr Haughey will be familiar with Burn Road in Cookstown, which stretches for miles and miles. Drum Road is similar. Emergency services can get lost, and have to come back several miles to find their destination.

I want to draw attention to a problem for the people of Carrickmore in County Tyrone. Sixmilecross has a larger postal sorting office, which means that the very name of Carrickmore is threatened with extinction. Believe it or not, the postal address of Main Street, Carrickmore is now Main Street, Sixmilecross. We have tried to secure a meeting with Royal Mail to discuss the problem, but it is resistant. Nobody has a problem with Sixmilecross appearing beneath Carrickmore on a postal address, but it is simply unacceptable that it be used as a substitute.

The role of councils has been mentioned. I have recently been appointed chairman of Omagh District Council, and we plan to address the matter seriously in the very near future. There is tremendous international interest in preservation, promotion and proactive campaigning around our townlands. Irish exiles in America and Australia return home to discover their roots and townland names are important in tracing those roots. Go raibh maith agat.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr Gallagher: I hope that in supporting the motion I can also provide some idea of the Fermanagh experience, the benefit of which might help to enlighten minds. Fermanagh District Council has always insisted on the retention of townland names. It has consistently opposed the introduction of road naming and numbering of houses. However, the council is at present revising that policy, because, in recent years, people have increasingly made complaints about shortcomings in the system.

Residents have experienced difficulties when trying to do business with some companies in England. For example, some credit card companies require applicants to provide a road name and house number. Applications are refused unless this information is provided. Insurance companies apply that policy with increasing frequency, and in certain cases they will not provide cover if applicants are unable to supply a road name and a house number.

5.00 pm

In view of that, we should try to devise a way to retain our townland names on correspondence, in the same way as Fermanagh District Council is revising its policy. However, at the same time, we need to avoid restricting opportunities for people to avail of keen rates offered by financial organisations such as credit card companies and insurance brokers.

The best way forward for everybody is a system whereby the name of the townland, the road and the house number are used in every address. References have been made to the fact that the tax office, the Electoral Office, and, to some extent, the Housing Executive include road names in their correspondence. We should not build on that work, because, in the case of Fermanagh, the road names used in such correspondence mean little to the people who live there.

Before we implement any changes, we should take time to consult with local councils and communities to get the best possible information. It may be necessary to carry out some pilot studies among local district councils, but the best approach is to make sure that our townland names are preserved. We need to be careful about the way in which we progress. Today's motion is a very useful first step, and I support it.

Mr Dallat: Our townlands are our heritage appreciated by all without division or dispute. I therefore welcome the motion, which, for a change, unites us on a common issue.

As our cities, towns and villages experience varying degrees of development sprawl, townland names have tended to be squeezed out as developers opt for names more appropriate to leafy suburbs of English towns. I have no objections to names such as South Winds, Pine Trees or Cedar Gardens, but I prefer the name of the townland in which I live: Gortmacrane, which means "stony field". It denotes breadth as well as length. Ninety-five per cent of townland names have their origin in the Irish language and, as Members have already demonstrated, one needs only a cursory knowledge of the language to develop a keen interest in our place names.

The issue before the House today is not new. Practically every council has called for the retention of townland names. The motion can make a difference for the first time, because we now have the power to instruct Departments to include townland names, and they must listen. Townland names have length and breadth; they can be measured and are critical to many Departments in cases in which ownership of land is an issue. Perhaps if Departments had paid more attention to townland names, fewer mistakes might have been made. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, for example, might not have paid an agriculture grant to a farmer for Lady Dixon Park, as was recently discovered by the public auditor.

However, the critical issue revolves around heritage, and fortunately that is something that Members no longer argue about in this respect. Members all cherish their place names, not only for personal satisfaction and pride but because they want to retain them for future generations. The townland issue has been bounced about for too long. It is time to act and put townland names back on the maps to paint a picture, sketch a scene or vividly describe the places in which we live.

When townlands first became an issue our postal service was called “the Post Office”, but today it is “Consignia”. For its own reasons the Post Office has no allegiance to names, heritage or tradition, so it would be foolish to follow Postman Pat. Let us stick with what we have. I am sticking to Gortmacrane, even though the farmers have gathered most of the stones that gave it its name, which means the stony field.

Mrs Courtney: I support the motion and congratulate Mr Ford and Mr McCarthy for tabling it. Townlands existed long before parishes and counties. Their original Irish names were written in English form as they sounded to English court scribes. A townland name in its original Irish form often referred to an easily identifiable feature of the landscape such as a “carraig”, which means “rock”, or a “tulach”, which means “hill”.

The social customs or history of people who have lived in a place can also be reflected in the name of a townland. Often those names are the only records that survive of families who held the land in pre-plantation times. An example of that is “baile” meaning settlement, and that prefix can be found all over Ireland in such place names as Ballywalter, Ballyshannon, Ballymoney and others.

Many townlands in Ireland took their names from early habitation sites — ecclesiastical and secular. Examples include “rath”, which means “fortification”, and “dún”, which means “fort”. In County Tyrone there is Dunamanagh, or Donemana, which means “the fortress of the monks”, and in Donegal one will find the Dunree fort.

It was often through the townland name that entitlement to land was determined, and that was important for inheritance purposes. For a long time prior to the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, councils were bound by the Towns Improvement Clauses Act 1847, the Public Health and Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 1949 and the Public Health Acts Amendment 1907. However, those were all repealed in the 1995 Order, and since then councils have had limited powers to do anything. It is almost impossible to change names.

Developers have no authority to name streets or developments. Derry City Council belatedly followed Fermanagh’s example and developed a relationship

with planners and developers to ensure that names would not be used except with the agreement of the city council. Derry City Council has promoted the use of townland names over the years. That has had cross-party support, and a lot of research continues to go into the naming of new estates and housing developments. Derry City Council has a policy of encouraging developers to research proposed names before presenting them to the council for approval. That policy is well known and is facilitated through the culture subcommittee.

It is a matter of record that many proposed names relating to contractors’ families, popular soap operas or known personalities in an area have been rejected, and any proposed names must have some relevance to the area or original townland. That policy can work. The debate is important, and Departments must take it seriously and start using townland names.

Over the years it has been almost impossible to complete an official form without the postcode or the correct postal address, but Derry City Council also includes the townlands. I come from a rural background, and I do not want to lose the townland.

The Junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister) (Mr Haughey): I am pleased to take part in this debate. I have long been of the view that society is at risk of losing something important and central to its identity if the use of townland names sinks into decline and disappears from our vocabulary and consciousness.

When a similar motion was tabled at one of our party conferences, a party colleague began his speech by saying that there were four reasons why the loss of townland names should be resisted: first, Altaglshan; secondly, Munderadoe; thirdly, Munterevlin; and fourthly, Drumballyhugh. What a tragedy it would be if all the richness, tradition and history inherent in those names were to be lost.

My postcode is BT80, but the town of Cookstown is built on five townlands — Derryloran, Gortalowry, Coolnafranky, Killymoon and Tullagh. It would be a tragedy if those names were lost. People in Cookstown still refer to certain commercial premises as “So-and-so’s down in Gortalowry” or “So-and-so’s over in Monrush” and to other local townlands.

It was said that it was in the power of councils to determine policy on the use of townland names. It was also said that Fermanagh District Council had an honourable record in that regard. I plead the case for my district council; it took the decision some years ago that all new signs bearing road names would have the townland name — Drumballyhugh or wherever — in bright red lettering underneath. Mr McGrady and Mr McElduff made the point that some long roads run for up to 10 miles, making it difficult for an emergency

services driver to locate a particular house if the numbering of properties along that road is inadequate.

Mrs Carson referred to the number of roads around Dungannon that have the same name — Moy Road, Portadown; Moy Road, Dungannon; Moy Road, Moy; and Moy Road, Armagh. How could the driver of an ambulance be absolutely sure of his destination in those circumstances? Mr Gibson made the significant point that property is legally identified by county, by barony and by townland name.

Chuir cuid cainte Pat McNamee i gcuimhne domh ócáid amháin tá cupla bliain ó shin nuair a dúirt comhairleoir de chuid Chomhairle Ard Mhacha nuair a bhí an chomhairle ag plé an ábhair seo: “Ní bheidh áitainm Gaeilge ar Drumnahunshin a fhad agus a bheas mise beo”. I was saying, Madam Deputy Speaker, that there was an occasion some years ago when an Armagh councillor said that there would be no Irish place names in Drumnahunshin as long as he was around to prevent it.

Mr Shannon and Mr Gibson reminded us that townland names are not just part of the Irish tradition; they are very much part of the Ulster-Scots tradition also. Mr Shannon talked about Betsy Gray and the Six Road Ends in his part of the world. Mr McElduff talked about the strong sense of place and belonging that is characteristic of people in his area. When he spoke about Carrickmore, I was not sure where he was talking about because in my dancing days we always referred to “Carmen”, which was a corruption of the Irish word “tearmann”.

Mr Gallagher made a number of noteworthy points about the legal aspects of, for example, insurance matters and said that there was no reason why road names and townland names could not both be used. That would give us a double dunder.

Mr John Dallat referred to the stony fields of his part of the world. Mrs Courtney talked about title to land, and she also referred to the fact that there was no division between the parties on the issue; that has been an essential characteristic of the debate. This is an important issue for people of all traditions in the North, including me. I have been at the fore in trying to preserve townland names in my district.

5.15 pm

At present, the Administration has no policy to promote the use of townland names in correspondence and official documents. The motion, which calls on Departments to promote townland names, suggests that the Administration should take a more proactive role in doing so. Researchers at Queen’s University, Belfast have worked on a project that covers townland names from all over the North. Other Members may have had

some contact with it. The appropriate Committee may wish to consider taking evidence from that project.

I hate to be a bore, but I must say that any change in policy has resource and cost implications. I have no right to give any undertaking on behalf of the Administration to make changes to policy until costs are properly quantified, however strong my personal support for the motion. Northern Ireland Departments will facilitate the use of townland addresses when they have been notified of them. Departments will reply to correspondence using the address given, including the townland name. I cannot go further than that, other than to confirm my support for the motion. I will report the views expressed during the debate to ministerial Colleagues through the appropriate channels.

Mr Ford: It is a great pleasure to wind up a debate in which everybody supports the motion. At least, that was the case until the Junior Minister — as opposed to Denis Haughey — spoke, which was a little sad. We have seen that townlands can have legal, administrative and ecclesiastical identities; I confess that the last of those was news to me. Above all, they give us pride in our culture and history and a sense of place. The modern system of addressing, by road name and number, does not give the sense of place that the use of the historic townland name gives us.

Since the late 1960s, Royal Mail’s policy towards townlands has been toleration, not encouragement. For all that Royal Mail — or Consignia — says that it will accept the use of a townland name, the name is dropped if an address becomes too long. Royal Mail has an electronic database of addresses. If I go into a shop and give my postcode, they can tell me my road name and postal town, but there is no space for the townland; there is something fundamentally wrong with that. Although Royal Mail says that it has not sought to destroy townlands, the actions of others using the addressing system that the Royal Mail promoted and rural district councils adopted has had that effect. That is why firm, speedy action is essential.

Members have highlighted the historical and cultural aspects of townland names. It was a pleasure to sit between the poems of WF Marshall, from Oliver Gibson on my left, and the Irish language from Pat McNamee, Barry McElduff and Denis Haughey to my right. Clearly, townlands are significant to people. I was delighted that Jim Shannon somehow managed to drag in a heroine from 1798 to support the cause of townlands; but if the DUP is adopting that policy then that is fine by me.

There is an issue about whether this subject relates to the culture of every side and section of the community; it is something that we can build on together. I do not claim to have a knowledge of Irish, as demonstrated by the two Members from Sinn Féin, but my love for townland names in the area in which I live came from

an elderly neighbour who died a few years ago. He did not speak a word of Irish, nor did he claim to, but he made it his business to find out what the names of the townlands meant.

It is clear, as other Members have said, that virtually every townland is still recognisable as meaning something. Indeed, only last week, when introduced to me, someone said "Ah, you are the man from Tardree." I pointed out that while my wife came from Tardree, I came from the neighbouring townland of Barnish. That was a fascinating example of how somebody who knew the neighbourhood thought in terms of townland and not road name.

It has been pointed out that many of our names have been corrupted. I am not sure that the Royal Engineers did it in a spirit of malice; it may have been a case of ignorance. Tardree is a classic example in that the name should be "Ardree", because anybody who saw the mountain before the Forest Service came along would have known that "the height of the heather" did not require the word to have a superfluous English "T". John Dallat made a similar point. If the stones have been cleared, so what? If that is the historic name of the townland, it stands for something in our cultural background.

I am delighted that a number of Members made positive suggestions about actions that can be, and have been, taken. Joan Carson's reference to getting primary-school children to use the townland as the basis for local studies is clearly a way to inspire the young and make them think in later life. P J Bradley highlighted his use of two townland names in an Adjournment motion last week. I am not quite sure about Oliver Gibson's suggestion that a boundary stone should be placed at every point where a road crosses a townland, but there may be something in that which will get the message across. I welcome what Annie Courtney and Cllr Denis Haughey said about Derry and Cookstown regarding their work on adding townland names to road signs. I got Antrim Borough Council to agree to that. It is a small step, but one that moves things forward.

We have problems in ensuring that Departments take the responsibilities that have been outlined by every section of the House. It is clear that there should be a policy that forms have a space left for the townland to be inserted. Some organisations, such as the Electoral Office, seem to do that quite well; many others fail. We need a policy of encouraging Departments to use correct townland names. In my area, the Roads Service is quite good at referring to junctions by the name of the next townland but one, rather than the one in which they are actually located.

We must face the fact that, without serious action, we run into the danger that I highlighted earlier — if

the address is too long, the townland will be omitted. While I welcomed Denis Haughey's comments in the early part of his speech, I was disappointed that he could not plead resource implications. If he is going to do that, then we may have to use up more resources by asking him questions about how much it will cost to add the odd box to the odd form or encourage Departments to look at a map and get the townland name right. I cannot see how that would have significant resource implications. The motion has been supported unanimously by the House, and the Minister ought to heed what Denis Haughey and others have said.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on each Government Department to adopt a policy of using and promoting townland names in all Government correspondence and official documents.

ALTERNATIVES TO PRIVATE FINANCE INITIATIVES / PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

Mr Molloy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to investigate and promote alternatives to Private Finance Initiatives/Public Private Partnership as a means of funding capital investment.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is timely that we have a debate on the subject of the private finance initiative (PFI). I use the term PFI deliberately as there has been a public exercise to change it to PPP (public-private partnerships).

The PFI of the past carried the baggage of bad contracts and projects. The new Labour Government put their usual spin on it and came up with the idea of public-private partnership. There is no partnership aspect to it — only private finance and profit-making.

The motion is designed to move us along. It is not meant to simply explore the various aspects of PFI but to look at the available alternatives and to encourage the Executive to take up those issues and investigate the alternatives. Earlier this year the Finance and Personnel Committee produced a report on PFI and made several recommendations. One in particular was that public funds and public services should be in the public domain.

Last week the Minister of Finance and Personnel — who has just entered the Chamber — made it very clear that there is not enough money to provide public services and to meet the requirements of the Programme for Government. That is not acceptable. This is a fledgling legislative Assembly. We have set an agenda in the Programme for Government that is heavily underpinned by PFI. We must commit ourselves to exploring the means of ensuring that we have the public funds to provide the necessary services.

Our public services — the hospitals, the schools and the roads infrastructure — are in crisis. A considerable injection of money is required to maintain them, never mind extend them. Money must be made available to retrain and encourage nurses, doctors and professionals to return to the Health Service.

We need to break the cycle. We have fallen into the trap of continuing as though direct rule still applied, and we have not come up with new ideas. I support the Minister of Finance and Personnel in his endeavours to get the extra finance that is needed. I do not, however, support the idea that the extra money should be obtained by increasing the rates or by “back door” taxes such as water and sewerage charges. That is not the way. We need to look at alternatives — bonds might be one possibility.

We need to be up front and honest. New investment in the system is required, but we must be careful not to charge down the same road as the British Labour Party in producing new taxes and other devices for raising the money. Those measures simply tax the people who most deserve the services and, in many cases, those who have been deprived of them. The problem with the rates is that they are applied to households. Each pays in line with the variations. Some people do not have to pay rates. Some rural areas, particularly west of the Bann, do not have such services as sewerage and public water. Our targeting for resources has to be fair and must not overload people.

How forcefully has the Minister put the arguments to the British Exchequer? How do we rectify the legacy of underfunding by successive British Governments under direct rule? Has the Minister pointed out the legacy of discrimination and the fact that the finances that should have been put into areas west of the Bann for hospitals, schools and infrastructure were not put in? How do we re-balance that and make the British Government come up with the required funding? It cannot simply be done under the Barnett formula on its own. We need to come up with ideas.

5.30 pm

The Barnett formula works on a headcount and does not reflect the need in our area. Our society is emerging from conflict. Are those arguments being made? Despite being told that there is no money available, and being asked how much money we will raise ourselves, we must question the British Government on whether they are prepared to rectify the imbalance in past spending.

I do not intend to become bogged down in the pros and cons of PFI. However, we either think about a dependency on PFI companies and the fact that we will be handing matters over to the private sector to build, direct and maintain, or we look at the alternatives. One alternative is “back door” taxation; it was, and still is, favoured by the British Government. Such a method would fail us and those who elected us. We must come up with alternatives.

The Finance and Personnel Committee reached several conclusions about the operation of PFI. Its primary conclusion was that public services must remain under public control. They should be financed with public money.

I note that the Executive have established a forum to investigate PFI and its implementation. Can the Minister confirm that the forum is looking at the alternatives to PFI and not simply at the current implementation of PFI? Has the forum been tasked with trying to break the cycle? Has it been tasked with looking for alternatives?

There are insufficient public funds, and we have been told that we must use PFI. Those who have been involved in PFI have told us that it is not suitable for all contracts and projects. There must be an alternative. Private companies may not be interested in a particular scheme because of its rurality or because they do not see it as a means of making money quickly. How do we deal with that?

How do we ensure that staff in schools, hospitals and other services are not disenfranchised by PFI and private finance taking over? Are we heading for a situation in which schools will not only be managed and built by PFI but in which the pupils will be taught by PFI? That is a serious consequence. We must look at what Tony Blair is proposing in England. More and more of the running, teaching and management of schools will become part of PFI.

The Committee's report made it clear that we must caution people about the contracts that are being set up now. Various Departments are forging ahead with PFI contracts. Have the Committee's recommendations been implemented? Twelve months down the road, or when the departmental review takes place, we could find that contracts have already been signed up to and that mistakes have been made. I urge the Minister to caution Departments that there is a clear strategy to follow when putting such contracts in place. We must learn from the mistakes that have occurred in hospital — and other — contracts, particularly in England.

Other means of raising finance came up in the inquiry. Some people in Dublin said that they had had a clear option — public finance was available for schemes, but they chose to use PFI. However, the background here is that PFI was brought in because public funds were not available. The situation is different now — public funds are available. Public borrowing is cheaper, and other options, including the European Investment Bank, are available. Do we need to stick rigidly to PFI?

The British Treasury does not allow us to go down that road. That is hindering the Assembly's establishment. We do not have control of our own taxation or finances, and we depend on the Barnett formula to provide us with the headcount and to deliver the money accordingly. The headcount does not provide the necessary funds. However, if, for example, the Assembly were able to sell bonds to the public, who would be guaranteed a steady stream of income for the years to come, a significant amount of money would be raised for investment. In the past, the British Government have used that system to finance schemes. The system has also been proposed for the London Underground, and it has been used in the USA, particularly in New York and Boston. We must look at the alternatives.

We do not possess the limited tax-varying powers of the Scottish Parliament. However, we do have the

power to set the level of the regional rate. We must recognise that that is not a significant part of overall public expenditure. Some would argue that that is not a significant amount of money on top of the rates. However, it is additional to the present rates, which some would say are high enough. I am concerned that the Minister is looking into doubling the regional rate in order to catch up with England, Scotland and Wales. I remind the Minister that those countries provide different services and they have different ways of providing those services. Although we do not raise a significant amount of money through rates, I ask the Minister to recognise that it is an unfair system of taxation.

The present system asks those people who have neither the services nor the infrastructure to pay the same as those who do. The issue of toll bridges has been mentioned. Again, those people who have been deprived of services for years are being asked to pay. For example, it has been suggested that the bridge on the Toome bypass should be a toll bridge. That denies access to the fast track into Belfast to those who did not have the services. Those who have had to move from the west to the east because of their employment will now be charged more because they were deprived in the past. I do not rule out any options, but we must continue to look at the alternatives. We should look at alternative sites and at how we raise money. If we introduce tolls, we should ask not only those who use a particular bridge or stretch of road to pay, but we should spread the load to ensure that we do not further tax those who have been deprived in the past.

We must get to grips with the issue because we cannot go from year to year without enough money to expand or provide services. We must face our responsibilities, but we must be sure that the form of taxation and the way that we deliver services — whether that be through bonds, PFI or any other method — is done in the most suitable way for a particular project. It is not enough to say that we do not have enough money to provide services or to fund them properly. We must move ourselves into a position in which we can fund services, and we need control of our own fiscal policy. Rather than tax-raising powers, we need tax-varying powers that will give us the freedom to explore how we borrow public money, as well as how we spend it.

Mr Leslie: We are speculating on these Benches about the notion that we need tax-varying powers rather than tax-raising powers to raise money. We are not sure that we understand the distinction. If we are looking for more money, we must mean raising taxes. We pay too much tax already, and I am doubtful about the value of the Government services that we get for that tax. There is opposition on these Benches to the notion of raising more tax. However, we acknowledge that in order to spend a greater amount of money on public services, especially to clear the infrastructure

deficit, money must be found from somewhere. You either pay for it, or you pay for it.

Regardless of whether the money is borrowed through the issuing of a bond — thereby deferring the final payment, but with interest being paid in the interim — sooner or later the bond must be redeemed. That means that all the money that is borrowed in the first place must be paid back with interest.

Alternatively, as is current practice, the Government can take as much money out of the block grant as they can to spend on infrastructure.

The third way is for the public sector to provide some of those services, for which it will charge a fee that will give it reasonable profits. We do not want the public sector to make what we believe to be unreasonable profits. The public sector wants to avoid making what it regards as unreasonably low profits for their efforts put in the risk they take.

The fourth option, which may well be a function of the second, is to make the user pay for the service by introducing tolls — a word that Mr Molloy was careful not to use. With a toll, for example, on a bridge or a road, only one kind of person pays: the person who uses it. As long as use of the service is voluntary, it is not unreasonable to invite people to pay for that extra convenience. In countries and cities where toll roads are in place, such as France and Hong Kong, the road usage by workers in particular is tremendous. For example, for a lorry driver on his way to a port, time is money, so it is worthwhile for him to pay the toll. Of course, it is important to judge the right price for the toll so that it does not become a disincentive to using the road and that it generates sufficient revenue.

Only the user pays the toll. The rest of us do not have to — although we all pay tax, and if the Government are providing those services, then, in effect, we are paying for it. The more the Government provides, the more we all must pay through tax. It is a question of whether one wants to contribute to the general pool in the hope of getting what one considers to be value for money, or whether one would rather pay only for the individual services that one wants. I am not going to get into the issue of healthcare. I see Dr McDonnell looking thoughtful. He will be well aware that that is at the core of the healthcare problem.

I have no alternative but to go into some technical detail on bonds. I am concerned that although we have some grasp of the notion, we have not grasped all the pertinent facts. In July, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee circulated a paper entitled 'Bonds – a Capital Idea'. I read the paper with some concern, and I trust that people who are interested in that area will read other literature to inform themselves on the subject.

The biggest issuer of bonds here is the Government, and the biggest issuer of bonds in the world is the Government of the USA, as they need more money than any other country. The UK Government has been issuing bonds for over 200 years; they pioneered the concept and have managed public finances very successfully by so doing. In recent years, there has been a surplus on the account, and the net level of Government debt has been reduced. That is essentially because when bonds become due, they have already been repaid and a replacement has not been issued.

However, given that the corporation tax revenue will undoubtedly fall in the United Kingdom over the next two or three years, the likelihood is that the Government will either have to raise more taxes or borrow more money. They will probably borrow more money or perhaps opt for a combination of the two.

There is not all that much debt around with a maturity of over 20 years, and the Government are not borrowing much money for that length of time. As a result, the opportunity exists for the right kind of organisation — with a good credit rating — to borrow money relatively cheaply over 20 to 30 years.

5.45 pm

That window is gradually closing. It was conspicuous that last week when the Treasury went to the market for £500 million, it was on 25-year maturity. In fact, today I dug out from the Government web site the plan for the current financial year. They plan to issue around £5 billion of the £13 billion they need to borrow — so well over a third will be in long maturity, in the 20-year area. Clearly, the Government have spotted the opportunity to generate money. Gradually one will find that there is more paper available in that area and that therefore, the yields will rise.

It has been asserted that bonds are a cheap way of borrowing money. However, one must be very cautious about that statement. The Government can borrow money reasonably cheaply by issuing bonds because Government are regarded as undoubted. They will definitely pay the interest and definitely redeem the bond on time and therefore get privilege for that certainty — they pay a lower rate of interest than the public sector. Whether a bond is cheap or expensive is, more than anything else, a function of the rate of inflation and the anticipated rate of inflation. If one invested now in a bond issued by the Government yielding 4.75%, you would, if you were the market, knock off the expected rate of inflation of about 2.3% and say that that is worth 2.4% real, or 2.4% over inflation. The tradition, certainly in the training that was drummed into me, was that when the real interest rate was more than 2.5% that was getting expensive. On the other hand, lending at a rate of interest that was more than 2.5% real was pretty good — one was getting good

money. That is why the interest rate on index-linked yields is usually 2.5% real. That is regarded as the rate that the market needs when it thinks it has got good value.

Much has been made of the buyout of the Welsh Water services by Glas Cymru. I consulted my friend Ian Adamson to find out how to pronounce this company's name — I trust that he is right. We must be cautious about that particular example, for that was the deal from heaven. The company was being asset-stripped — it did not want the Welsh Water bit because it would not make it much money; nor did it want the £1.8 billion debt. When somebody made an offer for it, a deal could be done. We must be clear that just over half of the bonds issued there were at a very high credit rating. The market thinks that they are good and has attached a pretty low yield to them. Typically, the yield on those bonds is about 1% more than an equivalent Government bond — 5.75% is roughly the yield on those bonds at present. They are 28-year bonds, which mature in 2028. That is the triple-A-rated part of the financing of that buyout — £1 billion worth.

The other £800 million, however, was not nearly so tasty as far as the market was concerned. It carried a much higher degree of risk with it. The single A bonds yield 154 basis points over the equivalent Treasury bond. They yield about 6.2% or 6.25%. The triple-B-rated bond, which is the lowest grade of bond, is 250 basis points over the Treasury's, which means that it is yielding well over 7%. In other words, the market thinks there is substantial risk attached to that bond and therefore wants quite a high rate of interest if it is going to buy it. Compare this with the equivalent bond issued by Severn Trent or Anglian Water, which is yielding about 6.4%. With regard to Glas Cymru and the bonds it issued to finance its buyout of Welsh Water, it is borrowing £1 billion of the £1.8 billion it needs at fairly fine rates of interest. However, the £800 million is becoming expensive.

The notion that all that money is cheap is simply not true. There is a considerable difference between high-graded paper and the lower graded. Moderately well rated corporate paper is yielding approximately 6.4% at the moment, and that is reasonably expensive borrowing. If one regards inflation as being about 2.3%, that is about 4% real.

Often a company takes the view that a bond is issued only when money cannot be obtained in any other way. A cheaper way of raising money is to tap the shareholders through a rights issue and get it through equity. Another is to borrow it from a bank, and that might be the better option if interest rates are likely to go down. The advantage in a bond lies in the certainty, and that applies to the borrower and lender. Each knows how much interest will be paid each year for

the specified number of years and when the date of repayment is.

If finance for Northern Ireland's infrastructure is to be raised by issuing bonds, the interest payments and repayment of the money must be addressed, and it is unlikely that the asset will be sold. For example, the water industry must borrow £2 billion over the next two years, so repayment of the £2 billion and the interest — and interest of 4% or 6% on £2 billion is quite a lot of money — must be considered. I know that the £2 billion does not have to be spent all at once — this is a 20-year scheme. However, we must be realistic about where the money comes from, and it can only come from two sources.

One source is the Government, and they spend tomorrow's money today by borrowing money from themselves and paying it back later. Another source is the consumer: for example, charging for water, as is done with electricity, or subsidising it, or a mixture of the two. A good example here is Scottish Rail, a private company that the Government subsidise by more than £20 million a year. Scottish Rail offers a fantastic service. It might be easier to sell and subsidise a railway service than run it, having defined the quality of service in advance. Those are the areas that should be considered when looking at alternative means of financing Government services.

We must be realistic about deciding what we are prepared to pay for and who ought to pay, given that money will not drop out of the sky. However, I do not dismiss the notion that we should look at ways of accelerating the rate at which we make progress by finding ways to harness either the private sector or private-sector financing.

The Minister will deal with that much better, but Treasury rules will make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Executive to issue bonds. There are devices that can be used to spin the assets into a certain company that is still controlled by the Government, but I will leave that matter to the Minister because I am sure that he will get it absolutely right.

We are spending tomorrow's money today, and we must be careful about how much of tomorrow's money we have hocked up in advance. Nonetheless, looking at those alternative approaches, one may conclude that one could generate enough revenue by improving the quality of the service. One may also conclude that the problem of repaying the debt that one incurred would not be as great as the current problem — that practically nobody wants to use, for example, the rail service. Raising revenue by improving services might be a lot cheaper.

As I keep saying, we cannot escape the fact that somehow we will have to pay for this. The questions are: who pays; what is the timing; and what is regarded as

a reasonable risk to take on when managing our infrastructure development in these ways?

I am conscious that I have been speaking for some time, and others will no doubt want to speak. I trust that this is an issue — and the matters relating to it such as PFI and PPP — with which the Assembly and particularly the Executive will continue to wrestle. Indeed, I think that the ball is with the Executive at the moment. I certainly would not like to claim that I know the answers. There are horses for courses in this area. Experience in PFI is still fairly short, and better solutions will gradually be devised over time. Depending on the particular service that is involved, the answer will be different. It is crucial that we are having a debate and an active investigation into this matter. For that reason, while I am concerned about some of the logic driving Mr Molloy's motion, I nonetheless believe that the sentiment is entirely correct and therefore give it my support.

Ms Lewsley: All the available resources under the Barnett formula are insufficient to meet the needs of our society. It would be desirable to have all of our public services funded from public resources, but unfortunately that is not possible, so we must look at all innovative means by which we can make up the shortfall.

We in the SDLP are not in support of privateers seeking to make money out of those projects. We stand for the development of best practice, good value for money and good client services. Our social democratic principles must be tempered with the realism that we must use when promoting the need for value for money. I welcome Mark Durkan's commitment to examining PFI and PPP as a means of addressing the £3 billion plus legacy of underfunding that resulted from direct rule, a system that the detractors of the Good Friday Agreement wish to return to. It is essential that every aspect of PFI and PPP be examined as we attempt to address this matter. But neither PFI nor PPP is a mature science. We are still learning about them. We must look at models of best practice from everywhere to enable us to develop a model with, what I would call, a Northern Ireland accent.

We must increase the educational provision for children, create better roads, build a stronger economy and increase and improve the care of our sick, elderly and the most vulnerable in our communities. These ambitions drive us forward and spur us to action, but if we are to achieve our goals, we must back them up with a clearly thought out financial strategy. I make no apologies for wanting a strong public service, and central to this thinking is the development of models without bankrupting the Exchequer. As we do not have full financial control of the departmental expenditure limits, we must look further afield to develop a strategy that reflects the needs of our society and seriously tackles social disadvantage.

The report that was put before the House on the inquiry by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on PPP and PFI has already been mentioned by several Members. The recommendations of the Committee include a co-ordinated programme of strategic projects and methods of finance that will address the infrastructure deficit through a sustainable programme of investment. It also recommends further research by the Economic Policy Unit with assistance from the Department of Finance and Personnel on financing mechanisms that can reconcile decisions made on the value for money of schemes against future revenue planning and budgeting for public services.

It also recommends that the support of all key players, including the private and voluntary sectors and local communities, be gained by means of a social partnership approach.

6.00 pm

When we utilise the instruments of PFI or PPP, we need to ensure that we evaluate their pertinence and impact. They must be consistent with our core commitment to social democratic objectives and the creation of equality of opportunity, targeting social need, and high quality public services.

There is an overall need to properly examine this complex area. I ask all Members to work intensively with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and to make a significant contribution to the debate. I welcome the Minister's announcement of a high-level task force, which met last week. It will be examining international experiences and proposing new initiatives to address the funding shortage here.

Finally, it is important that the Assembly look at many ways to build innovative partnerships throughout society that can achieve the development that we need, consistent with social democratic values.

Mr Dodds: As Members have said, this interesting debate has arisen because we do not have enough money from the Treasury to do what we need to do. There is a legacy of underfunding in key areas that will not be rectified overnight by means of an increase in the block grant. It is therefore necessary to look for other ways to finance urgently needed projects and programmes in Northern Ireland. Most of us are in agreement on that, but the exact way in which that is achieved will be the subject of this and further debates.

Too often in the past — especially on the mainland — much of the debate on the matter has centred on the conflict between two people's dogmas, political principles, and so on. However, proponents of the belief that the private sector does everything best, or that the public sector must do everything, seem at times to abound in roughly equal numbers. That sort of approach does not solve problems, build schools and hospitals,

or help to alleviate our historic underfunding of transport, which alone requires investment of some £1 billion over the next 10 years. We need solutions, not sound bites; delivery, not doctrine.

This debate allows us to set out what we want to achieve. Ultimately, the key issue is not how we should do something, but what we should do. The method of delivery is only ever a means to an end. Often, those who castigate the role of PFIs or PPPs do not have a realistic alternative. It is easy to say what needs to be done; it is altogether more difficult to pay to get it done.

There are easy answers and there are realistic answers. Unfortunately, few easy answers are realistic. We need to look for alternatives that successfully answer the question, "Do they work?" We can examine a number of possibilities: we could press for a renegotiation of the Barnett formula and, on the basis of all sorts of reasons, seek to make the case for more funding for Northern Ireland. I agree with many Members who said that we have a very strong case to make. However, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel pointed out last week in his characteristic way,

"We will not get a free run at the rickety wheel when it comes to challenging the Barnett formula."

Even a successful renegotiation of the Barnett formula, or a one-off payment from the Exchequer, would not be solutions in themselves. Other approaches will be necessary. In the past, we have attempted PFI projects in Northern Ireland with varying degrees of success. The role of the private sector, and the efficiencies that it brings, are to be welcomed. However, we must not lose sight of what is happening. We are in effect buying projects on hire purchase. In the long run, this may be a dearer alternative. The private sector may be financing the projects, but we should not forget that the public sector continues to fund them, and to fund the profits of the private enterprise as well.

There are long-term difficulties. Too often in the past, when the private sector entered into negotiation with the public sector, the public sector ended up coming off worst. It is notoriously difficult to estimate what will happen in future years in the more complex PFI projects. We need only look at the agreements reached with the electricity generating companies in the early 1990s to demonstrate that point. As a result, we are left today to face higher bills.

Let us be clear. I believe that there is a place for PFI projects, but we must be sure that there is a sufficient transfer of risk to the private sector to ensure that we are achieving value for money. We must be sure that we are actually achieving efficiencies in the private sector, and that we are getting a better deal than we could in the public sector by using the private sector to carry out aspects of work with carefully defined targets. If it is to deliver, PFI must serve the purpose of

delivering projects today which otherwise could not be delivered for years ahead.

Enormous economic benefits flow from using private finance today to make progress today. However, we must not fall into the trap of paying huge fees to consultants to transact with the private sector in a way that will act as a drain on future generations. If there is a genuine transfer of risk, and we reduce costs for the public sector, then they are worthwhile. I fear that the jury is still out on that issue. We do not have the opportunity in this debate to examine in detail the merits of PFI schemes. It is clear, however, that they are not a panacea for our problems. They may be just the start of problems for future generations.

PFI is not the only possible option. There are other ways to make sure that we do things today that will serve us all in the future. Greater use of bonds has been mentioned. The Americans in particular use bonds to finance projects while retaining control in the public sector. It is an attractive option in many ways, although as has been pointed out, it is not free of difficulties. Bonds allow significant amounts of money to be raised at lower interest rates. Instead of the private sector dictating terms to the public sector, the roles are reversed, allowing the public sector to have a greater say in delivering efficiencies, and retaining control.

The Treasury is not keen to allow branches of Government to simply borrow money, run up the public sector borrowing requirement and know that if all goes wrong, the Treasury will pick up the tab. That is problematic. Bonds can be Government-backed, or revenue-backed, or, depending on the nature of the projects, backed by a mixture of revenues, grants and other sources. Instead of having to wait 25 years to get a project completed, the project can be delivered in the short term. While the public is benefiting from it, payment can be made for it. The key is to get approval from the Treasury to allow such borrowing not to be reflected in the public sector borrowing requirement. That is not an easy task, but neither are any of the alternatives.

The opportunity exists for us to make a special case for Northern Ireland. The last 30 years have left us with a legacy of under-investment, not least because of the amount of money that was distracted away from other vital areas of investment in the need to fight terrorism. We are seeing an illustration across the world today of the enormous sums of money that are going to have to be spent in the fight against terrorism. In Northern Ireland, unfortunately, we have been paying that price.

When I hear some Members of the House talk about a lack of investment from Westminster over the years, I just wonder how much more money could have been invested in public services if they had played a role in getting violence and terrorism stopped. This is, of course, a political question. It can be resolved with the

necessary will, and it could be an answer to Northern Ireland's problems.

Our challenge should be to press for such an approach by the Treasury. It will not be easy, but if we can send out one clear message from the Assembly and make our case effectively, such an approach could be made given the exceptional circumstances of Northern Ireland. When the alternatives are either allowing our infrastructure to degenerate further or getting an increase in the amount of money the Treasury directly supplies to Northern Ireland, what I am saying may look like a more realistic approach. Our task in the short term must be to assess this option fully and at the very least keep it open as a possible way forward.

PFI and PPP schemes do have a role to play in Northern Ireland, but let us not be afraid to be innovative in the approach that we take to dealing with the problems that we have been left to tackle.

Mr J Kelly: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I welcome this debate. I welcome the motion because it gives us an opportunity to debate a very important matter that can be ideological and doctrinaire. Coming from a trade union background and still being a trade union member, it would be easy for me to slip into a doctrinaire or ideological approach to PFI. It is an important issue, and one that has not received the debate that it deserves. There has been little public debate about PFI.

However, since PFI has been introduced, a number of concerns, including outright opposition, have been raised from a range of bodies. Since the election of the second Blair Government, trade unions in Britain have begun a concerted campaign against PFI, with some threatening strike action if its implementation is continued. In particular, the largest British trade union, Unison, remains vehemently opposed to PFI and has campaigned strongly for its abolition. Perhaps more surprisingly, the British Medical Association has added its voice to those opposing PFI. The British Medical Journal has described PFI as a perfidious financial idiocy that could destroy the NHS.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, the National Audit Office and the House of Commons Public Accounts and Health Committees have also raised public concerns about the operation and effects of PFI. So it is not only those people on the left of politics, either here, in the rest of Ireland or elsewhere, who are expressing concerns about PFI. Concerns are being expressed by those august bodies that I have just mentioned.

It is not in opposition to Mark Durkan that we are debating this motion, and it is not a way of getting at anyone. It is an attempt to open up a debate around how we should finance our essential public services — for example, health and education. It is about whether we should allow private finance to take control of

those very important services and institutions, or whether public finance ought to keep the main handle on them.

The debate, therefore, on how we pay for public services, on how we protect those services and on the rights of the people who work in them is one we cannot sidestep. The state of our hospitals, schools, roads, railways and sewerage systems demands nothing less than a substantial increase in the money we invest in public services. We all agree on that.

The debate on the future of our public services must bring into focus the fact that we do not yet have economic sovereignty and are subject to the financial resources provided by the British Government. The current economic policy that has come to govern public spending and the interest in using private-sector finance and management are the results of the crisis in public borrowing and 20 years of British Conservative rule.

Those who advocate using private money to fund our public services argue that it generates money the public purse simply does not have. It transfers the risk of public-sector borrowing to the private sector. It brings private know-how into the public sector and, by implication, efficiency savings, and it accelerates investment. Those arguments are used by those who are in favour of PFI.

6.15 pm

One may ask whether private finance through PFIs or the evolving PPPs — they are the same things — are the only, or even the best, ways forward. The costs of using private money must still be met from the public purse, and it is an expensive way to borrow money.

There are many indicators that the PFI projects entered into five or 10 years ago were not cheaper than they would have been if public money had been used. In some cases PFI projects have resulted in poor safety standards, lower levels of services, poor working conditions and no savings on running costs. But does that mean that PPPs or PFIs should be rejected? Several billion pounds still have to be found to invest in the public services.

Members must not forget that in the British Government's last comprehensive spending review, PFI accounted for about 14% of investment in the capital building programme. Given Tony Blair's total conversion to the merits of the private sector, one can expect that figure to increase. When our slice of the British budget is worked out by the flawed and unfair Barnett formula, we will have to fund an even greater portion of our public-sector capital building programme using PFI. In key areas such as health and education the Departments are not getting a fair share of funding from the Minister of Finance and Personnel. In many ways the Assembly has yet to live up to the commitments put forward in the Programme for Government.

If there was a greater level of economic sovereignty we would have more options. Public borrowing is always cheaper than private borrowing, and that is before we start to examine the British Treasury rules that block borrowing from the European Investment Bank — a route that is used to greater effect by other European countries. The Assembly ought to look at that.

Private-sector finance can help accelerate building and investment, but whatever means we use for increasing our investment in vital public services, they must remain under fully accountable public ownership. That is a reasonable objective of any party that calls itself democratic socialist or plain socialist. All Members have an obligation to ensure that those essential services remain under public control and are not given over to PFIs.

We will still pay for finance that is raised by PFI, so is PFI good value for money? There is a case to be made for identifying key public services that should not fall within the remit of PFI and where criteria other than that of profitability should be paramount. That is also essential in public services, and it is an argument put forward by Bob Kiley in his report on the London Underground in which he rejected part privatisation in favour of public bonds. Kiley favours the use of bonds to maximise the benefits of using private finance while services, delivery and management remain under public control and workforce rights are protected. It is essential that the rights of the workforce are protected and not handed over to what can become the ravages of a PFI.

There are a number of options to be examined. It may be difficult, but the unfair Barnett formula should be altered to increase our block grant allocation, and a peace dividend should be secured by transferring expenditure on the British war machine to rebuilding a society emerging from conflict. Greater investment should be made by the Irish Government to meet their financial responsibilities in the North — especially in border areas. Alternatives such as borrowing at preferential rates from such bodies as the European Investment Bank should be considered, and the use of public bonds should be examined. I would not dismiss the notion of public bonds.

Whatever the solution, without economic sovereignty we will be constrained by the British Exchequer. We have to take responsibility for some difficult decisions, and rhetoric will not help when we realise that we need to find billions of pounds to invest in restructuring our hospitals and railways.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, this is not an attempt to have a divisive, ideological or doctrinaire debate. It is an attempt to ask whether there are alternatives to PFI. We ought not to allow the areas critical to the well-being of our community — health and education — to escape the net of public service.

Dr Birnie: Money provides the sinews of Government, and therefore this is an important issue. It is a pity that so few Members are here to debate and consider those crucial matters. I congratulate the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee on tabling the motion. It is appropriate to consider the full range of alternatives. I would not, however, necessarily agree with his comments on the alternatives to PFI and PPP.

My first point relates to the Barnett formula, a matter that is often raised in the House. It has become a litany on these occasions to say that the formula must be renegotiated. That demand is our local parallel to the phrase used by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s with respect to the renegotiation of the UK's net contribution to the European Community: "Give us back our money".

I wish the Finance Minister and the Executive well in their dealings with the Treasury. While it is possible that they may succeed, it is equally possible that they will not. If needs throughout the UK are to be assessed on a regional basis, we do not yet know how our needs will compare, after careful research, with those of the south of Wales or the north of England, where social deprivation also exists. Perhaps our needs base will be shown to be the greatest in the UK, but it might also be shown to be equal to the needs of many other regions. We should not assume that by following this route a large increase in the Northern Ireland spending block would be granted. As is the case in many areas, the Northern Ireland Executive must hope for the best, but prepare also for the worst. We need a strategy of regional competitiveness and wealth generation, regardless of what happens as a result of a reassessment or recalculation of the Barnett formula and the Northern Ireland block of public spending funds.

My second point is on the matter of bonds, which Mr Leslie covered well. One of the many problems that might arise if this route is taken is that the institution of water charges would be required. Bonds were used to fund water services in Wales — unlike Mr Leslie, I will not attempt to pronounce the relevant Welsh name. Many Members will remember the discussion in the mid-1990s of the possibility of privatisation in Northern Ireland. The suggestion was supremely unpopular with much of the public.

My third point is that in the proposer's speech there is something of an enigma or conundrum. It is unclear what he meant by his reference to tax-varying powers. Did he mean tax-raising or tax-lowering powers? That matter will have to be pursued in the future, and quite rightly so. The proposer criticised the one piece of tax-varying power that the Executive have exercised, albeit that the increase has not been more rapid than in Great Britain — the increase in the regional rate. Other Members have made the same criticism in the past. Given that it is not clear what view is being taken on user charges, or so-called toll charges, is a regional

income tax, or a regional variation around the national UK rate and levels of income tax, being hinted at?

The Scottish Parliament and Executive have the theoretical power to raise income tax above the UK base rate by up to three pence in the pound. However, it may be significant that to date the Scottish Parliament has not used that power. Some people think that it is extremely unlikely that the Scottish Parliament will use it in the foreseeable future. Even if it did use that power, the quantum of revenue raised might not be very large relative to the total base of revenue in Scotland. The same arguments apply even more forcibly in our region.

As someone who has tried to teach students about so-called regional economics, I know that there is a theoretical argument that when a devolved or federal assembly within a greater fiscal and monetary union varies its spending at the margin, it should also vary its tax at the margin. The argument is that that will help to make the politicians who take such decisions more responsible for those decisions. At the theoretical level, that argument carries some weight. If during debates about the Budget or PFI, we faced the prospect of having to take votes on raising a regional, Northern Ireland or Ulster rate of income tax, we would find that debates would be better attended.

I doubt if the House is ready to take on the responsibility of a regional income tax rate. What may happen in the medium-to-long term is a decision for the future. I support the motion because it is sensible to evaluate the full range of alternatives.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion. It is good to open up the debate on attempts to get finance for capital investment project needs that are so starkly visible in Northern Ireland. We all recognise that there has been a severe lack of capital investment in infrastructure projects for 30 years. However, we should not get hung up on the ideology of PPPs or PFIs. When Lord Keynes introduced the idea of deficit budgets many years ago, it was intended that a society could borrow money from the private sector to finance capital investment projects in particular.

The public sector borrowing requirement (PSBR) is no longer in vogue; it is now the net cash requirement. Governments can still borrow money, but they borrow it from the private sector. In a small region such as Northern Ireland we cannot get as much extra public finance as we would through the Barnett formula, and we cannot continue to labour the point about how we are suffering from its inadequacies. However, sooner or later, the region will have to get a better picture of its public finance position. As I said on 25 September in a question to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, the sooner we see Northern Ireland's revenue receipts the better. We will then have a better understanding of how public finances operate in Northern Ireland and how we are performing as a region.

6.30 pm

Resource accounting is coming in. There is a massive notional charge being attributed to capital assets in each Department at the moment. If there is to be no direct public finance input into projects then there will be a charge and we should open up our minds to having value-for-money PPP projects. There have been some good projects in Northern Ireland — the Department of Education has endeavoured to lever in private funds for some projects that have not all been bad.

We must develop expertise in Government about how to manage the process of leveraging in private finance for particular capital investment projects; an area where there is a severe lack of knowledge in the British government system. This is the most important reason why trades unions and other established and respected bodies in the UK oppose PPP. Project management has not been good. There has been overcharging as far as some of the private finance levered in has been concerned.

Given our new dispensation we should open up our minds to leveraging in private finance. We should not get hung up about private finance being bad money. Virtually everyone who works has money tied up in a pension scheme. They are saving with assurance companies or in pension plans, and investment managers are looking for projects to invest money in. There is a large public sector in Northern Ireland and there are many people whose money is tied up in pension plans. Do we want that money to leave Northern Ireland and be invested in other places, or do we want it to be invested in capital investment needs and projects here?

We must accept the principle of using private finance in an efficient and effective way to rebuild the infrastructure that we need so badly. If we go on — in the same way that we have for the past 30 years — depending on the annual drip-feed subvention, we will slip further back and create even greater disadvantage.

I welcome the motion, but we should not close off any options at this stage. I hope that the Minister will put resources into an interdepartmental group that can look at alternative sources of finance that will help to regenerate and build our regional economy.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Every Member and party agree that our public services are in crisis. It is not only our hospitals and schools; roads, railways and services across the board are in trouble. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment told the House today that the North of Ireland is heading into an economic crisis. Serious job losses were announced last week, and the Minister warned of more. We must break the cycle of depression and economic instability.

There is an onus on us to ask difficult questions and come up with big ideas. We must break the cycle of

under-investment in public services that is a legacy of British involvement in our affairs. There are serious concerns about PFI. As Mr Byrne said, organisations and individuals across the board have reservations. The matter must be examined with regard to value for money, workers' rights and accountability. Clearly, such concerns are well founded.

The purpose of the motion is to urge the Executive to look at alternatives. However, we do not have economic sovereignty, and that fundamental issue must be examined. We are subject to the financial resources and policy planning set out by the British Government. To date, our influence over the amount of money that we have to invest in public services has been sadly lacking.

The Barnett formula was mentioned, and it is clear that in the House and among political parties there is great unhappiness about that system of funding. We have failed to exert the necessary political pressure not only on the Barnett formula, but on tax-raising and tax-varying powers. We have focused on tinkering with rates and have toyed with other forms of back-door taxation. We are now in a position of crisis management across our essential services. We do not have the resources to plan for the future, or to look at those issues with imagination and vision.

There is a legacy of underfunding, discrimination, and, as a result of partition, of peripherality. Our need is not reflected in the headcount of the Barnett formula; our society is emerging from conflict. Where is the peace dividend that we were promised? We must demand, for example, that the British military expenditure be diverted and used instead to build on peace, and, in a sense, to create a period of economic reconstruction. The Irish Government should also be approached to ensure that their responsibilities in the North of Ireland extend to economic support and incorporation into the national development plan.

It is necessary to examine ways to develop our economic sovereignty. We must be allowed to borrow from such bodies as the European Investment Bank whose preferential rates would be much more favourable to the public sector than to the private sector. We must build upon the foundations of peace and conflict resolution. At present, the rules of the British Treasury do not allow us to do that. In European terms, that is highly unusual. It is an unwarranted and extremely tight restriction on the rights and economy of public bodies. There is no legitimate economic basis for it. I urge the Executive to take the matter up with the British Exchequer and at EU level.

We must also consider public bonds. That matter has not been explored with any great urgency. If the Assembly were able to sell bonds to the public a steady stream of income would be guaranteed. A significant amount could be raised for investment. An example of such an

initiative is the London Underground, and there are others in Boston and in New York. There is concern that that approach amounts to regressive taxation, and indirect privatisation, but if it is handled properly it does not have to be like that. Such a scheme would ensure that capital investment projects remain under public ownership and management, and lower interest charges would result.

Why do we not look at public interest companies and genuinely independent trusts, instead of the compromised examples that we now have?

In regard to tax varying, we do not have the limited powers of the Scottish Assembly. We have the power to set the regional rate. However, we must recognise that that is not significant when compared to overall public expenditure. It represents a form of taxation that hits people unfairly. The British Government must live up to their responsibilities. To support a society that is emerging from conflict, they must ensure that there is a real peace dividend by recognising our need.

We must make progress in establishing economic sovereignty. We must have real control over the setting of our objectives and goals for public service expenditure and investment. That is where the solutions lie. Fundamental to all that are the constraints on economic sovereignty. It is key to movement on the issue. Go raibh maith agat.

Sir John Gorman: I was impressed by the fact that the Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee had the initiative to start to look outside PFI. We must look at something new. We did it once. We took housing in Northern Ireland and sold it. Many people objected, and I am looking at people in the Chamber who in 1979 must have thought that it was a dreadful to sell a public asset to the private sector.

Northern Ireland was the first region in the United Kingdom to do such a thing. What was the result? Members can see the results all around them — housing is the one thing in Northern Ireland that is not controversial.

How was that achieved? It was achieved because people had a good, new idea. In fact, Mrs Thatcher had the idea originally, but it took her nearly two years to persuade the erstwhile Marxists, the soft socialists and the liberal do-not-change anything people who were in Parliament then. However, she made it. We were lucky in that we had such an odd parliamentary system that we could go in one night to Westminster and say that we in Northern Ireland wanted to do that, and so for 18 months we had total freedom to sell the housing.

It meant that we had an asset that we could, through the excellence and initiative of the Minister then responsible for finance, make a case to the Treasury

that was special and different for Northern Ireland. We were able to exhort the Treasury to pay some attention to the dreadful times that we had had with terrorism, the expenditure on security and the drain on all our functions and cash. The Treasury accepted that. Uniquely, Northern Ireland is the only place in the United Kingdom today that can sell its public housing and get all the money — not half in dribs and drabs — directly back. Councils are free to use the money.

PFI has happened once, so might it not be an idea to be a little bold and think of something new and different? It could happen if guns are given up, the Loyalists stop beating people up all night and the terrorism that ruins the country is given up for good. Imagine how the rest of the world would say “My God, that place is different and new. That is somewhere we should invest in.” Instead of having to worry about whether public finances must be supplemented by private finances or vice versa, money would be flowing in. There is the challenge.

6.45 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): Like other Members, I welcome the debate and I am happy to support the motion’s sentiments. I wish that more people had been present for the debate. I also wish that more people could have developed their points further, as I would have been interested to hear where some of their thoughts would have eventually led. Several Members said some intriguing things and provided key insights. Not all the points added up, but with limited time, not every point can be made or fully developed.

We have a fundamental need to identify alternative means and sources of funding in order to address the legacy of historical underfunding of the infrastructure of our public services, which was recognised in the debate. The deficit is estimated to reach at least £4 billion in the next 10 years, and it will probably be more. Many Members pointed out that that legacy of underfunding has meant some of our public services have required levels of capital investment far in excess of our available resources if we are to fund them in the traditional manner of public sector capital investment. That makes it important for the Executive and all Departments to explore new ways, such as public-private partnerships, to finance and to provide public services — I stress the words “public services”. We can use new methods provided that they are affordable, deliver value for money, provide effective solutions to meet the public service needs, and add to the outcomes that we would otherwise have achieved.

It is also important that new methods are in accordance with the Executive’s wider social and economic objectives, and I accept the point that many Members made. We need to examine all options carefully and objectively and develop a clear policy in those areas. It

is for that reason that the Executive made a commitment in the Programme for Government to review the opportunities for the use of private finance in all major service provision and in all major infrastructure projects by March 2002. The aim is to increase investment and to provide innovative value-for-money solutions through public-private partnerships.

The high-level working group that Ms Lewsley and other Members referred to was established to carry out that review. It is jointly chaired by my Department and the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The group had its first meeting last Wednesday. I want to assure Mr Molloy that, in its deliberations, the working group will take into account evidence from many quarters on the benefits and the constraints of using PPP. That evidence will include that found in the Committee for Finance and Personnel’s report. The report acknowledged that PPP can be a valuable tool and means of investment, while highlighting concerns about, and shortcomings of, aspects of certain PFI models. The members of the working group represent a wide range of interests and stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors and, I hope, from the trade union sector also.

The Executive aim to ensure that policy in this area is developed using a social-partnership approach, and that was reflected in our invitations to a whole range of social partners to participate in the working group. We recognise that not everyone agrees with the concept of PPPs, and some people have particular concerns about their use. We will ensure that a broad cross-section of views is sought, and heard, during the course of this review through public consultation with all interested parties. Equally, we want to learn from the experience of others in this area — locally and internationally — so that we can be most effectively organised to develop policy and manage procurement of PPP’s where their use is appropriate in the public interest.

One of the working group’s first tasks has been to develop a working definition of PPP. I take issue with John Kelly’s assertion that PPP is simply another name for PFI. We are talking about a model that can have a much wider scope, a much more varied form, and, hopefully, a more effective and beneficial impact than the standard PFI models we have seen before. It is significant that the group will be trying to develop a working definition of what PPP actually means for our purposes in this part of the world. It is not a matter of taking a “karaoke” policy from elsewhere and singing along to it. We intend to develop our own practices and our own approach.

The group has been considering what forms of partnership are right for our public services, drawing on national and international experience. The group is asking what will work best in the context of our local, social and economic environment, and what forms of

partnership generating increased investment funding for our public services can fit within our existing public expenditure control regime.

Some issues are unique to us, especially the equality dimension that several Members have emphasised, and we must take these into account in developing policy. The Executive are committed to ensuring that the working group will address all the relevant social and economic issues surrounding any future use of PPPs.

The motion asks the Executive to investigate alternatives. If there are any other viable alternatives to the use of PPPs or the traditional means of public capital expenditure, the Executive will certainly welcome hearing about them and will readily try to follow them up. At this stage I can assure Members that nothing is being excluded. I made it clear when talking to the working group last week that nothing can be excluded. No option should be deemed to be taboo, nor should any means of securing better investment levels for our public services be deemed old hat.

It is not, therefore, a question of our saying that everything now has to be done by PFI or through the broader notion of public-private partnerships. As some Members said, we are trying to make sure that we can meet investment needs across the range of our programmes. We have to do so in the context of the deficits that we have inherited, and in ways that add up to more investment and that secure more public services at the standard people here have the right to expect. If, for doctrinaire purposes, we are to rule out the option of using private finance, then we will deny ourselves that opportunity. We will limit the scale of our impact in relation to public investment, and we will limit our opportunities to provide services of a modern standard in the sort of facilities that people have every right to expect.

Several Members did recognise that our present public expenditure control regime places certain limits on the ways open to us to raise additional funds for investment. That regime, whether we like it or not, is determined by the Treasury and not by us. It operates primarily on the basis of departmental expenditure limits. As has been said, direct borrowing or issuing of bonds by publicly funded bodies cannot, in fact, lead to any increased expenditure within the Northern Ireland block total. The effect of the departmental expenditure limit is to limit what we can spend in departmental terms. As some of my officials say, it does exactly what it says on the tin. Within those particular constraints, raising money through bonds will not actually raise the amount of money that we can spend or invest. Yes, we can raise money through bonds, but it will not add to the sum total of our effective expenditure. It will not actually add more investment.

I am not recommending or defending those particular rules, but we cannot simply wish them away. We have

to recognise that bonds are a form of borrowing — they have to be financed by someone. In our circumstance the rules are clear. If we borrow, the full amount is deducted from our public expenditure block — we do not get the additional expenditure. It is not entirely true to say, as Dara O'Hagan did, that there is absolutely no legitimate economic reason for that. The fact is that borrowing absorbs savings, and it can only proceed if interest rates are attractive. If you have higher borrowing, you have higher interest rates, and that in turn suppresses private investment elsewhere and potentially damages growth. It is not the case that there is absolutely no possible economic reason or insight that might inform the Treasury's view of those matters.

A lot of people in the House seem to think that it is just a case of our going and putting some of these ideas to the Treasury. They say "Just ask them, and when they say 'No', ask them whether they know who is asking and whether they know that we have had under-investment. Tell them that we are emerging from conflict." They think that the answer is suddenly going to change. We need a more persuasive case than that. That is why we have a working group to explore options and come up with models that can actually work — options that will allow us to talk to the Treasury, and others, about ways in which we can be more effective as we set about our business.

In focusing on PPPs we are trying to realise increased investment. Obviously, however, that has to be within the parameters of public expenditure limits.

I make no apologies as Finance Minister. I am in favour of public spending, and I do not try to reduce the amount of public expenditure or the Northern Ireland block. I want to find ways to increase investment and modernise our public services to meet the needs of the whole community.

7.00 pm

That is why I agree with Members who want to try to improve on the Barnett formula. However, I caution Members to be realistic. It is not just there for the asking; we face difficult challenges as well. And let us remember, there are people elsewhere who want to change the Barnett formula, and not to Northern Ireland's advantage.

We need to look hard at the needs and effectiveness evaluation that is under way, and we have to be prepared to press the Treasury on the point in that evaluation which shows that we need added consideration and added expenditure if we are to meet our relatively greater needs. We have to be open so that we can accept that there may be areas in which our traditional spending is higher than the capital spending across the water. We may need to revise some of our spending tendencies downwards.

We have to be open to the possibility that some of the important investment in services in the recent past will allow us to put less emphasis on continued spending on them. It is possible to invest more heavily in programmes that are most under pressure, in particular health, schools, roads and transport.

The Executive is not interested in using PPPs to cut public services or public expenditure. We are trying to explore PPPs — possibly multi-sectoral partnerships. I discussed that with the high-level working group, because there are partnership models and experiences in Northern Ireland that we can recruit in order to expand and widen some notions of PPP. We have some cross-sectoral partnership experiences that go further than partnership experiences in other jurisdictions. Let us recruit those experiences to some of the financial public-private partnership experiences that we have elsewhere. That is one reason for having such a broadly based working group.

We do not wish to use public-private partnership as some form of privatisation. The aim is to ensure that we maximise our public investment. If we know that we need more infrastructure or investment in modern quality facilities to enable members of the public to avail themselves of better public services, we need more investment. If we want to start more projects but are limited in the number of starts we can make by the traditional route of public capital investment, we have to look at ways of marshalling private resources so that we can start more of those much-needed capital projects.

Some Members made reference to some old-style socialist tendencies that may lurk in some quarters in the Chamber. Northern Ireland does not have a command economy, but there are devices available to us with which we can marshal private finance and private-sector activity. We will never have well-developed public-private partnerships unless we use the capacity of the private sector to support public investment needs and the enhancement and provision of public services. We are talking about public services here.

We must remember that PPP transactions and workers' rights are governed by legislation, including EU legislation on the transfer of undertakings, and those obligations stand and apply in that instance. We must explore all the alternatives that we can, because as this debate has shown, there is no shortage of need. There is no shortage of good projects on which we can spend good money. We must ensure that we get good money as readily as possible.

If we had a fair wind with the Treasury and were able to change the allocation of funding through the Barnett formula, and if we were also able to secure a further dispensation from the Treasury allowing us to use some form of bond, we would still need to supplement the expenditure achievable through those means with

PPP. We would still have to use our experience of good PFI in some of those projects where it is suitable.

I hope that Members' thoughts on this matter will converge. Some among us have argued that the problem in seeking alternatives is that we have not sought tax-varying powers. The unusual suggestion has been made that we access tax-varying powers but not tax-raising powers as a means of raising more money. In other words, not only are we to ask the Treasury to give us more money in circumstances where we would not ask for more money from our own households, but less tax is to be exacted at the same time. I do not care how persuasive or persistent anyone in the House is going to be; we are not going to get far on that basis with the Treasury.

If we indeed need investment that many Members have termed "vital", is it so vital that we will face the hard choice of trying to raise the money ourselves from within our regional resources through the means available to us? Will people believe that we are seeking tax-varying powers and that we are going to be hard-headed and realistic about the exercise of tax-varying powers, when we are afraid of the one tax instrument that we currently have — the regional rate? We are raising it very little compared to household contributions across the water. I do not mention that in order to threaten that we need to double household contributions through rates, but rather to simply introduce a reality check into our consideration.

We were given some examples of the use of bonds; I am not against bonds. We must work to develop a system that includes a bond facility workable within Treasury rules, which will have the attractions in broader market terms, locally and internationally, that Members have mentioned.

Many of those bonds that people cited as examples — those used in the London Underground and in some American cities — do not just allow us to raise money. Dr Dara O'Hagan said that if we had bonds, we could raise money. With bonds, we also must pay the money back. Payments must be made on those bonds. How are those payments to be funded? Where does the revenue come from? Will our public expenditure just go to pay back those bonds? That would propel us back into the hire purchase argument that people have used against PFI.

Many of the examples where bonds have either been used or proposed involve projects where user charges generate high revenue. The same people who seem to be advocating some of these models have told us that we are not allowed to go down the road of charges, just as we are not allowed to explore further increases on rates. I am all in favour of exploring alternatives. That is what we are about, and the working

group has a wider remit than just trying to revamp PFI. That is why we want to involve our social partners.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Durkan: Let us remember that alternatives are not all going to be easy alternatives, and they are not going to be soft options for the Assembly. Equally, there will be no soft money from the Assembly — any more than there will be soft money from the private sector.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for attending the debate and for giving a very comprehensive reply. I will not deal with all of the issues he mentioned; there were so many. However, the debate has been successful in raising the issues and getting people to think about alternatives. I was glad to hear the Minister say that the working group is not just dealing with the implementation of PFI, but also looking at alternatives.

When it comes to tax-varying versus rates, it is about looking at alternatives and not about taxing households to the hilt. I will deal with a point raised by Esmond Birnie. I was not being specific with respect to a tax; I was saying that we should look at tax-varying and how we can have a fairer system of taxation. Simply increasing the rates is not the way to do it. I do not see tax-varying as a tax-raising power. We should not increase income tax or any other tax; we should look at taxation in general.

I remember listening to Esmond Birnie in Enniskillen some years ago, when he was saying that the South of Ireland was not economically viable and that it could not afford to be an all-Ireland republic. Esmond got it wrong that time and maybe he has got it wrong this time as well.

The debate is about PFI and alternatives. It is important that we look at all of the alternatives and rule none of them out. The Committee for Finance and Personnel held an inquiry into PFI, and proved that in some cases it was successful, but in others it was not. In some situations bonds may be successful. The difference between bonds and PFI is that bonds give you the finances, and you then decide how to use them. With PFI, you are giving someone a contract. There are benefits in some contracts if they are properly negotiated and carried out. The problem in the past has been that some contracts were not properly negotiated and carried out, and proper contract maintenance was not tied into them. We must look at that issue.

We should have alternatives so that our hands are not tied. If we are going to negotiate with the private sector as regards funding, and if we are saying at the same time that we do not have any alternative but to give them the contracts, then surely we are tying our

hands in relation to those contracts. They can charge us whatever they want.

While there were not many Members in the Chamber, quite a few of those who were spoke on this issue. I am thankful that all parties discussed it. John Gorman spoke about housing. That is an important factor, and we recognise the impact that the Housing Executive has had in trying to alleviate homelessness and the problems associated with that. However, in dealing with the broader political scheme, he must recognise that the Housing Executive was set up because of discrimination in the past by the Unionist regime in Stormont. Control of housing had to be taken away from local councils and Stormont so that houses could be allocated fairly — something that had not happened in the past. Unionists are now proposing to bring the Assembly down because it is not the same as the old Assembly, or the old Stormont, and they are not getting their own way on every issue.

The Minister said very clearly that the Programme for Government, and the possibilities in that programme, are underpinned by PFI. A marker has been put down. Within the present context, and until the working group reports, no alternatives to PFI are being looked at. I am concerned that in agreeing PFI contracts we do not tie our hands for the future, or tie up funds.

7.15 pm

I speak as a private Member in this debate, and not as Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. When James Leslie raised the issue of the use of bonds, he spoke in the same capacity, and not as Deputy Chairperson of that Committee. We accept that, at the end of the day, the taxpayer will have to pay. There is no way to circumvent that. There is no way to build schools, hospitals et cetera unless somebody pays. How we pay, and the freedom that we are given to put the contracts together, may decide whether we choose PFI, bonds or other methods. We could use tax-varying powers, or we could borrow from the European bank or some other source. We do not have economic sovereignty at present; we are dependent both on what the Exchequer decides and on what comes out of the Barnett formula.

Ms Lewsley defended the Minister, which she is entitled to do. However, we have to look at the issue. I am not here to decry the role of the Minister. He has been very open in his discussions with the Committee and with Members. This is not a competition; one of the benefits of the debate is that all parties have come together to support movement on the matter.

I acknowledge the remarks made by Mr Dodds. He pointed to the fact that we should not tie our hands, but should be open to all alternatives. John Kelly mentioned trade union concerns. The Committee picked up on that in its inquiry. There was concern

that people who had been guaranteed protection in their new employment under PFI did not receive that protection. Many people felt left out and worse off because of that.

The Minister said that PFI is not simply privatisation, which I accept. However, baggage from the past means that a danger remains that PFI may simply be seen to mean privatisation. We do not have to imitate what happened in the past. I welcome the fact that we now say that whatever is devised will be home-grown, it will suit the situation and we shall be responsible for it.

Mr Byrne raised the issue of pension funds. Many of the people who put those contracts together come from a pension-fund management background. We heard at the inquiry in England that housing associations and developers have put up money in various ways. We need to look at all the alternatives, and we can do that in our own way. There is unanimous agreement, as Dr O'Hagan said, that we do not have the public services that we require. A number of them are deficient, not just financially, but historically.

From today, we can progress and continue the discussion on the use of public-private finance. Last Monday, Sir Reg Empey and Séamus Mallon came to the House with a clear line on the Programme for Government and its aspirations. The next day, the Minister for Finance and Personnel told us what was feasible and what was not, and what could or could not be delivered.

I would prefer that the situation were made clear than that we should have a pie-in-the-sky Programme for Government that we know cannot be delivered.

The Minister made clear what was required, and we can work in that context.

There is a simple argument about the legacy of past underfunding. We must look to the British Government to pay for that underfunding. Some people may dismiss that idea and say that we will not get such payment. However, if we do not set the marker high enough, we will get less than we deserve. We must emphasise to the British Government that, in recent years and even in the lifetime of this Assembly, other regions negotiated for — and received — allocations that were over and above their Barnett formula entitlement, while we did not get sufficient to meet our need. The Health Service is one example: England, Scotland and Wales received sizeable amounts of money, but we lost out because of the Barnett formula. The need here for resources for the Health Service is as great as — if not greater than — that in other areas. We must make that argument as strongly as possible.

I thank Members for their participation in the debate and ask them to continue to raise the issue in their Departments and Committees. All of us on the departmental Committees have a vital role to play in raising the issue and starting a debate about PFI and alternatives to it. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to investigate and promote alternatives to Private Finance Initiatives/Public Private Partnerships as a means of funding capital investment.

Adjourned at 7.23 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 8 October 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXCLUSION OF SINN FÉIN

Mr Speaker: I propose to conduct proceedings in accordance with the decisions of the Business Committee, which has allocated four hours to the debate. As the next two motions relate to the exclusion of members of a political party from holding ministerial office, I propose to conduct one debate. I will ask Mr Trimble to move the motion, and I will then call Mr Adams to respond. Both those Members may speak for up to 30 minutes. All the timings I am giving are maximum timings, not minimum or normative timings. The debate will then be open to Members, and each of those called may speak for up to 10 minutes.

At the end of the debate, I will call on a Sinn Féin Member to respond and on Mr Trimble or his nominee to make a winding-up speech, each being allocated 15 minutes to do so. I will then put the Question on the first motion, and if the first motion is agreed, the second motion falls. If the first motion is negatived, I will call Dr Paisley to move the second motion formally, and, without debate, I will put the Question. I remind Members that the votes on those motions will be on a cross-community basis.

Mr Trimble: I beg to move

That this Assembly resolves that the political party Sinn Féin does not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That in consequence of the failure of the Provisional IRA to offer up its illegal weaponry for destruction; the Republican Movement's continuing terrorist threat, and active pursuit, of terrorist outrages to secure its aims; the maintenance by the IRA of an active terrorist organisation; the growing number of cases of IRA involvement in terrorist activity in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and across the globe; the fact that the Provisional IRA is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin; and the involvement and dominance of members of Sinn Féin in the decision-making "Army Council" of the Provisional IRA, this Assembly resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy its confidence because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means and further, in accordance with Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, determines that members of Sinn Féin

shall be excluded from holding office as Ministers for a period of 12 months from the date of this resolution. — [*Rev Dr Ian Paisley*]

Mr Trimble: First, I will explain what the consequences of the motion will be. I expect that later today the motion will be endorsed by a majority of Members. If it fails to receive the requisite cross-community support, it will have no effect. However, if it does receive that support, the motion will effect the removal of Sinn Féin Ministers from office. I wish to make that clear from the outset. The draft of the motion sticks to the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. A motion passed on those terms will exclude that party's representatives from office. We decided that there was no point in having any surplus verbiage. If the motion does not receive the requisite cross-community support, my party and I shall act. First, we shall withdraw; secondly, the Ulster Unionist Ministers will resign. We will follow that procedure with the objective of bringing about the complete and indefinite suspension of the Assembly. I hope that that will be achieved in a week or two.

Our withdrawal will mean that we shall not participate in Executive business, which means that the Executive will not meet. The purpose of the interval is to enable Ministers to tidy their desk and arrange an orderly transfer of responsibility to those who succeed them. At the beginning of next week, I shall announce the precise arrangements for resignation. I say that to make our position clear.

I wish to express my appreciation to the Progressive Unionist Party for its support of the motion. Some people have expressed surprise that we have accepted that support, but we are glad of it. As I stated at the first sitting of the Assembly, we have always taken the position that the fact that people have a past does not mean that they cannot have a future. We knew that when we embarked on the process, which we hoped would be transitional. I have no doubt about the PUP's commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

As the Speaker said, the DUP motion will be moved should the Ulster Unionist Party motion fail to achieve the requisite cross-community support. We shall support that motion, as it will have the same effect as our motion.

We have tabled the motion because, in the past three and a half years — indeed in the 17 months that we have been in office — the Republican movement has failed to demonstrate that it is committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. We embarked upon the process in the belief that it would be a process of transition, giving an opportunity to those who have been involved in paramilitarism to leave violence behind, move into the democratic process and commit themselves to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. That opportunity existed. We have been patient, but it is now more than seven years since the Downing

Street declaration first put that to the test. It has been more than three and a half years since the agreement was made, and we have had periods of office that amount to 20 months. There has been ample opportunity for transition. We have been extremely patient, but we have not seen any evidence.

The key element that has been used as a litmus test of commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means is the decommissioning of weapons and other materiel. Decommissioning has always been important, and other parties recognise that. It is not responsible to leave lying around many hundreds, if not thousands, of weapons and quantities of bomb-making material in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Modern weapons do not rust if they are stored carefully — which is probably the case in these instances — so the danger is always present. It is important that decommissioning take place, not only to deprive other people of the opportunity of using the weapons, but as an indication that people are not reserving for themselves the possibility of a future resort to violence. It is an indicator of future intent.

If there had been any clear expressions of future intent over the past three and a half years, things might have been different. We did not even receive what I asked for on the afternoon of 10 April 1998 when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, which was for people to say that the war was over. There have been no clear statements or any clear actions to indicate intent.

As others have done, we must emphasise that the retention of a private army shows that there is no commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. Even if the private army were wholly inactive, its mere existence shows that those people are not committed to exclusively peaceful means. If one is committed to exclusively peaceful means, there will be no private army.

I shall restate the commitments that were made and will go back to the agreement and beyond, right back to the Mitchell principles, published in January 1996 and endorsed by Sinn Féin. Then, Sinn Féin members said that they would be committed to

“democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues; to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations; to agree that such disarmament must be verifiable to the satisfaction of an independent commission; to renounce for themselves, and to oppose any efforts by others, to use force, or threaten to use force, to influence the course or the outcome of all-party negotiations; to agree to abide by the terms of any agreement reached in all-party negotiations and to resort to democratic and exclusively peaceful methods in trying to alter any aspect of that outcome with which they may disagree; and to urge that ‘punishment’ killings and beatings stop; and to take effective steps to prevent such actions.”

I have read out the Mitchell principles in full because they are, sadly, still relevant to the state of society in Northern Ireland. Those principles were agreed by the

parties in January 1996, and here we are in October 2001. Have all parties in the Chamber taken effective steps to prevent punishment killings and beatings? They have not.

The Mitchell principles were subsequently incorporated in the Good Friday Agreement. The commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means is cited again and again in the agreement. I could refer to paragraph 4 of the declaration of support, or to paragraph (b) of the Pledge of Office in annex A of strand one, in which there is reference to the commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means. There are over half a dozen points at which that commitment occurs. That is the first Mitchell principle.

12.15 pm

The second Mitchell principle, which refers to “the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations”

is also in the agreement, in the section on decommissioning. Paragraph 3 states:

“All participants accordingly reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations.”

That in itself is a commitment and an obligation. That in itself imposes an obligation on all participants with regard to the disarmament of paramilitary organisations. I know that there is a qualification to that — the qualification that refers to working constructively and in good faith — which is frequently resorted to by those who pretend that they have no obligation. However, that qualifier is merely a statement that people will act in good faith, which is assumed to be the case for all the obligations that people undertake. In any event, the second sentence, in which it appears, refers only to the timescale, not to the obligation itself. There is no doubt, therefore, that there is an obligation in the agreement. I make that point in order to establish that people have been in breach of that obligation ever since the agreement was made.

The interpretation of the agreement that I have given also gains support from a certain letter — a significant letter — which was sent to me by the Prime Minister on the afternoon of 10 April 1998. It is significant because it was issued and circulated before the agreement was made, and it was not objected to by any party to the agreement. Consequently, in so far as it gave us an interpretation of the agreement, it is to be regarded as an authoritative interpretation of that part of the agreement. The letter said:

“I confirm that in our view the effect of the decommissioning section of the agreement, with decommissioning schemes coming into effect in June, is that the process of decommissioning should start right away.”

That was written before the agreement was made. It was circulated and not objected to, and, consequently, it is an authoritative interpretation of the agreement.

Therefore, since June 1998 Republicans — Sinn Féin — have been in breach of the agreement.

We would all have liked the Government to have been more active in enforcing that obligation and in proceeding against those who were in breach of the agreement. The obvious way to do that would have been by linking decommissioning with prisoner releases. Unfortunately, they did not do that. However, because of the failure of Republicans to keep to the agreement — they were in breach of the agreement — the Government, on two occasions, proposed modifications to the procedures in the agreement in response. The first of those was included in the Hillsborough declaration of 1 April 1999. Proposed nominations for the posts of Ministers were to be made, but those would fail to take effect if there were no decommissioning. Secondly, the paper of 2 July 1999, entitled ‘The Way Forward’, formally proposed the suspension of devolution if no decommissioning occurred.

There are three important points about those papers. First, in the paper of 1 April 1999, Sinn Féin expressly accepted the obligation to decommission. The paper said:

“There is agreement among all parties that decommissioning is not a pre-condition but is an obligation deriving from their commitment in the Agreement.”

It also stated:

“Sinn Féin have acknowledged these obligations.”

The obligation was in the agreement, and Sinn Féin was in breach of it from June 1998. In June 1998, as Members will recall, Sinn Féin was in denial about the obligation, but in April 1999 it expressly accepted the obligation.

The 2 July paper reaffirmed the principles agreed by the parties on 25 June, which put inclusiveness and decommissioning side by side. The parties agreed to three principles on 25 June: the principle of an inclusive Executive; the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons by May 2000; and decommissioning to be carried out in a manner determined by the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. Those three principles were agreed, and I noticed at the time that Mr Pat Doherty of Sinn Féin said that the three principles — firmly embedded in the terms of the Good Friday Agreement — could resolve the impasse if there was the political will. Over the past three years, where was the political will? Where was the absence of will? Some things have happened, and some things have not.

The third point is that the 2 July paper provided for suspension, and that was agreed by the Irish Government. A myth is growing, supported by some so-called academic writers, that suspension in some way creates constitutional difficulties for the Irish Government; that is bunkum. The Irish Government agreed and proposed suspension.

The 2 July paper itself said that the Governments — plural —

“undertake that, in accordance with the review provisions of the agreement, if commitments under the agreement are not met, either in relation to decommissioning or to devolution, they will automatically, and with immediate effect, suspend the operation of the institutions set up by the agreement.”

The words

“automatically and with immediate effect”

are useful in the present context. Indeed, the Irish Prime Minister made his support for suspension in that situation explicit when he said in the Dáil on 23 November 1999 that, if there were default, the two Governments would

“step in and assume their responsibilities, including ... appropriate suspension arrangements.”

Unfortunately, as we know, there was no progress during the summer of 1999. It was not until after the Mitchell review that devolution occurred. Indeed, in bringing devolution about at the end of November 1999, we demonstrated our political will. The best — though rather pithy — statement about the precise content of that review was that made by the deputy leader of the SDLP, Mr Mallon, who said that the SDLP had been told by Senator Mitchell that he understood that devolution would happen on 29 November and that decommissioning would start by the end of January 2000. That was, indeed, the understanding. From my own direct knowledge, I can say that the Sinn Féin negotiators were left in absolutely no doubt by us, and by George Mitchell, about the importance of 31 January. It was made absolutely clear:

“31 January is the final cut-off date”.

We proceeded to put devolution in place on the understanding that there would be decommissioning, but unfortunately, by 31 January, it had not happened. That prompted the Government, in fulfilment of their promise, to suspend the Assembly and its associated institutions in February 2000. It is rather sad that, in October 2001, we are back at exactly the same point, without having made as much progress as we would have liked.

Suspension in 2000 produced results. One result came as the 22 May deadline loomed — there was movement from Republicans in the shape of the IRA statement of 6 May 2000. The crucial aspect of that statement was the promise made by the Republican movement that it would initiate a process that would put its weapons beyond use and, moreover, that it would do so in a way that would maximise public confidence. We look back at May 2000 and ask ourselves what exactly has been done to maximise public confidence.

The Governments, of course, had some foreknowledge of that statement. We know that because, on the

previous day — 5 May — they made a statement that set June 2001 as the date for the full implementation of the agreement. In that context, full implementation includes decommissioning. The Governments made that statement because we were approaching 22 June 2000 — the deadline set in the agreement — without decommissioning. The deadline for full implementation was moved forward to June 2001.

On the basis of the promise made by Republicans, we agreed to re-form the administration, and we did that. Moreover, we re-formed it in a way that did not set an explicit time for reconsideration. In our operations in June 1999, we had announced a date on which the Ulster Unionist Council would meet to consider the situation. We did not make that an explicit deadline, although people interpreted it as such and we were criticised for that. On re-forming the administration, we did not therefore set any explicit time for reconsideration. The leader of Sinn Féin will recall that we spoke together on one occasion immediately after the summer of 2000. On that occasion, I lamented the fact that we were not seeing steady progress on the decommissioning track and said that, without progress, a crisis would be inevitable — even if we did nothing.

I explained our position to our party conference on 7 October. I am tempted to recall the precise words that I used on that occasion, but I will not, because time is pressing. I made it clear that we would take action if Republicans failed to make progress. I did not announce the action at that stage, because I suspected that some of my dearly beloved party colleagues would use Sinn Féin's failure to move as an excuse to summon a meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council, with a view to changing party policy. Although we had a clear plan of action on 7 October, we held back until 27 October. On that day, I announced our decision to exclude Sinn Féin representatives from participation in the North/South Ministerial Council. We have sustained that exclusion since and will, if necessary, continue to sustain it until such times as the Sinn Féin Ministers demonstrate clearly that they are no longer in breach of the agreement. So far they have failed to do that, but we hope that they will.

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness):

Will the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party give way?

Mr Trimble: No. I am sorry, but I will not give way. I am running short of time. I am often told that, at party meetings, I bore the party into submission, and it looks as though I am doing that on this occasion.

We took action in October with regard to Sinn Féin's failure. We proceeded in a careful and graduated way. There was a reason for that. We are not using decommissioning as an excuse to destroy devolution. Our objective was, and is, to achieve devolution and decommissioning; even my opponents in the party

understood that. The alternative proposals put to the council on that date — over the signature of, among others, Jeffrey Donaldson — expressly endorsed the concept of inclusive devolution. The significance of that has not been fully appreciated.

We could not wait for ever. We had consultations in the party in January, and there was a consensus that 2001, the date set by the Government, was the key date. To convey the importance of that to the public, I made it clear on the anniversary of the IRA promise that if there were no decommissioning by June, I would resign with effect from 1 July. I kept my promise.

A further three months have elapsed, and it is, consequently, inevitable that we come to this point. The motion and the consequent withdrawal of Ministers are the logical and inevitable results of that resignation, and that was the inevitable consequence of the failure of the Republican movement to keep its word.

When I announced the resignation on 8 May, there was an interesting comment in 'The Irish News' editorial the following day:

"the circumstances might have been different if the IRA ceasefire had been properly observed, but this has simply not been the case."

Nor has it. There have been 30 murders by the IRA since the ceasefires, and matters are not improving. We cannot see any progress on that.

12.30 pm

We have seen the dreadful behaviour that has been occurring in north Belfast; the behaviour of the Loyalists in Ardoyne is dreadful. However, we must bear in mind that that comes after Sinn Féin spent the summer hotting up the interfaces of north Belfast and after an attack, in June, by Republicans on Loyalists in the Protestant part of Ardoyne. Therefore one must remember where the origins of that were.

After the summer I said that Republicans have no credibility left with any segment of Unionist opinion and very little credibility without it. I hope, even at this late stage, that Republicans will make some effort to rebuild credibility, but they must do it clearly, cleanly, openly and honestly. I hope that that happens.

There are two motions today. There was the possibility of a joint motion with the DUP. I was not enthusiastic about a joint motion. It would have made the debate a clash between two sectarian blocks — Unionists on this side and Nationalists on the other. I thought that undesirable. To avoid that situation I was prepared to risk what might have been the embarrassing consequence of not getting the necessary signatures. I did not want to turn the debate into a sectarian confrontation. There are some Members who would like that, but I do not want that. I must ask the SDLP to consider carefully what it will do. Will it allow the debate to become a

purely sectarian confrontation? Will it vote with Sinn Féin purely out of sectarian solidarity? Will it endorse the position that I think it ought to — namely, that a clear obligation has not been kept and there are consequences that must flow from that? If it is not prepared to do that now, when will it do that? How much longer must we wait? We have waited three and a half years since the agreement. We have waited nearly a year and a half since forming the Administration. Promises that were made by Republicans during that time have not been kept; violence has continued. There comes a point where a line must be drawn or the community will come to the conclusion that the process is failing and will not achieve its results.

As was said in one of the Dublin newspapers yesterday, the action that I am taking is done in the hope that we will preserve the agreement. There is more to the agreement than the participation of Sinn Féin, desirable though that might be. We must consider how to preserve what is important and see whether that can still provide a basis for society here to move on. I hope that it will, but I believe that the action we are taking today is necessary, just as it was in February 2000. I believe that it will be fruitful, just as that action was fruitful. The only question is how long we will have to wait, and that is a question I must leave with others.

We are debating the issue against the background of another bigger conflict and the consequences of terrorism elsewhere. It would be appropriate for my Colleagues and I, and for many people in the Chamber, to say that, while we must focus on our own circumstances, we do so conscious of a sense of solidarity with those people in the United States who were recently the victims of terrorism; with the American and British Governments in the action that they are taking; and with our own armed forces that have been in action today. They have our full support and will continue to have it, regardless of what problems we have here. We are conscious that we operate in a wider world and have obligations to the rest of our nation and to the world as a whole.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom comhghairdeachas a dhéanamh le David Ford mar Cheannaire Pháirtí an Chomhaontais; agus ba mhaith liom fosta an t-ádh a ghuí leis an iarCheannaire, Seán Neeson, agus lena bhean chéile.

Before I respond to what Mr Trimble said, I want to congratulate David Ford on his elevation to the leadership of the Alliance Party and to wish Sean Neeson, his family and his wife best wishes for the time ahead.

In considering the motion and figuring out the best way to approach it, I will try to be reasoned and reasonable, because everyone here has a very serious responsibility. For too long we have tended to see processes, the future and even each other's remarks from a very sectional viewpoint. The motion reads:

“That this Assembly resolves that the political party Sinn Féin does not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means.”

I could bridle against that, or I could outline the background of the Members on the opposite Benches who are either in the armed forces of the state or the unofficial armed forces of the state. However, I will not do that because I agree with David Trimble — the fact that a person has a past does not mean that he cannot have a future.

I want to make one thing clear: there is no basis for the exclusion of this party or for motions to exclude this party. There is no basis in the agreement for this sort of motion. I listened to what Mr Trimble said, and I want to make it clear that Sinn Féin has honoured every commitment that it made. It may not be good enough, and the party has a lot more to do, but it has tried to play a positive, leadership role in the peace process. Sinn Féin has taken risks; it changed its party policy; it changed its party constitution and created real initiatives — all to advance the peace process and demonstrate a real, forward-thinking way of advancing the search for peace. The motion is about the battle within Unionism — it is about the battle for the leadership of Unionism at this difficult time for Unionism.

Sinn Féin has worked hard and consistently in the Assembly. The party's two Ministers — the Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Bairbre de Brún — have carried out their duties without favour and in an exemplary manner. At every level of the structures that were established under the agreement — the all-Ireland structures, the implementation bodies and the Committees — Sinn Féin members have performed their duties with diligence. I reject the motion, and I reject the accusations that were directed at the party to excuse the behaviour of Unionism.

No one is surprised at the motion from the DUP. Some of the smaller parties that have become smaller since they came in here are resolutely opposed to the peace process and have said so from the very beginning. The DUP never had the gumption to deal with the issues properly with Sinn Féin or the Ulster Unionist Party. At every opportunity the DUP has sought to undermine and frustrate the potential for progress and the Good Friday Agreement. It does so because it is against change — that is the reason. It is against the principles of inclusiveness, equality and justice. The DUP draws its aspirations and inspirations from the old failed politics of the apartheid system that used to exist here. It is anti-Catholic, anti-Nationalist and anti-democratic — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Adams: The DUP's political philosophy, which is shared by some legal types opposite me, is based on discrimination, prejudice and real fear. It has a lack of confidence in itself to make peace and to move forward with other people.

I reject that philosophy, as will all thinking people. However, the DUP has a mandate, which we must recognise. We must try to come to terms with that party's opposite view of the world. It is also interesting that, of all the parties, the DUP takes the most delight from being here and from the influence that comes from attending this institution. Essentially, the DUP's big problem is that there are Fenians about the place — and that we are Fenians who are unrepentant, who can represent our constituency, and who also have a vision for the future.

Regrettably, there are those in the UUP who share that odd, quaint and played-out old view of the world. While some in the UUP signed up for the Good Friday Agreement, they did not really support the fundamental changes that it required. From the beginning they refused to embrace the principles at the heart of the agreement. They engaged tactically and initiated an approach, the purpose of which was to dilute the potential of that historic breakthrough.

David Trimble was forthright earlier. In his letter of last October, and in his remarks to the UUP conference, he said that he was about achieving suspension of the institutions by creating a rolling crisis within the process and seeking to blame Republicans and Nationalists.

I have no doubt that the issue of weapons is a huge one for Unionists, as it is for Republicans and Nationalists. Many people listening to the debate will question whether the focus is on only one section of the arms debate. They will ask why Unionism is silent, or at the very most mumbling, about the almost 250 bomb attacks and the other killings and attempted killings that have taken place. The Unionists must also bear in mind that many people do not understand why a Unionist leader has not walked up to Holy Cross Primary School with the little Catholic schoolchildren.

Secondly, Members on this side of the Chamber may appreciate that there are real concerns in the Unionist fixation on IRA guns. Apart from the tactical use of the issue as a blockage and a precondition for progress, there are other real concerns. We must ask ourselves how we can seek to sort that out. Can it be sorted out with people who will not even talk to us — people who are perhaps decent enough within their own families, but who reduce the debate to cat-calling across the Floor? Can it be sorted out with people who are in denial, who will not even ask why there had to be a peace process and a Good Friday Agreement in the first place? *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Adams: Mr Trimble brought us to the core of the flaw in the process. That flaw was the letter that Mr Blair gave him at the time of the Good Friday Agreement negotiations. We all know that the letter is worthless, but Unionists have clung to it since then, and that is the fault-line. Every crisis since that Good Friday can be traced to that point. The letter showed a willingness on the part of the British Government to pander to Unionism, to acquiesce to a Unionist veto and to create a space for those who wanted to hollow out, and seek a renegotiation of, the agreement.

It is also clear that the British Government have not honoured their obligations or commitments under the Good Friday Agreement — on policing and demilitarisation, on equality and on justice issues. We have done our best and will continue to do so.

Just for the record, it is worth noting that great progress has been made on a range of issues, not least that of IRA weapons.

12.45 pm

There are two indisputable facts. First, the peace process exists because of initiatives taken by Republicans. While others have conspired to weaken, fracture, collapse or bore us all to submission, we have wedded ourselves to continue a succession of initiatives with the objective of enhancing the process. Secondly, no matter about the heckling or hectoring, the lies and false accusations, Sinn Féin is determined to do all it can to make this process work and to make it work in the interests of all the people of this island.

The issue of weapons can be resolved — that is my clear view. I also believe that if Unionists, the British Government, the Irish Government and all the other parties are prepared to work together in a true partnership, we can collectively, as the Good Friday Agreement says, achieve this goal as quickly as possible. I have said many times, and I am sure you will agree, that it is not possible to resolve this issue on terms laid down by the DUP, or indeed the UUP and the British Government, or on the basis of threat, veto or ultimatum. It can be worked out only on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement. And what is the mechanism for that — the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD). The IICD together with all armed groups should be allowed to get on with making that mechanism work.

Last month a historic breakthrough was rejected by Unionists — a mistake in my view. The historic breakthrough was when the IICD announced that it had agreed a scheme with the IRA to put arms completely and verifiably beyond use. It is also in the public arena that the IRA continues to be engaged with the commission. Now, if I have to listen and try to understand what Unionism is saying, Unionism has to

understand, or at least try to understand it, when I say that these are not small, unimportant events.

No one who lived in, and survived, the 1970s, the 1980s, most of the 1990s, or who has any understanding at all of conflict resolution, Republican history or theology, would have considered any of these things possible back then. In a Republican context, these are huge developments. They actually point, if you have the vision to see it, to a future free from IRA weapons. But what has Unionism done? It has walked away from these openings. It refused to engage when these openings were created, and it is now threatening to walk away from the political institutions. Unionism, which said that Republicans would walk away, is now threatening to bring down the institutions. Mr Trimble has been found to have acted unlawfully. As a man of the law, legally trained in that profession, I am sure he finds this very irksome. He is the only one — the only one — who has been found to have acted unlawfully. It is he who is ignoring the mandates of all the other parties, the referendums on the Good Friday Agreement itself, his responsibilities and obligations and the obligations of his party under the agreement.

Ten days ago, at the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis in Dublin, I said that there was no easy way to sort these issues out. I reiterated my commitment, and that of our leadership, to playing a positive leadership role in bringing a permanent end to political conflict on our island, including the end of physical-force Republicanism. Maybe Unionists do not believe me when I say that, but I am committed to it — I have said it publicly. I wonder if Unionism really wants the end of physical-force Republicanism. I am put in mind very much of James Molyneaux's remarks that the IRA cessation of 1994 was the most disturbing development in the history of this statelet.

Coming out of 30 years of conflict, all of us perhaps have to learn that when Republicans take initiatives, they are seen as threatening by Unionists, and when Unionists behave as they do and say the things they do, that is seen as threatening by Republicans and Nationalists.

In respect of all of that, I am on a learning curve. I believe that Mr Trimble — though he may deny it — believes that we who have met him are committed to peaceful and democratic means. In my heart and mind, I believe that very clearly.

We have to continue to work in that broad Republican constituency, which has suffered grievously. There is no monopoly on suffering, but it has suffered grievously since partition. We are trying to bring an end to all of the armed groups, including the Irish Republican Army.

However, perhaps to the great joy of those on the opposite Benches, Sinn Féin will not be any part of any effort to criminalise or to deem as terrorists those

men and women who fought when they thought that they had no option, but who seized — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members in all other areas in the Chamber seem to have sufficient emotional continence to sit and listen to what is happening and sufficient confidence in their spokesmen that, when necessary, they will express their views. It is in the interest of the whole House that Members who are on their feet be listened to.

Mr Adams: Go raibh maith agat. We will not be part of any effort to criminalise, or to deem as terrorists, those men and women who fought when they considered that they had no choice, but who had the integrity, the courage and the wisdom to support a peace process when they had that choice.

Let me go further: as I said at the burial place of Tom Williams, there are brave people on all sides of each conflict. There are brave people in the British forces, in the Loyalist forces and among those who fought on the Irish Republican side. We have that shared past, and I urge Unionists to think again.

I urge Unionists to not turn their backs on the potential for permanent peace and a new future and to take up the leadership challenge presented to us all by the process. I ask those more enlightened Unionists who might believe that there is such a thing as pluralist Unionism to stop looking over their shoulders at less progressive elements, including the quaintly named Democratic Unionist Party, or even those in their own party who represent a minority opinion. They should give leadership to the section of Unionism that voted for the Good Friday Agreement.

Not for one second do I underestimate the difficulties that the process poses and represents to Unionists. I do not think that people on the opposite Benches really appreciate the difficulties that it also presents for Republicans or Nationalists. However, notwithstanding that, we all have to make peace with each other, and we all have to get into the shadow of each other to get some sense of how to move the process forward.

We want to try to address Unionists' concerns in a spirit of goodwill and respect, but the process cannot continue to be regarded as a zero-sum gain in which equality, justice and democratic rights and entitlements are seen as concessions to Nationalists and Republicans.

The process is unique — in the Irish and the British experience. It presents us all with an opportunity to reach across divisions and try to shape out a new dispensation. The Good Friday Agreement is three and a half years old. It was a defining moment in the history of Ireland and the Irish peace process. It was the result of lengthy discussions and of protracted and difficult dialogue.

Unionists were not involved in that process — not with our party — and that is a great pity. At a time of international conflict, when other peace processes continue to disintegrate, and when we have an opportunity to demonstrate that there is another way, I appeal to Unionists not to squander that opportunity. Unionists have a different view of the situation, but they should take note that if the political institutions collapse as a result of Unionism's refusal to work them, Unionism will have raised the threshold when we return to put the institutions together again.

The old days are finished. We are committed to making the current model, even in its flawed and fractured form, work. Unionism must get real; the world has moved on. One-party rule is no longer acceptable. Nationalists and Republicans are no longer a powerless, abandoned, leaderless minority in an Orange state. Those days are gone forever. Unionism is no longer a monolithic power block. "Not an inch" or schoolboy hectoring from the Back Benches are no longer any substitute for real courage and the ability to carve out a real future for people.

Agus seo iad mo fhocail dheireannacha. The Good Friday Agreement cannot be renegotiated. Conflict is not the way forward; dialogue is the only way forward. I call on the Assembly to reject the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I welcome today's debate. I regret that we do not have a joint Unionist motion. However, my party will vote for the Ulster Unionist Party motion, and I welcome the fact that its leader has indicated that his party will vote for our motion. I regret that immediate resignations will not be forthcoming, merely a withdrawal of all Unionists from the Executive. I am glad at that belated withdrawal; they should never have been there in the first place. My party brought down the first appointments to office in the Assembly, which we would do today if we could. We have lodged our letters of resignation, but those resignations should take place immediately and should not be postponed.

Tony Blair, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, has told the people that they must make a choice. Do they side with justice or with terror? The Assembly must face that choice. No amount of special pleading by the leader of IRA/Sinn Féin can cover over the fact that his party is associated in the lodge — if I may call it that — of international terrorism. Who attended his party's conference in Dublin? He had ETA, the Basque terrorist group in Spain, a representation from the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Puerto Rican separatists in attendance. What are his men doing in Colombia with terrorists — the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)? That group kidnapped three missionaries from the New Tribes Mission organisation in 1993, whom it has now murdered. Is

that freedom fighting? That is an act of murder and terrorism.

IRA/Sinn Féin says that Unionists are not with it. There has been a change across the whole world, and people are opening their eyes to what terrorism is and what it really intends to do. The regime established in Northern Ireland by the Belfast Agreement shares the same characteristics of that of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Men of violence who have actively supported terrorism in any so-called democratic Government can no longer be tolerated in Northern Ireland. That is injustice at its height. It demeans, not enhances, the democratic process.

1.00 pm

Mr Rumsfeld, the US Defense Secretary, said yesterday that harbouring a terrorist carries a price. If Northern Ireland continues to harbour terrorism in its Government, that also carries a price. That price has been too high, and the consequences are clear for all to see.

We have a corrupt arrangement that postpones violence until the men of violence require the next concession, then that is followed by another threat of violence, and so strategically escalated concession after concession goes on. Today must mark the end of these concessions. Weapons that have the mark of the murderers' fingerprints on them must be taken in and destroyed, and those who have used them must not be pleaded with to hand them over. The British Government should be honest, cease from their hypocrisy and treat all terrorists alike. They did not send a letter to the Afghan Government saying "Please do this": they demanded it. The Afghan Government did not do it, hence the bombings and the war declared on international terrorism. The so-called peace process has not been moving towards peace but towards concession after concession.

The House has an opportunity to declare that it is with world opinion and with those who believe in democracy, justice, fair play and the right to live. The House can vote to declare on whose side it is. Terrorists have no place in a democracy, no matter from what section of the community they come, and they must realise that there is no place for them until they repent and

"bring forth fruits meet for repentance".

Why does IRA/Sinn Féin want to keep its weapons? Why does it not hand them over? If it is dedicated to peace and living in peace with its Unionist neighbours and the rest of the community, as we have heard today, why does it hold on to its murder weapons? Murder weapons have to be surrendered.

We also have the hiding of those murder weapons and the immunity given to that hiding by the Government of the Irish Republic. Let the Governments of the world come clean on this issue and declare to all terrorists,

including IRA/Sinn Féin that is represented in this House, that this day is over. All terrorism must be dealt with, and all terrorists must suffer as a result, by ridding them of the weapons that they keep in reserve so that they can continue to blackmail democratic people and squeeze concessions from them.

The time has come for action. We will not get cross-community support today. Members will not vote for the motion because, along with IRA/Sinn Féin, they are tied in to a process that they think will eventually bring about a united Ireland. I have more votes from the people of Ulster than any other politician in this House or outside, and I say that Ulster's Unionist people will not be beaten. They will stand for what is their right — to decide their future as part of this United Kingdom. No amount of blackmail, murder, terrorism or tormenting the people of this land will bring the Ulster Unionist people to their knees.

We are going to defend that which is our right. With no malice against anyone, we believe that all men should be equal under the law and all men equally subject to the law. Until the leader of IRA/Sinn Féin learns that lesson, there will be no peace in this Province.

Think of the orphans. Think of the widows. Think of those who mourn today, and as we think of them, let us think of the insult that has been hurled in their faces by Mr Adams that the men who shot down their loved ones were freedom fighters — freedom fighters who killed innocent children and innocent babes-in-arms, who murdered fathers before their families and carried out atrocity after atrocity. When votes of sympathy were passed in public places, they refused even to stand to their feet, but identified themselves with all the terror and bloodletting that had been brought about.

Today, the House must declare what side it is on. Unionists will be declaring that they are not on the side of terror.

Mr Mallon: It is with a sense of loss that I rise to speak to the motion, a sense of loss with the realisation that the opportunity to create a template for conflict resolution that could be used around the world is being put in abeyance. I do not say lost, but put in abeyance for some considerable time. I remember President Clinton's visit to Armagh, when he made the point that he could now go to any other country in the world and tell his hosts that they could solve their problems by looking at how they were solved in Northern Ireland.

I also have a sense of sadness. In two weeks' time, there will be nobody sitting on these Benches. In two weeks' time, there will probably be no Assembly sitting. In two weeks' time, all decisions will be moved from here to the Northern Ireland Office, to those who come here, do their jobs diligently, but without the commitment that is in the Assembly and the Executive.

I have a sense of futility that, given what is happening throughout the world, and the enormity and complexity of those problems, we have squabbled our way once again into suspension and put at risk that which is absolutely essential to making the new future that we all seek.

It is a matter of regret that the Ulster Unionist Party has tabled this motion. Its members were highly committed, able negotiators in the talks leading up to the Good Friday Agreement. They have been very able Colleagues in the Executive. However, this motion is a mistake. It is no different from earlier motions and attempts by the DUP and others to destroy the agreement. It has been initiated by the Burnside-Donaldson axis in imitation of DUP tactics.

Previous motions of this nature were rightly described by the Ulster Unionist leadership as stunts. They knew that they would not be successful. You cannot solve the type of problems we have with stunts, whether they come from the DUP, the UUP or any other party under any type of pressure. This is really about the internal power play of Unionism within the Ulster Unionist Party and between the UUP and the DUP.

It is an unseemly struggle for who leads Unionism. In a fight such as this logic and principle are very often forgotten, and that is happening now.

Look at the irony in that one of the parties to the motion speaks and interprets for Loyalist paramilitarism; so that attendant to this Ulster Unionist Party motion are the opinions which are seen manifest in bomb explosions, vitriol, sectarianism and the type of attacks that we have seen. The Ulster Unionist Party is a proud party; it does not need that type of association.

Our party has consistently worked throughout to establish the institutions. Our record of working in partnership with the Ulster Unionist and Sinn Féin Ministers in the Executive speaks for itself. At the same time, we have argued consistently for the putting of arms beyond use. We have supported, and not interfered with, the efforts of the two Governments and the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning. In doing that, I have no sympathy whatsoever with the Republican movement — indeed, I recognise the overwhelming onus on it to honour its commitments and to follow the primary responsibility, which is there for all of us in the Good Friday Agreement.

Decommissioning was settled by the agreement, which recalled that its resolution

“is an indispensable part of the process of negotiation”.

The agreement sets out the commitment of all participants to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. How often have I heard people dismissing this as an irrelevancy, as an unreasonable Unionist demand?

How often have I heard it said that they will not jump to meet the desires and needs of a British Government; that this is not what Republican areas and supporters want; that this is, indeed, an impossibility? What they have been doing, in effect, is signalling their unwillingness to implement the agreement fully, thus undermining Unionist confidence with it and defying the will of the Irish people who voted in such overwhelming numbers for the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations.

A heavy onus now falls on the Republican leadership to undo the damage that has been done and to turn the recently emphasised commitment to decommissioning into effective action. Words are not enough; deeds speak. The SDLP in conformity with the agreement seeks the completion of decommissioning to the satisfaction of Gen de Chastelain — no more, no less. I do not know whether, or when, that will happen, but I know, and I believe that everyone in the Chamber believes, that without decommissioning, the agreement will not survive.

Without decommissioning and the standing-down of paramilitary organisations, there will not be reconciliation and political stability on the island of Ireland. Without decommissioning, the time will come — and maybe has come — when there will not be any room in public or democratic life throughout the world for parties associated with paramilitary organisations.

Shortly after I became Deputy First Minister Designate, I said that the agreement gave us the opportunity to build something new for ourselves and to change utterly that which had gone before. I still believe that.

The Assembly, the Executive and the North/South bodies have proved their value and potential. Northern Ireland, and the whole island, is a better place because of their operation. They have provided the setting for a bright economic period and have enhanced the potential for investment.

1.15 pm

It is thanks to those bodies that the community, which Members lead, won the battle against foot-and-mouth disease. Even in the difficult circumstances of the past fortnight the Executive were able to produce a draft Programme for Government and a draft Budget and make strategic decisions on gas pipelines and roads that will improve people's lives. There have also been decisions that will begin to help in the difficult process of bringing peace to north Belfast. I pay tribute to Sir Reg Empey who has been a good colleague in recent times in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I conclude with a plea to those who have tabled motions today and to those who have caused the motions to be tabled: it is seldom in the history of any area that has suffered conflict resolution that all of the ingredients

for a solution are in place. We have the agreement; we have the institutions; we have the machinery; and we have the panoply of support that is essential. What would some of the countries involved in conflict give to have those advantages? What would they give to have the agreement, the institutions and the machinery for solving problems? Do not throw the opportunity away. Do not squabble this political generation into political extinction. Use it; use it now; and use it well.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thanks to the fan club on the Unionist Back Benches. I also thank Mr Adams for his kind words to me and for the words of tribute that he paid to my predecessor and friend, Sean Neeson.

There is no doubt that since the referendum was held we have encountered multiple problems in implementing the agreement — decommissioning is the biggest problem. Those problems have arisen because Republicans and Loyalists have failed to live up to their obligations, at least under the terms as everyone else views them. However, in the case of Loyalist paramilitaries there are no Ministers, so no exclusion motion is appropriate.

The issue before the House should be simple: it should be one of democrats versus those who are still prepared to resort to violence. Those who have a past are entitled to have a future, but some do not seem to want a present. This morning Mr Adams treated the House to a rehash of the Ard-Fheis speech. I do not expect him to condemn his comrades for their past activities; I am realistic enough in that regard. However, in the Chamber today Members expect to hear a clear, strong lead from every party as to the way of the future, and I regret that they have not heard that in the detail that they should have done.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr D McClelland] in the Chair)

Many groups have engaged in violence and, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will know as well as I do that there have been three murders in south Antrim recently — all committed by Loyalists. Ironically, two of the victims were Protestants who were assumed to be Catholics. In all of this Sinn Féin will argue that its guns have been silent since 1994, but, unfortunately and palpably, that is not the case. There have been numerous beatings and shootings, and up to 30 murders have been committed against dissidents and drug dealers. There is a warped notion that one can kill without impugning the ceasefire so long as it is only a case of Unionists killing Protestants or Nationalists killing Catholics. The Alliance Party considers that the integrity of the ceasefire does not depend upon the interplay between the religion and politics of the victim and the perpetrator respectively.

Mr Trimble said that he did not wish to have a single Unionist motion because he did not wish the

motion to be regarded as being sectarian. I found that bizarre. Once David Trimble and his Colleagues sought to co-opt the PUP to signing their motion it became a simple issue of Unionist versus Nationalist; not an issue of democrats against those who resort to violence.

On Saturday, I heard Mr Ervine say that decommissioning was just around the corner. I therefore presume that he feels that the motion, in the context of unilateral sanctions, is going to help, not hinder. I would like him to explain how those sanctions could possibly be beneficial.

Mr Trimble has compounded his error — the error of being sectarian and making it a purely Unionist matter — by trying, yet again, to impose a deadline. That is particularly surprising, given that he highlighted in his speech the occasions when he had not imposed a deadline and when he had tried not to have one. By his actions over recent weeks and by his threat of what he and his Colleagues will do when the motion falls, he has again imposed a deadline. Experience has proved that deadlines have never worked and will never work in the process. The unilateral Unionist deadline that almost destabilised the Mitchell review in late 1999 was a classic example of that. There are other examples. Unilateral deadlines have never worked, because the talks process never worked on that basis. It worked when it was inclusive, when people were brought together and when they sought to reach an accommodation.

The sanctions on North/South meetings, which have been in place over the past year, not only did not work but have been held by two courts to be illegal. Today Mr Trimble seemed to rejoice in that judgement because he was playing politics and misusing the courts. It was not the legal system; it was a matter of his use of the courts to make a political point.

If the UUP is serious about decommissioning, and if it wants the Assembly to consider matters in a genuine, balanced way, why did it put forward this pan-Unionist motion? Why did it not talk to the SDLP, the NIWC or Alliance about how there might be joint action to confirm the integrity of the process and to ensure that decommissioning happened? It knows that exclusion could only be a realistic prospect if there were widespread agreement, yet it has not sought that agreement. It is simply playing Unionist politics.

Following the summer holiday excursions to Colombia and the dreadful events of 11 September in New York and Washington, there is worldwide pressure on any organisation that is carrying out acts of terrorism. However, today, the day after British forces, as Mr Trimble has highlighted, went into action against the Taliban and Osama bin Laden, the Ulster Unionist party is giving the IRA “wriggle room”. This is the only way that it can be presented. The rest of the world is turning

against terrorist groups while Unionists are taking that pressure off by being unilateral and one-sided.

As Mr Mallon reminded us in July, the Government have responsibilities in this area, yet they have taken no action. Mr Mallon implied that if the Government were prepared to take action, he would follow it through. I trust that if they do take action, the SDLP will live up to that promise.

Unionists and Republicans have groups that are allegedly on ceasefire and which have taken no action on decommissioning. Decommissioning is long overdue on the part of all paramilitary groups, including those linked to Sinn Féin, the PUP and the UDP.

There is the serious issue of the removal of weapons, but the motion is not dealing with that. It appears to have been precipitated by Ulster Unionist members such as David Burnside and Jeffrey Donaldson, and it is not in any way seeking a way forward for the institutions. It has played into the internal games of the Ulster Unionist Party, and it is most regrettable that Ulster Unionist Members of the House have taken the opportunity to follow it through. Perhaps the unhappy looks on their faces, the corridor chats last week, the talk of further postponement and the endeavours to avoid crisis are an indication of what most Unionist Members — at least those from the Ulster Unionist Party — really think about this.

In proposing the motion, Mr Trimble said that his objective was to have both decommissioning and devolution. However, the motion is merely attempting to buy off his internal dissidents. The motion, followed by further threats of resignation, has, as Mr Mallon has just said, every potential to destroy devolution without bringing decommissioning any further forward. It should be resisted.

Mr C Wilson: In the light of the horrific terrorist activity in the United States of America on 11 September one could be forgiven for believing that the people of Northern Ireland would expect something different in the approach to terrorism from Northern Ireland parties. We have listened to Mr Mallon’s words and to the approach of the SDLP. We need to bear in mind that that party is washing its hands like Pontius Pilate and refusing to join with other democrats in excluding from Government those who are inextricably linked to a terrorist organisation. No amount of smoke, mirrors or imagery will change that fact.

Mr Trimble has laid out a catalogue of blame for the plight that those of us who are committed to peaceful and democratic means find ourselves in. He mentioned the British Government and Mr Blair’s betrayal of the pledges that he made that those involved in and inextricably linked to terrorist organisations would not remain in Government. In the referendum Mr Trimble encouraged the people of Northern Ireland to support

that position and endorsed the Prime Minister's guarantee. The Irish Government also had a duty. Mr Trimble reminded us that we are three and a half years into the process and still not one ounce of Semtex or one bullet has been handed in by the IRA.

We would have expected different things from those in authority in the United States of America. Not one person whom I have spoken to or met with has not been amazed by the events in Dublin at the weekend when the United States of America's Ambassador to Ireland attended the terrorist conference and brought the American Administration into disrepute. Circumstances such as that have contributed to the fact that Sinn Féin is in the Government here today.

A crucial question has to be asked about the Ulster Unionist Party's involvement in bringing about the present situation. It is clear that Mr Trimble has discredited a worthwhile and needed debate on the exclusion of those inextricably linked to terror by aligning himself with, and seeking the support of, those who are fronting Protestant, Loyalist paramilitary activity. That he did so to enable himself to table a motion to exclude those who are involved in armed Republicanism has everyone aghast.

Mr Trimble did not need to do that to achieve today's debate. He could, personally, have walked into the Business Office any time during the past 12, 18 or 24 months and signed any one of the various motions in the name of the DUP, the Northern Ireland Unionist Party, Mr McCartney's party and others tabled to exclude Sinn Féin, which required only one further signature. Mr Trimble can attempt to excuse his position, but that leads us to the real game plan and to the real reason for his taking the convoluted route of seeking the support of the PUP. He told my Colleagues and myself that he wanted to delay the motion to exclude Sinn Féin at the behest of Mr Blair — the man who, Mr Trimble said, betrayed the Unionist cause and gave false promises and undertakings. This is the man who is still pulling the strings of Ulster Unionist Party policy at Glengall Street.

1.30 pm

Mr Trimble does not seek to exclude Sinn Féin; he has made that clear. He said that he wished to see it remain in Government, and he noted the valuable contribution that it had made to the process. Mr Trimble has embarked on a scheme to allow time for some act of decommissioning that will catapult him back into his position as First Minister, with Mr Mallon as Deputy First Minister. I remind Mr Trimble, and lest Members think that this point is hypothetical, those in the Government agencies in Northern Ireland —

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, is the debate not about the exclusion of Sinn Féin rather than about Mr Trimble?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Wilson may continue.

Mr C Wilson: I say this as a warning to those in the Ulster Unionist camp who may weaken in the next few weeks. I remind Mr Trimble that he said that, even if there were to be some act of decommissioning by the IRA, that would not convince him, nor would it convince the people of Northern Ireland, that Sinn Féin/IRA, represented by Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, is fit to be in Government. A paramilitary organisation may decommission a few weapons; the LVF decommissioned weapons some years ago. However, I do not imagine that the family of Martin O'Hagan would regard that as a guarantee that that organisation would not return to violence.

Mr Trimble and his Colleagues work hand in hand with the Government to have him and his Colleague, Mr Mallon, reinstated in the Northern Ireland Executive. There is only one way for Unionists to exclude Sinn Féin from the process, and it is in our hands. We cannot depend on other Governments or on the other people at whom Mr Trimble points the finger of blame. Mr Trimble and Dr Paisley could remove their Ministers from the Government today, and Mr McGuinness and his Colleague, Ms de Brún, would no longer be in the Executive. If we cannot have decommissioning, and if the price for Government in Northern Ireland is having terrorists in that Government, we should seek a better form of Government.

Mr Trimble said that Mr Ervine and Mr Hutchinson had convinced him that they were in favour of peace and that he could do business with them. Mr Adams said that if that is the case, it does not matter what the IRA's position is; Sinn Féin Members need only convince Mr Trimble that they are seeking peaceful and democratic structures in Northern Ireland. If Mr Trimble is to be consistent, he cannot take a different approach.

We need to remove from the process those who pollute and corrupt it. Mr Trimble chided the Democratic Unionist Party in this Chamber for months and said that to withdraw Ministers would make no sense. He told the DUP that it was still up to its neck in the process, as he and his Colleagues will be for the next two weeks. Had he any integrity or decency, he would do what the DUP leader has done. Dr Paisley has proposed the immediate resignation of his Ministers. I trust that Mr Trimble will follow his example, and that he will not play around with the process any longer. The honourable and decent thing for Mr Trimble to do is to resign. He should withdraw his Ministers, and the Executive will fall today.

Mr Agnew: I support both motions. Leaving aside Mr Cedric Wilson's comments, I welcome the united Unionist front in this debate. Speeches made today have reflected the Unionist community's frustration at

an agreement that has failed to deliver and, particularly, at the inability of the forces of infidel Republicanism to state that the war is over and prove it by giving up weapons.

I have said before that my difficulty with the Belfast Agreement was not so much decommissioning, or even prisoner releases, but the North/South bodies. As a Unionist, I had a genuine fear that they could lead to some form of joint authority. However, decommissioning and prisoner releases were also important moral issues. We are dealing with an important moral issue today — decommissioning.

There is a real need for decommissioning. Looking at the situation in north Belfast, with which some of us are familiar, and the orchestration of much of what has happened recently, we can see the need for some form of decommissioning. Over the years, 132 members of the security forces have lost their lives in north Belfast. More significantly, 281 Protestant civilians in the upper Ardoyne area have lost their lives during the troubles. That is why we must view the situation seriously.

The issue of decommissioning concerns us all and must be addressed. Sinn Féin has cynically used the process to change its strategy. If Sinn Féin were genuinely of the opinion that the war was over, there would have been an element of repentance — an apology, or an assurance that it would not happen again and some evidence to show that. There has been no repentance. Instead, Sinn Féin cynically changed the system.

It is unfortunate that when Sinn Féin changed its strategy to one of orchestrating violence, it knew exactly how people in the Protestant community would react. There are difficulties in the Protestant community because of that. Protestants have reacted predictably and, at times, have followed self-defeating strategies that have taken away from what is happening in those areas. They have distracted attention from the failure of the Provisional IRA to decommission and from the needs of a Protestant community that has suffered greatly — more so than the Catholic community, particularly in north Belfast. Attention has been deflected away from the genuine needs of people in those areas. It is slightly nauseating to hear Members of Sinn Féin deriding the large amount of money to be invested in north Belfast and saying that the Protestant community, which is greatly in need of that money, should not receive it because it is a payment for violence. That is untrue and inaccurate. Of course, Sinn Féin can, and does, get away with making such statements.

I understand why the Protestant community follows self-defeating strategies. Housing conditions in Protestant areas have been poor, and that problem has not been addressed. The Provisional IRA has failed to give up the weapons of war that have created such unease and uncertainty in the Protestant community. Attitudes in

that community have hardened, with the result that if a referendum on the agreement were held today among the Protestant community, there would be a wholesale rejection of everything that many Members have tried to establish. Thankfully, I was not one of those Members.

What is the difference between a freedom fighter and a terrorist? I am not sure. I had a strong Presbyterian upbringing, and, to me, right was right, and wrong was wrong; I still see it that way. I do not see how it can be said that a war is going on between the Provisional IRA and the British occupying forces. Where were the British occupying forces at La Mon, Tullyvallen, Darkley, Kingsmills and Teebane? Where were they on Bloody Friday — an exercise orchestrated by a Member of this House? Eleven people were blown to bloody smithereens because of the activities of that individual.

There is an absolute need to give up the weapons of war, to decommission, if only on moral grounds. No one who is involved in democratic politics should be allowed to hold on to illegal weaponry. People are pretending to be involved in the democratic process but are holding on to the weapons of war. We all know why. They hold on because some of them hope to go back to war for a final push towards their ultimate aim. They do not realise that people down South do not want them either, but that is a debate for another day.

Today, we are debating a serious moral issue. People who are involved in the democratic process do not need illegal arms. For those in democratic politics, there is a legal imperative not to hold illegal weaponry and not to be involved in illegal activities such as gun smuggling, protection rackets or bludgeoning a community into support, even if the community's wish is to reject such actions. All those issues are involved.

I support the motion for all the right reasons. I welcome the fact that there is a united Unionist front. I urge the House to reject Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin and to exclude it from Government.

Mr Ervine: Unlike my Colleague, I hardly celebrate such Unionist unity. If there are as many knives in my back when I have finished as there were in David Trimble's before he started, we will know how much Unionist unity there is.

We in the Progressive Unionist Party are accused of hypocrisy, and I am sure that we will be accused of more later. I need to clarify that my party's policy is one of inclusion and pluralism; we recognise that exclusion is at the core of our historical difficulty. If exclusion is that core, inclusion is a way to correct it. I wish that it were a perfect world and that we could do what we wanted on any given day. We made a decision to sign a motion. We had never signed one before. Nobody was that keen on asking us, because we were expected to refuse.

We are in an interesting phase. With or without this motion, we face a suspension, an election, or whatever the Secretary of State decides on, following consultation. Perhaps, however, we have an opportunity to tell each other the truth, to hear that there are serious problems and that others have not fully understood or been prepared to understand? I can give examples. Once, there was 72% support for the Good Friday Agreement. There were those who thought that 26% of the vote was the majority. They found out differently; there was a readiness in both sections of our society to try, to explore and to see.

When we walked out of Castle Buildings on 10 April 1998, we all said “Bye-bye” to each other. We all sold the agreement in ways that could not be described as collective. We were fearful — if we cannot convince the people whom we need to take with us, where will we go from there? In a divided society, no one can convince the people whom he or she represents that they are going in the right direction alone; former enemies are also needed. If the theories and arguments that are being put forward are aimed at pointing people towards the future — along what are, undoubtedly, uncharted waters — those people’s representatives and their former enemies must tell them that they are going in the right direction. People need to be shown that circumstances have changed. That has not happened.

1.45 pm

Mr Trimble referred to the mention of decommissioning in the Downing Street declaration of 1993. I have never been a loud advocate of decommissioning. I have been a loud advocate of each person’s taking responsibility for identifying changes and shifts. In the first instance, in a divided society, that can only be a change in language. However, if someone is asked to say that the war is over and that person cannot do so, that means that the war may not be over. If there are so many caveats, it may not be possible to believe that it is over. That has been the case.

The Progressive Unionist Party’s withdrawal from the process, after the Weston Park talks, was an acceptance, on our part that unless the Unionist community could see greater political effectiveness from the Good Friday Agreement we could not proceed. To achieve progress the opposite side must recognise the efforts of Unionists who have taken risks and are prepared to take greater risks. The opposite side must acknowledge those risk-takers, rather than believe, as it has consistently wanted to, that Unionism was attempting to exploit weakness and that there was some kind of game plan involving Mr Trimble and Mr Donaldson. It was thought that the difficulties that the Unionist leadership was experiencing were part of a game to box the Provos in. That could not be further from the truth.

The opposite side is bound to see the hatred, the bitterness and the venom in the Unionist community.

We can change the old adage “If you put three Republicans in a room, the first issue on the agenda will be a split.”; now it is “put any three Unionists in a room, and the first issue on the agenda will be a split.” Republicans saw a society being salami-sliced. Some incidents were not individually earth-shattering but, taken as a collective, were nightmares for Unionists. We believed that there was a chance that when we explored the future, we would see the curtain come down on a brutal and awful past. That belief was blown out of the water by something as simple as the case of a lady who wanted to present prizes in a Catholic school. The Duchess of Abercorn wanted to present prizes for literature to pupils in a Catholic school. Sinn Féin vociferously opposed that on the basis that the lady is a member of the royal family. Sinn Féin was wrong — she is not a member of the royal family. Unionists reeled at that. Then, when Fr Denis Faul met the RUC to discuss crime levels, a crowd of Sinn Féin activists hounded Fr Faul and the RUC officers, and Unionists reeled at that too. We thought that it was OK to have that dialogue; we were told that dialogue worked and that we must make politics work. In his own inimitable way, Fr Denis Faul was trying to make something work for a community that was suffering from increased crime.

There was the nonsense over the Angelo Fusco extradition to Northern Ireland. The extradition was perfectly legitimate within the parameters of the Good Friday Agreement, but pressure exerted by Sinn Féin leaders tragically encouraged the Irish Government to change their mind. Unionists heard a certain language from the leadership of Sinn Féin but saw different behaviour from Sinn Féin — or in some cases IRA — activists. Which is the true element?

It is difficult for someone who has stood exposed in his own community, having said that he believed that Sinn Féin and its leaders, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, were genuine about the future, to discover that most of his community, while willing to listen when the question was first asked, are unlikely to believe that Sinn Féin is genuine.

There will be another chance to put things back together. In some ways, the motion highlights the fact that we the Unionist community cannot be salami-sliced. The Unionist community cannot think that it will manage this society easily by itself and leave Republicanism and Nationalism behind. There must be a collective way to create inclusion — not a collective form of exclusion — so that people will be relatively comfortable. It might be a long time before we are completely comfortable. However, I appeal for us to do that.

In answer to David Ford, who asked where my confidence in decommissioning was, I should explain the comments that I made on Saturday. My confidence in the delivery of weaponry is not founded on morality.

This society uses morality as a weapon, which does a great disservice to our hopes for the future. In a divided society, there is no single overarching morality or truth. We can weld ourselves into a little homogenous unit and touch each other's anal parts, like chimpanzees, for comfort, but we must learn to live together. The choice is simple. In order to show that politics works, decommissioning, or putting weapons beyond use — as some people like to term it — will come out of practicality, not morality.

Soon, we will face a choice. I hope that when the motion is defeated, as it undoubtedly will be, Sinn Féin does not spit out the dummy. I hope that it will recognise that, for whatever reasons, there is a requirement to give confidence to the Unionist community. Whatever move it makes, could it please ensure that that move is recognisable?

Ms McWilliams: October has turned out to be a sad month. It is also the month in which the Shankill bomb and the Greysteel murders took place. It is the month of the funeral of Marty O'Hagan, the first journalist to be killed in the troubles, and of the military response in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, one of the saddest things for us is that we meet for probably one of the last times before we go into yet another suspension.

Some of the language used today was important. We have heard again and again, as Mr Trimble said, that if a person has a past, he or she can still have a future. Those are important words, and they should not be disparaged. We should all apply those words to ourselves. I am fed up with the denial, the minimisation and the rationalisation that goes on when we talk about our past. Every one of us contributed to that past, so let us stop denying that we are unconnected to the reasons for our differences.

It is important that we continue to hear that militant Republicanism will be redundant — not in the past tense but, as David Ford said, in the future tense. That must be worked out. It is important that when Martin McGuinness, who is named in one of the motions today, contributed to the book 'Being Irish', he specifically addressed the Unionist people, arguing that

"they will not have to give up anything they wish to preserve — including their British citizenship"

in what he also hoped would one day become a multi-cultural, secular society. Those sentiments would not have been expressed in the 1970s. However, they were expressed last year and continue to be expressed this year.

It is time to move beyond the newspaper articles that undermine confidence and the shock security disclosures of the past few months. It is also time to move beyond someone else's deadlines. The IRA need not wait for the correct political context to be set by others — I believe that it is within the IRA's power to set that context itself. That is why our language and

our actions are important. If we go into review, we must ensure that the political context remains uppermost in our minds.

I am despondent. We have one final opportunity not to do what we have done during every other review, which is to create and continue a cycle of breakdown and patch-up until we have almost destroyed the community's confidence in our ability to make the agreement work. It is hurtful to use the word "exclusion" and tell people that they are not wanted, that they are to be excluded or marginalised — except for those who feel that they have a self-importance given to them at birth. It is important that, when an exclusion motion is tabled, or a review is entered into, parties realise that it is not only their issues that are on the agenda, but all parties' issues. Authorship of the agreement is ownership of the agreement, as we should work to include all parties. Some Members may say things that we do not wish to hear; none the less, it is extremely important that we hear them, especially if some think that those who support the agreement are the minority of a majority. A majority voted for the agreement in the referendum. However, if those who support the agreement are now in the minority, we must hear them say why it is not working.

Clarity about substantive issues and about the creation of relationships that enable those substantive issues to be dealt with makes for good negotiations. We know the substantive issues that contribute to making the agreement work, but we are useless at creating the relationships that would enable us to deal positively with those substantive issues. We must stop talking at each another and begin to talk to one another. To date, that major ingredient has been missing. We know the confidence-building measures that must be put in place. Our communities almost despair that we have not got enough faith in one another to put those confidence-building measures in place. Senator Mitchell said that

"Intransigence takes people's hope, violence takes away lives."

I have a great deal of respect for Alan McBride, whose wife and father-in-law were killed in the Shankill bombing. He represents victims in his work at the WAVE Trauma Centre and represents victims' organisations in the Civic Forum. He says that he does not represent all victims. At the Civic Forum he said that he recognised that he was

"a minority in that majority community because he would still choose to say yes to the Belfast Agreement. He could see no other conceivable, workable solution that would bring us to where we are today."

He went on to make the important point that there would be the beginnings of a new future:

"if all parties keep up their end of the bargain".

We should remember that that man lost his wife and his father-in-law, but he still believes that it was important for him that we put the agreement together. He believes more work must be done. As political leaders, the least that we can do is to stop demanding political progress and begin to work at it. If we are to go into review, the most important message that we can send out to people is that, this time, we shall set the terms of reference. It is ridiculous to talk about opening up the entire agreement. We know what substantive issues must be worked at and fixed, and that is the message that we must send out to the community.

2.00 pm

Mr McCartney: Since entering the Assembly I have been consistent on two points. First, the political representatives of active terrorist organisations retaining arms have no place in the democratic process. Secondly, I have a committed and dedicated opposition to all forms of sectarianism. As far as I am concerned, the remarks by Mr Adams about people who do not want Fenians, as he described them, about the place are totally and completely inappropriate, and I have made that case many times here.

On the basis of those principles there is absolutely no way in which, even at the price of Unionist unity on this, I could conceivably support the UUP motion. There is no basis upon which one can argue, from either a rational or a moral ground of justification, that a motion to exclude one group which is not entirely dedicated to peaceful methods should be supported by another group that is guilty of exactly the same intransigence.

Until today I had thought that if there were a contest for the crown of utter political hypocrisy, Mr Trimble and Mr Blair would be the front runners. However, Mr Adams has placed himself in prime position for that crown. When we hear people such as Mr Adams, Mr McGuinness and Mr Ervine give forth lofty sentiments about working together, democracy and peace, we have to examine their antecedents. Mr Adams himself was commander of the Belfast Brigade on Bloody Friday, and Mr McGuinness was a self-confessed officer — commanding officer, perhaps — in the Derry Brigade during a period when 22 people had their lives taken from them.

We hear the mantra repeated by Mr Trimble, and echoed by Mr Adams, that because people have a past does not mean that they cannot have a future. It could be nonsense, or it could be true. However, the real issue is where they stand at present and whether they have shown any ability or capacity to transmute themselves from terrorist to democrat. I see no evidence of that. I see no such evidence because both Mr McGuinness and Mr Adams are members of the seven-man IRA Army Council, and recent information is that Mr McGuinness is now the general officer commanding.

We have these people coming forward, and we have the “trainspotter supreme” gesticulating. Someone should send him a pair of binoculars so that he can see Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness more closely.

The truth is that Mr Trimble, as usual, has got absolutely nothing. He got nothing when he signed the agreement in April 1998. He was totally conned by Mr Blair. These are two lawyers. Mr Trimble is a lawyer who was conned by a letter from Mr Blair that gave him some sort of comfort. Mr Trimble should have understood that one party to a multi-party agreement, even if that one party were a Government, could not alter, amend or substitute any term of that agreement without the consent of all. That is the sort of stuff for first-year law students, not an alleged constitutional lawyer.

He desperately wanted to get his sticky fingers on what he believed to be the levers of power in the devolved Government. He got nothing after the Mitchell review in autumn 1999. He tells us now that George Mitchell made all sorts of statements about what was agreed, but when George was asked to make some public utterances as to what had been agreed, George disappeared. Mr Trimble got nothing after the Hillsborough talks in May 2000 either. However, before leaving George Mitchell’s review, I should mention the infamous letter of resignation. This man of political awareness and acuity was so confident that the IRA would decommission that he offered his letter of resignation if his hopes were not fulfilled.

Mr Adams: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can the Member clarify whether he is speaking for or against the motion?

Mr McCartney: That is not a point of order, and I do not have to clarify it. It is typical of the bogus points of order that Mr Adams engages in. The truth is that Mr Trimble got absolutely nothing then. Then there were the Hillsborough talks in May 2000. He got absolutely nothing then either. Having got nothing three times, he was willing to be persuaded that he should re-enter the Assembly and the Executive.

Now he is under pressure from his own party and believes that there is a window of opportunity because of the events in New York and Washington. The focus of the world democracies is on terrorism generally, and sooner or later it will be on the terrorism of the IRA. He believes that that provides him with an opportunity to bring this, on the face of it, macho motion to exclude Sinn Féin.

In truth it is nothing of the kind. In essence the motion is a fraud. It permits Mr Trimble to withdraw his Ministers, hang about for 10 days or two weeks while all sorts of pressures are brought on Mr Adams and Company to produce some absolutely worthless gesture about decommissioning that will enable Mr Trimble to get those sticky fingers back on the levers.

So the UUP motion is not one that any democrat could support.

There was talk from Mr Mallon about stunts, but this is not the first time that a motion supported by every Unionist has come before the Assembly. In December 1998 the UKUP proposed a motion that every Unionist agreed with. What was that motion about? It was about preventing the representatives of paramilitary organisations who had not decommissioned from entering the Executive until they had shown their bona fides.

Mr Trimble supported that motion, but a few months later he abandoned all that and entered, in league with members of Sinn Féin, into the Executive. Having got them into the Executive, he was faced with the problem of how he could get them to honour the basic requirement of any democracy. Of course, all along the line he failed. Now, probably in league with his puppet master in 10 Downing Street, he produces the argument that they have to be put out.

Two weeks ago I described the political hypocrisy of Mr Trimble as mind-boggling. That was based on his condemnation of the UDA for its activities in north Belfast. However, he used the UDA and the UVF and their political representatives to get the Belfast Agreement signed and to be elected as First Minister. Now, within two weeks, he excels even that level of hypocrisy by inviting the representatives of one set of terrorists to bring about the demise of another.

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

Mr McCartney: I will be voting for and supporting the exclusion of Sinn Féin. I would also vote for the exclusion of the PUP if that were an option.

Mr Foster: I speak in favour of the motion. I am not sure if there has been an amendment tabled, given the attacks on Mr Trimble. There is a crisis of confidence in the political institutions and the political process in Northern Ireland. Whose fault is that? Even the IRA recognises its culpability. Its statement spoke of putting in place a

“confidence-building measure”.

There is no confidence, and that lack of confidence has led to the motion’s coming forward. The Provisionals have been involved in 32 murders since 1994.

If the IRA will not disarm and disband, the time has come for the House to ensure that its political representatives have no role to play in the governance of Northern Ireland. As a result of the terrible events in the USA on 11 September, the free world has changed forever. Sinn Féin/IRA must realise that. Its fascist campaign is over; it cannot be resurrected.

The Prime Minister has declared war on terrorism. If he is serious, he could send no clearer signal of his

intent than to start here in his backyard. I have not forgotten the Prime Minister’s handwritten pledges made to the people of Northern Ireland in May 1998. They included the promise that those who use or threaten violence would be excluded from the Government of Northern Ireland and that prisoners would be kept in prison unless violence was given up for good. I ask the Prime Minister about the promises to the people of Northern Ireland. He has failed us miserably.

Yet Sinn Féin/IRA arrogantly continues to defy public opinion in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and it ignores the public statements of Her Majesty’s Government and the Irish and American Governments. Decommissioning is patently not just a Unionist demand or the result of a Unionist deadline; it is a democratic demand and part of a democratic deadline. In seeking justice, we do not seek to bring down Stormont and the democratic institutions. Indeed, it is because Stormont and the democratic process mean so much to us and we have so much respect for them, that we cannot allow either this place or this process to be debased any longer by the presence of the political representatives of terror in the Government of Northern Ireland.

Republicans confound the truth regularly, because the problems that they allegedly suffered under the Stormont Parliament come at the lower end of the scale of human grievances. To make comparisons with South African people under apartheid, as they often do, is absurd. Their comparisons only belittle the serious grievances suffered by those people.

The Republican campaign slowed down legal reform in Northern Ireland. The result of the IRA-inspired rape of this community was more hatred, distrust, bitterness and strife between the people of Northern Ireland. The Republican movement should hold its head in shame. Seven and a half years after Dick Spring said that the IRA must decommission, it has failed to do so. The Republicans are the wreckers of the Good Friday Agreement. Their continued campaign was, and is, wrong; it is criminal and filled with deceit.

As for the claim that the guns are silent — what nonsense. I referred to 32 people murdered by the Provisionals. However, even if it were true, it would be irrelevant. During the period of the Cold War, many people protested against nuclear weapons. The fact that those weapons were silent did not make them any less of a threat. It is the same with the illegal stockpiles of weaponry held by the IRA. The usual excuse of silent guns will come as a surprise to the RUC officers who came under automatic fire in north Belfast recently. It will also come as a surprise to the families of those who suffered IRA punishment shootings. The real human rights abusers are those who shoot or beat young people tried by a kangaroo court. Yet there is a deafening silence from senior Sinn

Féin Members, including their Ministers. Strangely they are not so reticent when they suspect Loyalists or the security forces of wrongdoing.

2.15 pm

The schizophrenia that characterises Republicanism is, therefore, alive and well today. At the Sinn Féin party conference 10 days ago, Gerry Kelly said that he knew all three Colombian “tourists” — that is strange. When they were arrested, Sinn Féin was at pains to say that those men were not party members and that no one, even those who had appeared on platforms with them at previous gatherings, seemed to know who they were. Gerry Adams had to be told by the Cuban Government that Niall Connolly was his party’s representative in Cuba and Latin America — that is questionable. I wonder how many other representatives about whom he knows nothing are out there? No doubt, they and Mr Adams are as elusive as a wet fish.

In addition, let us not forget the Florida gunrunning plot. At the time of the incident, the IRA said that it was not responsible, yet those who were convicted are now listed as Republican prisoners alongside the killers of Garda Gerry McCabe. In the dark world of Sinn Féin/IRA, evil is good, murder is justifiable, and the truth, like other people’s lives, is a cheap commodity.

Recently, the president of Sinn Féin claimed that terrorism is ethically indefensible. Where has Gerry Adams been for the past 30 years? The dead and wounded of Bloody Friday, Claudy, Birmingham, La Mon, Harrods, Enniskillen or Canary Wharf could have told him that a long time ago. The victims of those attacks, which were all on civilian targets, would have little difficulty in identifying those responsible as terrorists rather than freedom fighters. How dare the perpetrators of these outrages on civilians send condolences to the American victims of terror? Links to ETA, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Libya and now the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are well documented.

The problem for Sinn Féin/IRA is that the truth hurts. It has told so many lies and generated so much propaganda that it believes its own publicity. It cannot accept the fact that the IRA is a terrorist group, because it cannot face the awful truth of what it has done to this country and its people over the past 30 years.

Let us look at what it has done: it has bombed the centres of cities and towns; destroyed the economy; frightened off outside investment; created unemployment; murdered the forces of law and order; and murdered and maimed innocent people, Protestant and Catholic. Despite this, it has the effrontery to talk about human rights, jobs and equality. That is blatant hypocrisy, and with full intent to deceive the uninitiated.

Footage of IRA funerals shows that leading Sinn Féin members play key roles in those events, and some might even say that they organised them. The prime example must be the funeral of Thomas Begley, the mass-murderer of innocent shoppers on the Shankill Road. Was Mr Adams not a pallbearer that day? In response to the cry “Bring back the IRA”, a certain gentleman felt confident enough to reply, “They haven’t gone away, you know”. How could he speak with such authority?

The same individual now issues thinly veiled threats to those Nationalists who are tempted to join the Police Service of Northern Ireland. It appears that it is acceptable for Sinn Féin MLAs to be in the pay of the British state by virtue of their Stormont seats, but not so for young Catholics who want a job serving all the people of Northern Ireland as part of the police force.

It is, therefore, time to call a halt to the gut-wrenching hypocrisy of Sinn Féin/IRA. This process has given it a chance to leave behind its past and to build for itself a democratic future. It is not the fault of democrats that the IRA is still wedded to the path of fascist armed struggle. Democrats should not be expected to indulge the IRA any longer, and they should not be punished for the failure of fascists. We have been patient and have gone beyond the extra mile in an attempt to secure peace, while others have not budged. Time and time again we have jumped.

David Trimble, with tremendous courage, has taken great political and personal risks to sustain the process. No one could have done more, and I pay tribute to his skills, resilience, dedication and responsibility. However, the responsibility for the present crisis lies with the Sinn Féin/IRA Republican movement as a whole. It alone has failed to fully implement the Good Friday Agreement. Having listened to Sinn Féin today, I know of no spectacle more offensive and more ridiculous than the Republican movement in many fits of pretentious morality. I support the motion.

Ms de Brún: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is ar alt 30 mír 2(a) d’ Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998 a bhraitheann rún an iarChéad-Aire, agus féachann sé le baill de chuid Sinn Féin a eisiáimh ó oifig aireachta.

Níl aon amhras faoi thiomantas mo pháirtí don neamhfhoréigean agus do mhodhanna síochánta daonlathacha amháin. Mar sin de níl ciall ná réasún leis an rún. Níl ann ach leithscéal le gníomh a dhéanamh níos moille leis na hinstiúidí a chur ó mhaith. Níl sa mhéid a fheicimid inniu ach toradh chairt na scriostóirí a leag sé amach ina litir chuig a chomhAontachtaithe tá bliain ó shin nuair a chuir sé síos ar a intinn an Tionól a thabhairt chun éigeandála, na hinstiúidí a chur ar fionraí agus an locht a fhágáil ar Phoblachtanaigh.

Is léir go bhfuil an tUasal Trimble in éadan an athraithe. Sáróidh ar a rún inniu. Mar sin féin, tá seans go n-éireoidh leis na hinstiúidí a chur ar fionraí nó iad a scrios go hiomlán fiú féin.

Faoi alt 30 d'Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998 is féidir Aire ar bith a chur as oifig má sháraíonn air/uirthi téarmaí ar bith an Ghealltanais Oifige a chomhall. Cuimsíonn siad i bhfad níos mó ná tiomantas don neamhfhoréigean agus do mhodhanna síochánta daonlathacha amháin. Cuimsíonn siad gealltanais dualgais oifige uile a chomhall de mheon macánta. Cuimsíonn siad gealltanais fónamh don mhuintir uile ar bhealach comhionann agus gníomhú de réir na n-oibleagáidí ginearálta a bhíonn ar rialtas comhionannas a chur chun cinn agus leithcheal a chosc.

Cuirim i gcuimhne do Chomhaltaí go n-éilíonn an Cód Iompair, a chaithfidh Airí a chomhlíonadh i dtólamh, ar Airí oibriú ar bhealach a chabhróidh le deachaidreamh pobail agus le comhionannas déileála a chur chun cinn.

Lena chois, sa Dearbhú Tacaíochta sa chomhaontú tiomnaíonn rannpháirtithe iad féin don chomhpháirtíocht, don chomhionannas agus don chomhurráim mar bhonn leis na caidrimh laistigh de thuaisceart Éireann, idir an Tuaisceart agus an Deisceart, agus idir na hoileáin seo.

Tá sé íorónta mar sin de go bhfuil muid ag plé rúin a fhéachann le mé féin agus mo Chomhghleacaí aireachta Máirtín MacAonghusa a chur as oifig aireachta. Cuireadh an rún seo chun tosaigh ag iarChéad-Aire a sháraigh níos mó ná uair amháin go neamhnáireach Gealltanais Oifige an chomhaontaithe, a Chód Iompair, a Dhearbhú Tacaíochta agus Acht Thuaisceart Éireann 1998. Chinn na cúirteanna go ndearna an t-iarChéad-Aire, le linn dó bheith in oifig, beart mídhleachach nuair a dhiúltaigh sé ainmniúcháin a dhéanamh do chruinnithe earnála na Comhairle Aireachta Thuaidh/Theas.

The motion brought by the former First Minister relies on section 30, subsection 2(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. He seeks to exclude members of Sinn Féin from holding ministerial office, and when one of them rises to speak, he leaves the Chamber.

My party's commitment to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means is unequivocal. Therefore, the motion has no rational basis. It represents no more than a smokescreen for subsequent action aimed at collapsing the institutions. What we are dealing with here is the outworking of Mr Trimble's wrecker's charter as set out in his letter to fellow Unionists a year ago, when he outlined his intention to see a crisis in the Assembly, achieve suspension of the institutions and place the blame on Republicans.

It would appear that Mr Trimble is opposed to change. His motion will fail. He may, however, succeed in again provoking the suspension, or even the collapse, of the institutions.

Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 allows for the exclusion from office of any Minister on the basis of a failure on his or her part to observe any of the terms of the Pledge of Office. These terms include a pledge to discharge in good faith all the duties of office. They include a pledge to serve all of the people equally and to act in accordance with the general obligations in Government to promote equality and prevent discrimination.

Let me remind Members also that the code of conduct, which Ministers must abide by, requires Ministers to operate at all times in a way conducive to promoting good community relations and equality of treatment. Furthermore, in the declaration of support for the agreement, participants commit themselves to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships in the North of Ireland, between North and South, and between these islands.

It is ironic, therefore, that we are debating a motion put forward by a former First Minister, who in his period of office was in clear and flagrant breach of the agreement's Pledge of Office on a number of counts — its code of conduct, its declaration of support, and the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In his period of office as First Minister, the courts found that he acted unlawfully in refusing to make nominations to the North/South Ministerial Council's sectoral meetings.

It is also ironic and a little hypocritical that Mr Trimble informs us of his intention to bring the motion challenging my party's commitment to non-violence and exclusively democratic means yet tells us in almost the same breath that when his motion fails, as it clearly will, he will withdraw his party colleagues from the Executive and bring about the collapse of the institutions.

It would appear that Mr Trimble's own commitment to democratic means extends only to the point at which he ceases to get his way. Mr Trimble announced his intention to put his motion to the Assembly and, at the same time, threatened to take action to bring down the political institutions if his motion does not get the endorsement that he seeks. It does not seem to matter to Mr Trimble that over 70% of the people who participated in the referendums, North and South, voted in favour of the full operation of the institutions.

Against a background of overwhelming support, North and South, for the agreement and the institutions, Mr Trimble has provoked the suspension of the operation of these institutions three times. He has fractured the operation of the North/South Ministerial Council and blocked sectoral meetings of that Council on education, and health and food safety. His actions have led to the postponement of further plenary meetings of the Council, and he has impeded proper ministerial consideration of work on accident and emergency services, emergency planning, high technology equipment, cancer research

and health promotion. He has impeded the operation of the Food Safety Promotion Board at a time when food safety is so crucial to people across the island of Ireland.

Mr Trimble has threatened to withdraw his party's Ministers from the Executive to render unworkable the remaining political institutions and to bring about a further suspension or collapse. No one should underestimate what the effect will be if Mr Trimble is allowed to continue with his wrecker's charter. Many of those who voted for the institutions did so in the belief that an Executive comprising local Ministers could and would benefit their lives in the way that we have committed ourselves to doing in the Programme for Government. They voted in the belief that if we are to catch up with the rest of Europe on the delivery and quality of services — health and social services, in particular — we stand a much better chance of doing so with an Executive of local Ministers and a local Assembly than under direct rule, which presided over the rundown of those same services in the past.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Most importantly, the Good Friday Agreement offered a historic opportunity for a new beginning, a fresh start for everyone in society. It gave all Unionists the opportunity to see myself, as Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and my party Colleague, Martin McGuinness, as Minister of Education, impact positively on their lives. That is beginning to happen. The agreement gave Nationalists the opportunity to see Unionists carry out their offices for the benefit of all and act without holding on to power for themselves and without excluding others. That we still await.

Those who refuse to take up the challenges place at risk the opportunity to make the agreement a success. It is little wonder that people now ask me whether the prospect of success might be precisely what motivates or agitates Mr Trimble. I am asked whether it is Mr Trimble who is becoming increasingly nervous as Nationalist Ministers, and others, show evidence of their commitment to serve everyone equally. People also wonder whether Mr Trimble has the same difficulty, or even greater difficulty, with Sinn Féin and SDLP Ministers' placing equality at the heart of Government as he has with accepting the democratically expressed wishes across the island of Ireland.

The logic of seeking to move from the conflict of the past to a new and peaceful future is to realise that to overcome the hurt of the past requires dialogue and co-operation. The key to conflict resolution is a resolve to avoid using the process to gain short-term political advantages over old adversaries. Dialogue, negotiation and implementation of agreements already reached cannot and must not be reduced to political manoeuvring. We who are partaking in a transition process need to

convince our supporters that co-operation rather than confrontation is the way forward. To undermine those who seek an alternative way is to risk a mood swing against the whole process. That would benefit no one.

Oral Answers To Questions

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Question 4, in the name of Mr Fee, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and will receive a written answer.

Question 8 in the name of Mr Billy Armstrong has been withdrawn, and question 18 in the name of Mr Seamus Close has been transferred to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and will receive a written answer.

2.30 pm

Good Friday Agreement

1. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail what steps have been taken to ensure the full and early implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. (AQO223/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The implementation of the Good Friday Agreement is the collective responsibility of the British and Irish Governments and the political parties. The two Governments published a paper on 14 July 2001 which set out in detail the progress made on the implementation of the agreement and on aspects that were within the responsibility of the devolved Administration, including the effective working of the institutions under strands one, two and three.

The Executive meet regularly, as does the Civic Forum. Progress in the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council has been good in most areas but, for reasons that are well known to the Member and which have been a matter of public controversy for some time, has been lacking in other areas.

Ms Ramsey: On Friday, the Court of Appeal upheld an earlier court ruling which stated that the former First Minister acted unlawfully by refusing to nominate Sinn Féin members to attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings. Given that judgement, can the Minister confirm that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will nominate Sinn Féin Ministers to attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings, and will the Office agree dates for those meetings?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I have always believed that the then First Minister acted illegally in preventing meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council on health and education by refusing to nominate the appropriate Ministers. I argued that point in court, and I welcome the judgement of the Court of Appeal which vindicates the stance that I adopted. It is important now for the North/South Ministerial Council to be able to resume its work in health and education. The Ulster Unionist Party should respect the decision of

the court and nominate the appropriate Ministers to those North/South meetings.

I regret that I cannot give the Member an assurance that they will take place now or in the immediate future considering the peculiar set of circumstances that surround the workings of the institutions.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister confirm that, at its last plenary meeting, the North/South Ministerial Council agreed to meet in an institutional format to examine any difficulties that it had? Why has that not happened?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: At its last plenary meeting, in September 2000, the North/South Ministerial Council anticipated that it would meet by agreement in institutional format before the next plenary meeting to consider procedural and cross-cutting issues. The agendas were not considered and will be subject to agreement between the two Administrations before the next meeting. The reason why that has not taken place is no secret.

Mr Kennedy: The implementation of the Belfast Agreement is being obstructed by the actions of one party. Will the Minister specifically identify Sinn Féin/IRA as preventing proper progress by its steadfast refusal to commit to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I made my position on that issue clear in the previous debate. The North/South Ministerial Council meetings are not taking place as they should for two reasons: one is the way in which the agreement has not been properly worked with regard to decommissioning, and the second is because of what has been deemed an illegal decision not to nominate Sinn Féin Ministers to take part in those institutions.

Mr Speaker: I want to remind Members that when they put questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, they are putting questions to both Ministers. Members have risen to ask supplementary questions and have said "I ask the Minister". That is not possible in questions to the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, as questions are addressed to both. When either Minister answers, he is deemed to have answered for both.

Parades Commission

2. **Mr McClarty** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to detail the nature of any consultation with which the Office has been involved over the review of the Parades Commission. (AQO211/01)

Sir Reg Empey: There is no review of the Parades Commission, and no joint consultations have taken place with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister about such a review.

Mr McClarty: Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree with my Colleague the Rt Hon David Trimble that the Parades Commission should be scrapped? So-called controversial parades and the manner in which they have been dealt with by the Parades Commission should be subject to a public inquiry sponsored by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Do the Ministers accept the findings of Prof Liam Kennedy who, in his report ‘They Shoot Children Don’t They?’, vividly makes the case for establishing an anti-intimidation unit?

Sir Reg Empey: Although there is no review of the Parades Commission, it is true that, in a statement in August 2001, the Government said that to create greater consensus on the parades issue and a less contentious environment, they would initiate a review of the operation of the Parades Commission and the legislation under which it was established. The Government’s statement also indicated that the review would involve consultation with interested parties, including the Irish Government. On that basis, it appears logical for this institution through its Executive to be consulted also.

Mr Watson: The Prime Minister promised clearly at the Weston Park talks that he would review the Parades Commission. Do the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister agree that the Executive should encourage the Prime Minister to proceed with the review?

Sir Reg Empey: If there is a review, it is essential that not only the Executive but the entire Assembly be consulted. A significant number of consequential problems arise because of the failure to have the matter addressed, and they cause disruption to the devolved services. Therefore, as the representative institution of the people of Northern Ireland, the Assembly should be asked for its opinion.

It is evident that the commission is not achieving consensus in our community. There is still widespread disagreement over contentious parades, even though they are a small proportion of the number of parades that take place in any year. Nevertheless, it is clearly a contentious issue, and it has not been resolved by the actions of the current Parades Commission. That is why I am pleased to note that, in their submission in August, the Government indicated that they would initiate a review of the operation and the legislative basis under which the commission was established. That is the key to progress.

Mr A Maginness: I am glad that no review has been established. Do the First and Deputy First Ministers agree that a review is unnecessary, given that the Parades Commission has done a good job, in the main, in determining contentious parades in an independent and dispassionate manner? It has also taken controversial decision making away from the police, providing a neutral environment in which parades can take place.

Sir Reg Empey: If something is not functioning properly, or if it is believed that it could function in a more effective way, one reviews it. Anyone who thinks that the parades issue is being dealt with satisfactorily is mistaken. The process was supposed to bring about consensus in local circumstances and avoid controversy. That patently has not been the case. We have endured several contentious decisions that have not received support from various sections of the community — it is not a one-sided issue — and it is timely to have a review, not only of the operation but especially of its legislative base.

Anti-Intimidation Unit

3. **Mr Cobain** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to indicate what steps have been taken to establish an anti-intimidation unit in the Office. (AQO206/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: We have no current plans to establish such a unit. Our Department, working through the Community Relations Council, provides financial support to several community and voluntary organisations working to tackle intimidation. In developing a cross-departmental community relations strategy, we shall include measures to tackle the underlying causes of community division, sectarianism and racism as well as measures to ensure an effective and co-ordinated response to sectarian and racial intimidation. As a first step, we are examining practice throughout the devolved Administration for responding to such intimidation and how it might be improved.

Mr Cobain: Do the acting First Minister and the acting Deputy First Minister agree that it is regrettable that there are no plans to establish an anti-intimidation unit? Maximum priority should be given to rectifying that problem. It would be a useful means of co-ordinating the involvement of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in tackling the persistent problem of sectarian intimidation, including punishment shootings, beatings, attacks on people and property, threats and forced evictions.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: As I have said before, in the draft Programme for Government there is a commitment to an effective and co-ordinated response to sectarian and racist intimidation across the entire devolved Administration. Our officials have been asked to consider how to take the matter forward. I do not believe that it would be appropriate to commit to any structure or outcome at present. The specific matter of punishment beatings is a reserved matter and, therefore, not for the devolved Administration to deal with.

Dr McDonnell: What steps have been taken to resolve the dispute at Holy Cross Primary School? Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First

Minister accept the right of the children involved to receive an education?

Mr Speaker: Order. The question will need to be restricted to the terms of the primary question, which deal with the establishment of an anti-intimidation unit.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I respond to your direction, Mr Speaker. One wonders how, if an anti-intimidation unit were in place, it would deal with the barbarity of the events at Holy Cross Primary School. The entire community must make known its views about that situation. It must protect the right of children to go to school unmolested and without the verbal barrage that those children are subjected to daily.

Mr Dodds: The acting Deputy First Minister mentioned financial support for a number of groups, including those tackling intimidation. He will be aware of the representations from myself and others about the concerns of some of those groups about the funding gap. Many of them will go out of existence, and their work on intimidation and other issues will be badly affected. Can he assure us that the issue will be addressed quickly, and that those people will get word soon that the money will be delivered to keep their organisations in place?

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Order. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. This question should also be answered in the context of the primary question.

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Again, I speculate as to how an anti-intimidation unit could deal with matters as they are. I recognise the validity of the Member's point. The acting First Minister and I recently discussed the matter with the Member in the wider context of problems in north Belfast. I note that, in the past few days, the Minister of Finance and Personnel stated publicly that it was essential that gap funding be made available to assist groups such as those to which, I assume, the Member referred. I could not agree with him more; now is the time to ensure that all groups working for the good of the entire community are given the resources to do so.

Needs and Effectiveness Study on Health

5. **Mr Savage** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to indicate what progress has been made with regard to the needs and effectiveness study on health. (AQO207/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The Executive launched the needs and effectiveness evaluations to establish the level of need for key public services in Northern Ireland, relative to those in England. They will also provide information to support our argument with the Treasury for a more equitable financial settlement than

that which the Barnett formula provides and help the Executive to improve the effectiveness of programmes. The health study is progressing well. The work has been taken forward by an interdepartmental group of officials from the Economic Policy Unit (EPU), the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

In recent months, subgroups have been set up to examine programmes of care including acute services, mental health and care for the elderly, families and children. They are also examining population need, general effectiveness, administration and the health elements of the needs assessment study. The subgroups are collating information on the needs and effectiveness of certain services in the Health Service and, where possible, are comparing those to services in England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The final report is due by spring 2002.

Mr Savage: How will the Executive deal with the vexed question of waiting lists, given that the problem appears to be getting worse, although there is ample hospital capacity in other European countries?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: In essence, the Member's question is a matter for the departmental Minister. However, we have had long discussions about waiting lists and about the problems facing the elderly in our communities. Unless more money can be found for those services, the problems will continue.

At the previous Question Time, I expressed the hope that there would be a robust approach to the issue during Assembly debates on the Programme for Government and the Budget — and in the relevant Committees — to ensure that resources are available to give the aged and those in immediate need of acute services the attention that is their due. It is an important issue. If the Assembly is still here, this matter will be its acid test. I hope that it will show the robustness that is required.

Dr Hendron: Can the Deputy First Minister confirm that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has made substantial increases to the health budget in each Budget adopted by the Executive? How will those increases compare with those in Britain?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: Statistics can prove anything, but let us have the statistics. I can confirm that the Assembly's first Budget in December 2000 provided an additional £114 million over the existing planned expenditure for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in 2001-02. The Department's budget for 2001-02 is 5.3% higher than expenditure in the previous financial year, compared to an estimated 9.4% increase for the equivalent services in England.

In September, the Executive agreed a draft Budget for 2002-03 that will provide a further £31 million

over indicative plans, representing an 8.1% increase over plans for the current year. No comparable information is available for Britain. Despite those statistics, there is still not enough money for the type of services that the Member asked about.

Commissioner for Children

6. **Mr McMEnamin** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to outline what arrangements are being made in respect of the Children's Commissioner to ensure that there is a full and inclusive consultation process. (AQO230/01)

Sir Reg Empey: We have invested considerable effort in ensuring that consultation is as comprehensive as possible and have put particular emphasis on the involvement of children and young people. Over 11,000 copies of the consultation document and 260,000 information leaflets have been distributed. A billboard advertising campaign and a poster campaign in schools was run in August. A version of the document for children and young people has been sent to all primary and secondary schools and all further education colleges. A facilitator's version has been produced for teachers and youth leaders. It has been sent to schools, further education colleges and youth groups. A dedicated web site has been set up for the duration of the consultation. Irish versions of the children's document and facilitator's guide have been sent to Irish-medium schools, and a Cantonese version of the information leaflet has been produced. Other special versions will be produced if required.

Mr McMEnamin: Can the Minister give an assurance that the composition of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) forum will be reviewed, given the representations of certain groups that may not have been included?

Sir Reg Empey: The forum was established on an ad hoc basis to contribute to the development of a children's strategy. The current membership was drawn from the core members of the Putting Children First campaign, as it includes the major children's organisations and umbrella groups for smaller organisations throughout the country. Umbrella organisations concerned with disability and ethnic minorities were also included in order to ensure that those issues are considered in the context of the policy on children's issues.

It is well known that we have received representations from several organisations, notably faith-based organisations and organisations working with disabled children, suggesting that membership should be more broadly based. The forum itself has also asked us to review its composition, which we intend to do in the near future. In so doing, we shall give careful consideration to the representations made to us.

Mr McCarthy: Can the Minister give an assurance that there will be no age barrier to the appointment of a children's commissioner? [*Interruption*].

Mr Speaker: Order.

Sir Reg Empey: I hope that there was no self-interest being declared in that question. I assure the Member that it is the intention of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to comply with all statutory requirements across the board.

Executive Meetings: Failure of Ministers to Attend

7. **Mr Davis** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to advise of any practical difficulties which arise out of the failure of some Ministers to systematically attend meetings of the Executive. (AQO209/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The Minister for Regional Development and the Minister for Social Development have both taken a pledge to fulfil the duties of their office. Although they are prepared to take up ministerial office, they have refused to participate in Executive meetings. Despite the non-attendance of those Ministers, the Executive have ensured that matters are progressed, even in the absence of ministerial co-operation, so that the people of Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged by their absence. The allocation of £40 million for the trans-European network route from Larne to the border and the funding of free travel for the elderly are but two examples of such action. Nevertheless, people will inevitably draw their own conclusions. The two Ministers will, no doubt, claim credit for the actions of the Executive while trying to undermine its collective approach to tackling the problems faced by the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Davis: Do the acting First Minister and Deputy First Minister accept that the term "systematically" refers to the specific pre-planned methodology that falls short of resignation but that has resulted in the withdrawal by two Ministers from Executive meetings? Has the systematic absence of those Ministers from Executive meetings impaired the effectiveness of the Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The term "systematically" probably refers to a specific pre-planned methodology that falls short of resignation. I believe that that is the case, but we need not spend much time on the semantics — we all know the meaning of non-attendance and withdrawal. As a result of such action, politics and the Departments suffer. The wider community depends on good government, and it is being short-changed. The Member will agree that anything less than full

participation in Executive meetings at all times sells short the entire community and should not be condoned.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister accept that today's announcement by the former First Minister that he intends to withdraw his Ministers from the Executive means that, from Thursday, most Ministers will be in non-attendance mode? That proposed withdrawal is in line with the DUP policy of non-involvement and justifies it. Does the Office accept that that constitutes a massive vote of no confidence in the Belfast Agreement and in the institutions created by it?

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I listened carefully to what the former First Minister said, and I did not get the impression that he regarded the motion as a vote of no confidence in the institutions. I accept that it would fall under the category of systematic withdrawal from the Executive. The withdrawal from the Executive of all Ulster Unionist Members, along with DUP Members, would inflict enormous damage on the political process that involves us all and on our hopes for a better political future. Even at this late hour, people should re-examine their position and adhere to a stance which leads into the future rather than one which tries to slink back off into the past.

North/South Ministerial Council

9. **Mr Byrne** asked the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister whether the Executive will give consideration to a North/South Ministerial Council meeting in institutional format as provided for in the Good Friday Agreement. (AQO234/01)

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: The agreement provides that the North/South Ministerial Council will meet in an appropriate format to consider institutional or cross-sectoral matters and to resolve disagreement. At its last plenary meeting in September 2000, the North/South Ministerial Council anticipated that it would meet by agreement in institutional format before the next plenary meeting to consider a range of procedural and cross-cutting issues.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Morrice] in the Chair)

Mr Byrne: I thank the Deputy First Minister for his answer, but will he ensure that an institutional format meeting occurs as soon as possible and that co-operation on cross-border transport is on the agenda? Will the Minister bring up at the North/South meeting the commendable work done by the Executive on the N1 section of the Belfast to Dublin route?

Will he urge that similar progress be made on the N2/A5 Dublin-Omagh-Derry trans-European network route?

3.00 pm

Mr Séamus Mallon MP: I thank the Member for the question and, in the interest of brevity, I will answer the second part of it. The N2 Dublin-Omagh-Derry route is one of the key transport corridors set out in the spatial development strategy. That will be a factor when the prioritisation of resources for roads is considered.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

New Bus Station — Downpatrick

1. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when funding will be provided for the design and construction of a new bus station in Downpatrick; and to make a statement. (AQO194/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): I am seeking to secure funding from two sources for a new bus station in Downpatrick. I submitted a bid for £1.1 million to the September round of the Executive programme funds to cover the full estimated costs for the station. In keeping with my policy of seeking funds from all possible sources, I am also bidding to obtain the maximum possible contribution from the 2000-04 European Union special support programme for peace and reconciliation — Peace II. If the Peace II bid is successful, the amount required from the Executive programme funds would be correspondingly reduced.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his full reply. It is somewhat hopeful, compared to previous replies. His file must be very old — archaic almost. Perhaps it is almost as archaic as the depot for passenger service in Downpatrick. I encourage the Minister to ensure that the funding he is seeking is received as soon as possible. The current provision is totally inadequate for modern-day travel and is at variance with the important environmental improvement and redevelopment that has taken place round it.

Mr Campbell: I understand that Mr McGrady and other Members have been pressing for a new bus station in Downpatrick for many years. I take on board his comments about the antiquity of the present building. The Peace II programme that I referred to in my initial answer was not signed off by the European Commission until June 2001. Therefore it was not possible to submit a formal application for bids until October 2001. My Department is fully involved in the process. It is encouraging Translink to submit applications at the earliest opportunity. I hope that significant progress can be made and that, in the not-too-distant future, we will successfully obtain the resources needed for a new bus station in Downpatrick.

Local Government Reform — Implications for the Department for Regional Development

2. **Mr McNamee** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline when he intends to begin consultation on the implications of the reform of local government on the structure and responsibility of his Department. (AQO189/01)

Mr Campbell: I am not aware of any ongoing reform of local government that would impact on my Department. Therefore there are no plans to commence consultation on that issue. It is anticipated that a wide-ranging review of public administration will be launched in spring 2002. That review will potentially impact on the workings of, and arrangements with, local councils. I will be able to consider fully the impact on my Department only when the terms of reference for that review are agreed.

Mr McNamee: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an tAire as ucht a fhreagra. The reform of local government may create an opportunity to devolve some departmental responsibilities to the councils, particularly the responsibilities of the Department for Regional Development and perhaps some local road issues. Will the Minister advocate such devolution of responsibilities to councils from his Department?

Mr Campbell: A series of consultations have taken place between my Department and district councils as part of the twice-yearly meetings that Roads Service officials have with local councils and also about the review of the winter maintenance, which I reported to the Assembly recently.

There has been, and will continue to be, consultation with local government on areas of co-operation. I am also considering other areas of co-operation such as grass cutting. Consultation between my Department and local authorities on a range of other issues is ongoing. However, at this stage, I have no plans to divest my Department of any of these responsibilities. We will engage in serious and comprehensive consultation with local authorities to deliver the best possible service in the best possible way for taxpayers.

Cycle Lanes

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans for the extension of Sustrans cycle lanes to rural towns; and to make a statement. (AQO238/01)

Mr Campbell: Since 1996 the Roads Service has co-operated with Sustrans, the transport charity, on the development of the national cycle network in Northern Ireland. The first phase of the network, known as the

millennium routes, is now substantially complete and comprises 527 miles of cycle network, both on-road and off-road. The Roads Service will continue to assist Sustrans as it seeks funding for the second phase of the national cycle network. That phase will include the provision of a proposed further 350 miles of cycle lanes which will extend the network to a number of rural towns. In the meantime, in conjunction with district councils, and in support of the Department's transportation objectives, the Roads Service is seeking to improve cycle usage by focusing on the development of urban cycle networks in a number of towns across Northern Ireland.

Mr Dallat: Given the increased volume of traffic that is rumbling through our towns, villages and smaller settlements, does the Minister agree that it is necessary for him to take direct responsibility for the safety and well-being of rural dwellers. Will he give an undertaking to the House to do everything possible to expand the cycle tracks as quickly as possible and bring about other safety measures that are long overdue?

Mr Campbell: I concur with the Member's comments about safety, the environment and the health of our citizens. For those reasons, it is obvious that we should promote the cycling initiative across Northern Ireland. Mr Dallat will be aware that we recently opened the cycle/footbridge in Coleraine, which has proved to be very successful. Sustrans is very supportive of the Department in obtaining finance. I will endeavour to do whatever I can to promote cycling for people in Northern Ireland who wish to cycle and to try to persuade those who do not that they should.

Mr Shannon: What finance is available for the extension of Sustrans cycle lanes to rural towns? In Newtownards we have not seen any evidence of these. What criteria are used? In the light of the fact that the European Union is pushing for more people to use cycle lanes, have targets been set and are those targets achievable?

Mr Campbell: Almost £2 million has been secured from the European Union's Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation for the first phase of the national cycle network in Northern Ireland. The Roads Service has contributed approximately £1.25 million from its own funding for that scheme. I urge Mr Shannon and other Members to liaise as closely as possible with Sustrans, which is embarking on the next phase of the cycle network and which would be very keen to hear proposals and suggestions from Members about the extension of the network. The network will be expanded if resources permit, as is the case with everything else. I am sure that Sustrans would welcome enquiries and applications from Members so that it can see where it is possible to extend the cycle network. I encourage Members to take up that offer.

Road Networks

4. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to upgrade the Newry/Armagh and Armagh/Dungannon road network; and to make a statement. (AQO248/01)

Mr Campbell: The roads to which the Member refers form one of the four link corridors in the regional strategic transportation network identified in the regional development strategy. That corridor runs from Newry to Armagh, the A28, and from Armagh to Coleraine via Dungannon and Cookstown, the A29. The western division of the Roads Service is carrying out several minor capital schemes on the route between Dungannon and Swatragh. Some further minor schemes are programmed on the same section.

The section of the route from Newry to Dungannon is generally considered to be of a good standard, so the Roads Service has no current plans to carry out improvement schemes on that section of the link corridor. However, I have recently written to Members to inform them of the consultation process planned for the Roads Service's 10-year forward-planning schedule. The chief executive of the Roads Service will write soon to Members to detail schemes to be considered for inclusion. Several schemes on that link corridor, which include a Dungannon bypass, will be included in the list of schemes to be considered. I hope that Members will remember that I have said "to be considered". In the past, when things were being considered, Members often assumed that they were being done. In the meantime, I assure you that the Roads Service is committed to maintaining the road structure and the running surface of the Newry to Dungannon route and will continue to ensure that it is maintained in a safe and satisfactory condition.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister will be aware that Mid Ulster is in good economic shape with low unemployment levels. However, it requires appropriate transport and infrastructure. Can he set plans in motion to improve the A29 beyond Dungannon, through Cookstown and Moneymore, so that the area can have good links with markets throughout Northern Ireland, especially with the south-west.

Mr Campbell: I outlined the importance that my Department attaches to the A29 and the A28. An examination of the regional development strategy shows that it is an important route. I understand and accept the Member's comment that those routes are essential to the economic well-being of his constituents and people in the surrounding area. I shall endeavour to obtain whatever resources I can to upgrade those corridors, among others.

A8 Larne to Belfast

5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the current

planning status, progress on land vesting and allocation of financial resources to enable the safety improvements at the Millbrook and Antiville junctions on the A8 Larne to Belfast road to commence. (AQO201/01)

Mr Campbell: In lieu of formal planning approval, the statutory procedures for major road schemes of that nature require a detailed environmental assessment of the proposals and the creation of a direction order. In this case, the environmental procedures were completed in December 2000, and the direction order was made on 26 September 2001. That will come into operation on the 9 November 2001, subject to ratification by the Committee for Regional Development and the Assembly.

A notice of intention to make a vesting order to acquire the necessary lands should be published in the local press this month, and, subject to no objections being received, the land could become available early in 2002. Finance for the scheme has already been secured. Therefore, I hope that, subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures, work on the six-month construction contract can begin by the spring of 2002.

3.15 pm

Mr Beggs: That will be very welcome news to the people of Larne who have waited a long time for these junctions to be improved. This part of the A8 is significant in the trans-European network system. It has importance in the regional development strategy and Executive funding. With all this, and a large increase in housing, will the Minister acknowledge that it is essential that this work should progress as soon as possible, given the number of accidents in the area? Will he ensure that it will receive priority funding and that the programme will proceed now that the Executive have made the finance available?

Mr Campbell: I have endeavoured to be as clear as I possibly can. However, in all of these instances there are possibilities for delay, and I have outlined a number of them. Less than two weeks ago the direction order was made. Subject to the ratification of the Regional Development Committee, and the Assembly itself, I am extremely hopeful that that order will come into operation on 9 November.

As the Member noted, funding is available. Notwithstanding the possibilities for delay, I would be extremely surprised if we could not proceed in the timescale to which I have referred.

Mr Neeson: I remind the Minister of the growing number of serious accidents on the A8. If there are objections to the vesting, will that necessitate a public inquiry?

Mr Campbell: I join with others in the House in wishing Mr Neeson all the best in what may be described as his "semi-retirement".

I am aware of the build-up of traffic in the area, and I am also aware of the safety concerns of public representatives and people in the wider community. I am hopeful that we will be in a position to move, provided that there are no objections. However, on some occasions there have been objections as we have gone through the statutory process. Sometimes it has been possible to negotiate with the objector, and the need for the objection has been obviated. I do not want to pre-empt this, but if objections are made we will have to examine the nature and scale of those objections. I am hopeful that none will be raised. If that is the case, I expect that we shall be able to proceed on that basis.

Transport Infrastructure

6. **Mrs Carson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what action has been taken to develop a transport infrastructure in the west of the Province. (AQO205/01)

Mr Campbell: In recent years my Department's Roads Service has completed a number of major road schemes to enhance the roads infrastructure in the west of the Province. Most notably, these schemes have included the A5 Omagh throughpass, stages 2 and 2B, the A509 Aghalane Bridge, the A5 Leckpatrick scheme and the A5 Magheramason scheme. The Roads Service also has plans to undertake a significant number of further major roads schemes in the west of the Province in future years.

As far as public transport in the west of the Province is concerned, my Department's rural transport fund supports 14 rural bus routes and 11 rural community transport partnerships. These services are in addition to the normal Ulsterbus services that run throughout Northern Ireland. My Department is currently preparing a draft 10-year regional transportation strategy for Northern Ireland. It will set out the longer-term strategy for the delivery of transport policy throughout Northern Ireland and provide a strategic framework within which funding decisions on investment in roads and public transport can be taken.

The strategy will fully recognise the importance of accessibility in rural areas and in particular the significant structural maintenance backlog on minor roads in rural areas. The draft strategy is due for completion in the autumn.

Mrs Carson: The Minister mentioned the A5 in the Omagh area, but I am particularly interested in the A4, and much work has been done there. The 'Shaping our Future' document shows the regional transportation infrastructure to mean minimal transport development west of the Bann.

I was amused to hear that a bypass for Dungannon is being considered, although there was no mention of

a bypass for Moy on the A29. It is a notorious bottleneck, and I hope that a feasibility study will be done to alleviate pressure on that particular part. I welcome the Minister's transport policy, and I want to know what has been done about the A29 Moy bypass.

Mr Campbell: I will try to cover roads, public transport and the regional transportation strategy. Mrs Carson raises two specific issues — the Moy bypass and the A4. Several schemes are included in the Road Service's construction programme and the major works preparation poll, and I have mentioned some of them. The improvements to the A4 at Eglisish and Cabragh are further good examples. I will respond to the Member in writing regarding proposals for the Moy bypass and the A4.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Does the Minister agree that we need to act on the matter of bypasses for Cookstown and Magherafelt if we are to have a proper, appropriate and successful transport infrastructure in the west of the Province? They are needed urgently, as that is a major route to the sea and the airport and thus vital to the economy of west of the Province.

Mr Campbell: The short answer is yes. There are several towns in Northern Ireland about which I have received significant representations regarding bypasses, and each of them must be judged on its merits. I do not underestimate the importance of the towns that Dr McCrea mentioned. However, the difficulty lies in the resource implications for each of them.

Members will be aware of the continuous representations that have been made to me about more than a dozen areas, all of which are in need of bypasses. Members will also be aware of the criticism that the Department receives when a bypass has been agreed. However, we will proceed nonetheless. I do not in any way underestimate the economic implications for Cookstown and Magherafelt.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answer, particularly regarding the Eglisish roundabout and Cabragh. Does he accept that in the past the transport infrastructure was severely underfunded in the constituencies in the west, and can he guarantee that he will skew resources in order to make our roads safer, in line with roads in the rest of the Six Counties?

Mr Campbell: I cannot speak for the allocation of resources in former years, let alone decades, but I can speak with some authority on the implications for resources that have been allocated since I became a Minister.

The number of occasions on which I have been west of the Bann to announce schemes — for example, the Newtown Stewart bypass, the Limavady bypass and the Omagh throughpass — or in relation to schemes that

have been completed, should underline my Department's commitment to all of Northern Ireland, not least areas west of the Bann.

Road Network – West Tyrone

7. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of how the recently announced draft Budget proposals will help to improve the road network of West Tyrone. (AQO213/01)

Mr Campbell: The Minister of Finance and Personnel, when he announced his draft Budget for 2002-03 on 25 September, spoke of additional money being allocated to the roads programme. Some £8.79 million of that is to maintain current levels of investment in the country's roads infrastructure. The increase is essentially to avoid reductions in planned service throughout Northern Ireland, including West Tyrone, that would otherwise have been necessary because of additional costs, including the effects of the aggregates tax. For example, it will allow the Roads Service to start work on the Strabane bypass next year, following completion of the statutory procedures. I am also aware of the importance of routes such as the western A5 and the south-western A4, which are key transport corridors to West Tyrone. As I indicated in my recent letter to Members, the Roads Service has identified a number of major works on key corridors for possible inclusion in the 10-year forward planning schedule.

Mr Gibson: Is there sufficient finance available in the draft Budget proposals to complete the bypass of Omagh, which is a much more significant town than Dungannon, Magherafelt or Cookstown?

Mr Campbell: I will decline the Member's offer to elaborate on the relevant importance of the major towns in or beyond his constituency. Subject to the successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures, and the availability of funds, it is hoped to start work on a number of schemes — and the Omagh throughpass is among them — in early 2003. The cost would be approximately £5 million.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister agree that roads investment is vital to an area such as West Tyrone, which is solely dependent on a road network for all its transport needs? Does he accept that the accumulated roads maintenance backlog has had a detrimental effect on the condition of those roads? Does he accept that it is very difficult to attract inward investment or promote more locally based economic development, given that a 40-tonne lorry cannot travel above 40 miles per hour anywhere in my constituency? We do not have one mile of dual carriageway or motorway in West Tyrone.

Mr Campbell: I accept the importance of an infrastructure that will allow the passage of passenger

and freight vehicles freely though many of our towns in Northern Ireland. I accept, and take note, that economic development can be hindered as a result of the infrastructure not being provided. We come back to the chestnut of sufficient funds being available to provide that necessary infrastructure. I will, of course, make every application possible to secure those resources.

Mr Hussey: The Minister will realise that the A5 is a route of major importance to those of us who live in West Tyrone, and it is a trans-European network route. On 2 October, the European Commission discussed transport and some proposals for the modification of the criteria used in the funding arrangements for trans-European network routes, taking account of eight new such routes and of European enlargement. Can the Minister assure the House that those decisions will have no negative impact on the long-term future improvement and development of the route, despite the problems of additionality, and that they will have no negative impact on the overall 10-year plan?

3.30 pm

Mr Campbell: Rather than respond on the hoof, I will reply to the Member specifically in writing.

Public Access to Information and Services

8. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the steps he has taken to ensure and assess public access to information and to services provided by the authority as required by schedule 9 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and to make a statement. (AQO244/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's equality scheme contains a commitment to the highest level of inclusivity in the provision of its information and services. The Department has completed an audit to establish the current provision of information on services accessible to section 75 groups. We are now building on the evidence gained through this exercise to produce good practice guidelines for making information more accessible. These are being developed in consultation with relevant groups. I have also ensured that effective arrangements are being put in place for monitoring access to information and services in order to ensure equality of opportunity.

Ms Lewsley: It is important that the public should know all the transactions of any Department and that they should be open and transparent. What is the Minister's Department doing to ensure that people know that this information is accessible?

Mr Campbell: I have referred to some of the arrangements that have been put in place. I will write to the Member to elaborate on those.

I look forward to the day when I, or some of my Colleagues, will be able to return to this House to make positive statements and more beneficial announcements for the people of Northern Ireland. I will work for the context in which we can do that, and I hope that it will have acceptance and support in my community as well.

ENVIRONMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: Question 5, in the name of Mr Fee, has been transferred to the Minister for Regional Development and will receive a written answer. Question 16, in the name of Mr Close, has been transferred to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and will receive a written answer.

New Developments: Effects on Infrastructure

1. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment in relation to the effects which new developments in areas such as Carryduff are having on the road infrastructure such as the Saintfield Road. (AQO190/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster):

The Planning Service is guided on these matters by the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, which is consulted during the preparation of the development plans that provide the framework for determining planning applications. It is also consulted on relevant planning applications.

Many problems highlighted by the Roads Service in relation to planning applications are of a detailed nature and are often resolved by negotiation. However, major development schemes such as those currently under consideration in Carryduff, which generate substantial traffic, have wider traffic implications. In such cases, traffic impact assessments are required from the applicant to assess whether the road network can accommodate the development and, if not, what remedial measures are required. Advice given by Roads Service is an important factor in determining planning applications and in whether lands are zoned for development in the relevant plans.

Mr M Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the problems associated with Carryduff are a direct result of the lack of a Castlereagh area plan, despite many promises in previous years that one would be forthcoming? Can the Minister give an assurance that a strategic area plan in relation to Castlereagh will be accorded the proper status within the Belfast metropolitan area plan?

Mr Foster: I can assure the Member that all situations are taken on their own merits, and it will be considered. My Department is currently considering three major

planning applications for approximately 1,100 dwellings and associated facilities on green belt lands in the Carryduff area. The demand is great: it is not easy to contend.

My Department has asked the Planning Appeals Commission to convene a public inquiry into those applications. That is programmed to take place in two stages early next year. The Member referred to the Belfast metropolitan plan, which is currently being considered, and every opportunity will be given for respective areas to put in their requirements and to be examined and assessed.

Lord Kilclooney: Is the Minister aware that there is increasing anxiety in the Carryduff area about the major planning applications to which he has referred? It has been standing room only at public meetings in the Lough Moss Centre, as people express their opposition to schemes that do not have the proper infrastructure or social and community facilities. Is he aware that in Carryduff, and in other areas of Northern Ireland, people are criticising the Planning Service for its failure to take their opinions into account? Will the Minister assure the House that no major schemes will be approved until an area plan for Carryduff is created?

Mr Foster: The recently published regional development strategy indicates that significant planned expansion of seven small towns in the Belfast metropolitan area, including Carryduff, is required to meet anticipated housing growth. Undoubtedly, there is great demand. To ensure that balanced and complete communities are created with the necessary services and infrastructure, including access to public transport services, some towns may need major improvements to their transport infrastructure.

My Department is preparing a Belfast metropolitan area plan, which will consider the scale and location of new housing development in Carryduff. My Department also intends to publish an issues paper towards the end of the year, which will facilitate public discussion of those matters. Having said that, the Department takes into consideration all aspects of all applications, and it does not ignore difficulties. They are taken into consideration, and they are fully assessed.

Waste Management

2. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions have been initiated through the North/South Ministerial Council on developing a common approach to waste management. (AQO193/01)

Mr Foster: I refer the Member to the statements I made to the Assembly on 12 March 2001 and 24 September 2001, following meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council on 23 February 2001 and 15 June 2001 respectively. Those statements include details of

North/South Ministerial Council discussions on the subject of waste management in a cross-border context.

The Assembly Official Reports for 12 March and 24 September contain transcripts of the statements. At those meetings, Ministers from both Administrations agreed that there was scope for improved waste management in a cross-border context. It was further agreed that initial work should focus on promoting recycling and on developing markets in manufacturing opportunities for recycled goods and materials.

Ministers have asked their respective officials to work together to develop proposals for a structured approach to the establishment of a joint market development programme. The Council also agreed that officials should jointly give consideration to a cross-border proposal to encourage community-based recycling.

In addition, Ministers noted the success of the recovery scheme for foreign plastics in operation in the Republic of Ireland. It was agreed that my Department, in discussion with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, would assess the desirability of a complementary initiative in Northern Ireland.

Mr M Murphy: I thank the Minister for his constructive statement. Given the recent decision by the British Government to start production at the MOX plant in Sellafield, can the Minister tell us what contacts he has initiated with his Southern counterparts, whether he has initiated any joint action and if he will make a statement? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Foster: Discharges from the Sellafield plant are regulated by the Environment Service in England and Wales. My Department and I do not have any direct jurisdiction. Sellafield has been agreed to as an issue for consideration by the environment sector of the British-Irish Council, and it would not be appropriate for the subject to be discussed on a North/South basis alone.

The next meeting of the environment sector of the British-Irish Council (BIC) has not yet been arranged. This is a matter for the Whitehall Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). DEFRA chairs the environment sector of the British-Irish Council and provides a secretariat. The Member referred to the MOX plant omissions. DEFRA has estimated that the radioactivity in the gaseous discharge from the MOX plant will contribute to less than 1% of the total activity discharged annually from the Sellafield site.

I am aware that people have concerns. Radioactivity and the liquid effluent would contribute about one ten thousandth of 1% of the total activity discharged from the site in liquid form. At these levels, it is expected that the most exposed members of the public would receive around 0.002 microsieverts per year from the operation of the MOX plant. At this rate,

DEFRA estimates that it would take 10,000 years to get the same exposure as in a single chest X-ray.

Mr Kane: Can the Minister inform the House if such discussions have included a resumption of dumping of specified risk material from the Republic of Ireland at Aughnacloy landfill site?

Mr Foster: Yes, we have been in discussion about those aspects, and I assure the Member that every aspect to which he has referred has been taken into consideration and will be watched very closely.

Mr McGrady: I am very disappointed with the Minister's reply to Mr Murphy about the British licensing of the MOX plant. Is the Minister aware that this is in direct contravention of the Oslo/Paris Commission (OSPAR) agreement entered into by the two Governments and other European Governments and, therefore, should be, in view of the concerns of the people in Northern Ireland and the South of Ireland, and particularly those on the east coast, a matter that should be addressed by the North/South Ministerial Council?

The Minister knows that there is an intention to increase the discharge of radioactive toxic waste into the Irish Sea and that there is to be enhanced transportation of very dangerous radioactive material up and down the Irish Sea. It is a matter of concern for this island and many other islands and Governments in western Europe, and it should be a matter of urgency for the North/South Ministerial Council.

Mr Foster: I am aware that Mr McGrady and others are very concerned about the Sellafield plant. Mr McGrady has questioned me several times before, and I have given him answers on the situation. I impress upon him that we attach great significance to these issues, and I assure him that we do not ignore them.

Statistics show that people in Northern Ireland receive on average 2,500 microsieverts of radiation a year from all natural and artificial sources. Of that, 50% is due to exposure to radon at home, and 12% is as a result of medical exposure. Nuclear discharges account for less than 0.1%. In the assessments, which are carried out periodically, we have not found any great sense of danger in so far as the waters of the Irish Sea are concerned.

Waste Management Strategy

3. **Mr Poots** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail progress to date on developing the waste management strategy. (AQO247/01)

Mr Foster: The Northern Ireland Waste Management Strategy was published by my Department in March 2000. Its main aim is to achieve sustainable waste management through the reduction, re-cycling and

recovery of waste. A key requirement for the strategy is the development by district councils of waste management plans, showing how they propose to meet the targets in the strategy and provide the strategic network of waste management facilities that will be needed.

The strategy set a deadline of the end of June 2001 for the submission to my Department of final draft plans following public consultation. All three council partnership groups submitted draft plans to my Department before the end of June. However, these were pre-consultation rather than final drafts.

My officials have recently met with representatives of the three groups and provided information to assist them to finalise the draft plans for public consultation. My Department has also provided a workshop to assist councils to identify the best practicable environmental option in their plans.

Completion of those plans and the establishment of the physical infrastructure needed to meet the strategy's objectives and targets will be central to its success.

3.45 pm

The Department of the Environment recently consulted on a draft planning policy statement that was concerned with planning policies for the development of waste management facilities. The Department has also funded a further study of waste arisings in Northern Ireland. The results will assist councils in making their decisions on waste management.

An important part of the machinery to deliver the strategy was the establishment of the Waste Management Advisory Board. The board held its inaugural meeting on 6 June 2001. I am confident that it will play a key role in the guiding, monitoring and progression of the strategy.

Mr Poots: Given that the three sub-regional waste management strategies reflect the key objectives of the Northern Ireland waste management strategy, why has the Department of the Environment delayed its identification of generic education and public awareness programmes to support the implementation of the district council waste strategies. As a consequence, £1 million of funding to support the local strategies' implementation has been surrendered. What steps has the Department of the Environment taken to provide training and innovative and meaningful consultation mechanisms for local government officers involved in the development of district council waste management plans?

Mr Foster: I do not fully understand the Member's question. I think that Mr Poots is referring to the publication of details about the plans and the education processes that there can be. Madam Deputy Speaker, is that correct?

Mr Poots: I am aware that the Department of the Environment handed back £1 million. Why did the

Department not proceed with the education plans at an early stage and bring the public on board with the waste management strategy?

Mr Foster: Some councils did not make representations to the Department of the Environment until June 2001, and the Department received only consultative documents rather than draft plans. That held back the Department. There was £3.5 million set aside, but the Department had to return £1 million. However, I assure the Member that that does not mean that the Department will treat the issue any less seriously.

The Department hopes to push the education plans when the other plans go out, because if one issue is put in front of another it is forgotten about and it loses its impact. That is why the education plans are not running now. However, they will run concurrently with the other plans.

Ms Lewsley: My question follows on from Mr Poots's question. Will there be adequate funding and help for the consultation and education programmes as well as for their practical implementation?

Mr Foster: The Department of the Environment tries to obtain as much funds as are necessary. In advance of the plans' completion, the Department has sought the views of district councils and the Waste Management Advisory Board on immediate expenditure needs. In this financial year, the Department will invest £400,000 on extending the Great Britain waste and resource action programme (WRAP) in Northern Ireland in order to assist the creation of a stable and efficient market for recycled materials and products. To complete waste data studies costs a further £400,000, and £500,000 will be invested in a public awareness and education programme to coincide with the public consultation of district council plans.

Departmental officials are also looking at the scope for further assistance to councils on top of the £130,000 that has already been provided to help complete their plans and to set up pilot schemes. The indicative allocation for waste management in the 2002-03 draft Budget is £7 million.

Mr K Robinson: The Minister has upstaged me in stating the figure of £7 million that his Department seeks for 2002-03. Will he tell the House at what areas that welcome extra money will be targeted?

Mr Foster: Detailed decisions on the distribution of the funds have not yet been made and will depend on progress on the development, agreement and implementation of district council waste management plans, which the Department awaits.

Environment Action Programme

4. **Mr Carson** asked the Minister of the Environment to give his assessment of the impact that the sixth

Environment Action Programme of the European Community 2001-10 is likely to have on Northern Ireland.
(AQO204/01)

Mr Foster: The EU Commission's proposals for a sixth Environment Action Programme, first circulated to Members for comment last January, will soon go before the European Parliament for Second Reading. Therefore, it is likely to be some time before the content of the programme is finalised. The UK is broadly supportive of the Commission's proposals, and I have endorsed that line.

The programme includes a more vigorous approach to implementing existing environmental policy, integrating environmental objectives into social and economic policies and developing more sustainable production and consumption patterns. That approach would undoubtedly provide challenges for Northern Ireland as well as for other parts of the UK and other member states.

However, much of what the Executive have initiated on the environment since devolution means that Northern Ireland should be well placed to respond to those challenges. That includes the commitments to sustainable development and environmental protection set out in the Programme for Government as well as the substantial increases in resources provided for environmental protection in the Budgets for 2001-02 and 2002-03. The proposals in the sixth programme identify a number of priority action areas at European level. Those largely coincide with environmental priorities on both GB and Northern Ireland levels.

Mrs Carson: The Environment Action Programme identifies five key approaches, one of which is to integrate environmental concerns into all relevant policy areas. How does the Minister envisage his Department integrating those environmental concerns into the relevant policy areas?

Mr Foster: The Environment Action Programme seeks to deepen the integration further. In order to effect that, in the next few weeks a consultation paper will be published on a draft sustainable development strategy.

The consultation paper will seek views on the implementation framework for sustainable development. Simultaneously, that will achieve the four objectives of sustainable development: social progress, which recognises the needs for everyone; effective protection of the environment; prudent use of natural resources; and maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment. In this way environmental objectives will be integrated with social and economic gains. I assure the Member that the consultation paper will look at those issues and that the Department will await representations.

Provision of Residential Developments

6. **Ms Armitage** asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any new plans to promote and provide

quality and affordable residential developments for all and, in particular, for first-time home buyers.
(AQO215/01)

Mr Foster: Through the development plan process my Department has responsibility for zoning land to provide for housing growth anticipated by the regional development strategy. The Minister for Social Development advises me that increasingly developers recognise the commercial potential of providing new housing development within co-ownership price levels, and that in redevelopment areas houses are being set aside for co-ownership in a drive to promote sustainable mixed tenure estates. The regional development strategy recently published by the Department for Regional Development sets as policy a requirement to provide a housing choice by achieving a mix of housing tenures and house types, to promote home ownership and generally affordable housing and to provide social housing targeted to meet identified housing needs.

The strategy sets targets for achieving brownfield housing development through the development plan process. At my specific request — and progress is monitored against those targets — account will be taken of the need for the planning system to make provision for affordable housing particularly, but not exclusively, for first-time buyers and those on lower incomes.

With regard to quality, in June 2001 the Department published planning policy statement 7: 'Quality Residential Environments'. That sets out my Department's planning policies for achieving quality in new residential developments and advises on the treatment of that issue in development plans.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr D McClelland] in the Chair)

Ms Armitage: Can the Minister tell the House how long it will take for his policy to have any effect?

In many areas in Northern Ireland, the problem of second home owners has resulted in a situation in which there is no settled community. School numbers are in decline and church numbers have dropped. In one area in my constituency, over 70% of homes are empty for approximately 42 weeks of the year. As a result, shops have closed, and the post office no longer exists. Is the Minister content that his efforts will overturn this situation? If so, how long does he envisage it will take? I hope that the Minister does not intend to drag his feet any longer over this important matter.

Mr Foster: I am aware of Ms Armitage's concerns about second homes in her constituency. The demand is great at the moment, and it is not easy to contend with. The recently published regional development strategy indicates that, in future, development plans will identify settlements and areas under pressure from second homes. The development plans will deliver a set of criteria which allow for evaluation, in consultation

with local residents, of the capacity of a small town or village to absorb new second home development. The development plan process will take account of such matters as scale, character and setting. Consideration can be given if local planning policies are needed and an assessment made if there is a need to zone additional lands to ensure local supply of affordable housing.

As for dragging my feet — I have been 17 or 18 months in this post, and I do not accept that I have been dragging my feet. A magic wand cannot be waved overnight to solve the problem, much as I would like that.

Rev Dr William McCrea: It is important to provide and promote quality in affordable residential developments for all, particularly for first-time home buyers. One of the major problems in my constituency of Mid-Ulster is that of developers who build homes without planning permission. Action should be taken by the Department to make it an offence to build without first having planning permission. The law should apply equally to all buyers, whether they are individuals or big companies.

Mr Foster: I am aware of the Member's point in relation to enforcement. We are working on the planning amendment Bill, which is aimed at strengthening the Department's existing enforcement powers and giving primacy to development plans in deciding planning applications. The opportunity is also being taken to introduce some other provisions to strengthen and improve the planning system in Northern Ireland.

For a long time we were short on resources, both financially and in personnel, but I stress that the problem is not being ignored.

Recycling

7. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his plans to promote the recycling of household and industrial waste; and to make a statement.

(AQO198/01)

9. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of the Environment to indicate what measures he has in place and what measures he plans to put in place to recycle waste products from industrial processes. (AQO202/01)

Mr Foster: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission I will answer Questions 7 and 9 together.

My Department's policy on the promotion of recycling of waste is set out in the waste management strategy for Northern Ireland, published in March 2000. One of the aims of the strategy is to move waste management practices towards increased reuse, recycling and recovery for all waste streams, including household and industrial waste. The strategy sets out challenging targets for recovery and recycling, and for reductions in the quantity of industrial and commercial waste and

biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill. District councils are working to finalise comprehensive waste management plans. One of the aims of these plans is to ensure that there are adequate facilities for the recycling and recovery of waste to meet the targets set out in the strategy. These draft plans will be subject to public consultation. In order to help promote an informed public debate my Department will mount public awareness and education campaigns, which will highlight the need for recycling. These campaigns will run in parallel with the public consultation stage of the draft plans.

4.00 pm

The main barriers to the expansion of recycling here are a shortage of local markets for recycled products and a lack of reprocessing infrastructure. The recently established Waste Management Advisory Board, which I referred to in a previous answer, will oversee the introduction and development of a market development programme to stimulate demand for recycled materials and products.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the answer in response to question three, which was also relevant. Is he not concerned that local councils are not big enough to handle the problem? There is a need for a regional strategy that is comprehensive and seamless. He mentioned the advisory board, which is welcome, but something with more teeth is necessary. Perhaps a recycling agency would work. The Minister said that there was no market for products. Could he talk to his colleague in Roads Service —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr McDonnell, there were three questions in there.

Dr McDonnell: Recycled concrete, aggregates and hard core should be used. I am told that the biggest problem concerns the market for the products.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you might not have time to respond, but you can reply in writing.

Mr Foster: I will reply now. I am aware of the recycling problem. It involves a long, arduous programme of education. The primary target of the waste management strategy is to recover 25% of household waste by 2005 and 40% of household waste by 2010, of which 25% will be for recycling and composting. It is a big issue. It is not going unnoticed; we are working on it and we are working on cross-border issues as well.

EXCLUSION OF SINN FÉIN

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly resolves that the political party Sinn Féin does not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful and democratic means. — [Mr Trimble.]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That in consequence of the failure of the Provisional IRA to offer up its illegal weaponry for destruction; the Republican Movement's continuing terrorist threat, and active pursuit, of terrorist outrages to secure its aims; the maintenance by the IRA of an active terrorist organisation; the growing number of cases of IRA involvement in terrorist activity in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and across the globe; the fact that the Provisional IRA is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin; and the involvement and dominance of members of Sinn Féin in the decision-making "Army Council" of the Provisional IRA, this Assembly resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy its confidence because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means, and, further, in accordance with Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, determines that members of Sinn Féin shall be excluded from holding office as Ministers for a period of 12 months from the date of this resolution. — [Rev Dr Ian Paisley.]

Mr P Robinson: During the first few hours of this debate, I noted that several Members spoke in acrimonious tones. The word "hypocrisy" seemed to feature in everyone's speech. I look at this debate more positively than some who have spoken. I welcome Mr Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party to this debate on the exclusion motion. My Colleagues are well used to such things — they have been through them on several occasions.

On the first occasion, Ulster Unionist Party Members decided to lock themselves in their Glengall Street office. The whiff of the debate might have been too strong for them. On the second occasion, they ventured into Stormont although they locked themselves in their rooms. Therefore, it is real progress to have them here for an exclusion debate. As Mr Mallon said, they used to consider such a debate to be a stunt; Mr Trimble now sees it as a clever tactical move, replete with moral efficacy, and that must be progress for Unionism.

There are those who say that it is hypocritical of Mr Trimble to withdraw his Ministers, or to contemplate doing so, having chided the Democratic Unionist Party for many months, if not years, for taking up what he described as an unacceptable position. I recall that when Nigel Dodds and I first went into ministerial office, he referred to us as rogue Ministers. Members may say that that is hypocritical of Mr Trimble, but I see it as progress. Just because someone got it wrong in the past, it does not mean that he must get it wrong in the future. I welcome the fact that he has taken the DUP line on exclusion and withdrawal. He may want to take it a step further and recognise that immediate resignations are required.

There are also those who consider a joint Ulster Unionist/PUP motion to be hypocritical. How, they argue, can the UUP table a motion to exclude IRA/Sinn Féin while in harness with the PUP? Well, it gives us an opportunity to vote twice for the exclusion of IRA/Sinn Féin, and we should not miss any opportunity to exclude terrorists from Government.

The main issue is the exclusion from the Government of Northern Ireland of a terrorist group still wedded to active terrorism. It is not a new issue for debate — there are no new factors. In the debate on 18 September, I outlined in detail the breaches of the so-called ceasefire and the contraventions of the principle of exclusive commitment to peaceful and democratic means. I showed that the Provisional IRA had carried out 170 punishment shootings during the period of its so-called ceasefire. On top of that, I said that it had been involved in 250 paramilitary beatings, in robberies, in excluding people from Northern Ireland, in gunrunning from Florida, in training and in equipping itself with new expertise in bomb warfare in the jungles of Colombia, as well as multiple murders. The IRA has murdered Jim Guiney, Robert Dougan, Brendan Campbell, Andrew Kearney, Eamon Collins, Brendan Fegan, Paul Downey, Charles Bennett, Joe O'Connor, Christopher O'Kane and Paul Daly. That organisation is on ceasefire and is supposed to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

We have had the hypocrisy — there is that word again, Mr Deputy Speaker — of the leader of IRA/Sinn Féin saying in the Assembly today that no reason had been given for excluding it from Government. Are not those names good reasons why it should be excluded from Government? IRA/Sinn Féin is still tied in to active terrorism and has not given it up. As Mr Adams said himself, the IRA "has not gone away, you know." It is not necessary to argue too much of a case that the Provisional IRA, with its political wing, Sinn Féin, is in breach of any requirement to be committed to peaceful and democratic means. It has used its weaponry to extract concessions and intends to continue to do so.

We have had the nauseating spectacle of Sinn Féin/IRA's attempt to dissociate itself from terrorism because, today, there is an acceptance throughout the world that those who are involved in terrorism should be shunned. IRA/Sinn Féin attempts to distance itself by saying that there is some distinction to be drawn between the violence that it was engaged in and the violence that we saw in New York and Washington. Indeed, at the Sinn Féin conference, the Member for North Belfast said that the IRA was not a terrorist organisation:

"When I went to war against the British because they were at war with the occupied section of my people, I didn't think it was immoral. On the contrary, I thought we had a moral right. But I have no hesitation in condemning what happened in America

because hijackers took civilians in aeroplanes and crashed into other innocent people in the towers and the Pentagon. Those were quite obviously acts of terrorism.”

He cannot condemn the bombing of the World Trade Centre out of one side of his mouth and then decree that virtue and merit should be ascribed to the bombing of Canary Wharf, the City of London, Enniskillen, La Mon or any of the other acts of terrorism in which the IRA has been engaged. The leader of IRA/Sinn Féin suggests that the heroes of Enniskillen and La Mon are brave men. The world rightly condemns terrorism, of which the IRA is an integral part.

The road is running out for the IRA. The world has changed since 11 September, and its members know it. They will now consider trying to placate world opinion by some token act of decommissioning. The two dumps with their obsolete weaponry have already been compromised. Perhaps they will consider concreting over them. That will not satisfy Unionist public opinion, nor will it satisfy world opinion. To be meaningful and credible, decommissioning must be complete and publicly verifiable. Moreover, it will necessitate a programme for dismantling the IRA’s paramilitary machine, which in every aspect is still active.

The SDLP has coasted through the debate by telling the Ulster Unionists, Sinn Féin and the DUP that they are wrong, without focusing on its own behaviour. The SDLP could keep the Assembly operating, but I know that it will instead maintain its link with IRA/Sinn Féin. Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, it will not give the terrorists up. However, the SDLP must choose between Taliban tactics or side with those who will not accept terrorist rule.

The Prime Minister, Mr Blair, and President Bush, at the start of the present campaign, which affects the whole world, said that they would invite nations to choose to be with or against the terrorists. They asked “Whose side are you on?” Today, in Northern Ireland, the same question is posed in this Chamber. When we go into the Lobbies, we will see who votes for the terrorists and who votes against them.

Dr Farren: We are debating a motion that should never have come before the House. Those of us who signed the Good Friday Agreement recognised that it required more than signatures to end conflict and to facilitate the development of new political partnerships. Mutual trust remained to be built, not just by working the new institutions but by delivering on all the confidence-building measures prescribed by the agreement, including decommissioning. Mutual trust is clearly not yet sufficiently present among all the pro-agreement parties, and especially not between Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party. Until it is, the agreement’s promise will be only fitfully realised and its very continuation endangered.

Removing the only context in which the agreement can submit considerably increases the risk of its collapse. For 30 years, Sinn Féin supported the IRA’s campaign of violence. Thousands of its victims were from the Protestant, Unionist community. The need for Sinn Féin and the whole Provisional movement to build confidence in its commitment to the Good Friday Agreement was therefore an inescapable and profound challenge. Building that confidence had to mean more than participation — no matter how enthusiastic and committed — in the institutions alongside Unionist representatives. Participation accompanied by mere promises on decommissioning does not generate sufficient confidence that the IRA really intends to put its arms permanently beyond use. I accept that the inspection of arms dumps has not been unhelpful, but promises to the international commission have not been followed through by practical steps towards putting arms permanently and verifiably beyond use.

4.15 pm

Do the IRA and Sinn Féin not see that a minimalist and apparently reluctant approach to decommissioning is seriously undermining pro-agreement Unionist confidence in Sinn Féin’s commitment to the agreement? It is also, perhaps, undermining the agreement itself. I cannot believe that they do not see that. To judge by some things that were said and by some things that were done, I am forced to believe that some of them do not care. It is a strange position for a movement that claims that its ultimate objective is to unite the people of the island.

It is not just Unionist confidence that Sinn Féin and the IRA are required to encourage. The wider Nationalist family in Ireland, which also suffered greatly during the 30 years, from IRA and Loyalist violence, and which overwhelmingly opposed politically motivated violence is just as entitled to know whether the Provisional movement is fully committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means.

As much as anyone who has been involved in politics in Northern Ireland, I recognised that putting 30 years of violence behind us was never going to be easy or swift, no matter how widespread the support. People in both communities needed convincing both by their own leaders’ words and by the words and deeds of leaders in the other community. Resolute action to have all aspects of the agreement gradually implemented in parallel was required. A willingness to take account of each other’s difficulties, as well as one’s own, was required. Perhaps, Martin McGuinness’s words at his party’s Ard-Fheis last week about how Unionist concerns need attention can be welcomed as a shift in that direction.

The UUP and other Unionists, just as much as Sinn Féin, should have realised the need to take others’

difficulties and perceptions into account. Prevarication in the early months of the Assembly over the Executive and the North/South Ministerial Council and, more recently, sanctions against Ministers' attendance at North/South meetings have raised doubts about the depth of their commitment to the political process and the Good Friday Agreement. Loyalist paramilitaries claiming to support the agreement should also have realised and acted on the requirements to build trust, just as much as the IRA. Their re-engagement in violence has been even greater than the IRA's, and it has stretched the meaning of being on ceasefire beyond belief. Is the PUP's support for the exclusion motion to be taken as a signal that the Loyalist paramilitaries who are associated with that party are, at last, prepared to commence actual decommissioning? If so, the PUP's support for the motion, in one sense, can be taken as a welcome signal. If not, the sincerity of its support for the motion is seriously open to question.

I recognise that the UUP agreed to enter the Executive — not once, but twice — following IRA promises on decommissioning. As a result, together with Ministers from my party and Sinn Féin, UUP Ministers have demonstrated what can be done for the people of Northern Ireland when we combine our political resources. Last week, I addressed the House with Sir Reg Empey on the threats hanging over hundreds of workers in the aerospace industry. This week, I am due to engage with Sir Reg and Mr Morrow on the economic development of west Belfast and the Shankill. I am engaged with Ministers de Brún and McGuinness in dealing with drugs and alcohol abuse, especially among the young. I make those points to illustrate the positive work that the Executive and the Assembly are doing. We should work together to address the problems that affect all the people of Northern Ireland. However, to sustain our efforts, we need more trust and confidence between pro-agreement parties.

We are on the brink of another of those critical moments that have plagued the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. The SDLP remains convinced that the agreement, with all its checks and balances — constitutional and political — together with its human rights, policing and justice agendas is the only basis upon which lasting peace and stability can be achieved. What is needed, even at this late stage, is a political breathing space that would help to cement the agreement. That would strengthen, not lose or endanger, the emerging partnerships. Through their past actions and their intentions over the next few days, the Unionist leadership, together with Sinn Féin, are denying the process the space that it requires.

Mr Leslie: As someone who has supported the agreement through thick and thin, I know a bit about taking political risks. I take no pleasure from the fact that we find ourselves forced to table this motion.

However, I see no alternative. I remind the House that the mechanism that is reflected in our motion was envisaged in the agreement and, therefore, in the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

There were — and still are — three things that the Republican movement could do to demonstrate its good faith in the implementation of the agreement: decommissioning; saying that what it calls “the war” is over; and ending the violence. Curiously, ending the violence perhaps receives the least attention. Although it appears from the evidence of recent years that the Republican movement has given up fighting the Army and the police — a contest in which it could never get more than a draw — it has certainly not given up terrorising its own community; nor have certain Loyalist elements. When it suits them, Republicans and Loyalists terrorise the interface to make one side stir up the other. Nowhere would an end to violence be more welcome than in those paramilitary fiefdoms. Unfortunately, those fiefdoms seem to have expanded over the past five or six years.

The Republican intimidation and terror machine was at its most visible during the recent election campaign. In ‘The Irish News’ on 5 June 2001, Ms Rodgers, who was the SDLP candidate in West Tyrone, said that she had received a warm reception from most people in West Tyrone, but that

“there are some Sinn Féin supporters who are engaged in a sinister and systematic campaign of abuse and intimidation against me and my election workers”.

That is a disgraceful situation in a democracy. When that election was over, Ms Rodgers said that she did not want to make a fuss. Had that intimidation come from part of the Unionist community, we would still be hearing the fuss. There is no doubt that it suits Sinn Féin to undermine the electoral process, but it does nothing but harm to the SDLP and the institutions that are elected through that process. I sometimes wonder whether the SDLP is really the voice of moderate Nationalism — the voice of the community that is having to live under the jackboot of nightly terrorism from the Republican machine.

For clear language on the subject, I turn south of the border to Mr Quinn, the leader of the Irish Labour Party, who made some pertinent comments at his party conference. He said that

“To be a Republican is to believe in the sovereignty of the people. But these people are not true Republicans. For three years, they have refused to comply with the mandate explicitly voted for by the people of the whole island, north and south. That mandate was to put arms beyond use.”

He went on to say:

“it's time... to stop peddling the lie, that the putting of arms beyond use is some kind of British or Unionist diktat. It is a direct order from the Irish people, no more and no less.”

On occasion, we hear similar language from Mr Mallon. I have a question for Mr Mallon and his party. If a direct order of this kind is disobeyed, what action follows the words? Mr Bush and Mr Blair made direct demands of the Taliban regime. When they were not obeyed, that regime got the answer — in fact, just the beginning of the answer — yesterday. It is just as well for the IRA and the Irish Republic that we are dealing with this issue entirely through the constitutional mechanisms available to us, and not by more drastic means.

The SDLP could have won considerable political advantage by distinguishing itself from Sinn Féin. A consistently robust attitude towards intimidation by the IRA and towards its failure to decommission would be an obvious way to express that distinction, and I am surprised that the SDLP rarely seems to adopt such an attitude. The SDLP could also point out that terrorism has contributed nothing towards the realisation of the dream of a united Ireland. Indeed, it has made that possibility more remote than ever. Those are powerful arguments but for some reason, they are not being properly made.

The d'Hondt system was used to form the Executive. The system was not designed for that purpose; it was designed for use in the formation of Committees. The d'Hondt system, when used in the formation of an Executive, creates an unusual and distorted system of government. It was employed mainly to accommodate the Republican movement. If Republicans are not going to fulfil their obligations on decommissioning and non-violence, there is no need to persist with those distortions. That, however, does not mean moving away from an inclusive system of government. It means drawing a distinction between a fully inclusive system that includes terrorist organisations and an inclusive system that does not include those terrorist organisations.

The appointments to the Policing Board have already created a precedent for that situation, and I warmly welcome the SDLP's appointments to that board. I believe — I suspect that the SDLP believes — that, in due course, Sinn Féin will make appointments to the board. I would like to believe that, in due course, Sinn Féin will do what is necessary for its representatives to become bona fide members of the Executive. However, as Mr Attwood said a few weeks ago, without some use of the stick, how are we going to persuade Sinn Féin to do that? The precedent of the Policing Board shows the correct course to follow as we seek decommissioning and non-violence. In the interim, a price must be paid by those who do not comply with the will of the vast majority of the people.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants to work in an inclusive system, and we find it offensive to be accused of having any degree of equivocation on that score. My Colleagues and I have worked assiduously in every part, and through every mechanism, of the Assembly to

demonstrate our commitment to inclusiveness. We have worked companionably and constructively with all parties, and we have shared information and ideas with a view to providing good and fair governance for all the people of Northern Ireland.

It has been said that the IRA will not do anything under pressure. It certainly does not do anything when it is not under pressure. Each time proper pressure is applied, we start to see some sort of movement in the Republican machine. Once again, we must apply pressure. The routine is becoming wearisome, but that is what we must do. Otherwise, we will continue to have a situation in which paramilitaries decide what peace is and in which the Provos say that there will be no peace if they have to give up their guns.

We must ask again what sort of society we want to live in. Is it to be a society that recognises and values diversity, and in which equality means equality of respect and opportunity, and freedom means the ability to live in peace with others? Or is it to be a society based on ideas peddled by the Republican movement, in which diversity is seen as a threat, the only law is Provo law, equality means joint authority and freedom has been perverted to mean a hatred of all things British?

That is the sort of society in which all too many people find themselves living in a climate of fear in those Republican ghettos.

In 1998, the people of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland decided which road they wished to travel. The Republican movement is still standing at the crossroads, where we should leave it while it dithers about its next step forward. We should proceed without the Republican movement.

4.30 pm

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Whatever the purpose of the motion, I have no doubt that it has little or nothing to do with achieving that which it purports to seek. In fact, the movers of both motions know that none of this will result in Sinn Féin's expulsion from the Executive. The more that the Ulster Unionist Party protests that its motivation to collapse the political institutions is to force the IRA into an act of decommissioning, the more obvious its real intentions become.

The Ulster Unionist Party now differs only tactically from the DUP and from those Unionist paramilitaries engaged in daily gun and bomb attacks. In fact, today's motion is part and parcel of a deeply rooted resistance within Unionism to political change and to the effective delivery of the equality agenda. We saw that at the time of the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement when almost 50% of Unionism voted to reject the peace process. We see that every day in the

despicable blockade of schoolchildren on the Ardoyne Road.

I listened with disbelief as Mr Trimble and other Unionist spokespersons attempted to rationalise the reality of naked Unionist bigotry and sectarianism. A recent enduring image was created when Mr Trimble walked into the negotiations in September 1997 — in what he termed a show of Unionist unity — shoulder to shoulder with the political representatives of the UDA, the UFF, the Red Hand Defenders and the UVF. On entering Castle Buildings, David Trimble asserted that they would not negotiate with Sinn Féin but would achieve my party's expulsion. He did not succeed then, and he will not succeed now. Four years later, David Trimble is still fascinated and fixated by Sinn Féin; four years later, his authority and his ability to lead his community and his party is eroded. However, he still clings to the failed and foolish notion that to exclude the largest non-Unionist party in the North will somehow solve Unionism's problems.

I am obliged to point out that Sinn Féin represents more than 21% of the electorate — one in five of the people who live here. I must ask whether that is the democratic commitment of those who would seek to exclude that community. The threat to the Ulster Unionist Party comes from within Unionism, not from Republicanism. The Ulster Unionist Party leader has delayed implementation. He has been prepared to repeatedly break the law and to use public moneys to pursue his futile and unsuccessful legal defence of his party political actions. David Trimble has carried letters of resignation in his pocket. Finally, he resigned from the Executive — how ironic. I wonder has it even occurred to him that one of the consequences of his foolish brinkmanship is that he finds himself in the very position that he has sought to impose on Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún. He is the one who is outside the Executive. That would be funny were not it so serious.

Instead of putting those sad experiences behind him, it seems that the Ulster Unionist Party leader is intent on repeating his mistakes by waltzing out of these institutions — once again hand in hand with Dr Paisley and supported yet again by the PUP. However, there is a certain consistency to David Trimble. It is not only his relationship with Dr Paisley that has been opportunistic, hypocritical and ambivalent, Mr Trimble's on-off relationship with violent Unionism goes back to his Vanguard days, and specifically to his role as legal adviser to the UDA-led Ulster workers' strike in 1974. Indeed, Mr Trimble, we can all have a past as well as a future.

That ambivalence was again evident when he could not reach an accommodation with Dr Paisley in his quest for signatures for today's motion. Who did David Trimble, the crusader for decommissioning, turn to for support?

He turned to none other than the political representatives of the non-decommissioned UVF. That is not so surprising when you recognise that Unionism's real agenda is not at all about decommissioning. Were that his genuine objective, the leadership of Unionism had the opportunity to demonstrate authority and vision in early August when John de Chastelain, in strict accordance with the Good Friday Agreement, reported that he had successfully negotiated a formula to put IRA weapons beyond use.

It was presented on a plate, largely because Sinn Féin had used its influence on behalf of the peace process, but Unionism could not find the courage to respond positively. I was disappointed to note today that neither Seamus Mallon nor Sean Farren availed of the opportunity to defend the initiative on IRA weapons and did not defend the agreed mechanisms of the Good Friday Agreement.

However, at the time, neither did the Irish or the British Governments. Even now, such validation would be very helpful. Unionism's real agenda is to stall the change that is already in train and to slow the progression towards a society that is built on equality. It matters not to the opponents of change how peacefully that objective is pursued.

Ulster Unionism's consistency has been its persistent opposition to change, but if Unionism believes that it can prevent change, it is sadly mistaken. If Unionism believes that it can return to the days of untrammelled power, it is even more mistaken. And if Unionism believes that it can deny Sinn Féin's electoral authority as the representatives of the majority of Nationalist and Republican people in the North, it is absolutely and fundamentally mistaken.

Sinn Féin is committed to resolving all of the issues between us by entirely peaceful and democratic means — all problems, including the issue of weapons. I am pleased to have the opportunity to reiterate that today.

I urge those Unionists who do accept that there is a need for change to accept the hand of friendship that Sinn Féin offers and to join us in managing that change, so that it will be peaceful and beneficial to all of the people of Ireland, regardless of their religious or political persuasion.

I respond to a point raised by Dr Paisley in his contribution: contrary to his assertions — and it would be helpful if he would check the facts — there were no representatives of either ETA or the Puerto Rican organisations at our party conference. They neither attended, nor were they invited to attend. It is important that the record reflect the facts.

Collective elected leadership is the responsibility of us all. We are the representatives of our divided society. We represent the diversity of our society. We can self-

determine in the Assembly to make politics work and to deal with the issues that have sustained conflict and division for generations, or we can self-determine not to do that. But what happens then? Go raibh míle maith agat.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Durkan: As my Colleagues have already indicated, the SDLP will support neither exclusion motion. We will oppose both, just as we have opposed all previous exclusion motions. The SDLP's position in regard to exclusion motions has not changed; the position of the party opposite has.

I understand the frustrations that are expressed in the Chamber today, and outside of it, regarding the failure to achieve decommissioning. We do not join with Sinn Féin in dismissing those concerns, and we are not playing games of "now you see it, now you do not". In other words, we will not address a party conference saying that there are legitimate Unionist concerns and then march in here and rubbish the very legitimate Unionist concerns that have been expressed — concerns that are well rooted in the agreement itself.

It is three and a half years since the Good Friday Agreement. It is time that we achieved decommissioning — not only by Republicans, but by all paramilitary groups. That was the promise of the agreement. People voted for the agreement with the prospect that along with the inclusive political institutions we would have decommissioning.

I reject those who insist that decommissioning is a red herring, or that it is a rejectionist ruse. For several years we have heard Sinn Féin's claims that decommissioning was not a requirement of the agreement in the first place; that the insistence upon decommissioning was a figment of Unionist rejectionism. Because I reject that, I welcome what Martin McGuinness said at the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis: the party seemed to recognise that there are legitimate Unionist interests in respect of decommissioning.

Those legitimate requirements in respect of decommissioning do not attach or belong to Unionism alone, inside this Chamber or in the community at large. We need to achieve decommissioning not only in the interests of the wider community, but to meet the democratic requirements of the country.

Mr Trimble spoke earlier about wanting to preserve the agreement and these arrangements. The SDLP wants to work with all other parties, not just in preserving the agreement but in developing it and the operation of all its institutions to their fullest possible potential. It is precisely because we want to protect the agreement that the SDLP has not supported exclusion motions in the past and will not support exclusion motions today.

In doing that, I want to nail Peter Robinson's misrepresentation that somehow we will be simply voting with Sinn Féin. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Durkan: In opposing the exclusion motion we are not voting for Sinn Féin; we are voting to protect the agreement. Three weeks ago in the Chamber the SDLP tabled an amendment to a DUP motion. The effect of that amendment was to call — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members will allow other Members to speak, more views can be expressed in the remaining time. I encourage all Members to listen in some degree of quietude to the views being expressed now and until the end of the debate.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The clock was not stopped during your intervention.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Durkan: The effect of the SDLP amendment was to call

"on all parties who profess to be committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means to unequivocally repudiate any and all such [paramilitary] violence and to call on all paramilitary groups to give real effect to the decommissioning provisions of the Good Friday Agreement".

That was the SDLP amendment. The first part of it was entirely consistent with the Mitchell principles; the second part was entirely consistent with the Good Friday Agreement. Sinn Féin voted against the amendment. It was joined in the Lobbies against that amendment by the DUP. The DUP was voting with Sinn Féin here three weeks ago in repudiation of an amendment that reflected the Mitchell principles. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order for someone to misinterpret what took place, when clearly the DUP voted for precisely those words when it became the substantive motion?

Mr Speaker: Mr Robinson has made his point.

Mr Durkan: The DUP went through the Lobbies with Sinn Féin against that amendment. So, who voted with Sinn Féin in relation to the decommissioning issue in the Chamber a few weeks ago? Mr Peter Robinson need not think that he can throw up some sort of asides against the SDLP.

Let us be clear. If we are going to preserve these arrangements, we must make more progress. The institutions have worked well. In all the recrimination that might break out in the Chamber, let us not forget that together we have operated these institutions and these arrangements well. All parties in the Chamber have operated Committees well; all parties in the

Executive have contributed to better governance in this part of the world. All parties that have participated, and that have been allowed to participate, at any level in the North/ South arrangements have made effective contributions to improving co-operation on this island.

The irony is that the institutions are now threatened, not because of any inherent failures in the them, not because of an inability of parties in the Chamber or elsewhere in the arrangements to work together, but because of difficulties in other areas of the agreement. We must make those good. The best way to concentrate on making good those outstanding issues elsewhere in the agreement is not by collapsing the institutions. I do not see how we get to the fuller implementation of the agreement by jeopardising such implementation as we already have by playing a game of chicken with the institutions.

Just as the SDLP opposes exclusion, it also clearly opposes the evasion that has passed for the Republican response to the issue of decommissioning.

I have already welcomed the remarks that Martin McGuinness made at the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis. However, contrast them with what I think was Mitchel McLaughlin's second reaction to events in New York. In one contribution he actually said that seeing aeroplanes used in that way to attack people shows the nonsense of decommissioning; if things can be used in that way, then weapons are not the issue. That amounted to equating some of our issues with violence with the violence in New York, contrary to the rest of the Sinn Féin spin on that issue.

4.45 pm

Mr McLaughlin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Mr Durkan knows when he is misleading this House, and I hope that he will withdraw that remark. Mr Durkan knows that in that programme I absolutely condemned what had happened in Pittsburgh, Washington and New York. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. The question of Ministers misleading the House is one thing. Conveying a misinterpretation of each other's comments appears to be a stock-in-trade on all sides of the House — nobody is particularly guilty of it. While Members may want to clarify matters, I cannot take matters of that kind as points of order on which I can rule.

Mr Durkan: Mr McLaughlin seems to think that I was referring to a particular TV programme. I said it was about his second contribution. It was not in the TV programme that he was referring to. He will find that the quote was carried in several media sources at the time, and not actually repudiated.

Since New York, Sinn Féin has tried to say that that was terrorism and that anything that has happened here is not terrorism. We have heard language about

things being “ethically indefensible”. Members across the Chamber have said, and I agree, that there is no ethical difference between the violence in New York and the violence that has been carried out here in the name of various paramilitary groupings. We cannot accept or see the ethical difference.

People might see an empirical difference as far as those paramilitary groupings are concerned now. The empirical distinction that might be made that could give people some confidence and basis of self-respect for continuing to take the risks that they have with this process would be if progress was achieved on decommissioning — not more commitments made, only to be withdrawn. It would be terrible if the Republican movement, having made further commitments in recent weeks to engage intensively with Gen de Chastelain, were to try to use the excuse of crass Unionist tactics — in particular, recruiting the two signatures for the motion from the PUP, with all of its associations — as the latest excuse for not doing anything about decommissioning.

We hear a lot about the “securocrats”. We have also suffered in this process at the hands of the “obdurocrats” in the various paramilitary organisations who will not move. They insist that they will determine the pace at which the process moves on, that they will determine that various things have to be done as bargaining chips to achieve decommissioning. I take the point that was made earlier by Sinn Féin Members, but let us remember that that bargaining-chip process has been going on at an inverted level on the part of Republicans as well.

We need to make sure that we can move forward with this agreement and the institutions intact. We can only do that if we are able to believe that this dispensation gives us all hope of a new inclusive basis for working together. The best way to create the belief that people have changed their ways over past violence is for them to give up the means.

Mr Dodds: I welcome the debate on the two motions. I also welcome the fact that on this occasion there is a good turnout — particularly on the Ulster Unionist Benches. When this was previously debated, I think that only Mr Kennedy was present to speak and vote. The change and the progress that has been made away from negative language such as “stunts”, “political opportunism” and “waste of time” has to be welcomed.

The Unionist community will welcome the fact that there is a unity of purpose among Unionists in the Chamber today in taking on Sinn Féin/IRA and attempting to put them out of the Executive. Many of us wish that it had come earlier. Belated as it is, we welcome it.

I also welcome the fact that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party has indicated that he is prepared to withdraw his Ministers and that he is going to have

them resign, or dismiss them. Although that too could have come sooner, it is welcome. Many of the arguments that we are debating this evening have been rehearsed here before. The situation has not changed: there has been no decommissioning, and there was no decommissioning when we debated the issues in the past.

If it is right now that IRA/Sinn Féin should not be in the Government of Northern Ireland, it was right in May 2000, because exactly the same situation pertained then as does now. It was right in November 1999, when the decision was taken — wrongly — to put IRA/Sinn Féin into the Government in the first place. All the damage that has been done to the democratic process, and the corruption of that process, could have been avoided, had those wrong, misguided decisions not been taken by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

We have made progress, and more parties now support the motion. However, it would be very welcome if the Prime Minister, who was very strong, and rightly so, in his denunciation of terrorism on the international stage were also to open up a new front against terrorism in his own backyard. He should join with the political parties who are trying to rid the Government of Northern Ireland of those who still remain totally wedded to the use of the Armalite in one hand and the ballot box in the other.

There will be no use in standing up in the House of Commons later tonight to decry the fact that Governments across the world are providing safe havens and cover for terrorists when in part of the United Kingdom there are members of a political party and a Republican movement, which is still wedded to violence, who are at the heart of Government. They control half the Budget of this region of the United Kingdom. There are double standards, and Mr Blair should face up to that.

Other Members have clearly, and at some length, detailed why Sinn Féin has a case to answer. It seems that each time those issues are highlighted — whether it be the Colombian holiday adventure of three leading Republicans, or today's debate — so that the spotlight is turned on the murderous activities of the Republican movement, the stock reply is that Sinn Féin has no case to answer.

There is a very strong case to answer. There have been 30 murders since 1994. Guns have been used, beatings have been carried out, and there has been racketeering and intimidation. There has been a summer of violence, much of which, as the Chief Constable made clear, was orchestrated by the IRA. We had the Florida gunrunning episode, during which it was made clear that at the highest levels the Republican movement was involved in the plan to import armaments from the United States. Sinn Féin's liaison with the narco-terrorists, the drug dealers of Colombia, has also been very clearly exposed.

The nauseating distinction, already pointed out by my Colleague Peter Robinson, made by some in the Republican movement who label the terrorism of 11 September as unacceptable and claim that they were not engaged as terrorists, but as freedom fighters in a struggle for liberation, is also hypocritical. That hypocrisy will not be lost on the relatives and loved ones of those who they turned into human bombs, or left orphaned, and for whom they have not one word of remorse, regret or apology. Rather, they try to justify their war and their terrorism.

I have listened to Mr Mallon lament the fact that in two weeks' time there may not be an Assembly. Of course, that is very much down to how he and his Colleagues vote today. Will they decide to back the terrorist frontmen, or will they vote with the democrats to put the frontmen out of Government? That is their choice.

I listened to the argument that to exclude Sinn Féin would not be in keeping with the provisions of the agreement. The agreement and the legislation that flowed from it include explicit provisions for the exclusion of parties. Therefore, a vote to exclude parties would carry out what is included in the Act and, therefore, what flows from the agreement.

To answer all the talk about full and early implementation of the agreement, why not use one of the provisions in the legislation that was designed to exclude parties that are not committed to exclusively democratic means? The SDLP's decision to vote along with Sinn Féin/IRA is not based on any desire to protect the agreement; it is a decision to protect its own party. The SDLP should have learned by now. Mr Durkan, in his first speech in the House as leader elect of the SDLP, does not seem to have learned anything from the past four or five years. He should have learned that by going down the same road with Sinn Féin/IRA and by refusing to take it on, he is encouraging its greater electoral success.

I remind Mr Durkan — and he should consult Hansard — that on Tuesday 18 September, when it is clear that the SDLP amendment weakened the import and thrust of the DUP motion proposed by Peter Robinson, the SDLP called for the decommissioning of IRA weapons and the DUP supported that. He should, therefore, correct the comments he made earlier.

I have also listened to the argument that the only way to achieve decommissioning is to persist with the approach of including Sinn Féin/IRA in Government and to continue to offer the carrot rather than the stick, and that nothing will be achieved by coming down hard. The carrot has been dangled in front of Sinn Féin/IRA for the past two to three years. We were told initially that unless it got into Government, it could not be expected to decommission. We were then told

that it was not in Government long enough to prove to its troops on the ground that it was worth persevering. It has now been in Government for almost two years, during which time it has continued to engage in murder — and still it will not decommission. It is long past the time to use a bit of stick. It must either be the handover of weapons or expulsion from the Government of Northern Ireland.

There was much coverage in the weekend newspapers about a move on IRA decommissioning, and on such occasions we have become used to the IRA/Sinn Féin leadership coming forward with a gesture designed to put itself on the high moral ground, so to speak, in propaganda terms. Let me make it clear that the concreting over of two redundant compromised arms dumps will not fool anybody in Northern Ireland. We were told by Members on both sides of the House that decommissioning would have to be completed by May 2000. We are still waiting for decommissioning to begin, and gestures and stunts will not work and will fool nobody.

There is a basic flaw in the agreement, and while the motion may not succeed because it does not have cross-community support, let it be remembered that as a result of the vote tonight, the continued presence of Sinn Féin/IRA in Government does not enjoy cross-community support. It invalidates its presence in Government just as much as it may claim that the vote is invalidated by lack of cross-community support. It applies both ways.

There must be a fundamental review of the agreement. Let us stand on the side of democrats, reject terrorism and vote for these motions.

Mr M McGuinness: First, this has been a long and difficult journey for all Members, including Sinn Féin Members. It has been a difficult journey for the Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, many of the smaller parties and, of course, the DUP. Against all the odds, we reached an agreement on Good Friday 1998. Undoubtedly, that was, and will remain, a very significant date in the history of this island.

It was an interesting experience. I found the journey to the large room in Castle Buildings interesting; it was a hive of activity and a lot of excitement. People came together from all political parties, and the political representatives of those parties took their positions at the table.

5.00 pm

At that time, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, David Trimble, whom I watched carefully, said that he was in favour of the Good Friday Agreement. I could see that it was painful for him to sign up to it. When it later became clear that the British Prime Minister had effectively handed him a side letter on decommissioning,

I knew that we were in trouble and that the Good Friday Agreement was in big trouble. I also knew that decommissioning, contrary to what some Members said, would be used to prevent the implementation of the agreement and that it would be a big problem for Sinn Féin in the political process.

When Jeffrey Donaldson walked out of the peace talks, it became clear that some Ulster Unionist Party members were not prepared to face up to the change that the Good Friday Agreement heralded. Ever since that day, the Ulster Unionist Party has tried to deal with its internal contradictions over the agreement. The Ulster Unionist Party has tried to ride two horses. It stated publicly that it was a pro-agreement party, but at the same time it caved in to people such as Jeffrey Donaldson, David Burnside and others who were opposed to the agreement.

I listened to Robert McCartney pooh-poohing the notion that Fenians were not wanted about the place. I have also heard senior members of the Ulster Unionist Party state on television in the North of Ireland since Good Friday 1998 that they were opposed to the Good Friday Agreement because they were opposed to power sharing. They believe that there should be majority rule, and that is what the DUP believes. The DUP is not a pro-agreement party; it is opposed to the Good Friday Agreement lock, stock, and barrel. It does not want a Fenian about the place. Not only does it not want a Fenian of the Sinn Féin variety, it does not even want one of the SDLP variety. Boxcar Willie, Peter the Punt, Papa Doc — none of them wants a Fenian about the place. That has posed a huge challenge to Sinn Féin.

In the recent years, Sinn Féin has tried to deal with the need to implement the Good Friday Agreement fully and to get all the political parties who said that they were pro-agreement to put their shoulder to the wheel to get the agreement implemented in full. That has been a difficult task, particularly given the Ulster Unionist Party's decision that it would emasculate the Good Friday Agreement.

Peter Mandelson changed the rules on flags to satisfy the Ulster Unionists. The British Government caved in to the Ulster Unionists on the policing issue; they were not alone in that. At an early stage, the British Government caved in to Unionist attempts to rewrite the section of the Good Friday Agreement that deals with decommissioning and how it should be handled; they were not alone on that either.

This morning I listened to the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party taking Members on a legalistic journey for about 15 minutes. Many Members wondered where it was all leading. Not once during those 15 minutes, when he tried to state the legal case in defence of his exclusion of Bairbre de Brún and myself from the

North/South Ministerial Council, did he acknowledge that he had twice been found to be acting illegally by a court in Belfast. Of course, the British Government have not said a word about it — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Will Members check that any communication equipment that they have is either switched off or on vibrate mode, so that Members can continue the debate uninterrupted by pagers or phones.

Mr M McGuinness: It was interesting to hear the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party say that he had no doubt about the commitment of the PUP to use only peaceful and democratic means. I say that while freely acknowledging that David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson have been two of the most positive contributors to the peace process over recent years.

Only 12 months ago, members of the UDA and UVF were killing one another on the Shankill Road, yet David Trimble sought the support of a party associated with what happened then. Responsibility for what happened on the Shankill Road lay mostly with the UDA, because of its anti-agreement stance.

David Trimble made another important statement. He said that decommissioning was important as an indicator of future intent. With due respect, I have never heard such rubbish. It took someone on the Unionist Benches, a short time later, to point out that the LVF had indeed decommissioned some time ago, yet it was the LVF who killed Rosemary Nelson and the LVF who recently killed Martin O'Hagan. That is the reality.

The hullabaloo about decommissioning has not gone down well in the Nationalist/Republican community. People watched in amazement as the issue was elevated over the rest of the agreement, despite 250 pipe bomb attacks on the Nationalist community throughout the North. Yesterday, at the Davitt's Club in Swatragh, County Derry, a child lifted a pipe bomb, and we never heard a word about it. Condemnations are dragged out in television interviews.

We see despicable scenes in north Belfast, with little children walking to school with spittle running down their faces. I was there several days ago and was told by people, with immaculate credentials, that the protesters at Glenbryn held pornographic photographs of women up to parents of the children as they walked into the school. Who was with the protesters that morning and afternoon? Nigel Dodds, the MP for the area, was there with them.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is entirely wrong and outrageous for this IRA commander, members of whose organisation went into a hospital and shot through incubators, such is its regard for children, to stand there and tell barefaced lies about what happened.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member knows very well, from here and from elsewhere, the language that should be used in the Chamber. Therefore in response to his point of order, I put back a point of order.

Mr M McGuinness: I am satisfied with the accuracy of the information that I received on that matter.

I said that it had been a difficult journey. There are good and decent people in the Ulster Unionist Party, as there are undoubtedly good and decent people in the Unionist community who voted to endorse the Good Friday Agreement three years ago. It is important that we try to build bridges and work together. For 18 months, we have worked together in the Executive. We have worked well with the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Ministers at Executive meetings. The public would be pleased to see the way in which their elected representatives approach the work that goes on at those meetings on health, education, agriculture, the environment, the economy and many other matters.

People continually ask where Sinn Féin stands in relation to the Unionist community and Unionist political leaders who say that they are in favour of the Good Friday Agreement. We value the contribution made by those people. Unionists must also take on board the strong opinions in the Nationalist community about the way in which they have messed about in the past three years, while we tried to implement the Good Friday Agreement. I am sure that everyone heard my Ard-Fheis speech. In it, I acknowledged that some Unionists feel strongly about decommissioning. Some Unionists also feel that the issue can be used to prevent change and political progress. It is important that Sinn Féin deals with the concerns of those whom we believe are serious about the search for peace on this island. Without contradicting Mark Durkan, I stress that I am not retracting what I said in that speech. I am saying that the decommissioning issue must be dealt with and that all political parties have a responsibility to do their part to make it happen. Where do I stand? If decommissioning were to happen tomorrow morning, I would be as pleased as Punch. It is my job and that of all pro-agreement political parties and the two Governments to try to make it happen. We must create the circumstances in which we can remove all the guns from Irish politics.

I do not accept that decommissioning is the reason for the current difficulties in the peace process and the institutions. It would be wrong of me to say that, because I do not believe it. We are in difficulty because Unionist political leaders of the anti-agreement variety — and even those who say they are pro-agreement — find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that Sinn Féin is growing in political strength in the North and all over the island of Ireland. The Westminster and local government election results came as a significant shock to the Unionist community. Sinn Féin representatives

now chair Strabane, Omagh, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Dungannon and Newry and Armagh councils. We also have four Sinn Féin MPs. People are concerned about the fact that the combined votes of the SDLP and Sinn Féin amount to something that can no longer be ignored.

The days of second-class citizenship are over; the days of Nationalists and Republicans sitting at the back of the bus are over. Given the increasing confidence of the Nationalist and Republican community, the last thing we want is to be part of a political process that consigns any section of the community — be it Ulster Unionist, DUP or anyone else — to the position that we have endured since the partition of this island. Go raibh maith agat.

5.15 pm

Mr Trimble: It falls to me to reply to the motion. Due to a misjudgement, we put the motion down with only my name on it. Then I discovered that I had to wind up, as well as propose the motion, otherwise I would have happily passed that duty on to someone else.

I will try to refer to several of the speeches that were made. I ask Members whom I do not mention to accept my apologies. It is not that their contributions were unimportant, but time is limited, and I want to focus my comments on those things that are especially significant.

I start by congratulating Mr Ervine on his contribution, which was serious and honest. Every Member who listened to it will have been impressed by it. I found it curious that so many of the comments from other Unionists were not directed to the motion; they were not directed towards criticising Sinn Féin, although that is their position. The bulk of what they said criticised my Colleagues and me. I listened to Mr Cedric Wilson, who said nothing that was not an attack on me and my Colleagues. The kindest phrase to describe it would be “a farrago of nonsense”.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The record will show that, once again, Mr Trimble has lost it.

Mr Trimble: I am confident that the record will show the emphasis that Mr Wilson gave, and it will show that my comments were accurate. The same comments are true for 95% of the speech by Mr Wilson’s former leader, Mr McCartney. It is so nice to see both of them singing from the same hymn sheet again.

Mr McCartney: I have arrived in time.

Mr Trimble: I cannot reply to that comment. The acoustics of the Chamber prevented my hearing it.

I congratulate Dr Farren on his comments. In his opening line, he said that the motion, in a sense, should never have come before the House; he was right. If other people had kept their obligations and implemented the agreement in the way that they

should have done, the motion would never have come before the House. It comes before the House only because of the failure of people to fulfil their obligations.

Several comments were made about recent court rulings. I will not go into details, but nearly all of them misunderstood the position. The court said that some of the reasons that I gave for my actions went outside the ambit of the Act, but it indicated that other reasons were within the ambit of the Act. I am acting wholly within the ambit of the Act and have been doing so. I have also been acting within the ambit of the existing judgements. If the party opposite does not believe that, let it go back to the court and challenge it again. It can go to the House of Lords and challenge the issue there. Then, we will see how things work out.

Reference was also made to the timing of the resignations of Ulster Unionist Members. All of those comments were wrong. The reason for our action is simply that we are not here to cause an abrupt disruption to the business of government, but to arrange for an orderly transfer of business to the relevant Northern Ireland Office Ministers when suspension comes. It is not another deadline — that was a fatuous comment. It is not to give the IRA another chance. It is not necessary. If suspension comes, people can decommission afterwards, and then there can be resumption; that is not a problem. The Members who made those comments were completely wrong.

The nature of decommissioning was also mentioned. We should remind ourselves of the simple. There is legislation. It contains a statutory definition. The definition states that decommissioning is a method by which weapons and other materials are made permanently unavailable and permanently unusable. If it is not permanent, it is not decommissioning. General de Chastelain, who is there to verify that decommissioning has taken place, will certify to that effect. Those are the basics. There may be discussion about the details, but no one can make any mistake about the basics. Those tests must be satisfied; otherwise decommissioning has not taken place. I suggest to those Members who are concerned about whether or not an act constitutes decommissioning that they remember the basic principles. They should wait and see and keep those principles in mind if and when something happens. I hope that something does happen, but if it does not, the consequence of that will lie elsewhere.

Sir Reg Empey: Does my right hon Friend agree that the frustration that is felt on these Benches is occasioned by the discrepancy between the requirements as set out by the former Secretary of State, Mo Mowlam, that all parts of the agreement move forward in parallel and the expectation of the Republican movement that every part of the agreement should be concluded before it will, for tactical reasons, make any move on decommissioning? Does he also agree that

the objective of the entire exercise was that all parts of the agreement would move forward in parallel, and that, regardless of what anybody else says, no actual decommissioning has occurred? That is what is causing the frustration on these Benches?

Mr Trimble: My hon Friend is right. Indeed, he could have gone further and said that while the then Secretary of State made it clear that all elements should have moved together, it was that Secretary of State who failed to ensure that that happened and who consequently did much to bring about the present unsatisfactory situation.

It was interesting to hear a Member quote something that I said off the cuff three and a half years ago about having a past and a future. It seems to be going down in history. I have taken the trouble to locate the text of a speech that I made at the first sitting of the Assembly, because it is worth revisiting. If I may pat myself on the back, that speech was entirely extemporary. If certain Members check the record tomorrow, as they have been advised to by Mr C Wilson, they will find that they quoted my phrases inaccurately. It will be worthwhile if I take a little time to remind them of what I actually said. To set the context, I had been questioned about my party's Assembly manifesto, which made references to "unreconstructed terrorists". In response to that, I made the following comment:

"A number of Members who are here today have done terrible things."

That was simply a reference to the violence in which some had been involved in the past. I also said:

"I do not need to elaborate, though I should say that those concerned are not all in one corner of the Chamber."

That was a recognition that the violent and terrible things done in the past were not solely carried out by the Republican movement, but that other elements also have something to consider.

I then came to the point that has been misquoted today. I said that

"We are not saying, and we have never said, that the fact that someone has a certain past means that he cannot have a future. We have always acknowledged that it is possible for people to change."

It must be noted that that does not mean that there is automatically a future — it depends on change. I then said:

"Because of the situation in this society it is desirable that all Members with a terrible past should change and should demonstrate that they have changed."

I then described the process as an inclusive one. I continued:

"There is an opportunity for people to take part in the process if they have shown that they are committed to peaceful means and democracy. I underline these points not out of a desire to exclude but simply to emphasise the things that need to be done. The sooner there is a realisation of that need, the better." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 1, p17*].

Unfortunately, three and a half years later, there has not been a realisation of that need, and the change has not taken place in the way that it should have done.

Mr Durkan said that the SDLP had always opposed exclusion. That was not always the case. I remember when, in 1998, the then deputy leader of the SDLP gave a formal commitment to exclude. He said that

"For many Unionists there is the fear that Sinn Féin seeks to pocket the maximum sectoral advantage from the agreement — membership of the Executive, prisoner releases, changes in policing, criminal law reform, demilitarisation, new equality legislation — and then will fail to honour their decommissioning obligations under the agreement within the specified two-year period.

Mr Mallon then continued:

"I believe that this will not occur — and that it is not intended. But no one should have any doubt that if it did happen the SDLP would rigorously enforce the terms of the agreement and remove from office those who had so blatantly dishonoured their obligations."

Those are his precise words.

Mr Durkan: The Member will recall that in that address to the SDLP Conference, Séamus Mallon made a twin offer: one that reflected and understood Unionists' concerns and one that fully understood the natural suspicions that Sinn Féin had. We made a twin offer to both parties, an offer that was aimed at setting up the institutions in 1998. It was rejected by the Unionist party, and the institutions were not set up until a year later.

Mr Trimble: Mr Durkan is half correct. A twin offer was made, but the other half was not necessary because we did set up the institutions and included Sinn Féin in the Administration. I will not go back on it again.

Mr Durkan's second point is not correct. There is no conditionality here. Mr Mallon said:

"I believe that this will not occur — and that it is not intended".

But it did occur. He also said that

"no one should have any doubt that if it did happen the SDLP would rigorously enforce the terms".

It has happened. Mr Durkan must therefore consider whether it is appropriate not to follow those principles through. If SDLP Members seek further advice on the matter, I refer them to yesterday's 'Sunday Independent'. I believe — I stand to be corrected — that the 'Sunday Independent' has the largest circulation of any daily or Sunday newspaper published in Ireland. I should frame yesterday's editorial. It starts:

"The Ulster Unionist leader's move is inevitable and largely unavoidable. Mr Trimble's decision to press for Sinn Féin's removal reflects a crisis of public, and not merely unionist, confidence in both the intentions and actions of the republican movement in securing the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons."

It concludes:

"His move to secure the expulsion of Sinn Féin from the power-sharing Executive should not be seen as an act of revenge

and frustration. It represents a final desperate move to save an Agreement that can only be worth saving if all who accepted its terms are willing to honour them in practice. Mr Trimble is right. That can only mean IRA decommissioning. And until it happens, Sinn Féin should have no place in government.”

Those are the words of the ‘Sunday Independent’.

Mr M McGuinness: Is that the same ‘Sunday Independent’ that crucified John Hume four or five years ago?

Mr Trimble: It is yesterday’s issue of the ‘Sunday Independent’. The SDLP — and others — should reflect upon its advice.

Sinn Féin Members have lost the plot. They have been offered opportunity after opportunity that they have not taken. They seem to think that the game that they have been playing for the past three years can go on indefinitely; it cannot. Time and time again, we have given them opportunities. In dealing with the matters that they raised, the Government went much further than my Colleagues and I wished. Every point that they raised at Weston Park was dealt with sympathetically by the Government. What happened? There was silence in August — silence and inactivity.

Sinn Féin Members are determined to keep their heads down, hoping that somehow the problem will blow over. Consequently, this action is necessary to show them that it will not blow over. There is only one way now in which they can proceed, and the sooner that they summon up the courage to do so, the better. When they decommission — they probably will, eventually — they will demonstrate something extremely important: the war was wrong.

5.30 pm

Mr Adams asked why there had to be a peace process. Why was there a need for one? Why was there a need for violence? There was never a need for violence; there was never any justification for violence. This was a democracy. It might have been flawed; it might have needed changes. Those changes could have been made peacefully. The violence that Republicans engaged in made the situation worse. They spread more bitterness in the community; they slowed down positive changes that would otherwise have happened; they have achieved nothing but the deaths of 3,000 people; and they have left a dreadful legacy to this society. It is time that Republicans addressed the need to change and to cure that problem.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 54; Noes 45

AYES

Unionist:

Dr Adamson, Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Berry, Dr Birnie, Mr Campbell,

Mr Carrick, Mrs Carson, Mr Clyde, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Ervine, Mr Foster, Mr Gibson, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Trimble, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr J Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr P Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O’Connor, Dr O’Hagan, Mr O’Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Other:

Mrs E Bell, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice, Mr Neeson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>(54.5%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>(0.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>54</i>	<i>(100.0%)</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

5.45 pm

Motion made, and Question put:

That in consequence of the failure of the Provisional IRA to offer up its illegal weaponry for destruction; the Republican Movement’s continuing terrorist threat, and active pursuit, of terrorist outrages to secure its aims; the maintenance by the IRA of an active terrorist organisation; the growing number of cases of IRA involvement in terrorist activity in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and across the globe; the fact that the Provisional IRA is inextricably linked to Sinn Féin; and the involvement and dominance of members of Sinn Féin in the decision-making “Army Council” of the Provisional IRA, this Assembly resolves that Sinn Féin does not enjoy its confidence because it is not committed to non-violence and exclusively peaceful means, and further, in accordance with Section 30 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, determines that members of Sinn Féin shall be excluded from holding office as Ministers for a period of 12 months from the date of this resolution. —[Rev Dr Ian Paisley.]

The Assembly divided: Ayes 56; Noes 45

AYES

Unionist:

Dr Adamson, Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mr Berry, Dr Birnie, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mrs Carson, Mr Clyde, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Foster, Mr Gibson, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr Hussey, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Morrow, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr K Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Savage, Mr Shannon, Mr Trimble, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr J Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Nationalist:

Mr Adams, Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr P Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Other:

Mrs E Bell, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice, Mr Neeson.

Total Votes	101	Total Ayes	56 (55.4%)
Nationalist Votes	39	Nationalist Ayes	0 (0.0%)
Unionist Votes	56	Unionist Ayes	56 (100.0%)

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote)

Adjourned at 5.55 pm

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 9 October 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

InterTradeIreland

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that he wishes to make a statement on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, in its trade and business sectoral format, held on 28 September 2001 in Newry.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The fifth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its trade and business development sectoral format took place at the InterTradeIreland offices in Newry on Friday 28 September 2001. Dr Farren and I represented the Northern Ireland Administration. The Irish Government was represented by Ms Mary Harney TD, Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This report has been approved by Dr Farren and is made on his behalf also.

The Council received a verbal report from the InterTradeIreland chairperson, Dr Martin Naughton, and chief executive, Mr Liam Nellis, on recent progress by the body. This included progress on the establishment of the body and progress of the major programmes launched within the 2001 operating plan, which had been approved by the Council. Key areas discussed included the equity network, which focuses on increasing awareness of the potential for, and availability of, equity funding; and the knowledge transfer initiative with its two cross-border projects — Fusion and Focus — which bring together, on a cross-border basis, companies, graduates and institutions of third level education.

The Council considered and approved InterTradeIreland's corporate plan 2002-04. The plan has two main strategic goals. The first is to increase the quality and quantity of knowledge concerning cross-border trade, and the second is to ensure that this improved

knowledge and information is made available to those involved in decision making on cross-border trade.

Working with and through existing agencies, the body's strategic goals will be translated into several activities, including the development of an all-island business model; the development of an electronic all-island business directory; a knowledge transfer initiative; and an equity awareness network.

The Council considered InterTradeIreland's draft equality scheme, which had been revised following public consultation. The Council agreed that the draft scheme should be submitted to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for approval.

The Council accepted the resignation of two board members of Tourism Ireland Ltd, Mr John Dully, former chief executive of Bord Fáilte, and Mr David McAuley, former acting chief executive of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. The Council appointed as their replacements Mr Niall Reddy, acting chief executive of Bord Fáilte, and Mr Alan Clarke, chief executive of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee (Mr Neeson): I thank the Minister for his concise report on the meeting, and I welcome the fact that InterTradeIreland has now developed a corporate plan for 2002-04. When will the full corporate plan be made available to the House? Can the Minister update the House on the work that is being carried out by Tourism Ireland Ltd? Is the Minister satisfied with the present staffing levels at the Belfast office of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board?

Sir Reg Empey: In response to Mr Neeson's final question, which is slightly off centre in the context of the report, the staffing situation at the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is not satisfactory. We recently appointed a chief executive, and advertisements will soon appear for several posts which have fallen vacant after people have moved on. It is to be hoped that a reasonable complement of staff will be restored shortly.

The Member will be aware that the staff members who deal with selective financial assistance are to be transferred to Invest Northern Ireland, and others will be transferred to Tourism Ireland Ltd, if they so wish. However, several key vacancies have arisen recently; also, several key members of personnel are now to take maternity leave. Those factors combine to create shortages. The Department is in discussion with the Tourist Board, and we hope to put interim measures in place.

The corporate plan will be published in the next few weeks, and it will be available for inspection by Members and the public. Detailed operating plans will appear annually, and these will be linked closely to budgets.

Dr McDonnell: I congratulate the Minister on his succinct, precise and informative statement and the

sterling efforts he and Dr Farren have made in the North/South Ministerial Council. In the light of the events of 11 September, the work of the Council becomes more and more vital. The statement shows the importance and the benefits of working together on a cross-border basis in the area of business development.

However, given the potential for economic downturn since 11 September, does the Minister agree that the work of InterTradeIreland is vital to the economy on both sides of the border? What short to medium-term benefits does he foresee in that respect?

Sir Reg Empey: The events of 11 September are having an impact across the board. We have not yet grasped the full implications of events, although later today the House will have an opportunity to debate some of those issues in broader terms.

In the short term, a number of key drivers are at play. The level of inward investment that we have become used to, particularly in the last financial year, is not going to be there. We must face the facts. A downturn was already under way, and that was accelerated by events in the United States. Therefore, we are going to be depending more and more on our own resources, and the key function of this body is to increase, among other things, the level of cross-border trade. It may well be that we will have to make up for the absence of inward investment by trying to increase trade closer to home. That is one of the key objectives of InterTradeIreland.

It is also essential that we measure what cross-border trade amounts to. It may surprise the House to know that this is proving difficult. The statistics are confusing. A study and work with the authorities are under way to try to assess the current level accurately.

Dr McDonnell: Is the Minister referring to legitimate or illegitimate trade?

Sir Reg Empey: We are sticking to legitimate trade. It is difficult to measure. We want to assess that accurately so we can use it as a benchmark against which we can measure the progress and success of the body.

Much work is undoubtedly being undertaken. There is an attempt to alert people to the potential market on their doorsteps. The lack of knowledge and contact and the opportunities missed are staggering. People may be buying materials, goods and services from thousands of miles away when they could be buying them practically next door. The gaps in people's knowledge are amazing in that respect. This organisation will be redressing that in the next few years.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Can the Minister assure the House that in relation to Tourism Ireland Ltd, the fair employment legislation of this country — as part of the United Kingdom — is being strictly adhered to? Will he now publish the perceived religion of the employees of Tourism Ireland Ltd?

Sir Reg Empey: My report today, as the Member knows, is on InterTradeIreland, but any body or organisation working and located in Northern Ireland is subject to the laws of this part of the United Kingdom, and that includes all the employment law. Tourism Ireland Ltd will be obliged to file its returns on the religious make-up of its workforce with the necessary authorities just as any other employer will. This statutory obligation also applies to the implementation bodies that are located in Northern Ireland; it is their statutory duty to file such returns.

The first returns from Tourism Ireland Ltd will be due early next year. The company has not yet filed a return because it has not had staff for more than a few months. All the people who have been working for that body have been secondees from the Northern Ireland Civil Service or the Irish Civil Service. However, the recruitment process is now well advanced, and it will therefore have its own complement of staff from now on. It has not yet reached its establishment level. Further recruitment will also be undertaken. All the returns that it makes will be freely available to Members, so that people can see the breakdown of the staff in those bodies.

10.45 am

Ms Morrice: One of the most important issues affecting cross-border trade is the launch, in less than three months' time, of the single European currency. To my surprise, I find that it is not on any agenda or given any priority at the N/SMC meetings or by InterTradeIreland. Is the Minister playing King Canute with the single European currency and trying to stop the tide? How will he prepare businesses in Northern Ireland, especially those on the border, for that inevitability?

Sir Reg Empey: The launch of the euro in January will not be confined to InterTradeIreland or any cross-border body; it will apply to all businesses. Whether we are in the European single currency zone or not, the euro will be available as legal tender. Some businesses already trade in euros, and some are already invoicing and paying bills in euros. A forum is working to inform businesses about the euro; seminars have been held, and outreach work designed to upgrade the knowledge of our business community has been done. That work is not confined to this implementation body.

InterTradeIreland acts as a catalyst in both jurisdictions. It does not have a specific remit, but it points out the fact that the Republic and many other parts of Europe are in the euro zone. We have discussed the matter, but the body can take no decisions about the European single currency; that is a matter for the United Kingdom Government and the Chancellor. The role of our Department is to ensure that all businesses are prepared, and that work is well advanced. A group has

been working on that for over two years, and, over the next few months, there will be a series of seminars for businesses. There is also a large amount of literature available, and, when the time comes, businesses will be as well prepared as possible to meet the challenge.

Mrs Carson: The statement says:

“Working with, and through, existing agencies, the Body’s strategic goals will be translated into a number of activities”.

What are those agencies, and how will the work proceed? How many of the agencies are based in Northern Ireland, and how many are based in the Republic?

Sir Reg Empey: The reference is to agencies such as IDB, LEDU, the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) and their equivalents in the Republic — Enterprise Ireland and the Industrial Development Agency (IDA). Those are the main agencies through which the body will work. The cross-border body is not designed to replace or supplant the work of any of those agencies in either jurisdiction; its functions are to raise awareness and to see that every step that can be taken to increase and improve cross-border trade and business is taken. InterTradeIreland does not have the capacity to deliver the services offered by the delegated statutory agencies in each jurisdiction. It is important that that fact be known.

There is growing co-operation between the existing agencies and InterTradeIreland. InterTradeIreland has facilitated meetings in various places, and it also works with chambers of commerce and other organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), and the Institute of Directors (IoD). It mounts roadshows to raise awareness and also works through educational institutions. One of the key thrusts of the corporate plan will be the improvement of knowledge. That can be realised only by working through the existing structures in each jurisdiction; it is not intended that they be supplanted or replaced.

Mrs Courtney: The Minister has spoken highly of the corporate plan presented to the North/South Ministerial Council by the board of InterTradeIreland. He has focused on the two cross-border projects, Focus and Fusion, which bring together companies, graduates and third-level education institutions. Will the Minister tell the House how recruitment to those programmes will take place, who will be involved and how Ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government will review and measure the delivery of the plan?

Sir Reg Empey: When the corporate plan is published, the Member will be able to see that a number of agenda items were set out for InterTradeIreland in December 1998. One or two of those proved impossible to advance and were discarded. What we are now seeing is the

outworking of some of those agenda items. The knowledge transfer initiative brings companies, graduates and third-level institutions together on a cross-border basis. At a meeting of the body in February, Dr Farren and I pushed to increase the number of people who were eligible to participate. That was agreed, and the number of participants was doubled.

We have focused on giving companies access to the technical skills that they need to develop their products and markets. In other words, we find a company in one jurisdiction that has a perceived need and in another jurisdiction we find a potential graduate, or someone with the required skills, to be seconded to meet that need. The response has been extremely good, and a large number of people with first- or second-class degrees have been identified. We have far more applicants than we have places available. The issue is one of transferring skills to a company that might not otherwise be able to get them.

The Focus project provides a business with a graduate to assist with sales and marketing initiatives. That is one of the weaknesses of businesses throughout this island and further afield. The Fusion project matches a business with a third-level education institution and a graduate to help with the development of new products and processes. We are very encouraged by the early responses we have received to both projects.

Mr Poots: The Minister’s statement declares that through work with, and through, existing agencies, the body’s strategic goals will be translated into a number of activities including the development of an all-island, or all-Ireland, business model and an electronic all-island, or all-Ireland, business directory.

Does the Minister accept that he is wholly implementing the harmonisation aspects envisaged in the framework document?

Sir Reg Empey: If people feel so insecure in the Europe in which we are now working that we cannot do business with a neighbour because to do so would imply a constitutional weakness or impropriety, that is unfortunate. The objective is to increase business, increase sales and increase efficiency through business.

There is no reason to prevent consistent promotion of the East/West agenda. If someone from the Republic is involved in that initiative, does it mean that he is revisiting the old days of the Union? People have to understand that our focus is on economics, business and trade. Currently, some 146 companies from the Republic of Ireland are among the largest investors in Northern Ireland, second only to investment from the United States of America.

You cannot have your cake and eat it. If you want to do business, then you do business with whomever you can trade with. This is nothing whatsoever to do with

the framework document. I personally rejected that document, and it did not include my views or represent me. If people take the opposite view and say “Let us not do any of this”, they are taking the easy way out. We could easily neglect the development of trade and linkages. We could adopt that attitude; I had hoped, however, that “head-in-the-sand” economics was now behind us.

We are part of the European Union, whose functions include trans-European networks and a degree of economic integration within the European Union. We could always pull out of that as well and sit here in splendid isolation and purity — but we would have no trade.

Sir John Gorman: I was pleased to hear the Minister mention the Institute of Directors. While he was chairman of the Ulster Bank, the chairman of the institute, Sir George Quigley, also chaired an important body involving businesses from both sides of the border which wrote the Quigley report on cross-border trade. It provided a very good guide to the way in which the sort of joint activity mentioned by the Minister could be developed. It would be worthwhile for the Minister to obtain that report and to see how much of it is still relevant. What is relevant is that the membership of the IoD, from both sides of the border, comprises about 1,000 people, all of whom are directors, chairmen or managing directors of companies. There is a great deal of latent availability for cross-border trade within that context.

Sir Reg Empey: Professional organisations do have contacts. The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) have had contacts for years. The IoD has contacts with its equivalent. We are, of course, focusing here on one particular area of activity. We have to remember that these organisations have links. They are, generally speaking, GB-based bodies in the first place. They also have links throughout the European Union and beyond. They are all linked internationally. If the last few weeks have taught us anything, they should have taught us that we are part of the global economic structures. We are not isolated, and we must not be isolated. The last thing that we need at the moment is to go in that direction.

If we want success, all our key economic activity must be linked outside Northern Ireland. Our main focus — and one of the main policies of our economic agencies — is to encourage exports. If you go around the world saying “We want to sell you our products but we are not interested in you or your products” you will soon get short shrift. The professional and business bodies have grasped that simple fact. They have realised that the more effective we can make ourselves, and the more effective our neighbours are

in any direction, the better will be the basis for trade and economic prosperity. That is particularly so in current circumstances, as foreign direct investment (FDI) is going to be in exceptionally short supply in the not too distant future. People should focus on that aspect. It is possible to grow, and increased trade is as good as inward investment. It secures jobs, and I am sure that that is the rationale for the involvement of organisations such as the IoD.

Mr O’Connor: I welcome the Minister’s statement. Can he tell us what has been done throughout Northern Ireland to publicise the work of InterTradeIreland among small businesses that are not necessarily operating in conjunction with LEDU?

Does he agree that to create a prosperous society here, and for local businesses to be successful, we must expand upon the work of InterTradeIreland and establish an east/west link, a European link and a global link? Does he envisage any expansion of the plan to include other European trading partners?

11.00 am

Sir Reg Empey: Those are sensible ideas. I agree that our objective should be to focus on increasing links, not only on this island and with the rest of the UK, but with the rest of the EU and further afield. Trade International Northern Ireland — the trading arm of the IDB — has received support from companies for missions overseas, which I will explain in more detail later.

InterTradeIreland held four roadshows that were well attended by members of the business community: I attended two of them. The purpose of the roadshows was to let the business community know of the organisation’s existence and potential. InterTradeIreland has also held themed events on e-commerce; it has a web site; it has communicated with all the major statutory organisations on both sides of the border; and it has sponsored several events, such as awards ceremonies. InterTradeIreland has also tried to establish itself by linking with chambers of commerce and several local authorities.

One must remember that it is only in the past few months that InterTradeIreland has had permanent staff. When it begins to publish its reports and deliver on the programmes that are now commencing, its work will be more widely known than it is at present.

Approximately two weeks ago, a substantial supplement to ‘The Irish Times’ focused on equity, and indicated the work that InterTradeIreland is doing in that area. The Member will find that supplement in the Library, and he will see how that organisation is doing its best to publicise its activities.

Mr Beggs: The Minister mentioned the importance of sales and marketing to the Focus and Fusion

schemes. Given the advent of the one-hour ferry crossing between Larne and Cairnryan, does the Minister accept that to increase trade with Scotland, the north of England and the rest of the UK will become more important to businesses in Northern Ireland in future?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened to several questions, and I must say that Members are using the opportunity afforded by statements, and questions to them, to rove wide of the statements themselves. That is inappropriate. It seems to have come to the point where I will have to talk to the Business Committee because the matter of questions on statements is being abused by some Members.

It is up to the Minister whether he wishes to respond to Mr Beggs's question. However, it has nothing to do with InterTradeIreland, which was the subject of the statement.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I hope that you do not include my question, because that was relevant to the statement.

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not mention any particular Member. If Members sense that what I said is relevant to them, that has nothing to do with me.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I do not feel that it refers to me. I will continue to ask my questions.

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not mention any particular Member. However, I caution on the general issue because I have listened carefully to all the questions — at least those that were questions, because not all of them were. I leave it to the Minister to decide whether to respond.

Sir Reg Empey: In response to my Colleague, 37% of goods that we produce go to the rest of the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that that is our single largest market. There is scope for the British-Irish Council to take up that aspect of the work, and there is no reason why that should not happen.

The Member refers to the links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Ferry crossings are undoubtedly one of those key links. Activity by any of our statutory agencies that ignored that fact would indicate a failure by those organisations, because they would not have focused on their nearest and most significant market.

SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD BILL

Further Consideration Stage

Clauses 1 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Social Security Fraud Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Assembly Standing Orders

The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures (Mr C Murphy): I beg to move the following amendment: In Standing Order 52 delete all and insert

“52. SUB-COMMITTEES

(1) Each Committee (“the parent Committee”), in the discharge of its functions, may establish sub-Committees.

(2) Unless with the approval of the Business Committee and the Assembly, a parent Committee shall establish no more than one sub-Committee to operate at any one time.

(3) A sub-Committee shall be appointed to consider specific, time-bounded matters within the terms of reference set by the parent Committee and shall:

(a) report only to that Committee; and

(b) stand dissolved on disposal of those matters.

(4) A sub-Committee shall not take any decision on behalf of the parent Committee.

(5) A parent Committee may appoint a member to be the Convenor of a sub-Committee.

(6) Each sub-Committee shall, in as far as it is practicable, reflect the party strengths in the Assembly.

(7) The quorum of a sub-Committee shall be determined by the parent Committee.

(8) The proceedings of a sub-Committee shall be such as the parent Committee shall determine.”

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClelland] in the Chair).

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As part of the ongoing review of Standing Orders, the Committee on Procedures has reviewed the procedures for establishing Sub-Committees.

The Committee focused primarily on the purpose of Sub-Committees and the procedures by which they are established. In its consideration, the Committee sought and received the agreement of the Chairperson's liaison

group to propose a Standing Order. The Committee drew on the practice used in other parliamentary institutions.

The purpose of the motion is to clarify the existing Standing Order that deals with Sub-Committees, which is Standing Order 52. That facilitates the establishment of Sub-Committees and formed part of the original Standing Orders agreed by the Assembly on 9 March 1999. However, the Committee concluded that several important issues are not addressed in the Standing Order. There is no provision for setting a quorum; there is no provision for setting procedures under which a Sub-Committee will work; and no account is taken of the possibility that a Committee may wish to establish two or more Sub-Committees to operate concurrently.

The proposed amendment to the Standing Order is designed to take account of those omissions. Sub-Committees can be useful to enable Committees to make progress quickly and efficiently, especially when a Committee is faced with a heavy work programme, or when there are other pressing engagements on Members' time that could make it difficult for the Committee to operate effectively. I refer to recent difficulties faced by some Committees during the recent Westminster election campaign.

Under Standing Order 52, a Committee of the Assembly currently has the right to establish a Sub-Committee, but it must first seek the approval of the Business Committee and, subsequently, that of the Assembly.

The Committee on Procedures considered that to meet that requirement was an unwieldy procedure. It concluded that the decision regarding the establishment of a Sub-Committee was one for the relevant Committee to make, and that the approval of the Business Committee and the Assembly was unnecessary.

The Committee on Procedures has therefore proposed that the Standing Order be amended and that the parent Committee be allowed to decide whether to create a Sub-Committee, without the prior approval of the Business Committee or the Assembly. However, to ensure that there is no abuse of the procedure, the Committee on Procedures has proposed that the new Standing Order state that Committees must seek the approval of the Business Committee and the Assembly if they wish to operate more than one Sub-Committee at any one time.

A further safeguard to the procedure, which is in addition to the current provisions of Standing Order 52, is that a Sub-Committee may be appointed only to consider specific time-bounded matters and must be dissolved upon disposal of those matters. That would ensure that Committees do not set up Standing Sub-Committees, the danger being that the importance of the Sub-Committee could, in time, outweigh that of the parent Committee.

Several other safeguards have been incorporated into the new Standing Order. It has been made explicit that a Sub-Committee may not take a decision on behalf of the Committee. That is an important stipulation, as it ensures that the Sub-Committee cannot operate independently from the parent Committee.

The new Standing Order also proposes that a Sub-Committee's quorum should be for the parent Committee to determine. Whether a minimum quorum should be set for Sub-Committees was a matter of some debate in the Committee on Procedures' deliberations. In arriving at its decision, the Committee acknowledged concerns that full party participation might not be achieved in Sub-Committees. To set the quorum at two or three would not resolve that potential problem. However, the Committee was confident that the new Standing Order would make it explicitly clear that Sub-Committees cannot make decisions on behalf of the parent Committee but must make its recommendations to the full Committee. That would allow full party participation in the decision-making process.

The purpose of the new Standing Order is to clarify the existing provisions of Standing Order 52 and to give Committees greater flexibility to manage their work programme. The amendment is part of our ongoing programme to improve methods of doing business in the Assembly.

Amendment agreed to (with cross-community support).

LIVESTOCK AND MEAT COMMISSION

Rev. Dr Ian Paisley (Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Report from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its Inquiry into the Livestock and Meat Commission (1/01R).

I call Members' attention to the corrigenda that have been circulated. Members should keep that information for reference when reading the report. There has been a mix-up between "producers" and "processors," and it is important that the two groups be correctly referred to.

For Members unfamiliar with the subject of the inquiry, I shall set out some background information. The Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland (LMC) was founded by law in 1967. It had the task of providing services to the Northern Ireland red-meat industry, which is vital to our economy, and to advise the Department of Agriculture on other related matters. The LMC is an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

To many farmers, the LMC is something of an enigma. They believe that it has become too closely aligned or too cosy with the meat processing companies and has lost sight of the farmers' interests.

In other words, farmers are saying that the LMC is providing services to only one part of the red-meat industry and that its independence is compromised.

11.15 pm

The LMC's carcass classification service and the make-up of its board are also common causes of complaints from farmers. Against the background of such criticism, the Committee agreed to undertake the inquiry, and it concentrated on two parts of the LMC's work — promotion and classification, and the way in which it is funded and its members are appointed.

First, I would like to thank those from all sectors of the industry who took part in the inquiry. The LMC gave its full co-operation throughout. Its chairman and the entire board accompanied the chief executive and marketing manager to one of the seven oral sessions that were held. The Committee also received 17 written submissions to the inquiry, for which we are most grateful.

Using that significant body of evidence, the Committee aimed to get under the skin of the LMC to discover whether the criticisms of it were justified and to offer constructive suggestions about how things might be improved. With the publication of our report, which we ask the Assembly to take note of, the Committee has achieved its aims.

The Committee makes a total of 33 recommendations, the majority of which are aimed at the LMC. A number are also aimed at the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as the sponsoring Department of the LMC.

The Committee believes that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a significant role to play in improving the sectoral balance of the LMC and in ensuring that it performs its statutory obligations in a manner that is seen to be totally impartial. Having considered the evidence, the Committee concluded that the LMC must re-invent itself to counteract farmers' perceptions. The Committee believes that the LMC must demonstrate its impartiality and independence much more clearly than it does at present, and our recommendations will help it to do that.

I do not propose to list or explain all the report's recommendations; however, I would like to highlight several of them. To begin with, the Committee considered producers' concerns about the relationship between the LMC and the meat processing industry. We have called for the LMC to develop and publish a protocol in which it will define the purpose, level and frequency of all contact between it and the processing industry. That is an attempt to overcome the perceptions of cosiness while recognising that those bodies will need to work closely together at times.

The Committee also addressed producers' disquiet about the fact that the current chairman of the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association also serves on the LMC board. The Committee has asked the LMC and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to consider the implications of such a situation in an attempt to avoid conflicts of interest.

Secondly, the Committee calls for a code of conduct to be drawn up to establish standards of behaviour expected of board members towards their home sector. Such a code would allow interested parties to make judgements on whether individuals were behaving in an appropriate manner. The code would apply as equally to farmers' representatives as to those with links with the processing industry.

It is important to consider the fears about the major meat processors. The Committee invited them, through the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, to participate in the inquiry. The Committee wanted to ensure that all sides of the argument were heard. The meat processors participated fully, which the Committee appreciated, although it did not see eye to eye with them on many topics.

However, it became clear that the meat exporters' interest in the LMC begins and ends with its marketing role. That is, perhaps, understandable. Their livelihoods depend on securing markets and making profits. They forget that the LMC is meant to support the entire

industry, not only one sector of it. That includes farmers who have spent time and money, and who have made strenuous efforts to provide the raw materials that allow processors to achieve their profits. Those profits are handsome in comparison to the farmers' poor returns. I repeat that the profits of the processors cannot, in any way, be compared to the poor returns of the farming community.

At times, the meat exporters' attitude to farmers had bordered on contempt. They said that it was not the issue that farmers did not know what promotional work the LMC was doing. They said that once-a-year producers and cattle dealers were out of touch with classification and that mixed farmers had little understanding of classification standards.

The meat exporters wanted the LMC board to be made up of captains of industry who could demonstrate their marketing vision and who understood the international marketing arena. They said that farmers were not the best people to be involved in marketing. They failed to recognise the imbalance caused by ignoring the most crucial part of the industry. In such a scenario, the meat exporters clearly consider the farmers' needs, aspirations, opinions and expectations to be of little consequence.

From the evidence heard by the Committee, it was all too obvious why producers fear that, as they put it, the meat exporters control the LMC. It is necessary for the LMC to demonstrate that its commitment to producers is not compromised by its relationship with the meat processing industry. The Committee's recommendations attempt to ensure that the correct balance is restored and that improper influence, perceived or otherwise, is no longer an issue.

The Committee made 10 recommendations on carcass classification. All sides recognised that that area caused greatest contention and farmer frustration. The Committee accepts that there will always be difficulties with such a subjective system, especially when the grade awarded can make such a substantial difference to the price paid to farmers. However, the Committee made an important discovery: the LMC's classification staff are permitted, under EU legislation, to be wrong in 20% of all classifications.

I asked one of the LMC members whether he would tell employees that they could afford to make mistakes in 20% of all their classifications. He replied that he would do nothing of the sort. The Committee said that the LMC should be doing nothing of the sort. Frankly, the Committee was astonished, despite assurances by the LMC that its employees do not err to the permitted extent.

The rules do nothing to reassure producers. Some of our findings relate to the fundamental rights of producers to see and to understand how their animals are graded and to question the results. The Committee's objective

is that due respect be given to the farming community, that the classification service be applied impartially and consistently and that education about the service be targeted at those who need it most.

Funding is always an important issue, and the Committee made a series of recommendations in that regard. All sectors of the industry agreed that more funding for the LMC was necessary. Our inquiry established that Government support in varying degrees is provided to equivalent bodies in England, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The Committee's recommendations seek to redress that imbalance and to provide continuity of funding, but to avoid the need for large increases of the slaughter levy paid by farmers. I emphasise our belief that the LMC should not be funded from the farmers' pockets. The meat exporters advocated a large increase in that levy. However, the Committee was satisfied that no such increase could be justified, nor would it be sustainable, given the farmers' present economic position. The main recommendation was for Government funding of the LMC's promotional activities as part of a clear marketing strategy. That does not represent the Committee's unconditional approval of the LMC's promotional work; rather it asks the Department and the Executive to recognise the importance of the red-meat industry, and acknowledge that EU state-aid rules include an obligation to provide assistance with marketing and promoting the industry's products.

In conclusion, the report is the Committee's honest attempt, after spending many hours in interviews and debates, to make a real difference. It sets out to help to overcome some of the problems faced by the LMC, particularly with regard to how they communicate with, and are perceived by, their most important customers — the farmers.

I commend the report to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is a time-limited debate, and I would be grateful if Members will limit their remarks to 10 minutes.

The Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I support the motion and associate myself with the Chairperson's comments on the report. It is an important piece of work, and I extend my thanks to everyone who participated in the inquiry.

I highlight two recommendations that were not covered in the Chairperson's opening remarks. After we had finished taking evidence, but before the report was compiled, there was discussion in the agricultural press about the creation of an agricultural forum.

11.30 am

The Committee agreed that that was relevant to the inquiry into the Livestock and Meat Commission,

particularly in view of the findings regarding communication with producers, and also throughout the supply chain. For that reason, in its report the Committee agreed to recommend that discussions should take place, which would lead to the development of such a forum. More specifically, the Committee has asked the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to facilitate those discussions, given that it has the necessary resources and accommodation. The proposal concerns development of the supply chain, which is in the Department's remit.

The recommendation is consistent with those made by the Committee in previous reports. For example, in its report 'Retailing in Northern Ireland', the Committee asked the Department to develop a structure whereby retail expertise could be used to improve the export of Northern Ireland goods. The Committee also asked the Department to create a scheme that would allow groups of producers to avail of processor and retailer assistance and advice in areas such as training, marketing and consumer research. In its report 'Restoring Profit for the Beef Producer', the Committee asked the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to create and lead a production task force that would consult with processors and retailers and focus on serving the markets better.

One stage of the chain has been overlooked; that of the consumer and the housewife. I am glad to see the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Chamber; she is both our Minister and a housewife. A major problem is staring every farmer in the face. The BSE crisis and other matters have helped to bring the agriculture industry down, but the cost to the housewife has remained unchanged. There is a profit of some 30 to 40 pence per kilo on beef. Where does that profit go?

The pig sector reported encouragement, better communication and co-operation among all elements of the supply chain. A properly organised forum could provide a better structure for the relationships in the supply chain. I hope that the Department accepts the Committee's recommendation.

The Committee's second recommendation seeks a thorough and transparent inquiry into the alleged practices of some meat plants in Northern Ireland. All those allegations fell outside the remit of the inquiry. Members agreed that they were relevant to it, given the Committee's scrutiny of the carcass classification service. How can producers have confidence in a classification system that can be inconsistent in the application of standards and the awarding of rates? In fact, that might also be open to abuse, with meat plants changing grades once classification is complete. The allegations must be fully investigated in order to build producer confidence and to safeguard the markets in which the processors operate. Under European law regarding the classification of beef carcasses offered

for sale, the Department is the competent authority and it must act quickly and decisively.

I commend the report to the Assembly. I will ask the Chairperson to ensure that the Committee follows up the two additional recommendations that I highlighted.

Mr Bradley: I apologise if I repeat points made during the in-depth analysis and presentations given by the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. I support the changes to the make-up of the LMC board. Those changes would result in all participants in the supply chain having full confidence in the LMC. Members of the board would then be seen to be acting impartially and independently, with a full understanding of the circumstances faced throughout the chain.

Producers must be represented in order to remove the element of doubt that is always present when the LMC's role is being discussed. The board would gain more credibility with producers if the board of the commission adopted a policy of more all-inclusive membership. The imbalance would be addressed by increasing to nine the number of members of the board, and allocating a third of the positions to farmers. That would provide an ideal foundation on which to build improved relationships.

I support the view that members of the commission should be paid for attendance at meetings and when appointed to work in its interests. Producers should have some access to classifiers' work. If the classifiers have such self-confidence in their work, and if access to that work improves business relationships, why should producers not have a right of access?

Some witnesses called for a better appeal procedure, while others even questioned its existence. The Ulster Farmers Union gave the considered opinion that the existing appeal procedure needs to be overhauled to make it more friendly to producers, and that a procedure must be implemented whereby all genuine enquiries and concerns would be fully addressed.

Widely used terms such as "openness", "transparency", "quality", and "best practice" spring to mind. Witnesses expressed many different views during the inquiry, but the word "Holstein" was quoted several times. That word seems to set off alarm bells for graders. If the graders did not know in advance that the carcass was a Holstein, I believe that the grades might have been different.

During the evidence sessions, we were told that grade prices varied from £1.70 per kilogram to £1.30 per kilogram. Since we received those figures in May, I have seen producers' dockets on which the price has ranged from £1.25 to £1.15 for a batch of meal-fed Holsteins. I found the figures difficult to believe — we can only imagine how the producer felt.

Putting the issue of Holsteins aside, I share the concerns of the chairman of the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association (NIAPA). In written evidence, he stated that many farmers believed that grading standards must keep moving as producers continue to spend more on resources to improve their breeding stock. It appears to be a case of improvement without reward. That leads me to the issue of the 20% margin of error that classifiers are permitted, which was referred to earlier. That margin of error is difficult to accept from a professional body such as meat classifiers, and it must be reviewed. Perhaps farmers could be granted similar latitude when completing integrated administration and control system forms (IACS), but I doubt that that will happen. I appreciate that grading is not an exact science and that the number of grades that are in place at the moment are not helpful to anyone. However, I share the view of my Colleagues on the Committee that the classifiers' performance must be made demonstrably better than it is at present in order to build all-round confidence in the payment and grading system.

I support the suggestion that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development should facilitate producer meetings with the LMC, in consultation with farmers' representative organisations. A series of meetings would provide the opportunity for the LMC and the producers to exchange views, and for producers to learn more about the LMC's activities. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could also consider facilitating the proposal to develop an agricultural forum in order to structure the relationships between the LMC, the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA), producers, consumers and all other interested parties.

In the past I have called for information technology (IT), sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to be made available in the homes of full-time farmers. With appropriate IT training, we could end the nightmare of bureaucracy and form completion that farmers currently face. It should be simple to devise a farmers' computer programme that would be compatible with technology in the Divisional Veterinary Office and with the LMC. The provision of IT-accessible information from bodies such as the LMC would be a welcome factor in customer relationships. It would also keep the producer updated on relevant LMC information.

At no time did the Committee have a "let's-get-LMC attitude". This was not a witch-hunt. Throughout the inquiry the Committee worked positively and constructively to improve relationships between all sectors of the beef industry. Naturally our prime concern was the interest of the farmer/producer. If beef production in Northern Ireland ceases, that will have a knock on effect on many in the agriculture industry.

I call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to initiate an in-depth study of the Committee's report, with a view to implementing the recommendations. The methods that must be implemented to secure the long-term well being of the producer, the LMC, the meat plants, the graders, and the general beef industry can be found in the pages of the report.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the report to the House. It forms a vital part of the inquiries that we have carried out on the agriculture industry. People in the industry — including some of those who gave evidence to the Committee — may well feel that the report's criticisms are directed at them. However, there is a positive side to this also. The report contains 33 recommendations, together with the evidence collected. It is there for everyone to read.

I hope that the report will focus people's attention in a way that has not been the case in the past. We have found through our work in the Assembly — and not only in agriculture issues — that there has been a tremendous lack of critical self-examination by industry, and especially by statutory bodies including the LMC. The agriculture industry tends to grind on without necessarily looking at things from the point of view of the individuals who go to make up the industry, such as the primary producers.

Many people may feel that the Committee of Agriculture and Rural Development is biased towards farmers, but that is not the case. The Committee is critically examining the entire situation and, in some instances, has tried to strike a balance on behalf of the producer. In examining what is sometimes conflicting evidence, the Committee has found that the bodies involved, the LMC in particular, have not taken farmers' concerns and opinions into account, nor acted on those concerns. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a role to play as overseer of the industry. In order for there to be an industry in the future, it will have to work as a unit. It cannot operate in separation, with some parts making a profit while others do not. If the industry does not work as one unit, we will have no farming industry here, and we do not want that to happen. That is part of the reason why we have carried out inquiries and targeted groups such as the LMC.

Concerns have been voiced about an inquiry that was conducted by the Department before 2000 and which was not published. This inquiry is, therefore, timely.

The LMC's role is to support the livestock industry and provide services for the processors. Many people who have given evidence to the Committee have expressed concern about some of the LMC's relationships and its impartiality. It is a difficult issue. I do not know how it is going to be resolved, but it must be resolved. Many farmers perceive that they are being blamed for not

taking action, or for not being capable of taking action. For example, as regards grading, many farmers feel that they are being accused — not only by the LMC but, in some instances, by NIMEA — of not being up to the job because they are not large-scale meat producers. We do not want to reach the stage where all farmers in this part of Ireland have to become large-scale producers like those in Argentina. We can never reach that level of production. We will never reach a situation where farmers are committed to large-scale production. We will always have family-size farms and the difficulties associated with them. The blame has been pointed in the wrong direction. It should have been apportioned even-handedly. It was not.

11.45 am

Other difficulties about the LMC were raised by many in the farming industry. Farmers — the primary producers — felt that they were under-represented and that their point of view was not being heard. There were no female representatives. The way appointments were made was mentioned and also the fact that the individuals appointed could sit on other boards. All these things are important. Farmers have always felt that everyone else is against them. We require clarity of purpose for each individual member. Are particular interests being neglected if someone is sitting on two boards? If so, that needs to be changed for the betterment of everyone.

The classification system was probably the most contentious issue for farmers. The grading of animals is one of the services provided by the LMC. Who gets the most out of that, the producer or the processor? For farmers, the question of value for money was a concern. The amount they pay to rear each animal — for little return in many instances — is a problem. In a previous report we read about alleged cartels among the processors. It may be no more than a perception. However, it has never been developed any further than that.

There is a communication problem between the LMC, the processors and the producers which needs to be put right. Both the Ulster Farmers Union and the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association mentioned this. This is a critical point, and we have made recommendations to deal with it.

The promotional activities of the LMC were also focused upon. Everything was going well before BSE and foot-and-mouth disease struck. Farmers were receiving good prices. Now things are totally different. Markets came under particular pressure at that point, and we have to ask questions about the type of markets that are available. The processors and large supermarkets do not really mind where they source their raw produce. They are happy enough to go to Argentina or Brazil, and both countries have said that they are going to treble their output of beef in the next three years. This

is what we are up against. Most of our beef is sold in the British market, with small amounts sold in the European market. Farmers feel they are paying for something that is not really happening. They are not getting to the wider markets, so why should they bother paying at all?

Quality assurance is an extra pressure and expense for farmers, and they do not necessarily gain anything from it, as it is not directly connected with the production of beef. Beef from farms that are quality assured and beef from farms that are not probably go to the same markets and achieve the same prices. This week, the price is 65p per kilo for heifers in local markets. A farmer selling at that sort of price has to ask what is in it for him when steak costs around £14.

These are the difficulties as farmers see them. Everything will have to change over time, and we need to find a way forward. Our recommendations certainly point the way. The retailers, the LMC, the NIMEA, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and everyone else have to take account of each and every one of those recommendations. I have been told that some of them will not be taken into account, but most have much to offer.

Another point raised concerns a 20% error rate in the grading classification. That should not be the case, but those things have only come to light through the report. There is far too much inbuilt leeway. We have produced a positive report, but there is much justified criticism. However, it should be seen in a positive light, because we want to improve the industry's future for everyone, particularly the producers who have not been looked after so far. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Douglas: I too welcome the report. There seems to be a great gulf between producers and the LMC. Producers see the commission as too closely aligned with the meat processors. Reasons for that perception include the inadequate producer element on the LMC board and the apparent processor bias given the number of seats producers hold.

It is imperative that a body that promotes our meat has the necessary expertise of the processing sector, but is it necessary to have the chairman of NIMEA and the directors of two of our major meat processors on the board, with only two part-time farmers? It is difficult to understand how a balance can be achieved.

To correct the perceived bias, we must have a fully transparent and independent nomination and appointment process which is representative of all. If that can be achieved by more openness, perhaps farmers will come to have a greater affinity with the LMC, which should be their board after all. They fund it, and it should be for the benefit of everyone.

We must give credit to the LMC for its work in promoting Northern Ireland meat. That is an important

aspect of the meat industry which must be pursued vigorously. I am glad to see the continued pursuit of international markets and the contracts that have been established with potential customers to ensure that, when the European market opens up again, there are good relationships to build on.

We must remember that pre-BSE, when beef was trading at a top price of 240 pence per kilo, as opposed to 160 pence today, that price was obtained by successful exports to Europe through the greenfield brands and a more favourable exchange rate. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development must press for low-incidence BSE status again soon, so that at least one of those variables can come into play and, I hope, lead to the re-establishment of Northern Ireland beef on the premium market which it deserves.

Unfortunately we cannot control the exchange rate, so we must work on the export factor to increase competition in the marketplace. The LMC can market produce both at home and internationally, but the programme must be funded, and that is a point of contention among producers and processors.

One of the main problems is that any additional levy collected from processors always finds its way out of the producers' pockets. As processors protect their profits no matter what happens, producers need more information on the promotional activities, funded by them, that are carried out by the LMC and the processors. They might then be more willing to consider a small increase in funding, perhaps through a transaction levy at a low level, to ensure that funding comes from the whole food chain and not just the producers.

Many producers feel that most of their levies support grading, and due to their bad experiences with that system they are reluctant to fund such activities. Farmers do not like the words "carcass classification", and the majority of producers do not like the present system. The LMC maintains that it is lenient and biased towards the farmers, but that is strongly refuted by most producers. The main tenet of this is the reluctance to have farmers see their cattle graded and the reluctance of the meat processors to have the producer there to see cattle being classified.

Variations of 20%, as the report states, are too high and must be drastically reduced. A 1% difference in classification can result in a 6p per kilo differential in the cost of a carcass, which equates to approximately £30 per animal. That is unacceptable and must be improved on; alternatively, new subjective systems, which are now available mechanically, must be adopted. Producers must be reassured by being actively brought into the system and educated regarding the reasons for giving particular grades. Undoubtedly the producers have their part to play in producing carcasses that meet the demands of today's markets.

Unfortunately, because of the MacSharry proposals in the early 1990s, farmers have not so much been encouraged to keep more cattle, as they have had to keep more cattle to be able to survive and to make a profit. There was little encouragement for farmers to produce better quality. They just kept higher numbers in order to survive. Perhaps that needs to be addressed.

The Department should be congratulated on its attempts to educate farmers through the colleges regarding keeping better cattle so that we have better carcasses. Ultimately there are some cattle that do not meet the higher standards that are now needed in the world. Much more must be done through the farming community and through LMC to promote better cattle for today's markets.

The report is a well-balanced reflection of the LMC's operation. Its recommendations seek, to help advance the aims of the organisation by making it more transparent, farmer-friendly and responsive to the long-term needs of the industry. After all, there is an important job to be done in promoting the Northern Ireland meat industry, and we must have a strong and progressive organisation to do that.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I welcome the opportunity for the Assembly to take note of another report by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee. I support the comments of the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson. I thank our Committee Clerk and staff, and all who participated in the Committee, on coming up with another excellent report.

We are here to take note of the report, and I understand that the Minister will want some time to study it in detail and consider the recommendations and their implications, both for the LMC and for her Department. I look forward to another debate on the details of the report at a later stage. I hope that by that time the Minister will have responded and will have prompted some action to deal with our recommendations.

However, it is important to sound a note of warning and caution. I hope that this report does not suffer the same fate as the other three reports that our Committee has produced: they are published and the fundamental matters that we address are considered, but nothing else appears to happen. I have no doubt that today all sides will unite and endorse the report. Unfortunately, that is where it all appears to come to an end.

There is a sigh of relief after public representatives have spoken on these matters, but no action appears to flow from them. As a result of our previous reports, the Department has implemented the minimum, not the maximum, amount of activity. The Department has other issues and its own agenda, but it is important that these issues are taken up and implemented as fully as possible.

What I am going to say next is not just a criticism of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, it is a criticism of all Departments. Indeed, it is a criticism of Government generally. Departments appear to be a big, amorphous sponge. They are able to soak up all the criticism.

They are able to note all the concerns, but without any apparent change on the surface. There is no change in direction or policy, and no change in legislation. The only Bill that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had to give time to was the Dogs (Amendment) Bill — a minor piece of legislation — and that was in the previous session.

12.00

Sooner or later, someone is going to look at our Government and ask whether they are doing anything that is more strategically helpful to local farmers than previous Administrations did. If we have to search to see whether we are making a difference, the Administration, in general, fail the test. We must face up to that. All the excuses of the day will be levelled at me for those remarks, such as the fact that our hands are tied by regulations from Europe and by European Directives, or that we have had a major foot-and-mouth disease crisis. I accept that.

However, such problems limit what is possible; they do not prevent the Government from taking action. We must not allow the Department, or any Administration, to padlock itself into a cage and stand still. The world goes on in spite of those crises and setbacks. The Administration will be judged on how they work through those crises to achieve their goals.

A report from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is before the Assembly. Previously, after debating such reports, the Committee was right to anticipate action from the Department in view of the unanimous endorsement that those reports received. I hope that the Minister will say today that, if this report also receives a unanimous endorsement, it will not suffer the fate of previous reports and action will be taken.

It would be disgraceful if the report were shelved. I hope that the Department is prepared to implement the report's recommendations that directly affect it. If the Minister is prepared to implement them, I hope that she will be able to provide us with a timescale for implementation. We can only judge the Department by the timescale that it sets, and it should let us know whether it has a timescale in mind. It is important for Members to know the answers to those questions; otherwise we are wasting our time, and we do not want to feel that we are doing that.

The Chairperson has said that it is time for the LMC to re-invent itself, and I agree with other Members on that. If it is time for the LMC to re-invent itself, the

Minister must take the necessary action to bring that about. Does the Minister agree that the producers do not perceive the LMC in a favourable light? Does the Minister agree that the LMC requires more than a makeover and, if so, what is she going to do about it?

I refer to paragraphs 2.1 and 3.4 of the recommendations of the executive summary about the perception and communication of the LMC. It is important to put on the record the points that have been summarised in the report. The report states that

“Both the Committee and representatives of producers believe that the relationship between the LMC and the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) is perceived as being too close, compromising the independence of the LMC in the eyes of the producers.”

It is important that the recommendations to deal with that are fully implemented. It goes on to say that there is

“poor communication between the LMC and producers. This has contributed to suspicion and scepticism on behalf of the producer in relation to a range of LMC activities and must be addressed.”

On page 207 we see NIMEA's paranoia in a submission that it made to us. One of the members of that body, instead of addressing the issue of communication between the LMC and the producer, spent two or three paragraphs criticising the Committee for raising that matter. That shows that either paranoia exists at the LMC and within NIMEA or there is a failure even to recognise that the producer has a legitimate concern, which the Committee attempted to get them to address. It is essential that the LMC and NIMEA tackle that issue. The criticisms that were made on page 207 by NIMEA were fundamentally wrong. Until NIMEA faces up to that and realises that the Committee's comments and its activities were designed to help the entire industry, it will continue to miss the point.

The Committee made several recommendations on funding and levy charges. We did not make them lightly, but we received a caveat that the Committee could support such a move only if producers here were receiving similar prices to those that their colleagues in Great Britain were getting. That is certainly not the case at present. We list seven or eight issues that relate to funding, which we hope the Minister and the LMC will be able to address, if not today, then when the Minister has had an opportunity to consider them in detail. We should not ask the Minister for a knee-jerk response to those important matters, which have important implications for the entire industry.

Is the Department going to invest in a new and more accurate classification system? That is important. The LMC does not have the resources to do that. The responsibility falls to the Department, and in paragraphs 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 of the report we have highlighted some of our concerns in that regard. The Committee thinks that the accepted standard error in classification of

20% is too high and that actual performance must be regularly assessed should an error rate occur between 5% and 10%.

Farmers are dissuaded from viewing the grading of their animals. We recommend that farmers should be able to see their animals being graded, and we ask the Minister to implement that recommendation.

I hope that the Minister accepts that much of the concerns and animosity among the producer, the LMC and NIMEA arise from the perceived grading problems. The sooner that we have new technology in that area, the better for us all. I hope that the Department will respond to that request by providing the LMC with the resources and equipment that it requires.

Mr Armstrong: I commend the report to the Assembly. In recent times, the LMC has failed to demonstrate independence and even-handedness in its work. The perception of the commission by farmers is relatively negative in various areas. In turn, that reflects on the flow of the entire supply chain.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's duty is to investigate such matters with the aim of creating an environment in which farmers can maximise their potential, and in which housewives can get value for money and products of the highest quality. It is our intention to raise concerns and make recommendations to ensure that agriculture in Northern Ireland is a viable industry.

The investigation found that the current system of animal classification is ambiguous, confusing and unaccountable. It is unacceptable that one in five animals receive a classification that is not totally correct. I reaffirm the report's recommendation that farmers should be encouraged to view the grading of their beef cattle. Producers must be clear about the process, and their animals should receive a fair grade.

LMC officials are seen to be partial to the interests of the processors. A system of appeals should be set up to safeguard producers' interests further. Immediate steps must be taken to restore farmers' confidence.

I support a reduction in the number of payment grades to make the system clearer. There could be around 25 different grades.

Does the housewife benefit from the present system? I do not believe so. I welcome the initiative on mechanical grading, which will help to reduce the extent of human error and inconsistency in the grading process.

The current links between the LMC and NIMEA are too close to allow farmers to have confidence in the LMC. It is unacceptable that the chairperson of NIMEA also sits on the LMC board. It is vital for the LMC to extend its grading process to benefit the consumer — our families. Consumers should be informed of the quality grade of meat products on display at retail outlets.

Finally, the LMC should work for the benefit of the farmer and monitor the complete supply chain. If Northern Ireland's agriculture industry were to disappear, there would be no need for the LMC. We all know the pressure that the agriculture sector is under these days. It is unacceptable that the primary producer has been made to feel alienated by the present workings of the LMC. I therefore encourage the LMC to take on board the Committee's recommendations and give confidence to the Northern Ireland farmers, thus enabling them to meet the needs of the consumer and processors.

Mr Dallat: The inquiry could be a milestone on the way to recovery for the red meat industry. I would not be so worried about the report gathering dust on the Minister's shelves; I would be more concerned about there being no Minister, because the LMC, like many other organisations, did its own thing during direct rule. It was answerable to no one.

Given that democracy will continue, the LMC cannot ignore the report's recommendations. If common sense prevails, the LMC will have to accept the findings and begin the process of rebuilding confidence, which is critical to the farming industry.

Without doubt, there is a serious image problem, but it goes much further than that. The LMC must convince the farming industry that it is totally impartial, independent and in no way influenced by the processors. That is no mean task, but it must begin immediately. The present conflict serves only to sap the industry of its energy and vision for the future. Reference has been made to funding, which is critical to the efficiency of any modern organisation involved in such important work. Consultation and sensitivity are required if radical changes are to occur.

The report concludes that the classification service is the major problem, and the Committee advocates a much greater degree of separation between the classification service and the LMC's other activities. The margin for error in classification performance is too great. It results in a serious lack of confidence — a confidence that must be rebuilt. There is a perception that the primary producer is undervalued by the rest of the supply chain. That is totally unacceptable.

Several Members have referred to marketing, which is one of the most critical aspects of our meat industry. However, I was not convinced that the issue was addressed with the degree of enthusiasm that it deserved. The LMC certainly failed to convince us of its success in that respect. Whatever the truth is, there is no doubt that more visible work on the domestic market would be beneficial.

Appointments have also been mentioned. They are often a contentious issue, and nowhere more so than in relation to the LMC. The report contains positive and useful recommendations to make the LMC more

talented and representative in carrying out its duties. It would be foolish to ignore those recommendations.

Much of the concern expressed in the report relates to transparency and how the LMC carries out its functions. There is genuine concern that processors have undue influence and that that is to detrimental to the farming industry. The report's recommendations are intended to bring improvements to the operation of the LMC and to the greater interest of the red-meat industry.

I have no doubt that the Department will give every assistance to the LMC to repackage itself as an organisation that is free from unfair influence and that is dynamic enough to change for the common good of everyone.

12.15 pm

Mr Kane: I support the motion. The inquiry into the LMC has been extensive, and those Members who are not directly involved in farming may be surprised by the diverse role that the commission plays in modern livestock farming. The commission's role is extensive and so too must be its obligation to its largest contributor — the farmer. That is why, almost unfailingly, farmers' representative organisations have questioned the level of farmer representation on the LMC board.

Farmers demand nothing less than appropriate representation on a body that claims to act impartially between them and the processors. It is hoped that the recommendations to resolve that problem will be adhered to.

LMC funding is fraught with controversy. Producers who have received minimum returns for produce are compelled to pay, whereas processors — and everyone knows how well they have done — contribute voluntarily. Not one farmer in the Province is fooled. Farmers know that the processors' stake is all too easily recovered from the producers, and the belief is that a stake from processors will serve only to increase the control of the sector over the LMC's activities. Therefore it is time to review the make-up and size of the commission board as contained in the recommendations.

Classification has been an area of extreme difficulty. Despite that difficulty, it is essential that those who carry out the task do so with impunity. Producers must be assured that the grading of animal carcasses will be done subjectively. An animal's value can be changed considerably by the grade awarded to it. The increasingly disturbing scenario is that classification is conducted by staff recruited by the processors. That is a daunting prospect and will render as useless any recommendations contained in the inquiry document. Members must act quickly in the event of such a development.

The LMC's reaction to strong branding of Northern Ireland's meat products has been lukewarm. Instead, it

has favoured a farm quality assurance scheme as a more effective marketing tool. That is not as acceptable to producers, who have to pay up to £50 per year to participate in the scheme. Green Field was an effective selling brand for Northern Ireland beef before the BSE crisis. There is a strong suspicion that because the commission and the processors are so closely associated, and because a poorly administered farm quality assurance scheme means that all sorts of products are successfully marketed under the farm quality assurance scheme, that is the reason that the scheme was chosen over the branding approach.

It is also striking that even though the LMC is aware of price quotes for cattle and sheep — indeed, it compiles the figures in Northern Ireland — it has not questioned the disparity in price between the Province and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The inquiry has been extensive and protracted, but its recommendations are clear. The Assembly looks forward to the LMC's speedy adoption of the Committee's recommendations, not least its active participation in an agriforum. The agriculture industry eagerly awaits changes as a result of the proposals. Therefore, the onus is on senior figures in the commission to act or to accept the responsibility for the delay.

Mr Poots: I support the report. However, part of our problem is that Northern Ireland beef producers cannot export. As has been highlighted, differences exist between the views of processors and producers. There is not as great a disparity between the producers and processors in other sectors of agriculture as there is in the beef sector, the reason being that since BSE the processors have been able to wring the producers for every penny.

The producers have been suffering ever since the ban was put in place, so there is a great burden on political representatives, especially the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, to see that the ban is lifted at the earliest opportunity. Until that happens, we shall not have a level playing field.

Members have highlighted the problem that allows 20% of grades to be wrong. I do not want to go any further with that as it has been spoken about for long enough. However, there are 42 different grades for animals, and there is a disparity of 60p per kilo, which could result in a difference of anything from £150 to £300 in the price of an animal. That should be addressed. Therefore, many grades are unnecessary, and we could have a much tighter grading system.

The grading system should be transparent so that producers feel that they are getting fair grades for their animals. I am concerned that the Vision Group's report considers transferring responsibility for carcass classifications from the LMC to the meat companies. Much of what we have heard this morning and read in the

report has shown that producers are greatly dissatisfied with the meat companies. However, the Vision Group suggests that we should transfer responsibility for grading animals to the people who will buy them. The processors had the producers in a difficult position before, and to transfer grading to the processors will put the producers in an even more difficult position. I trust that when the Minister looks at the Vision Group's report she will throw that recommendation out of the window and have no truck with it.

The processors have said that levies should be passed on to the markets, so that every time an animal goes through the market there should be a levy on it. That would be wrong. Hill-sheep farmers bring their store lambs down from the hills each year to sell on to the lowland producers who buy lambs for fattening. If a levy were put on the market, lambs could be levied two or three times. That would be wholly unfair and go against the markets and, again, the producers.

I wish to express a note of caution. The markets offer an alternative for producers, which is why the meat plants do not like them. Where lambs can be exported, the markets allow farmers to maximise their returns in the conditions prevailing. Therefore, it would benefit the processors if the markets were hit with that levy.

I welcome the recommendation that a processor levy, fairly applied on a statutory basis, be imposed. The processors are currently paying that levy voluntarily, and they appeared to emphasise their generosity in their submissions by pointing out that they give that money to the LMC.

They have received a reasonable return for their benevolence, but it would be fairer for a statutory levy to be imposed on all processors.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The LMC is a significant organisation in the Northern Ireland red-meat industry. It has a specific responsibility to advise the Government on industry-related matters, and it provides important services to the industry. It is therefore appropriate that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has undertaken an inquiry into the LMC's activities. I welcome the publication of its report.

It would be inappropriate to give a detailed response to the report's recommendations because I received it only a few days ago, and it needs to be reflected on and studied properly. The Committee has asked me to respond in substantive terms in due course and I will do so, taking account of Members' comments made today.

In reference to the main recommendations of the report, the future funding of the LMC is an important issue. Nearly all the reserves that had been built up for several years have been used to help the LMC to undertake core activities. It is 13 years since the levy

was increased, and another increase will be necessary if those core activities are to continue. I shall issue draft legislation for consultation to provide for an increase in the levy and to make statutory the levy currently paid voluntarily by processors. The size of that increase will be determined after the consultation process. I note the Committee's view that the increase should be limited to the rate of inflation.

I note also the Committee's comments on the classification service and the series of recommendations addressed to the Department and the LMC. The majority of contributors to the debate referred to classification. I recognise that, by its very nature, classification is a subjective process and that it is often, therefore, a controversial one. Undoubtedly, a mechanical system would provide the necessary objectivity, which, it is to be hoped, would remove a large element of the controversy. I agree with the Committee that we should work towards the development of a satisfactory mechanical system, although it would take some time to develop such a system and to achieve EU approval. In the meantime, I shall study the report's recommendations on the present system.

The Committee has also asked the LMC to consider recommendations that relate to its promotional activities, especially in the domestic market. I look forward to reading the LMC's response. The LMC undertakes considerable work in the local market at retail level. Moreover, it encourages young people — the consumers of tomorrow — to understand the nutritional value of Northern Ireland red meat. I was pleased to be able to assist the LMC in the launch of its summer lamb promotional campaign, an evaluation of which will soon be completed.

The Committee also made recommendations on the appointment of members to the LMC board. That issue was also discussed today by Mr Bradley, Mr McHugh and Mr Dallat, among others. I shall consider the matter in full. Reference was made to the regrettable absence of women on the LMC board. In the past, the board included a few women, but not enough of them. When the most recent advertisement for members was published, no women applied for the post, despite the fact that they were encouraged to apply. Women have a substantial contribution to make, especially in the area of marketing.

When forwarding the report, the Deputy Chairperson, Mr Savage, asked me to consider it in the context of a forthcoming appointment to fill a vacancy in the LMC that will arise at the end of the year. The appointment process has already started, but I assure Mr Savage and the Assembly that the skills and qualities required for that post were discussed fully with the chairman of the LMC before the advertisement was finalised. That advertisement will appear in the agriculture press, and

the relevant industry organisations will be notified of the vacancy.

Mr Savage and Mr Bradley asked about the facilitation by the Department of discussions between the LMC and the producers. I am happy to confirm that the Department's facilities are available for meetings between the two bodies. They have been used for that purpose in the past. I agree with Mr Bradley's comments on the need for co-operation among all parties involved in the food chain and his recognition of the interdependence that exists throughout the chain.

12.30 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr referred to the problem of perceptions. I may have powers, but I do not have the power to change perceptions, especially in Northern Ireland. If I did have that power, we might have a different society.

In relation to Mr McHugh's point about the quinquennial review report, the final report was made available to the main industry organisations last year. I delayed its formal publication pending the outcome of the Committee's inquiry into the LMC. I have already told the Committee that I shall publish the review report as part of my response to its inquiry.

Mr Paisley Jnr made a point about my response to earlier reports. I have responded to the recommendations made in the Committee's previous reports where appropriate, and I have implemented them where appropriate. Not all recommendations can be implemented, because I must take account of wider issues, which include, unfortunately, budgetary considerations. Those represent a considerable constraint.

I agree with Mr Douglas's point about the importance of quality. I thank him for his remarks about the Department's efforts to deal with that important issue. The Department injected £2 million into the beef quality initiative, and it is hoped that that will bear fruit and improve quality.

Mr Poots mentioned the reopening of the marts. I am aware of the importance of that issue, and I am working hard on it. The Department is speeding up BSE testing in the hope that it can make a substantial case for reopening the marts by the end of the year. I have already spoken to Commissioner Byrne about this matter, and he is sympathetic. I have also spoken to Lord Whitty, who has agreed to support me when I go to Europe.

In a report published last week, I note that the National Beef Association (NBA) suggests that we should wait until the case is made for the whole of the UK, which would probably happen at a later date. In relation to Mr Poots's comments, it would be extremely unfortunate if, because of the DUP's point of view and current events, I were not in a position to pursue our case when the time comes. It will certainly not be in

the interests of the Northern Ireland industry if the case for low-incidence BSE status is not pursued by a local Minister, as I have done.

I agree with Mr Poots's comments about the importance of lamb exports, and I am sure that he will agree that if a local Administration, led by a local Minister, had not been in a position to achieve regionalisation for Northern Ireland, we would not be exporting our lamb now. That issue underlines the importance of retaining our local Administration and of setting aside political stunts. I am serious about that, because the agriculture industry is in a serious position. We have been through difficult times, and it is important that we should be in a position to deal with all the issues as soon as possible.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I welcome the debate, which has been useful in highlighting the report's main points. It is an important report, given the financial interests of farmers, the operation of the LMC, and the concerns and allegations that were made to the Committee during the inquiry. The Committee did not initiate the criticisms. The criticisms came from witnesses, and the report lists those legitimate criticisms. Some people may think that the Committee simply sat down, calculated the number of things that it could say, and put them on paper. That is utter nonsense. What is on paper is hard evidence, tested by close enquiry and cross-examination. The report reflects the views of farmers and of workers in the meat industry.

I agree with the comments of the Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, Mr Savage. The Committee will follow up the issues of meat plants and the agriculture forum.

Our report has been published at a time when there is a great deal of interest in another report, 'Vision for the Future of the Agri-Food Industry'. The Committee will meet the authors of that report shortly to compare our recommendations with those in the Vision Group's report before we draw our conclusions.

I regret that the Vision Group report proposes that the whole issue of classification be handed over to the meat companies. I am amazed at that recommendation, which falls completely contrary to the Committee's examination of the evidence. However, debate is healthy. The Committee welcomes the meeting with the Vision Group, and those matters will, no doubt, be discussed at length.

The Committee did not expect the Minister to give a considered response to the report, and it is glad that she did not. If she had given a considered response, it would have been a dismissal of the report. The Minister will study the report and may ask for further amplification. The Committee welcomes the fact that the report will be studied carefully — it certainly deserves to be.

I hope that the LMC itself will look at the report. I hear that one person has already dismissed it by saying that the Committee had no right to even consider those matters. As long as this elected body exists, it has the right under law to look into those matters and, no matter who is angry or who does not like it, we shall look into it and give our answers. We shall hear people's legitimate complaints and criticisms. The processing side of the industry has said that it is content with the LMC's work. Why would it not be content, given the cosy relationship that the processors have enjoyed with the LMC? The primary producer side sees things very differently, and those matters must be commented on.

I take off my cap as Committee Chairman in order to reply to the political point that the Minister made. If her party had walked into the Lobbies yesterday with the majority of the House, cross-community support would have been established, and the Assembly would have been unable to fall. It was because her party walked into the wrong Lobby that it will be responsible for bringing down the Assembly. I regret that I must say that, but when the Minister takes sides and lectures people on an issue that has nothing to do with politics, the world must hear that, had she and her party said loudly and clearly that there are Nationalists who want decommissioning and who want it now, the Assembly would not be in jeopardy.

I trust that this debate will continue, that the farming community will be given its rights and that future Committees appointed by the Department will be fairly appointed, giving representation to all sides of the community.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Report from the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development on its Inquiry into the Livestock and Meat Commission (1/01R).

The sitting was suspended at 12.39 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

THRESHOLD ASSESSMENT (NORTHERN IRELAND)

2.00 pm

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly believes that the 'Threshold Assessment (Northern Ireland)' does not provide equality for all members of the teaching profession. — [*Mr B Hutchinson*]

Motion not moved.

SAFEGUARDING INDUSTRIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr McClarty: I beg to move

That this Assembly, realising the full extent of international terrorism, resolves that the Executive should re-double its efforts to safeguard existing industries in Northern Ireland and give maximum support to agencies responsible for the generation of new national and international investment.

I am painfully aware that the announcements of job losses and cutbacks in the past fortnight could be the tip of the iceberg. That gives me all the more reason to feel disappointed that the Benches are so empty this afternoon.

We all recognise the pain of unemployment. We all know people who have had their dreams shattered virtually overnight. We all know entrepreneurs — many of them self-made people — who wait anxiously to see how their enterprises will fare in the coming turbulent months.

The real tragedy is that Northern Ireland had been performing so impressively before the onset of global slow-down and the horrendous events of 11 September. It is worth reminding the House of the achievements of the local economy. In the past three years the IDB has promoted a total of over 21,000 jobs, of which 16,200 were with externally-owned companies and almost 4,000 with companies that are locally-owned.

From 1995 to 2000, the figures are even more impressive. In that period Northern Ireland attracted over £300 million in new foreign direct investment, and a further £1.6 billion from overseas firms already located in the Province. Almost 40,000 new jobs were promoted and sustained by foreign direct investment.

Rising productivity and consistent growth in overall competitiveness are features of a modern, progressive

and outward-looking economy. Our performance has easily outstripped that of the rest of the United Kingdom. In the year to March 2001 output rose by 8.1%, compared to the UK average of 1.2%. Output in technology-led sectors such as electrical and optical equipment increased by 229% in the past five years, while the UK figure stood at 41%.

Our export performance has been nothing short of remarkable. Even with difficult sterling exchange rates, exports were up 14.2% in 1999-2000. In the year to June 2001, export markets outside the European Union jumped by 20% to represent almost half of Northern Ireland's exports, now accounting for 39% of our total sales.

We are succeeding, but the task is far from complete. Global slowdown and the prospect of a full-blown recession will mean retrenchment, economic hardship and the prospect of only modest growth. If nothing else, the economic indicators that I relayed to the House tell us that we are, perhaps, better placed to meet whatever crisis arises. As the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment acknowledged last week, we must brace ourselves for further job losses, gloomy news and economic reversals that threaten our manufacturing and service sectors.

We need a co-ordinated, joined-up approach to counter the threat. We need Government Departments to work under the direction of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to plot a course that will see us able to offer assistance to safeguard jobs and businesses, and we must redouble our efforts to attract new national and international investment. We saw the first signs of that last week when Sir Reg Empey told the House that he had suggested a range of measures to Downing Street and the Department of Trade and Industry to alleviate the problems at Bombardier Aerospace. In the case of B/E Aerospace (UK) Ltd, Kilkeel, specific, speedy and practical help was extended to protect employment in a TSN area.

As far as the crisis facing the aerospace industry is concerned, the Administration made representations to British Airways and Aer Lingus, who announced their decisions to withdraw from Belfast International Airport's Heathrow and Shannon routes. Other companies in that hard-pressed sector should be encouraged, particularly British European and Easyjet. This morning, British European announced the addition of two daily services from Belfast City Airport to London City Airport. British European's managing director, Mr Jim French, confirmed the company's takeover of the Belfast City to Newcastle route following the demise of Gill Airways. British European flies about 800,000 passengers per year to and from Belfast, a figure that will rise due to the latest developments. If Easyjet gets its way, the route from Belfast International Airport to Heathrow will be safeguarded, and I was pleased to note British Midland's decision last week to operate

four daily services from Belfast International Airport to Heathrow.

In this unfolding and fluid situation, some companies are clearly suffering and, at the same time, there are companies that are poised to exploit a commercial advantage or fill a gap in the marketplace. These airlines are demonstrating enterprise, and, in British European's case, the commitment made today is timely and welcome.

My constituency, East Londonderry, has not been immune to the recent economic downturn. Coleraine's largest manufacturing employer, AVX Ltd, has had to lay off approximately 200 people in recent months. Although it has experienced a slight improvement in recent weeks, it is still much too soon to gauge the effects of the global slowdown and the events of 11 September on that sector of the market. The textile industry in my constituency has also suffered adversely with many redundancies and closures.

Manufacturing is not the only sector that is suffering. No economic sector has greater potential in Northern Ireland than tourism. In recent years, we have witnessed a steady increase in the number of visitors to the Province. However, the figures still fall short of the potential that could be achieved. There is little doubt that, if the current global war on terrorism continues or escalates, it will have an effect on the number of tourists who are willing to cross the Atlantic to Ireland and Northern Ireland. We may suffer a significant downturn in our North American and, to some extent, European markets. In recent years, we have welcomed international hotel chains, such as the Radisson Hotel in my constituency, to Belfast and other parts of the Province. We must safeguard these trends.

As the supply side continues to increase, we must work on the demand side. The vagaries of our weather dictate that we must encourage demand for a shoulder season and off-peak and event-led tourism. We have excellent hotels, conference and sporting venues as well as a great outdoors. Those should all be adequately marketed to a national and international audience in order to encourage their investment in our tourist product. Running parallel to that is the necessity to address key issues in the sector such as hospitality training and recruitment challenges, as well as providing efficient transport and infrastructure networks.

Retaliation against international terrorism began on Sunday and, as we meet today, it is being prosecuted vigorously. Undoubtedly, there will be consequences for the Northern Ireland economy — some good, some adverse. Terrorism — either of the home-grown variety or in the form of the Taliban — must not be allowed to succeed. Northern Ireland needs stability more than anything. It needs the opportunity to advance on the basis of the gains already made. I appeal to the Members of this House by saying that the stability we

need must come in the form of decommissioning. I make no apology for saying to Republicans directly: "Decommission now, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of the entire community as we try to protect our manufacturing and business base against a slow-down or a recession that is likely to test our ability to the limit." I trust that the motion will attract unanimous support from all sides of the House.

Dr McDonnell: I am pleased to support the motion because it is timely and useful. The events of 11 September 2001 will turn out to be pivotal for our immediate and future economic state. When those events occurred, I was trapped with the proposer of the motion and others in Brussels airport en route to Denmark to look at some of the major energy issues facing us. I could not help thinking that the events in New York made our work seem out of context; that if those events were to realise their full impact, energy might not be the major issue we thought it was.

Everything changed that day — some things will never be the same again. However, the downturn had already begun; over the previous 18 months we had seen evidence of it through the demise of some dot-com companies. That downturn has accelerated.

The first clear message that the House should learn from the events of 11 September is that we have a global economy. Within hours of their taking place, the events in New York led to the threat — and in some cases more than just the threat — of insolvency for numerous American and European airlines. The proposer went into detail about that. The downturn in those airlines, and the financial crisis that they found themselves in, rapidly reduced the need for new aircraft and aircraft parts. In turn, jobs were threatened in Kilkeel, County Down. That is not something that we would have envisaged on 11 September. Nevertheless, the spiral of decline has continued, and there will be an ongoing knock-on effect on our economy.

Another clear message we received is that we can all do well when things are going well; however, in bad times we will all be affected. Even the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's tremendous skills cannot protect us from the chill winds that are now beginning to blow.

2.15 pm

The events of the 11 September 2001 and their fallout have rapidly taught us just how much influence and leverage we have over indigenous local industry, which has nowhere to run to. It is quite easy for big multinational operations with a headquarters in Toronto, Chicago or Boston to cut back on what, for them, could be a relatively insignificant subsidiary or branch in Belfast. It is much harder for a local company to cut back if its base and headquarters are here.

Perhaps we are all Nescafé instant experts on how to get jobs and generate an economy. The events of the last month show clearly that the prosperity, growth and economic well-being put together brick by brick, by slow, steady slog, can be taken away at a stroke.

The motion seeks a redoubling of efforts to safeguard existing jobs. That is a desirable objective, and we have a clear window of opportunity to assess our indigenous businesses fully, including the small businesses that are often neglected. Those small and perhaps not-so-small businesses may be able to exploit opportunities that perhaps have lain stagnant for some time. Perhaps some event has had a stranglehold on them and held them back. We may now be able to focus on some degree of growth, expansion and job creation in our indigenous industry.

I have often heard cries from local industry that it is neglected and taken for granted. This is due to its perception that large packages of considerable financial clout were offered to foreign investors here while local businesses were rarely granted the same favour. I am not saying that that did happen. However, it is a perception that we now have an opportunity to deal with.

Furthermore, there is an chance to dramatically expand some niche markets for local industry and, in particular, to avail of a range of life and health science opportunities. Mr McClarty is well experienced in the advances that are being made by the University of Ulster at Coleraine — I only wish that similar advances were being made in the Belfast region. A range of medical and bio-medical opportunities exists within the context of expanding niche markets.

Moreover, we must be honest with ourselves. There has been much waste, padded bureaucracy and inefficiency under the guise of research and development (R&D). I hope the Minister will take the opportunity to find out what happens to the substantial research and development funds in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety budget. I have long been dissatisfied with the amount of money that is put into R&D and the lack of any product from it. There is a tremendous opportunity to create between 3,000 and 5,000 jobs in a short period in the complex employment network that bridges enterprise, trade and investment and our health capacities.

The motion also requests maximum support for agencies responsible for the generation of new national and international investment. No one could disagree with that. I will gladly support those agencies, but I want to be sure that they want my support. I need to be sure that they are operating with a maximum of efficiency and effectiveness. In the past I have not been sure that some of our agencies have been as inclusive and user-friendly — not just to clients but also to local government officials, local councillors

and others — as possible. Though some of us may not have been as enlightened, well-informed or well-heeled as they were to deal with some of the issues involved, our intentions were nevertheless honourable and our commitment genuine. As we move forward, we have to get everyone who can contribute into the tent. We have to be as inclusive as possible.

I do not want to drag on, but I do have some other brief points. I want to be sure that we reduce duplication. I am thinking of our various local enterprise agencies. It is no secret that we have a whole web of people and organisations trying to create jobs — or so they tell us. It appears to me that, at times, they spend more money on, and put more effort into, surviving and competing with each other than actually creating wealth. We have to find some mechanism, subservient to our main agencies, where they can fit in — underneath the skirts or umbrella of the main agencies — and play a constructive and creative role. There will have to be some considerable amalgamations, and perhaps a fivefold reduction in the number of organisations.

I am aware that with the present restructuring of IDB, LEDU, IRTU and others, we are reorganising ourselves for the twenty-first century. However, in that reorganisation we have to be sure that we develop a strong structure, with the right attitude. We have to create a can-do and will-do situation — a sort of “Bob the Builder” role. Perhaps, Mr Deputy Speaker, you are not familiar with Bob the Builder, but through domestic circumstances I have become extremely familiar with Bob the Builder in the last few months. *[Interruption]* Bob the Builder cannot say no; he can fix anything, and we are asking the Minister to be a sort of Bob the Builder — a will-do and can-do individual.

Joking aside, we need to be as creative as possible. In our new agency we need to get as far away from bureaucracy and process as possible, and to focus on results. Process is necessary when public accountability is involved, but we cannot allow the process to smother the product.

In redoubling our efforts we cannot allow any of the hard-won gains of the last 10 years to slip away easily, and I urge the Minister not to allow that to happen. I urge too that the men and women of the small business community be listened to. In the past we have found that the whole generation of the last surge in the American recovery was driven by small businesses.

I do not want to hog this debate, but I want to briefly mention the possible role that local government can play. I urge that we look at sectors where we have strength, such as food and agribusiness — even though the latter has taken a battering in the last few years. The proposer mentioned tourism, and I do not want to dwell on that, or indeed on the transport connections that I think are vital.

I want to mention e-business, e-government, and the whole opportunity afforded by the downturn. We need to get our act together in a much more efficient way. We should cut out the bureaucracy and make things work. We now have an opportunity to gear ourselves up for the next upturn. For years we were struggling behind, but we have made tremendous gains in the last 10 years. We would much prefer that we did not have a downturn, but with the downturn we can take advantage. There are opportunities in the downturn for us to position ourselves and ensure that we advance on the next surge at the front of the field.

Mr Poots: I support the motion, and I recognise its import. To take it to its natural conclusion would mean providing more financial support for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, if that were called for. Last year’s Budget did not provide a significant increase in that Department’s budget, and the same is true of the current draft Budget. Those decisions were right at the time because the economy was strong, and it cost less to attract inward investment. However, in recent months there have been signs of economic change, and that change became ultimately more dramatic as a result of the events of 11 September.

The first line of the motion states that the Assembly realises the full extent of international terrorism. There is probably no political body in the world better placed to realise the extent of international terrorism than this Assembly. For 30 years so-called freedom fighters have used arms from eastern Europe and Czechoslovakian Semtex supplied by Col Gaddafi in the Middle East.

They have trained with the Palestine Liberation Organisation with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and with ETA, and they have carried out a campaign in five different countries in Europe — but in particular, in our own country. We fully know and understand the extent of international terrorism in our own country. It has decimated every opportunity that Northern Ireland’s tourism industry has had to create jobs. It has stopped the tourism industry here from realising its potential.

Our geography, weather and other factors are similar to those in the South of Ireland and Scotland, yet both those countries can attract enough tourists to represent 7% of their gross domestic product, while we can manage only 2%. The role that terrorism had, and continues to have in destroying our tourism industry is clear.

Dr McDonnell made some salient points. Promoting jobs is not so difficult when the world economy is good. It is a different task altogether when the world economy is in recession. In a sense, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment had an easy ride. I am not saying that he has an easy job by any stretch of the imagination, but he did have an easy ride in

attracting inward investment, because world economies were going well.

America could not get enough people for the jobs in its own country, so it was looking at other areas where those jobs could be carried out. In the new era of electronic communications, the option of moving to the other side of the Atlantic was much more realistic than it might have been in the 1970s, when a similar American situation prevailed. In the light of those factors, the Minister's job was not so difficult. In the current circumstances, however, we are going to see what he is made of.

Shorts have indicated that they are laying off 2,000 workers. In my constituency, Shorts have a base in Dunmurry that employs 680 workers; that is just over 10% of its workforce. It appears, therefore, that some 200 of those workers could lose their jobs. That is not all. Many of my constituents travel to work in Newtownabbey, Queen's Island and the other Shorts bases.

2.30 pm

It is likely, therefore, that more than 200 jobs will be lost in the constituency. In addition, EM-Solutions (Electro Mechanical Solutions), a successful company that has delivered a great service to the local economy, has recently made 90 workers redundant. That would have had an impact on the economy before 11 September, but the events of that date could further exacerbate the problems.

The loss of 160 at British Airways, located in the adjacent constituency of South Antrim, will also have an impact, because it is likely that some of its former employees came from Lagan Valley. Many of the firms that supplied equipment and carried out subcontracting work for Shorts were based in the Lagan Valley constituency. Those events will have a devastating impact on my constituency.

The impact is not confined to the manufacturing industry; it feeds right through to the service sector where many will feel the pinch as a result of what has happened. For a long time I have maintained that the manufacturing base is by far the most important element of our economy. While I like to hear of the creation of service jobs, I much prefer to hear of new manufacturing jobs being created, because if the manufacturing base is in place, the service industries will flow from it. It is therefore essential that we concentrate on ensuring that our manufacturing base is consolidated.

"Consolidation" is the key word at this time. Companies might have to downsize by paying off employees, and, while we must do our best to try to avoid that situation, it is much more favourable than the complete closure of a company. If, during a world economic recession, a company pays off some employees, and does not close, it will have the opportunity to

increase its staff levels when the economy recovers. If companies are allowed to close down altogether, no base will remain. It is therefore important that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and his Department seek to consolidate jobs and companies as far as possible so that companies do not close.

I hope that the Minister succeeds in preventing the closure of the factory in Kilkeel, because it provides essential work for an area that is not well located to attract fresh manufacturing jobs. My Colleague, Jim Wells, has been encouraged by the support that he has received from the Minister in that regard.

The Department needs to set up an early warning system. It must look at what companies are likely to suffer or to be hit as a result of a downturn in the world economy. It must at an early stage identify the weak areas and implement contingency plans to assist those companies that are affected.

Having said all that, I am happy to support the motion. As I said at the outset, it is essential that we have a strong economy. If necessary, we should divert money from other Departments to retain that strength. The other Departments will suffer as a result of a weakened economy, and they will benefit from a strong one. It is essential that in this situation we look after the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr J Kelly: In normal circumstances, the Ulster Unionist Party's motion would be laudable. However it is slightly surreal that Ulster Unionist Party members should call on the Executive to redouble their efforts to support local industry in the very week that their party leader has announced his intention to collapse these institutions. It is clear that any progress, particularly on economic development and safeguarding existing industries, relies on the Assembly's continued functioning.

Reg Empey has displayed a degree of competence and energy that recalls the late Brian Faulkner; there is no better compliment that any Nationalist could pay him than that. It would be a pity to lose such energy, enthusiasm and commitment to the creation of the kind of economy that would sustain the North of Ireland. Everyone wants to see the institutions continue; no one more so than we on this side of the House — *[Interruption]*. It is those who are laughing who least want to see the institutions coming down.

I do not want to rehash yesterday's debate, but I must say that the leadership of Sinn Féin has made — and continues to make — a genuine effort to resolve the outstanding differences that impede the further progress of the institutions. Martin McGuinness and Bairbre de Brún have played an outstanding role and have demonstrated their ability to use the fruits of the peace process or the political process to help not just their own community, but the community at large in the North of Ireland.

It would not be helpful to introduce bitterness or vindictiveness into the debate, but we should consider a recent survey by PricewaterhouseCoopers, which said that the suspension or collapse of the Assembly would cause 88% of companies to reduce their investment plans for the North of Ireland. That gives us an indication of the likely economic effects of any political downturn. What would be the effect of such a reduction in investment and such a diminution of confidence in the peace process?

No one could disagree with the motion. There has been agreement in the Health and Education Committees about the need to improve health or education services or to improve the lot of the unemployed, the young and those who are finishing education and seeking employment at home, so that they can rear their family here. We all have an obligation to them. Perhaps, some of us who are getting on a bit look at our grandchildren and wonder what kind of society we will leave to them. We must create a better and more secure future, one in which we can all share.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Neeson, who wishes to speak in a private capacity rather than as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Neeson: In the circumstances, it is better that I speak as an individual, although much of what I have to say will be endorsed by other members of the Committee.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is an important one, bearing in mind the circumstances in which we now live. It is almost exactly four weeks ago to the minute that we witnessed the terrible events in the United States. Dr McDonnell was correct when he said that things would never be the same again. It is somewhat ironic that we are debating this issue today, when we consider the implications of yesterday afternoon's debate.

What are those implications? At this point, we face the collapse of the institutions. By allowing that to happen, we are handing all of our responsibilities over to the street politicians. We have seen marches through Belfast in recent days. Does that provide stability? I do not think so.

I am sorry that Mr John Kelly did not remain in the Chamber. We are involved in a process. Many of us — not all — signed up to the Good Friday Agreement. We signed up to it in the hope and expectation that it would be implemented in full. It is to be regretted that the paramilitaries, both Republican and Loyalist, have failed to live up to their responsibilities. That is why I am sorry that Mr Kelly is not here.

It is not just the Ulster Unionist Party, the DUP or the other parties that are calling for decommissioning

to take place. With the events of 11 September, the discovery of Republicans in Colombia and the almost daily violence from Loyalist quarters, the world is now demanding that international terrorism should be brought to an abrupt end. I entirely agree with that. The onus is on all those involved to live up to their responsibilities so that the institutions can move forward. However, it is regrettable that the leader of the Ulster Unionists is going to carry out his proposal to withdraw his party's Ministers from the Executive.

The benefits of devolution are recognised by the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland. Devolution has worked in the areas of enterprise and the economy. After Nortel's recent announcement that it was going to cut 20,000 jobs worldwide, Sir Reg Empey immediately got in contact with the company. His intervention, along with other circumstances, meant that Northern Ireland did not suffer the impact that many dreaded. That shows the importance of devolution and of having someone on the ground to deal with such issues. That was clearly seen last year when, at times of difficulties for Bombardier Shorts and Harland & Wolff, Sir Reg Empey was there.

2.45 pm

Direct rule is not good for Northern Ireland. Despite the good intentions of the various NIO Ministers, we have all come to realise that during the period of direct rule we had almost 30 years of gross underfunding in our public services, such as education, transport and schools.

Most Members have acknowledged that the downturn in the economy began before 11 September. Northern Ireland is very much a part of the global economy. We cannot ignore that, nor the difficulties that we will face in the days ahead in trying to attract inward investment from overseas. It is going to be very difficult. However, our economy has a very strong indigenous base. We have over 80,000 small businesses, the vast majority employing less than 50 people. That is something that needs to be built upon and encouraged. We need to concentrate mainly on the strong base that we have.

We need to encourage more companies to avail of the research and development facilities that exist and will be created in Northern Ireland, not only through the science parks but also through the universities. It is vital now to develop marketing, to encourage exports and to create greater competitiveness within the industries of Northern Ireland.

There is also the issue of the development of the European market. I look forward to the enlargement of the EU. It will provide a challenge, but it will also provide major opportunities for many companies in Northern Ireland. It is up to businesses to take up the challenge. It is also up to the Assembly and the

companies to avail of the new facilities of the Executive office that we have now in Brussels. In the same way, we are at present developing our own office in Washington. It is important to develop IDB, which will become Invest Northern Ireland.

A big danger on the horizon for Northern Ireland is the danger of isolation. We have witnessed the proposals by British Airways to withdraw from Belfast International Airport. Any other air carrier that wants to take up the slots that British Airways will not be using at Heathrow should be granted them. We knew that Sabena was withdrawing, but its recent announcement was also a bitter disappointment. With regard to direct links with America through Aer Lingus, I was talking at the weekend to one of my predecessors, John Cushnahan, MEP for Munster, and the two of us hope to work together to try to retain at least some of the services from Belfast to Shannon. It is a very important link. However, there are serious dangers there.

This afternoon I received a letter from the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation warning of the same dangers. The tourism industry has had a difficult year, first with the foot-and-mouth disease crisis and now with events following 11 September.

I welcome the interdepartmental approach that Sir Reg Empey is prepared to take on many issues. He and Seán Farren have worked closely together. Infrastructure is important, but ultimately the stability of these institutions is vital for the future.

Several months ago the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment brought forward its report in response to 'Strategy 2010'. It was a good report and, if anything, is more relevant now than ever. I hope that many of the major recommendations — particularly those relating to small businesses, which the Minister knows I have a deep interest in — contained in the report will be implemented as far as possible to ensure that the interests of the economy are safeguarded.

Edwin Poots mentioned the need for extra money. While there may be a small reduction in next year's Budget, it is important — and this was outlined to the Committee last week by departmental officials — that there is flexibility in approaching it. I am sure that the Minister would agree with me on that.

I support the motion. I meant what I said about the institutions very sincerely, because it has been shown that the Assembly works. It is important that Members be allowed to continue that work.

Ms Morrice: I support the motion. Given the state of the world economy in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks and what might become of the economy, and given what the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said to the Assembly last week about the potential fall-off in foreign direct investment

— and Members are aware of that serious possibility — the Minister must urgently consider a serious rethink of the direction of Northern Ireland's economic policy. It should not be a knee-jerk reaction to what is going on but a reassessment of our priorities in light of the global circumstances.

There must be a new focus, as Mr McClarty said, on rescuing those industries that are feeling the immediate effect of the 11 September events. Unquestionably, companies such as Bombardier Aerospace, and the airline and tourism industries, will need special attention, and we do not know whether other industries will join that list. The need for funding to rescue, to help and to divert the skills of those people into other valuable areas is important. I welcome the fact that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is working with the Minister for Employment and Learning on those immediate needs.

As each Member has said today, greater support is also needed for local indigenous industries, on which the economy will become more dependent as the weeks, months and — I predict — years go by.

I have figures from the IDB for funding inward and local investment. I was not surprised to see that IDB support during the years since 1995-96 for inward investment compared with its support for local investment has been at a ratio of almost 5:1. The IDB has put approximately £500 million into attracting foreign investment to Northern Ireland and just over £100 million into supporting local industries. The ratio will have to change.

For a period during 1995-96 it was costing Northern Ireland £23,619 per job for the IDB to bring in foreign investment. The cost was high. The cost has reduced, and we welcome that. Much of the policy has worked, and we have had good, healthy investment in Northern Ireland, particularly in recent times. However when one takes the global context into account there needs to be a volte-face. The money that has been put into attracting foreign investment must be put into local industry because there will be much less foreign investment available, at least in the coming year. The Minister knows that I have been suggesting this for some time, but since 11 September it has become more important.

I want to focus on three sectors that I think merit specific attention. First, there is the manufacturing industry. In the housing market it is said that price is dictated by three things; location, location, location. In a shrinking global market, I say that what matters for our industry is reputation, reputation, reputation. In Northern Ireland the reputation of the textiles industry is second to none. Irish linen, for example, is of the highest quality and is a superb product that we can export throughout the world; to the tables of Presidents and the fashion centres of Milan. However, I do not

believe that we are marketing it enough. We should be doing more to market it locally and globally.

We have been watching our textiles industry shrink. We have such special skills in textiles; and we know that people have to be clothed throughout their life. Why should we allow competition from the Far East to reduce our market? Why do we not push harder? I appreciate that work is being done using experts from Denmark to examine the textiles industry. However, I am impatient; I want things to happen faster, and I want us to get there faster. Northern Ireland and our textile industry are worth it.

Northern Ireland has a worldwide reputation for shipbuilding. Why is it being allowed to disappear? Think of the skills that are being lost. There is one contract left at Harland & Wolff, or so the television reports tell us. The workforce has fallen from 30,000 to 1,000. It is a superb industry employing skills that should be valued, supported, rewarded and helped.

I visited the research and development office in the Industrial Research Technology Unit (IRTU). Their computer screens show stretched aeroplanes and all of the new technology that is making the aircraft industry work so well. Why is this technology not being applied to the shipbuilding industry, and particularly to Harland & Wolff? It should be allowed to move away from shipbuilding and into areas such as offshore wind energy, a pet subject of mine. Something like that would be valuable to Harland & Wolff.

3.00 pm

We have a superb reputation for producing excellent, clean, green farm products. Why do we not push organic produce? We have a healthy product that can be sold in these islands and beyond. We need to expand the export market and provide more support for indigenous industry.

One of the most important areas that we need to consider is energy. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment is conducting an energy inquiry. In the aftermath of 11 September, we need to rethink our energy policy, especially our reliance on imports. We have a perfect opportunity to meet our energy needs with local supplies, particularly renewable energy supplies. It has been said that Ireland's potential for wind energy equals that of Saudi Arabia's for oil. Why are only a few windmills dotted around Northern Ireland? We recently visited Denmark, which has many windmills. There is no need for us to destroy our wonderful landscape in the process — we can consider offshore wind energy. That option has been taken up elsewhere. We have the potential to reassess our energy policy and look at renewable sources such as water, waves, solar energy, biomass and recycling. Those could change our approach and make us more self-sufficient in energy, which is vital to our economy.

Mr Neeson mentioned small businesses, the backbone of our economy. DrMcDonnell said that there was much more support for indigenous industry, especially niche markets and creative industries — things at which we excel. I refer to support for life and health sciences, and for the film industry. It is vital that we enter those areas using new technology. People are moving into the new sector of social economy that we need to support, similarly, we need to support socially-responsible business because that is to the fore globally. Business must put something back into the community as well as take from it.

The Minister has heard my plea many times before. It is now more poignant and important than ever. We have a worldwide reputation for excellence. Please let us push that. We have so much to do — not just to make Northern Ireland normal, but to make Northern Ireland great in world terms. We have far too much to lose if we stop now.

Dr Birnie: I congratulate Mr McClarty and Mr Ken Robinson. The motion is vital, and it is regrettable that attendance is so low.

The motion refers to economic development agencies, and one crucial issue in that context is research and development. Nothing can contribute more to economic growth than research, development and the associated training of human capital. That is not something for which my party has responsibility, but if we are at the point at which the Assembly is to be paused, it is a good time to evaluate progress under devolution on certain fronts.

Mr Neeson referred to the particular importance of cross-departmental work. To take the Executive as a whole, there has not been much interdepartmental work in the past couple of years. The Executive programme funds have had only a limited effect. However, one favourable exception is that the relationship between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning seems to have been close and fruitful.

I commend the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and his Colleague at the Department for Employment and Learning on their work to promote a regional research, development and innovation strategy. I urge them to complete that as soon as possible and to conduct an audit of the R&D effort across the entire economy, including the public and private sectors and the universities.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has already made recommendations on such a strategy as part of the consultation. The Committee tends to favour the 1999 recommendation from the Northern Ireland Economic Council that there should be a single unit in Government that could bang together departmental heads to achieve a greater output from Northern

Ireland's R&D spend. Dr McDonnell made some interesting points on that. Perhaps such a unit could be based in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; perhaps it could be aligned with the Economic Policy Unit.

It is interesting that both the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Industry and the Minister for Employment and Learning have proposed that the management or co-ordination role for public sector R&D should lie with the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU). Is that appropriate, given that IRTU will form part of the new single agency, Invest Northern Ireland? Will that new role fit with its industrial development role?

Regardless of the institutional architecture, it is more important to raise the total amount of R&D in the local economy. That currently stands at 0.6% of GDP, which puts us almost at the bottom of the western international league. We should be reaching at least 1%, as the Irish Republic has achieved in recent years. It is a matter of regret that from the perspective of employment and learning, the block funding for university-based R&D in Northern Ireland declined during the 1990s, whereas in Great Britain it grew by about 30%.

The economic agencies must encourage overseas marketing. They need to encourage preparation for or adaptation to the introduction of the European single currency in January 2002. Even whether one thinks, as I do, that the balance of economic arguments alone stands against the United Kingdom joining the single currency, our companies must be prepared to deal with it.

Finally, much work on R&D and related issues has drawn on the research of the Northern Ireland Economic Council. There is an ongoing review of independent economic advice and research for Government in Northern Ireland. It is important to get the right information in order to form a sound basis for policy.

At present, we have the Northern Ireland Economic Council and the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre, each of which differs in its own way. There is a role for both types of research in the future, although whether those units should merge or not is another issue. It is important to strengthen the Economic Policy Unit so that we can have strategic oversight of all Departments in order to promote higher economic competitiveness and productivity.

I wish to refer to some of the remarks made by the Sinn Féin Member, Mr John Kelly, who, unfortunately, is adopting an abstentionist policy at this point.

At least, or at the very best, his party is ambiguous about the use of violence to "break the British connection", as Sinn Féin would say. Somewhat hypocritically, Sinn Féin also wishes to see more money squeezed out of the imperialist British Treasury, as it would term it, to underwrite some of its economic

notions. I am reminded of Gerry Fitt's remark about getting the Brits out but asking them to leave their chequebook behind. That is not the way forward. There must be a decommissioning of weapons and of mindsets. I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I am not sure what efforts the Executive can make to safeguard existing industries or to attract new industries, given the arrangements for the orderly transfer of responsibility to direct rule. Mr Trimble said that he was preparing a soft landing for the Executive and the Assembly. Let us hope that there is progress on decommissioning from everyone, and an understanding by Mr Trimble that the Assembly is not his property but that of the people who voted overwhelmingly for it.

Since the democratic institutions came into being, we have been told that the greatest single contribution to sustaining economic activity is the retention of those institutions. However, there seems to be an obsession with doing away with them. That makes no sense whatsoever — not now and not ever. The very institutions that can instil confidence in the business world and create the potential for inward investment have been undermined continually by those who have caused their suspension on more than one occasion.

The violence of the past 30 years has cost tens of thousands of jobs. No one would deny that fact, given that the reasons for murdering industrialists, burning out factories and warehouses, and generally causing mayhem were to undermine the economy and to cause widespread unemployment. I hope that that aspect of our lives is in the past and has gone for ever. One would have hoped that, given our relative stability and that the political institutions were working well, there would be opportunities to rebuild what had been destroyed or neglected during the past 30 years of direct rule. However, I am pessimistic.

David McClarty, a mover of the motion, knows as well as I do that there is enormous potential for the generation of new international investment. He has been to the United States on several occasions and knows that the one fundamental question that is asked relates to political stability and the evolution of the peace process.

I shall travel to Pittsburgh and Washington later this month to renew and advance relationships that both Mr McClarty and I have helped to build in the past few years. I shall be supporting the University of Ulster and shall do everything possible to influence industrialists to take advantage of the ultra-modern research and development facilities at the university.

Years of effort have gone into the science parks that were created on the back of a stable society in which politicians were expected to sort out their problems without pulling down the political institutions. Surely

we owe it to the people who placed their confidence in us to ensure that the present crisis is resolved in a way that does not penalise the very people who helped to keep the economy of this country going while others were pulling it down.

We need look back no further than a few months ago, when the foot-and-mouth epidemic threatened to ruin our tourist industry, for evidence that the Assembly can manage the economy, protect jobs and do what Governments are expected to do. Through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and in co-operation with Coleraine Borough Council and local hoteliers, it was possible to put together a rescue package that shielded the tourist season from the worst effects of that crisis, and saved many jobs and businesses. Sir Reg Empey has, of course, been in my constituency on many occasions, where he has promoted jobs, opened new premises, and generally encouraged economic growth and job creation. He could not have been better. He is an outstanding Minister who is doing a good job.

His Colleague, Seán Farren, who has responsibility for employment and learning, has transformed the entire approach to further and higher education and widened access for people who previously had no hope of a vocational or academic education. The problems of illiteracy and innumeracy, which were not only personal injustices for employees but a real difficulty for them in the changing world of new technology, are being tackled so that Northern Ireland will no longer be three times more illiterate than some of its European competitors.

Let us hope that common sense will prevail in the days ahead and that those of us who were elected to the Assembly to help to improve the standards of life for everyone will be allowed to get on with that job. Let us hope that we do not have a repeat of 1974, when political institutions were pulled down by hooded men and ordinary decent people were consigned to 30 years of misrule called "direct rule".

3.15 pm

Many did not survive, because a political vacuum creates opportunities for men of violence who have no interest in protecting industries or in creating jobs.

I have no doubt that we can create full employment, attract new industries, lift our labour force to new heights and earning capacity, and educate our youth to compete with those in any other part of the developed world. There is no better part of the world; the ordinary people here have hearts of gold. We owe it to them and to the next generation to create stability, to build confidence, to forget about political chess games and to get on with the job in peace and in partnership.

I worked with David McClarty for many years. I know that he and his Colleagues on the Ulster Unionist

Benches are sincere, and I have no difficulty in supporting the motion. I only wish that their party leader were singing from the same hymn sheet — or at least taking singing lessons. However, we must look on the bright side and assume that common sense will prevail. We must believe that the rights of ordinary people are greater than the survival of private armies. We must also hope that our politicians will accept that they are no more than the servants of the people. They must develop the confidence and self-esteem to allow them out of their trenches and on to the middle ground, where partnership, friendship, trust and co-operation are the cornerstones on which to build new jobs and to protect existing ones. Rather than put out the lights in the Assembly, we should radiate hope and prosperity for the future. Industrialists here and abroad have told us that, and they know.

Mr S Wilson: I started by agreeing with Mr Dallat, but he went rapidly downhill after the first few paragraphs. Although almost every party noted John Kelly's description of the debate as "surreal", many of us find it surreal that IRA/Sinn Féin Members should speak about a strong economy and protecting jobs when they spent 30 years waging economic warfare. It is a pity that Mr Kelly did not stay to hear the remarks of the SDLP, Sean Neeson and Esmond Birnie. He probably expected such comments from me, but they also came from unexpected sources.

It is important that the Assembly voices concerns about the present economic position, but we must realise that we form a small part of the global economy. In creating some jobs, we are especially dependent on big, global companies. However, there are limits to what an individual politician or a collection of politicians in a regional Assembly can do. We should not raise unrealistic expectations of the Minister's or of the Assembly's capabilities.

We must recognise that, despite the great strides that Northern Ireland's economy has made, there are still many structural weaknesses. We rely too heavily on the public sector and not enough on the private sector. More people here are employed in low-productivity sectors of the economy than in any other United Kingdom region. Our gross added value in manufacturing is still the lowest of any region or sector of the UK economy. Those structural weaknesses make it difficult to tackle some of the problems caused by the present global situation. If we are to compete, we must make our economy attractive to investment.

'Strategy 2010' identified the ponderous planning process as one of the constraints on our economy. That process has held people back from spending money in our economy. That situation has not improved; it has got worse. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is in the House, but other Ministers should also address the problems that we face in attracting

inward investment. It takes two and a half years, on average, for a major industrial or retail project to get planning permission. That is a major disincentive to investment and, thus, to the creation of jobs.

I listened to what Jane Morrice and other Members said about small-scale industry. There are Members who — almost every week — call for the placing of more and more bureaucratic burdens on small industry. Last week, Dr Esmond Birnie rightly raised the issue of the human rights legislation that Members on the other side of the House so enthusiastically embraced. The impact of some of the Human Rights Commission's recommendations, especially the social and economic rights, would place an immense burden on small firms.

We already have that burden imposed through much of the equality legislation. One of the biggest changes that we should make, if we want to remove some of the pressure from small businesses, is to make the Equality Commission liable for the costs of failed cases. At present, many small firms find themselves having to settle out of court because they cannot afford to win a case if they must bear all the legal costs. We must address those problems.

'Strategy 2010' included a recommendation that the Assembly should introduce a rates regime that would help to nurture small, indigenous retail businesses. What has the Assembly done? It has voted, every year, for a rates system that puts a greater financial burden on small businesses. That must be addressed. It is not only a question for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, it is a question for several Ministers. Those are small moves, but they can help.

Mr Savage: It is essential that the Assembly and its Ministers continue in office as long as they can in order to protect the interests of Northern Ireland industry. Only by having such well-informed local input will businesses here be adequately protected in the increasingly uncertain world economy. Recession was a possibility before the World Trade Centre disaster; it is now a betting certainty. In such a recession, job losses are part of our daily experience. My Colleagues spoke about the uncertainty in the textiles and manufacturing industries. That uncertainty affects many of my constituents, especially those in Lurgan, Portadown and Banbridge. The situation has arisen because of problems over which they have no control.

Northern Ireland needs the care of local Ministers. With the best will in the world, a return to direct rule would be a return to a less focused approach, which would put Northern Ireland low on the list of national priorities. In contrast, local Ministers who are accountable to the Assembly have a greater sense of duty, a greater sense of urgency, a greater sense of responsibility and a greater need to do something to protect local business.

If I may say it as his Colleague, we could not have a better Minister than Sir Reg Empey, whose recent achievement in obtaining the North/South gas pipeline cannot be praised too highly.

The people who are losing their jobs are the constituents of local Ministers or Assembly Members. Those Ministers are accountable to their constituents. The importance of having Northern Ireland Ministers was forcibly brought home to me last week when Sir Reg Empey told us that 70,000 people in Northern Ireland are employed by firms from outside Northern Ireland. That is a lot of people. Make no mistake, those jobs will be most at risk in a world recession. Without local Ministers working in a business-friendly climate that attracts inward investment, I fear for many of those jobs. In order that the public are left in no doubt, it is critical that the Assembly sends out the loud and clear message that the survival of the Assembly and its Ministers is vital to protect present jobs and to attract more jobs to the Province.

It is vital for all of us to behave responsibly because only the survival of the institutions will provide people with the maximum possible security for their jobs and futures. I am amazed at the behaviour of Members. There were two important debates today — this debate on the economy and this morning's debate on agriculture. However, only a handful of Members thought it worthwhile to take part. Those are two of the most important debates to take place on the future of our community. Jobs are jobs, and while people have jobs they are content and make a sizeable contribution to the well-being of all. I hope that the party opposite will get its act together and fulfil its obligations.

Following the establishment of economic and monetary union and the single market, the economic integration of Europe is almost complete. It is now necessary to draw up clear proposals for a political union. We face the task of designing a political union that may consist of 27 or more member states. A clear allocation of powers, tasks and responsibilities between the various levels of Government and Europe is essential. For reasons of political transparency and economic efficiency, that allocation of power should comply with the principles of transparency, proximity and subsidiarity. Citizens must know who is responsible for what. We must know who is responsible for our country's well-being. Our people need to know what is happening. We need to know what is in the minds of people, and where we want to go. The European Union currently has 15 member states and is in accession negotiations with 12 other states. All of those are our competitors. We must compete, and it is better to compete with those communities than to compete against them. I support the motion.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion and the sentiments expressed about what has happened to our economy since the events in America. Consumer demand has

been severely affected and we have entered a period of recession. The old economic factor of external-shock syndrome has become apparent to us as a result of the collapse of the World Trade Centre on 11 September. Business confidence has been hit, inward investment has suddenly dried up and uncertainty prevails. Many manufacturing businesses that were already vulnerable because of exchange rate difficulties, high energy costs, high fuel duties and general business uncertainty now face difficulties, or downsizing at least.

3.30 pm

Economic development agencies must therefore be sensitive and prudent in their handling of the situation. I pay tribute to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Sir Reg Empey, for reacting so quickly to the difficulties experienced by the aerospace industries, in particular Bombardier Shorts and B/E Aerospace in Killeel. Many American firms in Northern Ireland and the Republic are offshoot or peripheral plants, which are always vulnerable when demand for their products declines. However, firms such as Bombardier Shorts and DuPont have a long, well-established track record in Northern Ireland.

Technology businesses — and dot.com businesses in particular — have experienced difficulties in international trading for at least 18 months. Nortel's position here is an example of the general international difficulty in the IT sector, which is causing job losses such as those experienced in Newtownabbey.

Northern Ireland has a good track record in manufacturing, engineering and technology-based companies. We have a powerful range of good companies such as Bombardier Shorts, FG Wilson, Powerscreen International, the Finlay group, SDC Trailers Ltd, Hyster (Northern Ireland) Ltd, and R Wright & Son (Coachworks) Ltd in Ballymena. Those are all good examples of resilient and robust manufacturing companies. Many of them are also good examples of local companies that started out as small or medium-sized enterprises. Norbrook Laboratories in Newry and Galen (Pharmaceuticals) in Craigavon are excellent manufacturing examples in the pharmaceutical sector. They are high-value-added businesses whose strong export records successfully contributed to good foreign exchange receipts. All those companies give a good volume of quality jobs to their local communities.

If we were to talk to people in manufacturing who have been involved in exporting over the last three years, I think we would find that they do not agree that we should stay out of the euro. We must give greater support to more of those industries and individual businesses.

Northern Ireland has developed some excellent high-technology, software-based businesses over the past 10 years. The role and support of our two universities has been crucial and strategically significant, especially

in the area of R&D. My Colleague, Esmond Birnie, said that more resources should be put into R&D in the universities. I agree with him. Indeed, more financial resources should also be given to those companies that are at the cutting edge of technology research in their particular sectors.

Since the events in New York, people here have realised that the Northern Ireland economy is a small regional economy, very much intertwined and interlocked with the international business community. The industries and services that depend on global and international demand have been severely damaged. The tourism industry in Northern Ireland, which has struggled over the past three or four years, has been dealt a severe blow. It will take time for foreign tourists to visit again, given the great uncertainty surrounding international air travel and public reluctance to fly. We hope that confidence can be rebuilt. It is crucial, therefore, that our economic development agencies be sensitive to, and supportive of, those businesses that have long-term potential.

I support the sentiments of the motion. I am not going to indulge in the more narrow political aspects of it. We are dealing with a largely economic situation. However, it is important that our local Administration should be kept going. In general, people respect and acknowledge the support that local Ministers can give when such external economic shocks affect our industry.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I have listened to many constructive and encouraging contributions during this important debate, and I want to thank those Members who attended for their frank and forthright sentiments.

First, I want to outline the background to this debate. Since my statement to the Assembly last week, air attacks in Afghanistan must be added to the equation. I said that Northern Ireland was facing its stiffest economic test in more than a decade. Especially since the commencement of the counter-offensive on Sunday, it is fair to say that that test will not be for the faint-hearted. It is clear that we will pass this test only if we can demonstrate the same mettle, resilience and determination that saw us through decades of terrorism here. The coming weeks and months will not be easy for Northern Ireland plc. However, we have one huge advantage: more than at any time in our past, we are well equipped to weather the difficulties. We are taking action. It is not all doom and gloom. Our economy remains strong.

Northern Ireland continues to be a prime investment location in which to grow profitable business. Leading world economies may be on hold at the moment, and there will doubtless be some retrenchment. However, we must ensure that when the upturn happens, Northern Ireland is strategically placed to take advantage of it.

The proposer of the motion gave some of the economic indicators: our competitiveness has never been better, we are producing and selling more, we are employing more people, and the underlying strength of the local economy is not in question. However, I readily acknowledge that there are structural and strategic weaknesses in productivity, output, wage levels and business birth rates. It would be foolish to brush them under the carpet.

The efforts of companies in their export drives have been showing dividends: exports have increased to almost £4 billion in 1999-2000. Seventy five thousand jobs here depend on sales outside Northern Ireland. Some 44 companies recently participated in three visits and trade events, including missions to Romania, meetings with French executives in the aerospace industry, and participation in textiles exhibitions in Dubai. Sixteen local companies leave this week on a trade mission to the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar. Next month, 45 representatives from local companies will take part in a trade mission to China, which is an important emerging market. The determination of our companies to continue to seek out opportunities in world markets augurs well for the economy in overcoming the challenges facing us. At a time when our industrial base is under pressure, we must ensure that existing manufacturing operations are as efficient and effective as possible.

The IDB, LEDU and the Industrial Research Technology Unit (IRTU) are working with client companies to improve efficiency, take out costs and achieve greater results. For example, I recently approved the piloting of a business improvement agent scheme under IDB's business excellence service. In this scheme Government will part-fund the cost of employing a person who has the knowledge and experience to offer continuous improvement skills to several companies. In the current circumstances, I am considering whether there is merit in extending this pilot to cover more companies.

The IDB's e-business service is promoting web-based solutions as a means to interface with companies, to find new markets and to speed up transactions. Of course, this is even more relevant if companies have air travel difficulties. I am pleased to tell Members that a consultancy contract has just been placed with a locally based business to develop e-business solutions with IDB and with appropriate LEDU clients.

We have also developed a Northern Ireland small business strategy that identifies the need to provide support for small indigenous businesses as a key objective. Under the small business strategy, a business birth rate strategy is also being developed; it will deal with generating more business start-ups. Several key initiatives have already been undertaken, and these will be part of the business birth rate strategy.

I will list a few of them. A revised business start programme aims to support 6,000 new business starts over the next four years and offers a range of training, mentoring and grant support. That is in addition to the fast growth start supported by LEDU's regional offices, over 100 per year, which are export-orientated businesses. The personal enterprise roadshow — a major event — will encourage entrepreneurship and help individuals progress their business ideas.

Business/education linkages will be developed through the Northern Ireland business and education partnership, which is supported by the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. I met with them a few days ago. A raft of business education activities will be funded. Organisations such as Young Enterprise, Sentinus and Livewire will play a role in encouraging young people to be more positive about enterprise.

In 2001 the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's support for young enterprise will enable more than 20,000 young people to participate in schools programmes, and they will be supported by more than 1,000 business advisers. Enterprise Northern Ireland and LEDU, together with the information age initiative, have supported the development of the local enterprise agency network with a major project costing more than £2 million to build an information and communications technology network and introduce the e-business process for locally based businesses.

The local enterprise agency network is a valuable asset, with more than 300 local voluntary directors, 200 staff and more than 1,000 tenant businesses, which in turn employ more than 5,000 people. The enterprise agencies will also provide information at local level to encourage people to start businesses and deliver the business start programme.

At the end of October the Washington business summit will take place. It has been created and led by American sources. The summit is dedicated to developing economic networking opportunities between companies in the United States, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland; expanding relationships amongst corporate and government leaders; and developing collaborative strategies to respond to the challenges presented, especially following the events of 11 September.

Prior to that date we had already seen the start of a slow-down in the global economy and a reduction in the flow of foreign direct investment since the start of 2001. That mirrors the experiences of our nearest competitors. The events in September will have brought uncertainty into international markets, particularly to north America, which traditionally has been the largest market for investment in Northern Ireland.

The IDB had record results for inward investment last year but anticipates a much-reduced level of inward investment this year from all major markets as the global economy continues to slow down. Nevertheless, some sectors, such as software and biotechnology, will continue to demonstrate growth and provide inward investment opportunities. We will pursue all such opportunities with current and potential investors.

Several Members mentioned the tourism fund. Clearly there is uncertainty in the tourism industry due to the present unpredictability in the economic, political and travel situations. The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) is in a unique position to benefit from market intelligence from the British Tourism Authority's (BTA) and Bord Fáilte's international networks. NITBs approach has been to work with Tourism Ireland Ltd to analyse several likely developments and their impact on travel demand and Northern Ireland's competitive stance within the "Ireland" brand.

Tourism Ireland Ltd and NITB will announce a detailed domestic and international tourism strategy for 2002 in November. Cohesion of effort with Northern Ireland industry will be the key to success. The availability of competitive access is critically important to tourism performance. In recent years the advent of low-cost carriers increased capacity, and competition, thereby acting as a driver for growth, especially in the British market.

NITB will work in partnership with key carriers and operators to determine the best prospects for 2002 and will benefit from the additional selling platforms Tourism Ireland Ltd and the extensive BTA network will provide. Both organisations are committed to profiling the Northern Ireland region and its products in key markets. However, some Members noted that there have been some redundancies because companies have lost orders. My Department's officials have been in contact with client companies to discuss ways of limiting job losses and to look towards recovery.

I have already mentioned some of the programmes that IDB and LEDU have in place and in which companies are already participating.

Members have raised many points, and I will try to respond to as many as I can. If I miss any out, I apologise.

3.45 pm

In giving many of the statistics, Mr McClarty set the scene. He spoke about the airlines, as did other Members throughout the House. We are doing what we can. Mr Mallon and I are initiating negotiations and working closely with Gregory Campbell, the Minister for Regional Development, who has charge of the airport issue. We have a keen interest in it from a tourism perspective. We have been making approaches on behalf of Belfast International Airport. The key issue is not simply

which airline flies — although that is important — but the landing slots at the airport. If one loses those slots and they are sold off for international trade, then nobody can fly from Belfast to London, for example. That is a huge problem.

Mr McClarty took the opportunity to mention some little local issues in East Londonderry, such as AVX. I am pleased to say that having gone through a difficult period in recent months, that company is beginning to bounce back a bit and some recruitment has recommenced. Both Mr McClarty and Mr Dallat mentioned the question of how tourism affects their borough. I was pleased earlier this year to be associated with the North West Fest and with the attempt that was made locally to resuscitate the borough from the huge blow caused by foot-and-mouth disease. Nobody could deny the impact of that on the local economy, but there was a willingness, led by a consortium including the council and local tourism operators, to do something to help restore their fortunes. We were pleased to be able to identify with that.

Mr Poots raised the issue of the Department's budget. He is, of course, correct. A few weeks ago people were saying that we did not need the budget; everything was going well. I kept making the point that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's budget is largely discretionary. It is not like education or health; we know how many doctors or teachers there are, and we can easily calculate what they need. That is not the case with our budget. Because it is not already pre-committed, the tendency is to grab it and use it for something that it is pre-committed. We have been making the point that if we do not spend our budget, it goes back into the pot.

We must recognise that if we have a strong economy, the other Departments will benefit. Equally, if we have a weak economy, other Departments will suffer. There is a proven link between health, education, et cetera and a strong economic base. I have been able to retain the baseline levels for next year because we have been performing better. We have had a deliberate policy of trying to drive down the cost per job, and we were therefore able to pass some money back into central funds last year. Certainly that might have been the expectation this year up until this point. But, as Mr Poots rightly asked, who now knows?

He also took the opportunity to raise the question of consolidation. That is a good point, because consolidation will be the name of the game. Mr Poots cited Kilkeel as a site of consolidation. Mr Wells is now in the Chamber; I know that he and others have been working hard in that area.

Mr Wells: Does the hon Member accept that the American board of directors of B/E Aerospace, the parent company of the Kilkeel plant, was extremely

impressed by the work of both his Department and IDB in bringing together the funding package? No decision has yet been issued, but everything that could have been done in Northern Ireland has been achieved. Now the decision is entirely with the American parent company.

Sir Reg Empey: I am grateful to the Member for his comments. I hope that we will be successful in that. It is out of our hands now, but if there is anything that we can do, we will certainly try. It is important to try; one cannot just sit back and allow these things to happen.

Mr John Kelly seems to have made a bit of smash-and-grab contribution, because he has gone. As soon as he made it, he went. He talked about the suspension of the Assembly and so on; Mr Neeson and a number of other Members also mentioned that. None of us here wants to see the institutions suspended.

I want to be able to continue to do my job if I am permitted to do so. However, that is all very well, but people must understand that the basis on which we are here has several component parts to it — a number of foundation stones. Sadly, one of those parts has been severely weakened. There is the question of understanding the arrangements that were entered into. In business, as in politics, if those arrangements are not honoured, everything else is undermined. That is the issue. I took the opportunity, in an intervention in yesterday's debate, to make the point that there is no desire on my part to see devolution concluded — far from it — but there must be movement from those who possess weapons. The use of weapons during the past 30 years has created many of the economic difficulties that we now encounter. People must get that into their heads.

Mr Neeson talked about the Heathrow situation. I have referred to that and to the vacuum that may be created. I fully understand that, and Mr Neeson knows what the solution is.

Ms Morrice seems to be on a bit of a roll with the euro. I am focused on the need to assist indigenous industry. She must understand that the figures can be misleading. Companies that may have originated overseas and have subsequently reinvested over the years, such as DuPont and others, may appear in those figures. It all depends on how you define those companies — are they indigenous if they have been here for 40 years or are they blow-ins? However, the point has been made, and I understand what the Member is saying.

Dr Birnie referred to research and development. Dr Farren and I are working closely on that, and we have written to our ministerial Colleagues, Ms Rodgers and Ms de Brún, who have a specific role in research and development. We are trying to work together, and we hope to arrange a meeting to discuss how we can improve not only the amount of money available for research and development, but its performance. That is the key issue. I can assure Dr Birnie that it has always

been my intention to ensure that research, development and innovation are at the core of the new agency being formed. I hope that that will be achieved, given that we are not putting enough into research and development. That has to be addressed. However, it is not simply a matter of money; it is also about targeting and quality.

Joe Byrne talked about consumer demand, energy costs and exchange rates, which are all major issues. Ms Morrice also raised the issue of energy. Kirk McClure Morton has done a report on wind energy throughout the shores and coastal areas of the whole island. Mrs O'Rourke, the Minister for Public Enterprise in the Republic, and I are working closely on that, and we intend to bring forward new proposals. We in Northern Ireland are committed to creating new proposals for sustainable energy. We have an ambitious target of 10% of our supply of electricity coming from renewable sources in the next few years. It is a jolly good idea, but first we must address the high costs that we have now. As the year progresses, I hope that proposals will be made on how to do that. There will be gnashing of teeth when they are made, because it will not be cheap to buy our way out of the contracts.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that the Business Committee met today. There is some confusion over whether the Assembly will meet next Monday. Can you confirm whether the Assembly will meet next week or not?

Mr Deputy Speaker: You may discuss the matter with your Whip.

Mr S Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Do you realise that you have prevented Mr Wells from being the last Member to speak during this session?

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is the second time that he has tried to do that.

Mr K Robinson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and well spotted. Mr Wells falls at the final hurdle.

I welcome the opportunity to wind up the debate. The contribution from many, if not all Members who spoke, has been mostly positive. I particularly welcome the presence of the Minister throughout the debate. He has a tight schedule, but he has remained here and taken note of the positive points that have been made.

When Mr McClarty and I decided to bring the matter to the House, we thought that it was a timely motion, and I am delighted to say that it seems to have achieved support from all corners of the Chamber.

Last week, Sir Reg Empey said that Northern Ireland was facing its stiffest economic test in more than a decade. It is somewhat ironic that after 30 years of terror inflicted on the Province, we are suddenly faced with the economic and human effects of international

terrorism. Our purpose in tabling the motion was to draw attention to the stark realities that Northern Ireland now faces, and the Chamber must be mobilised to take responsibility for generating a favourable climate for future economic investment and expansion.

We all have a role to play in achieving that, but there is a particular onus on some groups who are absent today. For 30 years, our positive marketing opportunities were limited by terrorist violence. Now that our economy has picked up significantly in recent times, it is imperative that we do not allow the intentions of international terrorists or the intransigence of local terrorists, or, as Mr Durkan called them yesterday, the “obdurocrats”, to damage our growing reputation as an advantageous investment location.

We are not immune to world economic conditions. The announcement during the past week of the loss of 2,200 jobs at Bombardier Aerospace and British Airways is a reflection of that vulnerability. It has left many families in shock and despair, including many in Newtownabbey in my constituency of East Antrim. Because Northern Ireland is a small economy, centred within the jet stream, as it were, of the world economic climate, we suffer the full effects of the economic winds from the west.

The events of 11 September have hastened and deepened an already unstable global economic position. The implication of those trends for Northern Ireland is alarming. We need not, however, be unduly pessimistic. As has been said by several Members, we have an opportunity. The IDB has created 16,000 from outside sources which means that 4,000 jobs have been created internally. There is a possibility, to which several Members referred, that we might find a way to retain jobs and to expand them. Two fifths of our exports are going outside the United Kingdom. In ordinary times, that would be very positive and something that we would seek to increase. However, I want to touch on a couple of sectors that will be hardest hit by the global economic downturn.

The aerospace industry has suffered dramatically, and the knock-on effects, as Mr Wells and others have mentioned, have gone far beyond the areas that are traditionally seen as the centre of the industry. It is a multi-sectoral industry: it contributes to aerodynamics, mechanical, electronic, software, science and technology bases. The industry has the most intensive research and development in the engineering sector. It is one that we must protect as far as we can. I thank the Minister for the efforts that he has already made.

It is imperative that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning demonstrate their commitment to resolving the difficulties faced by the aerospace industry. It is vital that the workers who will lose their

jobs are adequately advised, supported and re-skilled to meet the needs of tomorrow’s global marketplace, a marketplace that will inevitably experience growth in the future. Advice and support for the redundant workers at Bombardier Shorts on issues relating to self-employment business start-up should be forthcoming from agencies such as LEDU.

Recently, the Department of Trade and Industry produced a report that said that one million jobs would be created in the small-and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector in the UK in the next decade. That is also the key to our future success. We must ensure that SMEs in Northern Ireland are the main drivers of economic growth and can produce the innovation and job creation that is vital for the future. Our ability to attract domestic, national and international SMEs will be crucial to the drive to ensure that the Northern Ireland economy is balanced and stable. There is no room for complacency in the Chamber or in our economy. We must recognise that the economy relies to a large extent on foreign direct investment and that it is, therefore, susceptible to global instability.

For the foreseeable future, not many people will travel across the Atlantic from the United States. However, we are a European region, and we should turn our attention to the market in Europe, which is now larger than the American market. I have just returned from Poland, where I saw the impact that can be made if Europe extends its boundaries to the east. We could easily attract European visitors to Northern Ireland who cannot go to the United States. We have good, efficient ferry services in the North Channel, and the North Sea services improve each year. Before the new season, our tourist industry should investigate the growing European market.

The Programme for Government stated that the Executive would work to attract inward investment, improve efficiency in our economy, ensure that businesses and consumers have access to regulatory services of an international standard, and — importantly — increase Northern Ireland’s attractiveness to visitors. We have the potential to do something and do it soon.

I was particularly impressed by what Dr McDonnell said about the global economy and the opportunities for growing prosperity. Such prosperity can be slow to build up and can be taken away at a stroke. We have all learnt that in the past few weeks. Every Member who spoke said that small indigenous industries were the key; that is something on which we should major. Dr McDonnell referred to the opportunity to develop niche markets, such as bioscience, and that might create opportunities for growth.

Mr Poots made the obvious point that terrorism had stunted the growth of our tourism industry. Perhaps there is an opportunity for our friends from across the

Chamber to do something positive and help us become a tourist magnet. He also suggested the creation of a departmental early warning system to identify weaknesses in our economy; that is vital. If we can identify the indicators, we can deal with the situation before it arrives on our doorstep. That way, we could head off some of the worse eventualities that might lie ahead.

Mr Neeson mentioned the indigenous industrial base and the opportunities for the EU. I am at one with Mr Neeson on that. He welcomed Sir Reg Empey's interdepartmental approach, as do we all. Ms Morrice wanted us to consider economic policy. I agree with her that it is not a time to sit in the corner and moan, but to think about where we have come from, where we are now and where we might go in the future. She said that we needed a new focus; most of us would agree with that. She spoke about the Irish linen and shipbuilding industries et cetera, and her comments on those were welcome on this side of the House. We wondered about her dress code today; we do not know whether her suit is Irish linen, but we shall ask her after the debate.

Ms Morrice: It is.

Mr K Robinson: That is good.

Dr Birnie spoke about research and development. We should invest more of our gross domestic product in that, and there should be an interdepartmental approach.

Dr Birnie also said that economic agencies needed to encourage overseas marketing and prepare Northern Ireland for the euro. I agree with him about the possibilities there.

Mr Dallat made some of the local — *[Interruption]*.

Ms Morrice: Will the Member give way?

Mr K Robinson: No, I will not give way. Mr Dallat made some of the usual remarks about the wonderful places around the north coast and those remarks were replicated beside me. Mr Sammy Wilson said that the Northern Ireland economy was too reliant on the public sector — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: He has run away.

Mr K Robinson: He has run away, but we want to move away from that.

I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for attending the debate and for the positive remarks that he made. I also thank the Members who contributed to the debate.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I reject the scurrilous remarks made by the hon Member for East Belfast, Mr Wilson.

Ms Morrice: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Do you agree that that was not a point of order?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have not dealt with the first point of order, but I am sure that the House will understand the point being made.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, realising the full extent of international terrorism, resolves that the Executive should re-double its efforts to safeguard existing industries in Northern Ireland and give maximum support to agencies responsible for the generation of new national and international investment.

Adjourned at 4.07 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 October 2001

*The Assembly met at noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).
Members observed two minutes' silence.*

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification that may be helpful to the Assembly. I refer to comments made last week by Dr Paisley:

"We have lodged our letters of resignation, but those resignations should take place immediately and should not be postponed." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 12, p294].

What was the result of the lodging of those resignation letters by Dr Paisley and his party members? Have you acted on his desire that they should take effect immediately?

Mr Speaker: As I understand it, Dr Paisley set out the situation clearly, and the position is as he stated it. There is nothing further that I should add to that.

Mr C Wilson: Are we to understand, Mr Speaker, that he was tendering his resignation and those of the relevant Members of his party from the Executive? There has been no public confirmation that that has occurred.

Mr Speaker: The Member is somewhat confused. First, Dr Paisley could hardly have been tendering his resignation from the Executive since, for all his distinction, Dr Paisley is not a member of the Executive. He made it clear that, in the context of resignations by others, the resignation of his party's Members would take effect.

This is not the first time on which the matter has arisen. Similar letters were previously provided. I take it that Dr Paisley wanted it to be clear beyond peradventure that, should other events take place, we will proceed.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it permissible, under the code of conduct and Standing Order 42(4)(b), regarding the Pledge of Office, for Ministers to write newspaper articles in their capacity as Minister, without making reference to the matters that are supposed to be in their portfolio?

Mr Speaker: I will examine the matter and consider the extent to which it relates to Standing Orders —

and, therefore, to what degree it involves me — and the extent to which it refers to the ministerial code, which is an Executive matter. As Members will be aware, the code has never been brought to the Assembly for approval. I will look into the matter that the Member has raised and respond to it.

ASSEMBLY: SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): I beg to move That Standing Order 40(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Social Security Fraud Bill (NIA 16/00).

The Social Security Fraud Bill is an integral part of the overall strategy of modernising the social security system to ensure that the right money goes to the right people at the right time. The Bill is designed to improve the way in which fraud is detected and to deter potential fraudsters. Members across the Assembly have endorsed my desire to tackle fraud. The Committee for Social Development passed the Bill unanimously. No amendment has been put forward during the passage of the Bill, because Members are aware that I am required by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to work with the Secretary of State to secure single systems of social security, child support and pensions for the United Kingdom. The Bill maintains parity with Great Britain on social security matters.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the matter is the suspension of Standing Orders so that the Final Stage of the Social Security Fraud Bill may be taken today. I shall not accept speeches on the subject of the Bill, only on procedural matters. I have had no requests to speak. If the motion is agreed, we shall proceed immediately to the Final Stage. If the motion falls, the Final Stage of the Bill, which is on the Order Paper, also falls and will be taken at a subsequent time. Suspension of Standing Order 40(1) requires cross-community support. If there are Ayes on all sides of the House and no Noes, I shall consider that to be cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to nemine contradicente.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 40(1) be suspended in respect of the Final Stage of the Social Security Fraud Bill (NIA 16/00).

SOCIAL SECURITY FRAUD BILL

Final Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow):
I beg to move That the Social Security Fraud Bill (NIA 16/00) do now pass.

This is a short, but important, Bill. Members are concerned about fraud. The estimated £73 million per annum of public money that is lost due to benefit fraud must be reduced. I shall not go over the provisions of the Bill in detail. However, it will help to reduce that loss, first, through prevention and early detection, using new information-gathering powers, and secondly, by deterrence, using the powers to restrict payments to persistent offenders and the swift and effective punishment of collusive employers.

The Bill represents a measured response to the problem of benefit fraud. I do not suggest that it will eliminate all such fraud. However, it is a reasonable response to the problems that we face, and it will close some of the more obvious loopholes that have come to light in recent years.

I thank the Committee for Social Development for its careful scrutiny of the Bill, and also the Members who took part in the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security Fraud Bill (NIA 16/00) do now pass.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR INDUSTRY

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning 'Inquiry into Education and Training for Industry' (1/01R).

On average, each worker in the Northern Ireland economy has a significantly lower output than his or her equivalent in Great Britain, in much of the rest of the European Union, or in the United States. Unless those levels of productivity can be raised, it is doubtful whether we will be able to keep unemployment levels low or generate the resources from which money for necessary social spending, such as on education or health, can be raised.

Mr Ervine: Will the Member consider the fact that bad management is the reason that productivity is low or not as good as in other places?

Dr Birnie: I agree with the Member, and he will see that such issues are addressed in the report. Training, research and development can make a massive contribution to the achievement of higher productivity and, to reflect Mr Ervine's intervention, that includes management training. Many columnists have argued that the skills of the labour force together with spending on associated research and development are the factors that result in any one region or country having a higher rate of economic growth than another. Education and training can contribute strongly to making unemployment, poverty and social exclusion less likely. There are strong grounds for regarding training for industry and its associated research and development as one of the most important challenges faced by the Assembly and the Executive.

We are not, however, arguing that the only value of education is its contribution to the economy. In early 2000, the Committee decided to initiate an inquiry into the contribution of the education system to industry and the research and development base in the universities. We have now completed that inquiry and are grateful to all who contributed. We had almost 40 oral evidence sessions and received over 100 pieces of written evidence. I thank especially the Clerk, the Committee staff, the three special advisers, our researcher, and all the Committee members for their hard work in bringing this substantial report into being.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

The level of interest generated by the inquiry was heartening. It indicates the importance of the subject and the widespread willingness to contribute to shaping improvements and policy in these areas and to do so by working with the institutions of devolved Government.

The Committee supports the many initiatives in this area that the Minister and his Department have taken since devolution, and our recommendations are designed to enhance the impact of many of them. We do not underestimate the challenge that we face. Since as long ago as the mid-nineteenth century, official reports have argued that British schools are failing to meet the needs of industry. Even at that early stage a contrast was drawn with other countries, notably Germany. We all remember Tony Blair's famous slogan before the 1997 election when he said that his aim was "Education, education, education."

All around the world, education for industry, technology and the promotion of entrepreneurship has become a holy grail for economic strategy and policy. There are, however, steps that can be taken at the level of our regional Government, and one of those is to make the necessary tough decisions on the allocation of spending between Departments. While almost every area of public spending claims to be underfunded, it is clear from the evidence given to the Committee's inquiry that higher and further education and aspects of training require additional significant financial resources.

12.15 pm

The Department for Employment and Learning has a strong case in a climate of interdepartmental competition for resources, given that many of its spending activities can be seen as investments that will lead to future economic growth and, hence, to the resources to fund future public spending. Where possible and appropriate, industrial and other non-Government sources of funding should be accessed.

Further action is required to correct the low levels of adult literacy and numeracy in Northern Ireland. That has been said frequently in the House. Other Departments have a responsibility to ensure that that serious problem is not perpetuated in future generations.

The Committee is anxious to maintain a geographical spread of further education provision. At the same time, there are grounds for some colleges to specialise in certain activities, and thereby attempt to secure positions as centres of excellence. We should encourage further education colleges to improve the statistical database of students and staff and to make it more consistent. Where possible, information technology modules should be included in further education courses.

With regard to higher education, the Northern Ireland universities have had to cope with a rapid increase in student numbers in the last decade. That increase has far exceeded the growth in public funding of higher education. That is a UK-wide phenomenon, and it has generated considerable strain. The Committee shares the concern of those commentators who note the serious decline in the real level of funding for Northern Ireland university-based research and development in

the 1990s, which contrasts with its continued growth in Great Britain and its recent rapid expansion in the Republic of Ireland.

The universities can help themselves through the best possible performance in the research assessment exercise. At the same time, the Committee supports the creation of a separate pot of money, over and above that of the research assessment exercise, which can be devoted to research that reflects strategic or regional needs in Northern Ireland. I declare an interest in that subject, as I am on unpaid leave of absence from one of those universities.

The Committee wants to see business/education links promoted with vigour. It is pleased that the Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership now has a wider remit. However, the number of teacher placements in industry should be increased. In Scotland, one in 14 teachers — roughly 7% — has been placed in industry for at least one week. That compares to approximately 0.2%, or one in 400, of teachers here.

Careers education and guidance is a crucial area, and the staff who work in that field should be given esteem commensurate with the importance of their work. Careers education should be as up-to-date as possible, and therefore should make maximum use of information technology. Guidance provision should always put the interest of the recipient first, rather than any financial interest of a particular teaching institution.

While we await the completion of the Fulton review of the careers service, the Committee recommends that the Department give close attention to the recent development of careers education in places such as Wales. One cross-cutting matter of particular concern is the trend in subjects being studied at A level. Young people are voting with their feet against crucial disciplines, such as certain sciences and mathematics. Everything possible should be done to encourage an increase in the popularity of such subjects.

Even though the Northern Ireland labour market may now, sadly, be moving into a cyclical downturn, we believe that our findings on sectoral skills shortages are likely to be of lasting significance. Although the Committee commends the Department's attempts to better marry types of labour demand and supply, more could be done to make the variety of agencies involved comprehensible to the private sector. The structure of Northern Ireland's training organisations and sectoral training councils should be streamlined, given wider UK developments in those areas.

Above all, it should be recognised that skill levels in the Northern Irish workforce, in some respects such as sub-degree, technical and craft skills qualifications, fall short of those in Great Britain and much of the rest of the European Union. In the late nineteenth century, this region was one of the workshops of the world.

Significant contributions were made to global science and technology. What was once true can be true again. I support the motion.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Carrick): The Chairperson has already set the context for the Committee's inquiry into education and training for industry. It was clear from the outset that the contribution of education and training to Northern Irish industry was of paramount importance. No one denies that education and training have an intrinsic merit in contributing to social and cultural worth, and do not need to be justified through economic payback alone. Nevertheless, it is vital that both education and training systems be geared to meeting economic needs. That dynamic must always be present to meet the demands of a continually changing labour market. We all have a role to play in ensuring that those demands are met efficiently and effectively. Furthermore, we must strive together to guarantee access for all.

At the first evidence session of the inquiry in June 2000, the economic commentator John Simpson told the Committee that it was to be complimented on the ambitious breadth of the inquiry. The terms of reference were, in retrospect, wide ranging. However, I have been heartened by the number of organisations from all sectors in Northern Ireland that have taken the time to work with the Committee to help to shape future policy.

During the inquiry, several areas emerged as vital to education and training systems, around which the report has been structured. I want to briefly focus on three areas of particular importance. Before I do so, I reiterate the Chairperson's words of appreciation and gratitude to the Committee Clerk, his predecessor, the support staff, special advisers, and research staff. They were a tremendous encouragement to the Committee; they did an excellent job and deserve the Committee's appreciation and gratitude.

First, I will speak about skills strategies. I acknowledge the work that the Northern Ireland Skills Taskforce and the Priority Skills Unit have done. A report recently published by the task force aims to raise awareness of skills issues and to encourage the development of positive actions and potential solutions. However, more needs to be done to develop a co-ordinated and flexible skills strategy to enable Northern Ireland's education and training sectors to respond quickly and appropriately to the changing labour market. Any skills strategy must account for the fact that our economy is predominantly comprised of small and medium-sized enterprises. Their training costs can be particularly burdensome, and they find it more difficult to replace any staff released for training.

Neither can the low levels of adult literacy and numeracy in large sections of the community be ignored. The Department for Employment and Learning is

preparing an urgently needed basic skills strategy, and the Committee looks forward eagerly to considering it. I must, however, caution that while strategies are important, immediate action is needed. The Committee took evidence on the work of Moy Park Ltd to address basic skills needs in the Upper Bann constituency. The link that Moy Park established with the East Tyrone College of Further and Higher Education was especially commendable.

The Committee also heard from another progressive firm in the Upper Bann constituency. Galen (Pharmaceuticals) has had difficulties in recruiting appropriate chemistry graduates. The decline in the number of students of scientific subjects and mathematics needs to be given serious consideration in the current review of the curriculum for 16- to 19-year-olds. There is a great need for education providers, Government agencies and the media to work together to increase scientific awareness.

The Department for Employment and Learning has worked hard on the image of the further education sector, but much more needs to be done to ensure parity of esteem for vocational and academic education. Geographical spread is essential to ensure local access to further education and to underpin social inclusion. However, that needs to be balanced with further movement towards specialisation in support of particular sections of the economy and the development of centres of excellence as appropriate.

The Department will soon finalise its further education strategy, which should address those issues. It must guide the allocation of funding for the sector. While I welcome the recent improvements in support for further education students, the overall per capita funding for students in the further education sector needs to be increased if it is to achieve its objective of delivering high-class vocational training on a par with academic qualifications.

Several colleges have developed mutually beneficial relationships with local businesses, and those should provide a template for the whole sector. Further education staff, in particular, need to understand the needs of local industry. The Department's Lecturers Into Industry initiative has already played a part in that, as have the plans for its further development.

I am aware from the evidence submitted to the Committee that further education colleges are only just beginning to develop effective links with industrial development agencies. I urge action to ensure that the pace is increased with the creation of the Invest Northern Ireland agency.

A major review of careers education and guidance was carried out in 1995, but there has been only limited improvement since then. That area is vital, given increasing student numbers in tertiary education. Career

choices are often not made until its completion. A job is no longer for life. Many adults face difficult career choices throughout their working lives and need access to career guidance. I was extremely impressed by the work carried out by the Education and Guidance Service for Adults in that regard.

12.30 pm

I urge the Department to complete its response to the Fulton report. We need implementation and action sooner rather than later.

The Committee met the Committee for Education and Lifelong Learning from the National Assembly for Wales to discuss in depth the issue of careers education and guidance. It is clear that we have fallen behind our colleagues in Wales and Scotland, who have already opted for career guidance to be delivered to national standards in order to counteract the fragmented range of services at local level. I hope that we can soon achieve a centrally co-ordinated, independent and high-quality service to reflect the new curriculum and the needs of the economy.

The path from education through training to industry needs greater clarification so that stakeholders can understand it more easily. The Department for Employment and Learning has made a significant contribution towards ensuring that education and training systems respond early and effectively to economic indicators. However, much still needs to be done, and the Committee looks forward to collaborating with the Minister and the Department over the report, which sets out the key areas that the Committee believes must be addressed. I commend the report to the House.

Mr Byrne: As a member of the Committee, I endorse the report and congratulate the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson for the way in which they conducted the inquiry.

The inquiry into education and training for industry in Northern Ireland is vital to the training needs of our regional economy in the next 20 years. As a region, Northern Ireland must compete in a global economy through open competition in the EU, and, indeed, in the wider international trading context.

The statistics relating to Northern Ireland's gross domestic product (GDP) performance remind us that we have a deficit to make up. At present, the average production from workers in Northern Ireland equates to 84% of the UK average. However, when we compare our production performance with the average in either the USA or the EU, we only achieve between 50% and 60%. That is a major concern. Performance is not just the responsibility of workers; management in Northern Ireland is facing a major challenge in trying to improve output.

One of the key issues that the Committee uncovered — and it was made clear through several submissions — was the poor level of literacy and numeracy, particularly in adults. Approximately 250,000 adults lack basic skills in numeracy or literacy. That is a severe handicap to people when they try to find employment, above all, in sustainable jobs. Skills and training pose a major challenge to education and training providers in Northern Ireland, particularly for practical skills training and higher technology skills training for industry.

The Committee received a wide range of submissions from the further education sector, the higher education sector and several community and private training providers. We also received a submission from the Training and Employment Agency. The Committee was particularly impressed by Bombardier Shorts's submission, which outlined its in-house training facilities. The firm's basic skills training is very much tailored to the needs of industry, and it impressed on us the need for future skills training to be tailored to those interests.

The Committee was also impressed by the submission from Letterkenny Regional Technical College, which highlighted the importance of further education or regional technical colleges as engines of local economic development.

The Committee made 43 recommendations, but I will not go into detail about those. The Committee found that good statistical information on training output and quality was lacking. The Department needs a statistical information unit to collate, analyse and evaluate skills training. That is much needed and would help in the provision of training tailored to the future needs of our economy.

The Committee had a strong desire to see more resources put into the Careers Advisory Service, particularly in secondary schools and further education colleges. Good careers advice is vital if we are to provide young people with the opportunity to realise their full potential. Young people must understand the different career possibilities that are available through academic, vocational or practical training routes.

We are all aware of the importance of university R&D in enabling manufacturing industry to develop new products — or adapt existing ones — and thus gain a competitive edge. The Committee was concerned at the lack of postgraduate students, who are vital to the development of research and development in our two universities. Postgraduate students will not be interested in R&D unless we also invest in the resources that are afforded to postgraduate students. The most crucial resource in university R&D is the postgraduate student working on a project under supervision.

The Committee is concerned at the lack of co-ordination between the 17 colleges of further education.

Training provision for practical skills should be spread throughout Northern Ireland, not just centred in the two main cities or a few other towns. I come from Tyrone, which has a good history of providing workers for the construction industry. It is important to offer skills training in such rural parts of Northern Ireland.

The Committee had a wide-ranging remit. Tackling everything dealt with in the inquiry would be too big a project. However, it is important that it be used as a benchmark for the future provision of skills training in Northern Ireland. I commend the report to the House. I hope that lessons can be learnt, and that education and training providers can boost their contribution, so that young people and adults can avail of good opportunities in future.

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the report, and I urge all Members to read it. It is evident from the number of oral and written submissions that the inquiry was long overdue. We should acknowledge the valuable input from education and training institutions, businesses, trade unions, the voluntary and community sectors, student unions, borough councils and churches.

The submissions from such diverse bodies were wide-ranging and informative. If the 43 recommendations are adopted, the concept of the intrinsic value of education and its relevance to job creation and the economy will be embedded in society.

The terms of reference of the inquiry were

“To examine and make recommendations to improve the contribution of further and higher education and training, including university-based Research and Development, to ... industry.”

That is a challenge for the Committee for Employment and Learning, for the Department and also for joined-up government. Those challenges must be met if we are to collectively pursue a culture of lifelong learning that will create enormous benefits for the individual and for society. We must strengthen, develop and mainstream education, training and industry and North/South co-operation in order to increase and stimulate economic growth. That action must be directed to the provision of real jobs.

The inquiry's recommendations have assumed critical importance in the light of the current downturn in the global economy. In order to survive, we must implement them. In so doing, we will activate policies central to addressing unemployment, deprivation and social and educational exclusion, which are the lot of many of our young people.

We must make difficult choices if we are to lay to rest the twin evils of joblessness and poverty. We cannot sustain competing economies on this small island. We must set up a further and higher education system throughout Ireland, one which is open, inclusive and

delivers high-quality education and training to all. Our overriding need for North/South co-operation in research and development was brought home by many of the witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee.

A major weakness of the report is its failure to identify areas for all-Ireland co-operation that would mutually enhance our prospects of competing in the global market. That is particularly relevant in the field of training provision, and is essential if we are to ensure access to third-level education through adequate student finance. I welcome the U-turn by the Labour Government in that respect.

Current mainstream training is linked to British Government macroeconomic policy. That has had major implications for the North, such as the lack of adequate quality training and job creation. There are regular newspaper headlines on the topic — for example, “EU peace money has trained 22,000 people.” However, we rarely hear how that training has produced sustainable, full-time jobs; boosted the economy; upgraded the level of skills; or helped young people to build confidence.

As we have read in many submissions, training is geared to improving employability. However, it is not linked seriously to the provision of real jobs. In the main, the approach to training is top-down. That may, in part, account for the low skills level in the workforce.

Evidence also suggests that, in respect of sub-degrees and craft-trained qualifications, we fall far short of the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain and the rest of Europe. We must not underestimate the extent of the challenge facing us if we are simply to catch up. We recognise the initiatives begun by the Minister and the Department to address those problems, and we trust that the inquiry and its recommendations will speed the process.

12.45 pm

There is a strong case in recommendations 9 to 19 for proper acknowledgement of and funding for further education colleges — and especially those in Newry, Armagh, Fermanagh, Omagh and Derry — to enable the development of a strategic, cross-border role for delivering basic skills, vocational education and training equity. This is despite the constraints placed on the allocation of public spending between Departments and the significant additional resources required by the Department for Employment and Learning. It would be an advantage, in the terms of reference and the expansion of the recommendations 31 and 33, if the Executive and the Government of the Twenty-six Counties could explore the possibility of establishing an all-Ireland body to promote and validate vocational qualifications such as NVQs, advanced certificates of vocational education (ACVES), national diplomas and HNDs.

Finally, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will make a plug for my constituency and the development of Derry. It is the major alternative site for the growth of full-time higher education provision. I ask the Minister to consider establishing a working group to advance recommendations for the development of higher education in the north-west. This should be done in co-operation with the Dublin Government.

I wish to pay tribute to the Committee staff who have done sterling work in the preparation of this report. I urge all Members to give it serious consideration. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Neeson: I welcome the report, though I was disappointed not to receive a copy until Saturday morning. I am not a member of this Committee, and to do the report full justice more time to study its contents would have been appreciated.

Having said that, it is a good, timely report. I suggest that Members read it in conjunction with the report from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on its inquiry into the implementation of 'Strategy 2010'. During the public sessions of our inquiry, and even in oral submissions, the question of the relationship between training, industry and business came up time and time again. It is important that we take an interdepartmental approach towards the issues at hand; issues that affect not only the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning, but the Department of Education as well. Dealing with enterprise culture starts at an early age.

I again welcome the fact that on numerous occasions Minister Farren and Minister Empey have worked in partnership when dealing with pressing issues. There is a strategic issue here for the Department for Regional Development as well. In 'Shaping our Future', reference is made to the provision of educational facilities on a regional basis throughout Northern Ireland, so an interdepartmental approach is required.

It is critical that the institutions provide the skills necessary to meet the needs of the economy. Recommendation 8, which rightly draws attention to the fact that there is a need to provide skills for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), is important. The backbone of industry in Northern Ireland is small businesses, and it is important that that be reflected in new education provision.

By the same token, I acknowledge that when Nortel was expanding — before its sad decline due to global recession — many further education institutes provided and developed the skills necessary for that industry. That was very welcome, and devolution has given opportunities to develop such provision.

I draw Members' attention to recommendation 22 on the need to further increase the number of university places in Northern Ireland. The Department is working towards that, but far too many young people leave Northern Ireland for other parts of the UK and never return. We have lost many of our more talented people because there were not sufficient university places available in Northern Ireland. I hope that the Minister does not mind me reiterating the view that is shared by the vast majority of Members about student fees. Those fees must be abolished if we are to provide the equality of opportunity that is required.

Recommendation 28 refers to New Deal and to the need to monitor progress. I agree with that, but the Department and the Minister must seriously consider the vacuum that has been left with the demise of the ACE jobs. The impact of that is still being harshly felt in my constituency. I may have been critical of the level of skills development under the old ACE scheme, but at least the scheme contributed to meeting an important community need, particularly for the more vulnerable members of society.

Recommendation 28 also refers to equality of opportunity in training. That is an important issue. When the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was considering its report, the need to provide equality of opportunity — particularly gender equality — in the workplace became very clear. We made recommendations in relation to those matters.

The report quite rightly highlights the importance of research and development. That is vital, especially given the new circumstances that we face following the events of 11 September. However, I am disappointed at the delay in setting up the science park in Belfast's Titanic Quarter. I understand that the delay is through no lack of enthusiasm on the part of those charged with the task of establishing the organisation; rather, it is because of planning issues. If we are to have joined-up government and an interdepartmental approach, such issues must be addressed.

The report recognises the importance of information and communication technology. That issue kept cropping up, so I particularly welcome recommendation 19, which states that full-time students in further education should have one component in information and communication technology training. I ask Members to look back at recommendations 27 and 28 of 'Strategy 2010', which dealt specifically with further education and training and the commercialisation of new technology, as they deal directly with today's topic of debate.

As a former teacher, I — and I am sure that this applies to Assembly Member Carson also — recognise the need to provide opportunities for placement in industry for teachers, particularly those involved in careers guidance.

This is a good and welcome report, but it can only be implemented if the resources are made available. I hope that they will be. The development of skills for the twenty-first century is vital to the people and communities of Northern Ireland, and when we provide the necessary facilities, TSN must be taken into consideration. I support the motion.

Ms McWilliams: Some of the background research commissioned for the inquiry pointed to four main problems with education and training for industry. The first was the low percentage of workforce qualification levels in Northern Ireland. The qualification mix is not what Northern Ireland needs, and some qualifications are dated. One of the most important conclusions was that we do not have enough people with intermediate types of skills. Clearly, we must do something about that. The statistics for job-related training are also relatively low. Finally, employers' commitment to human resource development and investment is also lower than it is elsewhere.

We know what the problems are. The report includes a number of recommendations. I would also advise drafting a vision for the future along the following lines: we must enhance our human capital; we must have better and more flexible training; and education and employment services must be targeted towards identified growth services and sectors. One of the problems is that too much of our training is supply-driven; not enough of it is demand-driven.

Secondly, we need to tap into our local knowledge and expertise. A major recommendation of the report — and this must be part of our vision for the future — is to link higher education, further education and our centres of research excellence to optimise innovation.

Thirdly, the report points to offering more and better pathways to social integration — opening up access to jobs and training for those who were previously excluded.

Fourthly, we must modernise with a broader economic base, so as to shift from the old to create the new. We must create niches of high-value specialisation. I recognise the problem of simultaneously exposing ourselves to the vulnerabilities and volatility of modern global markets by becoming overdependent on any one particular sector. Unfortunately, as we know, Northern Ireland has suffered greatly from such overdependence in the past.

Finally, we must create high-quality working and training environments to induce our talent to stay here and at the same time to attract researchers and investors to come to Northern Ireland. Much of what we heard was about old infrastructure, about buildings that were falling down — unattractive environments for people to be trained in and not the places that adult learners should be returning to. They were put off so

much by what they had previously experienced that they never wanted to return.

The key view of many participants who gave evidence was that we needed to build more partnerships.

1.00 pm

What struck me very forcibly was the evidence that we took from the providers in the South. FÁS, the Irish training and employment authority, made the point that it had had to go through a period of rapid change. The colleges there had to face up to forming consortia: further education colleges, or technical colleges as they were formerly known, coming together to specialise. However, too many of them were providing too much of the same, rather than anticipating changes in the labour market and the needs of new investors in a flexible and rapid fashion. They have changed enormously, and we could learn a lot from that.

Currently, colleges in Northern Ireland are competing instead of co-operating. Someone needs to take a strong hand on that, and I ask the Minister to put in place a strategy for further education. The demands are not being met in the way that they should. The strategy should be anticipating changes as well as attracting young people into further education colleges and sending them out well trained, whether with modern apprenticeships or the skills that are in demand.

The evidence from the district councils was interesting. Banbridge District Council made a strong case that while district councils, LEDU and local enterprise agencies worked together, further education, higher education and the T&EA were not currently part of this collaborative effort. There needs to be a response to such statements.

There is concern that a unit should be developed. No doubt the Minister will tell us that there are agencies or units within the Departments that have some kind of workforce strategy and are developing ways to respond to future labour market needs. I sit on the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I am concerned that the Health Minister intends to carry out a workforce strategy, as there are enormous shortages. This report relates to industry, but if we are to have an interdepartmental approach, it might be useful to have a look, right across the Departments, at the workforce needs in Northern Ireland, and to have a strategy in place for that.

Another concern highlighted in the report relates to the careers service. Scotland and Wales have tackled this problem, brought together a number of providers in partnership, and examined how business and education can relate to industry. That is not the case in Northern Ireland. A report on that will be published shortly, and I cannot anticipate its recommendations. However, those giving evidence said that the current level of

careers advice at secondary school level left a lot to be desired. That was a major concern.

Secondly, they need to develop a mechanism to feed information about the skills shortages into the education system. An engineering firm made the point that it had huge skills shortages, and yet was not aware that teachers and careers advisors were knowledgeable about these skills shortages. We must modernise our careers service as soon as possible.

It would probably be useful to hear about 'career window'. What happened to 'career window'? It was to be an Internet service that could provide information. Resources were set aside for that, but it seems to have disappeared. Our researchers found that there was a lower use of Internet services in Northern Ireland. That is a problem for us. The promotion of the Internet among young people is important, but we must remember that the socially excluded do not always have access to such services. If we have gone down the road of introducing 'career window', can the Minister say when it is to take effect and what its importance to the careers service will be?

Clearly there are issues surrounding the curriculum — it seems that many of the matters that I am talking about begin with the letter "C" — and it has been one of the major problems in Northern Ireland. While Germany and Sweden have pointed to a mix of academic and vocational qualifications, Northern Ireland has done better in the academic field than in the vocational field. We need to start promoting parity between the two.

As a former academic — I should not say "former", given the current state of the Assembly — I am conscious that this is a very difficult job. There is a problem with the pathway between the vocational and the academic — it should be a lattice rather than a ladder. Currently a great deal of emphasis is put on academic and professional qualifications, particularly by parents. They must be made aware that there are many opportunities. The A-level content of the new curriculum could be changed accordingly. It is interesting to hear that the GNVQ is to be retitled as a "vocational A Level". That may make people look at it differently. Other countries have made a better job of this. We can learn from their experiences, as the report indicates. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment said that the number of pupils who currently mix academic and vocational subjects is not known. The database is inadequate in that respect.

We were also very impressed by the promotion of the worlds of employment and education through services such as the Northern Ireland Business Education Partnership (NIBEP). They speak to clusters of businesses. They provide mentors and role models. I was particularly taken by the fact that they are targeting socially deprived

communities. It is too often the case that businesses make links only with the grammar school sector. So it was important to hear that work experience, enterprise awareness and commercial understanding are being promoted through teacher placements and school placements. I repeat the statistics mentioned by the Chairperson. Scotland was able to provide 600 teacher placements, whereas we could provide only 45. The statistics speak for themselves. Nevertheless it is good to hear that 1,000 business advisers are now participating in schools in Northern Ireland.

The main theme that comes across is that this is now part of the mainstream. When we reflect on our school days, how many of us in the Assembly can say that we had opportunities to hear from business and industry representatives or to go out on work experience? That has changed. However, much more needs to be done, and we are concerned about the underfunding of organisations such as NIBEP.

We heard about equal opportunities issues and barriers to training. The benefit regulations show the need for interdepartmental partnerships between the Department for Social Development, the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. A more co-operative approach must be taken by the Departments. There are concerns about the eligibility rules. How meaningful is the training for those on the New Deal programme? I have heard from constituents who felt that the training was demeaning, did not lead to productive employment and was simply a way to continue to manipulate the employment statistics.

The positive action programmes were important for women. The Women's Training, Enterprise and Childcare organization (Women's TEC) talked about the importance of giving women confidence in a women-only training environment, especially in areas which are traditionally stereotyped as men's jobs, such as construction. They were able to encourage women into these jobs and into the area of information and communication technology. They also provide on-site childcare. The Minister has visited projects where he has seen this at first hand, and we encourage him to continue with that.

There were also, as Sean Neeson has pointed out, examples from the community of adult learning and community-based learning that we should be able to tap in to. The Chairperson was able to visit not-for-profit organisations in the United States and saw that there seems to be much greater collaboration between business and enterprise and community leadership. Given the amount of funding that is going into these areas, and particularly into the social economy, that is obviously something that we should be building on.

One of the major points of the report is the need for reorganisation. Representatives from the further education

sector complained that there are too many private training providers and that the sector is unable to compete with them. There is a plethora of national training organisations, sectoral training councils, and other providers; that is creating confusion. A much more strategic approach to training is needed. Perhaps there is an urgent need to look at how these bodies are collaborating — or are they competing against each other? The good practice models of the universities in Northern Ireland and the incubator schemes to enable higher education providers to reach out to business and the community should be encouraged.

A major recommendation is that the research assessment exercise is not helpful, given that sufficient credit is rarely given to researchers who apply their work to a Northern Ireland context. I emphasise the Northern Ireland Economic Council's recommendation that 10% of that research should be given credit where it applies to the Northern Ireland situation. Perhaps that would encourage more academics to produce work that is of relevance and that can be fed back into the economy here rather than to international journals that are not always relevant to Northern Ireland. That would encourage applied research so that researchers would not tend to look at their work solely from the point of view of how it will enhance their careers.

Finally, there is the question of an employer levy. Is the employer levy productive and should we be introducing it? It ring-fences the needs for training. Both France and Australia have this. We took contradictory evidence in Northern Ireland, and it would not be surprising to hear that the trade unions here were in favour of the levy and businesses were not.

It is argued that for such development in any country, materials, manpower, marketing, management and money are needed. The report addresses, in particular, the issues of manpower, skills, education and learning. In the end, the Minister will be asked "Where is the money for it?".

Mrs Carson: As a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I commend this report to the Assembly. I thank all the Committee staff for their hard work — we could not have battled through all of the submissions and the reports without their being well tabulated for us. I welcome the input into this inquiry from industrialists, employment agencies and education providers. Sitting there each day, and as a former primary school principal, I was extremely worried. We have always had pride in our education system and manufacturing expertise.

For many years Northern Ireland led in industrial development and achieved remarkable export results, et cetera, in spite of ongoing terrorism for 30 years. However, this view of our education system will change for everybody when they read this report and

see the evidence from the industrialists. The submissions to the Committee catalogued the failure of the present system to educate our young people properly and prepare them to meet the requirements of industry.

A submission from one firm gave examples of employees who were incapable of doing their job because of a lack of literacy and numeracy skills. That can produce an adverse effect on production and product safety. The firm's submission stated that some of its employees could not count pieces of a product into a bag, identify the letters of the alphabet, or identify the days of the week. The firm ended its submission with a plea that all students must achieve basic levels of numeracy and literacy before they leave school. It is not the responsibility of industry, secondary level education or higher and further education to tackle literacy and numeracy.

1.15 pm

One of the engineering firms stated that careers guidance must be radically overhauled. Another firm stated that it had received a visit from chemistry teachers, and 99% of them had not considered employment in industry.

The evidence from the Education and Training Inspectorate was particularly interesting. The Committee heard that the difficulties with literacy and numeracy were common across 17 colleges. However, one of the witnesses said he was

"always slightly bemused when people talk about employees who cannot add up to nine, and so on. To be honest our evidence is not of a system in further education, or anywhere else, dreadfully failing our young people on this scale. Of course, there are exceptions, and we dare not be complacent".

That was not what the Committee was getting from other submissions.

As a former primary school principal I know that Members cannot afford to be complacent. The crux of the problem highlighted in the report is not about education failing young people at secondary or further education level; it is about education failing young people at primary school level. Screening for problems at primary school level would be a start.

A remedial programme is a necessity for the 16-plus age group, but the root of the problem is in the primary school sector and it should be tackled there. I do not blame the teachers; the problem is with the bureaucratic pressure imposed on them. I ask for action now, not only for funding of the lifelong learning projects and liaisons with industry, but also for progress in the primary school sector to solve the problems of literacy and numeracy. I support the motion.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the report. The agreed terms of reference were

“To examine and make recommendations to improve the contribution of further and higher education and training, including university-based Research and Development, to Northern Ireland industry.”

Part of the Committee’s rationale was to determine the way forward for Northern Ireland to increase its productivity in the global marketplace. Northern Ireland’s productivity is significantly lower than that of its competitors. As has already been said, productivity is only 84% of that in the UK and just over 50% of that in the USA.

Education and training increase productivity levels, which in turn increase social inclusion. That, on an individual basis, will lead to higher earnings. The Committee gathered information from as wide a range of people and organisations as possible. The Committee for Employment and Learning is supportive of the infrastructure and the initiatives that the Minister and the Department have put in place since devolution.

The report is a timely contribution to an important debate. The economic environment is constantly evolving. The Programme for Government states that the Northern Ireland Executive is committed to developing a knowledge-based economy. The Foyle constituency, which I represent, has seen a significant growth in the IT sector, although there is still a long way to go in the north-west.

The North West Institute of Further and Higher Education in Derry made a significant contribution to the evidence gathering. The director of the institute, Peter Gallagher, and his deputy, Seamus Murphy, gave much oral evidence to the Committee. In addition, Dorothy McElwee and her associates from the North West Institute gave oral evidence on New Deal. Derry City Council supplied further written evidence. The future of our education, skills and development is in lifelong learning.

The downturn in the world economy after the appalling attacks on 11 September will be felt locally. The recent announcement from Bombardier Shorts is evidence of that. That will be the biggest mass redundancy here in recent times, and the knock-on effect has still to be realised. Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd in Derry is still waiting to hear if its production will be affected. In the run-up to Christmas, workers can only hope that the fallout will not affect them too badly, if at all.

This weekend there was the further announcement that Marketing Database Associates Ltd would not be setting up in Derry in the foreseeable future. The Boston-based firm was to have established a major call centre there. The development was announced about six months ago, and the firm took over a former shirt factory and employed 26 people. Not only will those people now lose their jobs, but the expected 150 new jobs will not be realised.

There will be a knock-on effect for local suppliers. People who supply office equipment and personal computers are very much affected. Some of those firms have outstanding accounts, and those may be sufficient to put some of them out of business. I hope that that is a worst-case scenario and that it will not happen. It is therefore more important than ever that we should be able to respond with speed, quality and flexibility to changes in the demands of industry.

The Committee has made 43 recommendations that are all worthy of consideration. I hope that the Minister will refer to some of his priorities. I know that he is committed to developing a culture of lifelong learning, and excellence in learning and training. People are at the heart of economic growth. I stress that we need structures built around people, not the other way round. Foreign investment adds value to the local economy, and we must encourage it. I commend the report, and I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I want to put on record my appreciation of the staff who collated the information during our oral and written evidence taking. It has been worthwhile, and many important issues have emerged. I will try not to go back over the many issues that have already been covered; instead, I will flavour my comments with my own experience and interest. I hope that that will be of some benefit to the discussions.

First, I want to comment on recommendation 1, which highlights the poor levels of basic adult educational skills in Northern Ireland. That is an area that is becoming increasingly important, not only to the people involved — and because of the social exclusion that may result — but to the economy of Northern Ireland. Unemployment levels are much lower than they were in previous decades, and we must try to continue to improve people’s educational attainments so that they, in turn, can take up job opportunities when those exist.

In an answer to a written question, the Minister advised me that 44% of the unemployed have no educational qualifications. We must continue to target that and to improve our education levels. Recommendation 4 is for a review of the curriculum for 16- to 19-year-olds, so that it will become increasingly relevant. In particular, we have highlighted the weaknesses in scientific subjects. I want to draw Members’ attention to some of the information that was highlighted during the evidence sessions. In particular, there may in this detailed report be lessons for members of the Education Committee that may not have been immediately obvious.

At one evidence session, Ms Carol Phillips from Bombardier Shorts advised the Committee that some students were struggling with a course at Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE). The college expected a high failure rate, but Bombardier expected

and wanted people to succeed. Bombardier was willing to do whatever needed to be done to ensure that the students in whom it was investing would succeed. Bombardier and BIFHE formed a partnership to review the students' curriculum. Time and money was invested in the course and the net result of incorporating new projects into the syllabus was renewed interest from the students because the course was relevant. Following that, students had a 100% pass rate where previously they had been failing. It is not rocket science. It is a matter of making the course relevant, changing the curriculum where necessary and enabling students to retain an interest in the subject. That is a basic concept that should be applied to all areas in which difficulties are being experienced.

Recommendation 10 states that

"Decisions regarding the development of centres of excellence at individual colleges should stem from the overall strategy for the sector."

I support that recommendation, which would develop expertise and enable some people to specialise, as everybody cannot do everything. However, the Committee has added a caveat that

"This should be underpinned by a commitment to innovative schemes, which increases access and supports a geographical spread of provision across Northern Ireland."

We are saying that basic courses for which there is an undoubted demand from all over Northern Ireland must be well spread throughout the Province. However, there will have to be a degree of specialisation if we are to reach levels to enable us to compete with other regions.

I must plug my own constituency, which remains the only one in Northern Ireland to not have a permanent further education campus. The people of Larne and Carrickfergus are badly served by the current further education structure. The lowest wage levels in Northern Ireland are also to be found in those towns. A low level of attainment at NVQ level 4 is to be found in the same areas. Those issues are all related. Neither the informal education structure nor educational bodies such as Proteus (NI) Ltd and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults have been sufficiently provided for. I strongly support a wide geographical spread so that no area is discriminated against and the educational needs of all are addressed.

Some of the historical difficulties with the informal structure may be related to the relatively low levels of community activity in East Antrim. That is another problem that the Departments must address collectively so that people will be able to get on to the educational ladder to improve their own abilities, which will increase their self-worth and the opportunities open to them.

Recommendation 17 refers to the establishment of

"Closer links with local industry, industrial development organisations, including increased staff participation in the Lecturers into Industry initiative".

I have become aware of past failings through my work in the Committee and through my interest in the subject.

I was astounded when an assistant director of a local college told me that until a couple of years ago the IDB had never made contact with a further education college. In the USA and Europe, a key factor in an investment decision is the local education provision and how it will marry with a company's needs. The IDB has begun to address that issue, and I hope that Invest Northern Ireland will dramatically increase interaction with local colleges. Introductions should be made so that new employers coming into Northern Ireland can feel confident that they will receive support. There are, undoubtedly, good examples of local colleges that have developed courses with local and international companies. That should be standard practice.

1.30 pm

Colleges must work towards creating better contact with local employers. The Committee's recommendation affects institutions other than the Departments. Everyone concerned must try to improve and increase partnerships. Partnership is the key word in any developing region, and groups should work together for the benefit of all.

Recommendation 26 calls for a more comprehensive and streamlined national training organisation and a sectoral training council. The evidence highlighted many employment sectors that are not covered by the current structures. That means that those sectors are not publicising or addressing the issues that concern them. There is also duplication and overlap. Procedures must be restructured and streamlined to bring them into line with the national training organisations. In that way we can easily have an input into changes — for example, changes to NVQs. We can also contribute to the national structure and air the Northern Ireland perspective.

Recommendation 36 states the need for an independent, comprehensive and up-to-date careers education and guidance service. As one of the younger Members of the Assembly, I can recall my own school days. Careers guidance consisted of two limited 15- or 30-minute sessions. The provision of careers guidance rests largely on teachers, who may have a limited perspective on the outside world and the needs of industry or employers.

There is potential for conflict, because it is difficult for a teacher in one school to recommend that a pupil should take up a course in another school. At a time of keen competition for student numbers between schools and colleges, it is convenient to recommend the easy option that pupils should continue their education in

the familiar surroundings of their current college or school. The full range of options may not be given an appropriate airing. Careers guidance should be more comprehensive and independent so that students are made aware of every employment opportunity. In that way they can take a more reasoned view on continuing their education or commencing employment.

During the oral sessions, one of Northern Ireland's leading companies, Galen (Pharmaceuticals), told the Committee of its difficulty in recruiting biochemists and chemists, even though job opportunities were available. Professors at the universities said that places were available on chemistry courses, but that they could not get students to take those places.

When university places and relatively well-paid jobs are available, what is wrong with the current structure? Why are those wonderful opportunities not being better highlighted to schools and further education colleges? Something in the system is surely failing. Unless the educational requirements of industry are met, companies will go elsewhere or, as with Galen, will recruit from Europe and further afield to get the specialisation that they require.

It is important that we build on existing opportunities and that young people be shown those opportunities at an early stage. It is not enough to encourage people to take an O level or an A level in a subject. Clear information should be available early on so that students can assess the current job vacancies in Northern Ireland and how much they could be earning. Students should consider that when choosing their A levels and university courses. Currently that information is not easily available.

There was much merit in the information we received on the careers guidance service in Wales, where an independent service has been developed. I am not saying that it should simply be imported en bloc — there are criticisms of it — but the concept of an independent guidance service, where there is no self-interest and where quality information is given to students irrespective of their school or college, is there. That service is of high quality; it is up-to-date and independent. That is not only desirable but essential if the needs of industry are to be met in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Chairperson of the Education Committee. Please keep your remarks fairly concise.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): Thank you for that useful tip — would that others had heard it earlier.

I welcome the report on education and training for industry. I congratulate the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Members and officials involved. The report covers a wide range of issues and makes important recommendations.

My remarks will be less detailed than I would have liked, but I want to make some initial comments. There is no doubt that education and training lie at the heart of Northern Ireland's ability to provide a highly competitive, skilled and adaptable workforce, capable of meeting future demands. That is absolutely vital in a strong and vibrant economy. I welcome the Committee's recommendations to improve links between business and education, and those to ensure parity of esteem for academic and vocational qualifications.

During evidence on the review of post-primary education, the Education Committee was told by a number of organisations, including the Confederation of British Industry and the Institute of Directors, of the shortage of employees with the necessary skills and aptitudes for today's workplace.

The evidence we received overwhelmingly suggested the need for parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications. Our report will be published shortly, and it will highlight those issues. We will also carefully scrutinise Mr Gerry Burns's recommendations in his report on the review of post-primary education to determine their potential and whether they can be implemented into any new education system.

I must record my dismay at the findings of the Committee for Employment and Learning on the low level of adult literacy and numeracy among large sections of the community. There is undoubtedly a link between poor basic skills, unemployment and exclusion. The current system has failed these people. I hope that initiatives to address their problems can be brought forward speedily, and I will wholeheartedly support them. While it may be true that the main problem lies with people who left school some time ago, there is no room for complacency. We must provide young people with those skills.

The Committee for Education welcomed the new targets for literacy and numeracy included in the new public service agreements, but was slightly disappointed that they were lower than those outlined in the strategy for numeracy and literacy. We pressed the Department of Education on that matter. As a top priority, we will scrutinise and monitor the work of the Department to ensure that appropriate action is being taken to enable those targets to be at least met and, if possible, improved upon, so that young people have the best possible start in life.

We need careers education and guidance to assist young people to make the best choices in their careers. The report highlights concerns about the quality of careers advice and the perception that academic courses are promoted in preference to vocational ones.

I agree with the recommendation by the Committee for Employment and Learning of a system that provides a high-quality service to all its users, reflects

the opportunities available in the economy and equally promotes academic and vocational careers. I anticipate appropriate action to achieve that in the near future.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): I thank Dr Birnie and the Committee for their thoughtful consideration of this vital aspect of my Department's responsibility. Like other Members of the House who are not members of the Committee, I have not had sufficient time to reflect on the report in detail. However, I certainly appreciate and welcome the Committee's intentions to improve the quality of education and training provision for our young people and to enhance the skills of our workforce and of those not at present in employment. The report is a valuable contribution to an essential debate and a fine example of how our institutions are able to interact with the wider community. Given the large number of organisations and institutions which presented evidence to the Committee, it is also an example of the close engagement, attention and interest on our part in the developments which are taking place in the sectors relevant to the work of my Department.

1.45 pm

I trust that we can continue — not just through the Committee for Employment and Learning, but through all of the Statutory Committees — to so engage, and to demonstrate that we can be responsive to the needs of our society.

I fully agree with the Committee's view on the importance of the subject. The Executive have emphasised the importance of the subject by including education, skills and competitiveness in the Programme for Government. My Department's aim is to promote a culture of lifelong learning and to equip people for work in a modern economy. Those aims and objectives are reflected in the Programme for Government. They spring from the belief that education and training after compulsory schooling can and do make a powerful contribution to economic position and social inclusion.

Universities and colleges create the vast majority of our higher level and technical skills; universities, as indicated in last year's report from the Northern Ireland Economic Council, provide a more substantial proportion of our R&D than is the case elsewhere in the UK and Ireland. Colleges and training organisations offer our young people and adults a first and a subsequent opportunity to gain a wide range of vocational, technical or occupational qualifications that allow them to progress to further and higher education or into work. Further education, higher education and vocational training feed directly into the economy and, as they are helping our population to acquire job-related skills, self-confidence and self-esteem, they are also promoting greater social inclusion.

Since I came to office I have endeavoured to promote policies that are in the best interests of those who attend our colleges, training facilities and universities, and the employers and public and social institutions who receive their skills and attributes. I am grateful for the support for these policies contained in the report. I fully accept the spirit of the report as a determined effort to develop and strengthen education and training and to enhance its contribution to the regional economy. It is important to bear in mind the general context in which the submissions were made and in which the report was compiled. It was compiled on evidence that was presented before we had any sense of a recession or a downturn in the global economy. Therefore, over the last year and further back, we were thinking in the context of significant growth continuing over the next few years.

I remind Members that more of our people are employed than ever before, and that our economy has been expanding at a significant rate. Trying to meet the needs that were created by the pressures of the expansion of our economy has not always been easy, particularly when it comes to skills supply. Several Members acknowledged that fact in their remarks.

Some of the developments I have been responsible for include the establishment of a skills task force and the initiation of a series of research projects designed to improve our understanding of the demand side of the labour market. The task force recently published its first comprehensive report, which I commend to Members.

That report covers much of the ground in the Committee's report, and, set alongside a major monitoring survey of skill needs, it complements and supports many of the Committee's conclusions.

The support programme for university research is another initiative. Several Members spoke of the need to invest much more in locally generated research. The support programme will provide over £40 million from a public-private partnership over the next four years to invest in the R&D infrastructure in both of our regional universities.

Last week, I was privileged to launch one of the projects selected as worthy of support by the international panel — the Sonics Arts Centre at Queen's University. This will bring together the knowledge and scholarship in the creative arts and technology sectors in an intensely creative way. It will also provide opportunities for economic and social activity, as well as for teaching and research. I was pleased to learn that the research that is being undertaken is at the frontier of research in that area. The centre could become a leading research centre in world terms. The Centre for Molecular Biosciences at the University of Ulster will build on the strong research record in this area and

provide support for the university's technology transfer activities. Those are only two of the projects funded through the support programme. Several other projects are in the process of development, some of which will be launched in the near future.

My recent changes to student support, my access measures in further and higher education, my introduction of individual learning accounts (ILAs) and *learnDirect* and my support for the Northern Ireland credit accumulation and transfer system (NICATS) are illustrative of my determination to embed the principle of lifelong learning in society and open up opportunities for education and training to a much broader cross-section of the community.

As a result of these initiatives, participation in learning has grown considerably, and Members are aware from recent Assembly Questions that we have had an overwhelming response to ILAs in particular. I do not have the most recent figures to hand, but over 50,000 accounts have been opened, although not all are being drawn down at the moment. However, those figures are well ahead of initial projections, and I trust that we will be able to meet the demands for finance so that people can benefit from educational opportunities, particularly in the lifelong learning context that the provision of ILAs opens up. I welcome the Committee's endorsement of my existing policy direction in these vital areas.

I will move to the essence of the report. At this stage I cannot respond to each of the 43 recommendations. Members will appreciate that there has not been sufficient time to give them the full consideration they deserve. However, I promise to return to those in detail in the near future. I would welcome the opportunity to respond in writing and follow that up in discussion with the Committee. The report is important and deserves no less.

I would like to reflect on some of the main themes suggested by the recommendations and relate my response to the published strategic plan of my Department. I have identified the following five themes: the need for action on poor levels of adult basic skills; a sharper focus, in particular, on information and communication technology skills and on retraining and reskilling the existing workforce or those currently unemployed; the strategic direction of further education and the issues which flow from that; the contribution which the universities can make to the economy and, in particular, to developing the enterprise culture; and the need to develop training provision and related occupational and vocational qualifications.

The issue of basic skills has come before the House on several occasions, not least through Members' persistent questioning of Ministers. The Committee is aware that basic skills have been identified in its

strategic plan as one of the key issues that the Department will face over the coming years. I understand the concerns of the Committee and others about this. It is a significant challenge that must be overcome if the skills levels available in the economy are to be raised and if our population is to aspire to social and personal advancement and esteem.

Officials are working on a comprehensive basic skills strategy for adults, which I hope to bring forward for consultation within the next two months. I recognise the impatience that many people feel about this, and I sympathise with them. However, I ask Members to recognise that it is complex. Existing approaches, while of benefit, have not brought sufficient success. In the 1970s, when I first became involved with higher education, an initiative to address that was launched with a great deal of publicity, and we live with its effects today. We must think carefully about initiatives that we launch now to ensure that they will have the desired effect.

Asking people to come forward and admit that there is a problem is not easy, particularly when it is to do with a basic skills deficit. The image of basic skills work must therefore be transformed, and a wide and comprehensive range of programmes and providers must be involved, including training in the workplace. We have had some experience of that through initiatives that employers have participated in with other education providers, notably further education colleges. Those initiatives have met with reasonable and gratifying success and have encouraged us to build on them. Standards, curricula, assessment arrangements and the professional development of tutors must be worked through. Realistic targets must be identified. In due course, I will welcome the opportunity to share our strategy with the Committee and to seek its support.

I have already mentioned the work of the skills task force, which supports our commitment in the Programme for Government. I fully acknowledge that we must update the relevance and quality of vocational education and training if we are to achieve and sustain our goal of an expanding economy based on knowledge-based industries. All our higher and further education and training providers are aware of this aim and are working towards it. We must also remember that there is, and will continue to be, a significant demand for traditional trades, notably in the construction industry. Evidence suggests an absence of candidates for modern apprenticeships in those areas. In emphasising the skills relevant to the knowledge-based economy, we must not forget that many traditional skills will persist. The demand for those skills will remain considerable, and that demand must be met. We must strike a balance between the two.

The current difficulties in the global economy have had an impact on Northern Ireland. Members have

stressed our current situation. In the last year, we have attempted to meet the skills shortage in some of the electronics sectors by providing a training programme tailored to meeting them. We now find that we have difficulty placing trainees who completed that programme, which was set up specially to meet the pressures that existed in those electronic industries.

Let us hope that the difficulties are short-lived. It is to be hoped that we will soon be back into a period of expansion, and will again face the challenge of meeting skills needs.

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are running a little over your time.

Dr Farren: I apologise if I cannot get to all of the Members' questions or points. I ask you to indulge me with a few more minutes to complete my general overview of the points that were raised. I will reply in writing to Members on points that I do not address which are of particular concern to them.

Careers education has been emphasised by many Members. A review is taking place, and Prof Fulton will report in the near future. A new course at Magee College is being provided to ensure that professional training and development exists locally. Members will see a significant change in career guidance provision. We must remember that independent career guidance is provided through existing jobcentres, so we are not totally reliant on the guidance provided at school level. We need to work on developing and improving that service.

Many Members have referred to the need to strengthen and develop relationships with the business community, particularly through our further education colleges. I certainly endorse that. Members have called for a spread of provision within the further education sector, and for a concentration on specialisation. Members will recall that through funds made available last year, moneys have gone to colleges to encourage them to work together. Several colleges have formed alliances under these auspices, supported by the funds made available. Centres of excellence have been identified in many of our colleges — a point made by several Members. Our further education sector needs to continue providing the broad range of courses that has traditionally been provided.

Frequent reference is made to the institutes of technology in the South. I direct Members' attention to a strong warning made to the colleges there by an authority, only last week, about the danger of what is described as "upward drift". This, in other words, is moving out of the provision of the broad range of vocational, business and technical courses in order to try to emulate the universities. What we have here is

an opportunity to maintain the best of both, and in our strategy we will have that very much in mind.

I take on board points made with respect to the need to keep in touch with developments in how training is organised. I note the suggestion by some Members that there may well be unnecessary overprovision, and competing provision, in some elements of training. It is important to point out that all training providers are subject to supervision, evaluation and assessment by my Department, and the standards are national, not local.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Minister, but you have now used up your time.

Dr Farren: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Curtailed as I am, I trust that I have attempted to indicate a positive response and a welcome for the report. It is a clear indication of how our Committee system is working well in conjunction with Ministers, enabling us to plan effectively for the future of those areas that we have responsibility for.

Dr Birnie: I thank everyone who spoke, especially the Minister, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I quote from George Bernard Shaw:

"He knows nothing; and he thinks he knows everything. That points clearly to a political career."

The linking of skills and jobs is of general interest and not just for us as individual politicians. Certain themes have been raised repeatedly in the last two hours. These include the need for a comprehensible skills strategy in co-operation with the private sector; the urgency of dealing with the appallingly high level of poor basic adult literacy and numeracy; the importance of having comprehensive careers guidance for young people — as well as for those already well established in the labour force — and the need to reverse a historical trend against funding for university-based research and development.

I apologise to Members for the relatively small period between the arrival of this tome in the post and today's debate. The report has been lodged in the Business Office for some time, and we did attempt to circulate the relevant recommendations to Committees over a week ago.

The report suggests that workers and managers should be able to stand tall as regards qualifications that are recognised and interchangeable with those in Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the world. Our universities should establish research partnerships whenever it is appropriate, and that may be in a North/South direction, with the rest of the UK, or with the world.

I applaud the Minister for his Department's objective of embedding a culture of lifelong learning. The

Committee will await the result of the current needs and effectiveness evaluation to see what extra resources are needed to realise that goal and to measure the productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of the existing resources. The Committee welcomes his commitment to respond quickly to the recommendations. I am aware that, to use a school analogy, I am racing against the lunch-break bell.

It is very appropriate that we have debated the motion today, because it is about the future. We have done so in a harmonious spirit, and I hope that the media will reflect that. Earlier, there was at least one school party in the Gallery. In a sense we are dealing with their future and the future of all the young people of the Province. Few areas are of greater significance to a regional Government, therefore I urge the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning 'Inquiry into Education and Training for Industry'.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

'GUIDE TO THE RULES RELATING TO THE CONDUCT OF MEMBERS'

Mr Speaker: Order. The next 11 motions relate to the 'Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members'. They are all on similar subjects, and I propose, therefore, to conduct one debate on all of them. I shall ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and then I will call on the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, who has a problem with his voice today. I hope that he will be able to manage; perhaps Mr Beggs will give some assistance. The debate that will then take place will be on all 11 motions, and I shall call the Chairperson or Deputy Chairperson to make a winding-up speech, if necessary.

I will put the Question on the first motion. I will then have the Clerk read all the motions that are relevant and ask that those Questions be put en bloc. I see no purpose in going through all of them seriatim, unless a Member objects. If a Member objects, we will take the vote on that particular motion separately.

Motion made:

That the following amendment to the 'Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members' be made: delete paragraph 3 and insert

"The guide is divided into four sections dealing with (1) Registration of Interests (paragraphs 8 to 37); (2) Declaration of Interests (paragraphs 38 to 53); (3) the Advocacy Rule (paragraphs 54 to 64); and (4) Procedure for Complaints (paragraphs 65 to 74)." — *[The Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.]*

The Deputy Chairperson of the Standards and Privileges Committee (Mr Beggs): I am pleased to support the motion to amend the 'Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members', which was initially approved by the Assembly on 14 December 1999.

The Standards and Privileges Committee completed an inquiry into the possible appointment of an Assembly commissioner for standards. The Committee report was considered and approved unanimously by the Assembly on 2 April 2001. As a result of recommendations contained in the report, several changes to the 'Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members' are required. The motions in the Order Paper reflect the necessary amendments. Some additional changes are required because of inaccuracies or omissions in the current guide.

The first motion proposes the deletion of paragraph 3 of the guide and the insertion of the suggested wording. That change will take into account the additional paragraphs 73 and 74 to the guide. The remaining motions propose the deletion of other specified paragraphs of the guide and the insertion of the wording given in the

Order Paper. Paragraph 10 will be amended to take account of the provisions of section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which permits the Secretary of State to

“make provision for the filling of vacancies occurring in the Assembly’s membership”.

Paragraph 33 will be amended to include the word “influence”, which was omitted from the original guide, thus extending its coverage. Paragraph 67 will be amended to provide clarification of privilege as it relates to complaints against Members.

2.15 pm

Paragraph 68 will be amended to provide for all complaints to be referred to the commissioner for standards, in accordance with one of the recommendations in the Committee’s report. The amendments to paragraphs 69 and 70 reflect two of the recommendations in the Committee’s report about reporting arrangements between the commissioner and the Committee.

The amendment to paragraph 71 reflects one of the recommendations in the Committee’s report about the procedures involved in the Committee’s reporting to the Assembly. The amendment to paragraph 72 reflects one of the recommendations of the Committee’s report. Standing Orders empower the Committee on Standards and Privileges to recommend sanctions against Members, but the Assembly will still have the final say.

Finally, paragraphs 73 and 74 have been renumbered. There is no change to their substance.

All these amendments reflect some of the provisions of the Committee’s report on the appointment of an Assembly commissioner for standards, which was endorsed by this House in April this year. I commend the amendments to the House, and I ask Members to support the motion.

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 3 and insert:

“The guide is divided into four sections dealing with (1) Registration of Interests (paragraphs 8 to 37); (2) Declaration of Interests (paragraphs 38 to 53); (3) the Advocacy Rule (paragraphs 54 to 64); and (4) Procedure for Complaints (paragraphs 65 to 74).”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 10 and insert:

“After an election to the Assembly, Members are required to complete a registration form and submit it to the Clerk of Standards within three months of taking their seats in accordance with Standing Orders. For Members returned at a by-election the time limit is also three months from the date on which they take their seats. Members taking their seats in accordance

with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 must also complete a registration form within three months of taking their seats. After the initial publication of the Register, (or, in the case of Members returned at by-elections or in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, after their initial registration) it is the responsibility of Members to notify changes in their registrable interests within four weeks of each change occurring.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 33 and insert:

“Members are required to register unremunerated directorships, eg directorships of charitable trusts, professional bodies, learned societies or sporting or artistic organisations, where such a body might directly benefit from public funds or from a decision taken by the Northern Ireland Assembly. Where a Member considers that an unremunerated interest, other than a directorship, which the Member holds might be thought by others to influence his or her actions in a similar manner to a remunerated interest, such an interest should be registered here.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 67 and insert:

“Communications between a Member of the Assembly and the Clerk of Standards and between a member of the public and the Clerk of Standards are not covered by Assembly privilege under section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 nor are they privileged at law. However, should the Commissioner for Standards decide to investigate a complaint, that investigation is privileged. Once the Commissioner reports his findings to the Committee, the proceedings of the Committee in relation to the report are privileged. The privilege attaching to an investigation by the Commissioner and the related proceedings of the Committee do not extend to include allegations made in the original complaint.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 68 and insert:

“All complaints submitted to the Clerk of Standards will be referred by him to the Commissioner for Standards for initial and, if appropriate, detailed investigation. The receipt of a complaint by the Clerk of Standards or the Committee on Standards and Privileges is not to be interpreted as an indication that a prima facie case has been established.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 69 and insert:

“When the Commissioner considers a complaint and concludes that no further investigation is necessary, he will report accordingly to the Committee through the Clerk of Standards.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 70 and insert:

“On completion of a detailed investigation into a complaint against a Member, the Commissioner shall submit a report to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 71 and insert:

“If the Committee on Standards and Privileges decides to adopt the findings and conclusions of a detailed report, as mentioned in paragraph 70, that report shall be submitted to the Assembly as part of a report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: delete paragraph 72 and insert:

“Where the report submitted to the Assembly in accordance with paragraph 71 deals with any matter mentioned in paragraphs 8 to 64 of this guide, it may contain a recommendation that the Member be excluded from proceedings of the Assembly for a specified period and have his/her rights and privileges as a Member withdrawn for that period.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: insert new paragraph 73:

“The Committee on Standards and Privileges has power under Standing Orders to send for persons, papers and records, to order the attendance of any Member before it and to require that specific documents in the possession of a Member relating to its inquiries or to the inquiries of the Commissioner for Standards be laid before it.”

Resolved:

That the following amendment to the ‘Guide to the Rules Relating to the Conduct of Members’ be made: insert new paragraph 74:

“While it will be usual for the Committee on Standards and Privileges to deliberate in private, the Committee determines for itself whether sessions at which evidence is to be taken shall be held publicly or in private and is empowered to refuse leave for the broadcasting of any public sessions.”

The sitting was suspended at 2.18 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.30 pm

Oral Answers To Questions

EDUCATION

Holy Cross Primary School

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to protect and vindicate the rights of children and parents travelling to and from Holy Cross Primary School. (AQO295/01)

14. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to bring an end to the daily attacks on the schoolchildren of Holy Cross Primary School. (AQO294/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): A Cheann Comhairle, with your permission, I will take questions 1 and 14 together as they both relate to Holy Cross Girls’ Primary School in north Belfast.

I am concerned about disruption and attacks on pupils at any school. I am therefore concerned about the situation surrounding Holy Cross Girls’ Primary School and the disruption and anxiety caused to teachers, pupils and parents. All parents have the right to escort their children to school free from impediment, and children have the right to be educated in a safe and secure environment that is conducive to learning.

The protest is unacceptable and must end immediately. The Department of Education will continue to support the board of governors, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Belfast Education and Library Board in their efforts to ensure that that is achieved for the pupils attending Holy Cross Girls’ Primary School and the nearby controlled school, Wheatfield Primary. Departmental officials are in regular contact with the relevant education authorities and are monitoring the situation closely.

Additional support has been provided to Holy Cross Girls’ Primary School and, along with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board, the Department is considering what further assistance may be required by the two schools. In addition, the Executive have established an interdepartmental liaison group of officials and have appointed a senior liaison officer who works from an office in north Belfast that is accessible to all sections of the community. That group has been established to provide regular reports to the Executive on the situation, and the Department

of Education is represented on that group at a senior level.

While the Department of Education, along with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board, is providing that support, the situation at Holy Cross Primary School can be resolved only by dialogue between the local communities. I have repeatedly urged local representatives to come together to resolve their issues.

Mr G Kelly: Will the Minister tell the House what support has been put in place for the Holy Cross Primary School teachers and pupils?

Mr M McGuinness: Additional staffing has been provided to Holy Cross Primary School, and further support for both schools is under consideration by the Department of Education in conjunction with the CCMS and the Belfast Education and Library Board. Funding and approval for two exceptional closure days was given to support the residential course for the teaching staff, and that was used to assist them in dealing with trauma.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for his response so far. Notwithstanding the present review of post-primary provision — which, it is hoped, will bring an end to the transfer test — will the Minister be able to do anything to ensure that the children of Holy Cross Primary School will not be disadvantaged by their present trauma while sitting the transfer test?

Mr M McGuinness: It is vital that pupils sitting the transfer test can prepare properly and are able to sit the test in a stress-free environment. It is hoped that the protest will have ended by 9 November, the date of the first test. Funding has been agreed to enable the teachers to provide additional curriculum support to pupils at Holy Cross who are taking the transfer test this year. The Department has also been in touch with the school authorities, who will take appropriate steps to ensure that the children can take the transfer test in a calm and orderly atmosphere. The Department and the statutory education authorities will do all that they can to help the school achieve that.

Mr B Hutchinson: Has the Minister implemented any initiatives in other schools, particularly the Belfast Model School for Girls, the Belfast Boys' Model School, Castle High School, Glengormley High School and Newtownabbey Community High School, all of which have been attacked in the past few weeks? I spoke to officials from Translink today, and there have been somewhere in the region of 146 attacks since 3 September. Are any initiatives being implemented to ensure that Protestant children can travel to and from school without attack? Are teachers being given advice on how to help with that?

Mr M McGuinness: My feelings on the situation in the north Belfast area have been made abundantly

clear during this period, which has been so detrimental to the pupils, their parents and society.

Attacks on school buses are absolutely despicable and deplorable, and the Department keeps all of this under constant review. Recently I have issued countless statements calling on all those responsible for the attack and intimidation of schoolchildren to bring their activities to an end. Community and political representatives have a huge responsibility to state their opposition to the ongoing abuse of children. It does not matter which section of society, school, or school bus is involved; attacks, intimidation, threats, and abuse of children are totally unacceptable.

The Assembly has an important role to play. Several Assembly Members have recently made positive efforts to encourage dialogue within the community to have this resolved. I commend them for their initiative. They must be supported by Members from other political parties. There is a responsibility on everyone in the House to ensure that we play as constructive a role as possible. We can make it perfectly clear to everyone that it is unacceptable to attack children and that it should end immediately.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's reaffirmation of the right of parents to bring their children to school safely. Fr Troy, the chairman of the school board of governors, has suggested that parents may choose to bring their children to school by car or bus given the current onset of inclement weather. At the same time, they can maintain the right or the option to walk their children to school. What is the Minister's reaction to that suggestion?

Mr M McGuinness: Fr Troy and Anne Tanney, the principal of the Holy Cross Girl's School, have played heroic roles in the defence of children and their right to education. I salute their leadership and the way in which they have managed a difficult situation.

The right of access to all schools must be maintained; it is vital that people have right of access. However, it is for parents to decide how their children get to school. Parents will have my fullest support whatever their decision. That is the only basis on which we can proceed. People have the right to bring their children to school; they have a right to decide what transport they will use.

Human Rights in Schools

2. **Mr M Murphy** asked the Minister of Education to detail what he intends to do to raise awareness of human rights issues in schools. (AQO291/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is vital that there be greater awareness of human rights issues throughout the education system, particularly in schools. Human rights and equality are central tenets of the Good Friday

Agreement. As part of the process to raise awareness of human rights, the Department recently held a conference on human rights in education, at which I announced several specific initiatives.

First, the Department is funding the appointment of an advisory teacher for a period of two years, who will be based in the Children's Law Centre. This person will develop human rights information and learning materials. Secondly, I have given my approval to the appointment of five teachers who, working in conjunction with the Human Rights Commission, will assist in raising awareness of human rights issues in post-primary schools, including the consultation on the recently launched proposed bill of rights.

The curriculum also has an important role to play in raising awareness of human rights issues. Members may be aware of the work being carried out by Prof Alan Smith and Mr Michael Arlow of the University of Ulster. That pilot project in a citizenship curriculum is firmly based on human rights values.

My Department and I will continue to work in partnership with the Human Rights Commission and those in the education sector to ensure that human rights issues remain high on the educational agenda.

Mr M Murphy: When will those five teachers be in post?

Mr M McGuinness: Recruitment will start shortly, and the teachers will be in post as soon as is practicable.

The Chairperson of the Education Committee (Mr Kennedy): Are they new posts? How much will they cost? Under which heading will they be funded? How can the Minister justify the posts when schools are making redundancies and are struggling to provide the core curriculum because their level of funding is not high enough?

Mr M McGuinness: There is indeed pressure on schools and on the education budget. However, the issue of human rights is important. Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement there is a responsibility on all Departments to co-operate with the Human Rights Commission. I have held several meetings with the commission, and I appreciate the important role it plays.

I do not have the details regarding funding for the posts. However, I will write to the Member with that information as soon as I can.

Common Funding Formula for Grant-Aided Schools

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for the implementation of a new common funding formula for grant-aided schools.

(AQO287/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I announced on 4 October that implementation of the common funding formula will be postponed until April 2003. The consultation on the Department of Education's proposals ended on 21 September. The decision to postpone allows more time to consider in detail the responses to the consultation, to prepare legislation, and to complete the necessary groundwork and practical arrangements for the implementation of the formula.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister accept that the use of the words "gainers" and "losers" to describe schools in his Department's consultation document is a cause of disquiet for teachers and governors? Does he agree that the use of such terms, given that they smack of market forces, should have no place in the vocabulary of any educationalist? Given the extended timescale he has announced, the common funding formula should concentrate on the delivery of equal support to all children in all schools.

Mr M McGuinness: I was not aware that the use of those words had created problems. I have not received any critical responses. Since the Member has raised the issue, the Department must consider those views. The rationale behind the common funding formula is to bring about a fairer and more equitable education system. Much work remains to be done regarding further consideration of the consultation document and the legislation that will be brought before the House. When the work is completed, the common funding formula will benefit all schools.

Mr Shannon: Many people are concerned about the common funding formula. There are children in TSN areas who are disadvantaged because of the current funding formula, which is linked to the uptake of free school meals. What steps is the Minister taking to address that issue?

Mr M McGuinness: TSN is an important element of the common funding formula. A 10% increase, from £40 million to £44 million, has been proposed. My Department is concerned about the issue.

2.45 pm

Great efforts are being made to ensure that TSN is aimed at areas of social need and needy pupils. We are also dealing with important educational indicators in an endeavour to ensure that we are dealing with all pupils who are experiencing difficulties.

The House needs to be reminded that we are working hard with the continuing school support programme and the issue of group 1 schools. It will be understood that a comprehensive view is being taken of this situation and TSN. New TSN will give funds to children with educational needs, and that will enhance our education

system and allow us to continue monitoring the situation so that support is directed to pupils who need it.

Mainstream Education

4. **Ms Ramsey** asked the Minister of Education what action will be taken to ensure that all young people have a right to mainstream education. (AQO293/01)

Mr M McGuinness: All children have a right to education, and there is a presumption that that will be provided in a mainstream school. Education and library boards have a duty to ensure that there are sufficient places in their respective areas to meet potential demand.

Ms Ramsay: What is being done specifically about bullying in schools and pupils who are afraid to attend?

Mr M McGuinness: Every school is required to have a written discipline policy which must promote self-discipline, good behaviour and respect for others among pupils. Bullying behaviour is unacceptable and should be addressed by schools as part of their existing discipline policies. Many schools have voluntarily developed a separate anti-bullying policy. I intend to strengthen that by taking the next legislative opportunity to make it a mandatory requirement for every school to have and to implement an anti-bullying policy. My Department recently issued guidance to schools on promoting positive behaviour, and that contained advice on addressing bullying.

Post-Primary Schools (First Preference Applications)

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of first preference applications and the number of children admitted to each post-primary school in September 2001. (AQO252/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information requested for September 2001 is not available at present. The information for September 2000 is, however, available. This is extensive, and I have placed a copy of the data in the Assembly Library. When the data for September 2001 becomes available I will supply it to the Assembly Library; I will also provide the Member with a personal copy.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his response. As this was originally tabled as a question for written answer, I did not expect full details. That would take the entire 30 minutes. Can the Minister, therefore, confirm that integrated schools are, and remain, significantly oversubscribed compared to mainstream controlled and maintained schools? Will he inform the Assembly what action he is taking in the field of transformation to meet this great need?

Mr M McGuinness: First, I congratulate the Member on becoming leader of the Alliance Party and wish him well in the future.

Of the 17 integrated post-primary schools, 11 were oversubscribed and 6 undersubscribed. My Department will normally consider any development proposals put forward to increase integrated provision. I intend shortly to announce a change in the viability criteria for post-primary schools.

Mr Hamilton: What is the average percentage of children admitted annually to grammar schools on the basis of first preference after the transfer test at 11, who subsequently pass GCSEs in five or more subjects at grade C or above?

Mr M McGuinness: I do not have that information to hand but will write to the Member.

Dyslexic Children

6. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Education what support he intends to give to the primary movement programme for dyslexic children. (AQO290/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is essential that innovative research findings be evaluated properly in order to assess their usefulness to the local education system. Two education and library boards have trained teachers in primary movement, and, in conjunction with my Department's inspectorate, they intend to carry out an evaluation of the method's effectiveness on children with dyslexia. The findings of the evaluation will be made generally available.

Mr C Murphy: I note that progress on this issue will be made in the future. In the meantime, what is being done in schools to target children with dyslexia?

Mr M McGuinness: Provision for children with special educational needs is the statutory responsibility of the education and library boards. It depends on the assessment made, and provision indicated, in each child's statement of special education needs. However, not all children with dyslexia will have such statements. The provision for children with dyslexia is broadly similar across all five boards. Most provision can be made in-school with supportive organisation and planning. Sometimes outside assistance is given by an education and library board reading centre or by peripatetic, or outreach, literacy support. That assistance may include advice or in-service training for the class teacher and the school's special needs co-ordinator.

Statements are made on some children whose learning difficulties are particularly severe. In such cases the additional tuition is extended, and information technology equipment may be provided.

Playgroups (Funding)

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education if his policy of refusing funding to playgroups with less than eight children in the immediate pre-school year has been subjected to rural proofing. (AQO277/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In formulating their pre-school education development plans, pre-school education advisory groups are required by the Department to give particular regard to the needs of rural areas, where existing levels of provision tend to be lowest. However, the minimum group size requirement is one of the key features of the programme. It is designed to promote high-quality pre-school provision that has been applied consistently to all settings regardless of location. The pre-school programme involves an investment of £38 million over a four-year period.

Mr Beggs: The educational training inspector set the minimum number of children at eight. Given the effect of this number on the rural community, and on the service delivered by the health and social services, were other Departments' views taken into account in setting that number? How does the policy target social need when playgroups which have been assessed by the educational inspectorate as being of high quality face potential closure for failing to have the magic number of eight children?

Mr M McGuinness: The expansion programme is designed to promote the personal, social and emotional development of children. In order to facilitate this development it is important that children learn and play in a group of reasonable size. We must all be aware that voluntary and private centres in some areas are concerned about possible displacement. Officials continue to monitor the situation. The Department holds regular discussions with officers of the relevant pre-school education advisory group on specific cases where concerns have been expressed. However, the Department is not aware of significant or widespread problems.

There are many possible reasons why voluntary and private pre-school education and care providers cease to operate. Together with advisory groups, my officials and I take seriously our responsibility to ensure that the risk of displacement is minimised. An important part of this process is the provision of the pre-school database which sets out the numbers of children in an area in order to inform the decision-making process.

Ms Lewsley: Does the Minister agree that, between the statutory and voluntary sector, people feel that there is now a two-tier system? When a playgroup drops in numbers, its funding is stopped automatically. Funding should be phased out to give the playgroup time to try to get new placements, because it is not given that chance at present.

Mr M McGuinness: Playgroups in the five education and library boards are responsible for dealing with pre-school education. There have been difficulties in developing pre-school education. I have met with people in the different sectors to discuss their experiences of transition. It must be remembered that this school year of 2001-02 has 85% provision. There has been an extraordinarily rapid move forward in the past number of years, given the circumstances. From the Department's point of view, flexibility must be provided, and we are prepared to do that. We are prepared to look at different interest groups' concerns, and, in consultation with the boards and the pre-school education advisory groups, to ensure that everyone gets a fair crack of the whip.

Ms Morrice: If everyone should get a fair crack of the whip, why do pre-school playgroups which fulfil the criteria, such as the cross-community playgroup in Kircubbin, not receive support or funding?

Mr M McGuinness: The mention of Kircubbin is music to Mr McCarthy's ears. I recently met a delegation involved in pre-school education in Kircubbin. Mr McCarthy accompanied that delegation. We are trying to resolve the difficulties. It is hoped that that will be achieved in due course.

Brytenwalda Tradition

8. **Dr Adamson** asked the Minister of Education if he will ensure the right of children and young people to be taught the history of the Cruthin Kings of Ulster and the British Imperium of Óengus, King of the Picts, in the tradition of the Brytenwalda. (AQO258/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The statutory curriculum is not designed to take up 100% of teaching time. Schools are free to teach additional topics as they wish. That allows them to teach other topics considered important in meeting pupils' needs. The programme of study for history makes specific allowance for schools to focus on topics of their own choosing. The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) is currently undertaking a review of the curriculum, including history. At this stage, it would not be appropriate for me to suggest to the council how any particular issue should be covered in the revised curriculum.

Dr Adamson: I asked the question because the Minister is descended from the ancient Cruthin kings of Ulster, as are Alban Maginness, Ken Maginnis and some of the finest DUP supporters in the Kilkeel area. Can the Minister ensure that the shared inheritance of Ulster and Ireland is given due prominence in the curriculum in future?

Mr M McGuinness: Many Members on the Benches opposite will be pleased to hear that I am descended from royal blood. That is an interesting analysis.

History is an important issue and is something in which Dr Adamson takes a keen interest. The curriculum review provides an opportunity for the CCEA to look at all the different interest areas that Members, or others, may have. Several people have suggested areas of history that should be studied. The Member named but one — there are many others that people believe should be included in the curriculum. I have advised them to put their cases to the CCEA, which will examine them. It is hoped that, as a result of its deliberations, everyone will be given an adequate opportunity to learn, and appreciate, our combined history.

Mr Speaker: Question 9 is in the name of Mr McElduff, but he is not in his place.

3.00 pm

Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)

10. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Education what costs are associated with the scrutinies carried out by both the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Education and Training Inspectorate on the regulatory functions of CCEA. (AQO273/01)

Mr McGuinness: In a typical year, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority conducts three or four scrutinies of specific subjects at an estimated cost of £5,500 per subject per year. The cost of inspection activity and other Education and Training Inspectorate involvement with CCEA is not calculated separately; however, the cost of the inspectorate's current three-year survey of the CCEA procedures associated with a sample of four GCE A level subjects will be approximately £50,000.

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, time is up, so Mr Kennedy will not be able to ask his supplementary question.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Transport Services

1. **Ms Armitage** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to involve the private sector in providing transport services for patients travelling from hospital to home. (AQO256/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá socruithe ag iontaobhais leis an tSeirbhís Otharchairr na hothair sin a iompar a mheastar a

bheith neamhábailta de réir míochaine a gcuid socruithe féin a dhéanamh le taisteal abhaile ón ospidéal. Tá cuid de na hiontaobhais i ndiaidh socruithe breise a dhéanamh trí úsáid a bhaint as tiománaithe deonacha, as gnólachtaí príobháideacha tacsáí agus as seirbhísí príobháideacha otharchairr.

Trusts have arrangements with the Ambulance Service to provide transport for those patients considered medically unfit to make their own arrangements to travel home from hospital. Some trusts have supplemented those arrangements with the use of voluntary drivers, private taxi firms and private ambulance services.

I am, however, concerned that fully equipped accident and emergency ambulances are used for general transport. That is not an efficient use of those vehicles, and the private sector may well have a greater role to play than at present.

Ms Armitage: In April 2001 the journey of one of my constituents from Belvoir Park Hospital to Portstewart lasted five hours. This month a patient was to travel from Coleraine Hospital to a nursing home in Portstewart. An ambulance was called at 11.00 am, and the lady was told to be ready at 1.00 pm. The ambulance eventually arrived at 5.00 pm, so that lady waited all day to travel four miles. I should have thought that in urgent cases, when people are extremely ill, an ambulance was a necessity, but in a simple case where an elderly person is leaving —

Mr Speaker: Order. I must ask the Member to come to her question.

Ms Armitage: I am getting there, Mr Speaker. I am just slower than the rest of them.

Mr Speaker: Order. One thing that the Member is not is slow. This is an opportunity for questions to the Minister of Health, not for case notes. They are for the Health Service. Please ask your question.

Ms Armitage: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Minister consider that if we did perhaps use the private sector, it could be money well spent? The Minister has already told the Health Committee that a modest saving could be made in the trusts and boards. Does the Minister agree that if we make a number of modest savings, we could end up with a major saving?

Ms de Brún: I invited the Member to write to me in April, and I reiterate that invitation today with regard to those questions. I am very aware that, due to the pressure on the system, some patients face unacceptable delays in receiving ambulance transport home. In some trusts, therefore, supplementary arrangements are being made with voluntary car drivers, private taxi firms or private ambulance services to ensure that such delays are kept to a minimum.

With regard to the financing of that, trusts need to ensure that their arrangements for the provision of services reflect efficient and cost-effective use of limited resources. That could involve the private sector where appropriate. The type of transport given on the day clearly depends on the clinical condition of the patient, and that information is normally communicated to the ambulance service by the clinician making the request for transport.

I have spoken on several occasions about the restructuring of health and personal social services. Members know that the Executive are looking at public administration. However, I warn people that these moves, when they come about, will not solve the problems of health and social services, which have been underfunded for many years.

Ms Ramsey: What progress, if any, has been made in securing the provision of an air ambulance?

Ms de Brún: The cross-border pre-hospital emergency care working group is considering the case for an air ambulance service to cover the whole island. The group will review the location options for it. Those options include an air ambulance that would operate on a North/South basis with costs shared between Belfast and Dublin. The group is commissioning independent advice on the costs and benefits of such a service.

Mr Speaker: Question 2, in the name of Mr Dallat, has been withdrawn.

Homefirst Community Trust

3. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on the current financial situation of Homefirst Community Trust. (AQO269/01)

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain the variation in funding and the levels of services provided by different health and social services trusts. (AQO275/01)

Ms de Brún: Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, glacfaidh mé ceisteanna 3 agus 8 le chéile mar go bpléann siad le hábhair atá cosúil le chéile.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 3 and 8 together.

Maidir leis an staid airgeadais reatha in Iontaobhas Pobail Homefirst SSS, dar leis an iontaobhas faoi láthair go bhféadfadh sé tarlú go mbeadh róchaiteachas de £1.6 milliún a bheith aige. Chuir an t-iontaobhas plean teagmhasach faoi bhráid na Roinne ina raibh réimse roghanna faoi conas aghaidh a thabhairt ar an easnamh a d'fhéadfadh a bheith ann.

Maidir leis an dara ceist, tá roinnt cúiseanna ann a mbeadh difir ann i maoiniú agus i leibhéil seirbhíse ar

fud iontaobhas. Is iad na príomhfhactóirí is cúis leis sin ná aois agus méid na ndaonraí a bhfuil siad ag freastal orthu agus leibhéal coibhneasta riachtanais sna daonraí sin.

Homefirst Community Trust projects a potential overspend of £1.6 million. The trust has submitted a contingency plan to the Department that outlines options to address the potential deficit.

There are several reasons for the difference in funding and service levels across trusts. The key factors that contribute to that are the size and age of the populations they serve and the relative level of need in those populations. The elderly, for example, make more intensive use of care facilities than the rest of the population. It is also accepted that levels of morbidity and need are higher in deprived areas. The profile of local services is sensitive to those issues, and the demand for acute hospital services has also shown a dramatic increase in recent years, which has created particular problems for those trusts that provide such services.

Mr Ford: It is clear that a deficit of £1.6 million is significant for a community trust. Can the Minister estimate the costs that are currently incurred by acute hospital trusts because of problems such as bed blocking? Many other problems can occur; for example, in the field of psychiatry, the simple failure to provide community services when problems become more acute and must be dealt with by inpatient services is resulting in greater costs than there would be if the problems were dealt with by community-based teams. Homefirst Community Trust appears to be having to remove post-operative community staff. Is the Minister not concerned that, once again, the acute hospitals are wagging the entire departmental dog?

Ms de Brún: I do not agree with the suggestion that acute hospitals are wagging either a departmental dog or an entire service dog. They are part and parcel of an integrated service. I have stated in the past that all community services are important, and the Member will know that a community care review of services for the elderly is in the early stages of examining the impact of delayed discharge.

In recognition of the impact that that will have, I provided several million pounds in August for services in the community. On the difficulties that acute hospitals and health trusts are facing, 12 trusts have prepared contingency plans to address their deficits.

I have stated time and again, here and elsewhere, that the current financial position is based on a history of the failure of resources to keep pace with demand. I am therefore trying to secure additional funding for health and personal social services for the coming years from the Minister of Finance and Personnel and from Executive Colleagues. The funding is needed to

address the specific cost pressures that all trusts face in coping with the unprecedented demand on our health and social services. I know that Members will be debating that issue, among others, in the debate on the draft Budget proposals that the Executive have brought forward.

Mr Beggs: What role does the Department have in ensuring equity of provision of services to all areas? Does the Minister acknowledge that services for care in the community are grossly underfunded in the Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust area? Does she accept that, irrespective of the causes, she and her Department are ultimately responsible for ensuring that there is equality in the provision of community care services to all areas in Northern Ireland?

Ms de Brún: The Department monitors the performance of trusts against the targets set out in their service delivery plans, which are agreed annually with their main commissioners — the health and social services boards. The plans are subject to endorsement by my Department.

Boards are responsible for funding health trusts to meet the costs of the services that they provide. The Department encourages the boards to use its capitation formula to inform their allocations, and it has produced guidelines to assist them in that task. The Department does not insist that the boards mechanically apply the formula. However, I want to ensure that the boards use the formula to inform their decisions on how that formula should operate at local level. Under the TSN agenda, I expect the process to be refined, and, over time, the boards will be expected to demonstrate that resources have been applied equitably.

I recognise that there is a need to increase funding in community services, particularly in the Northern Board area. However, the Department's ability to address that issue is constrained by the overall level of resources available. I am aware that there have been ongoing discussions between Homefirst Community Health and Social Services Trust and the Northern Board on the levels of home-help provision and the resources available to the trust.

Acute Hospital Services Review

4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she will make decisions in the light of the review of acute hospital services.

(AQO274/01)

9. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate the timescale for completion of the decision-making process in respect of the review of acute hospital services. (AQO264/01)

Ms de Brún: Le do chead, a Cheann Chomhairle, glacfaidh mé ceisteanna 4 agus 9 le chéile mar go mbaineann an dá cheann le todhchaí seirbhísí ospidéal géarchúraim.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 4 and 9 together because they both relate to decisions about the future of acute hospital services.

Nuair a foilsíodh tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarospidéal i mí an Mheithimh, d'eisigh mé an tuairisc le haghaidh tréimhse comhairliúcháin phoiblí a chríochnóidh ar 31 Deireadh Fómhair. I ndiaidh toradh an phróisis a mheas agus caibidil a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe ar an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúcháin. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinntí a fhógairt le linn 2002.

Following its publication in June, I issued the Acute Hospitals Review Group's report for a period of public consultation that will end on 31 October.

3.15 pm

After there has been consideration of the outcome, and discussion with Executive Colleagues, proposals on the way forward will be published for consultation. I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in 2002.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that the sustainability factor should be a core consideration in any review strategy for acute hospital services? Given that the Hayes review considered accessibility only, will the Minister assure us that sustainability will now feature strongly in the Department's final deliberations on the future of acute services? Can she further assure us that the people of Tyrone will not be dealt a mortal health blow as a result of the Hayes review's proposal for the Tyrone County Hospital? The hospital's viability has been put in jeopardy. There seems to be a constant threat to its well-established and excellent range of medical and acute services, in particular its ear, nose and throat and renal dialysis departments and its associated supporting services, including its medical laboratory facilities.

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an opportunity to ask questions, not to make a speech about the undoubted benefits and qualities of Omagh. I think the Minister has heard the question.

Ms de Brún: Mr McElduff has put down a question regarding funding for the Tyrone County Hospital. The answer to that may well be of interest to Mr Byrne. The report that was issued for consultation contains far-reaching proposals that I will consider with Executive Colleagues. I issued the report for an initial pre-consultation period, to last until 31 October 2001, so that Members, the public, Health Service staff and those patients or prospective patients who will be affected by proposed changes can raise issues. At the

end of that period I will examine the issues raised, including those that Members mention today and others that have been raised in letters to the Department.

However, I stress that no decisions have yet been taken or will be taken prior to consultation and that any proposed changes to the long-term future of our acute hospitals will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

Mr Hussey: I must reiterate one question that was asked by Mr Byrne, because the Minister has not answered it. Does the Minister agree that sustainability of hospital services is a key consideration in determining the future profile of acute hospital provision? Will she take that into account when considering the site for a new hospital for the rural west as part of a review of acute services in Northern Ireland? Furthermore, I note from an edition of 'the Irish News' of last week that pre-consultation meetings are to be held in Belfast this Thursday and in Londonderry on the 23 October. Can the Minister tell us when such pre-consultation exercises will be undertaken in the rural west?

Ms de Brún: I will contact the Member with details of any meetings that may take place in his area. Several factors were brought to my attention in the pre-consultation period and will be considered when we look at the overall picture. I stress that, at this point, the review is pre-consultation. Following discussion with Executive Colleagues and examination of any proposals for changes in the future, including the issues that the Member has mentioned, those proposals will be put out to consultation. All proposals will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

Mr Gibson: While we are awaiting the decision on the location of the new hospital in the rural west, will the Minister give an assurance that there will be no diminution of services in either the Tyrone County Hospital or the Erne Hospital? People in Tyrone County Hospital are fearful — and this has already been put to the Minister by a delegation — that someone is already implementing a report that is only consultative in nature but which is being interpreted as a final outcome. Can the Minister assure both hospitals that there will be no diminution of service in the meantime?

Ms de Brún: I can assure all those who have an interest in health and personal social services that I have made it clear that until more long-term decisions are made, I expect every effort to be made to maintain existing services. Where, for any reason, this proves impossible, any changes made must be the minimum necessary to ensure safety and quality, and must be temporary.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Hayes addresses the issue of sustainability

very well — people from those areas should read the report. The Minister said that the decision would be taken in 2002. Will she agree with me that it is vital, as far as services and sustainability in those hospitals are concerned, that the date be sooner — as early as possible? Can the Minister say how early the decision could be made?

Ms de Brún: Mr McHugh is the third Member to raise the question of sustainability. I reiterate that I will be looking carefully at the recommendations in this area, along with other recommendations and matters brought to my attention. I will of course want to hear the views of everyone affected by the proposed changes, as well as those health professionals who deliver the services.

I have stated clearly that following discussions with Executive Colleagues I expect to be able to make decisions in 2002 and that we will have proposals brought forward for consultation. I want to resolve the uncertainty about the future of our hospitals as soon as possible. As the Member knows only too well, some factors are completely outside my control, and they may influence the timing of decisions on these important issues. For example, if the former First Minister goes ahead with withdrawing Ulster Unionist Ministers from the Executive, that may delay both the consideration of the initial public reaction to the recommendations in the review group's report and also the planned public consultation on proposals for the way forward. The matter can only be discussed if there are Executive Colleagues. I cannot give people a guarantee, but I can explain my plans for the way forward. I am basing my timing on conditions that I have some control over.

Hospital Beds

5. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of hospital beds are allocated as intensive care beds. (AQO255/01)

Ms de Brún: Le linn na bliana 2000-2001 as an mheán de 8,600 leaba a bhí ar fáil gach lá, bhí thart ar 1% ainmnithe mar chinn dianchúraim. Is féidir cuid de na leapacha sin a athrú idir dianchúram agus ardspleáchas, ag brath ar an riachtanas.

During the year 2000-01, of the average of 8,600 beds available each day, some 1% were designated as intensive care. Depending on need, some of these beds are interchangeable between intensive care and high dependency.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for her reply, though it is disappointing, bearing in mind some other statistics. In the USA, for example, around 10% of beds are designated for intensive care; Germany, I understand, has designated 5% of its beds, and the UK overall runs

at around 3%. Can the Minister advise me of the current occupancy rate across Northern Ireland? Is it still above the recommended 70%? What steps have been taken and what progress has been made, if any, towards implementing the recommendations of the Chief Medical Officer's report with regard to the number of intensive care beds in Northern Ireland?

Ms de Brún: In percentage terms, it is difficult to make direct comparisons. There are different systems in different places. We looked at the Chief Medical Officer's recommendations, as well as the guidelines from the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST), and they suggest that between 1% and 2% of our acute beds should be provided for intensive care. Currently, the figure is approximately 1%.

I am committed to ensuring that all patients receive the treatment that they expect and deserve. That is why I asked the Chief Medical Officer to progress that review prior to the Assembly's first suspension. Demand for intensive care continues to increase as a result of recent advances in medicine and surgery. The increased provision of intensive care and high dependency beds of the past year, together with the plans for future expansion, will contribute significantly to the care of very ill patients.

We have increased the number of beds available. Of the 26 recommendations in the Chief Medical Officer's review of intensive care services, nine have been fully implemented and plans are in place to implement the remainder over the next three years. An extra 10 intensive care beds and 11 high dependency beds have been provided, and there are plans for a further expansion of high dependency provision.

Mr Poots: Is the Minister aware that the lack of adequate numbers of intensive care beds has led to one of our top consultant surgeons leaving the Province? There was not enough work for consultants, due to a shortage of beds after surgery. Does the Minister recognise that many patients who require cancer treatment are taken into wards and starved the night before they are scheduled to have their operation, only to be told that the operation cannot take place because the intensive care bed that they require has already been taken? Does she further recognise that the extra beds that have been provided in the Royal Victoria Hospital will not meet those people's needs?

Ms de Brún: It is inappropriate to suggest why a consultant might have left a position and moved elsewhere, unless that consultant expressed a reason. I am not aware of any such suggestion in this case.

I have looked at the availability of intensive care and high dependency provision, and I realise that there is work to be done. I explained that in my answer to the previous question. It should be realised that a considerable amount of high dependency and intensive

care provision has already been brought into service, and there are plans for further expansion of high dependency provision.

I have been advised that most cancer patients requiring surgery do not need an intensive care bed. However, the increased provision of intensive care and high dependency beds that has already taken place, together with plans for expansion, will make a significant contribution to the care of very ill patients. Worthwhile work has been done. There are some shortcomings in intensive care provision which have an impact on services, and that highlights the need for further investment. Planning has been developed and further progress will be made.

Neo-Natal Screening

7. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide an update regarding neo-natal screening for deafness. (AQO283/01)

Ms de Brún: I ndiaidh measúnú ar na hiarratais ó iontaobhais, táthar ag súil go mbeidh Otharlann Ríoga Victoria ina láithreán píolótach do scagadh éisteachta nua-naíche anseo. Mar sin féin, braithfidh seo ar cé acu a riarfaidh sé ar na riachtanais bhreise a aithníodh le linn na cuairte leis an láithreán a mheasúnú.

3.30 pm

When the trusts' applications have been assessed, it is anticipated that the Royal Victoria Hospital will become the pilot site for neonatal hearing screening here. However, that is subject to its meeting the further requirements that were raised at the site assessment visit.

Ms Lewsley: When will the pilot scheme start? It was, after all, supposed to start in June of this year. Deafness in between five and 10 babies may have gone undetected through their not being screened.

Ms de Brún: This was part of a wider pilot scheme. The main pilot scheme, which is based in England, is not due to commence until the end of this year. That is because of problems encountered with many of the applications with regard to the need to ensure uniformity, the adoption of protocols and the development of standards and appropriate information technology support. The pilot scheme in the Royal Victoria Hospital is scheduled to commence early next year, only a few months after the main pilot scheme.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Publicity

1. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he is apprised of all press cuttings that are

kept by other Departments relating to public comments, statements and actions made by civil servants who also serve as elected representatives. (AQO261/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The Department of Finance and Personnel is not notified as a matter of routine of instances where the activities of members of staff have been reported in the press. Each Department is responsible for retaining such information as it deems necessary for the effective management of staff. The decision on whether particular information is relevant to an individual's employment rests with that Department.

Mr Bradley: Can the Minister give an assurance that if civil servants who are elected representatives make statements that are reported in the media, these statements will not be used by their superiors in the Civil Service to discriminate against them?

Mr Durkan: All civil servants are bound by rules of conduct and behaviour in and outside the workplace. A Department may grant an individual permission to participate in political activity, but such permission is subject to a code of discretion. It is for the employing Department to determine whether there has been a breach of the rules and to take appropriate action in the light of all the circumstances and with regard to civil service policies on harassment, bullying and equal opportunities.

Government Purchasing Agency

2. **Mr C Murphy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment of the performance targets set for the Government Purchasing Agency for 2001-02. (AQO263/01)

Mr Durkan: The targets that I set for the Government Purchasing Agency for 2001-02 and that I announced to the Assembly in July are designed to demonstrate to the agency's customers and to other stakeholders how their needs and expectations are being met by the agency. They cover two main areas: the efficiency of the agency itself and the benefit that it brings to customers. They fall under four headings: finance, output, quality and efficiency. These targets are demanding but achievable; achieving them will ultimately benefit the taxpayer.

Mr C Murphy: I thank the Minister for outlining those categories. Why are there no references to equality objectives in the performance targets that he has set for the Government Purchasing Agency?

Mr Durkan: I have already listed the areas covered by the performance targets. The agency is a key entity as far as Government procurement policy is concerned. It is in the context of the review of public procurement, which is now the subject of consultation, that we

considered equality and targeting social need. The procurement review will consider Government procurement and matters covered by the work of the Government Purchasing Agency.

PFI/PPP Projects

3. **Mr McMennamin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the criteria upon which PFI/PPP projects will be considered. (AQO280/01)

PPP Working Group

6. **Ms Lewsley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the PPP working group forum will be encouraged to take submissions from those groups/ agencies that have an interest in this subject. (AQO281/01)

Mr Durkan: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 3 and 6 together. The key criteria used to judge whether a project should be taken forward through PPP include whether there is a reasonable prospect of obtaining an outcome which would give value for money and be viable and affordable. This is tested through the completion of an outline business case before a project is approved for PPP procurement.

The answer to the second question is "Yes". The PPP working group is inviting views and opinions through public consultation, and I encourage all those interested to make written submissions to the joint secretariat.

Mr McMennamin: Will the PPP review group consider the possibility of involving the community and voluntary sectors in the provision of PPP solutions?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr McMennamin for that suggestion. The working group established to review the use of PPP to address our infrastructure deficit and service needs as part of the Executive's commitment in the Programme for Government includes representatives from the community and voluntary sectors. We will also consider all feasible partnership arrangements. The work of the review is not confined to looking at private finance initiatives or public-private partnerships. Where feasible it will also include multi-sectoral partnerships.

Ms Lewsley: Will the Minister assure us that every attempt will be made to ensure that public-sector employees affected by any PPP will be treated fairly, with comparable terms and conditions of employment?

Mr Durkan: I can assure Ms Lewsley that in all PPP projects which involve transfers of employees from the public to the private sector their terms and conditions of employment will be protected under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 1981. In accordance with Treasury guidance, comparable pensions provision will be made.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn. Question 5 is in the name of Mr McNamee, but I do not see him in his place. Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Government Departments (Absenteeism)

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what assessment he has made of the current level of absenteeism within each Government Department and what action has been taken to encourage improvements. (AQO276/01)

Mr Durkan: Each Government Department closely monitors its level of absenteeism. Mr Beggs will already be aware from my previous written answer of the average levels of absenteeism in each of the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments during 2000-01. The different levels of absenteeism in Departments reflect, among other things, varying age, grade and gender profiles. Work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has provided Departments with a comprehensive overview of their sick-leave absences and a sound baseline to enable them to identify underlying trends and causes and to enable more in-depth analysis and targeting of problem areas. Departments are taking action to reduce their levels of absenteeism.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that there is a huge variation in absenteeism, from 4.4% to 8.4%? Does he acknowledge that this can be a result of local management or of the stress levels of the workers involved? What assessment has he made of the under-funding in the social care services that may have contributed to the high levels of absenteeism in that area?

Mr Durkan: There is a significant range in the absenteeism figures. I have said that some of those differences are related to the different age, gender and grade profiles in Departments. NISRA has been helping Departments to identify underlying trends and causes. Each Department must address its own cultural problems. I have no indication of serious problems of lack of care in any one Department. The point of these statistics is to identify any problems that exist. That task falls to individual Departments as well as to the central personnel group.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us whether these levels of absenteeism compare well with other sectors, such as the private sector? Are they partly caused by the extra pressure of questions from Members of the Assembly?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his confession. Comparisons of absenteeism levels can be made. Unfortunate comparisons have been made between the absenteeism levels in the Civil Service and those indicated in a postal survey carried out by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). I caution that the figures in the

CBI report do not provide a meaningful comparison, as they deal with absenteeism across the United Kingdom in a range of private sector organisations of very different sizes, and are calculated on a different basis. They do not allow for the sort of factors that are taken account of in our figures.

All Members are aware that different Departments have seen an increase in their workload, and that working pressures have been added to as a result of the greater accountability that the Assembly and other institutions afford. However, I do not believe that those pressures are expressing themselves in absenteeism levels.

Barnett Formula

9. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if he has entered into consultation with HM Treasury to secure additional resources, and whether he will ensure that discussions on the Barnett formula reflect the needs of our society. (AQO284/01)

Mr Durkan: Earlier this year, the then First Minister and the Deputy First Minister met with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss a range of issues, including the operation of the Barnett formula. Senior officials in the Department of Finance and Personnel have also had a series of meetings with Treasury officials to discuss Northern Ireland's funding allocations as determined by the Barnett formula. The 2002 spending review sets the context for negotiations on the Barnett formula with the Treasury.

Mr Fee: Does the Minister agree that the Barnett formula is not widely understood, and that Northern Ireland is distinctly disadvantaged by it? Resources for our health, education, roads infrastructure and other public services are inhibited by the Barnett formula. We need to renegotiate it, and our local Ministers need to display the type of flair, creativity and imagination that will allow them to use resources to the utmost effect.

Mr Durkan: I am happy to agree with the Member that the nature and detail of the Barnett formula are not widely understood. Since devolution, people have become very familiar with the term, and the need for it to change has been a constant refrain in this Chamber. We also need to recognise that while we have one particular view of the effects of the Barnett formula on ourselves and how those effects can be compounded over time, other areas do not see its impact and our needs in the same way. We need to recognise that there are other regional views and there are other questions for us to face in regard to the spending levels of some of our programmes.

3.45 pm

While we can argue that some key programmes, such as health, are being increasingly jeopardised by

the Barnett formula, others can point to spending programmes where we are continuing to spend at a rate considerably higher than the UK average. That raises issues for us concerning the prioritisation of, and within, spending programmes.

I agree with the Member that we cannot always be looking for more money from the Barnett formula or from some other funding formula. We must do more with the money we have. We must provide the essential services needed by the most efficient and effective means possible, and thereby release valuable resources to develop other services.

Health Service

10. **Mr Close** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment regarding the potential release of moneys from departmental budgets to alleviate the crisis in the Health Service. (AQO296/01)

Mr Durkan: Ministers will consider the views of Assembly Members, Committees and others in respect of proposals for modifying the draft Budget for 2002-03, in accordance with the timetable set out in the document I presented to the Assembly on 25 September. The Executive will shortly consider the scope for reallocating resources for 2001-02 in the monitoring round, and that will include consideration of Health Service funding issues.

Mr Close: I thank the Minister for his reply, although I am surprised by it. He is aware that I have attempted to table questions to individual Ministers regarding the possible release of moneys from their respective budgets, only to find that those questions were kicked into touch through being referred to him. Is this a case of passing the buck? Is someone afraid to grasp the nettle?

Mr Durkan: The Member has asked Ministerial Colleagues a series of questions. He asked several Ministers if they would be prepared to release £10 million from their departmental budgets next year to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's budget. The questions were referred to me because they are common to the Budget; they are not specific to any individual Department. The questions are relatively speculative.

In the Budget deliberations, the Executive set out to achieve more room to manoeuvre than the Executive's position report indicated that we had. We examined several options and tested several issues including uniform cuts in resource budgets across Departments; uniform curbs on departmental running costs; and an examination of other means to release more assets. Departments made clear the difficulties they would have if they were to get a smaller allocation than last year's indicative allocations had suggested.

The Executive recognise that there are very real pressures on all Departments. However, we also recognise that there are very acute pressures on Health Service spending, and that is one of the reasons why in this draft Budget the allocation for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has increased significantly above the indicative allocation that was announced last December for 2002-03. The Executive have tried to address the particular pressures within the Health Service.

The Member will appreciate that the Executive had the benefit of the report from the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Executive position report, which reflected the views of the various departmental Committees. There was no suggestion in the various departmental contributions that any of them could do with less money. On the contrary, representatives underlined the needs and pressures of their own Departments.

Mr Shannon: It is not only the release of moneys that is needed to alleviate the crisis in the Health Service. Does the Minister agree that his Department must also monitor the spending on health board offices, such as those of the Ulster Community and Hospital HSS Trust, to ensure that money is spent cost-effectively?

Mr Durkan: Funding levels do not determine the full value that can be obtained, through services, out of public expenditure. As I have previously said, we must not only ensure that we have bids and ambitions for services; we must also have sound plans. Those plans need to be implemented efficiently and effectively.

It falls to Departments to manage the more precise allocations beyond the general headings that are presented in the Budget. It also falls to those Departments to monitor the performance and effectiveness of the public bodies and other entities that are used to deliver departmental services and programmes.

Mr Weir: Given the crisis in the Health Service, what consideration has been given to reallocating funds which have been put into the Executive programme funds but which have not yet been placed in any destination?

Mr Durkan: The Executive programme funds are an important device created by the Executive, in the context of devolution, to try to drive a wedge between the patterns of spending that we inherited and the patterns that we need to create under devolution to reflect our distinctive priorities. There has already been one significant tranche of allocations from Executive programme funds and there will be another one soon.

Members will be aware that some advance commitments have been made to cover, for instance, the gas pipelines and the commitment to expenditure on roads that was reflected in the Programme for Government.

In looking at further allocations from Executive programme funds, the Executive are well aware of

some of the pressures that are facing particular services, not least the Health Service. We have already allocated significant funds from Executive programme funds — including the infrastructure and capital renewal fund — to the Health Service. There is no reason to believe that the Department, with its service pressures, will not be in a position to usefully bid for allocations from Executive programme funds in the future.

Peace II Programme

11. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give an update on the Peace II programme. (AQO278/01)

Mr Durkan: The Peace II programme is a complex programme, under which a range of detailed stages had to be completed before calls for projects could be made. Those stages have now been completed or are nearing completion. Intermediary funding bodies have been appointed as implementing bodies under the programme, Departments are finalising arrangements for the measures for which they are responsible, and the detailed work of establishing new local strategy partnerships is nearing a conclusion.

Calls for projects will be issued over the coming weeks for some of the main aspects of the Peace II programme, with grants likely to be awarded from December or January onwards. As funding bodies call for projects, the application forms, and guidance on how to apply, will be available from the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special EU Programmes Body web site.

The extension to the gap funding arrangements that I announced recently will ensure that funding continues for projects until the formal application and selection processes have been completed.

Mrs Courtney: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he confirm that the recent gap funding announcement will enable front-line community groups to carry on their vital work? Does the Minister agree that that would not have happened under the direct rule status to which some parties here would have us return?

Mr Durkan: The recent announcement that extends the current round of gap funding should go a long way to ensuring that funding for projects continues until the formal application and selection processes for Peace II have been completed. In this context, I agree that the relatively ready access of community and voluntary groups to Ministers in the devolved Administration has allowed concerns to be voiced directly to Colleagues and me. In turn, this has meant that we in the Departments have been able to take these considerations into account when planning and managing European structural funds and wider public expenditure issues.

Mr Hussey: I listened with great interest to that answer, particularly with regard to the gap funding arrangements, which will allow continuity to enable existing projects to enter into the next phase. In general that is to be welcomed.

Is the Minister confident that the Peace II programme will successfully address the difficulties we encountered in securing applications from the rural Protestant community? Will it redress the imbalance of the previous programme that was admitted to in the House by his party Colleague and present Acting Deputy First Minister?

Mr Durkan: The arrangements for Peace II have involved extensive and elaborate consultation and monitoring exercises as well as evaluations of Peace I. We learnt lessons from Peace I about measures, schemes and models that worked, but we also recognise that more has to be done in the targeting of some areas.

The point that the Member refers to was supposed to be the subject of some significant admission by Séamus Mallon, which was reflected in an interim report a couple of years ago by Northern Ireland's three MEPs who recognised that there was an imbalance. In that letter they also stated that there was no question of discrimination, that it was to do with patterns of application rather than with any skewing of allocations.

Horizontal principles will apply in the next programme. They include strong consideration of equality and balanced intervention. The horizontal principle is one in which all Government Departments have a conscientious interest, as does the European Commission. That interest has been reflected by the three monitoring committees of the Peace II operational programme for building sustainable prosperity and the community support framework monitoring committee. That interest will be followed through in all the work that is being carried out with respect to Peace II.

Mr Wells: I looked forward to this Question Time — it is the hottest ticket in town. It has all been side-splitting stuff up to now, and maybe my question will be no different. However, I am being facetious.

Returning to the serious matter of the Peace II funding packages, does the Minister accept that the process to date has been painfully slow and that many community groups are at the end of their tether waiting for the situation to be sorted out? We have heard promise after promise that this would be dealt with, and each time the Minister has been asked about it on the Floor of the House we have been told that it would happen tomorrow. Tomorrow never seems to come. Now that we have reached the end of the tunnel, can the Minister give us a categorical assurance that every effort will be made to hasten the entire process? Will he devote his efforts, and those of his officials, to making sure that he can deliver on time, as many

groups are suffering greatly as a result of the delays that his Department has overseen?

Mr Durkan: First of all, I refute any suggestion that my Department has been responsible for delays. Bringing the Peace II programme to land has been slow and painful. However, we have to remember that the community support framework is a document of the European Commission, and that was only agreed to last December. The Department was unable to move on the operational programmes and the programme complements until the Commission had delivered the community support framework. Following agreement on the operational programmes, the Department moved to agree the programme complements. Those were signed in March, meeting EU regulations.

4.00 pm

The Department of Finance and Personnel and other Departments have worked to ensure that the targets

and timetable requirements of EU legislation were met. The Department has also set up monitoring committees that are more effective and meaningful for this round of community support framework money than was the case in the last round. Parties in the House are represented on those monitoring committees, as are a range of other interests. Everyone involved in the exercises is aware of the quality and intensity of the effort that has been expended by my officials. The Department is now determined to follow through quickly for Peace II money. The Department has not been able to achieve that as early as it would have liked, and is, therefore, making further arrangements for gap funding. The Department has now moved forward with other aspects of Peace II. Some calls for projects are now taking place, and more will follow. The Department is moving with all possible speed.

Adjourned at 4.01 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 22 October 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We meet today under most unusual circumstances. In the rest of the world there is conflict with terrorism, but in our country the Government seem more interested in making arrangements with terrorism than in preserving the basis on which the Assembly meets.

The Assembly is supposed to have cross-community representation, and cross-community votes were cast for the various ministerial posts and other jobs. All the Unionist ministerial positions are vacant at present, so the Government of Northern Ireland consists of a Nationalist and a Republican coalition. As I said to the Secretary of State, if the SDLP or Sinn Féin Ministers had left their posts, we would all have been out immediately. However, because the situation arose —

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Member come to his point of order? I am not clear on what it is.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: According to today's news, the Secretary of State has congratulated Mr Adams and said that he will be very generous if Mr Adams does what the Secretary of State wants him to do. No self-respecting Unionist can remain in the Chamber and pretend that business can be done with a Government that is both Republican and Nationalist.

Mr Speaker: Order. The issue that the Member raises is political — it is not a point of order. The Assembly is entirely in order to sit, to hear statements from and ask questions of Ministers, and to conduct debates on matters that are properly on the Order Paper. I need to bring some substantial issues to the attention of the House. I intend to do so, but the Member's point is not a point of order in respect of the House sitting. What he and his Colleagues choose to do from a political point of view is another matter — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Well, I will not be taking any part in this charade.

Mr Speaker: Order. If I inform the House, and particularly those Members who have put down questions

that will now fall, of the status of some of those matters, that may be helpful to those who wish to participate. I shall then take a point of order from Mr Trimble.

I confirm that on Thursday 18 October 2001 I received letters from the nominating officers of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party notifying me that the Ministers from those parties had been dismissed with effect from midnight on that date. I advise Members of the implications that those dismissals will have for today's Assembly sitting. The dismissals affect only those Northern Ireland Ministers who belong to the Ulster Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. Ministers from the other parties remain in their positions.

Question Time will be affected. Sir Reg Empey, having been dismissed as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, can no longer carry out the functions of the First Minister. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will, therefore, be unable to respond to questions for oral answer at 2.30 pm, nor will there be questions at 3.00 pm to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who is no longer in post. Questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development will proceed. Ongoing business will be interrupted at 3.30 pm for that purpose, because that is the time when the Minister would normally have answered those questions.

Those questions for oral answer listed on today's Notice Paper by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will fall. Members can of course table those questions again, and they can also table questions due for oral answer on 12 November by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of the Environment.

In relation to the six vacant ministerial posts, no questions for written answer will be accepted until Ministers are nominated to those positions. Questions that were tabled for written answer before the Ministers' resignation will be answered immediately following the ministerial vacancies' being filled.

It is important that I draw those matters to Members' attention. I shall also ensure that the detail of that is put in the all-party notice for this week so that it is clear for Members and is in writing.

Mr Trimble: My point of order, Mr Speaker, is also a comment on the matters that you have just mentioned, because it has been necessary to reorganise the business of the Assembly following the vacancies that have arisen — and I am not altogether comfortable with the method that was used to bring about those vacancies.

We were not anxious to see that happen. It has happened with a fair degree of regret on our part. I hope that this situation will be resolved quickly. It can

be resolved by those parties that have so far been in breach of the agreement by failing to take effective steps to achieve the total disarmament of paramilitary organisations. That there are five vacant Ministerial posts puts us in a difficult situation. There are immediate implications for what can and cannot be done. The situation is not stable, and the Secretary of State should consider what to do in that regard.

I raised my point of order to endorse what Dr Paisley said about the need for a cross-community Administration. I was glad to hear Dr Paisley restate that principle, which is contained in the legislation and in our Standing Orders. What he said about the need for a balanced Administration was true, and I acknowledge the embarrassment that it causes to Members opposite who find themselves in an unbalanced Administration with no desire to be there. Dr Paisley's party followed the Ulster Unionists into the Executive and onto the Policing Board. It followed the Ulster Unionists in withdrawing, and I am sure that it will also follow the Ulster Unionists when we go back.

Mr Speaker: The Ministers had two options: to resign or to be dismissed. The Ministers were dismissed, except for the Junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, who could not be dismissed, except by the First and Deputy First Ministers acting together or by Ministers fulfilling the functions of the First and Deputy First Ministers acting together. The Minister could have resigned, but that option was not taken. The position is clear.

Regarding the second point, Members may recall that, under Initial Standing Orders, an Executive could continue to function only on a cross-community basis. However, that Standing Order was not incorporated into the substantive Standing Orders, and therefore — whatever the political questions to which the Member refers — there is no reason why the Ministers currently making up the Executive cannot continue to fulfil their functions.

It is true that a substantial number of Departments have no political head. That has implications for the Assembly, and I have referred to the most immediate of those implications. It will affect Question Time today, the tabling of questions for oral answer and the tabling and answering of questions for written answer.

AGRICULTURE: NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

Sectoral Meeting

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I regret that the DUP Members have absented themselves from the Chamber for this important statement, which has implications for an industry that is important across Ireland, North and South.

The fourth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in its agriculture sectoral format was held at the Carrickdale Hotel in Dromad, County Louth, on Thursday 4 October 2001. Mr Nesbitt, Junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, accompanied me to that meeting and agreed this statement. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Mr Joe Walsh TD, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, who chaired the meeting.

The Council considered and agreed a paper on animal health policy, with particular reference to foot-and-mouth disease. The paper gave details of the progress made on animal health policy decisions taken at earlier meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council. The Council noted the progress made in controlling foot-and-mouth disease and the co-operation on animal movement and epizootic disease control, animal health policy and scrapie control. In its consideration of those issues, the Council recognised the potential impact of foot-and-mouth disease on animal health in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland. It was noted that the all-island approach to controlling the outbreak had minimised the spread and impact of the disease in both parts of Ireland.

12.15 pm

The Council agreed that the experience gained during the outbreak clearly demonstrated the benefits of an all-island approach to animal health and called on Agriculture Departments, North and South, to proceed urgently with the work aimed at increasing such co-operation.

The Council considered and endorsed a paper on the World Trade Organisation, EU enlargement, and common agricultural policy reform. The paper set out the common North/South interests and objectives in those areas.

The Council noted the concerns of Ministers, North and South, with the issues highlighted; their agreement on the objectives that should be pursued in negotiations; and their agreement to continue to review developments in those matters.

The Council considered and noted a paper on the work of the steering committee on cross-border rural development, which outlined its progress on the work

programme that the Council formally endorsed at its meeting on 17 November 2000. The Council also considered a paper on the joint study of the pig industry that outlined the main conclusions of a consultancy study on pig-meat processing on the island of Ireland. That paper was commissioned by both Agriculture Ministers in December 1999. In noting the paper, the Council agreed that officials should continue discussions with the relevant development agencies and the industry to develop appropriate action to improve the competitive position of the pig sector on the island.

The secretariat tabled an additional paper seeking the Council's approval of proposed salary, and salary range, increases for chief executive officers based in Northern Ireland with effect from 1 April 2001. The Council approved the increases subject to final approval by the Finance Ministers, North and South.

The Council agreed that its next meeting in the sectoral format will take place in Northern Ireland in February 2002. The text of a communiqué for issue following the meeting was agreed; a copy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly her comments on an all-Ireland approach to animal disease control, cross-border co-operation on rural development, and the improvements to the competitive position of the pig industry, North and South. What cross-border provisions has the Minister made for the eradication of BSE, brucellosis and tuberculosis? Given that she set such a premium on cross-border co-operation with another EU state, will she indicate whether she has discussed the retirement scheme for farmers, North and South?

Ms Rodgers: Mr Savage will be aware that we have agreed an all-island strategy for the eradication of scrapie in sheep, which may mask the symptoms of BSE. However, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and not the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, is responsible for investigating BSE in sheep. My Department has a contingency plan that is out for consultation with the industry and other interested parties in Northern Ireland and the UK.

My officials were recently in Dublin to discuss TB and brucellosis controls in order to inform our decisions on the way ahead. We have agreed to establish an all-island animal health strategy, and that work continues.

The early retirement of farmers was not discussed. I initiated a desk-based study on early retirement last year. It was inconclusive because of the absence of data. Therefore, I have initiated a study to be carried out by Queen's University and University College Cork. I hope that their findings will be reported to me in the new year, and that they will look at the implications

of early retirement, its cost-effectiveness and its impact on the restructuring that is essential for the industry.

The report will be based on research that the industry does in other countries. When I receive the report, I will be able to judge whether early retirement will contribute to restructuring, and whether it would be a good idea. In the meantime, I shall keep that option open.

Mr McGrady: I welcome the Minister's statement and the progress that has been made under the various headings. What progress has been made in developing a strategy for animal and plant disease control? I refer in particular to brucellosis, which is endemic in my constituency and which causes difficulties for the farming industry. There has been a substantial increase in cases of brucellosis since 1996, at a cost of £22 million to the industry. The matter requires urgent attention. It must be eradicated and the carriers of such diseases must be controlled.

Ms Rodgers: Brucellosis and tuberculosis are matters for concern. There has indeed been an increase in brucellosis, and we have been reviewing the strategy in Northern Ireland. When the working group set up under the North/South Ministerial Council arrangements carries out its work, we will be in a position to consider the elements of a cross-border strategy. Unfortunately, we have been unable to take that as far as we might have done because of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. Nevertheless, my officials were in Dublin last week to discuss the subject — and brucellosis — with their counterparts there. Progress has been made and will continue to be made to deal with the scourge.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that the North/South Ministerial Council, which is so important to agriculture, is still meeting and making progress. The statement mentions an all-Ireland approach to disease, and, in particular, to outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease. Work by Departments on both sides of the border minimised its spread and impact. Is the North/South Ministerial Council in agreement with Departments, North and South, that the way to a disease-free future is through an all-Ireland policy?

Why were impact studies for foot-and-mouth disease carried out in some areas, but not in the Meigh border area, which was badly affected by the disease?

Ms Rodgers: At a North/South Ministerial meeting in October 2000, before there was any suspicion that we would be affected by foot-and-mouth disease, Mr Joe Walsh and I agreed to work out a joint strategy on animal disease on the island of Ireland. During the foot-and-mouth crisis, that strategy was shelved because there was no time for people to work on it. Work has now resumed on its development.

I am not sure what Mr McHugh was talking about with regard to the studies in Omeath. The Member will be aware that I am conducting an independent review on the foot-and-mouth epidemic. The remit is wide and will involve examining all aspects. Perhaps Mr McHugh could let me know in writing precisely what he has in mind, because I am not sure what he means.

The Speaker: Questions can be put to Ministers only on matters for which they have responsibility. Problems usually arise when issues fall between the Departments' areas of responsibility. That is also the case in respect of jurisdiction responsibilities. Despite the Minister's success in many areas to date, she is not responsible for studies that take place outside her jurisdiction. The Member's question can be answered only by the Minister responsible for that jurisdiction — in this case the Minister in Dublin. I hope that that clarifies the matter.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I mentioned Meigh, which is in County Armagh.

The Speaker: I thought that you said Meath and the Minister thought that you said Omeath. I would of course have recognised Meigh. I thank the Member for clarifying the matter.

Mr Leslie: I read the Minister's statement with interest. However, what was missing from the report was more notable than what it contained. I was particularly interested in the references to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), EU enlargement and reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP), an area that may change considerably in the future. Can the Minister say which interests were identified as common to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and those which were not?

Ms Rodgers: We have many interests in common with the South with regard to the reform of the CAP, the WTO and EU enlargement. That is referred to in the communiqué, which has been placed in the Library. The main areas of common concern include: the impact on exports to third countries and further reduction in export refunds; the consequences of any further changes to CAP for producers; and the effects on farm incomes of any proposals affecting direct payments.

Mr Bradley: I welcome the Minister's statement and the progress that has been made since an all-Ireland animal health programme was first discussed in the Assembly. There has been much talk of future strategies. Will they include the continuation of an all-island fortress policy, regardless of future situations?

Ms Rodgers: At present, a fortress Ireland policy is part of our strategy to maintain freedom from foot-and-mouth disease on the whole island. The policy will remain in place as long as it is necessary and as I long

as I am Minister. I cannot speak for what will happen if a change in Administration occurs.

Mr M Murphy: Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the Minister's statement. What impact will an increased instance of tuberculosis have on the Southern side's disease-free status?

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I understand that the Member is asking what would be the effect of an increase in tuberculosis in the North on the disease-free status of the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Rodgers: I would not want to comment on the impact on the South, or on whether there would be any impact. That is a matter for the Minister there.

Mr Speaker: I tried to raise that exact point in respect of the earlier question by Mr Murphy's Colleague. It is neither possible nor proper for the Minister here to respond to questions that relate to matters for which the Minister in Dublin has jurisdictional responsibility — *[Interruption]*.

I am not sure whether that was a "hear, hear" in response to the point of order.

Mr Armstrong: The Minister is aware of the importance of farm quality assurance in Northern Ireland. Has she discussed with her counterparts in the Irish Republic the system that they use? We all know that foreign produce finds its way to consumers in Northern Ireland who believe that those products will be of the same standard as that sought here in Northern Ireland.

Ms Rodgers: I did not discuss farm quality assurance at the agriculture sectoral meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. That matter was not on the agenda, and it was not discussed. Therefore it is not in my statement.

Mr Dallat: I am pleased that the North/South Ministerial Council discussed the pig meat report. Can the Minister explain the recommendations of that report?

Ms Rodgers: The main recommendations are set out in the consultants' report. They relate to: rationalisation of existing slaughter capacity and scaling of plant size; supply chain agreements between producers and primary processors; the need for secondary processors to improve reliability and consistency of supply; and the development of a stronger value-added sector. The report also indicates that without a significant improvement in the competitiveness of the industry in all of Ireland, it will face a further reduction of the production and processing sectors.

Mrs Courtney: What steps are being taken to deal with the illegal cross-border movement of livestock?

Ms Rodgers: Discussions continue between my officials and their counterparts in the South on the illegal cross-border movement of livestock. Among the issues being examined is individual sheep tagging, a practice that would have had an impact on our recent situation. The Government in the South have already made progress on that matter, and we are co-operating with them in that regard. We are also examining possible measures to reduce “incentives” for illegal cross-border sheep trading, such as reduced value-added tax and other forms of tax relief.

Dr McDonnell: Can the Minister provide more detail on the role of the steering committee on cross-border rural development?

Ms Rodgers: The role of the steering committee on cross-border rural development is to promote maximum co-operation in the implementation of EU and rural development programmes; to exchange information on experience and best practice in regard to rural development in each jurisdiction; and to examine the scope for a common approach to the feasibility of developing cross-border area-based strategies and rural development research.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (BEST VALUE) BILL

Committee Stage (Period Extension)

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Ms Hanna): On behalf of the Environment Committee, I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 14 December 2001, for the Committee Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA Bill 19/00).

Mr Foster: I speak, if I may, as an MLA who has an awareness of the situation. I have no objection to the extension of the Committee Stage, provided that it does not prejudice the urgency of repealing compulsory competitive tendering before 1 April 2002. I am, however, obliged to respond to recent points that have been made on the matter. There is concern that the Committee’s preference for a two-clause Bill — as communicated to me — would give precedence to the interests of district councils over the rights of residents and ratepayers, who are entitled to the assurance that council services are subjected to the independent best value audit. That applies to all parts of the public sector. I assure the House that best value means providing quality services at a price that local people are willing to pay. Councils should therefore operate in a framework that is transparent and accountable to the citizens that they serve.

Mr Speaker: Order. The question relates solely to the extension of the Committee Stage. The Member may raise a matter relating to that question, but I cannot entertain a debate on the substance of the Bill.

Mr Foster: I reiterate the important point that although I have no objection to the extension of the Committee Stage, it must not prejudice the urgency of repealing compulsory competitive tendering before 1 April 2002.

Ms Hanna: Work on the Bill has taken longer than was anticipated, and the Committee believes that more time is required at the Committee Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 31(5), the period referred to in Standing Order 31(3) be extended to 14 December 2001, for the Committee Stage of the Local Government (Best Value) Bill (NIA Bill 19/00).

REVIEW OF POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr Speaker: I have this morning received a letter from the Minister of Education, Mr Martin McGuinness. It is relevant to the debate, and therefore I propose to read it to the House. It says

“Dear Lord Alderdice, I regret that due to urgent party business, which requires me to be in the USA, I cannot be present in the Assembly today for the take-note debate on the motion on the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the review of post-primary education in Northern Ireland. I would ask you to convey my apologies to the Members and hope that both you and they will understand. I have written separately to the Chairman of the Education Committee, Mr Danny Kennedy, explaining the position and indicating that my officials will be monitoring the debate, and if appropriate I will provide a written response to Members’ questions.”

Mr McGrady: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The report before the Assembly deals with primary education and the 11-plus, an issue that is fundamental to every family in the North of Ireland. Is it not therefore an insult to the Assembly that the Minister of Education will not be in attendance to answer the finer points of the debate and to have exchanges on the matter?

Mr Speaker: It has been the custom in the Assembly and in other places that Ministers, if at all possible, attend debates on matters of their departmental responsibility to listen and to respond to points raised. If a Minister is unable to be present at a debate, be that on account of alternative arrangements, health matters or other reasons, a Colleague may act on his or her behalf. As a member of the Business Committee, the Member may wish to raise this question there. It would be inappropriate for me to comment other than on the simple procedural matter, which is that it is the custom, and the Minister has recognised that it is the custom and has written to apologise because he recognises that he is breaching the custom. The Member has said what he has said.

Mr J Kelly: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. Surely the Minister’s absence is not for any frivolous reason. If the Minister were not absent on that business, these Members would be criticising him for not doing all that he could to ensure the survival of the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: It is difficult for me, from the Chair, to decide whether the visit by the Minister is frivolous or otherwise. Perhaps only history will demonstrate that; it remains to be seen. It is clear that the Minister — in fairness to him — has recognised that he is not following the normal custom. He has written and tendered his apologies to the House and to me. It is proper to put that on the record, lest there be any sense that the

Minister had not recognised that his non-attendance was an unusual matter.

It would not be proper for us to extend this into a debate. Of course, if there are points of order I will take them, but only if they are legitimate points of order.

Mr McGrady: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You read out a letter from the Minister of Education stating specifically that he is abroad on party business, not ministerial business. Surely the primary responsibility of a Minister who is being paid for the job is to be responsive to this Assembly when he has already agreed to be so by the arrangement of the business today?

Mr Speaker: From a procedural point of view, as Speaker of this House I of course regard the responsibility of a Minister to his ministerial job as being a primary one. However, I suspect that as everyone searches themselves and looks at whether their responsibilities are primarily to the House, their families, their parties or whatever else they have responsibilities to, they might come up with different answers to that question. The Standing Order position is clear — there is a primary responsibility to the House. The Minister has recognised that and has sent a letter of apology, which I have read into the record.

Mr J Kelly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not want to labour the matter, but surely Mr McGrady can recall when Ministers from his party were absent from the House when issues were raised that were relevant to their Departments.

Mr Speaker: Order. After the earlier departure, I assumed that points of order which verged on the political would be less likely in the Chamber, but it does not necessarily appear to be so. As one can see, one just never knows what the future brings.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the ‘Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland’.

It was once alleged that I could make a moving speech. I did not realise that I could ever move an entire political party or grouping from the Assembly, but I understand that I may not be to blame for that.

At the outset of this important debate on education, I — on behalf of myself, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Education Committee and the entire Assembly — unreservedly condemn the outrageous attack that resulted in injuries to a couple of children in an explosion last night in north Belfast. I hope that the House will join with me in saying that attacks of that nature have no place in north Belfast or, indeed, anywhere in Northern Ireland.

Mr M Murphy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I cannot hear what the Member is saying.

Mr Speaker: It is clear that some Members are unable to hear. Perhaps the Member would speak with a little more robustness. That being the case, I ask him to start again.

12.45 pm

Mr Kennedy: It may be considered an advantage that I cannot be heard.

On behalf of my party, the Committee for Education, and the Assembly, I unreservedly condemn the outrageous attack in north Belfast last night, which resulted in injuries to two children in an explosion. I hope that the House will join with me in saying that attacks of this nature have no place in north Belfast or anywhere in Northern Ireland.

I am pleased and honoured to bring forward the report, which outlines the Committee for Education's views and findings on the review of post-primary education. I am grateful to the Committee members for their assistance, good humour and hard work on the report. I also want to place on record my appreciation and gratitude to the Committee Clerk, Committee staff, the specialist adviser, Prof John Gray and the Assembly researchers for their hard work.

It is regrettable that the Minister of Education is not here on this important occasion. Whilst he has more pressing matters to deal with, his absence from the Chamber is most unfortunate. However, he has written to the Committee and myself apologising for his absence.

On 28 September 2000 the Minister of Education published the results of the research carried by Prof Tony Gallagher and Prof Alan Smith into the effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland. At the same time the Minister launched a public consultation on the arrangements for post-primary education in Northern Ireland and formed an independent review body to consider and make recommendations on the matter. These actions sparked one of the largest debates on education here in a very long time — *[Interruption]*.

I note that senior Colleagues are now deserting me.

The Committee for Education believed that the issues under consideration were crucially important and that any decisions taken would affect generations to come. Whilst we did not want to replicate the review body's work we felt that we needed to give the matter due and timely consideration. The purpose of the Committee's report is to crystallise the views of the Committee and to enable us to carry out an informed assessment of the recommendations of the review body when they are published on 24 October.

The Committee also decided that any evidence it gathered, its findings, views, and conclusions reached should be published to further inform consideration of the issues and contribute to the public debate that will ensue. We felt that that was important, as there appeared to be a lack of information to enable people to reach informed opinions on the various alternative systems available.

The Committee agreed to consult with interested groups and organisations. Recognising that we could only hear evidence from a relatively small sample of the many groups, organisations, and individuals with an interest in the issue, we identified a number of key witnesses. We received written submissions and took evidence from, among others, the education and library boards; teacher and head teacher organisations; higher and further education organisations; employer organisations; and academics who have carried out relevant research. We also had access to the views and comments expressed to the review body through its web site.

To ensure that we received the views of parents, teachers and pupils, a number of focus groups were held on our behalf in Belfast, County Fermanagh and County Tyrone by the Assembly's library and research staff. The results proved extremely interesting, and various views were expressed, particularly by pupils. The Education Committee also considered research papers on various alternative post-primary education systems and undertook visits to Kiel and Munich in Germany, as well as to Edinburgh and Glasgow, to see at first hand how other education systems operate.

While the Committee recognised that it would be helpful to observe other systems, we acknowledged that a model could not simply be lifted from somewhere else and applied without account being taken of the unique circumstances and the historical context of Northern Ireland.

As I have illustrated, the Committee gathered a great deal of detailed information and a wide range of views. We are grateful to all those who showed such willingness to contribute. It was particularly important to establish a link with our counterparts in the Scottish Parliament. I hope that other Committees of the Assembly will pursue such links, where relevant to their responsibilities.

I will now outline the Committee's key findings and conclusions. I am sure that my Committee Colleagues will also highlight these areas in their contributions to the debate. The primary legislation shaping the current system of education in Northern Ireland dates back to the Education Acts of 1944 and 1947, which resulted in the bipartite system. It has, relatively speaking, remained unchanged since then, although the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 introduced greater

parental choice, open enrolment and the introduction of a national curriculum.

Demands on the current system have changed dramatically. Whereas in times past, only a small minority of pupils was expected to achieve examination qualifications, a great majority now does so. Many would argue that the current system has served us well over the years. A number of the strengths of the current system were drawn to our attention. However, many others who gave evidence have suggested that, given changing expectations of education, substantial reforms are now required.

It is clear from the evidence received by the Committee that three key issues need to be addressed. The first is the nature of the school curriculum and the opportunities and experiences available for all pupils. The second is whether the current arrangements for organising schools are appropriate for future demands or whether structural changes are required. The third is whether changes to the procedures by which pupils are allocated to post-primary schools are required.

Taking account of increased educational participation rates and the potential spare capacity in the system, the Committee believes that, irrespective of the arguments about the strengths or weaknesses of the current system, reorganisation and change seem inevitable.

I come now to the 11-plus. It is clear that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the present transfer tests. I must stress that these are criticisms of the present tests, and it should not be assumed that the Committee is opposed to testing using alternative methods. Criticisms of the tests include the effect that they have of narrowing the primary curriculum, particularly in the final two years; the power of the tests to predict potential — many young people who are judged to have only modest potential often go on to perform well; and the extent to which stress and related factors affect the test performance and the longer-term consequences of pupils' self-esteem. Many witnesses also wished to see more effort being made to acknowledge parental preferences.

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

The Committee believes that the two one-hour tests are no longer appropriate and recommends that the current tests should cease to be administered from a feasible future date. It recognises that this cannot happen immediately and, therefore, recommends that as an interim measure the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) should be instructed to undertake such improvements as can be made within a limited timescale.

The Committee also recommends that a transfer profile seeking to combine the four elements — current pupil performance, other aspects of pupil development, parental wishes and teacher guidance — should be

implemented as soon as possible in order to provide a fuller and broader picture of pupils' achievements during their primary years.

It is apparent that the post-primary curriculum needs to be changed and updated to meet future requirements. There is great concern regarding the status of vocational education and the need to improve this. The need to provide choice and flexibility was also highlighted. In particular, local business organisations drew attention to the shortage of employees with the necessary skills and qualities for today's workplace.

The Committee is of the view that changes to the current curriculum are necessary and should be implemented as an integral part of any changes to the post-primary system. Specifically, the Committee recommends that a core curriculum should be offered for all pupils to follow until around the age of 13 or 14, with flexibility to reflect the needs and circumstances of individual pupils. Choices available to pupils should include academic, vocational and technical subjects.

Schools should explore collaborative arrangements with other institutions to ensure a range of opportunities for all pupils. A broad skill-based curriculum should be implemented, along the lines already recommended by the CCEA. A formal mechanism in which business and industry can highlight changing skill requirements at a relatively early age should be established. Stronger links between schools and higher and further education providers should be explored in order to increase flexibility of provision.

To inform the education system of the future, the Committee reviewed the strengths and weaknesses of alternative structures, including the current bipartite system, all-ability comprehensive schools, delayed selection systems and consortia of schools. However, in considering the way forward, the Committee wished to focus on the required outcomes of the education system rather than on the structure by which they would be delivered.

Some Members will be greatly disappointed that the Committee has not made a recommendation in favour of one particular structure. We are all aware of the particular views of the political parties on this matter, and it was not the Committee's intention or wish either to pre-empt the report of the Burns review or to do its job. The Committee therefore has recommended a number of key principles that it believes should underpin any future developments — for example, the social, economic and educational objectives of any future system must be clearly identified and stated. The Committee has outlined its views on what these should be, and I will come back to that shortly.

Any reforms of the current system should be phased in over a period of time and should involve key groups throughout the change process.

That will be essential if change is to be managed. Any changes must recognise and build upon the current system's strengths. The Committee for Education was consistently advised to retain the best and improve the rest.

1.00 pm

Choices on post-primary schooling should be offered to pupils and their parents. The high educational standards achieved in Northern Ireland over the years must be maintained. However, strong action must be taken to tackle the perceived tail of underachievement. Any changes that are introduced must recognise that the commitment and contribution of all teaching staff will be central to the implementation programme. Whatever the nature of educational provision at post-primary level, parity of esteem must be achieved.

The social, economic and education objectives of any future system must enable pupils to develop their potential; enable them to exercise ownership and choice; provide appropriate and varied opportunities to ensure the development of a well educated, skilled and employable workforce for the Northern Ireland economy; place greater emphasis on innovation, creativity and entrepreneurial skills; enable every individual to identify his or her aptitudes, interests and vocation in life; and improve the processes for identifying and addressing elements of deprivation that may impact on a pupil's performance. At present, we are not meeting those objectives well.

I have presented the report as Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and my party Colleagues will outline the Ulster Unionist Party's position on the matter. However, my view is that the system should open up opportunities for pupils rather than close down their choices. Any new system must be fair to all, and it must build on and encompass the best of the current system.

In considering the matter, the Committee was reminded on a few occasions of the opportunities and the responsibilities that it faces. For the system to change, it is essential that a high level of consensus be achieved. A consensus already exists in some areas, but in others it has yet to emerge. The report outlines the views of the Committee for Education, and it will enable the Committee to carry out an informed assessment of the Burns review body's recommendations when it publishes its report on Wednesday.

I took pleasure in presenting the report. The Committee spent a long time considering this important issue, and I trust that it will make a significant contribution to the future. The Committee for Education looks forward to playing a full part in that process with the shared objective of improving the quality of education for everyone in Northern Ireland. I urge Members to support the motion.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion as a member of the Committee for Education and as education spokesperson for the SDLP. The SDLP views the education system as the cornerstone of society. Education is a fundamental human right, as well as being a key driver of the economy and central to personal development. Genuine equality of opportunity cannot be created without first securing an effective and well- resourced education system that is open and inclusive, flexible enough to cater to all needs, and responsive to the society that it serves.

The selective education system has done untold damage to generations of children. It has inaccurately tested them, artificially segregated them and precipitately closed doors to future careers. However, the damage to fragile self-confidence is unforgivable.

Since its inception, the SDLP has called for a new all-ability system to offer inclusive education that guarantees equality of opportunity for all. We have maintained our opposition to selection on the grounds that the system is unfair, divisive, ineffective, and damaging to children and society. The arguments have been made time and time again, and I will not rehearse them here.

We have acknowledged the initial benefits brought about by the introduction of the 11-plus in a post-war society in which standard education finished at 14. It opened the door to second-level education for a generation of children. However, modern society requires all children to be educated well beyond the age of 14. The second-level system must move to meet the needs of the twenty-first century.

The SDLP acknowledges the concerns expressed that the significant achievements of the current system might be lost if selection were abandoned. The high academic results attained in grammar schools represent enormous dedication and skill on the part of staff and students. However, it does not detract from that to point out that selection brings children together from the most educationally advantaged backgrounds, socially and economically. The necessary corollary means that it comes as no surprise that schools face difficulties where the student body reflects disproportionately high levels of social and economic disadvantage. High numbers of young people leave school with few or no qualifications, and there are grounds to believe that the selective system has played a role in that.

The Gallagher report says that the differentiated pattern in Northern Ireland, with a consequent over-representation of low-achieving schools, may be the inevitable consequence of a selective system. There is a compelling case to be made for the fundamental reform of procedures for transfer from primary to post-primary schooling. That would entail fundamental reform to structures and curricula at post-primary level. It is vital that, in

making the transition to a new system, the highest possible standards and quality of education are maintained and developed. In moving to implement such reform, the SDLP believes that, by teaching 11-to 18-year-olds together, the highest academic standards of the present can be maintained and offered to a greater number of children alongside improved vocational and social development.

The key principles that we wish to see maximised in the new system include: excellence in the standard of education available to all; equality of opportunity; parity of esteem for academic and vocational training; structures to encourage the development of all students' full potential; parental and student choice; and the involvement of individuals in decisions that will affect them. Students should not have their life choices restricted before it is necessary to do so. Therefore, flexibility is required to cater for different rates of development. We want to see social inclusion in the new system. Access to all levels of education should be open to everyone, irrespective of their social background. Equitable funding for all schools should take account of the imperative of targeting social need.

The review body's work must be seen in context, and the ongoing curriculum review has obvious significance. Recent years have seen the introduction of more vocational subjects in schools. It is hoped that an end to selection can contribute positively towards the creation of a more balanced primary curriculum, ending the unhealthy practice of "teaching to the test". It should make room for a more flexible system in which children might explore a range of interests, combining the so-called academic subjects with the vocational, leaving career options open for as long as possible and encouraging better motivation through wider choices.

Change must be managed effectively in order to minimise disruption to students during the process. Teachers should have maximum input and protection during such upheaval. The implementation of reform should be undertaken in a manageable fashion in consultation with the teaching profession, taking full account of the additional workload involved in implementing any new arrangements.

Any transition should be properly funded. It is vital that parents have an opportunity to discuss the impact of options for change and that they should be kept fully informed as reforms are implemented.

I add my thanks to all those involved in the production of the report, as the Chairperson of the Committee has already done.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I endorse and broadly welcome the extensive report. It should receive a wider audience and not only be read by the members of the Committee for Education. Although it precedes the findings of the Burns review,

it will make a significant impact nonetheless. The Committee underwent many rigours to get the report to this point. I add my thanks to everyone involved in its delivery.

I support the Chairperson's comments about north Belfast and the protests outside the school. Those protests should not be going on and children should be allowed to attend their school. Children have a tremendous affinity with their school and their teachers.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is clear that we discussing post-primary education, not primary education. I ask you to make people stick to the subject.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Hutchinson, you are correct. However, as Mr Kennedy referred to the matter, I thought it improper to interfere.

Mr McHugh: A LeasCheann Comhairle, post-primary and primary education cannot be separated nor dispensed with. The subject must be discussed in the round. The Chairperson referred to those issues, and it is right and proper that I also refer to them.

The Committee's report contains much detail. The current selection system has been in place since the 1940s. It catered for the situation pertaining at the time but which has now become outdated. The selection system was meant to separate people for leadership roles or professions; the rest would be employed in manual work. We have moved on since then, and the selection process is now seen as divisive. People are being typecast, and there is a stigma and an exclusive nature attached to the selection procedure and the schools involved. The percentage of children who are deemed to be failures at age 11 is something that few people now support. Much of the evidence that we heard points to widespread dissatisfaction among parents, teachers and the public with the present system. Changes are needed. Much of the Committee's response agrees with that.

Various attitudes for and against vocational and academic pathways were expressed. We have three options: we can reform, or tinker, with the present selection system; we can abolish it; or we can retain the status quo. However, the final one is not really an option.

The Burns review, the review of the curriculum and the local management of schools (LMS) review will be parts of an essential process. Many people would say that the past was well served by the selection procedure. I disagree, as would many others. The expectation then was that pupils would leave school at 16 and gain employment in agriculture, textiles or other industries.

The percentage of people that the system was meant to cater for has changed since its inception, and that must be taken into account.

1.15 pm

We have a high-tech, global economy, and more opportunities exist in the changing world of business. Jobs are higher paid, especially vocational ones, and pay is closely connected with knowledge. Education continues through lifelong learning of skills. People no longer leave school and stop learning.

The Committee's approach to the evidence and the inquiry was one of consultation. All those who were involved — teachers, employers' organisations, academics and schools — have already been mentioned. The Committee carried out some benchmarking by travelling to Scotland and to Hamburg and Munich in Germany. The Scottish system seems to be closer to what we need than the systems that exist in England and Wales.

The strengths of the inquiry have been mentioned, but one of its failings is that it did not extend its benchmarking process by examining the system in the Twenty-Six Counties. We require a vocational education system that is close to its system, and it could have provided a more valuable knowledge base than the systems in Scotland and Germany. The Committee failed to look at that system this time, but there is no reason for not doing so in future.

The report mentions the strengths of the current system — the number of pupils who attain five GCSEs at grades A to C and the standard of excellence achieved by grammar schools. However, those are achieved at great cost and at the expense of secondary schools.

Supporters of the current system often point to the academic results that are achieved by grammar schools. School performance data, which are gathered by the Department each year, provide comfort for those who wish to retain the current system. Almost 95% of year 12 grammar school students achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C, which is the standard performance indicator. During the academic year 1997-98, those commendable results were achieved at a cost. The downside of the two-track educational system is illustrated when one compares grammar schools' achievements with those of secondary schools in which only around 31% of year 12 students achieve five or more GCSE passes at grades A to C.

Another problem, which illustrates the negative effects of selection on those who are deemed failures at the age of 11 is the relatively high proportion of pupils who leave school with no GCSE passes or equivalent qualifications. The Gallagher report pointed out that almost 22% of the North's school leavers in 1986-87 had no qualifications compared with 9.6% in England and 16% in Wales. The Northern Ireland Economic Council states that selection can be criticised for

“the apparent polarisation in attainment between grammar and secondary school leavers. This may occur as a result of the demotivation of students who are assessed as academically less

able, and because more able students, whose presence may help to raise the attainment of less able groups, are educated separately”

Recent research on the North's education system raises doubts about whether it is possible to substantially raise the standards of secondary school students under the present system.

Grammar schools have many powerful supporters who are often products of a grammar school education. A high proportion of parents opt for their children to undergo the selection process. It could be argued that the overwhelming majority of parents recognise, at least in academic terms, the benefits of grammar school education. However, the selection test is, in fact, a deselection test, as 60% of children fail to obtain grammar school places. A parental decision to put a child through the transfer test may be as much a choice for the grammar schools as a choice against the perceived shortcomings of secondary schools. Selection by socio-economic background, often referred to as selection by mortgage, is as bad as selection by tests at 11 years old.

The current selection system was built on several assumptions that no longer apply. The labour market needs a highly differentiated workforce. At present, most manual labour is performed by machines, which people must learn to monitor and programme. Today's workforce needs a better overall education, and it must learn to adapt, understand and effect change by social and technological means.

Society can only afford to pay the high educational costs of an elite group. That should be intolerable in a democracy. It is possible to identify, accurately and early, those with superior intellectual skills. The old 11-plus test was based on a measure of IQ, which itself was supported by flawed research. Prof John Gardiner of Queen's University showed how inaccurate the 11-plus test is, with as little as 18 marks out of a possible 150 separating grades A to D. New theories of intelligence ascribe many different components to intelligence — not only the ability to perform well in a written exam. It is now accepted that children develop in spurts and not in a linear or even fashion, and that development is subject to influence.

It was difficult to ascertain which Committee members were in favour of keeping selection and those who wished to move away from it. I am glad that the SDLP is in favour of 11-to-18, all-ability education, which my party supports. That is the way forward, with pupils from all levels supporting and helping each other to gain an overall higher level of achievement for the school. That would make more of a difference than to take away the cream of some schools and leave those less able or less well off together in a particular school. That lowers the levels of achievement and makes it more difficult for those schools to aspire to high levels of achievement.

I am happy that the report's recommendations are fairly even-handed, although I cannot agree with some of them. The Committee Chairperson said that changes should be phased in. Changes could be phased in over 10 years, depending on the approach. We do not want to do that. The essential change should be introduced immediately. Industry and others must have something of which they are sure. Schools and pupils must know what will be in place in three to five years' time. Pupils, teachers and parents want it sorted out in two to four years, rather let it drag on indefinitely with different levels of support.

I agree with other recommendations. There is no problem with parity of esteem. There is said to be perceived underachievement, but there is underachievement — it is not perceived — in some schools. Many pupils leave school without achieving anything, which leads to tremendous problems in later life. I recommend Members to read the five volumes attached to the report. What the Committee is trying to do is commendable, and I hope that one day there will be 11-to-18, all-ability schools. Vocational education has not had the recognition that it deserves. Society must deal with that.

The main purpose of the review is to maximise potential in education for everyone.

Mrs E Bell: I add my thanks in acknowledging the work of my Committee colleagues, the Chairperson, the Clerk, the assistants, the Assembly researchers and the specialist adviser.

The considerable volume of oral evidence and written submissions in the Committee's work on the report clearly demonstrates the interest and concern of all in education. Our general conclusion was that it is essential that future structures be efficient and effective.

The Committee visited Scotland and Germany, and the overall message from all our considerations was that any future system of post-primary education must be flexible and cater as far as possible for the needs of every child. The age range must be less restrictive yet challenging. I hope that the outline of key components and the key values of equality, inclusivity and flexibility proposed in the report will be seriously considered in the Burns report.

We wish parents to have a better and more informed input in their children's choices. Teachers must also be involved, so that a realistic curriculum and choice of subjects will be offered to pupils at this important time.

The report states that

"The high educational standards which have been achieved in Northern Ireland over the years must be maintained whilst vigorous action must be taken to tackle the perceived 'tail of underachievement'; any changes introduced must recognise and build upon the strengths of the current system."

We should not throw the baby out with the bath water. The Committee did look into that issue.

Such a system would negate the stress and tension felt by all in the present system who must make a choice at 11-plus age. I will not go into that system's disadvantages. We need to be constructive and progressive.

The bottom line was to ensure that children had the opportunity to develop their potential to the full — intellectually, physically, spiritually, socially and creatively. The Alliance Party would certainly concur. We do not, as people may say, advocate the complete abolition of grammar schools. However, there should be viable alternatives, so that all children with differing abilities can enter a secure and confident future.

From personal and party experience, and from our Committee work on the report, I know that the present system does not work. Rather, it disadvantages the majority of our young people. As a direct result, many have faced adulthood with little or no incentive or ambition. We hope that the report's recommendations go some way to improving that situation. A good working relationship between schools, higher education institutes, industry and commerce will provide ample opportunity for each pupil to fulfil his or her own ideas of development.

The Alliance Party promotes the point that the review body will look at the lessons learnt in the all-ability integrated education sector. The positive elements of the current system have been coupled with a realistic structure that will serve all our people well. In doing so, the system will not only benefit pupils, but the whole of Northern Ireland in the long run.

I hope that the Assembly accepts this cross-party, consensual report, and that the Burns review body will adopt it as an integral part of its own report.

Mr B Hutchinson: I am the first person to speak who is not a member of the Committee for Education.

1.30 pm

Debates are becoming reruns of Committee meetings. That is dangerous. We should hear from other people who have views on education, not just from Committee members.

I could do what Sinn Féin has just done and score a few political points. Sinn Féin has answered at least one serious question this morning. The Ulster Unionists understood Sinn Féin to say that decommissioning would be immediate, but we have found out that that means between two and four years — in education terms.

My party does not support the concept of grammar schools. It believes that they are an elitist form of education. Every child should have the same right to education, irrespective of his or her class or economic status. We must get that right. We will not get it right

by saying that some people are an elite and that therefore they should be allowed to do certain things because that might be to the benefit of Northern Ireland. Every child should have the same opportunity.

Mrs E Bell: When I said that my party did not support the complete abolition of grammar schools, I was saying that there must be choice.

Mr B Hutchinson: I was not referring to a particular party; I was referring to my party's position.

I welcome the report, but some of its recommendations must be examined. The report is vague; it is a non-prescriptive picture of an ideal education system. We need more than that. There was no recognition of the value of the Youth Service, and there was no suggestion that the Youth Service and the formal education system could be linked. We talk continually about the problem of low achievement, but we will not recognise that the Youth Service can do something about it. There is a need to harmonise the Youth Service with the formal education sector.

Everyone knows that "choice" is a weasel word. Nobody really has choice in the education system. Our key objective must be to consider how we can provide it. I am concerned at the idea that guidance by teachers will enhance pupils' choices. There are several things wrong with that. First, teachers may not want to move into that field. Secondly, trade unions would be concerned about it. Thirdly, what do we do if a teacher makes the wrong choice or gives the wrong information?

Underachievement begins at pre-school age. We talk continually about the problems in post-primary education, but they exist because nothing is done earlier. There are examples of how schools have tried to alleviate those problems. Several schools in the Greater Shankill area decided to do away with the curriculum for primary 1 and use the Scandinavian model. However, it will take a while for the results of that to be seen. We cannot tackle underachievement only in so-called sink schools. We must tackle the problem before children go to primary school.

It is too late to tackle underachievement at the post-primary stage. It must be done earlier. Secondary school teachers believe that they do not get the finished product. They get a child who, at the age of 11, has the reading ability of a nine-year-old. Primary school principals tell us that children from nursery school are not ready to go to school and are not ready to learn. Unless we listen to those views and develop a system that will get children ready for school, we will not get to the nub of the problem.

With regard to teaching staff, the report states that the value of teachers should be recognised. We should, however, also recognise the failures of teachers. We should look at how we can develop a fast track to get

failing teachers out of the system. That will cost money, but it must be done. Most MLAs, and anyone who has ever been on a board of governors, will recognise that there are failing teachers and that something must be done about that. Is the money there to do that?

I decided not to move my recent motion on the threshold assessment because the Minister was not available. That was unfortunate, but I recognised the reasons why he was not here. The threshold assessment in Northern Ireland does not set a positive tone. It discriminates against young teachers, as well as against principals. We must correct that situation.

Recommendation 6.2.3 implies that a transfer profile will measure only what the child can do. If that is the case, how will we measure, for example, a child with a swimming commendation against a child who is an Irish dancing champion? How can we ensure equality? We cannot say that one is less valuable than the other. Who will decide which is most valuable? We must address such issues.

I agree that the vocational curriculum should be regarded as having the same worth as the academic curriculum. However, it is difficult to convince parents of that. How do we persuade parents of the value of a vocational course for their child? People have suggested the establishment of centres of excellence. That is probably the way in which we will go forward. Students will move around a campus. They will go to it because it is good for sport or information technology, for example.

There is a lovely word in all of this — "creativity". It is lovely no matter what it is applied to. It can be applied to anything — even to sport, whether football or any other sport. However, I have always found the word hard to define. I would like the Education Committee to define that word. Perhaps the Committee will be able to do that as matters unfold.

Ms McWilliams: We await the outcome of the Burns review body on Wednesday, and that needs to be borne in mind during today's debate. It might have been better to discuss both reports together. Nonetheless, it is good to see the cross-community work of the Committee. I am not a member of the Education Committee, but I realise that it must have taken a lot of work to reach agreement on some of the recommendations. However, having gone through the review process, it would have been surprising if we had not heard some of the recommendations that have come forward, such as the abolition of the transfer test.

It is good to see recommendation 6.1.9, which emphasises that any changes should not encourage the development of a sizeable independent sector. That was a major concern during the discussions about the review. We must be careful that the conclusions in the

Burns review body report do not lead to an increase in the independent sector, with people opting out.

For the first time, Northern Ireland has an opportunity to tackle the education system, particularly as we now know what is needed with regard to the curriculum. We are talking about devising a system that is moving towards the year 2020. An overhaul of the education system is needed — we are not tinkering with the margins any more. Prof Gallagher, in his report, referred constantly to the long tail of underachievement. The only way to tackle that is to overhaul the system. It is good that we now have the opportunity to do that. Unless we examine the structure of the current system and attempt to make some major structural changes, we will miss this opportunity.

The huge need for an inclusive, comprehensive and integrated system was put on the record in an earlier debate in the Chamber. I am delighted by the Northern Eastern Education and Library Board's thoughtful submission to the Committee, detailed in volume 3 of the report. The board wanted matters put on record, and today is a good opportunity to do so. Paragraph 7.7 on page 102 states:

"The Board would also place on record the opportunity afforded by the present Review to undertake a strategic and radical examination of educational provision throughout the province. The opportunity exists in consultation with other providers to create a system which meets the needs of a pluralist society through the establishment of a genuinely comprehensive and inclusive education system, an opportunity which may not arise again for many decades."

The report goes on:

"The Board would ask decision-makers to give this matter serious consideration if it is proposed to undertake a radical review of existing provision. Such a model would have much to commend it in terms of contributing to an inclusive society and it is the model that would make most effective use of resources."

The board then makes a very interesting point:

"A starting point could be to have a fully integrated, non segregated schooling system for 16-18 year olds."

Clearly that type of system exists at age 18. Students progress to a fully integrated, non-segregated system of further and higher education. The board sees such a system as a starting point.

I take the point that there are different interpretations of the timescale of phases. However, it seems realistic to suggest that changes should be implemented within two or three years of the Burns review body's report being published. If changes are made, we must have a huge campaign of education and raising awareness among parents about what those changes will entail. Scotland made changes and did not look back. I understand that more Scottish children, right across society, are going to universities as a consequence of the creation of a pluralist and comprehensive system of education.

The system here is not working at the moment. As was stated by Prof Gallagher and others the assessment tail is wagging the curriculum dog. It should not be that way.

Mr McHugh mentioned John Gardiner's research into multiple intelligences, which are not taken account of in the transfer test. It will be interesting to see what replaces the transfer test. I was a teacher for many years. Higher education moved away from tests at the end of final year towards a system of accreditation over three years. The system of course assessments and inbuilt work with the students to improve their performance was a system that the students much preferred, rather than a test at a particular time that was based more on memory than on knowledge. That is the test that will be set now as we move forward.

I was concerned about the recommendations on the curriculum in the report. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is undertaking a curriculum review, and it will be interesting to see the outcome of that. Recommendation 6.3.2 mentions the type of curriculum that could be followed up to the age of 13 or 14. It specifies that it would probably include, but not be confined to:

"English, Mathematics, Sciences, at least one additional Language, Humanities, Personal Development, Physical Education and ICT."

One of the criticisms that came from schools, and from many principals, was that education should be an enjoyable experience. I have children, and I know that one of the subjects that they most enjoy is drama. It is sad to see that it is not highlighted. Billy Hutchinson referred to creativity. Children often find themselves confined in classrooms at a very early age, particularly in this country where, at the age of four, they start in huge classes of 30 pupils. They rarely have the opportunity to be creative themselves. Since most of the post-primary principals pointed out that learning should be enjoyable, it seems rather disappointing that we have not included subjects such as music and drama — indeed, the arts as we know it. Over and over again the criticism is made that these are the first subjects to be cut when we curtail the curriculum. I am a little concerned that they have been narrowed — indeed, those subjects seem to have disappeared from the recommendations.

1.45 pm

It is good to see that the report flags up exploration of collaborative arrangements between schools. I certainly hope that we do not follow the line that Billy Hutchinson took earlier as regards the creation of specialist schools. As a parent myself, I do not look forward to a future where I may be travelling huge distances between one school and another depending on my children's specialities. I am sure that others in the Chamber will agree with me. It is possible for us to

have inclusive schools, providing a broad curriculum up to 13 or 14 years of age. After that there may be specialities according to subject, but I certainly would not want to see sports cut out of a curriculum for those children doing academic or vocational subjects. That is why this recommendation is important. It suggests collaborative arrangements between schools and other institutions to create the mixes that students favour.

The report also moots collaboration between further and higher education and schools, which is often missing at present. Last week we discussed the report from the Committee for Employment and Learning, which pointed out the need for universities and colleges in Northern Ireland to do more outreach work, particularly where they have an underrepresentation of students in higher and further education. That work needs to start if we are going to make changes. It is clear that, in the past, fewer students moved from secondary education into further and higher education, and this is an obvious opportunity to change that.

One of the advantages of the Committee's report was that it called on those giving evidence to carry out some work with young people. Again, Billy Hutchinson made the point that perhaps not enough evidence was taken from the Youth Service. I noted that the Belfast Education and Library Board did gather the views of the Youth Service. In a range of youth clubs, 1,131 young people in total were asked a range of questions about the current system. Eighty per cent answered that they would abolish the transfer test now; 8% said they would retain it; and 10% said they would retain it, but for older children. It was interesting to hear what a sample of over 1,000 young people had to say about the system. Indeed, the young citizens' jury was an interesting way of gathering evidence. We have clearly engaged young people in Northern Ireland and gathered their views. It was interesting to find some of this evidence in the generous appendices to the report.

In conclusion, it is wonderful for all of us to say that we were part of this debate. Clearly, major changes will now be made, but the most important thing is to include teachers in these changes. At present they seem to be exceptionally demoralised by the wait for change, particularly in the light of current community relations' difficulties. I am concerned that we are not in a position to provide the kind of safety and security that children have a right to, both outside and inside the school. That point is missing from this report.

We talk about education for the new economic society. We talk about it as regards ethos and values, but education in a peaceful and stable society is one of the most important parts of a values system. However, the report does not concentrate on that point to any great extent. It makes no recommendations on the future of pupils with emotional or behavioural difficulties, some-

thing that teachers see as one of the major issues they have to deal with.

I am glad that many of the schools set aside for children who were rejected by mainstream schools have been evaluated. If we are to continue to nurture children, particularly those with emotional or behavioural difficulties, we have to address that matter in any new education structure.

The issue of teacher training must be addressed if the school system and the curriculum are to be restructured. What will happen to that, given the segregated nature of teacher training in Northern Ireland?

More research must be done in Northern Ireland in order to achieve the correct social mix. More collaborative arrangements must be put in place so that children can be educated together. Whilst we desperately need to start that now, we need to manage, plan and resource the change well.

Mr K Robinson: I welcome the fact that the report has been brought to the Assembly for consideration. It is a weighty report, and it is the result of many hours of intensive Committee meetings, written submissions, focus group briefings, field visits and commissioned research.

I thank the key witnesses, including the main education bodies, teacher and employer organisations, and interested bodies, who added a new dimension of analysis to our deliberations and discussions and aided the Committee in its quest for clarity. Furthermore, I acknowledge the hard work of the Committee Clerks, the members and the Chairperson, Mr Danny Kennedy, who treated the review with the sensitivity and professionalism it deserves.

It has been said that it is more than 50 years since the education acts of 1944 and 1947 came into force. The fact that so many facets remain central to our present system is a testimony to the vision of the architects of that legislation. However, it is obvious that the ever-increasing demands of a fast-moving modern society are not being fully met by the bolt-on and ill-considered solutions that epitomised the era of direct rule.

The report's findings and recommendations are based on an honest attempt by parties holding different views to find a common focus through which they can address the challenges of the new century. The Committee did not want to replicate the review body on post-primary education's consultation exercise, but it believed that it had a responsibility to give the fundamental issues the due time and consideration they deserve.

Many of the report's conclusions and recommendations are worthy of further and detailed consideration. The recommendations are not intended to be a blueprint for the future structure of our education system. However,

they include several key principles that must underpin any educational developments in Northern Ireland.

These key principles and recommendations sit very comfortably with the Ulster Unionist Party's response to the review on post-primary education entitled 'Excellence, Diversity and Choice', which was published early in the year. The document contained the main educational concerns and aspirations of the community.

I draw Members' attention to the Committee report's findings in three major areas. First, whether one likes it or not, the much maligned transfer procedure has been central to the current dissatisfaction. The Committee's recommendation to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) that it should undertake improvements in a limited timescale is to be welcomed as an interim response. We have heard about the difficulties with timetables and the definition between current grades. Those areas need to be dealt with immediately.

In the longer term, which the Committee has defined as in the next three years — it has wisely designed a timescale — there should be a transfer profile incorporating current pupil performance, pupil development over a period of time, parental wishes and, despite Billy Hutchinson's recommendations, professional teacher guidance. All these must be fully discussed and tried. This approach appears to offer a more equitable and acceptable way forward than anything that we have had heretofore.

Secondly, the curriculum needs to change as part of any review of the post-primary education system. The recommendation of a core curriculum offered to all pupils up to the age of 14 has much to commend it as it would allow flexibility and enable pupils to sample a range of subjects before making choices which would reflect academic, technical and vocational strands. The rigid current "in school" approach should be replaced by a collaborative arrangement with other institutions to better advise potential choices by pupils. The Ulster Unionist Party looks forward to further debates centred upon that.

Thirdly, the principles that form the basis for the future education system must focus on the requirements of that system. Those referred to in paragraphs 6.1.1 to 6.1.9 of the report deserve careful consideration and should form the basis for discussion. My party regards several factors as critical to achieving educational excellence, and perhaps more than anything else the quality and commitment of our teaching staff are critical to that. We are fortunate to have a wealth of first-class teachers, and we are proud, as the entire House should be, of what has been achieved in the majority of schools. Yet we are not complacent; there is a clear need for improvement. Change must enable young people to maximise their potential and to

ensure that we must retain what is best in the current system and allow no dilution of our renowned academic results.

Apart from the Army, education is the only organisation that conscripts its participants. This report signals a move away from conscription and curricular prescription toward choice — individual choice, parental choice, a choice of routes, the choice to switch between routes, to mix and match to reflect an individual's interests, skills and personal objectives. That alone would release much untapped educational energy.

Disaffected post-primary pupils play a large part in the tribulations of many secondary schools and feed the perceptions that make that type of education unattractive to certain echelons in society. They will be challenged as never before to become active participants in a meaningful educational experience. That segment of the school population largely contributes to our having only half the level of qualification levels of our major European competitors. It represents a sizeable slice of that 25% of the underperforming tail that we hear so much about.

My party feels that paragraphs 6.3.1 to 6.3.11 offer society an opportunity to address these problems in a structured way that will replace the "Band-Aid" approach that currently seeks to address underachievement and disaffection. I want to touch briefly on this. The nature and content of the curriculum are key. The core curriculum on offer up to 14 years of age should include English, maths, sciences, language, personal development, physical education, information and communications technology and the flexibility to meet individual needs and circumstances. Perhaps this is how to meet the creativity concerns of Billy Hutchinson and the other areas that were referred to by Monica McWilliams. There is no intention to exclude any of those aspects of education. It would not be a full education if they were excluded.

An opportunity to sample a range of subjects before deciding on choices is crucial to this change.

How many of us know of glaring examples of people locked into courses and systems that allow no flexibility and that cause them to drop out and fail to maximise their potential?

2.00 pm

A relevant and broad skills-based curriculum should be encouraged as part of the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's (CCEA) ongoing review. That must stretch and challenge pupils to maximise their potential. We do not want the lowest common denominator of a curriculum: it must stretch pupils right across the board.

A formal mechanism by which business and industry can inform curriculum developers and managers about

changing skill requirements is long overdue. However, the fact that the Committee has referred to it is a welcome innovation that must be pursued quickly. Many Members have mentioned collaboration with other institutions. An opportunity now exists to develop natural integration among nearby institutions that might previously have interacted only with other establishments in their specific sector of education. That would have the potential to offer even wider curricular choices at certain localities and might be especially attractive in some rural settings. That would present a further opportunity to develop the cross-community contact that occurs naturally in further and higher education institutions.

We are acutely aware of the considerable implications for teacher training and in-service training provision, which include staffing, funding and course content. Those must be addressed as early as possible if the new programmes of study are to be in place ahead of any proposed changes. Many of the disasters of previous educational changes can be put down to the fact that they were ill-considered and ill-planned; we were always playing catch-up with teacher training, resources and persuading people that a project was worthy.

Education, as has been said, is a partnership of pupils, parents and teachers, and any change must enlist the active support of all three groups. The period after the Committee's report and the findings of the Burns review, which is imminent, should be used to explain and explore the recommendations contained in both. I hope that, on the basis of those recommendations, we can move away from the emotional responses of recent times and enter an era informed by reasoned debate that will lead to rational solutions.

Finally, in supporting the report, my party is conscious that it will not embark on an exercise in social engineering. Rather, it will enter wholeheartedly into a genuine attempt to ensure equality of access, provision and opportunity to maximise the skills and talents of individuals, not as members of any class or tribe, but for the benefit of individuals and society at large.

Mr Gallagher: My party has consistently opposed the present arrangements on the grounds that there have been far too many injustices and inequalities in the system. I welcome the report because it will help to promote debate, not so much on the injustices of the system, of which everyone is aware, but about how we change that system. It is clear that we need to replace the present system with a better one. We have very high standards in many schools, which nobody can overlook. Rather than dismantle the present system, a sound education system for the future should be based on an evolving version of it. That would be in the best interests of all children and all sectors.

One of the report's recommendation is that the current tests should cease as soon as possible. Members may

be aware that questions are being asked about when the tests will come to an end. Many people want to know what circumstances will prevail at the time of transfer for children who are now eight, nine and ten years old.

There have been suggestions that the CCEA should introduce some improvements while we are in a period of change. Nobody would disagree with that. However, I want to sound a note of caution. In the past, so-called improvements were introduced which many educationists would argue, served only to make the operation of the system worse than it had been.

One suggestion that enjoys some currency at the moment is that the tests should be moved back into the second term of the school year; they currently take place around eight weeks into the first term. To move the tests further into the school year would prolong the agony for children, teachers and parents. I welcome suggestions to improve the tests, but we should hear about them before they are introduced. They should be debated, and the teaching profession should be consulted in detail.

The report contains several recommendations on changing the system. Those recommendations will help to promote a challenging debate on why changes are needed, and on what kind of system is needed to prepare young people for the future and for earning a living in the twenty-first century. It is important that education prepares young people to contribute to the local economy and enables them to compete in the global economy.

The report refers to the fact that, under the present arrangements, too many children's curriculum experiences are limited. That is especially true for those from socially-deprived backgrounds. As I said at the outset, high standards across the education spectrum are important. However, we must look at what we are preparing children for. In a modern society, everyone must have ample opportunity to acquire a range of skills, be they basic skills, key skills, communication skills, literacy and numeracy skills, or information and communication technology skills. In future, employees will need to be adaptable.

Many challenges lie ahead, but few are greater than devising a system in which academic education, although remaining important, is accorded equal status with vocational education. The report states that they should be accorded parity of esteem.

The report will assist the debate and discussion of the issues. I have mentioned some of the challenges, but a stark fact should be kept in mind as we look at the background against which we will be working. There are 133,000 students in post-primary education today. In 25 years, that number will be reduced to 110,000. The scenario that we face will also test our imagination. To reiterate, if we adopt a method based

on retaining all that is best and adapting what currently exists, rather than dismantling it, we shall be able to create a more useful and successful system that will include, where demand for it exists, local solutions.

Local solutions operate in some parts of Northern Ireland; for example, in all-ability schools. I do not make claims about the merits of any of those — some seem to work well, and others need improvement. However, in our vision of the way forward, issues on which there is strong agreement between the governors, teachers and parents of every school in an area should not be ignored.

Mr J Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am the third non-member of the Committee for Education to speak. I speak on behalf of Mr McElduff — that is not an easy task, but I will do my best. He sent a letter of apology to the Chairperson to explain why he could not be present. Mr McElduff believes in local politics, therefore he is working in his locality this morning. I notice, however, that other Members with other functions are not here either.

Billy Hutchinson asked Mr Kennedy to explain “creativity”. Some years ago, when I asked a similar question, I was told that creativity was a bit like sex appeal — if you had it you did not have to ask about it. After that, I stopped asking about it.

Mr B Hutchinson: People think that I have both.

Mr J Kelly: Perhaps he does.

Many years ago, when Don Revie managed Leeds United, football was like geometry. It was very unattractive, because it was played within the tight parameters of parallelograms and triangles. The 11-plus and the education system have confined children and teachers to such narrow parameters as part of a thought-out process. That has denied them the opportunity to be creative, in the same way as footballers were restricted.

Mr B Hutchinson: Was it not successful?

Mr J Kelly: It was not successful. Under the present education system, children are not allowed to develop their talents.

I meet many primary and secondary school teachers. At the moment, I have never met so many who are seeking early retirement. They want out because it is horrendous; it is difficult for them to express themselves in the system. Young, talented and able teachers, at primary and secondary level, are attempting to leave that system.

Fairness, social inclusivity, pluralism, equality and justice should underline our education system. Education is at the very foundation of our society. Cognisance should be taken from the fact that an education system

is an integral part of our society and of the way that society develops.

I do not wish to make a political point, but in his book, ‘The Murder Machine’, Padraig Pearse described the education system as it existed throughout the island of Ireland before partition. It seems that children were put on a conveyor belt at one end and came out at the other stereotyped, stamped and left with no real creativity or personality, apart from the ability to get a job in the Civil Service or as a teacher. That was because the education system was geared to particular jobs and to the tailoring of children and people for those jobs. There was no notion that the purpose of education was not only to prepare children and adults for work, but to prepare them for life and for their role in society. That getting away from the personal notion of an educational system has contributed to the breakdown of the fabric of society.

2.15 pm

The 11-plus has created a two-tier education system. Mr McHugh and other Members have said that the creation of all-ability schools would provide the best avenue for equal access and equal opportunity. The Assembly has not looked at the fundamentals of education. However, it must examine education, root and branch, to see where it has gone wrong. It has gone wrong by failing to prepare children to become citizens of society.

Under the heading “Making a Difference” in the draft Programme for Government,

“high quality education to all, with equal access for all”

is stated as an aim of the Executive. The draft Programme for Government asserts that the Executive are committed to policies that actively promote equality of opportunity and adhere to international standards of human rights. Those who advocate the retention of selection see its survival and its singularity as a positive feature of education in the North of Ireland. The implication is that there is some form of excellence or wisdom peculiar and particular to our system that is worth preserving. However, its demise or its non-existence elsewhere indicates the enlightenment of those jurisdictions in which non-selective systems have worked.

I was surprised at Mr Gallagher’s remarks. He seemed to be singing from a different hymn sheet to that of Ms Lewsley and the rest of his party. He appeared to be formulating the adaptation, rather than the total elimination, of the 11-plus system. Mr Gallagher appears to be at odds with the SDLP on that issue.

All the appropriate points have already been made. An education system should provide all children with equal opportunities to develop at their own pace and to avail themselves of the greatest possible breadth of curriculum choices. It should promote equality of

teaching and learning in all schools. In particular, pupils of different ages, academic abilities and social backgrounds would benefit from sharing the same learning environment, as would their teachers.

The education system should recognise the full diversity of children's needs and talents. Every child has a special need, which the present system ignores. Every school must endeavour to provide that space in which a child's differing and changing needs can be met. As parents will tell you, the education system has failed to do that. It must be inclusive of all partners: parents, teachers, students, local communities, and the whole of society.

Sometimes politicians do not look much beyond the next election. That is particularly true when tackling the 11-plus and other issues that affect the lives of constituents. Politicians try to be all things to all men — or women — without looking beyond that election and having some vision about the society that they are trying to create. Politicians must give the lead, particularly in such fundamental areas as health and, particularly, education. Politicians should give the lead to ensure that we provide a system of education that is fair and that provides social inclusivity, pluralism, equality and justice.

Mr Hamilton: I support the motion.

Mr Kennedy referred to the debate as being one of the most important that the Assembly has so far undertaken. He is correct. With that in mind, I wish to register a great deal of disappointment that once again the DUP Members have absented themselves. They are doing the children of Northern Ireland no favours by engaging in the type of political stunt that we witnessed this morning.

One of the main reasons that I so readily endorse the report is that it so closely mirrors my party's submission to the Burns review of post-primary education. The key elements of my party's submission — excellence, diversity and choice — underpin the report. Both papers reflect the need to preserve all that is good in our current system, including those elements that have, across the years, resulted in Northern Ireland producing a consistently higher success rate than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. That fact is borne out on page 10 of the report, in which reference is made to the increased levels of participation in higher education by young people from traditional working-class backgrounds in comparison to their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.

There is an equal need to address those areas in which improvement may be made. To strive for an educational system that provides excellence for all is remarkable, as is the inclusion of sections that deal with parity of esteem, parental choice coupled with professional guidance from teachers, flexibility in the curriculum, and the requirement for children to be able

to transfer more easily between different sectors in the post-primary system. All those essentials of my party's submission are addressed and reflected throughout the Committee for Education's recommendations, and I welcome that.

Coming in advance of the Burns report, it is right and fitting that the Assembly's Committee for Education should not be taking a hard or fast stand on the issues that surround the transfer procedure. Instead, it recommends the adoption of a series of principles and required outcomes against which the Burns report can be judged and appraised. In particular, I am pleased to note that the Committee, although suggesting its possible combination with other assessment methods, is not ruling out the idea of continuing to use some method of final standardised central testing. That is important.

Many in the House advocate continuous assessment. As a teacher, I can tell you that those results are by no means foolproof, any more than is the result of a transfer test. The results of continuous assessment can be backed up by the results of a final standardised test. Similarly, continuous assessment can be used as a method to validate the result of the standardised test. One can therefore act as a back up to the other. If that system were adopted, it would be a more reliable indicator than reliance on just the one method.

There are other reasons why I hold those views. However, to be honest, it would take about an hour and a half to explain them. Not even your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, never mind that of the other Members, would stretch that far. Whatever outcome is adopted to decide the issue of transfer into post-primary education, I welcome the recommendation that it be phased in over time, and that it be properly trialled and tested. I taught for 25 years, and in that time I experienced attempts at educational reform under direct rule.

The method used was to create the reforms before starting to train the teachers to carry them out. That often resulted in little more than a shambles; after training, teachers would often attempt to implement new methods, only to have their instructions altered because they had proved ineffective. As a result of that, teachers often had to make massive alterations, at an advanced stage of a course, which caused considerable disruption not only to themselves, but, more importantly, to the education of their pupils.

There is a widespread acceptance that the present transfer arrangements are unsatisfactory and in need of alteration. The Assembly must get it right, so the changes, which will come, will work in practice when they are implemented. Trials, along with a phased and considered plan of implementation, will help to achieve that.

My party and I wish to see a transfer procedure in Northern Ireland that opens up opportunities, rather

than closes them down. Such systems exist in other countries, and there is no reason why they cannot exist in Northern Ireland. The Committee for Education's report brings that possibility closer, and I urge Members to support it.

Mr Fee: I commend the report to the Assembly. I missed some of the debate, because, I must confess, I am one of the Members who metaphorically "jukes behind the bicycle sheds" from time to time. However, I understood the drift of the debate and will try not to repeat points already made.

We were in fraught and emotional circumstances 18 months ago. Many Members will have attended public meetings at which one section of parents and teachers was demanding that the 11-plus go. There were raw, emotional debates about the effect of the transfer test system on young children. That forthright campaign led to another and equally forthright crusade that was spurred on by a fear on the part of many educators and boards of governors that we would rush to destroy the best of education in Northern Ireland or that we would act rashly.

The report demonstrates that, in that emotion-charged debate, we have been able to marshal rational arguments by and on behalf of parents, teachers, pupils, boards of governors, those transferring and others to produce a coherent and rational set of recommendations.

The three reviews that are currently under way — the formula-funding review, the curriculum review and the review of post-primary education — constitute the most fundamental analysis of the education system in Northern Ireland. For the first time in over 50 years the selection procedure has been examined. It is the first time that anyone in Northern Ireland has been properly consulted about the impact of the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. When Brian Mawhinney introduced the Education Reform Act 1988, followed by the 1989 Order, every educational union, major church, political party and parents' group in Northern Ireland opposed it. We are now giving those people their first say on how education should be run and administered here.

At one point, many believed that the debate would deteriorate into a situation of grammar schools versus secondary schools, church versus state, one sector versus another, and, in many cases, one parent against another.

If we have learnt no other lesson, we have learnt that we can take on the most contentious issues, that we can provide a consultation exercise that is broadly engaged by the entire community and that the Assembly is a forum that can generate that type of political development.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair)

2.30 pm

I would like to highlight one or two of the report's recommendations. First, the education system must:

"offer pupils the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential — intellectually, physically, spiritually, socially and creatively".

The system must be:

"conscious of the particular needs, experiences and aspirations of all young people of varying socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds".

That says clearly that any new system must be based entirely on the needs of the individual child, and, as far as is possible, it must be customised for the child. That important statement must be highlighted.

Secondly, recommendation 6.1.2 says that:

"Any reforms to the current education system should be phased in over a period of time and should involve key groups — teachers, Governors, parents, pupils and other interested bodies and groups."

One of the biggest grievances of the last 20 or 30 years is that the educators — those delivering the service to our children — have been the last people to be consulted, trained, given resources and tooled up for the job. With this report, we are committing ourselves to a process that is inclusive and that goes at a pace that allows everyone to keep up.

The third great fear that was generated at the beginning of this debate was that there was some sort of tacit conspiracy to do away with grammar schools or to diminish the high standards of education that have been achieved in Northern Ireland. The report clearly states that those standards must be maintained, while vigorous action must be taken to tackle the perceived tail of underachievement. It could not be more explicit. We want to improve what exists, not destroy it. We want to expand accessibility to the best education to all children and not, in any sense, inhibit the high achievers in our society.

In case there is any misunderstanding — Mr John Kelly seems to have left the room, but I am sure his Colleague will pass this on — Members should read my lips: the 11-plus must go. That is, has been and will remain the SDLP's policy, and it is the policy of most of the parties in the Assembly. However, that is the easy bit. The hard bit is contained in the report — and, presumably, it will be in the report of the Burns review, which will be published this week — which is how to create a better system.

The report is very clear. Paragraph 6.2.2 says that:

"The current tests should cease to be administered from such future date as is feasible to implement."

The 11-plus must go; it is as simple as that.

I commend to the Assembly one other item from the report that has not been discussed in any detail. A transfer profile should be created for each child so that

every aspect of the child's potential can be measured over a sustained period, with input coming not only from tests but also from continuous assessment. Assessment should not be carried out through a two-hour snapshot of how the child performs. It should take into account how a child develops and performs over a long time. Input should be given by teachers, school administrators and parents. That would be an enormous, radical stride forward for our education system.

Unfortunately the Minister is not present, but we recognise that, some time ago, he committed himself to doing away with the current selection procedure, and we welcome that. By presenting this report, we are providing him with the political climate in which he can say that there is widespread support for fundamental reform. I ask him to get on with it as quickly as possible.

Mr Neeson: I want to make a brief contribution to this important debate. As a former teacher, I have a great deal of interest in the subject. The Education (Northern Ireland) Act 1947 was an important Act of its time and provided the opportunity for many people, particularly from working-class backgrounds, to avail of the benefits of a grammar-school education and then, more importantly, to move on to tertiary education, particularly university. That was important. There is no doubt that the 1947 Act created a new society in Northern Ireland. Change began in this society in the 1960s and the 1970s. That change, and particularly the political change, would not have come about had it not been for the 1947 Act.

The Act was legislation of its time, but things have moved forward. Working for a number of years in a secondary school, I saw the divisiveness of a bipartite education system. Many of my pupils became very successful in their careers, whether they attended university or teacher training college or whether they moved into industry or business.

Things have changed. It is a great shame that the DUP had to pull off its stunt today. Education is one of the most important issues and responsibilities that the Assembly deals with. It shows that devolution can bring about change. That can be seen across the board in many of the Assembly's areas of responsibility — we can bring about change.

Most of us agree that selection at age 11 is wrong. I welcome the fact that the report does not deal with educational structures but with principles. That is important. I congratulate the Committee for focusing on the principles. Like most Members, I am looking forward to the publication of Gerry Burns's report on Wednesday. This debate is a worthwhile preamble to that.

Changes in post-primary education can provide more opportunities to develop integrated education in Northern Ireland. There are various ways to do that. I have made no secret that I strongly believe in the

development of a Dickson-type plan for education where the first three years are all-ability. I hope that pupils from across the communities in Northern Ireland will be educated together. That is an important opportunity that is provided by the changes.

The report refers to parental choice. Parental choice is an absolute fallacy — it does not exist. Over the years many of my constituents have wanted to send their children to schools that were perceived as integrated in nature, if not in name.

They were deprived of that opportunity because the Department insisted that their children went either to a Catholic grammar school or to one of the state, or private, grammar schools closest to where they lived.

Change will come whether we like it or not. However, it is important that we get it right, and that is why the principle of phasing-in, put forward by the Committee, is important. Equally important is the need to make available the resources required to bring about the necessary change. My favoured option will cost money. As someone who believes strongly in the development of educational facilities in Northern Ireland I strongly believe that the Assembly should have tax-varying and tax-raising powers in line with those of the Scottish Parliament. Unless we provide such a facility I see major problems in accruing the funding necessary to bring about the change.

I welcome the report and congratulate the Chairperson, the Committee and the Clerk in producing it at a very important time. I look forward to its implementation and the change that all of us want to see.

Ms Morrice: I rise as the mother of a child who will do the 11-plus exam in three weeks time. I am in the thick of this subject, and I understand what it is all about as I have spent several months doing practice tests for the 11-plus. I will give Members some examples of the questions being asked. First, how many thousands are there in two million? Secondly, does a snake have a backbone?

Mr Kennedy: Does the Women's Coalition have a backbone?

Ms Morrice: I avoided referring to anyone in the House when I asked that question.

It is very important that people appreciate what children have to go through in the 11-plus. One wonderful example was the question "This watch has no batteries: what do you do to make it go?" My son said "Put in some batteries". That was the wrong answer. Simple logic was not correct. The answer was "Wind it up".

Many Members will appreciate the question in which my son had to write the opposite of a word by using a prefix such as "im-", "ir-", "dis-" or "anti-". One of the

words given was “agreement”. My son wrote “anti-agreement”, and he was marked wrong. His teacher said “You mustn’t bring politics into this class. It is disagreement, not anti-agreement”. Such an argument is illogical? It is unfair to put kids — who try their best — through a system that confines them to a narrow “Yes”, “No”, or “I don’t know” and does not allow for creativity.

Therefore I commend paragraph 6.2.2 of the report, which states that:

“the current test should cease to be administered”.

2.45 pm

It is a pity that it did not happen today, thus preventing my son from having to go through that trauma in three weeks’ time. It is to be hoped that it will happen as soon as possible to prevent other children having to go through that sort of test and trauma.

I am sorry that the Committee did not go further. The constraints of trying to achieve cross-community support meant that there was a certain inability to take a stance on the options, in one direction or another, but I am glad that we got this far. I am pleased that foreign languages are listed as playing an important part in the early years of the curriculum. It is essential that children learn a second or third language at an early stage.

Integrated education is not mentioned enough in the report. The Women’s Coalition believes wholeheartedly that education must play a part in healing the divisions in our community. It believes that a more just, appropriate and inclusive education system must be devised. I am sorry that the report does not go into that in more detail. The only way to promote a peaceful community is for children to experience the other side as human beings capable of friendships and understanding. It can be achieved only by the integration of children of all abilities and religions and, indeed, those who have other values or no religion. The education system must incorporate and express respect for all children and nourish them equally. The need for teacher training in integrated education, which is sadly lacking in this society, should also be included. Integration must become a matter of public policy.

Mr K Robinson: When the Member talks about integrated education, does she mean the bringing together of all children from all communities in one school system, or is she talking about a specific, contrived system that sets itself apart from existing systems and further dilutes the opportunity to bring all children together? Earlier I spoke about bringing post-16 children together. There are opportunities to do that, but I did not mean in a separate system; I meant within the existing framework.

Ms Morrice: There seems to be an implied criticism of the integrated education sector there. I hope not. *[Interruption]* I hear the Member saying “No.”

I am promoting the integrated education system that now educates 6% of children in Northern Ireland. It is a pure integrated education system that brings Catholics, Protestants and others together in integrated schools that Members know well — Lagan College, Hazelwood College, Strangford College. Those schools provide a model that is important in Northern Ireland. We do not need to build schools on greenfield sites; existing schools can transform themselves to gain integrated status. Integration is about respecting each other and learning about each other’s communities, religions and cultures. It is about teachers and boards of governors being integrated.

If resources were spent wisely, they would create further community cohesion, rather than pandering to the self-interest of any particular sector. While the Women’s Coalition respects and accepts the rights of parents and children to choose, it believes that there is enough evidence to show that many people in Northern Ireland, if they had real choices, would choose integrated education — that is vital.

The Women’s Coalition thinks — and the Education Committee’s report endorses this — that the creation of a unified, cohesive model is entirely feasible and that there is enough expertise and creative thinking in educational circles to do it.

That model will not only embrace the principles endorsed by the Committee and contained in many of the submissions, including our own, to this report and the Burns review, but — given the declining number of children in Northern Ireland — will also create a system that will begin to unify and heal and allow all children to fulfil their potential. Our argument does not compromise the standards of excellence on which we all agree. Our model — an integrated, comprehensive school system — recognises cultural diversity and religious or philosophical value systems; allows for the nurturing of those things without detriment to other priorities; encourages inclusion and parity of esteem for different cultures and languages; and widens opportunity for all, regardless of background.

Mr O'Neill: I applaud the Committee for the report and for the hard work that was put into it. It was an excellent exercise, which has opened up a series of important educational issues and amassed an impressive body of opinion. When I think about education, I return to my student days and the concept of equality of opportunity. That is still a pertinent concept; the important thing is not only equality of access, but equality of opportunity. The system must ensure that all children have the same opportunities.

The report, rightly, refers to underachievement and the consequent skills shortage. In the minutes of evidence there is reference to the growth in grammar school numbers from 27% to 35% of the pupil cohort. The report suggests that there are literacy and numeracy problems in that sector for the first time.

Open enrolment had a major impact on the post-primary sector. Members will recall that the former chief inspector of schools, Mr Ivan Wallace, described it as a process of bringing market forces into education. Children and parents were to be treated as customers, and the concept of service was lost. Such a policy is inappropriate in education. Many Members will also have experience of market forces through their membership of local councils. Recently an academic asked whether the same concept would be applied to the police. I could imagine Chris Patten trying to do that. Should we call the boys that the police arrest “customers”? Should the police say “I hope that you have a nice stay in your three-star cell tonight, sir”? There is a limit to how far business notions can be applied to certain areas, particularly public services. The Committee must ensure that that is better balanced with the other work that is being done, such as the report from the Burns review body, in order to take the pressure off schools.

The most valuable recommendation is the abolition of the 11-plus examination. The SDLP has been calling for that since its inception in 1969 — the issue was raised at the first conference. The report recommends that the 11-plus be replaced by a transfer profile. The Committee says that more work must be done on that, and it is important for us to figure out how that system will work.

It is also important to have a complete view of a pupil’s ability and performance. However, the transfer test should not be substituted. A non-selective system should be just that, but by replacing the 11-plus would we not be replicating the initial problem? In that respect I am a little critical of the report’s position. The Committee’s idea could be open to abuse, and it needs to be monitored carefully.

Primary school principals used to have a slight degree of latitude in grading pupils. I heard many stories of headmasters returning home to find televisions and other nice presents, which had been left by expectant parents. Can you imagine the parental pressure on the principal and the staff during the preparation of the profile? I strongly argue that while the idea has perhaps not yet been fully thought out, it needs to be monitored carefully by the Committee.

In addition, will the transfer profile help to eradicate the distortion of the primary 6 and primary 7 curriculum? Is there not a danger that that will become profile

time, rather than curriculum time? That is a second reason to be careful.

The concept of the “neighbourhood school” did not receive the justice that the Committee might have given it. We do much damage to the local community by taking many of the best 11-year-old youngsters 20 or 30 miles away from their community to educate them with children who have travelled similar distances. Thus, they begin the early process of emigration from their local town or area. That process continues when they go on to higher education.

We must not lose sight of the strong argument for having a school at the heart of a community. I hope that we can return to those values, if not for any other reason than an economic one — although there are many social and community reasons. A school in the heart of the community would help to keep those with leadership potential in the community in which they were born and reared, and to which they could continue to contribute.

I am a long-time supporter of vocational education, and I remember the days when one felt like a missionary when trying to encourage people to look at that form of education. I strongly welcome the recognition that it is given and the fact that it is no longer marginalised. Even so, it would have been nice if vocational education had been clearly referred to in the recommendations. However, I have enough conviction in the bulk of the report to believe that that key component will not be missed.

Point 6.1.8 has already been referred to my Colleagues on both sides. It states that:

“the commitment and contribution of all teaching staff would be central to the implementation programme.”

That is a real truism. In the last 15 to 20 years no other profession has had to undergo and suffer as many changes to its professional work as much as teachers have done.

It really is remarkable how so many people have endured and emerged still sane.

3.00 pm

I hope that when these worthwhile recommendations begin to be implemented, teachers will be given time for training and time to absorb them at a pace that does not affect the welfare of the children and the health of the teaching profession. It is no secret. The teaching profession’s early retirement rate over the last number of years and the waiting lists for replacements show that it is difficult. People are not taking teaching on as enthusiastically as before, and there is a serious problem. We need to be careful how we go about implementing these recommendations. That is a concern I have, and I hope the Committee will take it on board.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I will start by speaking as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. That Committee will welcome this report, and I congratulate all involved in its production. Obviously, it will have to be considered alongside the Burns inquiry report that will come out later this week, but the significant thing is that it emerges from a process that is democratically accountable.

From the perspective of the Committee for Employment and Learning, there is one significant aspect. Once the 11-to-16-year-old age group is better dealt with, it will be possible to make certain changes that are necessary for education in the older 16 to 19 age group. There will be implications for the future of further education colleges, and, indeed, curriculum reform was referred to in the report from my Committee published a week ago. With certain subjects at A level, notably mathematics, physics and chemistry, there has been a relative decline — in some cases an absolute decline — in the numbers of young people taking those subjects. I am pleased to see that some of the recommendations here hint at approaches to dealing with this.

The report seems to be recommending the retention of what is good while raising standards in what statisticians call “the long tail of lower performance”. Undoubtedly that is quite sound, and there is resonance with some issues that have emerged in the Department for Employment and Learning — for example, about 25% of adults here have the lowest measured level of literacy and numeracy. We note that compared to the German and other continental European economies there is a shortfall in the level of qualification of our workforce. Significantly, that does not occur so much at degree level as at apprenticeship, sub-degree, diploma and HND and HNC level, which hints at what may be happening in secondary schools relative to grammar schools.

I will now speak briefly as an MLA. As the report suggests, it is probably right that the current transfer procedure is not sustainable. It is pleasing that the Committee has proposed both short-term and longer-term reform of it. The report is valuable in helping us to think about selection and selectivity. Perhaps the problem is not so much selectivity per se, but the grounds on which selection is made. The Committee rightly looked at practice in Great Britain and other parts of western Europe. However, if time and resources had allowed, it should have considered some of the interesting developments in American schools over the last decade or so.

It is possible to talk about an Anglo-American approach, as exemplified by the city technology colleges in English inner cities and by the so-called charter schools and magnet schools in American inner cities. These have introduced school reform amid massive

social problems and massive social division, so they are not dissimilar to some schools in Belfast.

The Anglo-American approach allows schools to specialise, and diversity is encouraged rather than curbed. Such schools select their pupils on a range of criteria, not just on academic ability and aptitude.

Mr Billy Hutchinson spoke of schools that specialise in sport, IT, music and other subjects. Northern Ireland can learn from the experiences of English and American cities. As Prime Minister Tony Blair said on 8 September 2000:

“We now have the end of a one size fits all mentality in schools.”

I am pleased that the Committee has looked at the German example, because the former West Germany in particular is an interesting social laboratory in that respect. Some German Länder have comprehensives, some have selectivity based on parental choice and some have selectivity based on examinations.

Many parts of Germany seem to have succeeded in maintaining a diversity of school types after the age of 11 by keeping a model that approaches parity of esteem: they have the academic Gymnasien and the vocational Realschulen.

It is a very instructive example for Northern Ireland, and one that my own party noted in its policy position, which we offered to the Burns review. As policies develop, we must avoid a “Rip van Winkle” approach; we must not pretend that we fell asleep in 1969 or 1972 and that we can simply apply the policies of that time and forget that the world has moved on.

There was an unholy alliance in the late 1960s and early 1970s between the Labour Education Secretary, Tony Crosland, who went to a public school, and, later, the Conservative Education Secretary, Margaret Thatcher, who attended Grantham Grammar School, I believe. Together they closed down most of England’s grammar schools.

Significantly, Northern Ireland’s examination results have improved relative to England’s since 1971, and the gap is widening. That is no accident; it corresponds to the introduction of that great, or perhaps infamous, experiment of comprehensive education in England. It is an experiment, the Prime Minister has hinted, that is over and that has failed.

The teaching integrated mathematics and science (TIMS) studies show that the teaching of these subjects has deteriorated in Scottish comprehensives. On the whole, I warmly welcome the report. It dovetails with the report by the Department for Employment and Learning. I urge the House to support the motion.

Mrs Carson: I support the motion. Many Members have spoken about the importance of the debate. However, it is disappointing to see that many parties

have absented themselves. We can see the importance that they put on the debate.

I compliment the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Education on their stamina in collecting such a volume of information and views on post-primary education. One Committee member rightly said that you would almost need an education to follow the report. It was an impressive undertaking. Committee members come from different school backgrounds and allegiances, and it is to their credit that they got the report together. I commend them for that. I also compliment the Committee Chairperson's initiative on having the Stationery Office capture almost 600 pages of minutes and papers on a CD-ROM. How does one take in such a volume of information?

Dr Birnie: Do your homework.

Mrs Carson: In two days?

Reference to the contributions that would be necessary from teachers has not been given the priority that I think essential. Any major changes in the curriculum involving mixed-ability classes will impose demands on teachers, who will be required to cover a broad range of abilities. That is a tremendous demand on the teaching profession.

The report is wide ranging, but there appear to be several contradictions. For example, paragraph 4.4.3 states

“the need for fewer management teams”,

while paragraph 4.5.3 states

“the possibility that more management teams may be required”.

It is a small point.

Furthermore, paragraph 6.3.2 states:

“A core curriculum should be offered”,

and a list of subject areas is given. However, paragraph 6.3.6 states:

“A broad ‘skills-based’ curriculum should be implemented”.

Perhaps there is no contradiction, but it is a bit confusing.

Paragraph 6.3.2 states that the core curriculum should include

“at least one additional Language” .

Perhaps we could take on board the Scottish secondary school curriculum and stipulate that one modern European language be included.

The term “parity of esteem” figures prominently in the report. The expression is meaningless unless it clearly indicates the area being referred to. Is it parity of esteem between schools, pupils, subjects or awards?

Yesterday and last week I noted the excellent results recorded in a report in the ‘The Sunday Times’ on the top 25 voluntary, grammar, and independent schools in

Northern Ireland. All of the schools must be congratulated. In my constituency, Enniskillen Collegiate Grammar School obtained equal fourth rank in the whole of the UK. That is my old school.

Mr K Robinson: It has obviously improved.

Mrs Carson: It is well improved.

Mr Kennedy: They have done well.

Mrs Carson: It may not be possible to draw exact parallels with the results in GB, but the GCSE figures in Northern Ireland are only bettered by six GB schools. The top 13 independent schools in Northern Ireland — with over 60% success rate in A levels — compare favourably with the upper 200 schools in GB.

Recommendation 6.1.9 states:

“Any changes introduced should not encourage the development of a sizeable independent sector.”

In the light of the superb results that I have just mentioned, the independent sector will flourish if parents are dissatisfied with the proposed new system. That is their prerogative in this age of parental choice.

We have much to be proud of in our present system in Northern Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Party's response to the review states clearly that a diversified post-primary school system is the right way to meet the varied needs of our children, and that the existence of a differentiated system has proved its value in producing good academic results.

In the words of the old cliché, we must ensure that in looking for change we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. I support the motion.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: At 3.30 pm we will break for Question Time.

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest in this debate as a parent governor of a primary school and as a parent of three young children who will leave primary school in the next five years.

This debate is important to myself, my constituents, and everyone in Northern Ireland. Obviously I want the best for my children and for all the children in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their particular ability. The transition between schools should be as smooth as possible.

I welcome the recommendation that the current selection procedure should be ended as soon as possible. I am aware of the variation in the degree of coaching that can occur between schools and out of schools, through tutors, et cetera. I do not want the education of my children to be unduly affected by the time taken up by artificial test papers. I want them to be educated for life, not for a transition exam.

As an engineer, I was always taught to examine the evidence and ensure that when I tackled a problem, I tackled the root cause. Some Members have been advocating a new comprehensive system for Northern Ireland, but I have not heard evidence that our current education structure is the root cause. We have high education standards in Northern Ireland, and those high standards must be maintained. However, we all must accept that there is a tail of underachievement, and that is where the focus of change must be. We must ensure that the young people who are being failed by our current system are given an opportunity and that they are switched on to education, not only in school, but also for life.

Those who have advocated change have not addressed the core problem of underachievement. They are advocating change, but there is no guarantee that their particular change will improve the current situation of underachievement. It could result in the high standards that have been achieved being lowered.

Twenty-four percent of adults — who have been through the education system — are failing to meet basic international standards on numeracy and literacy. That is a big problem. Forty-four percent of those currently unemployed have no formal education, and we must tackle that. Those who urge an all-in-one system have still to advise how that system will best suit our young people. There has been a lack of clarity in what has been advocated.

As a member of the Education and Learning Committee I welcome recommendation 6.3.4, which would widen subject choice beyond the academic to include vocational and technical subjects. I am pleased that the Committee has made that recommendation. It was contained in the Ulster Unionist document, 'Excellence, Diversity and Choice'.

I also welcome recommendation 6.3.10, on improving linkages between schools and further education colleagues. During our recent inquiry, the Education and Learning Committee learnt that if we can make education more relevant to our young people, and particularly to those who are underachieving, they can become switched on to education and fully engaged in the learning process. In consultation with the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and Bombardier Shorts, we learnt that by altering coursework to make it more interesting and appropriate, 100% success rates could be achieved in some engineering courses.

Secondly, pilot schemes in the north-west were, encouragingly, improved by the increased use of a vocational model in the final year for students whose

attendance had been unacceptably poor. If under-achievers attend school for only 75% of the time, they will not succeed, no matter what type of education they receive. The pilots showed that work experience, and a greater involvement with further education colleges, could assist in reducing absentee levels by showing the students the relevance of what they were doing and could help them to go further.

Ms Lewsley spoke of the divisiveness of the present system and wished that all children be educated together. Had she nothing to say about the maintained education sector? Her comments could be applied equally to both systems in Northern Ireland. Why can our children not attend our state schools together for the benefit of all? That would allow us to offer greater diversity to our children in rural towns or in the middle of Belfast; it would also reduce the busing budget. Children would be integrated, but not in a selective manner; and more parents would send their children to such schools than send them to the present integrated sector. All children, not just those of the middle classes, would have an integrated education, and that would improve our society.

I welcome the report's emphasis on local solutions, because we do not have a clean canvas. There has been major investment in our school structures. Admittedly, many of them are in a poor state, but the cost of rebuilding and moving our children into a communal comprehensive system would be prohibitive. That system, as advocated in England and in Scotland, has created problems of social engineering through selection by proximity to schools. House prices, housing location and wages begin to determine the schools for which children will be selected.

Our vision for Northern Ireland should be an all-encompassing one. We do not want that sort of selectivity; we want to ensure that there is a mixed community in all our schools. We also want to ensure that we provide the highest possible standards.

There are problems that have not been addressed by those advocating a particular model. It is important to move forward cautiously and to take some of the other recommendations of this report on local solutions into consideration. It is also important to consult widely locally as well as through the educational structures.

It is easy to say that one will improve matters; it is much more difficult to ensure that one does not destroy the good in the existing system. I urge cautious movement forward, but I support the motion and look forward to its implementation.

The sitting was suspended at 3.24 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

3.30 pm

Oral Answers To Questions

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Mr Speaker: Question 1 is in the name of Mr Barry McElduff, but he is not in his place.

Criticisms of Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

2. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps are being taken to address the recent criticisms of her Department by the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General. (AQO312/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I take all reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) seriously, and I have set in train action relating to such earlier reports. Following publication of each PAC report, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development addresses the issues contained in the recommendations and conclusions by way of the Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply. These memoranda have been produced, laid before the Assembly and published. The Member may wish to look at the memoranda which are available in the Assembly Library.

Following a recent hearing, I am awaiting the publication of a PAC report on the outbreak of brucellosis at the Agricultural Research Institute of Northern Ireland. When that report is published, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will prepare a response to the recommendations and conclusions by way of a Department of Finance and Personnel memorandum of reply. The memorandum will be laid before the Assembly and published.

Mr Armstrong: Has the next phase of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's rural development programme taken into account the criticism of the Department's previous programme — particularly with regard to the unfinished Seeconnell equestrian centre project?

Ms Rodgers: As the Permanent Secretary said when he was before the PAC, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has learnt lessons from the previous PAC report and will take every possible step to ensure that those are borne in mind with regard to

all areas that attracted criticism — including the Seeconnell equestrian centre.

Scrapie Eradication Programme

3. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the establishment of an all-Ireland scrapie eradication programme; and to make a statement. (AQO321/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the auspices of the North/South Ministerial Council, I have agreed with Joe Walsh that scrapie eradication must be tackled through an all-island approach. The nature of the disease and of the sheep population in Ireland means that it makes sense to adopt a unified approach. Officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are working with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development on a consultation document which will set out the thinking on how to tackle the disease. Suggestions will include genotyping — a method of breeding resistance to scrapie into the sheep population — and other more focused eradication measures. It is hoped that the consultation document will be issued in the next few weeks. Our overall aim is to have a programme of eradication in place by the end of December.

Mr Gallagher: As the Minister is aware, the findings of recent research in Britain into BSE in sheep gave cause for concern. Is the Minister still going ahead with her plan despite the revelations arising from that research?

Ms Rodgers: Yes, BSE can be transmitted experimentally to sheep. UK sheep had access to contaminated feed in the 1990s, so, theoretically, there could be a problem. Therefore it makes sense, from a number of points of view, to go ahead and try to eradicate the disease.

The problems that have arisen with the research were the responsibility of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The problem with the research and the discovery of the mistake with the brains that were being examined would not have happened had it not been that the devolved Administrations, the Welsh scientists initially, asked for further DNA testing to ensure that there was no cross contamination. This was supported by the Scots and Northern Irish Ministers. If that had not happened, we would not be in the fortunate situation of having discovered the mistake.

I want to make three points. First, BSE can be transmitted experimentally to sheep, and UK sheep had access to contaminated feed. Research work will continue in order to establish whether there is a risk. It remains important that we have a contingency plan to deal with any research findings that suggest that it does. The draft form of the plan has recently been put to the industry in Northern Ireland for comment by early

December. I ask recipients to consider it and let my Department have their views.

Secondly, the Northern Ireland scrapie eradication plan that my Department is developing will still go ahead, as we know that the theoretical potential is there for sheep to harbour BSE that may be masquerading as scrapie, which we have to eliminate from the Northern Ireland flock.

Thirdly, an important point is that the research that is underway in GB is looking mainly if not entirely at the situation in GB, and there is an obvious temptation for conclusions from that work to be applied to Northern Ireland. Therefore my officials have asked the Food Standards Agency to ensure that any research into the risks of sheep meat for consumers takes specific account of our lower reported incidents of scrapie, BSE and sporadic and variant CJD. This suggests that any problems presented by sheep — and there may be none — may be lower here than in GB.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): Can the Minister say what steps have been taken for anthrax control in the light of the current threat posed by international terrorism?

Mr Speaker: That question is out of order. A supplementary question should be that, and I know of no microbiological connection between anthrax bacillus and scrapie. That is wide of the mark.

Mr Savage: *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: I think you will be proved very badly wrong if I may say so. From a microbiological point of view there is no connection between the two at all.

Ms Rodgers: It is not my responsibility anyway; it is the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's.

Mr Speaker: It is unlikely to be your responsibility, indeed, Minister. That is correct, but the question was not supplementary to the preliminary question.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

5. **Mr Fee** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what recent co-operation has taken place between her Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development in the Republic of Ireland on foot-and-mouth disease; and to make a statement. (AQO323/01)

Ms Rodgers: I met Joe Walsh on 4 October in a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council. At that meeting we discussed various aspects of the effort to tackle foot-and-mouth disease. We agreed that the already high levels of co-operation between our two Departments would continue, particularly on the

precedent of maintaining an all-island defence against the disease's being introduced from GB by ports and airports, both North and South.

Mr Fee: Did the Minister discuss with Minister Walsh the terms of reference of the review of foot-and-mouth disease that she announced recently?

Ms Rodgers: Yes, I assure Mr Fee that we discussed the planned reviews of the respective foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks, and we both agreed that the cross-border dimension would be important. We will be contributing to the review in the Republic, and it will be contributing to ours.

BSE

6. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress is being made with the European Union towards achieving low-incidence status for BSE; and to make a statement.

(AQO313/01)

Ms Rodgers: There is no realistic possibility of the European Union considering our case for low-incidence status for BSE until a reasonable proportion of the results of our current screening tests, and those of the other EU member states, are known. So far, we have tested over 8,300 animals and have only found 17 confirmed positives. That augurs well because the proportion of positives is very low, and if that continues it will show that Northern Ireland has a very low incidence of BSE. However, we have only tested a small proportion of our total, so it is early days yet to be drawing conclusions. It will not be until the end of the year that we will see the comparable results from the other European countries, to see where we stand. I cannot change the pace of the testing, but as soon as the time is right and we have a good case to make, I will make that case.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for her positive reply. Can she give any indication of the incidence of BSE in other European countries compared with Northern Ireland? In the context of those statistics, could the possibility of accelerating the removal of the export ban be considered?

Ms Rodgers: I cannot state yet what the true incidence of BSE is in other countries. The surveillance results published so far by the Commission give the figures only for July — the first month of the EU-wide testing. It will be the end of the year before sufficient surveillance data emerges to give a reliable statistical base from which to make true comparisons. I am confident that the incidence in Northern Ireland will compare very favourably with that in other countries. We will be properly able to argue our case only when we have the figures. We have already tested 8,300 animals — we have 50,000 to test — so it is difficult

to draw a conclusion from such a small number, although the indications are encouraging.

Organic Farming

7. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action is being taken to encourage organic farming. (AQO315/01)

Ms Rodgers: The organic farming scheme was introduced in June 1999. It increased significantly the amount of aid available to prospective organic producers, especially in the first two years of conversion. Since the introduction of the scheme, 64 producers, farming a total of just over 3,400 hectares, have been accepted into it. Payments to producers under the scheme in the 2000-01 financial year totalled £470,000. I have also commissioned, and published for consultation, a strategic study on the best way to develop organic farming in Northern Ireland to a position where 1,000 producers will be farming 30,000 hectares organically by 2006. The closing date for receipt of comments is 30 November 2001.

In addition, earlier this year I secured £2 million from the Executive programme funds for a scheme to assist some 150 to 200 farmers over the next three years with the extra costs of converting, or providing, animal housing systems to comply with organic standards. The scheme is subject to state-aid approval from the European Commission.

Mr McCarthy: Given the increasing demand for organic products, does the Minister regard the numbers quoted as being anywhere near adequate to meet consumer demand and the changing needs of agriculture? Does the Minister agree that giving the entire population easier access to organic products could mean that the growing demand on our Health Service would be greatly reduced?

Ms Rodgers: A proposed increase to 30,000 hectares from an initial figure of 3,400 hectares is a substantial increase. I understand that there is an increasing market demand for organic food in Northern Ireland, but it is still not as great as that in other places, and it is confined to specific categories and classes of food. The proposed increase, and the target of 1,000 producers from a base of 64, is considerable, and I am happy that that is the case.

3.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: In view of the semi-organic state of hill farming in the Mourne, the Sperrins and on the Antrim Plateau and other upland areas, is there any economic potential for a special scheme to exploit the semi-organic nature of the food produced in those areas?

Ms Rodgers: Most upland farming in Northern Ireland is extensive by nature and would require little adjust-

ment to switch to organic farming — hence Dr McDonnell's reference to "semi-organic" farming. However, the producers must decide whether they want to switch or not. My officials ensure that they have the information necessary to enable them to make a business decision that reflects their circumstances.

Dr Adamson: Will the Minister comment on the fact that, unless there is a reasonable profit margin, there is little point in encouraging organic farming when Northern Ireland farmers' produce carries the farm quality assurance label?

Ms Rodgers: The profit margin is a commercial issue, and I cannot deal with it. I understand the Member's question, and there is a market for organic farm produce. We are not producing enough organic food at present, and that means importing a great deal of organic produce from across the water. Organic farming appears to be profitable. Because that market exists, we are encouraging farmers and providing the necessary resources to cope with the length of time that it takes to change to organic farming.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

8. **Mr Ford** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO145/01, to detail the timescale for implementing an inquiry into foot-and-mouth disease. (AQO316/01)

Ms Rodgers: As I announced at a recent Committee meeting, it is my intention to conduct an independent investigation into the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland. That review will highlight the lessons to be learned from the epidemic so that we will be better prepared for any future events of that nature. The terms of reference of the investigation are to review the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland with particular reference to contingency plans, preparedness, cause, spread, handling, logistics, compensation, cross-border issues and trade implications.

In the light of the lessons learned, the review should make recommendations to me by 31 March 2002 on how future outbreaks of epizootic diseases here should be handled. The review will be conducted by independent consultants, who will be selected by tender and will provide their own secretariat. The deadline of 31 March may be a little ambitious and may require further review. The function of the review is not to pass judgement on the actions of the Government, individuals or groups but to identify areas where improvements can be made.

Mr Ford: What are the precedents for conducting an inquiry of this sort by a competitive tendering? Does the Minister expect that farmers and others will accept that an exercise carried out by a business which is commercially responsible to the Department that is

commissioning it will fully consider the facts and criticise the Department where necessary? Does she expect to be more successful than the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was in persuading people that the internal investigation in England and Wales was conducted in an independent manner? Would it not be better to take a little longer to bring in independent experts, in whom there could be true confidence, to ensure that the inquiry has positive results and is acted upon, rather than do something that appears unacceptable?

Ms Rodgers: First, I have been at pains to explain to the Committee that this is not an inquiry, which would have all the implications of a public inquiry. This is a review of the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. I am satisfied that it will be independent. It is being carried out by consultants.

Nevertheless, there is no point in having a review that just tells us what we want to hear. As Minister, I would not countenance paying consultants to conduct a review on the basis that they were careful not to offend us. As I said, the review has a very wide remit and will look at every aspect of the handling of the foot-and-mouth outbreak in Northern Ireland.

I am happy that the review — not the “inquiry” — will be open and accountable. There will be no formal hearings with lawyers and submissions of evidence. The consultants will interview and take written input from all principal stakeholders as well as from anyone else who wishes to contribute. The findings of the review will be published in due course. I hope that Members see that I am conducting the exercise in a totally open way from start to finish. I have been open and honest at all stages during the foot-and-mouth epidemic, and I intend to be so with this review.

Mr Speaker: Mr Poots’s question has been withdrawn. Question 10 is in the name of Mr Mick Murphy, but he is not in his place.

Vision Report

11. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) her initial response to the vision report, and (b) what consultation is taking place; and to make a statement. (AQO314/01)

Ms Rodgers: I received the vision steering group’s report on 4 October and have started considering the recommendations. I want my response to be informed by the views of the various stakeholders, and I have started a consultation process.

Last week I met representatives from the Ulster Farmers’ Union, the Livestock and Meat Commission, the Northern Ireland Consumer Council and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. I am keen to meet as many stakeholders as possible. I hope soon to

announce details of a conference to be held at Loughry College in mid-to-late November. The consultation process will last until 31 December, and I will publish an action plan early in 2002 in response to the vision group’s recommendations.

Mrs Courtney: Can the Minister comment on any particular recommendations at this point? Does she believe that a suspension of the institutions will seriously hinder this very important consultation process?

Ms Rodgers: All recommendations will be actively considered. My decision will be influenced by the views that stakeholders give during the consultation process and by the availability of resources. Some recommendations are for the industry to address.

When the consultation ends and the action plan is addressed, there will be a 10-year vision for agriculture here. It would be unfortunate, to say the least, if a local Administration, Executive and Minister were unable to take action on the specific needs and priorities in Northern Ireland.

Bovine Tuberculosis

12. **Mr Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what strategy will be adopted under the cross-border animal health programme to fight bovine tuberculosis. (AQO303/01)

Ms Rodgers: As the Member knows, cross-border animal health is being addressed at working group level. However, we will be able to consider a cross-border strategy only when that group, set up under the North/South Ministerial Council arrangements, carries out its work. Unfortunately, because of the foot-and-mouth outbreak, we have been unable to make as much progress on that as we might have. Nevertheless, my officials were in Dublin last week to discuss that subject, and brucellosis, with their Republic of Ireland counterparts. Progress has been made.

Mr Bradley: Just this morning I welcomed the progress to date. What cross-border arrangements are currently in place to deal with bovine tuberculosis?

Ms Rodgers: Senior officials from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development meet on a regular basis to discuss tuberculosis and other animal health issues that affect the agriculture industry on both sides of the border. It is hard to get your tongue around all the different acronyms, especially since MAFF (the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) became DEFRA (the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

Veterinarians meet regularly to discuss the epidemiology of tuberculosis and to consider the options available to deal with it. In areas where landowners

have cattle on both sides of the border, there is ongoing local contact at divisional veterinary offices to co-ordinate the testing programme and discuss associated issues.

Equality of Opportunity

13. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to state the number of women employed in agriculture and what steps she has taken to ensure equality of opportunity. (AQO329/01)

Ms Rodgers: Last year's EU farm structure survey showed that some 16,000 to 17,000 women work on farms in Northern Ireland. Of those, 12,000 are farmers' spouses. As the Member knows, I am fully committed to the promotion of equality of opportunity in all walks of life and well aware of the considerable contribution made by women to agriculture and rural life.

I hope that the ambitious social survey undertaken by my Department will be completed by spring 2002. That will throw greater light on the contribution made by women to family farms and will provide information on their aspirations for training and development. That should enable us to identify gaps in existing provision and to assess how such gaps might be filled.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her answer and pay tribute to her for the emphasis she has placed on the rights of rural women. What particular training programmes are provided? Can a woman as Minister of Agriculture stop the drift of women from the land?

Ms Rodgers: Department of Agriculture and Rural Development colleges provide a comprehensive range of lifelong training and learning programmes tailored to the needs of those who work in the Northern Ireland agrifood industry. Increasing numbers of such women are participating in that lifelong learning provision, and that trend has been especially apparent in information technology and business management programmes.

In addition, my Department has supported the development and delivery of the Women In Agriculture programme in County Fermanagh, involving more than 200 women. That programme was launched in 1999 and aims to facilitate the competence development needs of women with farming backgrounds. Training provided has included farm administration, secretarial skills, IT in agriculture and livestock management. The programme also incorporates a farmhouse food initiative that has resulted in the establishment of four microbusinesses. The success of the programme will be marked by a special event, Celebration of Women Day, at Enniskillen College on 2 November 2001. I plan to attend, circumstances permitting.

With regard to Mr Dallat's question about a woman being Minister of Agriculture, I am very pleased to say that as I go round various events I notice that more and more women are becoming involved in rural develop-

ment and other farming activities. Perhaps having a woman as Minister of Agriculture is not a disincentive.

Mr Speaker: Mr McHugh is not in his place.

REVIEW OF POST-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the 'Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland'. — [*Chairperson, Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy)*]

Dr Adamson: I support this excellent report. I did, however, find one spelling mistake in paragraph 6.1.2 — the word "Governors" is spelt wrongly, so one mark must be taken off.

I speak as a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee rather than of the Education Committee. I address my comments to paragraph 6.1.1, which states that the education system of the future should be

"conscious of the particular needs, experiences and aspirations of all young people of varying socio-economic, religious and cultural backgrounds within society."

One major sphere of interest and concern that has always attracted serious attention in the Nationalist/Republican sector is that of cultural heritage.

4.00 pm

That is a sphere in which the minority community in Northern Ireland has been proactive for many years, but one in which the majority community has shown only a reactive or passive interest. The result has been a significant series of perceived gains by Nationalists and losses by Unionists, including the promotion of the Irish language, the problematisation of long-standing majority marching rights and the retrospective challenging of appointment and selection procedures in the workplace. All those things have enhanced — and will continue to enhance — Nationalist solidarity, while discouraging and marginalising the majority population, which, in the context of Ireland as a whole, is really a large minority. Significantly, there has been a call in the Republic for the revision of school history books to give greater impetus to the movement for national unity.

If the majority community in Northern Ireland is to maximise its potential in the important years ahead, close attention must be paid to enabling Unionists to feel increasing pride in and commitment to their cultural past, as the basis of a constructive future. They must be helped to explore their roots, past struggles and achievements and to develop a sense of pride in the contributions made by their ancestors and their contemporaries to the development of Ulster. For that to happen, a clear and detailed cultural education policy is required in our schools. It should be a policy of truthful analysis and celebration that will inform and buttress the majority population in a period of change that many may find, at best, unsettling and, at worst, highly threatening.

A cultural educational policy for the Unionist and British majority in Northern Ireland must in no sense be construed as an attack on the minority population. Rather, it should be viewed as clarification and confirmation of the Unionist identity, in the context of 10,000 years in the life of the people of Ireland. It should be centred on the ancient tradition of the Brytenwalda and should, on the basis of the past and present, look to a future in which the several traditions in Ulster have a significant role to play, but in which the majority's perspectives are clearly perceived to be worthy of respect and good stewardship.

Both main traditions — one ignoring the fullness of its history and culture in Ireland, the other unaware of any real history and culture, other than its own — have imperilled the possibility of co-existence based on mutual understanding and respect. The Assembly has offered us the opportunity to rectify that situation in our schools. It is of great importance that steps be taken to do so as soon possible. We would be mad to lose the opportunity.

Mr Weir: I congratulate the Committee on a fine piece of work. It is clear that a great deal of effort went into the report. It has enabled us to have an informed and informative debate. I am disappointed at the number of Members — from across the board — present for such a useful debate. I am especially disappointed that the Minister of Education, rather than attend, is engaged in extra-curricular activities. At least, his case shows that academic achievement is not always needed to rise to the highest posts.

Mr Neeson: What about the DUP?

Mr Weir: DUP Members will have to speak for themselves; I referred to poor attendance by Members from across the board.

The issue of post-primary education is rooted in the reforms of the 1940s. It is important to realise the extent to which those reforms opened doors for people. Neil Kinnock said that he was

"the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university".

My family, like many others, saw the opportunity for third-level education as stemming from the reforms of the 1940s. Therefore, we should be loath to throw the baby out with the bath water and completely rid ourselves of a system that has served Northern Ireland fairly well.

In looking at the changes that are required and at the current system, we must avoid falling into the trap of getting too involved with dogma, or of looking only at good intentions that may not work. For example, I agree with some of Joan Carson's criticisms. She said that we must be careful in the way that we use parity of esteem. If we take that concept to its limit in the education system, we will have a system where every

pupil scores the same mark in every exam because we will not want to feel that anyone has been discriminated against or disadvantaged. We must be practical.

It was not helpful that one of the Members on the opposite Benches quoted statistics that were 15 years old and out of date. I do not share the view of the Women's Coalition, which offered us the nightmare vision of pupils in years to come threatening passers-by with the horrors of street theatre. We must develop a system that is grounded in realism. We need what I call the "JESO test". The system must be just, it must maintain and improve educational standards, and it must be open and transparent. We must judge the key issues against that background.

There are two fundamental issues at stake. The first is whether we have selection in schools. The second is, if we have selection, what form it will take. On the first issue, I remain unconvinced by the advocates of comprehensive education. If we say that there should be no selection procedure between the primary and secondary levels of education, we are advocating comprehensive education. However, we must look at the way that comprehensive education has worked.

Another Member said that the gap between Northern Ireland's success rate and that of the rest of United Kingdom has increased. Yet another said that many years ago Northern Ireland had a higher percentage of people leaving school without any qualifications. However, in recent years we have reached the point where fewer people in Northern Ireland leave school with no qualifications than is the case in the rest of the United Kingdom. From a purely academic point of view, comprehensive education has not provided the solution to the problem of how to raise standards.

In addition, with regard to social inclusiveness and helping disadvantaged people, there are still problems that must be addressed, and we must focus on those. However, in Northern Ireland there are a higher percentage of school-leavers from working-class backgrounds attaining third-level education than in the rest of the United Kingdom, so comprehensive education has not produced a greater level of success.

I recently had a conversation with a couple of my party colleagues. I cannot remember whether it was Philip Weir or Clive McFarland who asked me what the point was in replacing a flawed system based on ability with a system that is largely based on the ability to pay. One point that the report highlighted very well was that we do not want to see a large independent sector grow up in Northern Ireland in response to whatever proposals we make for changing the education system. If that were to happen, we would have a system like that in England, where most pupils are served by a large comprehensive system, while the elite get into public schools on the basis of their parents' ability to

pay, rather than the ability of the pupils themselves. The current system is clearly flawed, but if we move to a system that is based on elitism by money rather than ability, we will be moving backwards. The case for selection is strong.

If there is to be selection, the question is what form that should take. I agree with some of the cautions that have been given in relation to the report. If applied properly, continuous assessment can provide a truer picture of pupils' abilities, but, as Tom Hamilton said, it is not a perfect system. It is important to remove the subjective elements. Billy Hutchinson also expressed concern about that.

Because of my age, I had a unique experience of the 11-plus, by comparison with other Members. When I was in primary 7 a system that did not operate in any other year was introduced, with the effect that each school ranked its own pupils. The pupils then sat an exam on an anonymous basis, and each school was told how many of its pupils had achieved top, middle or bottom grades. The schools then allocated the grades according to their previous list. That system, I believe, was dropped after just one year. That was partly because of concerns that the system — despite the many fine people who were involved in its creation — was open to abuse, and could be affected by subjective opinion. If we are to adopt a system of continuous assessment, standardised tests will be necessary to enable everybody to compete on a level playing field.

However, continuous assessment is not necessarily the perfect solution. Members have expressed concerns about the level of stress and strain that the 11-plus system places upon 10- and 11-year-old pupils. However, if placed under continuous assessment a pupil might feel under constant stress for one or two years, rather than the few months before the exam. Therefore, while I support the report's broad recommendations for the re-examination of the transfer procedure, I caution that some of the proposed solutions have associated problems.

If such changes are to be made, we must ensure that teachers are given support, because a system of continuous assessment will place an additional burden on teacher numbers.

As many Members have said, we must focus on ways to "retain the best but improve the rest" — a useful phrase that was used by several Members. In particular, we must identify problem areas where help and additional support can be given, and we should examine ways to improve the system. Until a better alternative emerges, we must not be tempted to throw out everything for the sake of what appears to be a perfect model or a system that will create some sort of social experiment. The key test is to examine the practical educational implications, and to try to implement a system that protects the best in Northern Ireland's

education and improves conditions for those at the bottom end. I urge Members to support the report.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to make a winding-up speech. I am pleased at the level and quality of this important and useful debate. I am sorry that the Minister was not present and that Members did not attend in large numbers. I am grateful to the Members who did participate and who made extremely valuable contributions to the debate. I place on record my thanks to my colleagues on the Education Committee, the Clerk and other officials involved.

Several themes recurred in the debate. There was widespread agreement that the highest level of academic standards must be maintained in any change to the system. We must at least acknowledge the concerns about the current system and the need for change, and yet be cautious with that change. Any changes will need to result in a flexible system, with opportunities for all.

4.15 pm

Members also emphasised that collaborative arrangements will be crucial, particularly in higher and further education, and in links with industry and business organisations. There is also a clear requirement that we create a more equitable system. Underscoring that is the need for adequate resources to fund those changes and the need to consider the requirements of continuous training for the teachers involved. We should bear that important point in mind.

I will respond to points made by Members. Patricia Lewsley said that education is the cornerstone of any society, and I strongly agree with that. That point highlights the importance of the issues that we are now considering. However, for the large part, Ms Lewsley concentrated on informing the House of SDLP party policy in respect of the 11-plus, rather than outlining in detail her view on the report. However, I record my gratitude for her contribution in the Education Committee, and her abiding commitment to education. Likewise, Eileen Bell made a real contribution to the Education Committee.

Mr Billy Hutchinson raised the issue of early years learning. The Education Committee appreciates the importance of that matter, and that is why we have already launched an inquiry into it. We are at the early stages, but we have already received written submissions from a wide range of interested organisations and individuals. We also took evidence from the Youth Service on its views on post-primary education.

Prof McWilliams expressed concerns about the Education Committee's proposals on the new school curriculum. I assure her — unfortunately, she is not here at present — that we are not attempting to be restrictive. Our recommendations are not exhaustive, and drama could, I suppose, be included. I welcome

her assertion that it would be unwise for Northern Ireland to entertain an independent sector. However, that argument is at odds with the evidence relating to the Scottish comprehensive system, which is strongly advocated by Prof McWilliams. A substantial independent sector has been created by that comprehensive system. Prof McWilliams is rather at odds with herself on that issue.

Mr McHugh expressed concern about the possible timescale for the implementation, and I remind him that it was Mr Gerry Burns who mentioned the period of 10 years in an interview in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. The Education Committee has recommended that the current 11-plus tests should cease as soon as possible. Mr McHugh reconfirmed all his views and prejudices about the current system.

I welcome my Colleague Mr Robinson's comments on the curriculum framework. He said that it should stretch and challenge all pupils so that they have the opportunity to maximise their own potential. That is crucial.

I agree that there should be no social engineering and that the report requires further consideration, as will the Burns review when it is published. Mr Ken Robinson's comments on natural integration are worth bearing in mind. Mr Gallagher reminded us of the importance of preparing young people for the world of work and of providing them with the necessary skills for a modern economy. We should adapt the present system rather than abolish it.

Mr Hamilton outlined the key principles underlining the Committee's report when he used the words "excellence", "diversity" and "choice"; coincidentally, these form the title of the UUP's submission to the Burns review. I agree with him that standardised testing is important so that all children and all schools can be treated fairly in future.

Mr Fee spoke of the emotionally charged atmosphere in which the topic was raised, and the fact that the Education Committee had approached these matters carefully. Mr Fee played a major part in the Committee, and he strongly advocated abolishing the 11-plus. I say "Amen" to that, but I add "in its current form". That may be the significant difference between us.

Mr Neeson welcomed the Education Committee's focus on principles rather than on structures. "Those are our principles, and if you do not like them, we have some more". That was a humorous digression. Those are our principles and we hope to measure them sufficiently against the Burns review. Mr Neeson, rather predictably, used the opportunity to discuss the matter of raising taxes on the people of Northern Ireland. I do not agree with him that parental choice is not important — it is increasingly important.

Mr O'Neill spoke of the need to tackle underachievement and to improve low numeracy and literacy skills; this is a need of which the Education Committee is acutely conscious. He also referred to what might be called inducements to teachers with regard to pupil profiles. I assure him that such a profile would start with the pupil in early years and would continue throughout and that it would be subject to contributions from all the pupil's teachers and would not be open to abuse.

Jane Morrice's contribution reminded me of one of those dreadful, mostly American, daytime quiz programmes, although we have our own version in Anne Robinson. Ms Morrice strongly supported the integrated education sector, and although I am happy to acknowledge the contribution that it makes I am concerned that there is criticism implicit in her remarks for those who teach in the controlled and maintained systems.

Dr Birnie welcomed the recommendations and was pleased that they agreed with his Committee's report on education and training for industry. I strongly agree with Dr Birnie that we must avoid introducing "bog-standard comprehensive schools" into Northern Ireland.

Mrs Joan Carson, my party Colleague, expressed concern that the local demands on schoolteachers were not being given priority. I assure the Member that the Education Committee was most concerned with the crucial role played by teachers, the contribution that they make and the need for their concerns to be taken into account; hence the inclusion of the relevant recommendation.

I agree with Mr Beggs, who highlighted the core problem of underachievement. He is wise to say that we ought to be cautious in our approach. Dr Adamson spotted what I hope is the only typing error. He had to go to the last section of the report to find it, but at least that proves that he read it. I agree with him about the importance of historical and cultural education in the future. I thank Mr Peter Weir for his endorsement of the report and the place that it will have in the debate that starts today and continues with the introduction of the Burns review. He was right to pay tribute to the current system. It has served us well, and we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.

In considering these issues, we are dealing with the future of all young people in Northern Ireland. The Education Committee is particularly conscious that the worst legacy would be to reduce in any way the high standards achieved by our education system. However, we have an opportunity to improve the system and to enable every individual to achieve their full potential. We must get it right. I thank all those who contributed to the debate, and I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the report prepared by the Committee for Education on the 'Review of Post-Primary Education in Northern Ireland'.

Adjourned at 4.25 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 2 November 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Why is there a table in the Chamber? I always thought that in a voting Chamber such as this, no one was allowed to say how a matter would be settled. I understand that the table is there because Members think that they are going to be able to change their position. The table could have been brought in later, if that was the decision of the House, rather than jumping to the conclusion that this was a rubber-stamp Assembly that would do what the powers that be want it to do.

Mr Speaker: The Member is wrong. The table is there so that if a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister are elected —

Mr P Robinson: That is an assumption as well.

Mr Speaker: It might be so, but that is another matter.

If a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister are elected, they will be able to come forward, one to each side of the table, to take the Pledge of Office. The Member was erroneous in thinking that it was related to re-designation.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: You must be bitten by the same flea —

Mr Speaker: Order.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I must advise the House that owing to a personal and family engagement, I will not be able to be in the House on Monday 5 November.

ASSEMBLY STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: If the motion is moved, the debate will last for no more than one hour. The proposers of the motion and the single amendment on the Marshalled List will each be given no more than seven minutes. All other speeches, including the winding-up speeches, will be limited to five minutes. The vote on the substantive motion will be on a cross-community basis, but the vote on the amendment will be on a simple majority basis.

Ms Morrice: I beg to move

That the following amendment to Standing Orders be made: In Standing Order 3(8), line 2, delete all after “during” and insert

“an Assembly session. Any such change takes effect immediately after notification in writing is submitted to the Speaker.”

There is confusion about the motion, the motives of the Women's Coalition, and the legitimacy of what we hope will be the end result. I want to clarify our proposal and our reason for making it.

The motion is not about the principle of re-designation. Any Member of the Assembly has the right to change his or her designation. The rules of the House rightly make provision for that. A Member's ability to change designation allows for the art of political persuasion. That is what politics is about. If a Unionist, a Nationalist or “Other” is persuaded by the political position of his or her opposite number, that Member can change designation. That is a logical argument. That is normal politics.

Our reason for tabling the motion is not that we have been persuaded to change our identity. The cross-community nature of our electorate enables us to do that. Some DUP Members have described that as “political cross-dressing”. The accurate description is “cross-community”. It is unfortunate that people cannot recognise that.

We are a coalition of Unionists, Nationalists and “Others”. We draw our membership and our votes from all three designations. We have never claimed to be a party of the centre. We do not attempt to persuade one another of the merits of our different cultural, political, religious and constitutional beliefs. We attempt to understand and respect one another's differences, listen to one another, and learn from one another. We first signed the Roll in the Chamber as Unionist/Nationalist/Other. When that designation was not accepted we agreed to designate as “Inclusive Other”. We want to change that designation in order to be consistent with the diversity of our coalition. If the motion is passed, my Colleague Monica McWilliams will re-designate as Nationalist, and I will re-designate as Unionist.

That does not mean that we are joining new political parties. We remain the Women's Coalition. It is a means of expressing the diverse, cross-community identity of our party. I have explained that the issue of re-designation itself is not up for debate this morning. The motion concerns the timing of such a move, and it is not only about its immediate effect but the amount of time that we recommend should elapse before any other change would be considered.

The choice to change designation can often depend on a change in the political context. The speed of that change, as we all know very well, is totally unpredictable. The timing of this change is crucial, not only because of the looming end of the six-week deadline for the Assembly but as a response to the highly significant events of the last 10 days. I refer specifically to the move by the IRA to decommission its weapons. We could not have predicted 30 days ago that the IRA would make such a momentous move and that David Trimble would put his Ministers back into Government. — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am finding it difficult to hear the Member.

Ms Morrice: Thirty days ago we could not have predicted that we would be facing one of the most crucial votes in the Assembly. If we had known that the IRA was about to do what we had been asking of it for years, we might have expected very little opposition. Perhaps we should have known better.

If, as a result of today's vote, we do not respond positively to these events and do not get ourselves out of this political limbo and restore stable power-sharing government to Northern Ireland, we will give the opponents of decommissioning the opportunity to say "I told you so". This amendment to Standing Orders may appear to be procedural, but it is much more than that. It is about making our votes count. It is ironic to think that our votes will not count if the motion does not pass. Our votes have no value otherwise. The motion provides an opportunity for us all to change designation. I urge others to take that opportunity.

The Women's Coalition got into politics to make a difference. Our voters will not allow us to sit on our hands and allow the Assembly to fall apart, and neither will the people who supported the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must ask the Member to bring her remarks to a close.

Ms Morrice: If this vote can make a difference, we are prepared to take that risk.

Mr Speaker: Order.

I have received one amendment to the motion, which has been accepted and is published on the Marshalled List in the name of Mr Peter Robinson.

Mr P Robinson: I beg to move the following amendment to the motion: In line 2, delete "an Assembly session" and insert

"the life of an Assembly"

and in line 2 delete "immediately" and insert

"45 calendar days".

About four or five years ago several politicians from Northern Ireland went to South Africa, among them the leader-in-waiting of the SDLP and myself. During that trip many of us found that one of the valuable mechanisms employed in the process in South Africa was the concept of sufficient consensus. We came back during the early part of the "talks about talks", which later became the talks themselves, and expounded on the virtue of ensuring that in a divided society a mechanism was in place to secure support from both sections of the community for whatever major decisions were to be taken.

That was enshrined in the rules through a fairly elaborate formula in the talks process. Since then it has found its way into our Standing Orders in a formula that is still elaborate, though less so. It is now known as "designation". The principle behind it is that in a divided society, whether we like it or not, it is not sufficient to carry the support of only one section of the community. We Unionists found that out to our cost during the period of the old Stormont Parliament. Unionists were happy with the institutions and would have been happy for them to go on. Nationalists, however, were not happy, and the institutions fell. Nationalists would have been content for the power-sharing Executive to continue. Unionists were not content, and they brought it down. It was recognised that there needed to be widespread support. That was the virtue that was enshrined in the Belfast Agreement, the Northern Ireland Act 1998, and Standing Orders.

10.45 am

The reality for society in Northern Ireland, whether or not people voted for the Belfast Agreement, was that a safeguard was placed in that agreement. It appears in strand one and 2, under the heading "Safeguards". That is where the issue of designation appears. It is a safeguard for both communities. No key decision can be made unless there is the support of both sections of the community.

Therefore it seems strange that some Members who say that they are here to save the Belfast Agreement want to break it. The only permissible and valid reason for re-designation would be if someone genuinely wished to become either a Unionist or a Nationalist.

Neither the Belfast Agreement or the Northern Ireland Act 1998 make any reference to re-designation. However, the Assembly — and the Committee set up by the Assembly — recognised that such a situation might

arise. Therefore the Assembly provided for a change of designation. When that decision was taken, it must have been known that some unprincipled Members might attempt to use this mechanism to achieve a result different from that intended by the legislation. The Assembly must have known that Members might attempt, for convenience, or for some spurious reason, to change their designation to affect an outcome.

For that reason two qualifications were set down in Standing Orders. One was that 30 days had to pass. This meant that a Member could not decide one day to change designation and impact on the outcome of a vote; a period had to elapse. That was the safeguard against such abuse. The second qualification was that the re-designation had to remain in place for the life of the Assembly. This meant that if re-designation were not being sought for a genuine reason, a Member would have to think twice about it.

The purpose of the motion is to set aside those safeguards. The Women's Coalition wants to set them aside because the proposed re-designation of its two Members is not based on a genuine reason. Re-designation is not being sought because Monica McWilliams wants to be a Nationalist and Jane Morrice wants to be a Unionist. I can say that with certainty because they said so publicly. This week, they said that their re-designation would be for the "sole aim" — no other alternatives — of saving the agreement. It was not being sought because they had genuinely changed their designation; it was being sought for the "sole" political purpose of saving the agreement. It is abundantly clear that the Women's Coalition's reason for re-designation is not valid according to Standing Orders, the Northern Ireland Act 1998, or the Belfast Agreement.

Some Members might say that this suits them, although it is not in line with what was intended. However, think of the mischief that could be caused if this re-designation is permitted to take place. That is why I tabled my amendment. It further removes the temptation for Members to use re-designation for a spurious and false purpose. My amendment extends to beyond six weeks the time frame in which to give notice, a period that might, in some people's minds, be a useful interval for re-designation.

The bottom line for the Assembly is that if this re-designation is permitted, what is there to stop a bunch of Unionists from either party, after an election perhaps, from re-designating themselves for a moment as Nationalists? What if Sinn Féin got its nose in front of the SDLP and thought that one of its members was going to become Deputy First Minister? What would happen — a re-designation, some sidestepping, some sleight of hand?

Mr Speaker: Order, the Member's time is up.

Mr A Maginness: The SDLP will support the motion to amend Standing Orders. I listened with interest to Peter Robinson. It is important to emphasise that he supported the concept of re-designation from the outset, as indeed did the DUP. Mr Robinson referred to his visit to South Africa, from where the concept emerged. There is, therefore, no principled opposition to the motion by the DUP. It is opposing the motion for party political reasons. Standing Orders clearly permit this procedure, and if the motion is carried, the Women's Coalition will be exercising a right enshrined in them.

Mr Robinson said that there are safeguards in the procedure for re-designation. A fundamental safeguard is that Standing Orders can only be changed with cross-community support. Cross-community support is the real safeguard. If the Assembly decides, on the basis of cross-community support, that re-designation is a proper course of action, the change will be made. The proposition by the Women's Coalition is not an unprincipled one. It is being made for a good purpose, for a valid reason, as explained by the representative of the Women's Coalition, a party which is making an important and constructive contribution to the Assembly and to sustaining the agreement.

We all know the circumstances that gave rise to the motion. We are in a grave situation which calls for supportive action. The fate of the Assembly and the agreement should not be permitted to be in the hands of those least committed to the agreement. People should not be held to ransom by two quixotic Members. Is it not more credible that the Women's Coalition should use its position to bolster the Assembly, which has done much constructive work for the community, and the agreement, which 71% of the people of Northern Ireland support? The DUP owes its places in the Assembly to that agreement, and some members of the DUP are secretly wishing that the situation would pass by and they could retain their positions here.

Should the future of the agreement and the Assembly be in the hands of maverick Members? The motion — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is becoming increasingly difficult for me to hear the Member and therefore to maintain any semblance of order.

Mr A Maginness: The motion sensibly changes something that is quite arbitrary — the time period.

That is the essence of the motion. If Members wish to re-designate, they should not be held back by the artificial constrictions of an arbitrary time period. That is precisely what the proposed amendment to Standing Orders does. It does not change the nature of re-designation.

The SDLP supports the motion. It is in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland who voted for the agreement. I invite Members to support it.

Mr Weir: I find myself in an unusual position in this debate, for two reasons. First, ironically, it would appear that I am the first and, possibly, the only Ulster Unionist Party member to speak in this debate. Secondly, and more importantly, I find myself defending the Belfast Agreement on this issue, possibly for the first and only time.

My position on the agreement has always been clear. Whether designation in the House was on the basis of Unionist, Nationalist or "Other", or on the basis of yes, no or John Taylor, I made it clear from day one that I did not regard the agreement as the best way forward. However, I am the only opponent of the agreement in the Chamber who was present on the first and last days of the talks, and I was a member of the Standing Orders Committee — which I freely admit as crimes to be taken into consideration.

We must examine the purpose of the clause in the agreement that relates to the designation of Unionists and Nationalists. It is no secret that, during the talks, Unionists took the view that they did not want people to be pigeonholed as Unionist, Nationalist or "Other". We felt that there was a danger that it would institutionalise sectarianism, and that it would lead to problems such as those experienced in Cyprus — which have been highlighted by Prof Anthony Alcock — where the designation of people in groups led to a double-veto situation.

However, as a result of strong pressure in the talks, the clause was agreed with the aim of creating a situation in which the interests of Unionists and Nationalists — not only in the Executive but on the Floor of the House — were protected by rights. The aim was that, if there were a vote, Unionists and Nationalists would genuinely have to support any measure of a cross-community nature. If that is the case — and it has been enshrined in the rules of the Assembly, it has worked to the detriment of Unionists at times and it has been there since day one — we tamper with it at our peril.

For example, if we allow instant re-designation, we could find ourselves in the situation where 28 Unionists re-designate themselves as Nationalists for a particular vote. That would constitute the necessary 40% of Nationalist support for any motion. However, that would clearly be a farce. It would drive a coach and horses through the rules and the intentions of the Assembly.

We are gathered here today for the serious purpose of electing a First Minister. I agree with remarks by David Trimble and others that the vote for First Minister should be based on the genuine wishes of the Unionist and Nationalist Members. There must be no sleight of hand. The key test is whether we will authorise sleight

of hand. No matter how much the Women's Coalition portrays itself as a coalition of Unionists, Nationalists and "Others", it is not —

Ms Morrice: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Time is short, and Ms Morrice has already had her chance. The Women's Coalition is designated as "Other". Its Members have not had a genuine conversion to Unionism. As Mr Kennedy said yesterday, one cannot become a Unionist overnight.

For the sake of argument, I might, in a vain attempt to boost my sex appeal, call myself Tom Cruise or Brad Pitt. I might even delude myself that I look like Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise. However, I am sure that I need not tell anyone in the House — *[Interruption]*.

11.00 am

Mr Speaker: Order. While I understand the response of the House, we should nevertheless hear what the Member has to say.

Mr Weir: I may succeed in deluding myself that I am Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise but, as I am sure Members from across the House will agree, no one else will be convinced.

There must be some integrity in the proceedings. If the Members from the Women's Coalition are allowed to call themselves Unionist or Nationalist simply to get a particular vote through, not only will the terms of the agreement be abrogated but, more importantly, the Assembly will be turned into a farce and a circus. I urge Members to have the integrity to stand by their designations and ensure that Standing Orders remain as they are.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to make a couple of brief points — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear what the Member is saying. Please continue, Mr Maskey.

Mr Maskey: On behalf of my party, I support the motion.

There are a number of safeguards in Standing Orders which have been approved by all parties and Members. Standing Orders have also been changed on a number of occasions. The principle of re-designation is not in question — the purpose of the motion is to enable re-designation to come into effect immediately. Some Members have suggested that this would mean that Members could re-designate after every meeting, every vote or every week. That is not the case. The change is designed to amend the Standing Order for an entire session, which I believe is a calendar year. The amendment to Standing Orders is not designed to enable any Member to re-designate willy-nilly. That is not the case at all.

Some Members, Peter Robinson included, mentioned various technicalities. It is fair to do that because Standing Orders are designed to ensure that business is run properly. Members are at liberty to change Standing Orders if they wish. Cross-community support is needed to secure any such changes, that is one of the safeguards.

Peter Robinson talked about South Africa and the need for sufficient consensus. However, South African logic resolved conflict through inclusion — not exclusion, which is what the DUP has been solely and exclusively about all of its political life. I do not see that party changing, no matter how its Members designate. It is important that Members such as Peter Robinson and the public who must listen to him realise that his amendment is about the politics of exclusion, not the politics of inclusion. Inclusion was at the core of conflict resolution in South Africa, and the principle of inclusion was recognised by over 70% of people across this island in the referenda that followed the Good Friday Agreement.

After this vote, it will be seen that almost 80 Members will have voted to make the necessary change to save the agreement. That is what the motion is designed to do. That shows that there are a number of parties, participants and elements in society who support a peace process and the agreement and who are prepared to make giant strides to save them. There are others, some of whom are in the Chamber today, who are bent on ensuring that the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process go down. Those people will be able to wallow in their anti-agreement, exclusive politics of the past. Whether or not an election is forced is not a matter for this debate. If there is an election, then so be it. The electorate will decide that the negative Members in the Chamber who base their lives on exclusion are from the DUP with, perhaps, Rag, Tag and Bobtail alongside them.

Mr Ford: It is well established that the concept of designation has caused great problems for my Colleagues and me ever since it was introduced in the discussions that led to the agreement.

We made some of those concerns known when Standing Orders were discussed in autumn 1998. We did not accept an easy change of designation. Designations do not solve the problems of our divided society. The concept of designations as it exists must be removed, and tinkering with 30 days or 45 days or one minute does nothing to address the problem. We should examine why designations are problematic. We should ask those people who devised the system whether it is what is needed. We should ask those who supported the minute whether they are proud that what they agreed in March 1998 was incorporated into the Belfast Agreement on 10 April.

The motion — however well intentioned — does not address the fundamental issue. Peter Robinson referred

to the South African experience and the need for sufficient consent. Clearly that is important. However, we must ask whether tinkering with Standing Orders addresses appropriately the problem of sufficient consent and whether having a very narrow majority in Unionism or Nationalism is an appropriate way to stop proceedings that are supported elsewhere in the House.

If Peter Weir were to go on record as supporting the agreement, I would be prepared to go on record as supporting him — at least in a sentence or two. He made an interesting point when he referred to the Unionist concern that designations entrench sectarianism and divisions. My party will not support designations and it will seek a more fundamental review. According to the current rules, there must be a majority of Unionists and of Nationalists to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. The candidate for First Minister wishes that to be a majority of “genuine” Unionists, and he can rest assured that we will not disrupt his concerns in that regard. We will not “dress up for Hallowe’en” as one Member described it. We will allow him to seek his majority among genuine Unionists, because the rule stating that our votes count for considerably less than those of others is fundamentally sick and wrong. Not only is that an insult to the five Alliance Members, it is also an insult to the many thousands who voted in May 1998 for non-sectarian politics. On their behalf, we will take no part in this charade of tinkering with Standing Orders. We will continue to work for proper change, to lobby Government and to make it clear that we do not accept that our society is divided into two tribes and that there is no coming and going between them. We do not accept that those who wish to stand outside the “two tribes” mentality do not have rights. Those who support us have exactly the same right as everyone else to have their voice heard in the Chamber.

Mr C Wilson: The attempt by the Women’s Coalition to change Standing Orders to permit instant re-designation by any Member is no more than a cynical exploitation and abuse of the procedures of the House. It is an attempt to subvert and thwart the will of the majority of the Unionist community as represented by this side of the House.

The Women’s Coalition has revealed that the true purpose of the motion is to secure the reappointment of Mr David Trimble as First Minister.

It is worth reiterating several points on which the opposition of the wider Unionist community is based. If the Assembly falls today, Mr Martin McGuinness would like it portrayed internationally that the message from Unionists and from those he calls “rejectionist” is that they do not want a Roman Catholic about the place. That is not the case.

There is opposition in the community to Mr Trimble's reappointment and the consequent establishment of an Executive. He and his Colleagues are well aware of that opposition. Mr Trimble knows that he does not have a broad base of support within his own party. He knows that the Unionist community has the mandate to state clearly what it rejects and opposes in today's motion and Mr Trimble's reappointment. The majority of Unionists in Northern Ireland say that they are opposed to the release of unrepentant terrorists; they are opposed to gunmen who front parties that are inextricably linked to terrorist organisations being placed in Government; and they are opposed to the destruction of the RUC.

Mr Speaker: Order. We must have silence. I am having difficulty hearing the Member speak.

Mr C Wilson: It is well known that the Unionist community is unhappy with the prospect of Mr Trimble resuming his post of First Minister, thus parachuting back into position those who continue to front terrorism in Northern Ireland. Members such as Mr McGuinness wish to portray themselves as representatives of the Catholic community. Many Roman Catholics and Nationalists have as much difficulty as I do with Sinn Féin representatives masquerading as democrats who are supposed to subscribe completely to the democratic process. Thinking of people such as Patsy Gillespie, Mrs Jean McConville, and the other missing victims, I throw back in the Sinn Féin/IRA representatives' faces their assumptions that they represent the decent Catholic community, or the law-abiding members of the Nationalist community.

When Unionists, I hope, reject the Women's Coalition's motion and, therefore, deprive Mr Trimble of his reappointment, let us be clear that it is not petty, vindictive score-settling against Mr Trimble; it is not an attempt to prevent people who genuinely want to re-designate from doing so. I make no apology for the message that my party will send out in opposing the Women's Coalition's motion and Mr Trimble's reappointment — we remain adamantly and vehemently opposed to those who front terrorist organisations being in Government.

I remind Mr Trimble, as I told him that I would, that, in the Chamber three weeks ago, he said that even if the IRA were to hand in a small quantity of weapons for decommissioning, that would neither be a demonstration nor a guarantee that Sinn Féin was totally committed to the democratic process. That is absolutely correct; on behalf of my party, I would take the same position if the actions proposed by the Women's Coalition were to put Mr Ervine, and those who front the Protestant terrorist organisations, into power. The House should send out a clear message today that it will not have people in Government who are linked to terrorists.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B Hutchinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has Cedric Wilson mentioned the motion? I have heard him talk only about terrorism. You should rule that he should stick to the motion under consideration.

Mr Speaker: Given that there is not too much time left, I ask Mr Wilson to continue.

Mr C Wilson: It is clear that I hit the target when I mentioned Mr Ervine and his party's association and affiliation with the Loyalist paramilitary groups that still terrorise innocent, decent members of both sides of the community.

Mr B Hutchinson: You'll never find me hiding behind anyone, you eejit, shut up.

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear comments that I wish to hear, and I can hear comments that I do not wish to hear.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you to look at the Hansard record of the debate and take some action based on remarks that you may not have heard from the Chair, but that are clearly audible to all in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I shall certainly read Hansard.

Mr Ervine: Members who speak should always remember that someone else will follow them. There has been a lot of fun and laughter at every political crisis in the Chamber. There is entertainment and delight for those who celebrate crisis. I do not know how the rest of the Members feel, and I am not sure what is going on in people's living rooms in this society, but I bet that people are terribly dismayed. People who have buried loved ones will wonder whether the end to instability will ever come. Instability and political violence are connected.

11.15 am

There is a clash between superiority and inferiority in the House. There are those who are superior and those who are inferior and, before we let people pick on the poor terrorists again, I am just talking about Unionism. There are those who take superior and laudable attitudes that are founded in morality. However, there are people who take a legalistic attitude, who say that they need absolute proof and that they must be absolutely certain. Such people say that certain other people could not be honest or reasonable because in 1902 those people were bad people or their granddads were bad people.

Mr McCartney: It was 1984.

Mr Ervine: It was 1974, "Lord Barrister".

We talk about, or say "Hear, hear" to sufficiency of consensus, and Mr Peter Robinson is correct that there

was sufficiency of consensus in South Africa. However, I bet that he could not define it because the South Africans themselves could not define it. It was a process of negotiation and debate, and only when people felt they could move forward did they move forward. There was no defined mathematical formula for sufficiency of consensus.

Mr P Robinson: There was — the African National Congress.

Mr Ervine: There was not.

Mr P Robinson: There was. Go and ask — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Ervine: We hear of the nonsense that the Women's Coalition is trying to save the agreement — perhaps it is just trying to save lives.

Mr P Robinson: That is sick.

Mr Ervine: It seems sick to me that the rotating Ministers are making a fool of the Executive. One Member has been in three different parties since he entered the Chamber, and we talk about commitment and determination and belief. The choice is very simple — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ervine: The choice is very simple: we either make politics work and offer a model for dialogue and ways to resolve our difficulties, or we do not. I suppose some will be happy playing 'Jingle Bells' as they go up the garden path, rapping on doors and asking people to vote for them. However, I see the debilitating circumstances in the streets and the dangers and difficulties that people face. I wonder — *[Interruption]*. This is not a threat, or a suggestion that tries to play a violin to make everyone sad. It is a stark fact that the stinking evil of sectarianism and the brutality of violence are directly connected to the pathetic state of our politics. Some have guffawed and enjoyed this. Hansard and videotapes show that there are those who take delight in every crisis. I hope that none of my constituents suffer because of such people's delight.

Mr McCartney: Any institution that wishes to do something for posterity must be based on integrity and reason. Any institution that turns itself into an object of ridicule and contempt is almost bound to fail. There is no doubt that the motion tabled by the Women's Coalition is a way of destroying the Assembly, and that it will make the Assembly an object of ridicule and contempt. Will people be Unionists or Nationalists for a day? Ah behold, the unfaithful stewards fleeth — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: There is no doubt that there have been considerable questions about the political orientation

of the Women's Coalition for a long time. Some people might describe them as political hermaphrodites, while others might describe them as chameleons because they change colour in accordance with the issue under debate at any given time.

I wonder if there is any democratic integrity left in the parties opposite. I am well aware that some whom I respect within the SDLP must have grave misgivings about Mr Alban Maginness pledging his party's support for this completely undemocratic motion. I have no doubt that those who have experience of Westminster and have some knowledge of the traditions of democratic procedure will be made unhappy by the suggestion that, by a simple vote, the orientation, description and designation of any Member can be changed to enable a certain vote and result to be obtained.

In the past, I have mentioned in the Assembly the example of the saint, Sir Thomas More. It was suggested to him that, because of the Act of Supremacy 1534 and the fact that Parliament was sovereign, he should give up what he believed and knew within himself to be true. In response to that proposition he said, "Tell me, Master Rich, can Parliament make of man a woman?" That was the essential issue — the thing was farcical because it flew in the face of reason. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: In a rather more humorous address, Mr Weir made it evident just how daft, ridiculous and contemptible the motion is. To suggest that Jane Morrice can be a Unionist or Monica McWilliams a Nationalist at the flick of a switch creates all sorts of difficulties and problems for the future.

Ms Morrice: We are a cross-community party.

Mr McCartney: You are a cross-dressing party. You do not know who you are — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: If the motion is successful, it will do more permanent damage to the Assembly institutions — for those who believe in them — than anything else. It will demonstrate beyond doubt the completely farcical nature of the provisions alleged to be democratic. It will store up infinite trouble for the future, and the Assembly will live to regret it. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Durkan can mutter from a sedentary position. Yes, it might even cost him his job in the Assembly, so I can understand why he is muttering. The truth is that his job, and the jobs of others, will be saved at the expense of democratic principle, respect and integrity.

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

Mr P Robinson: I have listened to what are intended to be the reasons for supporting the motion. They can all be summed up in one sentence: anything is permissible to save the agreement. That is their argument, and it is the only one that they have. It has nothing to do with the fact that this provision is intended to be a safeguard. They are happy to sweep it to the side when they choose.

In my earlier remarks, I tried to alert people to what they are walking into. The SDLP and Sinn Féin have said that they support this easy switch that has been proposed by the Women's Coalition. They support the idea that people can re-designate on a whim. To us it is an abuse of Standing Orders. However, they want it to be permissible for a Standing Order to allow Unionists or Nationalists to move from one side to the other in order to pass a provision through the Assembly.

The purpose of the safeguard was to ensure that Unionists and Nationalists would be content. When Members walk through the "Ayes" Lobby they will be sweeping away that safeguard. A lawyer has suggested the nonsense — and I can only guess as to whom his lecturer at law school might have been, but they are not in the Chamber to confirm it — that the safeguard lies in the requirement for cross-community support to change Standing Orders. The very thing they are undermining and tearing down is to be the safeguard that it will not happen. That seems to be a conundrum with no solution.

The second thing we are being told by the supporters of the motion is that there is no difference in outcome in allowing someone to change designation within 30 days or within a day. The clear message is that the Women's Coalition wants to do this for a particular purpose. The reason they advocate stopping the period from being the "life of the Assembly" is that they intend to switch back before an election. They want to be designated as "Other" rather than as "Unionist", or "Nationalist" when they face the electorate. That is the reality of the situation.

My amendment seeks to cement the original and proper intention of the Standing Order, which is to ensure that the threshold is raised. The amendment will make it less attractive to use the provision for corrupt purposes by people wanting to change designation — falsely claiming that they are Unionist or Nationalist — in order to affect the outcome of a vote. My amendment takes temptation out of their hands by raising the threshold.

The sad reality is that once again there is an attempt — this time for the prospective First Minister — to hang on to the apron strings of the Women's Coalition in order to get himself returned to office. What credibility can that have? It can have none. Mr Trimble says there can be none. On 'Inside Politics' last Saturday he said that re-designation by the Women's Coalition simply

would not be credible; nor would it be credible on the streets of Northern Ireland.

Effectively, the agreement is on a life support system, kept alive by dishonesty and sleight of hand. We have already seen some Unionists being prepared to abandon their manifesto commitments and go back on their commitments to the electorate in order to keep it going. During the past few years we have seen the Deputy First Minister resigning, with all the emoluments of office being swept away from him, and then suddenly heard that the resignation did not take place. This was all done to save the Belfast Agreement and keep it alive.

We have watched the Secretary of State trigger suspensions to restart the clock — again to keep the Belfast Agreement alive. Now we have deceitful re-designations when there is no change of heart on the part of those who wish to re-designate.

The truth, which is obvious to everyone who has not been hypnotised by this Provo-bolstering process, is that the agreement cannot exist without deceit, cheating, dishonesty and lies. It is a fraud, and is unacceptable in its existing form. That is why the electorate should have the opportunity to have its say and the opportunity to see it renegotiated.

Ms McWilliams: What we have heard from the parties supporting the motion and, interestingly, the party opposing the motion, is that they do not have a problem with the Standing Order allowing re-designation. Had we not proposed our motion, they would never have proposed their amendment. It is the time period they have a problem with, not the principle.

If it is the time period that they have a problem with, I have to remind Mr Morrow, the former Minister for Social Development, that he had a problem with the time period contained in a Standing Order. If he had not had such a problem, on 15 October he would not have asked the Assembly to suspend Standing Order 40(1) in respect of the Final Stage of the Social Security Fraud Bill.

Sometimes the DUP has a problem with timing, and at others it does not. *[Interruption]*.

11.30 am

Mr Speaker: Order. It is impossible to hear what the Member is saying, and therefore to be clear whether matters are happening in order. I ask all Members to restrain themselves during the speech, and I call Ms McWilliams to continue.

Ms McWilliams: On 15 October the DUP did not have a problem with the timing when we changed that Standing Order. We have amended Standing Orders 12, 31, 41, 59 and 40, which allows a Budget Bill to proceed under accelerated passage. That was a major amendment to a Standing Order. If there is a problem

with amending Standing Orders, let that be put to rest now. This is not a precedent.

Psychics try to read the minds of members of the Women's Coalition and the party's make-up, but we are Nationalists, Unionists and "Others", because of our party's membership and its title, and because we appeal to a cross-community electorate. That has been on record since the first Assembly sitting.

Let us remind ourselves of who changed the Standing Order — none other than Mr Weir, the same Mr Weir who supports parts of the agreement. He supported the part that allows amendments to be made, and he wanted to change from seven days to 30 days. He does not have a problem with re-designation; he simply had a problem with the 30 days and wanted to change it to seven days. Today he has a problem with changing it from seven days to "an Assembly session".

John F Kennedy said "Ich bin ein Berliner" when he visited Berlin. He was very confident about his identity, as all Americans seem to be, and he had no problem on that day, in that crisis, with standing alongside the Berliners. His statement meant "I am with you", and we are saying today "We are with you". We are with the majority of the Assembly. If today's vote were counted on a majority basis, it would go through, and the Assembly would have a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister in place by the end of the day.

Let me also remind Peter Robinson that I, too, visited South Africa while he was on his second visit there, along with Sinn Féin, before any ceasefire and before decommissioning. He was trying to understand the concept of sufficiency of consensus at a time when the DUP did not attend any meetings. The DUP changed the rules on that occasion, and he went on that visit.

We brought sufficiency of consensus to the Assembly, and the sufficiency of consensus referred to during the talks was different from that which exists in the Assembly today. From the talks came the triple-lock mechanism — majority of parties, cross-community consensus and majority of the entire number around the table. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Please continue.

Ms McWilliams: Thank you for calling order, Mr Speaker. The points have already been well made, and I have no intention of being politically offensive. Another party has that prerogative. I intend to make the points as they stand. We refer to politics as the art of the possible, and we have seen that to be the case with the rotation of the Ministers, as Mr Ervine has pointed out.

I must say that Mr Robinson's little lime green jacket last night, on loan from the Department of the Environment, was a very fetching little number. No

doubt it will have to go back to the Department of the Environment — or is it the Department for Regional Development?

We do not have a problem with our designation. It is integral to our party; it is legitimate; and it is legal.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Hanna, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr A Maginness, Mr Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Ms McWilliams, Mr Molloy, Ms Morrice, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 65; Noes 30.

AYES

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Hanna, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr A Maginness, Mr Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Unionist:

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Dr Birnie, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Ervine, Mr Foster, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr B Hutchinson, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr

McGimpsey, Mr Nesbitt, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Other:

Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

Total Votes	95	Total Ayes	65 (68.4%)
Nationalist Votes	37	Nationalist Ayes	37 (100.0%)
Unionist Votes	56	Unionist Ayes	26 (46.4%)

Main Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

In Standing Order 3(8), line 2, delete all after “during” and insert

“an Assembly session. Any such change takes effect immediately after notification in writing is submitted to the Speaker.”

12.00

RE-DESIGNATION LETTERS

Mr Speaker: I have received two letters to be opened immediately if the motion to amend Standing Orders is passed by cross-community consent. As instructed, I will open the letters. *[Interruption]*.

Order. I am not a Brad Pitt, nor is this any similar competition.

The first letter reads:

“Dear Speaker, I wish to change my designation in the Northern Ireland Assembly from the category ‘Other’ to ‘Unionist’. Jane Morrice”.

The second letter reads:

“Dear Speaker, I wish to change designation from ‘Other’ to ‘Nationalist’. Yours sincerely, Monica McWilliams”.

Under Standing Order 3(8), Members wishing to change their designation have to do so in writing, as is the case when choosing their designation in the first place. These two requests for change are in writing, and under the change in Standing Orders, they are operative immediately.

ELECTION OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr Speaker: Before we commence, I wish to explain how I propose to conduct proceedings. As Members will know, there is no procedure set down in Standing Orders, although a procedure was set down in the Initial Standing Orders. I discussed the matter through the usual channels, and it was agreed that we would follow that same procedure.

I will begin by asking for nominations. Members are reminded that under section 16(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, for a proposal to be valid, it must include nominations for both First Minister and Deputy First Minister. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded, as required by Standing Order 14. Each nominee will then be asked if he or she is prepared to accept the nomination. I will then proceed to seek further nominations. If further proposals are made, the process will be repeated until there are no further nominations. At that point the House may, if it chooses, debate the proposals. I propose to conduct one debate on any and all proposals that are made, and no Member will be permitted to speak more than once, as the Initial Standing Orders provide.

I shall then put the question that the first pair of nominees be the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of the Assembly. Under section 16(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the vote will require the support of a majority of the Members voting in the election, a majority of the designated Nationalists voting and a majority of the designated Unionists voting.

Should the proposal be carried, I will ask those Members chosen to be First Minister and Deputy First Minister to affirm to the Assembly the Pledge of Office. As mentioned earlier, the Pledge of Office will be placed on the Table, and I will ask those voted through to come forward. If the motion is carried and both Members affirm the Pledge of Office, I will deem the other proposals to have fallen, irrespective of whether they have been put to the Assembly for decision. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the question in relation to the next pair of nominees and so on as necessary until all nominations are exhausted.

The following times for the debate will apply. The debate will last no longer than one hour. Each proposer and seconder will be permitted to speak for up to seven minutes and other Members will have a maximum of five minutes.

Do we have any proposals?

Sir Reg Empey: I propose that the Rt Hon David Trimble, MP, MLA be First Minister and that Mr Mark Durkan, MLA be Deputy First Minister of the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder?

Mr Mallon: I wish to second David Trimble for the post of First Minister and Mark Durkan for the post of Deputy First Minister.

Mr Speaker: Mr Trimble, do you accept the nomination for First Minister?

Mr Trimble: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Mr Durkan, do you accept the nomination for Deputy First Minister?

Mr Durkan: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

As there are no further proposals, the time for proposals has passed. Several Members have indicated that they wish to speak, and I remind them that they may speak only once in the debate.

Sir Reg Empey: Normally, we would have expected this debate to be of a more technical nature. However, the Assembly has become a crucible for the political frustrations of many Members, representing their communities' frustration at the inability to advance the process at the speed that we would have liked.

Since the beginning of the process, those of us on these Benches have sought the full implementation of all parts of the agreement. That was what we were promised after the agreement was made in 1998. The then Secretary of State, Marjorie Mowlam, indicated that all parts of the agreement should proceed in parallel. Hitherto, that has not been the case. However, as a result of activity on the part of the Republican movement last week, this is the first time since April 1998 that all parts of the agreement have been implemented. It is important to state clearly on the record that this is the first time that all aspects of the agreement have proceeded according to plan.

With the stability that we believe should be afforded to the Assembly and to the political process, we want to proceed towards the elections due in May 2003. In the next 18 months we want the opportunity to show that the Assembly can deliver for the people that it represents. We believe that stability can be spread out into the community, and we want it to be given the opportunity to flourish.

Instability damages Northern Ireland; it damages our economy. After the events in the United States in September, the economy of Northern Ireland needs the stability, direction and leadership that can be provided in the Chamber. I do not believe that our economy and businesses and the jobs of the people that we represent will be better served by a direct rule Minister — no matter how well intentioned that person might be. It requires local knowledge, local effort and attention, and, in the relatively short time that the Administration

has existed, we have proved that we are capable of delivering those things.

I return to the frustrations that are felt by some Members and by a large section of the Unionist community. Last week, we had good news from the de Chastelain commission. However, the contrast between the way in which that news was imparted and the way in which other parts of the arrangements that were entered into last week were revealed caused much anger.

For example, the de Chastelain commission, for reasons that I understand, decided — in the interests of securing the implementation of its mandate — that it was best to confirm that the process of decommissioning had commenced without giving the details that we all crave. That was its judgement. On the other hand, a film set was created in south Armagh. One almost expected Francis Ford Coppola or Steven Spielberg to appear behind the towers shouting "Action" when members of the press were flown into the area to witness the angle-grinding scene. The purpose of that exercise was to reinforce the confidence of a particular part of the community. However, the emphasis on that, against the relative obscurity of the decommissioning process, created a tension — *[Interruption]*.

A Member: Total obscurity.

Sir Reg Empey: It was not total. That tension caused frustrations. However, my party and I believe that decommissioning has commenced. That is to be welcomed. It is a breakthrough and something that many Members, not far from where I am standing, never believed would be possible. We want to proceed now and get it completed, and we also want to get other people to start doing what they should have done three and a half years ago.

We should not allow our scepticism to plunge our Province into another political crisis that will have a significant impact. I do not believe that events on the streets are totally unrelated to events in the Assembly. We are supposed to be setting an example. From time to time, that has clearly not been happening.

After three and a half years of very hard work, we have achieved the set objectives of devolution and the commencement of decommissioning. We must bear in mind what our fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom will think if, after reaching those objectives, we suddenly decide to plunge ourselves into a crisis. It does not profit any Unionist to make Northern Ireland appear ungovernable — that only benefits Republicanism, and it has been clear for some time that Republicans have already anticipated that opportunity.

However frustrated one may be about the lack of progress hitherto or the fact that the process is not as open as one would like it to be, that is not sufficient justification for creating a crisis and plunging us into a

further period of uncertainty and instability. It is my contention that this motion should be allowed to proceed. The election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister would provide stability and be the centre of our Administration. It would give the Assembly the opportunity to fulfil its mandate. We will then all answer to the people for the work that we have done. At this stage — at the very point where we are making a breakthrough — it would be very foolhardy to shy away from that. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Mallon: It is my very real pleasure to second the nomination of David Trimble as First Minister and Mark Durkan as Deputy First Minister. They each have personal strengths that will serve them well in the joint office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I particularly welcome the fact that David Trimble is seeking re-election to the post of First Minister at a time when all the institutions provided for in the agreement can work to their full potential. I thank him for his courtesy and diligence during the time we worked together. He has not had an easy time politically. I wish him well, both as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party and as First Minister.

I have known Mark Durkan for a number of years — I will not specify how many. He has gained respect from all parts of the Chamber as Minister of Finance and Personnel. The Assembly can have every confidence in his ability, his personal integrity and his capacity to perform with distinction as Deputy First Minister. In many ways, he is the standard-bearer for a new younger generation in the Assembly and the community.

There is an old saying that two into one do not go, but, as ever, there are exceptions. Those elected to serve as First Minister and Deputy First Minister occupy a joint office. They rely on each other to make progress. They work together or not at all. It is a challenge that must be met if the vision of the Good Friday Agreement is to be fulfilled. I have every confidence that David Trimble and Mark Durkan will be able to fulfil that vision.

12.15 pm

I thank Reg Empey, with whom I have worked periodically in certain roles. He is a fine young man. He will soon have served his time and — depending on the outcome today — there may be another period of apprenticeship. I thank Reg again for his courtesy and for the way in which we were able to work together.

Recent weeks have seen welcome progress in the putting of arms beyond use and towards further demilitarisation. I particularly welcome the recent report of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning which represented the removal of a major

obstacle to the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Combined with the progress made across all elements of the agreement, that gives rise to the hope, belief and conviction that the better future offered by the agreement will be realised. I have no doubt that the vast majority of people want the new dispensation to work, and it will work whether the next step is taken today or in the future. Society wants to move forward on the basis of partnership, equality and mutual respect. The agreement provides the means to achieve a peaceful society which offers a future for all. As President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, said:

“It must be a peace without victory. Only a peace between equals can last, a peace the very principle of which is equality and a common participation in a common benefit.”

Those words are as relevant today as they were when they were first spoken, and their relevance will grow as this process progresses. However, to grasp that opportunity we need stable and fully operational political institutions. Those institutions need strong, inclusive leadership, but they also need a respect for politics and an end to the game-playing, the foolishness and the ego-tripping. They need an end to the sham approach of taking part, with all its advantages, while at the same time publicly undermining the institutions. That is not leadership.

In many ways, leadership is a dull thing. It is about having the integrity to move on a position based on respect for the political process and for all of those in it. It is my belief that David Trimble and Mark Durkan — different people in many ways — are the right people jointly to lead the institutions and the people of the North of Ireland towards that new peace and stability. I beg to second.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I want to read a statement:

“Democracy dictates that before we will sit in an Executive with Sinn Féin we require a declaration that the ‘war’ is over, the standing down of ‘active service units’, the handing over of the remains of the ‘disappeared’, full co-operation with the Decommissioning Commission, an end to targeting and punishment beatings and actual disarmament itself.”

All that has not happened, and those are the words of Mr Trimble, spoken on 26 May 1998. Sir Reg Empey, who proposed him, said on 30 August 1998 that

“an IRA arms handover would not be enough to give Sinn Féin seats on the Executive. If punishment beatings are continuing, if training, targeting, if units are still active on the ground, then the purposes of decommissioning would purely be fraudulent.”

We are asked to believe the spin doctors and the rigged polls in the ‘Belfast Telegraph’, and to bow to past pressures and not open our eyes. The people — both Protestant and Roman Catholic — have opened their eyes. They have been told to look at what the Official Unionist Party has brought to them. Mr Trimble boasts of what he has brought to us. What has he brought? He has brought IRA/Sinn Féin to the heart

of Government. Today, we heard that the leader of IRA/Sinn Féin is raising money for firemen and their families in America. What about the firemen and families that it murdered, blew up and shot? What hypocrisy.

The deputy leader of that party said that, if someone came to him and said that he or she had information that would lead to people being prosecuted for the Omagh tragedy, he would not tell that person to go to the police. In America, the leader of IRA/Sinn Féin said that the IRA has a different morality to that of the people who blew up the towers.

The people of Northern Ireland are not fools; they will not be fooled any longer. We must remember, "you cannot fool all of the people all of the time". Sooner or later, the matter must come to the country. We were told that cross-border bodies that are not answerable to the Assembly would not be formed — that has happened. We were told that terrorists who were put away by the process of the law could not be released, but killers and others have been. The Prime Minister wrote graffiti on the walls and tried to deceive the people of this country. The RUC has been destroyed. Think about those people who, under the shadow of night, took the badge of the RUC from outside its headquarters before the specified time. What more is there to come?

We have seen the British Government spend thousands of pounds to fly in propagandists to take photographs of the dismantling of security towers. No photographs have been taken of the so-called act of decommissioning. Why not? Surely, if it is an honourable, ground-breaking move, IRA/Sinn Féin should be proud of it. They are not. An amnesty is now proposed for those on the run. Such proposals have nothing to do with the agreement; they are additions to it.

Changes to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 have been suggested. It was unfortunate that, when Mr Mallon spoke about them, he quoted Woodrow Wilson, who, after making that statement, was thrown out of office. That is some comfort for Mr Trimble today. Mr Mandelson told us that the Act would not be changed.

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

Mr M McGuinness: Dia daoibh go léir. I was pleased to hear Peter Robinson bring up the subject of the trip to South Africa that I went on several years ago. There was a technical debate on cross-community support and sufficient consensus. However, Peter Robinson conveniently ignored the fact that the South African peace process was successful because it was an inclusive process and because there were people of courage in South Africa who wanted to end the hatred and division of the past. We are on that journey. The Middle East is also on that journey. South Africa is ahead of us, and we are ahead of the Middle East. We intend to continue to move forward.

I am very pleased to give my vote and my party's vote to David Trimble and Mark Durkan as First Minister and Deputy First Minister. We owe a debt of gratitude to the former Deputy First Minister, Séamus Mallon. He was a highly esteemed and respected Deputy First Minister, who made a wonderful contribution to the peace process. We thank him very much for that.

For the past decade we have been on a journey which has presented genuine difficulties for all sides. However, the process is about building a new future for all of us and for our children. The process ensures that the past does not become the future. That presents a challenge for everyone — Republicans, Nationalists, Unionists and Loyalists. This is an inclusive process, and everyone shares responsibilities, decision-making and accountability. The politics of exclusion belong in the past. We can make this work by building and bedding down the institutions. We must fulfil the mandate given to us by our electorate — the overwhelming majority of the electorate. No one said that this would be easy.

Last week, the IRA, in a historic and groundbreaking move, liberated the peace process. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: The move was not made without causing great difficulties for Irish Republicans. Republicans will have great difficulty dealing with this, but political leaders have a collective responsibility to grasp the opportunity that we were given last week and use it to best effect for the collective good of society. These institutions are not the preserve of one party or, indeed, of all the parties. These are the people's institutions. We have a contract with the electorate to work for the people and deliver what all the people want. We have a mandate to resolve a long-standing conflict. We have accomplished much, and we have much more to accomplish. We have made progress despite the odds. The institutions are working; they are popular and successful. They also allow us to work collectively.

I am pleased that, although the process has been difficult from the beginning, we are seeing the pro-agreement parties come together. The Ulster Unionist Party, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Women's Coalition, the Alliance Party and the PUP are coming together. The people who are outnumbered are those who live in the past — the tiny number of Assembly Members who live in the past. No matter what happens today, we will continue to make progress. I was disappointed that Peter Weir and Pauline Armitage were not prepared to talk with me so that I could attempt to allay their fears. However, that is a matter for them. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: They can answer to history and our children. My last words will be a short verse of a poem —

A Member: Sit down.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is for the Speaker to decide when Members stand up and sit down, but the Member has come to the end of his time.

12.30 pm

Mr Ford: On behalf of my Colleagues, I support the proposal for the nomination of Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan, just as we did three years ago when it was proposed that Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon take the offices of First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

First, I thank Séamus Mallon for all that he has done during his time as Deputy First Minister. That is certainly not to say that the Alliance Party agrees with everything that he has done — we have had several exchanges with him in the Chamber. However, he held an important office, which he took on at a difficult time, and he contributed to the best of his ability. It is appropriate that that should be recognised in the Chamber today.

I would also like to thank Reg Empey — whom I trust is nearing the end of his short-term apprenticeship — for what he has done in recent weeks in conjunction with Séamus Mallon.

There was a democratic mandate in the votes that returned all of us to the Assembly on the ticket of an Ulster Unionist and an SDLP member taking on these roles. It is tragic that although over 70% of us will vote for that ticket today, the arcane rules will deny an election. If the vote of 70% of the Chamber is not carried because of one or two votes within Unionism, I have no doubt that some people will put the blame on the Alliance Party. In July 1998 the Alliance Party cast five votes within its “Centre” designation for an Ulster Unionist/ SDLP ticket. We will do exactly the same today. Let us be quite clear about where the blame and the fault lie. It does not lie with those of us who have been consistent, have supported the institutions and have sought to make the Assembly work. The blame will lie with those who were elected as Ulster Unionists but who failed to support their leader. The fault will lie with a voting system that prevents such a majority from carrying the vote.

We do not need a short-term fix. However, we must look urgently at the rules to ensure that the will of the people, as carried out by their mandated, elected representatives, can be effective regardless of the way in which the current difficulties have arisen. If the vote does not pass today, it is not the end of the road, because a great deal has been achieved and much progress has been made, even recently. Regardless of the criticisms of individual decisions, there is a popular will that the Assembly should succeed and that the institutions should function. I might criticise the Executive’s achievements so far — and I trust that

I will have the opportunity to continue to criticise them in a constructive way — but there is no doubt that what the Executive have achieved to date is better than achievements under direct rule and previous Administrations. We are not trying to protect David Trimble. Whether he wants our protection is another matter. We want to use our votes and influence to protect the agreement, to secure the institutions and to ensure that progress continues to be made. That is the scenario that all of us will face when the vote is taken. However, a better alternative would be for those who were elected as Ulster Unionists to cast their vote for an Ulster Unionist leader and to ensure that the motion is passed by a majority and that it is also in accordance with the arcane rules that we are forced to abide by.

Mr Roche: The truly momentous decision that will be made today will influence the future of Northern Ireland. That decision will be made against the dark backdrop not only of what happened in America on 11 September but of the events in Northern Ireland throughout 30 years of terrorism. There are two simple reasons that that parallel is not inappropriate. There is no distinction between the evil intent that drove the planes into the twin towers and that behind what has happened in Northern Ireland. The evil intent that firebombed the twin towers is precisely the same evil intent that placed firebombs in the La Mon House Hotel.

The terrorism that took place in Northern Ireland had no legitimacy, and I say that regardless of the attempts that are being made to distinguish the so-called freedom fighters of the Republican movement from those who killed so many people in the United States on 11 September. That is another reason that there is nothing inappropriate in running those two things together as the dark backdrop against which we make this decision. What happened in Northern Ireland was devoid of legitimacy, for the simple reason that no citizens in Northern Ireland were ever denied their freedom. A child could demolish the logic of the arguments that have been put forward in an attempt to legitimise their pursuit of terrorism.

If the Assembly decides in favour of the appointment of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, we will do more than blur the distinction between terrorism and democracy: we will legitimise and elevate terrorism and debase and corrupt democracy. We will lay the foundation for a criminalisation of our society, already a major problem. That will be detrimental to the future of our society. First, the representatives of terrorism have been placed in Government. Secondly, terrorist prisoners were released because they were affiliated to an organisation on ceasefire — a ceasefire that could not be broken even by multiple murder or any other form of criminality. Now there is to be an amnesty for those who have so far escaped the courts. Furthermore, we have had the destruction of the police

force that stood between the law-abiding citizen and the terrorist. That is the elevation and legitimisation of terrorism, the crowning act of which took place recently, involving Mr de Chastelain. What happened was not the decommissioning of a murderous arsenal in such a way as to represent a renunciation of violence, it was a recognition by two sovereign Governments — *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Are we discussing the re-election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, or are we denigrating Gen de Chastelain? What is the purpose of the debate?

Mr Speaker: Please continue, Mr Roche.

Mr Roche: There was no authentic renunciation of violence or anything that could remotely be construed as such. It was a recognition by two sovereign Governments of the right of an illegal and criminal organisation to hold onto its arms and, if needs be, to dispose of them at its will. In other words, it was a legitimisation of the holding of a terrorist arsenal.

If the motion is successful, we will have the elevation of terrorism and the debasement of democracy. It is not only those who are committed to Unionism who must resist that; anyone who represents the decency that still exists in Northern Ireland must vote to prevent it.

Ms McWilliams: I express my support for Mr Mallon, who has been through difficult times in the Assembly. He once said that at times we turned the colour of his face to almost the colour of his hair with our patching up and breaking down. Through it all, he remained calm and encouraging.

I am delighted to support the nomination of Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan. We should remind ourselves of how far we have come, not just in the past few weeks, but in the past few years. In the Chamber, we often forget that. On 10 April 1998, we declared our intention to do something different for Northern Ireland.

On 22 May those best intentions were endorsed by the majority of the people, despite misgivings on policing, power sharing, a partitionist Assembly and prisoners.

Mr B Hutchinson: Does the Member agree that it has been implied that every prisoner who has been released from jail has become involved in activities that could bring down the whole process? The Member agreed that the Tory Government released 254 Republican and Loyalist life-sentence prisoners without any deals on 15 December 1994 — the day on which exploratory talks started.

Mr McCartney: No murderers were released then.

Mr B Hutchinson: Mr McCartney has just made a statement. Every one of those 254, including myself,

had served indeterminate sentences, which means that they were life sentences.

Ms McWilliams: There were many milestones during the process that led up to the talks, including the release and return of prisoners between Christmas and the new year. It was difficult, but we should remember that it was difficult for the victims too. If we do return the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, we should remember the sacrifice and hurt that they have experienced. In the acrimony of parliamentary debates their suffering is sometimes forgotten.

Nonetheless, we did bring a dynamic of creativity to the process, and during the past few weeks that dynamic has been restored. There have been some important events, and they have been as good as Good Friday. Peace building all over the world depends on the introduction of dynamics at the least expected moment, and given those events, we should be ashamed of ourselves if we do not bring Northern Ireland out of the limbo that it has been in since 1 July 2001.

I express my gratitude to Sir Reg Empey for filling the position since 1 July, but Northern Ireland needs a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. There will be acrimony if we do not elect them today, and we have seen enough of that in the past. It is time to return consensus government to Northern Ireland. It has worked; it will work; and it must work.

It is time also to pledge our intention to work with the coalition Government. It is unique and unprecedented, but so is Northern Ireland. People concentrate on bad behaviour, on poor and disastrous events of the past, on the wrong behaviour that we witness too often in our streets, villages and communities. Only the leadership of the Assembly can create the necessary framework to change that. We have done our best today, and we expect other parties to play their parts as well.

I am glad that we have this opportunity to support the nomination of Mr Trimble, and I welcome the nomination of Mark Durkan as Deputy First Minister. I am sure that he too will bring a wonderful voice of leadership to the community, because he is known to speak with the voice of consensus. I support the nominations.

Mr McCartney: No one in the Assembly doubts that I oppose the re-election of David Trimble. I have listened to the usual cant and hypocrisy about the good works that have been done. I have listened to Reg Empey talk about the difference between the publicity given to the events in south Armagh and the secrecy that surrounds the alleged act of decommissioning last week. We should also remember the speech that the Republic's Foreign Minister, Mr Cowen, gave in New York on Tuesday.

12.45 pm

He said that the British Government must move speedily to remove the hardware of war from south Armagh and from west Tyrone to show people that politics worked. As far as I am aware, no listening device or observation post has ever brought about the death of anyone, but Kalashnikovs, surface-to-air missiles and Semtex have.

That shows the hypocrisy not only of those comparisons but of Reg Empey's attempt to persuade the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland that what happened last week amounted to an act of decommissioning that they could accept. That party would accept anything — literally anything — to stay in office, to have their cars and emoluments, to posture that they are doing something under devolved government that has not been done before. What is the state of the Health Service? What is the state of the economy of Northern Ireland? What is the state of transport? All of them are worse now than they were before.

Séamus Mallon — that avowed democrat — should know all about the procedures of democracy that were distorted and disfigured by his mock resignation and that have been further defiled by what has happened here today concerning re-designation. Mr Martin McGuinness prattled on about decommissioning. Mr McGuinness, Mr Adams and Mr Pat Doherty undoubtedly consulted their fellow members of the IRA Army Council, Mr Keenan, Mr Ferris, "Slab" Murphy and others, to decide what they should do. They represented to the world that they were distant from the people to whom they were talking.

Monica McWilliams prattled on about consensus. She said that we must have consensus — as she and her Colleague Jane Morrice were attempting to undermine, as Peter Robinson so graphically pointed out, the very fundamentals of consensus and cross-community approval that were the alleged linchpins of the agreement. Martin McGuinness said that there was no pressure to exclude parties. I have never exerted pressure to exclude democratic parties from the Assembly. But I am opposed to members of the IRA Army Council being in charge of the education of our children. I am opposed to including terrorists in Government. *[Interruption]*.

Mr J Kelly: What about the terrorists beside you?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: As for this mock suggestion that some act of decommissioning has taken place, no one believes that. The arch-appeaser, Mr Trimble, has entered the Chamber. Mr Trimble told us that 22 May 2000 was the magical date for decommissioning; it never happened. Mr Trimble offered to resign if decommissioning did not happen by January 2000; it did not happen. Mr Trimble was conned in May 2000

by a target date for decommissioning of June 2001; it never happened. Mr Trimble, Sir Reg Empey and their party have been conned into believing that decommissioning will occur as a result of the events of last week. Even Gen de Chastelain confirmed that this was a one-off event; there was no suggestion of any continuum. We have reached the stage where the gombeens of Ulster Unionism will literally accept anything as long as they can stay in their jobs, get their money and get on with it.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you to make a ruling on remarks made by Mr John Kelly during Mr McCartney's speech, when he said, "What about the terrorists beside you?" I am not aware that either Cedric Wilson or Mr Dodds has ever been convicted of a terrorist offence, and I ask you to rule on that matter.

Mr Speaker: It is impossible for the Speaker to rule on remarks that have been made from a sedentary position. I cannot hear them, therefore I cannot rule on them. The Member has made some remarks about what he heard. He may well have heard them, but it is not possible to hear them from the Chair because, as Members know, remarks made from a sedentary position are not picked up by the microphones.

Mr Paisley Jnr: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was put out of the House for making a remark from a sedentary position — a remark that you admitted then that you had not heard. Why, therefore, can you not make a ruling on this point?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. He knows well that if he questions the Chair he is in defiance of it and that he may end up leaving again. I suggest that it may not be in his best interests to press the matter at this juncture.

Mr Poots: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you study Hansard and rule further on the matter?

Mr Speaker: Mr Poots does not appear to have been listening to what I said. A remark made from a sedentary position is generally made too far from the microphones to be picked up by Hansard. I shall be reading Hansard with considerable interest tomorrow with regard to several matters — the next five minutes will, I suspect, determine how much interest.

Question put.

The Assembly proceeded to a Division.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Paisley, a point of order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order. No Speaker is entitled to leave the Chair nor should the Chair be unmanned at any proceedings of the Assembly.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I was called for a point of order.

Mr Speaker: The Member will resume his seat. I seek to be a proper servant of the Assembly, and many Members, including the Member who was on his feet, frequently ask to have my ear in order to ask a question of procedure.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 72; Noes 30.

AYES

Nationalist:

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Hanna, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr A Maginness, Mr Mallon, Mr Maskey, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamin, Mr McNamee, Ms McWilliams, Mr Molloy, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Unionist:

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Dr Birnie, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Ervine, Mr Foster, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Morrice,

Mr Nesbitt, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Other:

Mrs E Bell, Mr Close, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Agnew, Ms Armitage, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>102</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>72 (70.6%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>38 (100.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>59</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>29 (49.2%)</i>

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Mr Speaker: No Members having been elected, the procedure may be repeated after a period specified by the Speaker. I may wish to consult with Members in that regard. Of course, there are other matters regarding the standing of the Assembly that will be decided outside the Chamber without the involvement of those who sit in the Chamber.

Adjourned at 1.04 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 5 November 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I trust that all Members received a draft Order Paper at the weekend and were advised that the draft was subject to approval by the Business Committee. That was not an absolute procedural requirement, but it seemed to me to be a proper way of dealing with matters. The Business Committee met at 9.30 am today and agreed the order of business and timings for today's proceedings.

I have been asked to rule on two matters. Mr Cedric Wilson asked me to look at Hansard in respect of a comment made by Mr Billy Hutchinson during the debate on 2 November. I told him at the time that I had not heard the comment, but that I would check the Official Report. Hansard reads:

"You'll never find me hiding behind anyone, you eejit, shut up."

In the 1982-86 Assembly a Member raised a point of order and asked the Speaker at the time, Mr (later Sir) James Kilfedder, whether or not it was in order for a Member to "act the eejit". The Speaker's ruling was that

"The Member is not acting."

He did not, however, rule that the word "eejit" was unparliamentary.

Regarding the use of the words "shut up", it might have been better if the Member, on a point of order, had asked if the Speaker would rule that the speech was repetitive or otherwise unwelcome to the Floor, rather than use those words. Although they are not unparliamentary, they are perhaps tactless.

The second matter was raised by Mr Edwin Poots, regarding Mr John Kelly's comment

"What about the terrorists beside you?"

when Mr Robert McCartney was speaking. I recall occasions when DUP Members have used similar terms about Sinn Féin/IRA, as they describe it. On those occasions, when they did not refer to specific Members and there was no legal indication that their

comments were correct — if there were, that would be a different matter — I have ruled that it is not unparliamentary. Mr John Kelly did not refer to specific Members, although Mr Poots did. It seems to me therefore that this was also not unparliamentary.

I have received a petition of concern:

"As provided by Standing Order 27 we, the undersigned, submit this petition of concern in respect of the business stipulated below: 'Motion to Amend Standing Orders'."

I have checked this and it appears to be in order. Members will recall that although the debate on such an issue may take place today, the vote cannot take place until tomorrow at the earliest. There is some uncertainty about this issue. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 states that a petition of concern is in order to facilitate a cross-community vote. Another good reason for a petition of concern, especially in a legislature that does not have a second Chamber, is that the Assembly has an opportunity to consider the matter overnight and to vote on it the following day. The petition of concern is not only in respect of the cross-community aspect of the legislation; it is also in respect of timing.

I have received a second petition of concern:

"As provided by Standing Order 27 we, the undersigned, submit this petition of concern in respect of the business stipulated below: 'Election of First Minister and Deputy First Minister'."

I have checked this, and it seems to be in order. It is possible to proceed with the debates today on both these issues. The timings have been agreed by the Business Committee. However, I must ask the Assembly to resume tomorrow purely for the purpose of conducting the votes on those matters. Are Members content with that?

Mr Speaker: I shall now take a point of order from Dr Paisley, followed by a point of order from Mr Peter Robinson.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At least one member of my party, my Chief Whip, did not receive an invitation to the meeting until 7.35 this morning. All Members were not notified yesterday.

Mr Speaker: I know that my staff — and I pay tribute to them — worked extremely hard and did their utmost over the weekend to facilitate the arrangements. Your Chief Whip is not a member of the Business Committee until perhaps later on today when there is a motion standing in your name nominating him to that Committee.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I did not make myself clear, Mr Speaker. Our Chief Whip did not receive notice of this meeting.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate what the Member is saying. I extend my apologies, but my staff have done the very best they can to try to get messages to everybody.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Whose are the lead signatures on the two petitions of concern?

Mr Speaker: I see no difficulty in advising the House of at least the first signature on each petition of concern. It is a public document which will be available from the Business Office later. The first signature on the petition of concern with regard to the motion to amend Standing Orders is that of the Rev Dr Ian RK Paisley. The lead signature on the other petition of concern is that of the Rt Hon David Trimble MP.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have asked leave of the House to determine whether the Assembly should meet tomorrow morning. Can you inform the House if it is at liberty to take that decision as the Secretary of State's decision to allow the Assembly to sit today is at present subject to legal action? In making that decision today we should be certain that we are not acting contrary to a court decision that such a sitting may not be appropriate. On behalf of my party, I object to the suggestion that we should predetermine that the Assembly meet tomorrow. It may not be appropriate.

Mr Speaker: I understand a little of the Member's concern, so I shall clarify the matter. His concern comes perhaps from a question of whether an election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister would be ultra vires, given that six weeks have passed. I would not be happy for a matter that I believed to be ultra vires to go on the Order Paper. That would not be proper. When I looked at the question my first thought was that it seemed uncertain that after six weeks it was possible for the Assembly to hold such an election. However, unlike some other distinguished Members of the House, I am not a lawyer so I did not presume to come to a conclusion on the matter without consulting senior counsel. That advice, which I proffer briefly to the House, was as follows.

The requirement is that there shall be an election within six weeks, and of course we have had an attempted election within the six weeks. We are not in default on that matter. Does it say that after six weeks there cannot be an election by the Assembly? It does not, so the question must be: would this be a reasonable interpretation? The Northern Ireland Act 1998 makes it clear that after six weeks the Secretary of State shall propose a date for an election. It does not say how long he has to propose a date. It may not be unreasonable for the Secretary of State to take a day or two to consult political parties about the matter and then to set a date. The Act states that the Secretary of State "shall" set a date. That in itself does not bring about the dissolution of the Assembly. It is Her Majesty by Order in Council who "may" take the advice of the Secretary of State. That is "may", not "shall". Often,

when speaking of the sovereign, the term is couched as "may" because of the royal prerogative. Parliament had to take a view that the Secretary of State "shall" put forward a date, but Her Majesty "may" call a dissolution. That opens the possibility that the Secretary of State would propose a date for an election, but that Her Majesty would not call one. That would leave the Assembly without a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister for, from this point, 18 months. Would that have been a reasonable interpretation of the wishes of Parliament? It seems reasonable to assume that it would not. Therefore it is a wholly tenable proposition that an election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister by the Assembly may take place after the six weeks, but of course at a time when the Secretary of State may be proposing dissolution and Assembly elections.

10.45 am

Having considered those matters, it seemed clear that it was not ultra vires for the matter to be included on the Order Paper and that it was reasonable to argue that the Assembly should have the right to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. I do not therefore accept the Member's argument that it would be unreasonable for the Assembly to proceed.

It is not a question of leave of the House. If leave of the House is not given, it is a question for the Business Committee, which will meet today. If the House gave its leave, that would make matters easier, but it is otherwise a matter for the Business Committee. I trust that I have clarified the matter.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My first point concerns the commencement of this meeting at 10.30 am. Standing Order 10(2) states that a Monday sitting shall commence at 12.00 noon. I find it difficult to understand how that Standing Order can be varied as a result of calling a meeting at 10.30 am, contrary to that Standing Order, to validate retrospectively the earlier starting time.

Secondly, in regard to Mr Cedric Wilson's point of order, it is clear from the Northern Ireland Act that on the expiry of the six-week period during which a First Minister and Deputy First Minister have not been elected, the Secretary of State has a mandatory — not a precatory — duty to propose a date for an election. He "shall" propose a date for an election; he does not appear to have any other option.

The matters that you, Mr Speaker, described as counter-arguments are contained in section 32(4), which reads

"If the Secretary of State proposes a date under subsection (1) or (3), Her Majesty may by Order in Council —

(a) direct that the date of the poll for the election of the next Assembly shall, instead of being determined in accordance with section 31, be the date proposed;"

Section 31 deals with the expiration of the term of that Assembly, rather than an extraordinary situation such as occurs when the offices of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister become vacant and are not filled within six weeks. That section has nothing to do with the date on which the Secretary of State has a mandatory requirement to propose a date for elections. It relates only to the question of whether or not the sovereign decides to confirm that date. However, the Secretary of State must propose a date, regardless of whether the sovereign subsequently decides to accept it.

Mr Speaker: The Member raised two points. First, on the question of Assembly sittings and whether a sitting at 10.30 am on a Monday is contrary to Standing Orders; Standing Order 10(2) states how sittings of the Assembly “shall ordinarily be arranged”. However, it also makes it clear that the Business Committee can respond to the exigencies of the Assembly.

Members of the Business Committee were contacted. The Member’s party is, by choice, not represented on the Business Committee, nor is the party of his Colleague, Mr Cedric Wilson. They would not therefore have been contacted. Not all the Committee members were content with the decision, but an overwhelming majority was. I nevertheless deemed it appropriate that the Business Committee meet at 9.30 this morning to make the matter clear. It met, and a vote was taken on the matter.

On his second point, the Member adduces a legitimate legal argument, and I have no doubt that in another place those arguments will be thought through and debated.

A court may choose to strike down the outcome of our proceedings. However, there is a wholly tenable legal argument that allows us to proceed in a proper and seemly fashion, and it seems to me that we should do so. I have one further point of order from Mr Roche.

Mr Roche: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is worth reinforcing what has already been said with respect to — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but it is not for Members to reinforce a point of order. If I have made a ruling on a matter, that is the ruling. If the Member has another point of order, he may, of course, put it, but he may not support robustly arguments against a ruling that I have made.

Mr Roche: This is another point of order.

Mr Speaker: We shall see.

Mr Roche: The point of order is that it is absolutely beyond dispute that there is a legal requirement if the Assembly fails to appoint a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister within six weeks. There is a legal requirement — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I fear that the Member has not been listening or perhaps has not understood the fine legal argument, but it is quite clear that I have made a ruling on the issue. Another ruling from another place may, of course, supersede us. If that should happen, the Assembly and I will be subject to the law. Unlike Westminster, we are a statutory body and subject to the law. I would not dream of suggesting otherwise.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Act one of the pantomime was on Friday; act two looks as if it will be rather short; and we await the entrance of the pantomime horse and the rider tomorrow in act three.

Can you confirm, Mr Speaker, that the Business Committee only met this morning at 9.30 and that there was no meeting of the Business Committee before that meeting about this morning’s Assembly meeting at 10.30 am?

Can you also confirm what you consider to be an appropriate time for requisite notice for meetings of the Assembly? Heretofore, it has been understood that there would be at least two working days’ notice — you have said that several times. Why has that been breached on this occasion?

Mr Speaker: I confirm that, although there were telephone conversations, there was no meeting. I am absolutely clear about that. However, Standing Orders do not stipulate that there must be a meeting — they say that sittings may be arranged. The Member is aware that sittings have often been so arranged. There may be Luddites who believe that virtual meetings may not be possible these days. Well, so be it. There is no doubt in my mind that what was done was entirely legitimate.

The Member asked another question about the timely warning of meetings. There were those — and I do not think that it is any great secret — who felt that it would have been good to have had an earlier meeting. I strongly took the view, although some have chosen to interpret it differently, that it was not possible to conduct the business on today’s Order Paper before today. Some Members may think that there was insufficient notice; others would like to have moved more quickly. I have tried to maintain some degree of decorum in a difficult situation. I shall take one final point of order from Mr C Wilson.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Did you say that the House would reconvene to vote on this matter at 10.30 am tomorrow by leave of the House? I take it that, as you had an objection to it, the matter will go before the Business Committee and you will not rule that the Assembly will meet tomorrow at 10.30 am before the meeting with the Business Committee.

Mr Speaker: The Member has made clear his objection. The Business Committee will decide today.

I shall recommend that the House meets at 10.30 tomorrow morning purely for the votes on the two issues. Do you have a further point of order, Dr Paisley?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to make it clear that in the Business Committee my party and Mr Denis Watson's party voted against this meeting.

Mr Speaker: That is perhaps a piece of information for the wider world, but it is not a point of order.

ASSEMBLY: SUSPENSION OF STANDING ORDERS

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): I beg to move

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 5 November 2001.

I must return the House to more prosaic matters. Later today, we shall have the take-note debate on the draft Budget, a matter that normally requires much attention from Members. Matters spanning the remit of all Committees will be raised. Consequently, I ask the House to extend today's sitting beyond 6 o'clock, if necessary. I trust that there will be cross-community support for that.

It seemed that several matters on the Order Paper would absorb the House's attention for some time today and that we might have had to sit very late. However, as circumstances have changed during the past half-hour, we may not need to continue so late. Nonetheless, the motion is appropriate.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, if under your earlier ruling on a point of order, it is possible to bring forward the starting time of the sitting as the result of a decision of the Business Committee, why is it not possible for the Business Committee to decide to open the floodgates at the other end? Why do we need this motion?

Mr Leslie: That point was made in an intervention, but I am not sure that it is within my bailiwick to deal with it.

11.00am

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not wish to be presumptuous, but I must say that the Member is correct; it is not for him to rule on that. However, there is, perhaps, some misunderstanding. The petitions of concern will not postpone the debates on the issues; the debates will take place today. The only question is the time of the votes on the issues, and they will take place tomorrow. The procedure for arranging the time that the Member may require still applies. That is simply a matter of order.

Mr P Robinson : On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When the point of order was raised about whether it was in order for the Business Committee to change the time of the start of today's sitting from 12 o'clock to 10.30, you said that the Committee had such power. If it has the power to start the sitting earlier than the time in Standing Orders, does it not also have the power to extend the sitting beyond 6 o'clock without the need for us to consider a motion to suspend Standing Orders?

Mr Speaker: No. The Deputy Chairperson is doing things properly. Members should read their Standing Orders.

Mr Robinson: You should, indeed.

Mr Speaker: The House can judge whether I am sufficiently familiar with Standing Orders; I am entirely prepared to throw myself on the mercy of the House in that regard. However, it would be an abuse of the right to make points of order if we were to continue in this vein rather than continue with the proper business of the House.

Mr Leslie has moved the motion. I have had no further requests to speak on the issue, and, hearing no requests, I shall put the Question. Suspension of Standing Orders requires cross-community support. If I hear “Ayes” from all parts of the House and no “Noes”, we shall take it that there is cross-community support. If there are “Noes”, we shall go through the Lobbies.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 68; Noes 29.

AYES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Hanna, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Mallon, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenamín, Ms McWilliams, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Mr O'Connor, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Unionist

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Dr Birnie, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Foster, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Morrice, Mr Nesbitt, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Other:

Mrs E Bell, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

NOES

Unionist:

Mr Agnew, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M

Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>68 (70.1%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>36</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>36 (100.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>57</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>28 (49.1%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

That this Assembly suspends Standing Order 10(2) and Standing Order 10(6) for Monday 5 November 2001.

ASSEMBLY: AMENDMENT TO STANDING ORDERS

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee allocated one hour for this debate at its meeting this morning. I have received one amendment, which I have accepted, and it is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the motion and the proposer of the amendment will each be allocated seven minutes, and the remaining speakers will be allocated five minutes. I have already advised the House of the petition of concern with regard to this matter.

11.15 am

Mr J Wilson: I beg to move:

From 5 November 2001, until the commencement of a review under paragraph 36 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement, Standing Order 3(8) has effect as if it read:

“A Member may change his/her designation of identity. Any such change takes effect immediately after notification in writing is submitted to the Speaker. Any subsequent change shall take effect seven days after the day of such notification.”

We regard this as a purely technical motion. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have received one amendment to the motion.

Mr P Robinson: I beg to move the following amendment: Delete all after “Speaker” in line 6 and add:

“and the change is endorsed by a majority of those already registered to this designation.”

I am not sure that the Assembly was convinced by the argument advanced by the proposer of the original motion. The motion might be tactical or contemptible, but it is not technical.

We covered much of this ground when Members sought to amend Standing Orders last Friday. Today, the ink is not even dry on that change, yet they are attempting to change it once again. They wrote the rules — the rulebook is in their handwriting — and decided the rules of engagement in this political process. When they were defeated even under their own rules, regulations and laws, they decided last Friday to change them. Having changed them, they found out that they still could not win, even by fixing the game. They decided to change it all again.

It is an unseemly spectacle when the Chief Whip of the Ulster Unionist Party is unable to muster an argument. He cannot marshal one single, coherent reason for the Assembly’s supporting this motion. He simply proposes it and resumes his seat. That shows that there is no substance behind his argument; it is purely to obtain an outcome. It is a Jesuitical necessity that the ends justify the means. That is the present proposal of the Ulster Unionist Party. It does not

matter if its members have to drive their coach and horses through the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — they will do it. It does not matter if they have to drive their coach and horses through the Belfast Agreement — they will do that too, and they will certainly not stop when it comes to the Standing Orders of the Assembly.

What did the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party tell us, only eight or nine days ago? He said it simply would not be credible if he were to find himself elected as First Minister on the back of a re-designation of the Women’s Coalition. A matter of days later, he went through the Lobbies of this Assembly to allow the Women’s Coalition to re-designate — even though it would not be credible. He then spent the rest of his morning twisting the arm of the Alliance Party to get it to do the same.

The Ulster Unionist Party is now proposing the mechanism for re-designation in the Assembly. It shows the unprincipled stand of that party that it is prepared, within a matter of 10 days, to do a complete about-turn on the issue. Perhaps it will swivel a few more times before the issue is finally decided.

I seem to remember the reason that the First Minister gave for his resignation. *[Interruption]*. He does not do justice to the dignity of his proposed office by shouting with red face from a sedentary position. He should contain himself and really should not get excited to the extent that he does.

When the First Minister resigned, the Ulster Unionist Party made very clear the reasons for his resignation and the conditions he required before he would change his position. Those requirements have not been met. The Unionist community can find no confidence in the unspecified location where an unspecified event took place, when an unspecified number of weapons of an unspecified variety were put beyond use in an unspecified way. This is the kind of certainty that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party was looking for before he would take back his resignation and seek to become First Minister again.

Groping as much as he can to return to office, he is prepared to forget about the commitments he made to the people of Northern Ireland. He is prepared to turn on the words that he gave to the people of Northern Ireland a week ago, and he is prepared to reverse Standing Orders in order to do it. That is the credibility of the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

He said on radio this morning that he was not afraid of an election. Can anybody think of anybody who is trying more deeply and sincerely than the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party to avoid an election? If he thought for one minute that he had half a chance in the election, he would do the decent and honourable thing. He would say, “I cannot get a majority in this

Assembly; I am going to the people to see if I can get my majority.”

On the subject of unprincipled positions, let me turn to the person who says that he is part of the pantomime. He volunteered for the position of rear end of the pantomime horse, but he did not tell us who would be the front end and who would carry the nosebag. The leader of the Alliance Party takes that credible position, yet his principled stand on these matters is on record, as he made his party's position very clear on Friday. That was a few days ago. It is said that a week is a long time in politics, but for the Alliance Party it takes even less. Only a few days ago, the leader of the Alliance Party, who cannot look anybody in the eye, said

“The candidate for First Minister wishes that to be a majority of ‘genuine’ Unionists, and he can rest assured that we will not disrupt his concerns in that regard. We will not ‘dress up for Halloween’ as one Member described it. We will allow him to seek his majority among genuine Unionists”.

He went on to say,

“We will take no part in this charade of tinkering with Standing Orders”.

We can see that in the space of a few days the leader of the Alliance Party will not only take part in that charade but will have the principal part, and he is prepared to dress up in Halloween clothes.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise on behalf of my party to support the motion. Much work was done over the weekend in order to arrange the motion and to overcome the remaining difficulties, and I am satisfied that the motion allows us to proceed in an appropriate fashion. The rejectionists and wreckers across in the corner thought that they had their day on Friday. Of course, they will continue with their attempts to stall, to delay and to frustrate the process, and that is what the petition of concern is about.

They will not and cannot be allowed to succeed in their wrecking tactics, now or in the future. That is what the motion is about. Those people can only offer a return to the bad old days of the past. The pro-agreement parties — certainly those who worked over the weekend — wish to create a process of change, to re-establish the political institutions and to make sure that they fulfil the aspirations of the people who voted in the referendum across this island.

We want to make sure that the institutions are bedded down, including the all-Ireland institutions, which have been disrupted and stalled for more than a year. Our mandate is to resolve the conflict, which is of long standing. It is our view that we have accomplished much, but we need to accomplish much more.

Despite the odds, and despite the tactics of the wreckers' charter which we have heard so often, considerable progress has been made in recent years, and it is up to all of us to ensure that we continue with

that progress. We have a collective mandate from the overwhelming majority of the electorate, not only in the Six Counties, but across the island: we will fulfil that mandate. We are here to attempt to bed down the political institutions and the process that spawned them in order to give everybody a brighter future.

I support the motion and reject the DUP's amendment.

Mr Ford: It is always interesting to have one's remarks quoted by another Member. It is particularly interesting to see the bits that are selected, including selective extracts from one sentence. It would be useful if I carried on from the point where Mr P Robinson finished his quotation of my remarks:

“We will allow [Mr Trimble] to seek his majority among genuine Unionists”.

He did not finish the sentence. The sentence continues:

“because the rule stating that our votes count for considerably less than those of others is fundamentally sick and wrong.”

In that context, today's debate is completely different from the debate that we had on Friday. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: The debate may appear remarkably similar, given the Standing Orders and the business in the Chamber. However, as we have seen, a small minority are hijacking the overall wish of the Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland that a First Minister and Deputy First Minister be elected and the institutions given stability. There is an issue about addressing the rule that allows that to happen.

I welcome the fact that, on Friday, the Secretary of State and colleagues from other parties that support the agreement informally initiated the process of the review of strand one. The first item on the agenda will be to address the failure of the voting system, designed to protect minorities, to enable progress to be made. We cannot have a system that is designed to protect minorities allowing a tiny minority to hijack all progress. I welcome that interest — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. From time to time, Members ask me to rule on whether what a Member says is in order. I am happy to do that, but I can only do so if I hear what the Member says. That is becoming increasingly difficult. I ask the House to listen to what all Members have to say.

Mr Ford: I welcome the review, and the participation of other parties in that review, because, as I said in my speech on Friday, we are not interested in simply tinkering with Standing Orders. We must address the fundamental problem that caused us to be back here this morning. That is what we are now proceeding to do.

I welcome the fact that Ulster Unionist Party and SDLP Members have put their names to the motion,

which will make an appropriate and temporary change to the Standing Order in the context of the review. I would have appreciated it if either party had been a little more enthusiastic than they have been in the Chamber this morning, but I welcome the fact that they have participated in that respect at least. It gives a degree of collectivity to the approach that we have sought. It continues the process that we sought to operate during the negotiations that led to the agreement. We made progress then only when parties worked collectively. There is now an option for us to continue to make progress.

There is no doubt that the stability of the institutions of Government rests on proceeding to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. The stability of Northern Ireland as an entity rests on that. Progress has been made in recent weeks, and we must continue to make that progress. I am not the least bit interested in the personal future of David Trimble and Mark Durkan; I am interested in the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland. I believe that this represents the best way forward. I support the motion.

Mr Roche: First, it is the opinion of our party that the motion — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Roche: The motion is designed to effect the election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, which, at this stage, is illegal under the requirements of section 16(8) and section 32(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The motion also represents a debasement of politics in Northern Ireland. That is apparent from the wording of the motion, which requires us to understand Standing Order 3(8) in a certain way.

The way it wants us to understand the reading of Standing Order 3 (8) exactly contradicts the existing content of Standing Order 3 (8). That is an intellectual somersault that reflects the emptiness of any coherent argument from those who are putting this forward and represents an absurd debasement of politics in Northern Ireland. The instrument driving this debasement is the Alliance Party. The point has been made by a previous Member that this is a party that is now splitting itself on the basis of its internal contradictions and lack of political principle.

11.30 am

The assumption behind this debasement of politics that we are witnessing this morning is that the objective of implementing the Belfast Agreement justifies using any means to achieve that objective. I point out to the members of the Ulster Unionist Party that it is a fundamental political miscalculation to use any means to implement the agreement. The miscalculation is that the pro-Unionist electorate is so willing to prostrate itself before a Government incorporating IRA/Sinn Féin repre-

sentatives of the terrorism that was directed against the Unionist electorate that the Unionist community will accept whatever political skulduggery is required to put such a Government into operation. That is a fundamental political miscalculation that is being made by members of the Ulster Unionist Party. Even from their own prospective as pro-agreement members, the strategy is self-defeating. The very process of implementing the agreement is alienating, and continues to alienate, a growing majority of the Unionist electorate.

The Unionist electorate wants peace. We are a peace-loving people, but we do not want peace at the price of legitimising those who have terrorised us for 30 years. That is a price for peace that is too high for any self-regarding electorate to pay within a democracy, particularly at a time when the civilised world is saying that we should draw the line between terrorism and democracy.

Finally I address the self-interest of the UUP Members. The leadership of their party is set on implementing an agreement that is being rejected by their electorate. It does not require any great amount of intelligence to understand that their leadership is sowing the seeds of political self-destruction. Apart from any commitment to the principle of democracy, their own self-interest should dictate that they reject this course of action.

I heard Mr Trimble on the radio this morning discounting the possibility of a significant legal challenge against what is happening here today. I remind Ulster Unionist Members that on every issue relating to the legality of the implementation of the Belfast Agreement their leader has got it wrong. I appeal to them, in the interests of their party, and especially in the interests of democracy at a time when the entire civilised world is orientating itself towards drawing the line between terrorism and democracy, to fall into line and vote appropriately.

Ms McWilliams: I take this opportunity to express our concerns to the people of Birmingham over what happened at the weekend.

I am pleased that other parties have the opportunity to follow the initiative that we took on Friday. Peter Robinson said here on Friday that our sole purpose for doing what we did was to protect the agreement. I am pleased that he said that, and I am glad that he has it on the record. He may note too that we asked for nothing in return: we did it solely to protect the agreement.

That people should be allowed to define themselves as they wish, and not have others decide that definition for them, is intrinsic to the agreement. People should have free choice in relation to their political aspirations and citizenship. We have always described ourselves as a cross-community party, not a party of the centre. We are a cross-community coalition supporting a cross-community coalition in Government.

What are this Government if they are not cross-community? What is so strange about being cross-community? *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms McWilliams: The agreement had something unique written into it — something that the DUP signed up to when its members became Ministers in the cross-community Government. These are good times, when people can finally accept that cross-community politics works. It is also very important to say that inclusivity works and that inclusivity counts. We have, once again, an opportunity to show that not just the big parties in the Executive count, but that the smaller parties in the Assembly also count. Otherwise, we would not be here today. It is good to see that we again have the opportunity to make our votes count. They counted on Friday when we re-designated as one Nationalist and one Unionist. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms McWilliams: I said of those who went out gloating on Friday that their views are not what Northern Ireland wants to hear any more. Their days will be short. The people do not want to hear the voice of intransigence.

I have one other point to make. We too welcome a review. During the Weston Park talks and, indeed, when Senator Mitchell first came to consider a review of the agreement, we asked for the establishment of an implementation committee. We asked for it again on subsequent occasions. I am pleased that at times such as this it is recognised that an implementation committee should be established, so that when problems such as we are currently experiencing arise, those Members who are pro-agreement, and, indeed, those on the anti-agreement side, can come together to discuss them. That is what people are supposed to do in Government. In moving this country forward, we expect nothing less.

Mr McCartney: The atmosphere and ambience of the House has often oscillated between farce and pantomime. However, I never thought the time would come when its future would depend upon the decision of a self-confessed horse's ass. That is exactly how Mr Ford described himself this morning on the radio. He has given an entirely new meaning to the aphorism "leading from behind".

On a more serious note, strand one of the Belfast Agreement provided a number of safeguards. One of those safeguards was that, in the election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, each community would have to have a simple majority of those who had designated themselves either Nationalist or Unionist. That was specifically put in to guarantee the sort of cross-community support that Monica McWilliams has prattled on about. What she fails to realise is that the farce that was conducted on Friday, when the Women's

Coalition designated themselves as the transvestite party, is being taken further today by the verbal and political gymnastics of Mr Ford and his Colleagues. They have demonstrated that their proper place is not in the political arena but in the circus, as a gymnastic troupe, because they have violated the whole principle of the matter.

Mr Ford suggested that Mr Peter Robinson read out only selected quotes. However, what did Mr Ford read out? He talked on Friday about fundamental changes, but what is he now seeking to do? He is seeking to make a change so fundamental in the political description of members of his party that it will last for exactly seven days after which his members can revert to being Alliance Party members. If that is the sort of thing that in Mr Ford's dictionary of political ideas and thoughts amounts to "fundamental", the Assembly is doomed.

On Friday Mr Ford declared that he would not be a Halloween Unionist, but on Monday he declares that he will be a Guy Fawkes Unionist. He will don his Unionist hat and posture as a Unionist. The public are not deceived. One very sensible but not politically acute member of the public has compared this to a football match at which when one side scores the winning goal the referee disallows it because the ball was not kicked from the player's own half with his left foot. The referee then cancels the match and reschedules it for Monday when the losing team would have 14 players compared with the winning team's eleven.

That is how members of the public see the charade, the fraud, the defilement, distortion and disfigurement of the basic principles of democracy that are occurring in the Chamber today. They are not fooled. They do not believe that the ends justify the means. If the intention is to create institutions that are respected and accorded parity of esteem from both sides of the community, one cannot base them on the sort of despicable horse-trading that went on over the weekend. Members cannot continue to violate the rules that have been set by the Assembly and at the same time expect public regard and respect. Those sentiments will not be there.

This is not a tactical manoeuvre as described by Mr J Wilson or by Mr Ford. It is a disgraceful piece of political shysterism, and I hope that it does not succeed.

Mr S Wilson: Anyone looking at what is happening in the Assembly could view it as Mr McCartney has described it as political farce at which Members should be laughing. Those who value democracy here ought to be asking "Does the Assembly have to go through these contortions and tear up the rule book to keep a party in power which no longer represents the Unionist community?" Members are hearing a party admit that it no longer commands the respect of the

community that it claims to represent. The Ulster Unionist Party has resorted to sordid tactics — tactics which, as Peter Robinson pointed out, it cannot even defend. The Ulster Unionist Party cannot give even two sentences of defence for those tactics.

Instead, the Ulster Unionist Party is relying upon the Alliance Party to ride to its rescue — not on a white charger but on a pantomime horse, with the leader of the party at the back end. Members must look at what has happened today and at Mr Ford's arguments. He says that Members from the Alliance Party are redesignating because the stability of the institutions is at risk, and he will not allow a small minority to hold this place to ransom.

11.45 am

That is what has changed his mind. However, those arguments pertained on Friday when he said that he would not engage in this charade and he would not help out the Ulster Unionists. Nothing has changed. The only difference is that between Friday and today the back end of the horse has engaged in horse-trading. It will soon be seen what kind of bribe has been offered to him. Some of his little friends have come along with him. Mr McCartney said that the leader of the Alliance Party is leading from behind — and he is leading from behind. He did not become a Unionist. Eileen Bell is now a Unionist. On Friday in this pantomime Alliance Members were all crying in unison “We are not Unionists. Oh no, we are not”. However, today they are saying “Oh yes, we are”. I hear Seamus Close bleating from outside “Oh no, I am not”. Kieran McCarthy is probably saying through clenched teeth “Oh yes, I am”. We have a Kieran and a Sean saying it through clenched teeth.

In order to perpetuate the charade, the leader of the Alliance Party admitted to being a “political ass” this morning, the first time I have ever heard a party leader do so. Some would say that with his beard and his political foolishness, a “political goat” is a more appropriate comparison.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member ought to be somewhat careful about Members who have beards.

Mr S Wilson: There is the wise old goat, and there is the foolish goat. If we have an Assembly that is sustained by skulduggery, chicanery, trickery and every other kind of underhandedness that we have seen today, we must question its long-term future and sustainability.

Sinn Féin accuses the DUP of being wreckers. We are not wreckers. We are not the people who have made the Assembly lose all credibility. Those who wrote the rules found that they did not work, so they rewrote them — and they still did not work. Those people are in the process of rewriting the rules again. They are the people who are wrecking the Assembly. They are

bringing it into disrepute. They are turning it into an institution without credibility.

Mr C Wilson: The implementation of the Belfast Agreement is a corruption of the democratic practice and the rule of law that is without precedent in any democratic and law-governed state. That position was taken by those who read the Belfast Agreement correctly and advised Mr Trimble and his Colleagues during the fateful weeks leading up to the signing of the agreement. Mr Trimble and his Colleagues have undermined the position of the Unionist community and endangered the Union itself. They have undermined the process of democracy and the rule of law.

Today we are witnessing the outworking of the corruption that lies at the heart of the Belfast Agreement. I do not believe that anyone looking objectively and fairly from the outside at what is happening in the House today believes that it has anything remotely to do with democracy. Unionists who were elected to the Assembly to further the cause of the Union do not believe it either.

I remind Mr John Taylor — although I cannot see him in the Chamber — that when he left the negotiations at Castle Buildings a short time before the Belfast Agreement was signed, he stated that he would not touch the agreement with a 40-foot bargepole because it would bring about the destruction of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. However, he re-engaged. In the last election he told the electorate, just as the Ulster Unionist Party did, that he endorsed the Belfast Agreement because the UUP had saved the RUC.

Mr Trimble and his deputy, Mr Taylor, should hang their heads. I hope that they experienced some feelings of guilt yesterday as we witnessed the final destruction of a gallant force that stood between the ordinary decent Roman Catholic, Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist and the men of terror whom Sinn Féin/IRA represent here.

Our stance is honourable. Unfortunately, the Alliance Party has shifted from the position of honour that it held on Friday when it resisted moves to re-designate. On Friday, the Alliance Party opposed what was taking place, not as a pro-agreement or an anti-agreement Unionist party, but as a party that had assessed the situation and realised that its electorate would not be well represented through use of trickery and sleight of hand in order to elect Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan.

The electorate should not lack heart because of today's events. As has been pointed out, Mr Trimble can run but he cannot hide, even should, in the next day or two, the House move to re-establish an Executive that will include two members of a party that is inextricably linked to and that fronts a terrorist organisation. Mr Trimble has said since the signing of the agreement and the formation of the Executive that it is wrong to be in Government with a party that fronts a fully-armed

terrorist organisation. Therefore, is it not equally wrong to be sit in an Executive with those who represent a partially, yet still well-equipped, terrorist organisation? As Mr Roche stated, Mr Blair and Mr Bush make lofty comments about taking a stand against terrorism across the globe. However, up close, it looks like it will be the people on this side of the House who will be denigrated by the press, by the church leaders and by the captains of industry who endorsed the agreement. I have no doubt that we shall be seen as the villains of the piece and presented as the wreckers — those who do not want the people of Northern Ireland to have peace, stability and reconciliation. I throw that allegation back in their faces. We are not playing some petty game in order to deprive Mr Trimble of his ministerial car and his office. Rather, we are determined not to have in the Northern Ireland Government those who front a organisation that terrorised the ordinary decent citizens of Northern Ireland for 30 long years. That is obscene and disgusting, and my party will do all that it can to prevent it. We may win or lose this round of the battle for democracy, but the battle will go on and on.

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

Mr P Robinson: The normal format for a winding-up speech is that the arguments advanced on the opposite side of the House during the debate are demolished. I had no difficulty in demolishing the mover of the motion's argument, because he did not make any. There followed an argument from IRA/Sinn Féin, the close friends of the Marxist drug dealers of Colombia. That party referred to anyone who wished to uphold Standing Orders and the law as wreckers. Of course, IRA/Sinn Féin has the Belfast Agreement wrapped around it as some form of purity that wipes away all its sins, whether those be the murders committed by its terrorist colleagues or the political chicanery in which it is involved.

We had the embarrassing spectacle of the leader of the Alliance Party. He is not having much of a time since he assumed that role. I see that he is experiencing great difficulty; he squirms as he swallows large chunks of his own words only days after he uttered them. However, he had the audacity to argue that the Assembly cannot have a small minority frustrating the will of the rest. That "small minority" happens to represent the majority of Unionists in Northern Ireland. That is the "small minority" that he seeks to sweep aside.

He also referred to a "tiny minority". That "tiny minority" is six times the size of his party. He is so puffed up with his own importance, and the belief that the Alliance Party has a pivotal role in the proceedings, that he refers to a group which is six times the size of his own organisation as being "tiny". That shows the degree of importance that he attaches to his own position.

Returning to the original proposition, what was the intention of the law, of the Belfast Agreement and of

our Standing Orders in relation to designation? The purpose is clear — designation was to be a safeguard for both communities. If key decisions were taken, both communities had to be satisfied. The Belfast Agreement identified some key decisions where it was not enough to have 40% of Unionist or Nationalist support, but which required a majority of Unionist or Nationalist support. One of those key decisions was the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Alliance Party, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionists and their friends in Sinn Féin regarded that as being of such importance that — *[Interruption]*.

I see that the leader of the Alliance Party is shaking his head. He is telling us that he does not agree with the Belfast Agreement, because that is what the Belfast Agreement says. Now he is saying that he does not agree with the Belfast Agreement. That shows how quickly he can change his position and that of his party.

They all signed up to the Belfast Agreement. They all believed in that aspect and accepted it. When it is put into form in the Standing Orders, they want a way to wriggle out of it. They no longer want it to require a majority of Unionists. Everybody knows the designation of individuals because of what they stand for at elections. That is a principled designation. If a Member stands as a Unionist, that is recognised as his designation. However, these people are not Unionist. The leader of the Alliance Party went on record at the weekend saying that he could not stomach being a Unionist or a Nationalist for more than 24 hours. That is the sheer hypocrisy of such a designation. Alliance Party Members are so sick of the whole process that they are prepared to tell the world "We could not bear to be Unionists for more than 24 hours, but we will do it for this purpose." That is the Alliance Party's principled stand.

I will give it one warning. If it has not learnt by now — *[Interruption]*.

Just listen to the warning; it is simple. Members of the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP are the people that the leader of the Alliance Party is relying on. They are the people whom he expects to ante up in any review. That is the position that they are adopting.

What did they say in this debate? Where were the words of reassurance from the Ulster Unionist Benches or from the SDLP? Does he think that their silence is accidental? Can he trust them to fulfil their obligations in any review? They will have already delivered by the time that that review comes around. The leader of the Alliance Party should know from experience —

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

I have a problem at this point, because one of the Members who spoke named another Member, and that Member has appealed for an opportunity to reply to what was said. Mr Cedric Wilson named Lord Kilclooney.

Lord Kilclooney has requested the opportunity to reply. I think that it is only fair that he be given the opportunity to reply to the remarks made by Mr Wilson.

Lord Kilclooney: First, I can confirm that the DUP's legal action was dismissed in the Belfast High Court today. Can I refer — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it right for Mr Taylor again to mislead an elected Assembly? What happened at the court was that the Secretary of State said that he would be calling an election.

Mr Speaker: Order. We should remain within the Chamber for the present, particularly to give Lord Kilclooney an opportunity to respond to being named by Mr Cedric Wilson.

Lord Kilclooney: I want, briefly, to — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Point of order, Mr Wilson.

12.00

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understood that you had given leave to Lord Kilclooney to address the comments made. He abused the Chair of the Assembly by taking the opportunity to speak about something completely different.

Mr Speaker: The Chair is used to being abused.

Lord Kilclooney: I will be brief, Mr Speaker. Of course there will be an election — the question is when.

Mr Cedric Wilson referred to me by name. It is a normal courtesy in parliamentary affairs that when a Member refers to another Member, the former gives advance notice. I regret very much that Mr Wilson misbehaved in this manner. I hope that the next time he mentions a Member by name, he will at least have the courtesy so to advise him.

The Member said that the Ulster Unionist Party had not fought to retain the Royal Ulster Constabulary. Let us get the facts right. Well — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Kilclooney: It was the Ulster Unionist Party that tabled 200 amendments in Parliament to benefit the Royal Ulster Constabulary — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear what the Member is saying. I ask the House to give the Member a hearing.

Lord Kilclooney: And, of course, the DUP — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understood that the hon Member was making a personal statement because of a personal attack.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is mistaken. Lord Kilclooney is not making a personal statement. A personal

statement would require the Member to give me a written note of precisely what was to be said. What I gave the Member — and I explained this to the House — was an opportunity to respond to the fact that he had been named by Mr Cedric Wilson in a particular regard.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you draw our attention to the Standing Order that allows someone to make personal remarks after the winding-up speech on an amendment?

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the Member can draw my attention to the Standing Order that forbids it?

Mr P Robinson: The Standing Orders do not allow it.

Mr Speaker: The whole question of personal statements, in case the Member is not aware, is dealt with in 'Erskine May', not in Standing Orders. The Speaker is entitled to call whomever he wishes, at whatever point he wishes.

Mr P Robinson: Not after a winding-up speech.

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that the Member is, yet again, wrong. I am not taking any further points of order. This is a piece of silly nonsense. Frankly, it feels less like a pantomime than a circus, with me as the ringmaster.

Lord Kilclooney: As you say, Mr Speaker, this is not a personal statement. It is part of a normal debate responding to allegations made by Mr Cedric Wilson. As I pointed out, we in the Ulster Unionist Party tabled 200 amendments in Parliament to the most recent Police Bill. The DUP did not table one amendment — not one. That shows that party's lack of support for the RUC — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Lord Kilclooney: I can hear some ignorant comments from some of the DUP Members.

I will explain the name of the RUC. The Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 says that

"The body of constables known as the Royal Ulster Constabulary shall continue in being as the Police Service of Northern Ireland (incorporating the Royal Ulster Constabulary)."

Mr Speaker: Order. This is going wholly wide of the debate.

Mr McGrady: In this debate, and indeed on Friday, much comment has been made about principles and democracy. It has been implied that principles and democracy can be protected only by the immutability of the Standing Orders of this Chamber. Those who used that argument ignored the fact that Standing Orders were created and enforced by the Assembly itself, conforming where required to the statute that set up the Assembly and reflecting the good sense and intent of all Members. Correctly, Standing Orders also

embody special safeguard provisions with regard to parallel consent and weighted majorities.

Those safeguards are there. They have not been tampered with, and they cannot be tampered with, denied or amended without the work of others outside the Chamber. The motion makes no attempt to change those safeguards, which are there for Unionists and Nationalists alike. No debate or motion today changes that fact. I hope that the safeguard of parallel consent will apply eventually to the motion we are debating. The DUP, by its amendment, has indicated its clear understanding of how Standing Orders can be used. That is its entitlement.

The motion concerns designation, not Standing Orders. Designation does not enjoy the same immutability — indeed, it would be odd if it did, because development and change could not be accommodated. Members would not be able to express their designation more fully or more precisely. The right to choose should not, and cannot, be expunged.

Designation as Unionist or Nationalist has a relatively clear meaning. The designation “Other” is less clear. Those who freely choose to use that designation feel that their votes are less valuable than those of people who are designated Unionist or Nationalist. They feel that their votes are not equally counted and that their mandate is not equal to that of other Members. Their votes are not counted in cross-community votes in relation to the Nationalist or Unionist community, even on crucial issues that affect the very existence of this devolved institution.

The motion enables that deficiency to be resolved temporarily until the matter can be examined more fully in the light of current experience. This can be achieved through a review of strand one of the Good Friday Agreement as provided for by paragraph 36. The Secretary of State has announced that such a review will commence on 19 November 2001. Until that review happens, I urge Members to accept that basic justice must be done to reflect democracy in the House, as expressed through the ballot box, and that the motion be carried.

There has been much abuse bandied about the House today concerning pantomimes and circuses. The DUP engaged in a series of vitriolic attacks on Members. Perhaps its wonderful circus act of riding two horses at once is competing with what it alleges is a pantomime. It takes the advantages of the Assembly and the benefits of office while trying to bring it down. Its other act is wearing a bit thin for public consumption — the mystery of the disappearing and reappearing Ministers. Watch that Cabinet very closely — a new face might come out of it before we finish today.

Let us not talk about circuses and pantomimes. Let us talk about the reality of our purpose today. The DUP has consistently tried all types of manipulations

in the House and elsewhere to frustrate the will of the people of Northern Ireland. That will not happen, because the expressed wish of those people is that the Assembly should continue.

Mr Speaker: In the normal course of events, two Questions would be before the House at this point — the amendment standing on the Marshalled List and the motion to amend Standing Orders. As a petition of concern has been received in respect of the motion, I propose to leave both votes until a later time. The Business Committee will meet at lunchtime today to consider the matter.

ELECTION OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My information — and, of course, it is subject to confirmation — is that the Secretary of State's counsel has declared that the Secretary of State intends to propose a date for an election after consultation with the parties. There are only two ways in which an election can be called. First, after the natural efflux of our term — four years, or whatever it may be — and, secondly, following the failure to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister within the six-week deadline.

If the Secretary of State accepts that he is now under an obligation to propose a date for an election, it can be based only on an acknowledgement that the time for the election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister expired at midnight on Saturday. That being the case, to go through the pantomime of electing a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, in circumstances where it cannot be valid, should at least prompt you, Mr Speaker, I suggest, before proceeding further, to seek some information as to the exact circumstances of this morning's court proceedings.

Mr Speaker: The House is always impressed by the Member's presentations. However, having considered the matter in advance, having heard what the Member said and having received a note about what happened in court, I find myself quite unconvinced by the Member's arguments.

Mr McCartney: That is a shock.

Mr Speaker: I mean the Member no harm, but his arguments do not convince me, and, therefore, we must continue.

Mr McCartney: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am always willing to be persuaded, as are other Members. Therefore, perhaps you will indicate the nature of the information that you received that would demolish my argument. I am always willing to listen.

Mr Speaker: There is no need for us to go through that. The situation is clear. The Secretary of State has said that he will propose a time. The Member may be trusting entirely in whether the Secretary of State will carry through on what he said; I do not place myself in any position in that regard. It will depend on whether there is a successful outcome to today's proceedings. However, the Member's remarks about the six-week deadline are manifestly wrong.

Mr McCartney: I do not think so.

Mr Speaker: The Member may think not, but in that case, perhaps he should have gone to the court — perhaps he would have got a different outcome. The outcome of the court proceedings is quite clear: there

is no injunction against our proceeding, it is perfectly legitimate for us to do so, and, therefore, we ought to proceed.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Democratic Unionist Party asked the court to consider, under section 32(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, whether the Secretary of State had a duty to call, or to propose a date for, an election. The idea behind that was clear — it was to force the hand of the Secretary of State to do what he is legally required to do. The Secretary of State's counsel put on the court's record that the Secretary of State recognises that he has a duty to propose a date for elections and that he will consult the parties about that. That makes it clear that the Secretary of State recognises that his legal responsibility comes after the six-week deadline has expired. If the six-week deadline, within which the Assembly had the opportunity to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister, has passed, how can we possibly consider that item on the agenda?

Mr Speaker: I have tried to explain the matter, in as much detail as I think reasonable, to the House. While I hear the Members' arguments, I think that they are mistaken. It is entirely for them, if they wish to challenge any outcome, to take it to court, and, if the court strikes it down, it strikes it down.

However, I am not persuaded by the argument. I have received a note from my own counsel that it is perfectly appropriate —

A Member: Change your lawyers.

12.15 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member may be happy to dismiss not only those who are not lawyers, but even those who are. However, I will stick with the counsel that I have.

Mr McCartney: That is clear.

Mr Speaker: I should think that it should be clear. In my profession, one generally does not deprecate the work of other professionals, but it may be different in the legal profession. However, for the moment — *[Interruption]*.

Order. For the moment we shall proceed with the election of the First and Deputy First Ministers. I propose to conduct the proceedings on the same basis as on the previous occasion, which was as long ago as Friday 2 November. I will begin by asking for nominations. A proposal must include nominations for both First Minister and Deputy First Minister. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded — *[Interruption]*.

Order. I think it would be unwise to miss any of this — you might get it wrong.

I will then proceed to ask for further nominations. If further proposals are made, the process will be

repeated until there are no further nominations. At that point Members may, if they choose, debate the proposals. I propose — *[Interruption]*.

Order. The Member may be setting aside her opportunity to be proposed.

I propose to conduct one debate on all the proposals, and no Member will be permitted to speak more than once. I shall then put the question that the first pair of nominees be the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of the Assembly. However, that cannot be done until the time set out in the petition of concern has passed. So, today, after any nominations are made, there will only be the debate. I trust that that is clear, so we will proceed.

Do we have any proposals?

Sir Reg Empey: I propose that the Rt Hon David Trimble MP MLA be First Minister and that Mr Mark Durkan MLA be Deputy First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Is there a Member to second the proposal?

Mr Mallon: It is still my pleasure to propose David Trimble as First Minister and Mark —

A Member: Durkan.

Mr Mallon: Mark Durkan. I thank the Member — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. This degree of cross-community co-operation is not required.

Mr Mallon: I thank the Member for his assistance — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Mallon: There are so many marks of Cain about this place at the moment that it is difficult to remember.

On Friday, I placed on record my views about the proposal that I am seconding. I do not wish to repeat them. Suffice it to say that I am confident that the two nominees will be able to bring some dignity and decorum to the proceedings — which, I regret to say, is very badly needed.

Mr Speaker: Does the first nominee, the Rt Hon Mr David Trimble MP, accept the nomination for First Minister?

Mr Trimble: I accept the nomination. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Members may not have heard clearly, but the Member accepted.

Mr Mark Durkan, do you accept the nomination for Deputy First Minister?

Mr Durkan: I accept the nomination, with assistance from the Benches.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

As there are no further proposals, the time for proposals has passed. Several Members have indicated that they wish to speak, and I remind Members that they may speak only once.

Sir Reg Empey: I reiterate many of the points that I made last week. However, I wish to add other points. I believe that the people of Northern Ireland want devolved Government to be given the opportunity to prove itself. At the beginning of the process we set out with two objectives in mind: to ensure that devolution was established and maintained; and, in order to sustain devolution, to ensure that all parts of the Belfast Agreement were operational. That meant that the decommissioning process would commence.

Many issues that were raised in the previous debate are again relevant. Cedric Wilson's remarks drew attention to the fact that there are a variety of opinions on the fundamentals of the agreement. Both sides' views are legitimate. I believe, and have maintained the belief within my own party, that one should not be demonised because one does not agree with the agreement any more than one should be demonised for supporting it. Those people who are morally indignant about certain things that are happening here should perhaps examine their own behaviour in the past three and a half years.

First, Democratic Unionists and others decided to abandon the talks that led to the Belfast Agreement. That was their decision. If a party walks out of a process before serious negotiations take place, it is inevitable that those negotiations will not bear that party's stamp, nor will they include the, perhaps valuable, contributions of that party, which might have helped mould the debate. It comes as little or no surprise that it does not like the outcome of the talks — it does not like it because it was not present and was unable to influence it.

Rev Dr William McCrea: We did not have to buckle.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member's party did not have the bottle to go in and negotiate, but it has the bottle to sit here — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. Settle down.

Sir Reg Empey: The DUP has had the bottle to attend 2,000 Committee meetings. It has had the bottle to stay in office. The party said that it would rotate its Ministers. That rotation mechanism was designed to keep the seats warm for the current occupants of the two ministerial posts. The DUP's tongues were hanging out to return to office. If the DUP is so opposed to what is happening in the Assembly, if it does not like the system, if it believes that the system is tarnished and inappropriate — well, nobody is forcing that party to be here.

Moreover, the DUP talks vividly about the presence of Sinn Féin and about its opposition to that party. Those are perfectly legitimate points of view. However, some of those same people ensured that Sinn Féin represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone in Parliament.

We can shout at one another and guffaw in the Chamber; we can point out the hypocrisies that abound. However, that disguises our main purpose, which is to try to provide good governance for the people of Northern Ireland. We wish to sustain an economy that will provide worthwhile work and a future for our young people, so that they will be able to remain here and avoid the emigration that so many generations have had to endure. We want to provide and improve health, education and housing services, and to address all the other social and economic problems from which our community suffers.

We must ask ourselves whether any of those areas would be improved by the reintroduction of direct rule Ministers to run the Province, or whether they would be better dealt with by this House. The vast majority of people, regardless of their views on the fundamentals of the agreement, believe that devolution is a better solution to our problems than the alternatives that have been in operation for 30 years. Direct rule did not bring peace or the lowest unemployment figures for generations. It did not, and will never, bring about the enforcement of the rule of law that we wish to see.

We can absent ourselves if we like, but I suspect — and the evidence supports my argument — that, since we came here in 1998, no Member has rushed out of this Chamber. Everyone present then — bar the fatality of Mr Benson and the resignation of Mr Hume — is still here, despite the views expressed by some that they were so appalled at the prospects that they could not stomach it. They seem to be able to stomach it, and that is also the case at the end of every month.

We should proceed to put in place the entire Administration. That would give us the opportunity to test and provide good government. It would also allow us to ensure that, against the background of the global economy before and since 11 September, we can compete in a situation where every region of Europe and of the Western World is scrambling for a diminishing supply of inward investment. Some might not be bothered about that — I am, as is the average person in the street.

Those are the issues that matter to people, and the histrionics of the Chamber are secondary to the question of whether people have a career and an opportunity to live a decent, dignified life in peace, enabling them to get on with their work. Those are the things that, given the opportunity, this Assembly could deliver. People might try to shout me down, but I will ensure that as long as I have the opportunity I will say my piece, and I will not be shouted down. I commend the motion.

Mr Mallon: On Friday I described Sir Reg Empey as “a fine young man”. I have since been taken to task on the grounds that that comment might diminish his standing in the Assembly, his gravitas and his authority. He is a fine young man, and those who wish to define “young” can do so.

I have three serious points to make. The first is that in this Chamber in 1973 I witnessed behaviour that I hoped would never be seen again in any elected Chamber. We had “performances” — and that is the only term that I could use — by many during those debates. I even saw fisticuffs in the Chamber at that time. I would have hoped that in the subsequent 30 years things might have changed. I believe that they have changed, and that underneath the bombast and the sotto voce contributions there is a recognition that what is happening here will last, that the entire community wants to be part of it, and that any ultimate stability will be based on politics. I do not want to see a return to the performances of 1973.

I know there are — and there will be — Members who find it impossible not to make snide remarks, and who regard themselves as the star of the show and a great comic act. However, we are not dealing with a comedy: we are varying between tragedy and farce. Tragedy exists on our streets, in our towns and in our homes, and we are not doing anything to resolve it; we are adding to it with the farce that is created in the House.

My second point is a serious one. Since last week I have heard much debate on Standing Orders, voting methods and procedures contained in the legislation and in the agreement.

However, the procedures are not deficient or at fault. Without intending any offence, I must say that the fault, when it comes to Standing Orders, the legislation and the voting requirements, lies in the number of Unionist parties. I may be wrong, but I have counted five Unionist parties. I may be one out — and I am not taking into account the halves that may well be added before the end of the week. That is what is at fault.

12.30 pm

A fractious, divided Unionism is not capable of, or competent in, maximising the Good Friday Agreement. That is not the business of Nationalists or of others. It is the business of Unionism. There is a concern and a willingness inside and outside the House to help those in the political process who find themselves in that difficult position. There are those who will spurn it and scorn it. However, there comes a day for everyone when help and tolerance is needed, and nobody should forget that.

In many ways we have had an unseemly week and an unseemly weekend. I do not want to see the Assembly,

the Executive and the political process being manipulated by anyone — not least by a Secretary of State. Our political process can, and must, stand on its feet without gimmickry, manipulation, and without people's having to pull rabbits out of hats every week.

Mr McCartney: Was it not a horse?

Mr Mallon: A rabbit is not a horse; rest assured of that. If we are honest, no amount of reviews will cure the problem, because the problem is not in the procedures. No amount of interventions — *[Interruption]*.

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

Mr Mallon: I thank the Speaker for his indulgence, but I ask as a final shot — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It ill becomes the Member to read homilies. I remember the vicious and diabolical attacks he launched against the UDR and the unanimous decision taken by all but two Unionist Members that we would leave when he rose in the House. Two Members would not leave. One of them was Reg Empey, and he is still running true to form.

What is the aim of the motion? The aim is to get IRA/Sinn Féin into Government. I carefully noted what Mr Empey had to say. He said that it was to get all of them into Government, which can only refer to IRA/Sinn Féin. That is what we are asked to do. Then when we use our democratic rights to try to implement our mandate, we are not supposed to respond to how we are treated. Fascism does not want an opposition. Sir Reg Empey does not want an opposition; he certainly does not want Unionist opposition. Sir Reg Empey has gone round the country — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: He has gone round the country telling people about salaries. He has never mentioned the fact that he gets his whole salary, but that the people that he is attacking only get one third of their salaries. He does not think that the public should know that. He does not tell the truth. If the people of Northern Ireland send a party — *[Interruption]*.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member has stated that I was not telling the truth. I want that remark to be withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: Dr Paisley, the Member has asserted — and I think that it is true — that you accused him of not telling the truth. He asks that you withdraw the statement.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I will change it: he has deliberately misled the people. Of course, if he met the truth, he would not recognise it.

Sir Reg Empey: Is that a withdrawal or not?

Mr Speaker: The question is whether Dr Paisley has withdrawn the remark. Dr Paisley, have you done so?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Yes. I made another remark — a remark that is acceptable in the House of Commons. It is used regularly there, so I am on good ground. Hansard can verify that.

Mr Speaker: I fear that the Member is right; it has to be used very often in that place, but I trust that it will not be used here.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There is no rule against saying that a person misleads people. I know the sensitivity of the Member on this matter; I can understand that.

Mr Haughey: Will the Member give way?

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: No, I will not give way. I would not give way to you in North Antrim when I beat you in the elections, and I will not give way now.

Are people who disagree with the so-called agreement entitled to come to the Assembly? It is interesting to note that all those to whom Mr Mallon referred back the agreement. Those on our streets, causing the mayhem and trouble, all back the agreement. Why then take it out on those who disagree? They continue to do what they told their electorate they would do. In other words, they come here and resist as hard as possible any effort to take us further towards unity with the Irish Republic.

“An IRA arms handover would not be enough to give Sinn Féin seats on the Executive. If punishment beatings are continuing, if training, targeting, if units are still active on the ground, then the purposes of decommissioning would purely be fraudulent.”

Those were the words of Sir Reg Empey. Then, when I say a hearty “amen” to that, he tells me that I should not say it in the House. He will say that to the electorate, like his friend, Mr Taylor, who has left us; he is Lord “somebody” now — I do not remember the geographical locality that he chose for his lordship. What a misleading statement he made today. What happened not far from here at the headquarters of the police? They took down — *[Interruption]*.

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

Mr M McGuinness: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When my time ran out on Friday I was about to quote Christopher Logue on Apollinaire:

“Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
Come to the edge
And they came
and he pushed
and they flew.....”

That sums up what is happening in the House today. We have seen the comedians at work this morning, and they have had a laugh at the expense of many Members. However, we shall have the last laugh. Before this week is out we will elect David Trimble as First Minister and Mark Durkan as Deputy First Minister. That will be quite an experience for us on the pro-agreement side. I hope that as a result of our efforts, and for the sake of our people and our children, this peace process will, at long last, fly. It is our duty and our responsibility to ensure that. I look forward to working with those Unionists who do want a Catholic about the place. I do not know them very well, but I have met them over the last 18 months in different situations. I say, without fear of contradiction, that there are decent people on the opposite side of the House who want to see Fenians and Catholics about the place and who are prepared to work with me to bring about the essential change that the Good Friday Agreement promised all our people.

I look forward to working with the SDLP, the Women's Coalition, the Alliance Party and the PUP. I also hope that at some time in the future the Democratic Unionist Party will recognise the need to be part of that change. The DUP is not there yet, but we can bring it there.

I have listened to people say that Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds enjoy their Ministries, that they like the place and that they are quite content with everything. I do not believe that to be true. I believe, from witnessing its behaviour, that the sectarian wing of the Assembly is dedicated to the total collapse of the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process.

What is the peace process about? It is about people, education, health services, culture, arts and leisure, the environment, finances, the economy, further and higher education and the education of little children. It is about making lives better. We are in this position today because we have made great advances in our process recently. People said that the DUP's main aim was to bring about decommissioning and that nothing else in the process mattered. I believe that the decision taken by the leadership of IRA was the worst nightmare of the DUP and of those opposed to the search for progress and change on this island.

Our job is to ensure that the power-sharing arrangements continue. It is the duty of the pro-agreement parties this week to cross that vital Rubicon together. We have shown that we can work together and that we can create the new future that all our people want. That future includes power-sharing institutions, equality, justice, an end to domination, the demilitarisation of our society and the taking of all the guns — Irish and British — out of Irish politics. It is also about the all-Ireland institutions and moving forward to create the new future that we all crave. Go raibh míle maith agat.

12.45 pm

Mr Ford: I rise as leader of the Alliance Party, a party committed to the centre ground, to support the nominations of David Trimble and Mark Durkan to the posts of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. I need not repeat the comments expressed on Friday. Everyone knows where my party stands on the need for progress under the agreement and on the need for people to be seen to be working together and for a collective approach.

It is absolutely clear from the reactions that I have received over the weekend that there is a huge will in the community to see the Assembly make progress and to see the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to match the other Ministers who are in place and to match the workings of the Assembly and its Committees.

Many people have told us over the last several years what they will and will not do. I am prepared to swallow my pride in certain respects. There are clear assurances that there are moves to resolve the difficulties that were demonstrated last Friday. I recognise that others have done what they previously said they would not do. I can remember when Sinn Féin spokesmen told us that the IRA would never decommission, and the IRA has decommissioned. Whether or not some people believe it, I believe that Gen de Chastelain is an honourable man, and his word is good enough for me. That is why we asked him to come — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: We are incapable of dealing with serious issues such as decommissioning. That is why we have had to ask for help from outside. It is time that we grew up and took on the responsibilities ourselves. That is why we must elect the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

I am also conscious of all that Sinn Féin has meant to the DUP, or what the DUP would not do with Sinn Féin. However, every Member knows that we have rotating, hokey-cokey DUP Ministers playing a part alongside Sinn Féin Ministers and that DUP Members sit in Committees negotiating and talking with Sinn Féin Members. So, if we are going to talk about charades and pantomimes, let us remember that the DUP has made its efforts here a complete pantomime and charade for three years. If some of us must live with that for 24 hours, we shall because the greater good requires it. *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ford: It is also essential that we deal with our problems and that a review makes serious progress on them. I shall be voting for David Trimble and Mark Durkan. I shall do that with pride, not in the designation I hold at the time, but as a representative of the vast

majority of the people of this community who want us to go forward together.

Mr C Wilson: Everything has been said that can be said about the proposed appointment tomorrow of Mr Trimble and Mr Durkan. As we shall not have an opportunity to debate the matter tomorrow, I want to bring these proceedings to a conclusion by appealing directly to the Ulster Unionist Members to examine their consciences between now and whenever the vote is taken. They should consider whether their loyalty is correctly placed and whether they should have more concern about loyalty to their party leader, which is normal in a party — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is only fair to hear the Member out.

Mr C Wilson: They should have consideration for their party. However, the priority for Ulster Unionist Members, when they consider this matter overnight, should be their country. They were charged, when they were elected, to defend Northern Ireland's position as an integral part of the United Kingdom. There is no doubt that the decision of the House tomorrow will greatly affect the future of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom. They should disregard the final attempt that was made by Mr Trimble and those in the Ulster Unionist Party to coerce them into supporting his reappointment and therefore the reappointment of Mr Martin McGuinness and Ms de Brún, and the continuation of the Executive and the Assembly.

Members should consider the latest promise — because we have moved on to another piece of nonsense from Mr Trimble and his party. Mr Trimble told Ulster Unionist Party members and its executive — and no doubt he will tell the council when it meets — that all decommissioning will take place by February of next year. I am certain that if the Members on the Sinn Féin/IRA Benches were honest, they would tell Mr Trimble and the Ulster Unionist Party that there is no chance of any such thing happening.

Mr Trimble has misrepresented the facts. He tells the House that decommissioning will have to be completed because the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning is due to wind up its work in February. A review is to be held in February 2002 as that is normal procedure in United Kingdom legislation. That is not required in the Republic of Ireland. The British Government will review Gen de Chastelain's position in February and will appoint it for another five years.

In a few months or a few years, the Ulster Unionist Party may be sitting in an Executive with a party that is inextricably linked to a terrorist organisation — a party that continues to hold weapons and a large arsenal. The violence, targeting and all the other activities in which it still engages will continue. Every member of the Ulster Unionist Party must consider that; they

need not point the finger at Mr Trimble or at the party executive when that becomes apparent.

The Ulster Unionist Party Members have a choice. In years to come, when their children or grandchildren ask them where they stood on the issue of putting Sinn Féin/IRA back into Government, it is to be hoped that they will be able to hold their heads high and say that, when the chips were down and the votes were counted, they took a stand, not for the Ulster Unionist Party but for Ulster and for Northern Ireland's position in the United Kingdom. It is hoped that they will say that they took a stand for democracy, decency, and law and order.

Tomorrow's vote, should the Ulster Unionist Party permit it to happen, will affect the future of Northern Ireland. Members are corrupting the democratic process and undermining the rule of law and order in Northern Ireland. The reappointment of Mr Trimble will underline Northern Ireland's departure from democracy and from support for the rule of law.

Ms Morrice: I add to the debate my voice, my vote, the vote of my Assembly Colleague, Monica McWilliams, and the vote of the people who elected the Women's Coalition so that it might participate in the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The Women's Coalition's ability to ensure that its votes counted in the election was only made possible by the initiative that it took on Friday to allow re-designation to have immediate effect.

As Members know, the Women's Coalition Members changed their designation — myself to Unionist and Monica McWilliams to Nationalist — to reflect directly the party's cross-community nature. By its actions, the Women's Coalition called into question the discriminatory nature of a system that does not take the votes of "Others" into account. The Women's Coalition believes that every vote in the House should count in this crucial election, and it is pleased that on Friday it opened a door for others to follow.

However, I wish to emphasise one point, perhaps to Mr Trimble himself. It has been said that the Ulster Unionist Party leader, the person who has been proposed as First Minister, should only receive genuine Unionist votes. I remind the House that David Trimble can only be elected by Unionist and Nationalist votes and that Mark Durkan can only be elected by Nationalist and Unionist votes.

I want to make this clear. We are voting for a slate that is neither one thing nor the other. It is both. We support cross-community coalition government.

The election is about more than putting the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in place. It is about sustaining the institutions of the agreement. The DUP says that it will use every opportunity to bring

down the agreement, including the use of ministerial “musical chairs”. That minority will use every procedural mechanism to usurp the will of the majority of people in Northern Ireland who voted for the Good Friday Agreement.

As demonstrated on Friday, the Women’s Coalition can use procedural measures in a more noble fashion in the pursuit of positive democratic advancement in recognition of the democratically expressed wish of the people of Northern Ireland.

Those who challenge the election of David Trimble and Mark Durkan fail to recognise that the two largest parties should have the posts of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. There is no question about that.

The anti-agreement parties speak nonsensically about legitimacy and motives for re-designation. Mr Mallon pointed out that we have seen schisms, party formations and individual and collective splits throughout the anti-agreement camp. The election is about getting ourselves out of a political limbo and back to the business of government.

That is possible because of new and exciting events in Northern Ireland politics. Parties have been standing separately behind the roadblock of decommissioning. That roadblock has been lifted. We must choose to walk through together or stand back alone.

Mr McCartney: I listened to Reg Empey defend the agreement with all the ferocity of a toothless sheep. Is this the Reg Empey who, when the Brooke/Mayhew talks foundered upon the rock of SDLP intransigence, wept and said that for people like him, the sticky fingers on the levers of power had gone for a generation?

This is the man who proclaims the great successes of devolution. What are its great successes? The economy and unemployment figures were not dependent on anything that the Assembly did. We simply rolled forward on the benefits of a world economic cycle, which is now going the other way. Reg Empey and the Assembly are powerless to do anything about that. He tells us about the great benefits that the Assembly will bring to the Health Service. The Health Service is in a disastrous situation, worse than that which prevails in the rest of the United Kingdom. He tells us about education. Education was the one area of government that succeeded under Northern Ireland provisions when comprehensive provisions in the rest of the United Kingdom were having a disastrous effect on its education system. That will all go. Those are the benefits of the Assembly.

Mr Mallon tells us about the great changes that have occurred since 1973. Great changes indeed.

We now have the political representatives of armed terrorists, Loyalist and Republican, in Government: that is a great change. He dismisses adherence to the

procedures of government as unimportant. One of the greatest English jurists, Sir Henry Maine, said that:

“Many of the most important and major principles of the law are contained in the rules of procedure.”

The rules were not laid down by anti-agreement Unionists; they were put into the Belfast Agreement by the pro-agreement parties and by the two sovereign Governments as a safeguard against a breach of the kind that is intended today. The rules were put there to ensure that the balance between Nationalist and Unionist opinion was preserved and that the form of government was truly cross-community.

1.00 pm

The enlightened Jane Morrice talked about the discriminatory nature of the system. The system was put in place by the parties to the agreement as a safeguard provision. Now, because the system does not suit, it has suddenly become discriminatory. Safeguards are abandoned because they no longer suit.

Ms Morrice also spoke about sustaining the institutions of the agreement, but she forgets that she tore up one of the most fundamental institutions of the agreement — a safeguard for ensuring that only a majority of Unionists and a majority of Nationalists could take certain decisions, including the election of the First Minister. She also talked about majorities. I understood that the difference between devolution in Northern Ireland and that in Scotland and Wales was that the latter had majority systems. We did not have a majority system; we had a cross-community system, based on securing a majority of Unionist votes and a majority of Nationalist votes. It was not intended that that would be defiled and distorted by transvestite Members and horses’ asses.

There are people here who do not understand the basic principles of democratic procedure. The ends are being used to justify the means. Ms Morrice is a very mixed-up person. The Assembly is being turned into a laughing stock, and the man and woman in the street know that.

Mr Speaker: We have reached the end of the debate. In the normal course of events I would put the Question, but, because the matter is subject to a petition of concern, it will, as with the previous Question, be put at a later time.

**ASSEMBLY:
BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

Resolved:

That Mr Maurice Morrow should replace Mr Nigel Dodds MP on the Business Committee. — [*Rev Dr Ian Paisley.*]

Mr McGrady: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of the discussion about timetabling and the need for the Business Committee to meet to consider that matter, may I suggest that the Assembly adjourn for approximately one hour to allow that business to be done.

Mr Speaker: The Assembly suspends — rather than adjourns — for lunch. That happens by leave of the Assembly. Are Members content that the House suspend for one hour and resume at 2.00 pm?

Members indicated assent.

The sitting was suspended at 1.04 pm.

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

2.00 pm

DRAFT BUDGET STATEMENT

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie): We return to more prosaic matters. If all the huffing and puffing, by some mischance, blows the House down, it would be just as well to leave the books in good order. I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the Draft Budget announced on 25 September 2001 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

On 25 September, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Durkan, presented the Executive's draft Budget proposals for the financial year 2002-03, in accordance with section 64 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In making his presentation, the Minister acknowledged that Departments suffer serious pressures and shortfalls. The Committee recognises that, in producing the draft Budget, difficult decisions had to be made to strike a balance between competing demands across Departments, of which there were plenty.

I have no doubt that the Minister and the Executive devoted much thought and a considerable amount of arm-wrestling to allocating finite resources so as to obtain the maximum return and to support the Programme for Government. Members must ask whether the correct balance has been achieved.

This debate will provide Members with an opportunity to comment on the priorities outlined in the draft Budget and to argue a case for any change to them. The Finance and Personnel Committee will be taking note of the issues raised by Members. It will reflect on those issues, together with written submissions from other Committees and produce a co-ordinated report on the draft Budget. On behalf of the Committee, I express appreciation for the timely and full responses that it received from every statutory Committee and from the Committee of the Centre. Those responses will be included in full in the report.

The Budget that we will finalise in December covers the second year of the 2000 spending review. There has been a relatively rapid growth in public spending since the comprehensive spending review of 1998. The departmental expenditure limits allocated by the Treasury show a rise of 5.8% in public expenditure in the financial year 2002-03, which is about 3% above general inflation. The allocations build on the 5.5% real-term increase in the 2001-02 Budget. However, even with these increases to the departmental expenditure limits — which the Treasury has indicated

we should not expect to continue after the 2002 spending review — it remains the case that most Departments are running to stand still.

The Minister, when discussing the draft Budget, and indeed any matter relating to finance, referred to the Barnett formula. Many Members feel that much can be gained by renegotiating that formula. The Finance and Personnel Committee has questioned officials closely about its application to Northern Ireland. The Committee recognises that Barnett is often weak at reflecting the particular needs of Northern Ireland, following some years of underinvestment in infrastructure and transport and in the acute needs of the health and education sectors.

Although it would appear that Westminster accepts that the shortfalls in public services require fundamental review, and, at the Westminster level, significant additional resources are being allocated, there is no guarantee that any Barnett formula consequential for Northern Ireland will focus on the same priorities. I reiterate that it is a question of deciding what our priorities are in Northern Ireland. I trust that that will consume some of Members' attention in this debate.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel shares those concerns about the Barnett formula and wants to see Treasury allocations to Northern Ireland reflecting the needs of the people. The Committee recognises that there is some need for caution. It is not axiomatic that Barnett should be regarded as the root of all evil. The Finance Committee welcomes the Executive's determination to address the Barnett issue and looks forward to an early report from the Minister on whatever progress is being made.

The Committee recently agreed that a research paper on Barnett that it commissioned should be made available on the Assembly Intranet. I urge Members who have an interest in the matter to have a look at that paper. The Barnett formula is by no means straightforward — it is surprisingly sophisticated in some of its manifestations. To inform a worthy debate on it and to drive any representations that are made to the Treasury, the more Members who get their heads around it, the better.

During last year's debate on the draft Budget, Members raised concerns about the Budget timetable and the need to involve Statutory Committees at an early stage when departmental spending priorities were being considered. The Minister said that those concerns would be borne in mind for the current Budget cycle, which would be initiated and run in tandem with the drafting of the Programme for Government.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recognises that the Executive have gone some way to meeting those concerns. This year's timetable has certainly been better than last year — although that would not

necessarily be difficult. On this occasion the Minister has brought the draft Budget to the Assembly at an earlier date, thereby giving the Committees an additional two weeks to scrutinise the departmental allocations. There is a general consensus that the extended timetable has proved valuable in allowing Committees, among all their other work, to plan and consider the details of the proposals for their Departments. There is also a feeling that it would not matter how early you started — you could always do with more time to consider those matters.

The publication for consultation of the Executive's position report prior to the summer recess was also a recognition that Committees and the public need to be consulted on the Executive's developing plans for the Budget and the Programme for Government. The preparation of, and consultation on, the report was, in effect, an additional stage in the Budget and Programme for Government consultation process. The Committee for Finance and Personnel found that useful.

The position report provided the Committees with a focus and a starting point for the commencement of budgetary considerations. In future budgetary cycles, that stage will grow in importance as Committees have access to service development agreements, providing much more detail than is currently available to use as benchmarks against which to assess departmental plans and allocations.

Most of us are just starting to focus on these public service agreements, but they will have an important role to play in enabling us to focus on whether there has been an increase or a decrease in efficiency of delivery within Departments. The Committee for Finance and Personnel welcomes these developments. However, the Committee remains concerned that further improvement in the process is necessary if Committees are to have sufficient and appropriate opportunities to contribute to the Budget process.

It remains the case that the earlier a Committee starts looking at the Budget for the subsequent year, the more impact it is likely to have on the outcomes. Essentially, it is never too early to start. Committees are beginning to identify, as the Finance Committee has, that the Departments may not be keen on Committees starting early. Indeed, from their point of view, Departments have more chance of getting their proposals accepted if a Committee starts late.

Members are now more familiar with the structures of the Departments that they scrutinise. I trust, therefore, that they can examine those matters further in advance and that they will be in a better position to drive the policies that are attached to the budgetary decisions. Nonetheless, I put on record my Committee's generally positive reaction to the improvements in the budgetary cycle. The Minister should, however, note

the intention of the Finance and Personnel Committee to pursue further improvements through its report on the draft Budget, which will soon be published.

Committees have expressed almost universal concern about the failure of Departments to consult them appropriately during the bidding round for the second tranche of the Executive programme funds. The allocations made to successful bids from the Executive programme funds represent a real increase in the Department's spending allocation, both in-year and across the budget cycle. There is probably a greater impact — certainly a greater discretionary impact — from the Executive programme funds than is likely to derive from this Budget round.

Unfortunately, the timetable for the Executive programme funds bidding process did not, in the eyes of many Committees, deliver an opportunity to be fully involved, informed or even properly engaged in the process. Owing to the serious problems identified with the process, the Committee for Finance and Personnel decided to act on behalf of the other statutory Committees, and of the Committee of the Centre, and to raise their concerns with the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

As a consequence, on 19 October 2001 the Committee published a report co-ordinating its views with those of the other Committees. The report outlined the problems and detailed 16 substantial recommendations for the attention of the Minister of Finance and Personnel and of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, who share responsibility for managing the Executive programme funds bidding process. The Minister is considering the report and will return to the Committee shortly to discuss methods and suggestions for improvements to the process. I assure him that Members and Committees expect to see a substantial improvement in that area in the future. In that context, it is never too early to start focusing on the next Budget, and by the same token it would never be too early for Committees to start focusing on the next round of Executive programme funds. In any case, the general criteria and the allocations to those funds are already well laid out.

I will not go into details of the Budget; my remarks are more general. However, I draw attention to one matter in the Department of Finance and Personnel. As well as conducting a thorough and strategic examination of the Executive programme funds, the Finance Committee took considerable pains to examine strategic issues in the Department of Finance and Personnel's central finance group section — if you like, the engine room for the Budget and the Executive programme funds process. Our aim was to ensure that the resources available to this pivotal part of the Budget management process were appropriate to meet the Department's objectives as set out in the Programme for Government.

From the concerns expressed to us by senior departmental officials, it was clear that resources in that area have been stretched to meet challenging objectives. As a result, the Committee for Finance and Personnel agreed that effective management of the financial process is essential if the outcomes that we all desire are to be achieved. The Committee, therefore, has supported, and will continue to support, the allocation of extra resources to the central finance group in the Department of Finance and Personnel in order to secure those objectives.

The purpose of today's debate is to give Members the opportunity to raise their concerns, to support various provisions, to pose further questions and to probe the issues. It will enable the Committee for Finance and Personnel to listen to and note the issues raised, to inform its proposals and to advise the Minister accordingly.

2.15 pm

That concludes my remarks as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; I now wish to make several personal ones.

Whether public services are delivered in the most effective way has become a national issue, particularly since the last general election. A great deal of soul-searching is going on over that. An interesting question arises as to whether responsibility for any fundamental changes, such as in how the Health Service is operated, should be transferred from Westminster, letting the devolved Administrations decide whether they should adopt them or not. That may well be what Westminster expects to happen. It does not need to be done in that way. We should also consider whether there is scope for the devolved Administrations to take the lead in reviewing how some services are provided and whether there is scope within existing departmental expenditure limits to look at things in what could turn out to be a radical way. I toss that thought out for consideration.

Members, and in particular members of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, must always focus on the fact that we are dealing with taxpayers' money. Those taxpayers come from throughout the United Kingdom, and it is important to ensure that they get value for money from the public services. The public service agreements and the service development agreements are new initiatives to assist in that. However, we must look at the administrative structure that surrounds how Departments exercise their different functions. Money is tighter than it was, and that should be a further stimulus to examine whether the administrative structures are appropriate or whether there is scope to pare them down and place more focus on outcomes and less on process. I trust that when Committees are scrutinising the work of their Departments, they will take account of those matters.

Taxpayers are becoming concerned about whether they get value for money from public services. If there

is to be an increase in general taxation, to go with the considerable increases that have occurred in past years, albeit of a stealthy nature, taxpayers will become increasingly cynical and question the real value that comes from that extra taxation.

I look forward to hearing the views of Members, and I welcome today's opportunity to have an extended debate on the draft Budget.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the opportunity that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has given Members to take part in a wider debate on the draft Budget. There is much to be commended in its proposals. The Minister has shown insight and fairness in dealing with the difficult task of allocating funds to areas of need and social deprivation.

As I have said before, it is easy to advocate change when in opposition, but it is not so easy when in Government. It is absurd to see the people who claim that they want change, and who are the most vocal about the Executive programme funds, resisting the mechanisms in the Budget for change.

We are all aware of the problems that many of the public services face, but rapid growth in that area is essential. At present, that growth still falls short of meeting expectations for service delivery, particularly in the health sector, where there is a serious deficit in funding for current needs, let alone increased future requirements.

The promotion of interdepartmental co-ordination to deal with issues that affect people with disabilities is a positive measure for building a stronger, more concerted way to alleviate current difficulties and to promote the social inclusion of one of the most disadvantaged sections of our population. Our aim is to provide better access to services and facilities for people with disabilities and to give them better access to education and employment. I commend the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning for addressing the issue in the draft Budget, because they are bringing people with disabilities into line with the rest of society.

The draft Budget contains a proposal to allocate an extra £20million for education in 2002-03. That represents an increase of 4.8% on last year's allocation. However, is that funding enough to make a real impact, particularly on TSN? Many schools are still experiencing funding difficulties, and, to advance the review of post-primary education and the review of local management of schools (LMS) grants, adequate funding will be needed to implement real change.

It is commendable that the Executive have recognised the difficulties faced by the education sector and that they have prioritised those needs. However, a revision of the Barnett formula would be preferable to ensure a

more equitable allocation of funding in line with England. However, there has not been a spending review in Westminster, and it seems that we still have to work within the constraints on our spending power.

I am concerned about the effects of the proposed £2 million cut in the local government resources grant. The consequences of that could leave less-well-off councils in a serious situation with regard to services for local communities. We need all Departments to examine their spending patterns to ensure that those are relevant to the real needs of the communities.

Our targets in the Programme for Government must be reviewed and examined regularly to enable us to turn them into realistically achievable objectives. However, we cannot do that without adequate funding in the first place. To achieve that goal, we must show support for the Minister of Finance and Personnel in his endeavours to secure greater levels of funding to benefit all our constituents.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rev Dr Ian Paisley): My Committee met the Minister on 12 October to discuss the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government. Members also agreed their formal response to the draft Budget during a meeting on 26 October. They had the chance to consider a draft of the contribution that I will make to the House today, and no comments were received.

One issue with regard to the draft Budget concerns my Committee more than any other: no provision is made for the implementation of the findings of the vision group's recently published report on the future of the agrifood industry. The Committee has not completed its own consideration of the report, and it will not agree with all of its recommendations. However, through the Assembly's research services, the Committee has established that many areas could be described as compatible or consistent with recommendations already made by the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in its inquiry reports.

On 19 October, the Committee met some of the authors of the vision group report, who expressed disappointment that the original bid for money had not been met. One of the subgroup chairmen pointed to the group's 208 recommendations and pleaded with the Committee to help secure the resources required to implement them. The Committee takes a similar line, pointing to its own two inquiries, which have resulted in four reports containing 73 recommendations. The vision group deliberated for more than a year, while the inquiries of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee lasted a year and a half. If there is no finance available to implement at least a proportion of those well-thought-out proposals, then all our time has been wasted.

The Executive's position report published in June 2001 asked Committees to concentrate on what will be achieved through Departments' programmes rather than on bids. However, in this case the Committee cannot separate those two aspects. If new actions are not financed, there can be no new outcomes. At best, the agriculture industry will remain in the doldrums it has descended into in the past few years. At worst, it may not survive at all.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's original bid was for £10 million per annum for implementation, but this bid seems to have been totally rejected. The Minister explained to the Committee that the proposed Budget settlement was a satisfactory outcome for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. She went on to outline her intention to bid for Executive programme funds for the necessary resources for the vision report, which she described as being £10 million — in total, presumably.

The Committee accepts that, for example, the new directions fund would be an appropriate source of funds for some of the actions proposed by the vision group and, indeed, by the Committee. There may also be scope for some reallocation of existing resources within the Department's budget. In the face of massive change in the industry, it is inevitable and desirable that the Government's approach must also change. However, it is not prudent to put all your eggs in the one basket. The Executive programme funds are limited, and there will be great pressures for access to them from all Departments. The Committee is concerned that the funds will not be able to satisfy the Department's implementation demands. Members are therefore convinced that there should be some mainstream element in the Budget to fund those actions. I would like to hear the Minister of Finance and Personnel's response to that theme.

There is a clear commitment in the Programme for Government to implementing an action plan for the strategic development of the agrifood industry. If the Executive are genuine in this commitment to the people of rural Northern Ireland — which we welcome — they must underpin that commitment by providing adequate resources that must be firmly established in the Department's budget.

I will continue when I am called again after Question Time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We shall resume the debate on the draft Budget statement at 4.00 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Cruise Initiative

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Armstrong is not in his place, so we will move to question 2.

2. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to give his assessment of the specific economic benefits of the cruise initiative. (AQO 333/01)

2.30 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The international cruise industry has been one of the fastest growing sectors in our travel and leisure industry. It brings substantial benefits not only directly to our ports but also to our visitor attractions, retail outlets, tour operations and hospitality establishments.

Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair:

Mrs Nelis: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am very encouraged by the Minister's reply, and I thank him for it. I seek assurances for local councils that will invest considerable finance in the cruise initiative. I understand the Minister's proposals to improve this. Can he assure local councils that are investing in the project so that they can assure local businesses that they will benefit from the spending of passengers who visit our cities through the cruise initiative?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct in saying that one of the key benefits — which we all hope for from this initiative — is that significant numbers of people who would otherwise not be visitors to Northern Ireland will come here. They will have an opportunity to visit various locations and will spend money in the areas where they shop or visit.

Ground handling agents are responsible for those visits, and they determine the itineraries on offer to passengers. This initiative, which is largely based around the Belfast and Londonderry conference, is only to get vessels into port. After that, the ground agents will offer various trips, which could comprise bus tours or walks into city centres.

The Tourist Board supports attendance at the major international conference, which showcases the cruise line industry. This projects Northern Ireland ports and helps them to attract attention. It has enjoyed a degree of success. Unfortunately, there have been some setbacks since 11 September. Renaissance Cruises has gone

into liquidation — a company that accounted for three or four visits to Belfast per annum. Londonderry has done well in recent years and is improving in this market. During this summer it has been clear that significant numbers of passengers can be brought in. I assure the Member that we hope to follow this up with a sales initiative later in the year.

However, events since September are working against us, as the Member will understand. I have no doubt that there is significant potential. I can confirm that we will link up with the western isles of Scotland. Our tourist office in Glasgow is discussing opportunities with Cruise Scotland Ltd for joint marketing and a possible joint Northern Ireland/Scotland initiative to ensure that cruise ships visit both destinations. We are also working with Cruise Ireland. We hope to cover as many bases as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McGrady has requested a written answer to question 3.

Bombardier Shorts

4. **Dr Birnie** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the implications for the scale of design work at Bombardier Shorts as a result of the recently announced job losses at the company.

(AQO339/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Details of the redundancies are still being discussed by the company and the trades unions. However, the company has assured me that the job losses will not affect its design and engineering capabilities in Belfast. I have also met trades union representatives and have asked them to keep me advised of progress.

Dr Birnie: Does the Minister agree that it is critical that, in order to maintain the durability of Bombardier Shorts employment in Belfast and Northern Ireland as a whole, the design department be retained at as large a level as possible in Belfast?

Sir Reg Empey: My views on that are well known. It is important to have the capacity to protect the long-term future of this and other companies. Some sectors have been under severe pressure in recent months, and those that have a significant research and development capability are the more stable.

Trades unions asked about design capability, and Bombardier assured my Department, not for the first time, that it remains fully committed. We are watching that closely, and we can tailor the letters of offer that the Industrial Development Board (IDB) makes to companies such as Bombardier to encourage that kind of development.

I assure the Member that I am satisfied with the replies I have received, but vigilance and care are needed to ensure that the potential for development is not lost,

because that is the key to the long-term security of the manufacturing facility.

Mr Wells: Following the lesson that has been learned from the excellent work done by his Department at the B/E Aerospace plant in Kilkeel, does the Minister accept that if Bombardier Shorts has a choice between downgrading a plant here and one in the States it is possible, with a high degree of support from the Department and the IDB and a good productivity rate, to retain the plant in Northern Ireland and save jobs? Shorts' productivity in Northern Ireland is good, so that can be argued successfully.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member is correct. Nortel announced that it is to cease manufacturing operations in County Galway and that it will move production to Monkstown, because there is a substantial research and development department of nearly 500 people. In the case of B/E Aerospace, I should put on record my appreciation of the help I received from several South Down representatives in that difficult situation.

Quality, expertise and being at the leading edge of production give the best security for the future, and it was the deciding factor in the two examples that we witnessed when confronted with potential job loss. I have no doubt therefore that it is the same for Bombardier Shorts.

Dr Farren and I have recognised that the ability to provide the right mix of skills at the leading edge of industry is necessary in the long term to protect jobs and to prevent plant closures, which were a feature of life in the 1970s. Northern Ireland gained much in the 1960s and lost it again in the 1970s, when we had a branch economy where factories were closed down. I agree wholeheartedly with the Member.

Dr McDonnell: The Minister told us that at present design facility and design work at Bombardier Shorts are guaranteed. Has he had any direct contact with the Bombardier Shorts management in Montreal? Is it possible to establish whether there is any further downside potential?

Sadly, one announcement of job losses may soon be followed by others. While I accept what the Minister has said — and I do not want to be negative — I am, however, a little worried that six weeks or two or three months down the line, gloom could set in again and the position could be reversed.

Sir Reg Empey: I share a certain degree of the Member's anxiety. I have had contact with Montreal-based senior management. I intend to visit the company there in the near future. I have taken those points up with the company. My concerns were dismissed as wholly unfounded, and I was assured that there was no intention to reduce the Belfast plant's design and engineering capability.

However, we all know that any business today is only as good as its last order. We all know that events can completely change estimates. Unforeseen circumstances can arise, as has happened in the last couple of months. Having said that, we have tested the company to the best of our ability. The company knows that we are helping it in processes and transactions that are focused. We are encouraging investment in that capability by profiling the assistance that we give to the company. In so far as I have sought guarantees, I have received them, but we must all understand that they are always subject to external issues. The Member will understand that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Although it is rather breaking with precedent, I shall, given that Mr Wells has already asked a question on behalf of his party, let Mr Shannon break with it because we shall probably have some time left.

Mr Shannon: Thank you for breaking with precedent. Can the Minister confirm that 619 people were employed in the design team in Bombardier Shorts in 1997 but that that number has been reduced to 368 in 2001 as a result of the 40 job losses in that area? That is at a time when the workforce at Bombardier Shorts has risen to perhaps its highest level for years. I am concerned about the numbers in the design team, given the past staffing levels and the numbers now.

Sir Reg Empey: I cannot confirm from personal knowledge those figures, but I accept the general thrust of what the Member said. I repeat that I have sought and received undertakings from the company. Regarding the precise methodology that a company with a design capability uses, the requirement for staff numbers may be linked in part to technology. The Member must understand that Shorts is an integrated operation with sites in different locations around the world. He must also understand that the company has been moving from the manufacture of aircraft to part manufacture of aircraft, so the processes and requirements are different.

However, I take seriously his main point that there are now fewer people carrying out that function. That does not necessarily mean that their output or capability is reduced by a similar amount. Senior officials in my Department are acutely aware of the situation; they are watching it and are contacting the company. We are in direct contact with the trades unions, and we have met the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions. Representatives from all the unions have spoken to the Department; we have discussed those matters with them; we are working closely together; and liaison arrangements have been established to ensure that the necessary information is flowing freely. I had a meeting with the company at the end of last week to pursue several issues with it.

I am acutely aware of the importance, strategically and otherwise, of this company to the Northern Ireland economy, and my Department is being as vigilant and helpful to the company as it possibly can.

2.45 pm

Derry City Council Area (Job Losses)

5. **Mrs Courtney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs lost in the past year in the Derry City Council area; and to make a statement. (AQO 346/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Between September 2000 and October 2001 6,930 redundancies were confirmed to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Of those, 604 were in the Londonderry jobcentre area. Despite this level of redundancies, almost 600 new jobs were created in the city last year. Furthermore, my Department's commitment to New TSN will ensure that disadvantaged areas such as Foyle will be effectively targeted through initiative measures such as Invest North West.

Mrs Courtney: I know that the Minister's commitment to securing jobs and reskilling the workforce is second to none. The previous question was about Bombardier Shorts, and I am anxious how the situation there might affect Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd. Was any question of further job losses in the Derry area raised during discussions with Bombardier Shorts?

Sir Reg Empey: I raised the issue of Maydown Precision Engineering Ltd with Bombardier Shorts and with its representative from Montreal and I was assured that they would be doing everything possible to protect the company. However, they could not give guarantees in blood.

I got the strongest guarantee possible, and we are satisfied that the company understands the importance of Maydown. It understands the potential of the facility there for the long term, and, in fairness to Bombardier Shorts, it has stuck with Maydown and has developed skills and capacities there. I visited the plant last year to find that it has moved forward in leaps and bounds. Maydown's problem is not with its work with Bombardier Shorts; it is with the work it used to have with Molins and the failure to get an adequate supply of parts manufacture undertaken. That is the major problem.

When a Minister is asked a question, the Department provides a briefing. The briefing for this question is exceptionally important and significant. It covers many issues that affect Mrs Courtney's constituency. With her permission, I would prefer to send her the entire briefing in writing. It deals with events over the past 12 months in the Londonderry jobcentre area. The

Member might find it helpful as it covers most of the issues that she wishes to examine.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister make it available to all Members by placing it in the Library?

Sir Reg Empey: Yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is that sufficient, Mrs Courtney?

Mrs Courtney: Yes, thank you.

Mr Armstrong: Does the Minister accept that pressure on the petrol industry has led to a loss of jobs in border areas, and has he discussed a compensation package with the Minister of Finance and Personnel so that those areas are not disadvantaged?

Sir Reg Empey: The Member and other Colleagues have raised this issue with me several times. I am acutely aware of the numerous filling stations that have closed in the past 12 to 18 months. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister made personal representations to the Treasury earlier this year at a meeting with the Chancellor. We have never ceased to be in correspondence with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury about the consequences. We have pointed out the losses of revenue and that this sorry saga is financing a whole structure of paramilitary organisations, which can make huge profits. We are pointing out that petrol imports to Northern Ireland have fallen by 55% over the past few years while vehicle numbers have increased by 22%. We estimate that between £100 million and £200 million per annum has been lost to the Treasury.

We therefore believe that measures must be taken to deal effectively with this matter. I acknowledge that the Treasury has increased Customs and Excise activity, but this is clearly not working adequately. I am aware of genuine cases of hardship.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel and I explored what could be done. Issues of compensation have been raised. To equalise the cost of fuel between Northern Ireland and the Republic would cost the Government of Northern Ireland £0.25 billion pounds every year. It is just not possible. However, I notice that fuel prices are down in some areas to 69.9p. I hope that those reductions continue and that the value of the euro will rise, giving us the opportunity to rid ourselves of this scourge once and for all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Tierney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. After the last question, did you go back to question 1?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No. It was a supplementary question.

Mr Tierney: Was that question supplementary to Mrs Courtney's question on job losses in Derry City Council? Was question 1 taken? I ask because Mr Byrne

has a supplementary to question one. You allowed question 1, and I am asking you to allow Mr Byrne a supplementary on question 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is the Minister prepared to accede to this request?

Sir Reg Empey: I was aware that the Member for Mid Ulster was not in the Chamber when question 1 would have been put. He did, however, submit a supplementary on job losses in the north-west. That is how he managed, with great ingenuity, to get his question answered. I am very happy to answer any questions that Members may have.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said about the difficulties suffered by petrol retailers. So many petrol stations in the counties of Derry, Tyrone, Fermanagh and Armagh have been closed that many legitimate petrol station owners are asking when the Assembly will deliver some meaningful help to them. Many of these own family businesses, and those who have remained open want reassurance that we are doing something on their behalf.

Sir Reg Empey: The Member and other Colleagues from West Tyrone have made a sincere cry from the heart. I have received several deputations, as has my Colleague, Mr Durkan. To our frustration, this is a reserved matter. The Assembly does not have power over excise duties. That is a matter for Westminster.

We have made representations at the very highest level. The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister went to see the Chancellor. Mr Durkan has been in touch with the Treasury, and my Department has written on numerous occasions. I have received delegations from the petrol retailers, and I have listened to the sincere and sorry stories that many have had to tell of how their livelihoods have been obliterated. The businesses that they built up over many years have disappeared before their very eyes. I sympathise with all the Members who are making representations on behalf of the petrol retailers.

However, as I have said, it is not a devolved matter. The Government must take us seriously when we point out that there is little value in having nominal excise duty limits when, in fact, the Treasury is losing money. More imagination must be shown in dealing with this matter. The smugglers who are illegally acquiring large sums of money and bleeding this industry to death are making the main gains.

If that were the responsibility of the House, I do not believe that Members would tolerate it for one moment. Sadly, it is not our responsibility. I hope that in the run-up to the next Budget, the Treasury will have listened to the representations that Mr Durkan and others have made and will try to end this scourge.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been asked to allow another supplementary question on this matter. No doubt the Member will realise that we have almost reached the end of the time allotted. Please be brief.

Mr McElduff: Does the Minister agree that the reason that many motorists travel to Monaghan or Donegal to buy fuel is the lower price there? Does he agree that there is an argument in support of the harmonisation of fuel prices at an all-Ireland level? Many MLAs of both political traditions queue up in Emyvale and Lifford to acquire petrol and diesel.

Sir Reg Empey: I have little doubt that the Member is not one of them. I understand that many people take advantage of the price difference. The undervaluation of the euro is an issue, but as it becomes more realistically valued the price difference will disappear.

Harmonisation can be achieved in other ways. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has tried to impress upon the Treasury that it is losing between £100 million and £200 million a year, that there is a regional dimension to that and that the Treasury has previously acknowledged regional issues in, for example, tax on airfares. The Treasury recognised that a specific need for air travel existed in the highlands and islands of Scotland, and therefore it reduced taxation of passengers to and from that region.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is making the case that there is also a specific need here. However, there are two aspects to the matter. There is the legitimate person who drives across the border to fill up his vehicle — that is an economic decision. However, huge amounts of illegitimate activity are being spawned and are fuelling all sorts of campaigns. That cannot be tolerated. It requires action across the board, and it is hoped that the Treasury will move quickly to staunch the flow of revenue and to eliminate a substantial flow of funds to those who are making that money for nefarious purposes.

The sitting was suspended at 2.57 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

3.00 pm

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure you do not need to be reminded, Dr Paisley, that points of order are addressed at the end of Question Time.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The point of order will be meaningless at the end of Question Time. The House is meeting tomorrow to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister. However, in every answer he gave, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

referred to “the First Minister” and “the Deputy First Minister”. I want that changed in Hansard to “the former First Minister” and “the former Deputy First Minister”.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will take up that issue with Hansard.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Higher Education Establishments and the Private Sector (Co-operation)

1. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to increase co-operation between the higher education establishments and the private sector. (AQO 347/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): Higher education institutions in Northern Ireland have well-established links with the private sector. The Department for Employment and Learning introduced the higher education reach-out to business and the community fund during the academic year 1999-2000 to facilitate further co-operation and develop the capability in universities to respond to business needs.

Initially, £2.2 million was made available to universities for the academic years 1999-2000 to 2002-03. This year that has been supplemented by an additional £200,000 to develop activities that have already been initiated.

Mr Armstrong: Will the private sector take an increased role in the building of new colleges?

Dr Farren: That question is somewhat marginal to the original question. However, if the Member has in mind the development of PFI schemes, he will be aware that the Department for Employment and Learning has been involved with the further education sector in promoting some PFI-funded schemes, for example, the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and the North West Institute. Recently, the Department launched the first phases of PFI schemes for the provision of new campuses at Omagh and Dungannon.

Mrs Courtney: I listened carefully to the Minister’s response on the reach-out to business and community fund and the additional funding of £2.2 million. Has the Minister any plans to further increase co-operation between the private sector and higher education institutions?

Dr Farren: The introduction of foundation degrees is a relevant and recent development. Foundation degrees, which are new vocationally oriented higher education qualifications, have been in operation since the beginning of the current academic year. They have been taken forward by university-led consortia involving the further education colleges and employers. The involvement of

further education colleges and employers under the leadership of universities from the design and planning stage of the nature and curricula of courses is a unique feature of foundation degrees.

The role of universities in the pilots will be to influence design and development and to quality-assure the delivery of the courses by further education colleges. Universities will award the foundation degree qualification. Employers will ensure that the programme matches current industrial needs. That will be achieved by the involvement of employers at the initial development and planning stage of specific foundation degree programmes.

Training Provision

2. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps will be taken to ensure that those recovering from mental illness and mental ill health will be provided with appropriate training for the employment market; and to make a statement.

(AQO336/01)

Dr Farren: Through its Disablement Advisory Service, my Department will continue to help people experiencing mental ill health to obtain appropriate training to help prepare them for employment. People can be referred to a range of training provisions, including further education colleges and training organisations, that provide specific services for those with mental health problems. The Department funds a number of training providers who specialise in that area.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his reply. In the light of the recent drive by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, carried out in tandem with the World Federation for Mental Health, to dispel the stigma attached to mental illness in the workplace, does the Minister anticipate further action from his Department to encourage the rehabilitation and integration into the community of people who suffer from mental illness? Asking firms to assist a number of individuals on their workforce would help employers to understand existing problems better. Through the social inclusion fund, does the Minister anticipate further programmes, either for group funding or individual retraining?

Dr Farren: My Department is in contact with representative organisations that are responsible for and support people with mental health problems to ensure that we meet their training and education needs. The Department's Disablement Advisory Service is monitoring the current provision, and we are always anxious to ensure that any deficiencies, gaps or further developments are identified so that all those who need that assistance will receive it. We have developed close relationships with employers.

Much of the current provision avails of funds from European sources. However, in a few years' time, there may be changes to the nature of the funding from those sources that could affect some of the programmes currently provided for those with mental health problems. We are monitoring and anticipating changes so that, when necessary, we shall be in a position to plan for further development and, not least, the continuation of current provision.

Student Numbers (Foundation Degree Courses)

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of students on foundation degree courses. (AQO 340/01)

Dr Farren: A total of 68 full-time and 60 part-time students have enrolled in foundation degree courses in seven further education colleges in this academic year. Those figures are on course to be close to, if not to meet, the target of 100 full-time student equivalents. That was the provision made available to the colleges participating in the scheme, which began in September 2001.

Mr Beggs: Is there any evidence that the new foundation degree course has encouraged additional students, or has it simply encouraged an alternative to or a substitute for existing HND courses? When will the Minister initiate a review of the effectiveness of that type of new course?

Dr Farren: The courses have just started, and the details for this year's enrolment in all higher education courses are not yet available, nor will they be for some time. We shall monitor the situation. There is a two-year pilot of the foundation degree programmes — the current intake and next year's intake — which will add 100 full-time student equivalents to the numbers enrolled for this year. The evaluation will proceed when appropriate this year and, much more, during the following two years, when decisions will be made on the future development of the foundation degree provision.

Mr McMenamin: How will the Minister evaluate the success or failure of the new foundation degrees?

Dr Farren: Foundation degrees will be evaluated according to the extent to which they meet the needs of the economy, with respect to the disciplines in which they are provided. Foundation degrees have been targeted at areas where there are skill shortages and at what might be called leading-edge industries, such as information and communication technology, multimedia, creative multimedia, telecommunications, computer networking, computing, computing technology and web technology. The satisfaction of universities and colleges, and the employers who are involved, will be a major criterion for the evaluation of the courses.

The uptake of the courses, and the impact of this provision on other higher education courses, particularly on competing qualifications such as HNDs or HNCs, are some of the criteria that will be considered when making the evaluation. We are committed to evaluating the degrees over this year's and next year's intake.

New Deal

4. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of participants who (a) have completed the New Deal training programme and (b) have obtained full time employment as a result of the programme. (AQO 334/01)

Dr Farren: Up to June 2001, 23,604 people had completed their participation in the New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds and 29,145 people in the New Deal for 25 plus. Of those, 9,585 and 6,944, approximately 40% and 25% respectively, are known to have gained employment within three months of leaving the programme.

Mrs Nelis: How does that compare with the Republic's FÁS schemes? Is the Minister satisfied that the quality and the duration of the programme assist participants to get meaningful work? Will he consider increasing the employment premium for providers — specifically for smaller, new providers — which might help more people to find employment when they have finished their training?

Dr Farren: I am not in a position to offer detailed information on comparisons with similar provisions in the South at present. If there are programmes that are comparable to New Deal, I will endeavour to obtain the information that the Member seeks.

We must appreciate that considerable evaluation work is being done on New Deal. One major independent report, which follows the experiences of a cohort of nearly 1,600 New Deal participants at an early stage of the programme, will be published next week. A copy of that report will be available in the Assembly Library. That evaluation found that participants generally had a positive experience of New Deal and believed that it had a beneficial effect on their chances of getting a job.

The follow-up to that report, which will detail the post-New Deal activities of that cohort, will be published in early 2002. My Department will also publish the findings of an independent qualitative evaluation of New Deal in December, and we are gratified by the information to be included in that report. Additional evaluation work continues.

3.15 pm

On the issue of employment premiums, I refer all Members to the current consultation by the task force on employability and long-term unemployment, a cross-departmental task force of which I am the chairperson.

The task force is taking evidence from a range of representative organisations, including employers, trade unions, voluntary organisations, community groups and training providers.

That process involves the consideration of such issues as the possible further assistance of people, particularly the long-term unemployed, to return to work or to take up work for the first time. I hope to bring the task force's report to the attention of the House early next spring. It would be wrong of me to anticipate the recommendations of the task force. However, the employment premiums that the Member mentioned in her question are among the issues to be addressed.

Mr Shannon: Can the Minister explain why those on the New Deal training programme are unable to apply for jobs or training through the Worktrack programme, especially if they have the necessary qualifications, expertise and the interest, as, undoubtedly, is sometimes the case?

Dr Farren: I am not aware of the detail of the qualifications that are inhibiting people from applying for training, but if the Member provides me with it I will give him a written answer.

Ms Lewsley: I welcome the Minister's comments on the ongoing evaluation of New Deal, a positive step by the Department. How much money has been spent on New Deal?

Dr Farren: In 2000-01, £24.5 million was spent on New Deal for 18 to 24-year-olds and for 25 plus. That includes New Deal personal adviser costs and other departmental running costs.

Employment for People with Learning Difficulties

5. **Mr M Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps is he taking to increase the participation of people with learning difficulties in all forms of employment. (AQO 350/01)

Dr Farren: The Department is keen to help those with learning difficulties to gain employment; it provides a range of support to help them. The extent of learning difficulties varies considerably, and my Department makes provision for as wide a range of needs as is practicable, including employment advice, access to appropriate training such as basic skills and specialist services, help with job placements and financial assistance.

Mr M Robinson: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he tell us when he expects to be in a position to detail further his Department's policy in respect of access to learning facing those with disabilities and learning difficulties as prioritised in the draft Programme for Government?

Dr Farren: As part of the Department's policy to widen access to education and training, enhanced funding is made available to colleges, through the further education funding formula, to encourage them to attract students with disabilities who may also have learning difficulties. That enhancement is applied through additional weightings in the recruitment and learning phases of the formula and is intended to reflect the additional costs incurred by colleges as a result of enrolling such students. The most effective way of targeting such funds is currently being assessed and reviewed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I ask the Minister for his assessment of the adequacy of the £2 million for disabled access, as included in the draft Budget for 2002-03, given that the Department's bid was for £3 million?

Dr Farren: Dr Birnie will be well aware that not all bids are met to the preferred extent. Therefore, spending has to be adjusted to the level of funding available. I have highlighted, as has the Programme for Government, the need to ensure that access for the disabled to training and educational facilities is such that they can fully avail of the opportunities and that their rights to do so are in no way inhibited by difficulties of access. There is a programme of work associated with that commitment, and ensuring that we can deliver on it as quickly as possible is very much determined by the level of funding.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister satisfied that sufficient funds are specifically available for young people with learning difficulties? I note that there is an increase of less than 0.5% for that area in the Budget for 2002-03. Is the Minister satisfied that he has the resources to address the problem, particularly with respect to those people who have serious literacy and numeracy problems?

Dr Farren: The Member's question relates to two provisions. As regards helping people with learning difficulties, we are endeavouring to ensure that everything possible is done to remove difficulties with respect to physical access. I indicated, in response to Mark Robinson's question, that there are forms of support and funding available so that people with disabilities can use college facilities to assist them in their study programmes.

Mr Dallat has frequently raised the issue of people who have difficulties in numeracy and literacy. He is certainly not allowing us to ignore the importance of addressing the needs of people with deficiencies in these skills. He will be aware that the Department for Employment and Learning is developing its strategic programme for literacy and numeracy. The essential skills unit of the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA) is undertaking considerable work, and I am endeavouring to ensure that an appropriate level of funding is available. As I told Dr Birnie, we do not always receive the amount that we bid for, but the Department for Employment

and Learning endeavours to use the funding in as precise a way as possible to expedite the programmes that it puts in place to meet particular needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up for questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning.

The sitting was suspended at 3.26 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Sir John Gorman] in the Chair) —

3:30pm

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Housing Allocation

1. **Mrs Nelis** asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment he has made as to whether the current system of allocating housing by points is addressing the social and medical needs of those on waiting lists for more than three years. (AQO 335/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds):

The detailed assessment process involved in the common selection scheme is designed to ensure that all housing allocations match the needs of applicants. The scheme was introduced in November 2000, and this month the Housing Executive intends to commence an evaluation of its impact.

Mrs Nelis: I am sure that the Minister is aware that there is great concern that the housing selection scheme has not dealt with the needs of this category of applicant. Will the Minister consult the Housing Executive on how the injustice should be redressed, and will the review deal with this?

Mr Dodds: When the evaluation begins, I am sure that the Housing Executive will be keen to talk to as many people with an interest in the matter as wish to contribute. I am sure that Members will make their views on the operation of the common selection scheme known to the Housing Executive. I regularly consult the Housing Executive on various issues, and I will undoubtedly consult it on the common selection scheme and its evaluation. I encourage Members and anyone with an interest in the matter to make their views known to the Housing Executive as part of the evaluation process, which will shortly be under way.

Mr O'Neill: Now that the Minister is back, I am sure that he can make a valuable contribution to the debate on homelessness that is under way in the Housing Executive.

I am glad that the Housing Executive is about to embark on a review of the new allocation system. Can the Minister assure me that the neighbourhood points scheme included in the old system will be addressed as

part of the review? Now that the scheme has been removed under the new selection system, I should like to review the evidence to assess whether the new scheme has been a disadvantage in some areas.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his question and his warm remarks about my reappointment —

Mr Kennedy: His remarks were not warm.

Mr Dodds: I took his remarks to be warm, although I am not sure whether they were intended in that way.

The Housing Executive will consider issues that Members or any other interested parties may wish to raise as part of the evaluation. I am aware of the issue that the Member raised, and Members from all sides of the House have made representations to me about their views on that matter. The Housing Executive will want to look at the matter, and I will also discuss that with it.

Housing Allocation (Portaferry)

2. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to ensure that new homes in the Portaferry area will be allocated to families living in the area. (AQO 344/01)

Mr Dodds: My Department's director of housing wrote to the Member on 24 October 2001 about the allocation of new houses in the Portaferry area. The Housing Executive is aware of the concerns of local representatives about the origin of applicants and tenancies allocated under the selection scheme introduced in November 2000.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome Mr Dodds back as the Minister for Social Development, and I thank his predecessor for considering matters that I raised with him. Does the Minister share local people's and representatives' concerns about allocation in the common selection scheme? They worry that it could be disruptive to an area with a good community spirit if troublemakers were allocated housing there. That was a concern when the houses were first built.

Mr Dodds: I thank the Member for his remarks, particularly those about my predecessor — I think that that view is widely held in the House.

This is an issue that the Housing Executive will no doubt consider as part of the evaluation of a common selection scheme. Members from various sides have made their views known, and my predecessor went on the record on the matter. At the moment, houses are allocated by a system of points allocation under various headings, but, again, I encourage the Member to make representations directly to the Housing Executive when the evaluation starts.

Mr Shannon: Has the Minister had any direct correspondence or discussions with the Northern Ireland

Housing Council about points allocation? Does he know when the re-evaluation will start and end?

Mr Dodds: I am not aware of any direct representations on that from the Northern Ireland Housing Council. However, I expect the evaluation to begin shortly, and I hope that it will be completed quickly so that we can make progress. I am tempted to say that it will perhaps be more than one week but less than 12 months, to paraphrase what another gentleman said on another issue.

Private-Sector Grants Scheme

3. **Mr Armstrong** asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the take-up of the private-sector grants scheme, particularly in relation to deprived housing areas of Northern Ireland.

(AQO348/01)

Mr Dodds: The Housing Executive has a duty to approve a grant application when a dwelling fails to meet the statutory fitness standard or must be adapted to meet the needs of a disabled occupant, regardless of the area in which the dwelling is situated. The scope for targeting deprived areas is therefore limited, and applications for grants are not categorised in that way.

From the beginning of the financial year to the end of September, 4,891 applications were approved, of which 1,737 were for properties that failed to meet the fitness standard or required disabled adaptations. Smaller-scale schemes accounted for 1,300 approvals. The number of approvals is expected to rise to about 9,000 by the end of the financial year.

Mr Armstrong: As the Minister is aware, Mid Ulster is a relatively deprived rural area, and schemes such as the private-sector grants scheme play an important part in improving the living conditions of my constituents. Will the Minister outline what future role he envisages for this scheme?

Mr Dodds: Successive house condition surveys confirm that the private-sector grants scheme plays a significant part in reducing housing unfitness. The most recent survey was carried out five years ago — it recorded housing unfitness of 7.3%. It is anticipated that the results of the next survey, which we expect at about the end of 2002 or early in 2003, will confirm a reduction in those levels.

A change has been proposed that would allow the Housing Executive more flexibility if better targeting is needed than that which is available from the present mandatory regime. A proposed discretionary scheme would help the Housing Executive to tackle social exclusion by supporting vulnerable people, improving the quality of the housing stock and by helping to ensure an adequate supply of housing to meet people's needs, particularly those living in rural areas.

Mr Fee: Does the Minister accept that there is a serious problem with the time scale for processing applications for disability adaptations and facilities under the private-sector grant scheme? One of the major problems is the pressure of work on occupational therapists and occupational therapy departments in the health and hospital trusts. Would it not be sensible to consider having dedicated occupational therapists, seconded solely to work on such applications?

Mr Dodds: Members will be aware of the delays that have been caused by the volume of work that occupational therapists have had to undertake. That matter is beyond the responsibility of my Department; it falls within the remit of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Attempts have been made to ensure that some adaptations can be made without a full occupational therapist's report, so that the work can be speeded up. When I was last a Minister, the Housing Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety worked on a review of the process.

We want to speed up the processing of applications as much as possible. If the Member has any specific applications to which he wishes to draw my attention, I should be glad to examine them.

Neighbourhood Renewal (Ballyhornan)

4. **Mr McGrady** asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking in respect of neighbourhood renewal for Ballyhornan, Co Down; and to make a statement. (AQO 338/01)

Mr Dodds: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, through its rural housing strategy, has been working closely with the residents' association in Ballyhornan for the past two years to tackle the housing problems in the estate. I am aware of the difficulties in the Ballyhornan estate, many of which are unique to the estate — for example, the problems with regard to the roads and sewerage systems, which fall outside the remit of my Department.

Mr McGrady: I thank the Minister for his understanding response. Ballyhornan is an old RAF camp that must be — Members will pardon the pun — decommissioned from a military environment to a civilian one. The problem is multidepartmental. Fifty per cent of the people living there are schoolchildren or elderly people; it is a huge social problem.

The Minister has already identified the cross-cutting nature of the problem. Roads were built, and sewerage and water pipes laid without any of the necessary planning criteria being met. In fact, no permission was required. Those systems cannot be adapted to modern standards, so Departments must get together to provide at least basic standard amenities. Would the Minister

lead an interdepartmental team? I have had several meetings with the Department of the Environment's planning and housing divisions and with other Departments. There has been some good co-operation, but someone must take a lead; otherwise the plans will get nowhere.

Mr Dodds: The Member has pursued the issue assiduously and has already spoken to me about it. He will have received — or will shortly receive — a letter from me, in which I offer the services of one of our officials to help to find a way forward on the housing issues.

I sympathise with the hon Member and his constituents and acknowledge the difficulties that they face. Such problems affect people's quality of life, but it can be difficult to organise a co-ordinated response. The Housing Executive, for which my Department has responsibility, is active in the estate already, drawing together the relevant agencies in an attempt to resolve the problems. The Housing Executive is trying to secure the co-operation of the relevant Departments and agencies.

Apart from providing £90,000 in grant aid for housing improvements, the Housing Executive is arranging for a mobile advice unit to visit the estate. That unit will promote home improvement options and will carry out a sample survey in the area to identify the issues of concern to local residents.

The Housing Executive has enlisted Groundwork Northern Ireland, together with Down District Council, to commence work with the local community group to plan environmental improvements for the area. My Department will play its part, and I am keen to see that it does, but since it is essentially a rural development matter, the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development may wish to consider her role in co-ordinating that strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That completes questions to the Minister for Social Development.

(Madam Deputy Speaker [Ms Jane Morrice]
in the Chair)

3.45 pm

DRAFT BUDGET STATEMENT

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the Draft Budget announced on 25 September 2001 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel. — [The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Leslie).]

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I want to comment on some aspects of the draft Budget for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Committee welcomes the additional £2.2 million allocated for BSE testing according to new European requirements. The Committee studied the bid carefully and supports it fully as an essential measure to regain export markets for Northern Ireland beef.

However, the matter was brought to a head by a visit of a committee of inspectors from Europe. Unfortunately, the Department had not maintained the full standards, and the leeway thus lost was used as an excuse to delay the vital decision of allowing our meat into the European market. Now that the Department has decided to spend this money, I trust that it will raise standards to the European level.

It is impossible to get away with anything in Europe. If one does not do it the European way, one brings disaster on oneself. If the standards that were set by the Department had been adhered to and the Committee had not been rushed, BSE testing might have been closer to the requirements.

The Department has allocated a further £2 million for the scrapie eradication programme. To the Committee's knowledge, that was not the subject of a new bid. There was a successful bid for £2 million in the 2001-02 financial year, and this £2 million is presumably additional to that. Can the Minister confirm that in his response?

Workload pressures on animal disease control are also quoted in the draft Budget as part of an allocation of £3.4 million. The Committee agrees that disease eradication should be a departmental priority. Much of the Department's annual Budget is spent on compensation payments to farmers whose animals fall victim to disease, particularly brucellosis and bovine tuberculosis.

Although it is vital to ensure that farmers' livelihoods are protected, a concerted effort must be made to eradicate disease. Compensation is not enough; eradication schemes must also be subsidised. Therefore, the Committee expects to see positive outcomes from the

Minister's reviews of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's disease policy.

Although it concentrates on the agrifood industry, the Committee does not ignore the plight of the fishing industry and of the rural communities dependent on that industry. The Committee notes that part of the draft Budget figure of £3.4 million is allocated to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

“to maintain existing service levels”

in several areas, including the cod recovery plan. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development was successful last year in securing £120,000 toward implementation costs in 2001-02. Members can only assume that this year's allocation will also go to the plan's administration and policing of fishing ground closures as part of that plan.

I want to remind Members that on 27 March 2001 the Assembly unanimously agreed a motion calling on the Minister to provide short-term financial assistance to the fishing industry to compensate for restrictions coming from the cod recovery programme. The Minister's reaction was that it was too late to act in the current year. She undertook to review the economic effects of the closures and to discuss the possibility of compensation, as permitted by Europe, with Colleagues in the other UK Fisheries Departments. However, she warned that it has not been the policy to compensate fishermen. It seems that one can take away a fisherman's right to fish and yet give him no compensation. That is intolerable. If extra funding can be found for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's administration of the cod recovery programme, it should also be possible to find funding to compensate fishermen for the sacrifice that they are forced to make when their fishing grounds are closed under the recovery programme.

The Committee must welcome the increase of 4.3% in the Department's budget. However, the Committee recommends, in the strongest possible terms, that the Executive allocate additional funds to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in support of two hard-pressed industries in the Province — farming and fisheries.

I am now taking off my hat as Chairman of the Committee and am speaking in a personal capacity. My Deputy Chairperson will be referring to the important matter of a retirement scheme. Each Committee member would be at one about that scheme.

I also want to correct a rumour that has come out of the Department. When Mr Hume and I, as Members of the European Parliament, met Commissioner Byrne, he told us that European money was available. Of course, that money would have to be matched on a retirement scheme. It has been put out by the Department that that could not be. I would have thought that the

Commissioner would know more about Europe than any member of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development or the Minister herself. The Commissioner did tell us that money was available. There were four witnesses — Mr Hume had someone with him, and I had my friend with me. Four of us heard it, and we had quite a discussion about it. If that is the case, there should be a move. There seems to be a tremendous hold-up when one mentions a retirement scheme.

I feel strongly about the fishing industry, and I regret the state that it is in. It is disastrous when men are put out of their livelihood, that their ships, with all the money that was spent on them, must be burned, battered and broken up, and nobody gets a penny. That is an utter scandal. If a man who has a boat leaves the business, why can he not sell that boat? It would not be used for fishing; it could be a residence or some sort of shed for use in the fishing industry. However, he cannot do that. No matter how many thousands of pounds have been paid, the boat must be broken up, and the fisherman must pay back the money that he got to repair that boat originally. I am glad that even the Alliance Party agrees with me on that one. I am thrilled to bits — *[Interruption]*.

Please do not transubstantiate yourself, or I might change my mind.

These are real wounds in the heart of the society of Northern Ireland, both in agriculture and in fishing. The Minister had to be Scrooge-like when he handed out his money, and I understand that. If the money is not there, he cannot hand it out. However, if we do not make some real moves to deal with these matters, the plight of agriculture and fishing will be even worse, and it will be even more difficult to extricate the fishermen from the mess they are in.

Dr O'Hagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have some general points on the draft Budget, and my Colleagues will make more specific ones.

We are tied to the budgetary plans of the British Exchequer, which for generations has had an obsession with cutting taxes. We need a real increase in investment in public-sector infrastructure. Preoccupation with tax cuts, ahead of the duty to schools, hospitals, pensioners and a whole raft of issues, is part of being tied to the political philosophy of the British Exchequer.

Our departmental expenditure limit allocations, as set out by the Treasury, show a rise in public expenditure in 2002-03 of 5.8%, or about 3% more than inflation. However, many of the costs that affect public services are rising at a faster rate than inflation. The allocations for 2002-03 build on the 5.5% real-terms increase in the 2001-02 Budget, which has allowed Departments to initiate the work started on the Programme for Government priorities.

The Barnett consequential that is used to calculate the block grant is unfair. It is a headcount that takes no account of need or of any meaningful adjustments to population structure. We have an ageing population, a high proportion of young people, higher levels of ill health and rural problems. There is an immediate need to increase spending on infrastructure, health, education, housing, roads, rail, and power, as well as on information and telecommunications technology.

Throughout the North of Ireland, and with the Dublin Government, we must find funds to build not just a North/South economic corridor, but an east-west, cross-border corridor. We do not want to see the good work done in the Assembly with the return of local democracy being undermined and undone by a parsimonious British Chancellor. An inflation-busting increase in the regional rates for the second year in a row will leave many businesses and households running for cover. Although businesses have been spared the worst of the increases with a 3.3% increase for the second year, householders have been hit by yet another 7% rates hike, also for a second year.

It is clear that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the entire Assembly need to unite and put that matter to the British Exchequer. There is a legacy of underfunding. We have a need that is not reflected in the headcount of the Barnett formula. We are a society emerging from conflict.

4.00 pm

Sinn Féin would like to see the creation of an all-Ireland economy. That is the only way that this island's economy can be more successful. The first step towards that goal is tax-varying powers for the Assembly. Unfortunately, we are not currently in a position to have those. In the meantime, we need a co-ordinated strategy to deal with the flawed and unfair Barnett formula that allocates our block grant. We need to ask why the massive British war machine expenditure has not been redeployed to support our transition to a more peaceful, stable, prosperous, fair and outward-looking society. The Assembly should also negotiate with the Irish Government for an increase in their commitments to expenditure on cross-border programmes and services, and on all-Ireland bodies through the North/South Ministerial Council.

We should work towards eradicating community differentials, ending discrimination and tackling disadvantage. We need to spend much more on the community and voluntary sectors, instead of starving them of resources. Their dire situation is compounded by the twin problems of the gap in the European funding that supports so much of those sectors' work, and the retreat of mainstream funding. The community and voluntary sectors deal with problems such as drug and alcohol abuse by giving advice and practical assistance. They

are a vital community resource, especially in the most disadvantaged and marginalised areas. Thousands of people employed in those sectors face job losses because of the lack of gap funding.

The regeneration of towns and villages is also a victim of the Budget, with annual allocations being slashed by 4.4%. Given the millions pumped into the Laganside project in east Belfast, expenditure on town and village regeneration should be given priority in order to create a level playing field.

Rather than tinkering around the edges, we should be developing a comprehensive plan to deal with the flawed and unfair Barnett formula that is used to work out our block grant allocation. There is also an onus on the Irish Government to spread the benefits of the “Celtic tiger”, and we need to put pressure on the British Government, not only about the Barnett formula but on the provision of the peace dividend.

The peace process has been in place for a number of years, yet we are still waiting for the money sucked up by the British war machine to be redeployed. We are a society emerging from conflict, continuing to suffer the social and economic consequences of that conflict. No adequate provision is contained in the Budget or financial estimates for the legacy of discrimination, inequality and injustice in the north of Ireland that needs to be redressed as a matter of urgency. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Close: I do not wish to use the opportunity afforded by this debate on the draft Budget to criticise the allocation of money to the various Departments. I am sure that the Minister will be pleased to hear that. Nor do I intend to rehearse the old arguments about the iniquity of increases in the regional rate that are above the rate of inflation. I am sure that the Minister will be doubly delighted to hear that. Rather, I shall use the opportunity to question the whole concept and methodology of our Budget process.

It has been three years since the Assembly first met, and in many respects we are still slavishly following customs and practices of the past. Although such practices may have served society well in the past, they ignore the stark realities of the present. The money that we are spending is not the Government’s money; it is not the Executive’s money. It is taxpayer’s money. That money is departmentalised — it is locked away in particular Departments. It is spent by Departments, and each is hell-bent on ensuring that it gets its percentage increase year on year oblivious to, or without concern for, the stark realities of life that exist outside.

The sums of money allocated and the percentage increases awarded can be justified when viewed in the context of a particular Department. For instance, who could question that more money needs to be spent on roads, transport, water and sewerage services. However,

the justification becomes less meaningful when viewed against what must be the Assembly’s number-one priority: the health of our people.

The Executive say that they prioritise expenditure, and to a small degree that is true. However, words have not yet been backed up with sufficient resources. The Assembly and the Executive pronounce publicly that health is the number one priority, but do Members mean what they say? Do the Ministers and the members of each Statutory Committee feel in their heart of hearts that health is the number-one priority, and do they treat it as such? Is their own Department their number-one priority? Do they not clamour year in, year out for more of that finite resource called money for their Departments? Ultimately, that is at the expense of health. Everyone wants his or her extra pound of flesh.

To say that there is a crisis in the Health Service is no exaggeration; it is an understatement. It is not an exaggeration to say that people are dying because of lack of resources. Thousands of people, maybe tens of thousands, are waiting for proper coronary care. The new cancer unit has been further delayed. There is a shortage of surgeons, nurses, beds, et cetera. Members could rehearse the problems, and they could beat their breasts. However, there is a huge void when it comes to doing what is necessary.

Over the past number of weeks I have tried to ascertain what the word “priority” means in the Assembly. I have asked all the Ministers to release at least £10 million from their budgets to alleviate the crisis in the Health Service. Such a move would increase the health budget by at least £90 million. I met with some interesting results. In a number of cases my questions were ruled inadmissible. However, I was not told that by any Minister: I was told it by others who appear to rule on whether a Member may ask a question on behalf of his constituents. That is a strange form of democracy.

Some of my questions were referred to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the grounds that it was his responsibility. That is an interesting concept. The Minister of Finance and Personnel apparently decides whether the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Department of the Environment, or any other Department, can release money. That is what I have been told. In one case I got a straight “No”. The Minister in question acknowledged the pressures on the Health Service but said that transferring £10 million would have severe implications for his or her Department.

So much for priority. So much for those citizens crying out for urgent health care. So much for those who are waiting on trolleys. So much for those who are dying. In the overall scheme of things, is it more important to save a life or to spend an extra £300,000 in support of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission, or an extra £500,000 on veterinary services? Is it not more

important to resource more nurses and surgeons than to increase expenditure on accommodation or give an extra £5 million to the Environment and Heritage Service?

Is transport more important than cancer care or community care packages? We are the guardians of the public purse. Our management of that purse must reflect the real and pressing needs of society — the taxpayers. Would a businessman or businesswoman continue with an expensive advertising campaign if that meant laying off production workers because of scarce resources and a cash-flow problem? Would the parents of a terminally ill child spend money on redecorating their home or buying a new car, or would they keep money in the bank if that money could save their child's life?

How can the Assembly justify keeping tens of millions of pounds in Executive programme funds for future spending, when people will die because that money is not being spent now? The draft Budget fails to give meaning to the word "priority". It fails the people. The Assembly has proved adept at changing rules over the past few days. I suggest that it put the same effort into changing practices of the past and give a real and meaningful definition to the word "priority".

Mr Watson: During the opening debate on the draft Budget on 25 September, the Chairman of the Environment Committee questioned the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the justice of the proposal to cut £2 million from the resources grant payable to those councils with the weakest rates base. Neither the Minister of Finance and Personnel nor the Minister of the Environment has explained the logic of that proposal. It takes £2 million from the weakest councils to pay for compliance with EU legislation that is primarily on waste management, which will benefit everyone, including people in the strongest rates-base councils.

I ask those Ministers again — and Members — how that stands with the key policy theme in the Executive's draft Programme for Government of targeting social need and the promotion of equality of opportunity. The Environment Committee has received letters from 14 local councils protesting against the £2 million cut and highlighting the unfairness of targeting the weakest rates-base councils. The Committee has forwarded those letters to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive, and has asked that the proposal to cut the local government resources grant be dropped from the 2002-03 Budget. Those letters show that the £2 million cut will have a major impact on local government services and rates in some of the poorest and most socially deprived areas of Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give this matter serious and urgent consideration.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Dr Birnie): I want to focus on two main areas in relation to the draft Budget: first, adult

basic skills, and secondly, research and development spending, particularly regarding Northern Ireland's universities.

I want to address the policy response to and funding of adult basic literacy and numeracy. The Committee for Employment and Learning was pleased that additional money was granted to that area in the first round of Executive programme funds. However, the sum granted at that time was less than the 30% of what the Department had asked for. No additional funding has been provided since then. Those problems are sufficiently serious to warrant further funding. This is a fundamental social problem that has implications for individuals' employability and state of health and has an impact on general economic growth and productivity.

4.15 pm

We welcome the fact that the most recent draft of the Programme for Government placed increased emphasis on that area. One quarter of the adult population here falls into the category of the lowest measured level of ability either to read or count. Along with Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the United States, Northern Ireland languishes at the bottom of the international league with regard to adult basic skills. This seems to imply that something systemic has gone wrong with basic education — particularly primary education — in the English-speaking world. That has happened in the past. Our priority is to ensure that this problem will never be recreated for future generations in primary and secondary schools. We also need to deal with those currently in the labour force who have a tragic inability to read or exercise basic numeracy. We appeal for additional moneys in that area.

My second concern in respect of employment and learning is R&D, as based in universities in Northern Ireland. The issue of the contribution of the training and education system to industry was given prominence in our Committee's report about three weeks ago. Subsequent to that report, the vice-chancellors of Queen's University and the University of Ulster gave evidence to the Committee in the strongest possible terms about what they saw as the inadequacy of the funding provided for R&D in general, and university-based R&D in particular.

There is a strong positive relationship between the proportion of R&D spending in any country or region as a percentage of regional or national gross domestic product (GDP) and the subsequent economic growth rate. It is worrying that Northern Ireland lies at the bottom of a second league table: that of Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. We fall in the class occupied by countries such as Turkey and Hungary. We have an R&D spend of only 0.6% of regional GDP, compared to 1% in the Republic of Ireland, where the spend has increased

rapidly over the last five or six years, and roughly 2% in the United Kingdom as a whole. Thirty per cent of the R&D spend in Northern Ireland is carried out in universities, compared to under one fifth in the UK as a whole. The universities will therefore have a pivotal role in increasing the level of R&D spend in Northern Ireland.

When presenting their evidence to the Committee, the two vice-chancellors argued very similar cases, making the point that the Welsh and Scottish Administrations have substantially increased the level of public support for university-based R&D since devolution. Locally, that has yet to happen to the same degree. It was also noted that a continued decrease in university-based R&D would have a negative knock-on effect on the economy and on society. The private sector would suffer from a resulting reduction in the numbers of so-called spin-off companies. Many of these are high-growth and high-tech entrepreneurial companies. There would also be implications for the public sector generally. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which rely heavily on the universities to do background research to aid the development of future policies, would find resources less forthcoming.

Both universities anticipate improved performance in the current research assessment exercise. Sadly, as things stand, there will not be enough money in the kitty to reward those university departments that have improved their measured research output with a commensurate increase in funding. This will remain true even if the bid for £4.5 million extra for university-based R&D is realised from the current round of Executive programme funds. Northern Ireland's universities, through no fault of their own, are slipping further behind their counterparts in Great Britain as initiatives and funding announced in London are not being read across to Stormont.

Other Departments may be able to make more apparently striking cases for extra money. However, the long term as well as the short term must be considered. The crucial point about R&D spending is that it is an investment. There is no doubt, according to the available evidence, that it helps increase future economic growth. For instance, it provides additional resources that could be used to provide funding for the health sector, which Mr Close talked about.

In a sense it is a partial answer to Mr Close's point about asking each Department to give £10 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That action might provide some short-term relief as regards waiting lists, but it would do nothing to generate future economic growth. That is the only sound and sustainable basis for an adequate level of health, social or educational spending in the Province. Unless the Northern Ireland Executive face up to the

challenge of matching the commitment to R&D already being shown by their counterparts in London and in the other devolved Administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh, devolution will fail to lay the foundations for a more prosperous future here.

I want to close by making some more general points about the Budget. To do so, I remove my Employment and Learning Committee Chairman's hat. I commend the Minister of Finance and Personnel on his stamina. By the end of the debate he will probably feel that he has heard many of the speeches before, and he is likely to hear similar speeches again in the future. That is the nature of such debates. Certain matters are so important that they deserve to be returned to again and again until the Executive deal with them adequately through the Budget and the Programme for Government.

The 2002-03 Budget is designed to deal particularly with changes in spending and to focus on areas that are deemed by the Department of Finance and Personnel to be new or inescapable commitments. It is not about a fundamental review of the baseline of expenditure and of the annual growth rate of expenditure of each Department. Such a fundamental review is projected for the following year's Budget. However, given that such a review of baselines is so necessary, I suspect that we will be treading constantly in that territory in the debate. Perhaps that is no bad thing.

In a debate such as this, many Members will yield to the strong temptation to bash the Treasury, for example, on the Barnett formula's inadequate funding of public expenditure here. In that context, I suggest that when Dr O'Hagan of Sinn Féin speaks about tax-varying powers, it must be recognised that that will almost inevitably mean substantial tax-increasing powers. We must be clear about that before we ask for it. The danger of asking for gifts is that you will be given them and that, sometimes, they are not really gifts at all.

On the point about the island economy and the alleged desirability of it, we must be clear about what is being asked for. The level of public spending in Northern Ireland is substantially greater by several billions pounds per annum than the level of tax revenues received. Therefore, if stress is being put on the so-called all-island, or all-Ireland, dimension, it must be asked whether Sinn Féin has asked the Minister for Finance in the Dublin Government, Mr McCreevy, whether he would be willing to contribute those several billion pounds, especially as his own fiscal position has become more difficult since 11 September. I am pretty sure what the answer would be.

As I understand it, the Executive programme funds were designed to engineer innovative areas of spending additional to what would have been spent anyway. Moreover, the funds were to encourage the so-called joined-up pattern of Government expenditure that we

have so often been encouraged to promote, particularly interdepartmental initiatives. It is a real source of regret that, as of yet, there have been relatively few such genuinely inter- or multi-departmental initiatives. Overall, there is not much evidence that the funds have been leading, at least so far, to genuinely additional, innovative or joined-up measures. There is a great danger that they have simply become a contingency fund for public expenditure in Northern Ireland by another name.

I support the motion.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr O'Neill): I thank the Minister and the Committee for Finance and Personnel for their combined efforts in ensuring that the budgetary process has, this time, allowed Committees to scrutinise the draft Budget allocations for their respective Departments more effectively than previously.

I have put it on record before that my Committee welcomed the additional allocations for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which totalled some £4.7 million. However, the Committee still has several major concerns about the level of underfunding that continues to inhibit the Department's activities. I am required to mention a few of them on behalf of the Committee.

The first is the safe sports grounds scheme, which was warmly welcomed by the Committee and the House when it was introduced. Unfortunately that scheme received only £1 million, when there was a lot more to be allocated in that direction. It is interesting and concerning that, of all the bids for sport in our departmental budget, that was the only one that received any recognition at all. The money received was below what was expected.

There was also great disappointment among the Committee Members because of the failure of the arts bids, which totalled some £4 million. Sometimes other Committees and those who sit on them forget that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has a very small budget indeed. If £10 million were taken out of it, as Mr Close suggested, that would be almost one sixth of the budget. Compare that with some of the higher-spending Departments — for example, one sixth of the health budget would amount to £250 million.

4.30 pm

Like-for-like calculations do not apply. We are working with such small amounts of money that often, if the figures for our projects were to be rounded up by other Departments, they would be "lost in the roundings". That would make a tremendous difference to our objectives.

It is important to bear in mind the need for serious action in the arts sector, particularly in the light of the launch of Belfast's bid to become the European Capital

of Culture 2008. That campaign is exciting and has captured the imagination of many, but it must be based on certain fundamental building blocks. One of the most important of those, which, in general terms would be considered a small bid — £1 million — is the Grand Opera House development scheme. The project would be a key plank in Belfast's application to become the European Capital of Culture, and recently the Committee was very concerned to note that there was a competing interest in the site. The Grand Opera House cannot bid for the site because of a lack of funds, and the expansion programme could be in jeopardy. A unique opportunity to enhance the arts infrastructure of the city would be lost, and it would be difficult to explain that in future.

The Committee is also concerned about such important institutions in the Department's responsibility as museums, the Armagh Observatory and the Planetarium. Recent research revealed that the budget for museums was cut by 8% in 1994. That historic underfunding has been inherited; the situation has never been rectified, and institutions have been trying to exist on a drastically reduced budget. The seriousness of the position is illustrated by the proposal to sell off Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland (MAGNI) property, at least in part, to meet the deficit. The Committee was concerned to learn about that proposal.

Our concern is that we will have to strip the assets of our arts and culture sector in order to survive. I place on record the fact that the Committee's deep concern was reflected in its strong opposition to such an approach.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has inherited a problem as a result of a library staffing review which was initiated by the former Department of Education for Northern Ireland at a cost of £10 million. The Department's bid for the £10 million to cover the cost of the review until the current year is OK, but, should its in-year bid fail, the Committee would not expect the Department to find the money from its own resources. That would also be our position on any in-year bid in 2003 for the additional £2 million that is still unmet in the draft Budget. The situation was not of the Department's making, and the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure would not support any attempt to fund a pre-devolution review from the Department's already inadequate resources.

However, the Committee expressed pleasure that the Department's bid for additional staffing had been met. That staffing is fundamental to departmental organisation, the creation of a proper corporate structure and the improvement of its services to customers and to the Assembly.

The Committee has known for some time that staff shortages have meant that progress on many important areas of work, which would have had a considerable

social and economic impact on the community, have had to be deferred. It hopes that the additional resources for staffing show that some recognition is being given to placing the funding requirement for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on a proper footing.

Leaving aside my role as the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I wish to ask a question on a matter that several Members mentioned: the all-Ireland economy. As we move to an integrated economy in Europe, has the Minister any comments to make on how Budgets, particularly in a cross-border setting, could be affected by the introduction of the euro? I represent a border constituency, and I know the concerns that many people have about the ordinary, everyday changes that will come about as a result of the euro's introduction. Has the Department of Finance and Personnel made appropriate plans to cope with any problems that may emerge?

Mr Shannon: Dr Paisley spoke about the fishing industry. He made the point about the shortfall and the need for support, especially this year, for the cod recovery plan. However, other issues must be reiterated.

The first issue came to the fore in my constituency in the past month. Complaints about health services apply across the Province, not just in Strangford. The worrying trend in Newtownards is that the trust intends to reduce the amount of time that home helps spend with pensioners and with the handicapped. That causes concern in my constituency and is a result of the stress and contraction of the budget that is allocated to the community care side of the Health Service. It is totally inadequate to deal with the needs of people in the area.

Several elderly constituents have contacted my advice centre. They were distressed because their home helps, who previously made their meals, had been replaced by meals on wheels, which the trust has said is more cost-effective. The trust has failed to acknowledge the therapy — I purposely use the word “therapy” — that home helps provide the people on whom they call. They do not simply make a meal; they spend 15 minutes to half an hour talking to the senior citizens or the handicapped people, who, in turn, are made to feel that despite being infirm they are not completely divorced from the rest of the world. We must address the despair and isolation that many elderly people feel, because, ultimately, that will lead to health deterioration and depression.

Last week, I met the chief executive of the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust. Although he sympathised with the home-help situation, he felt that it was the latest in a catalogue of budgeting blunders that have left the National Health Service, both in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom, at a loss. He reiterated that the necessary budget is not there to cope with the demands. Last year, the Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust provided nine additional

complex care packages. Members will know that there is now a greater demand on care packages; higher levels of need exist. This year, the trust has 60 extra cases, which compounds the issue.

The fact that the elderly population in Strangford is rising also adds to the problem. The population there contains 75% more elderly people than any other area in Northern Ireland. We have lost some nursing homes, and many residential homes cannot cope with the pressures that the system places on them.

In my trust area, we have been told that £500,000 would be needed to provide the appropriate level of home-help and care-package assistance. If we multiply that figure across the Province, we shall find that the issue needs to be addressed in all community trusts. It is hard to understand the situation here when we find that £300 million is available in England and Wales to get people out of hospitals and into the community. That money will dramatically reduce waiting lists. Why is the same emphasis not placed on solving the problem in Northern Ireland? Is Northern Ireland, once again, the poor relation in the United Kingdom?

Disabled sport is also affected by the draft Budget. We all remember the last Paralympic Games, and one would imagine that everyone would be behind our disabled sportsmen and sportswomen. Instead, we find that a paltry sum of £30,000 is set aside to appoint a development officer to an umbrella organisation. Nothing has been contributed to the Special Olympics. Given that our disabled athletes can bring home more medals than our able-bodied ones, the lack of funding is scandalous. Northern Ireland has many disabled sportsmen and sportswomen who were injured as a result of the troubles of the past 30 years. Often, the only release that those people can find from the frustration and anger that they feel towards those who caused their injuries is through sport. We should make every effort to ensure that disabled people who want to be involved in sport have the opportunity.

The Chairperson of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee mentioned the details of the bids. Looking down the list, I see that almost every bid was unsuccessful. It is frustrating that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee has been unable to achieve the level of support needed to deal with many of the matters that fall within its remit.

It is disappointing that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety seems more intent on spending money to promote the Irish language and her culture than on spending it on health provision that everyone wants.

A bid for £500,000 was put forward for languages, but it was unsuccessful. I am concerned, given the failure to provide money for languages, that Ulster Scots will not receive adequate financial assistance. There has

been a great resurgence of interest in Ulster Scots, but not enough money is being allocated to it. The BBC has an Irish programme on the radio every night and an Irish television programme several times a year. However, we are yet to see an Ulster-Scots programme, and I would like to see that happen. I know that that does not fall directly within the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, but perhaps such programme development is something that we should all work towards. The BBC must work towards it too.

Money must be put into the programmes that people want, and into language programmes, which are clearly needed. The failure to allocate sufficient money to the Ulster-Scots language is widely recognised. Such inequality and inequity is a bitter indictment of some people's lack of understanding about the rights and cultural identity that I share with many people in the Province.

I am disappointed that the bid for motor-sport safety improvements was also unsuccessful. Only one bid out of about a dozen was successful. The Committee tries to promote and ensure improved safety at road-racing circuits. Although £100,000 was set aside for that previously, the Committee is concerned that this year's bid for £100,000 has not been successful.

4.45 pm

Road racing is a unique sport in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is unique within the British Isles. Road-racing clubs and followers are keen to promote their sport, and it is important that the sport be encouraged and that it can progress. That can happen only if money is allocated for the necessary safety improvements. The clubs and the road-racing enthusiasts are keen to see improvements in the circuits and safety standards. It would not take much money to improve the circuits in the Province, but I am concerned that the £100,000 needed to ensure the short-term and long-term future of motor sports will not be provided in the Budget. About 100,000 people follow the sport — it is truly a sport for everyone, and it needs help.

Ms Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee has asked us to take note of the draft Budget announced by the Minister in September. Several Members have mentioned the problems faced by the Health Service as a whole. As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I shall give some detail of the problems faced by the Health Service daily.

Various groups have told us about the state of the Health Service. We have heard stories from children's organisations, the elderly, homes and hospitals, and we have heard about many problems from waiting lists to trolley waits. Everyone agrees that the Barnett formula is fundamentally flawed, that it is merely a

headcount that must be changed. The formula does not take into account our high levels of ill health and the many children at risk, our ageing population and long waiting lists. I could go on — the list is endless.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was informed that the Department's draft Budget bid was £275 million. The Committee was told that that was the amount needed merely to maintain the service as it is with its high waiting lists, trolley waits and so on. A plaster was put over them. However, the Department did not receive that amount. The amount received fell £121 million short of the original bid. I should like to ask the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel Committee and the Minister where that will leave the Health Service.

I totally agree with Séamus Close. I accept that this is a test for the Executive as a whole — they must tackle this problem, and by the Executive I mean every Minister in the Executive. This is a real test for collective responsibility.

Several weeks ago the Health Committee sent out letters requesting meetings with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. It might be easier if we could meet him when he wears both hats. This is not only the responsibility of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Finance and Personnel; there is collective responsibility in question.

The Finance Minister acknowledged that the proposed allocation to the Health Department would, at best, only allow it to maintain the provision of services. Critically, key commitments in the Programme for Government will have to be deferred. Given the serious situation which all parties have agreed exists, there must be a fundamental review of the allocation of money to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Members said earlier that if it means withholding funds from other Departments, so be it. Mr Close did point this out, quite rightly. Perhaps we can take on board what one Member from the Ulster Unionist party said about the Executive programme funds — allocate them to the Health Service to try to alleviate some of the pressures it is facing and the pressures it will face through the winter crisis.

I also sit on the Public Accounts Committee. Many who have spoken here today are criticising the Budget, saying there is a need for additional money for whatever Department or Committee they sit on. It is my view, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee over the last year, that public money has been wasted in various Departments. I need not rehearse the arguments because people have seen the media stories and have read the reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Committee. We must look closely at giving value

for money and at saving money from Departments rather than always crying out for additional money.

I stress that we need a review of the budget for the Health Service. Taking on board what the Deputy Chairperson has said, I shall take note of the Budget. However, I also take note of the present state of the Health Service and call for a fundamental review of its budget. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms McWilliams: I am glad to hear that the alarm is finally being raised in the Assembly about the disappointing increase in the health budget. Unless all Members and, indeed, all Ministers in the Executive come together and agree this as the number-one priority, we will bring disaster on those overstretched services, overstressed workers and demoralised staff — never mind what we are doing to the patients.

A real increase of only 7.2% was bad enough, but it will be even worse, going down, not up, to a 5.4% increase for 2003-04. I do not know whether any Assembly Member can walk into a local hospital or healthcare centre and tell people what he or she is going to do. They are cutting, and cutting and cutting. We need only look at the level of hygiene, the waiting lists, the patients on trolleys and the stressed-out workers who are just walking away. They feel — and they told us — that they cannot meet their professional standards.

This is not what people were promised, and I know that it is not the fault of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. It is time that we stopped leaving it at the Minister's door. I am also aware that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has done all in his power to deal with these matters. However, I ask him and the Executive to look at the matter again. We await the outcome of the September monitoring round.

I would also like the Minister to know that the Health Committee is trying to save money — he may not hear that too often. We are carrying out an inquiry into why 9% of outpatient clinics are cancelled, as that clearly wastes money. We are trying to find out if some of that money can be recouped for the Health Service. It has quite a lot to do with consultants cancelling appointments at short notice — I hope that it does not happen in psychiatry, Mr Speaker, but I hear it is happening right across the board.

I agree with Mr Shannon that we could also save money in community care. The statistics speak for themselves. If we had enough packages, we could immediately start to release some of the 150 patients who are in hospital beds only because they cannot move into the community. The Committee has calculated that, as the average stay in hospital is one week, 50 additional patients could be treated each week, which amounts to 7,500 patients a year. We must think about cost-efficiency and get a proper plan in place to co-ordinate

services, save money and put it back into the service, rather than constantly demanding more.

Are the Minister and the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel satisfied with the Executive funds? I can see neither rhyme nor reason to them, and I cannot understand how some of those headings and bids ended up where they are. They could equally come out of mainstream departmental funds, and we could explain them much more easily. They do not sit easily under their current themes or with the infrastructure funds, in which substantial funds are set aside for the development of hospitals or schools. Those moneys are welcome, but they should not be part of the Executive funds; they should be in the departmental bids, so that we can scrutinise those budgets properly. Only three of the funds were up for bids this time; the other two were not. It is difficult to keep the entire Budget together, and Committees find it hard to see what Departments are doing.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has fared badly, and I look forward to seeing whether the new cancer hospital at the City Hospital site will get funds under the infrastructure bid, which now seems to be the only bid that still has substantial funds in it. Perhaps the cancer hospital should not have been funded from that bid in the first place. I would never support salami-slicing the block grant in that way.

To what extent have the Minister and the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee been able to make criticisms of the waste highlighted in audit reports? Have Departments been asked to explain themselves? One example of such waste is the huge amount of compensation that was paid out by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development after the Department allowed its own herd in the research centre to become infected with brucellosis and had to replace it. That was a scandal that should not have happened, as the Northern Ireland Audit Office stated clearly in its exemplary report. Has there been a proper inquiry? Our Departments would have welcomed the £22 million that was spent on that, rather than seeing it go on something that will not even produce any benefits.

There is also a question over some departmental running costs. Why did the Department for Social Development need an increase of £20 million — 12% — over last year's figure? There may be a reason why the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure might require a 21% increase — it is still a new Department — but why would an established Department require such a huge sum for administration or running costs? I have already said that that Department wasted £1 million this year on unpublished consultancy reports. Neither Assembly Members nor the public had the benefit of knowing what was in those reports.

There are still major concerns, and we have a long way to go to get it right.

5.00 pm

To offer the Minister some sympathy: I supported his call — and I continue to support it — to address the issue of rates seriously. If the Assembly is to be responsible and mature it can no longer expect to meet departmental bids if it does not, at the same time, ask people to address the issue of rate increases seriously. I take issue with Séamus Close — he cannot ask for money while simply saying that there should be some tax-varying power. I hope that such a proposal could be sold to people if the Assembly could show where the money was being put, particularly if it could explain that a certain percentage was going directly into health and education. I have no doubt that that would make our jobs much easier.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Savage): I have listened to the debate, and for the first time everyone agrees about one thing — they are all looking for support from the Minister. I agree with what the Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee said about the draft Budget and how it affects the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, particularly regarding provision for the implementation of an action plan for the agrifood industry.

There is one area that he did not cover — the prospect of an early retirement scheme for farmers. Members will know that it is a subject that I care deeply about. The Committee has also frequently stated its position that there is a genuine need for a retirement scheme and new entrants' scheme. As recently as 6 July, the Committee put down a marker that assistance could be sought for such schemes through the Executive. As the Chairperson said, Executive programme funds are likely to be oversubscribed and in big demand. There is no provision in the draft Budget for the introduction of a retirement scheme, which is necessary if farming in Northern Ireland is to be successfully restructured. The vision group, which has been working this past six months and which was referred to by the Chairperson, does not support a retirement scheme. Any funds ultimately secured for implementing the group's recommendations will not, therefore, go towards a retirement scheme.

There remains the hope that the Minister will be convinced that a retirement scheme is a constructive way of managing structural change. When the Committee met with the Minister on 12 October she explained that she had commissioned research on it that should be available next year. A year is a long time. I trust that the research will be closely considered. Retirement

schemes are run in parts of the EU, such as Holland and France.

One of the main objections to such schemes is the cost. In June, the Minister quoted a figure of £30 million for a scheme involving 750 farmers. That is nonsense. There are schemes taking place in other countries and they are self-financing. All such schemes need is the backing of the Government and the Department of Finance and Personnel. Cheaper alternatives are a fact and must be pursued.

If — and it is a big “if” — the Minister agreed to implement a retirement scheme, the main funding for it would come from modulation moneys, together with Treasury match-funding of those amounts. This is money that has been skimmed off farmers' direct subsidies and is matched pound-for-pound by the Treasury. It would effectively have no impact on the overall Northern Ireland Budget.

However, if there was a shortfall and modulation funding was insufficient to cover the cost of a scheme, I suggest that money could be found from the Budget. I am sure that fellow Committee members and other Members who understand farming would agree with me. In every other sector where recruitment difficulties are being experienced, such as teaching and medicine, the Government creates special financial facilities such as cheap, interest-free loans for housing for key workers, et cetera. A recent news bulletin reported that such incentives are being introduced to rectify a shortage of key-sector workers in an area of England. Why should farming be treated differently? Farmers do not want anything for free, and they are prepared to pay back any money that they might borrow under a long-term low-interest loan scheme — they are not scroungers.

If the farming industry is to meet the demands of a growing European market, it must receive the support of the Government. Primary producers and the manufacturing sector are too often ignored, yet they are the basic wealth-producers on which the service industries rest. If that attitude is not supported, economic decline will be inevitable. The vision group has called for

“a dynamic, integrated, innovative and profitable agricultural industry”.

However, we cannot achieve that without the restructuring of farming. Only the loan scheme proposed by our Committee will achieve all that, and it is accepted that loans must be paid back. Farming needs the protection and the backing of the Government. For too long this matter has been kicked into touch by the Minister. We debated the matter last December, almost a year ago. The Committee has now decided to initiate a study by a team of academics, which will bury a live issue in a committee of so-called experts. As I said last year, we need action. The matter should not be put on the back

burner — we need action today. The rest of Europe has no problems with such action, so why should we?

I welcome the improvements that will be brought about by budgetary increases. If we do not do enough to help the industry, we will only be playing about, tinkering with the side issues. Mr Speaker, given your farming background and your interest in the industry, you will know that, if farmers do not achieve support, we will be in trouble. Although many Members do not think very much about farming, it must be remembered that, if one of the aeroplanes taking part in the terrorist attack of 11 September had hit its target, there would have been a big dependency on agriculture. We must protect and take pride in the agriculture industry.

Mrs Courtney: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Budget debate. I will make points relating to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, of which I am a member.

In a recent Assembly debate on the safeguarding of industries in Northern Ireland, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment said that Northern Ireland faced its stiffest economic test in more than a decade. He also said that we must ensure that Northern Ireland is strategically placed to take advantage of the upturn when it takes place.

In the proposed Budget for 2002-03 there is a slight decrease in the allocation of funding to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: £7.7 million this year, £5.8 million next year, and £3 million the following year for the telecommunications strategy. The Department's ability to spend £7.7 million this year has been held back for various reasons. It is therefore important that the Department be given end-of-year flexibility to carry forward underspending from this year into 2002-03.

There are other concerns, particularly in relation to Invest Northern Ireland, which is the body that is to replace the IDB, LEDU, IRTU and some aspects of tourism funding. We need to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to Invest Northern Ireland for maximum effect and that regionalisation is top of the agenda. There has been an economic downturn with potential for job losses, particularly in the aerospace and airline industries. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee is anxious to ensure that if in-year bidding is necessary, it will be successful.

The draft Budget also indicates a decrease in EU support for economic development. Approximately £870 million of European funding is available to Northern Ireland. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee will be interested in how this money is allocated.

The encouragement of an enterprise culture in Northern Ireland is a stated objective of the draft Budget and requires new and renewed investment. This is particularly relevant at a time of economic uncertainty. The global

slow down, together with the terrorist events in the United States, has already begun to affect Northern Ireland's foreign and direct investment, trade and tourism adversely. It has already been noted that the most vulnerable sectors are those exposed to global export markets, such as engineering, information and communication technology and aerospace. In the current economic climate, we must put strategies in place to ensure that the economy remains fast-growing and innovative. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its agencies have successfully promoted Northern Ireland as an attractive location for inward investment and will continue to do so.

The draft Budget shows that energy efficiency and the use of renewable sources will be supported by an allocation of £1.9 million. It may be that the greatest potential for renewable energy and electricity here will come from immature technologies, which will need grant support to achieve commercial viability. If this is so — and the Committee has seen renewable sources in action — we will wish to ensure that the Department bids successfully for additional support for renewable energy projects. The Department also made a bid for £2 million to enhance the North/South electricity interconnector. This was unsuccessful, and it will need to be re-submitted.

In paragraph 5.7 of the draft Programme for Government, recognition of the important role of local councils in inward investment is welcome. It is noted that work with universities, further education colleges, local councils and the private sector will secure investment in 20 knowledge-based industries each year. It is not said where they will be located, nor is there any reference to TSN in this sub-priority that might suggest that priority will be given to sub-regions with high levels of unemployment. I ask the Minister to take that into account.

In paragraph 5.6, on promoting entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, it is said to be expected that

“local councils will continue, through the Business Start Programme, to play a key role, particularly in encouraging potential high growth businesses while our universities and centres of excellence will play their part.”

The business start programme aims for 600 new business starts by March 2005, and 120 high-technology, value-added spin-out and spin-in companies will be formed in research-linked incubator units. Twenty new and enhanced centres of research excellence will be established by December 2004. These centres are clearly expected to have a major impact on the future industrial structure of Northern Ireland through spinning and start-ups, numbering approximately 700 enterprises over the next three years. They will also, no doubt, affect inward investment opportunities in their catchment areas.

Paragraph 4.7 covers enabling the socially excluded to enter the workplace. Reference is made to 1,000

additional university places. This is most welcome. Travelling outside Northern Ireland to study places a heavy financial burden on those who must do so. The largest growth in forced emigrants has been among those in the less well-qualified categories that often correspond with those whose earlier educational experience was less adequate. However, local higher education places also sustain more local jobs in the higher education industry. I ask the Minister to apply TSN to the allocation of places to the various centres of learning in Northern Ireland.

In the Budget programme for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, I note that £1 million has been assigned to the development of museums. As this represents an important part of the tourist package offered by urban areas, and as industrially oriented museums can also support local industry, can consideration be given to the establishment of a museum in the north-west to celebrate the clothing industry?

5.15 pm

It is also important to note that the Budget provision does not take into account possible major infrastructure projects, such as the recently announced natural gas pipelines and the provision of broadband telecommunications in Northern Ireland. Those will be considered under the Executive programme funds, and grants for the gas pipelines will probably arise in 2003-04 and 2005-06, not in the current budget year.

It is also noted that the Executive have identified the areas of regional development, education and health as being in need of special support. It is unfortunate that due to a lack of resources the introduction of free nursing care for the elderly has been deferred. That shows the tough decisions that the Executive have had to make and will continue to make. I support the motion.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh mait agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and wish to debate some points regarding all Departments, not just the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Some Members have already mentioned the importance of departmental priorities. Members will agree that outcomes should be more important than the functioning or costs of a Department. That is certainly what those outside the Assembly believe. However, the reverse applies. Departments hold dear their spending power and sustainability — at the expense of everything else that happens beyond their Department and in public.

The needs of different areas should be regarded by Departments as a higher priority than they are at present. There must be a change of mindset in how Departments prioritise their bids, what they do with their money after receiving their funding and how they spend their money.

West of the Bann, areas such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone — indeed all of Tyrone — have always been given low priority by all Departments. Investment policy in those areas must be examined in the light of recent job losses in Fermanagh. How much will be spent on trying to change the situation in the likes of Lisnaskea, or will it be forgotten about as time passes?

I have a question for the Department for Regional Development concerning roads. Recent meetings with the last rotational Minister gave little indication that Fermanagh and South Tyrone would be treated with any sort of priority compared with urban areas or those that normally receive a high level of funding. Members request that funding for public transport and rail be dramatically increased in comparison with that devoted to roads. That is a very nice environmental policy, but those in rural areas do not have an option. The motor car as the main form of transport is not just an option there; it is essential and will probably be essential for many years.

It is unlikely that any future Budget will see a great deal of money being spent on public transport or a rail system into the rural areas of Fermanagh and Tyrone in particular. It is a non-event; it will not happen. How many passengers are brought by public transport — by bus or rail — into Belfast city centre on a weekday? How can the system be improved to move people out of their cars and on to public transport? People have got the wrong end of the stick when they start pushing larger amounts of money into public transport at the expense of rural areas, particularly where the local people will have to depend on their own transport for many years to come.

The aggregates tax is an environmental tax that exists for the right reasons in the right places, but it is an anti-roads policy.

I suggest to the Minister that road projects in rural areas need to be prioritised now because there may not be the possibility of road budgets in the future. The environmental policy will become stricter, and rural areas will be given a lower priority, and it may be impossible for rural roads to be brought up to the standard of roads in eastern areas. Roads in urban areas such as Belfast and Dublin will be looked after in the future. I ask that rural areas be prioritised.

Sue Ramsey mentioned that at present the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a standstill budget. That is intolerable. Other Members have mentioned the prime importance of health. Individual Members have priorities, but health must come above everything. Waiting lists must be examined. Cancer sufferers in Fermanagh must travel to Belfast to receive treatment where there are long waiting lists. That happens on a weekly basis. I was told recently that the trusts and boards have no idea how much

money they are getting to deal with winter pressures and expenses. We are close to that critical time.

Massive savings could be made through providing better community care. Monica McWilliams made the point that when cuts are made in community care the cost of acute services increases. People have accidents in the home because they do not have the proper care, equipment or facilities to meet their needs. When care is not given at an early stage, the later costs are vast.

The main priority of rural areas such as Fermanagh and South Tyrone is that of overall acute care and the sustainability of services. The Hayes review is heading towards final decisions and implementation. A large amount of the Budget is required to bring those services to the proper standard. Due to the lack of consultants wanting to move to those areas, there is a real danger that some services will either collapse on to one site at Omagh or Enniskillen or will collapse altogether. Some people might think that that might be a good thing for their particular empire, but it is not something we should look forward to. It is important to sustain present services, and we need an increased budget to do so. As one Member remarked, it is important that health concerns are given priority over individual departmental concerns.

How is the Budget to be allocated? The Department of Finance and Personnel must stop “top slicing”. It discriminates against rural areas by giving some £1.5 million each to the Southern Health and Social Services Board and the Eastern Health and Social Services Board at an early stage and dividing the remainder among other areas later. That is working against rural areas that are the most deprived in the Six Counties. Money must be allocated on an equitable basis.

I have a particular interest in agriculture and most of my concerns have been covered in the vision group’s report. The Chairman mentioned that we were all in agreement. However, I have not argued exactly the same line. There are issues in that document that do not require money and should therefore not be allocated for. However, a section of that report concerns the important area of rural development. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development requires a budget that allows it to implement its priorities. It does not as yet have such a budget. Which parts of the document does the Department intend to implement, given that it does not have a budget for that in the coming year?

There is also a need to work across Departments to implement much of it, including planning and roads.

There has been a considerable increase in funding for disease control, but, as has already been mentioned, much of that funding has been wasted, which may be largely due to fraud. I must point out to the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee that fraud is not confined to just a few areas, as the DUP has been saying recently.

That was on a narrow margin compared to the £22 million mentioned by Ms McWilliams. There are farmers who have made more profit from bringing the disease onto their farms than from ordinary farming — not just here but also in England, Scotland and Wales. The money could be better used in other areas. Why does this happen year after year? We should be getting to the point where there is eradication, rather than continually pouring money into a bottomless pit.

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development questions the commitment of the British Government with regard to their policies on the North/South element. How much money is to be spent, for example, on a benchmarking exercise to compare business practices here with those in the South?

Mr Armstrong mentioned early retirement for farmers, and it is feasible under match-funding and even other self-financing methods which could be considered. It is vitally important that we have new entrants.

We do not want to face another foot-and-mouth disease outbreak. This one has cost the Department very dearly in time and in commitment to other issues which it should have been getting on with. We need to know how much of the budget will be spent on an inquiry. The cost will be considerable, but it is necessary if we are to avoid another crisis.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development may think that it is not its responsibility, but it needs to budget for advice to farmers regarding on-farm audits. The citizens advice bureaux provide this service at the moment, but do not have adequate funding. Farmers need help to prevent debt, and the funding for that should come from the Department rather than from local councils, which is ratepayers’ money. Certainly the Department could match the funding — that is something that is amiss with the bids. I hope that, if not this year, perhaps next, that aspect could be considered. Also, the issue of women in agriculture could be mainstreamed at some point in the future. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCarthy: It is good to take part in a debate such as this, particularly when one compares it to the events of this morning. Perhaps it is because only the good, sensible and important people are left in the Chamber to take part.

I fully understand that the Finance Minister works under extreme budgetary pressures. I realise that the Barnett formula does not give us the expenditure that we in Northern Ireland need and to which we are entitled.

Nevertheless, with these limitations in mind, I can only conclude that this Budget is not what we would wish for.

5.30 pm

I reiterate the comments made by my Colleague, Mr Close, and by others that we should get our priorities

right. As the Alliance Party's spokesperson on health, I want to concentrate on health issues, as many of my Colleagues have done. First and foremost, the Budget fails in its provision for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. There is no increase to help with the very serious problems in that Department. Total expenditure may rise by 8·1%, but this does not represent an increase in the money available for the Health Service.

In the Minister's own words, it includes a transfer of expenditure that provides no new spending power for the Department. There will be no money available for the Department to introduce new service developments. There are many needs in the community and, for example, dwindling resources for people with learning difficulties throughout Northern Ireland.

Commitments that were made in the Programme for Government will be left unfulfilled. It is to be regretted that the Assembly is now unable to introduce free nursing care for the elderly, despite having given its full approval to such a scheme some time ago. Who suffers from such a deferral other than the senior citizens and frail, sick people? That simply is not good enough.

This winter will bring the inevitable hospital bed crisis — it has already begun. Services will not improve, advances will not be made, and the consequences will be more pain and suffering caused by extended waiting lists for many of our ill constituents.

More money must be found, and it must be better managed. It must not come from the Minister's back pocket as a result of some underspending. It must be upfront and immediate. Also, there must be greater flexibility so that health and social service funding can be more effectively and efficiently used. This may be a matter for the trusts. However, it has already been mentioned in the Chamber. For example, it is indefensible that a hospital service should be subject to severe additional costs as a result of bed-blocking when relatively small amounts of additional expenditure on care-in-the-community schemes could relieve the problem. In the Ulster Hospital up to 70 people are awaiting discharge, but they cannot leave because there are no community-care packages. This must improve immediately, and I shall be taking this matter up with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

I am pleased to see the increase in spending for the Department for Regional Development. A sum of £8·7 million is to be used to improve roads. That is something that must be done, and we have been calling for it for some time. The rural electorate depends upon good roads for access to health care. Therefore I am relieved by the commitment to maintain and improve roads. I hope that my constituency of Strangford will benefit from the increase in funding.

When does the Minister plan to find the funds to implement the commitment that he made a year ago? When does he plan to find the money to avert, rather than manage, the annual winter health care crisis? When will he produce a Budget that will help to improve the health system for everyone? We know that our Minister of Health has asked for increased funding to provide better health facilities. There are many other financial and budgetary concerns, but the quality of our Health Service should be our first priority.

Mrs Carson: It is a delight to hear local politicians debating something sensible after the acrimonious debate this morning and especially debating how we spend our money.

I welcome the increase in the Department of the Environment's budget from £100·8 million to £108·9 million. That increase is a recognition of the pressures on the Department and will, I hope, support the Department in meeting its objective of improving the quality of life in Northern Ireland by protecting the environment through sustainable development and planning policies, promoting efficient local government and through improving road safety.

Further areas of special scientific interest must be designated and staff provided to monitor fully the existing sites. More finance is needed for that, otherwise the Department's objective is only fine words.

The 12·5% increase in the previous expenditure for road safety is also welcomed. Road safety is an important part of the Department's work. The number of vehicles on the road increases each year, and there has been a 1% increase from 1999. Unfortunately, the increase in the number of road vehicles has been accompanied by an increase in road accidents. During 1999-2000 and 2000-01, road traffic injuries increased by 7%, road casualties rose by 5%, and fatalities as a result of road accidents rose from 150 to 163. We cannot have that. More must be done with increased spending to reduce those levels. A sum of £1·4 million was mentioned for road safety. However, more money should be spent, with an emphasis on the training and education of young persons before they even get behind the wheel of a car.

I welcome the emphasis on waste management and the moneys that have been made available to enable the Department of the Environment to continue its programme of waste management and pollution control. There is a statement that ensures that Northern Ireland continues the work towards meeting EU Directives on waste management. The Budget allocation provides the Department with an additional £3·4 million on the previous Budget. However, I am concerned that £1·6 million has been reallocated from departmental resources to meet new pressures in that area. It sounds like robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Provision has been made for local government services to meet fully the cost of councils' de-rating policies and to provide resource grants to poorer councils. However, because of EU Directives, there is a reduction of £2 million in that grant. That reduction will be acutely felt in my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The resource grant for Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council will be reduced by £109,000; Fermanagh District Council's grant will be reduced by £127,000.

That will inevitably lead to a domestic and non-domestic rate increase and will put more pressure on councils, on the commerce of the area and on the residents. That will be most unwelcome, because my constituents in that area are already under great economic pressure due to the differential in the exchange rate with the Republic of Ireland. That differential has hit petrol stations, the quarry industry and the textile industry. They have all felt it greatly. I shall not mention agriculture because it has already been debated.

Fermanagh has been particularly hard hit because of substantial job losses over the past year. The Department documented £0.9 million for planning; I expect that that is for ongoing planning pressures. However, I ask the Department to find more money to co-ordinate planning policies across Northern Ireland so that there is a similar approach to planning permission in all areas. I hope that these points are considered, and I welcome the opportunity to put them forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr A Maginness): The Committee welcomes the significant increase of £42 million — representing 8% from 2001-02 — in the Department for Regional Development's budget. That increase is a recognition of the years of underfunding that have occurred in our roads, water and public transport. Poor infrastructure has had an adverse affect on many aspects of our lives, and the situation will be rectified only through the provision of proper levels of sustained funding. This increase is a recognition that this must be done and that it will be done.

The importance of our infrastructure cannot be over-estimated. The road network is critical to our economy. Ninety-nine per cent of Northern Ireland's goods are transported by road. A well-maintained road network reduces the time taken to transport freight. That in turn helps to improve business profitability, competitiveness and efficiency. Improvements in the road system will also help to reduce the number of road accidents; something that we all acknowledge is unacceptably high.

The Regional Development Committee welcomed the announcement by the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that an additional £40 million will be made available for the trans-European network routes, Larne to Belfast and Newry to Dundalk, as well

as a significant contribution to the upgrading of the Westlink. That is very important, not just for Belfast but for the whole Northern Ireland economy.

The Committee would like to see the targeting of similar funding at other trans-European network routes in Northern Ireland, particularly those in areas not serviced by the rail network. I accept Gerry McHugh's point that parts of this region look longingly at the money given to the development of the railway network.

Improved public transport helps to ease congestion by making people less dependent on their cars, and the extension and improvement of cycle lanes provides a healthier option than driving. Furthermore, reliable and accessible public transport will make a positive contribution to the promotion of social inclusion — a key priority of the Executive. This is particularly noticeable in rural areas where up to 30% of households do not have access to a motor vehicle.

Undoubtedly, investment in our water pipelines and sewerage systems will help to improve water quality and to avoid health risks such as the cryptosporidium outbreaks experienced in the past two years.

I could mention many other benefits, but I do not want to take up the House's time by reciting a long list. However, I seek to explain the importance and benefits of a properly funded and maintained infrastructure to all of Northern Ireland society. Page 39 of the draft Programme for Government states:

"The provision of infrastructure and major public services such as public transport, roads, water and sewerage is essential for the social and economic well being of the region."

I fully endorse that. The Regional Development Committee wholeheartedly agrees with this statement. Improving our infrastructure must be a key priority for Government. There still exists an approximate £100 million backlog in road maintenance, while the Water Service also requires major capital investment to update the pipelines and sewerage systems. If we are to achieve our objective of a socially inclusive society, we must provide an efficient, accessible and affordable public transportation system.

As a positive step towards that goal, the Executive have earmarked £48 million in 2002-03 for the purchase of new train sets.

5.45 pm

As with roads and water services, investment in the public transportation system is playing catch-up after many years of underinvestment. New train sets will undoubtedly make train travel more appealing, and the proposed Railway Safety Bill will help to ensure high standards. We cannot be complacent; there is much more to be done if rail travel is to become a major form of commuter transport. More money must be invested

in train sets and in the improvement of access and facilities. The same is true of our buses.

By encouraging commuters out of their cars and into trains and buses, we shall alleviate congestion, particularly in the Belfast metropolitan area, as well as contribute to the economy and the environment. A reliable and efficient bus network is especially critical to those people who live in rural areas. There are genuine concerns that rural bus services may be significantly reduced if private operators continue to target the more profitable routes, thus forcing Translink to reduce services on the less profitable rural routes. Consequently, the Committee for Regional Development encourages Government to provide additional funding to improve the Northern Ireland bus fleet and to aim at reducing the average age of buses in line with the UK target.

The Committee for Regional Development is conscious of the funding pressures on the Northern Ireland block, and it believes that new approaches to funding should be considered. The possibility of leasing trains for public transportation and the development of the railway network should be considered. The Committee knows of leasing arrangements in the UK. If leasing were introduced, it would release funds for investment in other infrastructure improvements.

I note that health expenditure has increased by about 8%. That represents more than 40% of the Budget. However, standards are falling; we see underperformance in practically every area of the Health Service. The public should know why that is happening in spite of the fact that health services receive the largest share of the Budget and have received an increase in spending. There must be an explanation; it cannot simply be the lack of funding.

There are 19 trusts in an area with a population equivalent to that of Greater Birmingham. Is that the most efficient way to administer the Health Service? Does that not prevent the efficiencies that we desire? Does that not eat up valuable money and resources that we need to apply to health and to other areas? I have no answers to those questions. However, I pose the question that people are asking — if so much money is spent on health, why do we not see the results?

The Chairperson of the Committee of the Centre (Mr Poots): I apologise for my poor attendance at this debate. I may be unable to stay because a school in my constituency has been threatened with closure, and there is a meeting about that tonight.

The Committee of the Centre scrutinised the draft Budget at the beginning of October and has discussed several concerns with the junior Ministers. The concerns centred on the approach that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister had adopted towards the bidding process and the inadequate funding of several important programmes. The Committee noted

that the draft Budget that was presented to the Assembly on 25 September had been developed in the context of the priorities and principles of the Programme for Government. The Committee is not convinced that the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will be able to deliver on its Programme for Government priorities with the funding in the draft Budget.

During the discussion with the junior Ministers, the Committee was advised that much of the work of the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister is of a cross-cutting nature and deals with many sensitive issues. The Committee endorses that assessment, but it adds to our concerns about the Office's ability to make progress on work in many high priority areas. There should have been a more vigorous approach to bidding to secure baseline funding, at least, for the children's commissioner post, the review of public administration and the implementation of the cross-departmental strategy for the promotion of community relations.

The draft Budget provides for increases in expenditure in five areas: £300,000 for work on the Single Equality Bill; £200,000 for the Civic Forum; £200,000 for the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington; £100,000 for TSN research and evaluation; and £100,000 for the establishment of a new strategic issues unit. The Committee questions the priority given to several of those areas and the benefits that that additional funding will provide. We also question whether the right balance has been struck between those and other high priorities, such as the Economic Policy Unit.

The Committee was concerned to learn, during the discussions with the junior Ministers, that the draft Budget did not contain sufficient provision for an increase in the cost of running the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. There will be a shortfall of about £200,000. The Committee was advised that, in order to meet the costs, the Department would, in the first instance, consider the outcome of the ongoing staff review. The Committee welcomes that. However, the Minister should explain how the pressure will be dealt with. For example, the cost of the children's commissioner is estimated to be between £1 million and £2 million. The review of public administration may cost £2 million, and a second permanent secretary post for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has recently been advertised. How will those costs be met without cuts in high-priority programmes?

The Programme for Government gives a target date of June 2002 for appointment to the post of children's commissioner, but the Budget does not contain any funding for it. The junior Ministers said that they might be able to get money from the Executive programme funds. However, a considerable proportion of those funds has already been used in the Budget, and any funding that

might have been expected to come from the Executive programme funds is already accounted for.

In the past, substantial Executive programme funds came from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment as a result of the declining need for large-scale investment in attracting jobs. However, because of the worldwide downturn in the economy and the effect of the events of 11 September, that money may not be available to the same extent, and the Executive programme funds will come under greater pressure.

The need for a children's commissioner may not be considered to be so great if there is less money available from the Executive programme funds. There are also continuing needs in the Health Service that will have to be dealt with. I want to highlight that potential problem now. The Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister has not presented the case for funding for the children's commissioner post well enough.

From the outset of the Assembly, when 11 Departments were created, a radical review of public administration was promised to offset the cost of having five additional Departments. We were promised root and branch reform, that the quangos would be cut to an absolute minimum and that the core issues would be examined. However, we have dragged on and on, and, to date, we have no funding set aside for the review of public administration. How can we have a proper review if we do not dedicate any resources to it? That issue will not be dealt with in the Assembly's lifetime. However, it must be dealt with — a radical review of public administration is important for the credibility of this institution, although it does not have much credibility at the moment. We want those programmes to begin without further delay.

The Committee was pleased to learn that a late bid of £750,000 for Executive programme funds for victims was lodged after we raised the matter with the Ministers. It was alarming that the Committee knew that a second tranche of Executive programme funds was available, of which neither of the Ministers appeared to be aware. It was only when the Committee raised the matter with the Ministers that the bid was lodged. I hope that it is successful. The victims' unit needs support; it is a big issue, and we want the victims to get as much support as possible.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Kennedy): I am pleased to participate in this important debate. Mr Speaker, I admire not only the patience and long suffering of the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel and of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, but also your stamina. You are showing remarkable endurance.

Dr McDonnell: What about the rest of us?

Mr Kennedy: Mr Speaker, you have the honour to listen to the rest of us. I acknowledge the efforts of Mr Leslie on behalf of his Committee. Those efforts have resulted in a more satisfactory amount of time being made available for Committees to consider this important matter in detail and to carry out their statutory duties. I hope that similar arrangements are put in place for the next round of Executive programme funds. I ask the Minister to comment on that.

My Committee welcomes the additional £20 million allocated to education over and above the original indicative figures. That represents a real increase of 4.8% on this year, which will enable most, but not all, the inescapable education bids to be met. My Committee has considered proposals from the Department of Education to cover those inescapable bids that have not been met. Those amount to £4.6 million. In general, my Committee supports the proposals. However, it does not wish to see a reduction in the maintenance budget for schools for longer than a year, as that would have an adverse effect and, in the longer term, could lead to increased capital costs. As Members are aware, we already face a huge capital-building problem.

I am pleased that the Executive acknowledge that, as education is one of the services faced with the most difficulties, it must be given high priority. My Committee believes that education must be given top priority because it is a foundation for a strong, vibrant and growing economy in Northern Ireland and that funding it is a long-term investment in the future of Northern Ireland. The pressures that schools face are very great, and therefore the proposals in the draft Budget are essential.

The Education Committee wishes to highlight that this funding enables schools to meet only identified, inescapable pressures, and to mark time. It does not provide any scope to improve or expand services, which is a concern. We are also concerned that some schools appear to be struggling on an ongoing basis and are not receiving the core funding necessary to provide essential services and the core curriculum for all pupils. This was a recurring theme during evidence taken by the Education Committee in respect of the primary and post-primary funding arrangements.

6.00 pm

The Committee will therefore be looking for a substantial increase to improve school budgets in the next comprehensive spending review. In my view that will also be crucial if the reviews of LMS funding and post-primary education are to be brought forward.

The Education Committee is firmly of the view that early learning, early intervention initiatives and capital building investment must continue to be given a high priority for funding. The draft Budget will enable the pre-school initiative to continue, but it does not allow for expansion or improvement beyond what was

already scheduled to take place. Members found that extremely disappointing. Similarly, the small increase for capital spending will not allow swift progress in addressing the problems with school buildings.

Given the amount of money spent on education administration, the Committee is concerned that there has been no clarification, or detailed timescale, produced for the review of public administration; a point touched on by other Members. The Executive must take this forward as a top priority, and the review must begin as quickly as possible to enable important decisions to be taken urgently. The Committee believes that an evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of all non-school activities must be carried out to ensure that the Department of Education focuses on the key priorities. The Committee also recommends that further work be carried out to establish clearer links between public-service agreement and service-delivery agreement targets.

The recent assurance given by the Minister of Finance and Personnel to the Assembly that he remains determined to seek improvements to the Barnett formula is welcome. The application of the formula has had a significant affect on the allocation of money to schools, and it raises issues of basic equality. Northern Ireland schools perceive that they are being treated less favourably than schools in England, and this must be addressed.

The Education Committee welcomes the extra funding for education provided in the draft Budget. This is clearly in line with the Programme for Government priorities and is an investment in the future of our children and our economy. However, we are disappointed that this level of real funding will enable schools and education initiatives to meet only existing pressures, and to mark time. It will not enable improvement or expansion of the services to take place. However, we endorse the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Dr Hendron): We are witnessing the slow disintegration of important aspects of the Health Service in Northern Ireland, and previous speakers have mentioned that. The morale of patients and staff is at an all-time low. Waiting lists are increasing, and the unacceptable practice of patients being placed on trolleys continues. In many areas, service availability fails to meet demand. Recently Monica McWilliams and I visited the Ulster Hospital's accident and emergency and intensive care units, and we were appalled at what we saw. Patients were on trolleys and sitting on chairs. No more trolleys were available, and that was a daily occurrence. Staff members were under so much pressure that they could not deal adequately with patients.

The position is the same at accident and emergency departments throughout Northern Ireland. If extra funding is not found, then the closure of accident and

emergency departments at times is a distinct possibility in the future. The Royal Victoria Hospital is the main trauma hospital for Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland there is meant to be cover for major trauma every day, seven days a week. A senior consultant recently told me that there is now only adequate cover every other 24 hours. I cannot go into details, but that is a serious situation.

Elective surgery is being cancelled routinely in many hospitals because of a shortage of beds. There is also a chronic shortage of specialist theatre nurses in areas such as orthopaedics and neurology, with the resulting cancellations of theatre lists. Cancer patients are regularly inconvenienced by the breakdown of old equipment at Belvoir Park Hospital, and the funding has not yet been identified for the planned regional cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital. The saga of the planned regional maternity hospital also continues, even though the Jubilee was closed and demolished some time ago.

The Committee is greatly concerned that the annual percentage increases in health spending over the next two years are over 2% less than those in England. In 2002-03 the figure is 7.2% as opposed to 9.3%, and in 2003-04 it is 5.4% as opposed to 8%. The bulk of costs are driven by developments in England, such as in the areas of pay, drugs and clinical and other standards. Unless there is match-funding, there will be a continuing deterioration in the levels of service here compared to those in England.

None of the figures takes into account the higher levels of need and demand in Northern Ireland, compared to those in England. My Committee fully supported the Minister of Health in her bid for an extra £122 million, and it is greatly concerned that only £31.6 million was allocated. Although it was hoped that the latter figure would cover essential expenditure, it is now apparent that the cost of junior doctors' pay will be £3.5 million more than was estimated, and that the care cost for people with learning disabilities will be an extra £2 million.

The total inescapable bids are therefore £37 million — some £5 million short of what has been allocated. The remaining £91 million was to be for developments to help the Health Service to maintain its current levels. It has been noted by the Committee that the overall spending for 2002-03 is proportionately on a par with the current year. There is not, therefore, a proportionate increase in the health share of the Northern Ireland block, despite the ever increasing demands. In his Budget speech to the Assembly on 25 September, the Minister of Finance said that the Executive had come

“to the view that health, education and roads were among the services that face the most acute difficulties”.

I pay tribute to the Minister and his Colleagues for giving that emphasis. Nevertheless, while I appreciate that all Departments need more money, it is time for all

of us — and for the Executive in particular — to sit up and look at the current situation in the Health Service.

We are concerned that the draft Budget will do nothing to reverse the increase in waiting lists. It is alarming to note that the recent draft Programme for Government has a target, by March 2003, to maintain the waiting lists at the March 2002 level.

No one knows what the latter figure will be, so it is not possible for my Committee to accept such a target. The trend is upwards — the latest figure is 54,000. The first Programme for Government, published earlier this year, had a figure of 48,000. That was to be reduced to 39,000 by March 2004. Clearly, that target will not be met, bearing in mind the current spending proposals for the next two years.

Another major problem is the bed-blocking system. There is no extra money to provide sufficient community-care packages. With an average stay per patient, other than for those requiring community-care packages, of approximately seven days, it is estimated that the waiting list could be reduced by at least 7,500 per year if that problem could be solved.

I welcome the fact that my Colleague, Alban Maginness, talked about the structures of the Health Service. There has also been talk about the review of public administration. We have raised that issue here before. The review of public administration seems to be years away. The Health Service cannot wait that long. I urge not only the Minister present, but the Executive, to co-operate and encourage the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety at least to take an initial look at the structures of the Health Service. Our Committee persuaded Dr Maurice Hayes in his acute hospitals report to look at those structures.

The point has already been made that there are 19 trusts for a population the size of Greater Birmingham. The Committee also believes that free personal care for the elderly should be made available. It is most concerned therefore to note that, not only is this service not to be provided, but that free nursing care is to be deferred. With the prospect of even fewer available resources in 2003-04, it appears that free nursing care could be a long way off.

I have already mentioned the regional cancer centre. We all know the number of people in Northern Ireland who are dying of cancer. Cancer death rates will soon be higher than coronary artery disease death rates. We have had a number of meetings with people from Belfast City Hospital and Belvoir Park Hospital. We have visited both centres; we visited Belvoir Park Hospital quite recently, and I sympathise with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding funding for Belvoir Park Hospital. It is going to take three years to build the dedicated regional cancer centre. In the meantime, should the Minister spend money on

it, or should she wait for the new unit in Belfast City Hospital? It will take three years to build the new unit in Belfast City Hospital, but that is three years from the date when the financial package is worked out. I understand that that package has not yet been worked out.

Monica McWilliams made reference to the infrastructure funds. In our last meeting with the Minister, we put great emphasis on those funds. Over the next couple of years, £51 million should be made available. I therefore hope that those funds will be used, and that all Ministers in the Executive will support the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Services in freeing those funds for the building of that cancer centre for all the people of Northern Ireland.

I mentioned free personal care for the elderly. There is also a great need to find funding for many facilities and services, including £1.1 billion for the implementation of the acute hospitals review.

Members of my Committee and I are unhappy with the whole overview of health spending. I appreciate the massive job that the Minister and her Department have to do. We understand that, but I sometimes get the feeling that with all the boards and trusts, people seem to be going round in circles. Of course there is a huge shortage of funding, but it is difficult to see how people's health would be improved even if funding were increased. Our Committee has discussed whether we should ask the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland to examine the Health Service in that regard. I am not sure that we have the right to do that, but we have asked our Clerk to look into that matter.

Even if the Department's budget bid of £122 million had been fully met, the standard of service for the people of Northern Ireland would be lower than that that to be provided in Scotland and England. With only £31.6 million being provided for 2002-03, the service must fall even further behind here. Our Committee is therefore concerned that whatever extra funding for health is announced in England, the Northern Ireland share does not go directly to the Health Service here. It is redistributed through the Northern Ireland block, and invariably the full amount is not allocated to health. There is a question mark over that; I am sure the Minister will clarify the matter. This would result in Northern Ireland falling further and further behind comparable standards of service. I respectfully ask the Minister and his Colleagues in the Executive to declare that the Health Service is the number-one priority in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson of the Social Development Committee (Mr Cobain): James Leslie said at the beginning of the debate that, along with other Committees, the Social Development Committee formally responded to the Finance and Personnel Committee on the draft Budget for next year. The element of the draft Budget with which we are specifically concerned is the suggested

overall increase by 8·6% in the Department for Social Development's budget. On the face of it, such an increase is not bad, until you note that the departmental running costs will have increased by almost 12% this year. The disparity in these increases seems inappropriate, given that the Department's aim is to tackle social disadvantage and build communities.

6.15 pm

The Social Security Agency provides front-line services, and the Committee acknowledges the difficult role it plays, but we are concerned about the continued increase in its running costs. The administration of the benefits system should run smoothly, and those who are entitled to benefits should receive the correct level of financial support at the right time. The Committee has been told that the agency required short-term investment to make efficiency savings through measures that would also improve levels of service. I hope that the increase for next year will lead to efficiency savings, and the Committee has urged the Department for Social Development to ensure that it does.

The Assembly will not be surprised to learn that the Committee has again felt the need to register concerns about the proposed allocation of funding to tackle fuel poverty and housing needs. The Warm Homes Scheme is a one-off capital cost. It has no recurring implications. If it were to be properly and urgently funded, it would have positive effects not only on the standard of housing, but on people's health and well-being. There would be consequential savings for the Department of Health. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his colleagues on the Executive to think long and hard about that.

The Executive and the Assembly claim to be working for the most marginalised in our community, and towards equality. Are those who live in social housing not among the most marginalised in this society — do they not deserve help? Is it right that people in social housing should have to endure longer waiting lists for the replacement of Economy 7 and room heaters? Is it right that kitchen and bathroom replacement work should be deferred because of a shortfall in the budget? I do not think so, and neither do my colleagues on the Social Development Committee.

We should not overlook the fact that my colleagues on the Committee come from parties other than mine. Like me, they have constituents to answer to. Our opinions might differ in some regards, but we are united in the view that the housing element of the Department for Social Development's budget must not be allowed to decline. Constituents who are already socially excluded and disadvantaged will remain so if this Budget is adopted.

Much has been made of the housing strategy for North Belfast, the constituency of three Social Develop-

ment Committee members and the recently reinstalled Minister for Social Development. However, no provision for that strategy is made in the draft Budget. That concerns us all, and the Committee has drawn the matter to the attention of the Finance and Personnel Committee. Recently, the former Minister for Social Development, Mr Morrow, made a statement in Belfast Castle in which he promised that the £137 million for the North Belfast strategy had already been acquired. That does not seem to be the case. I urge the Minister for Finance and Personnel to ensure that that money is made available over the next six or seven years to regenerate what was described by an independent survey as "the worst housing in western Europe."

I welcome back Mr Dodds to his ministerial position, and I assure him that the Committee will continue to press him on this and other issues. He can also expect to rely on our support in his bid for a decent housing programme. During his opening remarks, the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee also mentioned the Executive programme funds and the continued lack of consultation in that regard.

I raised that matter with the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister in April. In a written reply to AQO 1345/00 I was assured that there would be proper and early consultation. Clearly, that did not happen. I accept that we can and should be proactive in encouraging the Department, but the Committee should not get into the game of putting together detailed proposals. We do not have the resources to do that, and it is not our role. However, had the Social Development Committee been consulted, we would have encouraged, indeed urged, the Social Development Minister to seek Executive programme funds to tackle fuel poverty more extensively and to address the growing problem of homelessness.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate the Deputy Chairperson of the Finance and Personnel Committee on tabling the motion, the Committee members on their efforts, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive for consulting the House on the stages of the draft Budget and the draft Programme for Government.

I am pleased to be able to discuss the draft Budget today in spite of the attempts on Friday by a small minority of Members to derail the institutions and to subvert the will of the people. In the words of the draft Programme for Government, the thrust of this Budget is to "make a difference", and the Budget lives up to that commitment in many key areas. I will comment on a few issues.

First, I welcome back Mr Peter Robinson as the Minister for Regional Development. I hope that this time he will be allowed to stay in office for as long as the previous incumbent, his Colleague Mr Campbell. In general I welcome the increase by 14·8% in the

allocated budget for the Department and the planned expenditure of £538million on roads, transport, water, and sewerage infrastructure.

During direct rule the North's infrastructure was developed unevenly and was concentrated primarily in the north-east of the region. That has led to a sense of social exclusion and an infrastructural deficit in other parts of Northern Ireland. Now that we have devolved power, the improvement of the North's infrastructure must take place in a balanced fashion throughout the region, so that all of our citizens have equal access to good quality roads, transport, water and sewerage services, and also to develop the competitiveness of the region's economy.

I am pleased that an additional £8.7million will be made available to the roads programme to avoid any reductions in planned service levels and to compensate for the effects of the aggregates tax. The capital schemes to improve some key strategic routes are also welcome. That is vital in attracting inward investment, enabling local firms to expand and enhancing safety for motorists.

The improvements to the A4 between Ballygawley and Dungannon, a trans-European network status (TENS) road, which will be financed by the Executive programme funds, are most welcome. However, I remind the Department that other important routes should not be overlooked, such as the M2/A5 TENS road, which should also be upgraded. In the constituency of West Tyrone, we have neither a mile of motorway nor a mile of dual carriageway.

I also welcome the £48million for the purchase of new railway rolling stock. The railway network in Northern Ireland has suffered from serious underinvestment for many years, and that has compromised efficiency, passenger comfort and safety.

I am pleased that the Department for Employment and Learning's budget will increase by 6.1%. I welcome, in particular, the additional £37.3million that is designed to increase the number of further and higher education places, as it is important for the development of the economy that we encourage more students to remain in Northern Ireland. The additional money allocated to higher and further education and student support includes resources to provide for the expansion of further and higher education places. It will also promote access to these sectors through improved student support measures that target those on low incomes and those in need of additional assistance, such as childcare support.

Improvement in the skills level of the workforce is important to create a vibrant economy, but it is also important to ensure that resources are properly targeted so that people such as the long-term unemployed are not exploited. Therefore I welcome the Minister's recent decision to conduct a review into the individual learning account (ILA) scheme which is open to

possible exploitation by some unscrupulous ILA providers. Owing to the large number of adults in the North who lack basic literacy and numeracy skills, it is important that we implement a skills programme that encourages lifelong learning — it must be properly resourced and targeted to those most in need.

I am concerned that the planned budget for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for 2002-03 will decrease by 1.6%, especially given the effects of the events of 11 September on Northern Ireland's aerospace industry and the general economic slow down that we are experiencing. However, I am pleased that the Executive have given a clear commitment to increase investment significantly should the need or opportunity arise.

I also welcome the planned increase of 3% in the Department of Finance and Personnel's expenditure. It is important for the Department to be properly resourced so that it can provide effectively for the range of services to other Departments. The commitment to complete the major reviews of promotion and recruitment to senior positions in the Civil Service, a review of accommodation policy and the decentralisation of Civil Service jobs is particularly welcome. The decentralisation of Civil Service jobs, as I have said here, is something which the SDLP has consistently lobbied for over the past two years. The SDLP believes that the Executive should lead by example and relocate entire sections of Departments from Belfast to other main urban hubs. Such a policy would help to achieve more balanced growth beyond Greater Belfast.

I welcome the overall 7% increase on departmental spending programmes compared with 2001-02. I have some concern about the £48 million earmarked spending within departmental budget plans but which is coming from anticipated monitoring-round reviews which take place quarterly. There is concern that some double accounting has gone on.

I am also concerned about the £2 million cut in local government spending for the incoming year, particularly about how it affects some district councils. There is concern among some of them. Smaller councils are particularly concerned that they are expected to bear significant cuts in their central government contribution. Based on last year's percentage local government grant, Omagh District Council will suffer to the tune of £109,000, Strabane District Council, also in my constituency, will lose to the tune of £120,000, and some of the other smaller councils will lose between £65,000 and £100,000. Many of the smaller councils have a low district rates base of revenue income. It would be bad if some of them were to lose out now when we are trying to implement New TSN.

I welcome the fact that the draft Budget provides for a 3% increase in overall departmental expenditure

and that the Executive have made a commitment to ensure that New TSN will affect policy decisions across all Departments. New TSN and the statutory equality legislation are essential tools which should inform spending decisions in the 11 Departments and ensure that all Departments deliver upon commitments given in the draft Programme for Government to create a cohesive, inclusive and economically vibrant society.

6.30 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate. It is a valuable way of hearing and considering the issues that concern all Members in relation to next year's spending plans. I am sure that those who have taken part in the debate, and all those who contributed at Committee level, will join me in thanking the Committee for Finance and Personnel for the efforts it has made, and will continue to make, in drawing all those issues together, not least those that were raised during today's debate.

The draft Budget was developed to deliver the Programme for Government. The allocation of resources proposed in the draft has been designed to secure the objectives and priorities of the programme. I have listened carefully to the contributions made to the debate, just as I listened carefully to the points that were made to me in questions after my original statement. With my Colleagues in the Executive I will reflect on the issues and concerns raised by Members today and also in the long-term consultative feedback that we will continue to receive.

We will also look at any constructive suggestions that have been made, particularly at Committee level. When the Committee for Finance and Personnel prepares its conclusions it will find those suggestions helpful in reaching a better understanding of the full range of opinions that have been expressed in the Assembly and in Committees. I look forward to the report and to the Committee reaching conclusions and recommendations based on the exhortations the Assembly has heard today.

Some Members referred to the fact that we produced the draft Budget earlier this year than last, allowing more time for consideration. We also used the Executive position report to set out many issues and questions for the Assembly and the Committees. It was also made available for public consultation. The Executive position report was exactly the same document that was made available to the Executive, to the Assembly and to the wider public within days of Ministers receiving it.

The process has been more open and transparent than it was before, and that is only partly due to the shift of dates for the draft Budget. In future, Executive position reports could benefit from Committees focusing more sharply than they were able to this year on the issues that have been reflected here. Many of those

questions were not particular to each Committee. Many concerned key priorities for all Committees to address. I hope Members will reflect on the points that they have recommended to Ministers. They should not simply look to their own Departments but to the full range of services and broader range of responsibilities of the Assembly and its Committees in their consideration of these matters.

The revised Budget will be introduced on 3 December 2001. It will include some clarification and adjustment of the figures that go with the territory in an exercise such as the draft Budget. The Executive will consider whether changes could be made to improve the balance between spending areas. The views of the Assembly are important. However, with a fixed departmental expenditure limit, any increase will be offset by a corresponding decrease. All of us need to examine departmental planning figures for savings that could be redeployed. It is an important principle that money not required for the purpose for which it was originally allocated should be made available for reallocation by the Executive and the Assembly.

We have to use our limited resources in the best possible way and ensure that action is taken to improve efficiency and effectiveness. Actions must be targeted on a priority basis; a fact constantly emphasised in the Programme for Government and in the Budget. I am glad that it is increasingly being emphasised in the Chamber, and that people are not questioning us on what we are trying to do but on whether we are succeeding and if we are trying hard enough. That is the focus the Assembly should be bringing to bear on these issues.

We need to work together to maximise our advantage — if such it is — in relation to the Treasury. We must also ensure that lessons learnt from the audit process are used to improve value for money, as several Members have already mentioned. It is important that Committees follow up on areas that the Public Accounts Committee has highlighted as requiring room for improvement. That would ensure more joined-up scrutiny as we move towards the audit and accountability legislation. It would ensure that areas that, as Ms McWilliams said, have been the subject of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and which have in turn been considered by the Public Accounts Committee, are factored into our Budget considerations and that the reports are not just disappearing. It would show that we are checking that the recommendations are being followed. The Department of Finance and Personnel is meant to monitor the situation, but there is room for improvement and joining up the scrutiny role of the Executive. Departments may not welcome that, but it would be helpful.

I hope that Members appreciate that the Executive have to be convinced that the benefits of any proposed changes will outweigh the sacrifices that have to be

made in other service areas. Many Members have said that there should be only one priority and have then proceeded to speak about others. They have welcomed the bigger increases that other Departments have received compared with the Department that they were complaining about. When speaking about priorities we need to be using that word more in the singular if we are to be serious about our efforts.

We are working in a relatively benign context. Mr Leslie referred to the departmental expenditure limits (DEL) as set by the Treasury, which show a rise for 2002-03 of 5.8%, or around 3% above general inflation. I recognise — and several Members have mentioned — that many of the costs that affect public services are rising at a much faster rate than general inflation. No one can make a special claim, and it should be no political boast for the Executive or myself, when some of these costs rise at a much faster rate than general inflation. The same argument applies equally when people make a case for inflation-busting rate increases because those increases are to support the additional expenditure on public services that we need. If people are saying that inflation should be the rule of thumb in one area it is very difficult if they then insist that it has to be disregarded and treated as irrelevant in another. There is more consistency in the Executive's approach to this matter compared with some of the people who are criticising us.

The allocations for next year build on what was a 5.5% real-terms increase in 2001-02. Departments have been able to initiate important work in the Programme for Government. As I stated in my draft Budget statement, we cannot expect spending to continue to rise at that rate for much longer. The type of scenario that we have been in has been as good as it gets. I would like to be able to claim credit for this and say that the significant increase has happened while I was Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, it is fortuitous that my term of office and the Executive's work on the last two Budgets has coincided with what the spending review has given us. As we move into a spending review next year and see global economic conditions recovering from what they were prior to 11 September, but even more uncertainly since then, we must recognise that the choices will become harder. Making a real meaning out of priorities will become more testing for us as an Assembly.

Several Members referred to issues relating to the Executive programme funds (EPFs). In opening the debate, Mr Leslie referred to the Finance and Personnel Committee's report on EPFs. The EPFs are the key means by which the Executive are determined to break away from the spending patterns that they inherited. We must try to ensure that resources are targeted in line with the Executive's strategic priorities.

Many people are unconvinced by the evidence, but EPFs are designed to promote cross-cutting working

in line with the Programme for Government's priorities. I agree with observations that were made by some Members, notably Dr Birnie, that we must do more to promote interdepartmental co-operation in the delivery of services, and that must be reflected in the way in which we plan EPFs. I accept the point made by the Committee and others that we must ensure that the processes for managing and allocating the funds are as effective and efficient as possible. Simply throwing open EPF bids to Committees at an earlier stage will not necessarily be the best, or the only, way to do that if it just adds to the mono-departmental-focus syndrome that some people claim already exists.

We must look at whether we are using the right substructure or processes at Executive level to ensure that a cross-cutting priority comes through in planning. I have received a helpful report on EPFs from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and my Executive Colleagues and I will consider it before responding.

Several Members of the Committee for Agriculture, especially the Chairperson, Dr Paisley, asked about provision for the findings of the vision group. The draft Budget does not include any additional resources for the provisions in the vision report. That is because the public consultation process on the report will continue until the end of December. After the consultation process, the Minister will publish a plan of action for the strategic development of the agrifood industry. At that stage, firm bids for the implementation of the report's recommendations can be developed and considered with access to the EPFs as appropriate.

Those plans must also take account of any re-prioritisation of resources within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. As Mr Leslie warned, we must ensure that in this or any other area we do not implement any new structures, policies or processes until we are sure that they will deliver the desired outcomes. That, again, echoes a point that the Committee for Finance and Personnel made in its report on the Executive programme funds.

6.45 pm

In that report the Committee suggested that the Executive were, in some ways, making funding allocations on spec because they wanted to pursue proposals in a particular area but did not have specific measures. The Committee suggested that allocations should not precede the firmer proposals with all the relevant appraisals. That would be a pertinent area of interest for the Committee for Public Accounts, which regularly questions Departments as to whether allocations have preceded firm plans. We are trying to ensure that we follow through on some of the points raised by the various Committees.

A number of Members, of whom James Leslie was the first, asked if there was greater scope for the Health

Service to depart from policies that are determined in Westminster. I agree that we should try to determine and deliver policies that meet the needs of citizens in our region. We should not slavishly follow what is done elsewhere. There are already some good examples of that. There has been an integrated health and social services system for a number of years, but that is not to say that there are not gaps within that, nor that it meshes as well as the theory suggests.

As a result of that, the health action zones, for instance, include social services. They are more comprehensive and are probably better developed than those in other areas. Our response to the new arrangements for primary care involves local health and social care groups that can turn out to be more sophisticated and more comprehensive than elsewhere. However, I readily acknowledge the point that all Members will make that the resources must be there to match the structural proposals.

Dr Paisley, George Savage and Gerry McHugh raised points about retirement schemes for farmers. Early retirement and new entrants schemes are discretionary measures that are provided by the EU rural development regulation. Such schemes, as Members will appreciate, are expensive to run. Nevertheless, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development commissioned a study of their value and effectiveness. The study was not conclusive, largely reflecting a lack of research in that area. On foot of that, the Minister commissioned further research from Queen's University in conjunction with University College Dublin into the economic, social and environmental aspects of such schemes. The results of that research will be available in the summer of 2002.

George Savage then drew attention to modulation and match-funding as a source of money for early retirement schemes for farmers. Again, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is considering that, but it is important to remember that any such scheme will be expensive. It should also be remembered that modulation money, for our purposes in the Assembly, is outside the departmental expenditure limit. There are constraints, not least because of EU policy on how modulation money and match-funding can be used.

Quite a number of Members mentioned the Barnett formula. The Executive are certainly committed to addressing all those issues with determination. We must do so, not least if we are to be serious about tackling the backlog of underinvestment in infrastructure and the funding difficulties in health, education, transport and other services that many Members raised, particularly the Chairpersons of the relevant Committees.

We tell ourselves how bad the Barnett formula is, and how badly underfunded it leaves us, but we cannot ignore the fact that spending per person here is much higher than it is in England. The Treasury will

point to particular areas where our spending is markedly higher and will argue that we must reprioritise.

The political reality is that the perceived wisdom across the water is that the Barnett formula is highly favourable to us. Many people there would argue that we should receive a lower share of public spending or that the tapering effect that the Barnett formula has on our future spending plans is exactly the way things should be going.

We must remember that others do not see the problem as we see it. In all political exercises we must bear in mind that not everyone will automatically move over to see things from our perspective.

As regards services for which we are responsible and which are covered by our departmental expenditure limit (DEL), we were able to spend 25%-30% more per capita than in England in 2000-01. People elsewhere will not miss that point. No matter how often we make the points about need and coming out of conflict we must remember that in some areas of the debate on the Barnett formula we will have an uphill argument.

The EU peace programme is extra to our allocation. Again, in a sense, it is easy for the Treasury to argue that that is a generous concession in relation to public spending and reflects the fact that we are coming out of conflict. To that extent they count it as part of their contribution to the peace dividend. The Treasury will also point out, in relation to the debate on the Barnett formula, that the Chancellor's initiative offered us further facilities, such as asset sales, and that the Assembly chose not to use some of those. Let us be clear: the arguments will not be all one-way. The warning was well made by Mr Leslie.

Séamus Close promised that he was going to make a new point — not one on familiar territory — so I listened closely and carefully to what he said about prioritisation. Shock, horror — I agree with him. We must consider our priorities very carefully now and more fully in next year's spending review. That is what the Programme for Government and Budget processes should be about. We have the right to choose to spend more in some areas than is spent in England. However, the corollary is that we would have to spend less in other areas — either less than is the case in England, or less than we have allocated in the past.

Mr Close said that we should not slavishly follow what has gone before and suggested we were doing just that. He talked about money being locked up in Departments, and about Departments holding on to money. I have complained elsewhere that there is a danger in that for all of us. It is not just the Departments, the Civil Service, or at ministerial level, it is also at departmental Committee level. We have had some evidence of it in the debate.

It is very easy for Departments, Ministers and departmental Committees to get locked into the “Does my budget look big in this?” syndrome. It then becomes a matter of comparing their increases with other people’s. It becomes a matter of saying that, because a budget line has existed, it must continue to exist and be increased. Therefore existing budget baselines are not scrutinised, and everyone competes for additional bids.

I hope that the point will come when the Assembly will see the same degree of interest in what Departments do with the moneys they already have in their baselines as there seems to be in what happens to new bids. There is a great interest in chasing bids, particular those that have not been met, whereas the most important financial decisions relate to the moneys in the baseline. Members have said that they want more scrutiny and openness in relation to Executive programme funds. The proportion of the total Budget represented by the Executive programme funds shows that Departments are making decisions on much bigger sums of money that are not the subject of a report or scrutiny in the House or by the Committees. Therefore, the broader processes show that there is more for us to think about.

Séamus Close remarked that we were slavishly following what had gone before. He then attacked the Executive programme funds and said that we could do without them. The establishment of the Executive programme funds, following devolution, means that money does not automatically go to Departments by the traditional route. The funds allow for a more cross-cutting approach. Executive programme funds have been used for some major regional strategic initiatives such as the road improvements that Alban Maginness referred to and the gas pipeline decisions that other Members referred to. We can make those longer-term commitments because of the Executive programme funds.

Members spoke of the amount of money that is tied up in the Executive programme funds. They must remember that that money applies to next year and to the year after; it is not available for one year’s Budget, as some Members seem to think.

Dara O’Hagan and others raised a point about the regional rate and tax-varying powers. We have covered a lot of that ground before. The projected increases suggest that the regional rate will rise by about £332 million in the 2002-03 financial year. Obviously, that contributes to all of the spending that we try to undertake. I have no problem if Members want to identify priority areas that that money could go to. I recognise that there is a lot of unhappiness about, and criticism of, the rating system — not only about how the rating policy operates, but how we deal with the issues in the budgetary process. I recognise — indeed I would be a fool to not recognise — that it is not a popular area of the financial process, but it is necessary. We need to contribute to public spending.

As a Minister of Finance who wants money to be spent on public services and who is in favour of public expenditure, I defend the rate mechanism facility as a way of supplementing what we agreed would otherwise be inadequate resources. If the Barnett formula does not give us what people say that we need and deserve, and as Members are rightly stressing the plight of many services, we must find additional money from elsewhere. There is no point in fighting the end, if we do not will the means. The Executive can spend only what they have. They cannot make money appear from nowhere. Any reduction in rates, or capping of rates increases to inflation, will not give us the money that we need and will weaken our case for additional money from the Treasury.

Joan Carson, Joe Byrne and Gerry McHugh expressed concern about the position of district councils following the decision to reallocate £2 million from the resources element of the general Exchequer grant. I am happy for the Assembly, and the relevant Committees, to consider further whether that is the best way ahead. However, as Joan Carson pointed out, the draft Budget provides an 8.1 % increase in planned spending power for the Department of the Environment. That equates to a real increase of 5%. That was planned last year to ensure further progress in the compliance with EU environmental Directives. The costs of planned actions have proved tighter than anticipated, and that is not the only area where that has happened.

The Executive concluded that with demands on other services, such as health, education and roads, it was not possible for us to improve on the substantial, real increase provided for the Department of the Environment for 2002-03. That was one of those instances where it counts as to whether health is given priority. There is a choice, therefore, in relation to reducing support for councils, moving more slowly on environmental issues or imposing restrictions on historic building grants. I noticed that some Members questioned whether environment and heritage services needed money. That is an example of a situation where hard decisions must be made. The sentiments expressed in the Chamber show that there are competing priorities.

7.00 pm

Sue Ramsey, Kieran McCarthy and Joe Hendron were among the Members who raised the question about the deferral of free nursing care for the elderly in nursing homes. In May 2001, the Executive agreed in principle to introduce such care from April 2002. However, as many Members have pointed out, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety faces a range of pressures, and it is unable to meet all the demands that are already placed upon it. In that context, compared to the indicative figures that were published last December with the revised Budget, some £30 million was added to the allocation for

health for 2002-03. That amounted to an increase of 8.1% over 2001-02. In the Budget statement, I made the point that that was not a full extra 8.1% because there is a technical switch from the Department for Social Development, which accounts for part of that figure. Members, and the Department, have pointed that out, but they are not pointing out anything that I had not already been upfront in saying in my original statement to the House.

Such are the pressures on health and personal social services that there are not sufficient funds available to provide free nursing care without making cutbacks in existing services. The money that was allocated to the health and personal social services baseline for free nursing care is still there, but it is needed to meet other pressures as well. That decision was not taken lightly, and we recognised the fact with great reluctance. However, it would be dishonest not to represent the situation clearly to the Assembly. That deferral releases about £9 million to help maintain existing services elsewhere. It was not a decision not to give additional money — it was a decision whereby additional money, originally given for free nursing care, will go to meet other pressures in health and social services.

Esmond Birnie emphasised the importance of research as a key investment for future prosperity. The Executive recognise that university research is an important investment. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Employment and Learning are jointly leading the preparation of a regional innovation strategy, and it should be available early next year. Higher education funding has been increased by 5%, and that includes provision for the support programme for university research (SPUR), which will receive £40 million, funded on a pound-for-pound basis with the private sector, over the next five years. A further £7 million investment for science research was announced in February 2001.

Éamonn O'Neill, on behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, raised several points about areas, such as the arts, museums and libraries budget, that the Committee felt were not getting the increases in funding that were needed. Those areas fared relatively well in 2001-02 in comparison with the previous year. Between them, they received an increase of £3.4 million. That significant increase has been carried forward into 2002-03. As in other areas, that does not take account of possible assistance from Executive programme funds.

I understand that development plans for the Grand Opera House, together with other capital development proposals, are being considered by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in association with other interested parties, in an attempt to establish priorities for Belfast in the context of the bid to be European city of culture 2008. We have already identified the best way to deal with such issues as they mature, in

discussions with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Members often ask us not to make allocations until we have full business plans and appraisals; on other occasions, we are exhorted to make allocations before we receive those plans. We cannot do both.

I agree with Ms Ramsey and Ms McWilliams about the health issues that they raised. They gave graphic descriptions of the pressure on the Health Service, which puts many of the smaller issues into perspective. Perhaps the Executive and Members who spoke on behalf of other Committees about other issues might reflect on that. However, we cannot simply say that money that might go elsewhere should be spent on health. As Ms McWilliams said, there is scope to examine the budget of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to see whether it is managed and organised in the best way. We should consider not only the issues relating to the overall structures of the Health Service that were raised by Dr Hendron and Mr Maginness, but the methods and means that are used.

I am glad to hear that Members and Committees are considering how we might achieve efficiency savings that would allow us to use the money in other areas. I welcome any advice on that. For example, the case was made that appropriate practices in community care would relieve some of the pressure on the acute services sector. The Department of Finance and Personnel and the Executive would not be averse to such an exercise. However, we must ensure that we work on the basis of evidence. We need a database, and work has already been done on a needs and effectiveness evaluation of health and personal social services. We must continue such work if we are to get stuck into the Barnett formula issue in the way that people want us to. It would also be useful for our own purposes, allowing us to see whether we are responding successfully to demands.

The budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is not the only one that contributes to health provision. The public health strategy and other cross-cutting measures have shown that other Departments make a contribution. Perhaps, when Members suggest that we should simply tax the budgets of all other Departments at a flat rate of £10 million, we should remember that other Departments' spending programmes contribute to health outcomes. For example, spending on road safety by the Department of the Environment contributes to health outcomes, as will spending on structural maintenance or improvements to roads by the Department for Regional Development if it helps to reduce accidents.

Work is going on in other Departments that has a bearing on health and safety issues too. We need to recognise that a cross-cutting device such as the Executive programme funds does not just help health

in those services managed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; it has a bearing on our health achievements as well.

Ms McWilliams, as well as Mr Cobain on behalf of the Committee for Social Development, referred to the increases in departmental running costs for the Department for Social Development. The Social Security Agency is obviously playing a leading role in the welfare reforms and modernisation programme, which includes working alongside other Departments to deliver more modern, integrated, efficient and customer-focused services in the area of social welfare needs. Clearly that requires an investment in departmental running costs, which is really what we are looking at when people talk about this. This programme is expected to deliver significant benefits and administrative cost savings. A ring-fenced budget of £130 million over five years has been agreed with the Treasury to ensure that the programme is delivered, which accounts for the increase that has caught the eye of so many.

Several Members, in the course of making observations on other issues, pointed to the global downturn and the impact it is having on our economy, and Mrs Courtney focused on this in particular. Obviously the downturn is something that has had an impact already, and it is likely to have a further impact no matter how resilient we hope our regional economy can be. We have already seen some job losses, but it will affect us in the longer term in two main ways. We are obviously a significant beneficiary of direct foreign investment. Therefore, in so far as the downturn inhibits and reduces that which will affect us, our export sales are also clearly going to be harmed too. A lot of this is going to be dependent on the fortunes of the US economy.

Members such as Mr Byrne have emphasised their concerns about linking this to the possible or slight reduction next year in the budget for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, in all of this we must underscore a commitment we previously made that the Executive will be sensitive to the need to take any opportunities to support investment, especially in the difficult context that we have.

We also have to look at how effective we can be using all our policies. We need to remember that some of the issues that could arise as a result of the global downturn are not ones that call on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's budget and the sort of programmes it runs alone. Indeed, the Department for Employment and Learning could very well find some of its programmes and services being called on to deal with some of the effects and exigencies of a downturn if the worst fears being expressed by some Members are realised. It is not just the spending on direct support to industry that matters. In trying to make longer-term investments in our competitiveness and seeing beyond the recessionary cycle that we all fear

we are looking at now, it is clearly important that we sustain investment in infrastructure as well so that we will be in a better position to pick things up in the future.

7.15 pm

In dealing with the wider economic context, people should remember that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is not the only Department that is, in many ways, contributing to the economy. Other Departments do so as well. That is one of the reasons the Executive are investing in infrastructure and transport. By making such an investment we recognise that, although it is hard for us to find the money in the Budget that we want to spend on infrastructure, roads and transport systems, we know that we cannot spend the amounts of money needed equally across the region.

There are projects that attract particular priority, and we cannot even out, in a perfectly arithmetic way, the priority that we attach to every road or connection. I take the point that was made by Gerry McHugh, Joe Byrne and others that many areas feel they are still missing out on investment. However, if we are going to invest seriously in some major roads, we should marshal the resources for them wherever possible and then concentrate on trying to find the resources for the other roads. Spending many small amounts on all roads is a less strategic investment and is exactly the sort of thing that we are trying to get away from, because underinvestment will not advance the equality agenda. We need to develop good targeted investment and spread it over time.

Alban Maginness referred to Water Service funding. In the Budget for this year there was an extra £14.5 million to deal with the most pressing needs. That is retained in the draft Budget for next year, with a small increase of 1.5%, so Water Service spending is just short of £221 million. We have to provide that money out of the Budget with absolutely no provision for it in our old friend the Barnett formula, because water and sewerage is not part of public expenditure across the water. We get no money for it.

There will be serious health problems and added pressures if we do not make provision. That area of expenditure clearly has a health-related outcome, as we saw with cryptosporidium, but we do not receive any money from Barnett. People need to set that against some of the concerns that are raised about rates. If we get less in Barnett than we need for the services for which Barnett allocates money, and we have to fund other services that Barnett does not provide for, we have to be realistic about the sort of money that we want to add to what Barnett gives us.

Alban Maginness also raised the matter of train replacement. This is a follow-through from significant allocations made in the last Budget, and I welcome the

fact that procurement has proceeded. Leasing of trains was commended by many and was considered, but outright purchase represented better value for money. It is not that leasing was not looked at.

Edwin Poots raised several points on behalf of the Committee of the Centre. First of all, the draft Budget does provide additional resources in various areas for the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. A bid for funding will be made next year for the review of public administration, and that is clearly understood by the Executive. I have no hesitation in sharing that with the Assembly. We clearly understand that there will be a bid for that next year.

A children's commissioner is another area that is the subject of consultation, not least in the context of the wider children's strategy. The intention is clearly to appoint a commissioner for children in spring 2002, thus making progress there. Some Members, Monica McWilliams in particular, were worried that the fact that there is no discernible provision for it here in the draft Budget could mean that that appointment was somehow going to be hostage to financial issues and could be deferred on that basis. I want to give an assurance that that will not be the case.

Edwin Poots also raised the matter of funding for victims. He identified the fact that a further bid of £750,000 is being considered in relation to the social inclusion Executive programme fund. It would be wrong for me to speculate or give any advance indication on what is likely to happen there. The Executive published a consultation document on a victims' strategy in August. We have contributed almost £1.7 million to the Peace II victims' measure. That will address needs in a variety of ways, and £500,000 from the social inclusion Executive programme fund will be available to the victims' unit this year and in each of the next two years. I hope that Members do not labour, as some people do, under the false impression that the Executive have done nothing in this area. Because they are aware of a new bid, they assume that no existing moneys have already been given.

Fred Cobain raised issues relating to the north Belfast housing strategy. There is a funding package of £5.5 million available to Ministers for the purchase of sites for the first phase of the Housing Executive's strategy to tackle serious housing problems. This total strategy has been costed at £133 million over a seven-year period. That is the type of exercise that we are looking at. Nobody is under any illusions that that strategy or the types of resources that it is going to require are going to be made good in just one Budget. Also, the URBAN II funding is being specifically directed to North Belfast. That is worth a total of £8.7 million.

There were a couple of points that were partly particular but raised some more general questions. Joe

Hendron suggested, on behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, that the benefits from extra money for the Health Service in England were not coming through to health here, but were somehow being diverted elsewhere. The Executive have allocated more money to the Health Service than we received as a Barnett consequential of the increases in England. That is not to say that we have been able to match the sort of increases that there have been in England, but if people look at the exact amount that we got for health through Barnett, they will find that that and more has gone into the Health Service. We have not taken anything from the Barnett consequential that we get for health; we have been able to add to it.

To have made that sort of addition in health, as we did previously in education, in circumstances in which we were also having to carve out of the Barnett allocation money for water and sewerage and such like, shows that we are trying to prioritise. It also demonstrates that the Executive are trying to alleviate the difficult pressures facing the Health Service and, in particular, the very acute needs that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is trying, with her officials and services, to meet.

That effort has not yet provided the resources needed by the health and social services sector. I recognised this in the original Budget statement, and I have not gone into denial on the issue since then. We need to face several major issues relating not only to the draft Budget, but, more importantly, to next year's spending review. I hope that Members and Committees will be understanding of the Executive's decisions. We have already detected that Members are making a big deal of a slight decrease in one Department's budget.

We will not be able to take the spending review seriously if we lock ourselves into a position where there can be no decrease, where the spending patterns that we have inherited cannot be reviewed, or where we cannot review whether current expenditure is achieving the intended results. For example, if we can recognise that the intended results have been achieved, then we can afford to lessen priority in those areas and focus expenditure elsewhere.

Finally, Joe Byrne expressed a general concern about double accounting and the projection of £48 million into next year's Budget from moneys released this year. There is no question of double accounting; we have been upfront on the matter and have stated clearly that, based on our statement in the Executive's position report, we have been able to achieve slightly broader scope for manoeuvre. That has been done by calculating the level of moneys in this year's remaining monitoring rounds which could be carried over into next year's Budget. It is not a question of double accounting; we have received moneys in the past through monitoring rounds. However, the level of moneys available in

monitoring rounds of recent years will not necessarily continue.

Members will recall that we have already retained some moneys from the June monitoring round, and, given our knowledge of the patterns that exist, we felt that we could project a level of some £48 million. That figure is based partly on a £13 million projected under-spend by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment this year. We have also been using the Executive programme funds as an additional guarantee. When people tell us to wipe out the Executive programme funds they must remember that that funding is taken into consideration when projecting that £48 million. That figure provides more room to manoeuvre than was available before. I hope that there is no question of double accounting.

I will respond in writing, or during a further consideration of the Budget, to other Members' questions. I appreciate Members' comments. I look forward to seeing the Committee for Finance and Personnel's digest of their points and its cogent advice on where the real priorities should lie, where we should be drawing lines through issues, and where we should be trying to move forward. As an Assembly we are becoming much more thoughtful and strategic in our approach to certain budgetary issues.

7.30 pm

Mr Leslie: I thank the Members for their contributions to what has proved a very useful debate. I thank the Minister for his comments, and I thank those Members who have endured until the death. My recollection is that the Minister entertained us for an hour and seven minutes last year. It would be welcome if he could stick to a 7% reduction each year, but I thank him for the thorough way in which he has dealt with all the points. It does have the advantage that Members will get less from me, because they have had more from him.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel will publish a report in mid-November. That report will emphasise the points made by the Committees in their written submissions and matters that have arisen today.

I would like to comment on the conceptual issues that a number of points highlighted, rather than on specific finance matters. Some Members who made exceedingly pointed remarks to me as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel assumed that that Committee allocates the money. That is not the case. If you regard the Minister and the Executive Committee as Butch Cassidy and the Hole in the Wall Gang, we in the Committee are organising the posse. We can try to influence events, but we do not have carriage of the outcome.

The Minister referred to comments made about the Barnett formula, which I remarked on earlier. When

people ask for a review of Barnett, that is usually a coded request for more money. It is always nice to have more money, but in debating and allocating the Budget, we can focus only on what we have. It is not particularly useful to go on and on about the need for more money. We would always be able to spend more money if we had it.

If we do want more money, there are only three ways to get it: we can raise the rates, about which we have had plenty of debates; we can increase taxes, which we have also debated from time to time; or we can apply the principle of "user pays". Mr Maginness did not mention that principle in his remarks about transport and infrastructure, but we shall have to look at it in a serious way if we want to increase our overall level of spending.

Sadly, Mr McHugh has left us. Therefore, I will make the point to Sinn Féin. Its Members always invite us to copy the wonderful example of what happened south of the border. They should address themselves to what happened south of the border in the late '70s and early '80s when tax levels were increased to penal levels and a huge number of high earners fled the country. I was working in Dublin in the early '80s and observed that. It became more apparent as the '80s progressed. One of the key planks in the Republic of Ireland's economic growth in the past decade has been a reversal of those penal taxation rates. There is an obvious lesson to be learnt there.

Mr Close raised a conceptual issue with an overall resonance about sticking to the inherited formula. Mr O'Neill made the point that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure was landed with a commitment from the Department of Education to provide an extra £10 million for a library review. I am not sure if that means that Mr O'Neill thinks that they should not do that. It is however, an example of that principle. Mr McHugh was the only person to make the point that the focus should be on outcomes rather than on inputs.

That points in the same direction as the remarks made by Mr Close. I relate that to what Mr Kennedy said about education. The general thrust of the debate was that the key priority of the Executive is health. Mr Kennedy proposed that education was the number one priority and that economic benefits can evolve from education that may enable us to address other problems.

The two areas have something in common. If children are taught to grow up healthier, the Health Service will not, in due course, have to meet the same bills as it does now. I appreciate that we have to pay for the consequences of what has gone before and that it will take some years to get that out of the system — to work the ill health out of people's systems.

If education were to be made the priority, the priorities within education would be for children to learn

how to be healthier and how to protect the environment by learning not to throw litter all over the place. Councils spend enormous amounts of money collecting that litter. Children should learn about recycling waste, sustainable energy and a number of other related matters which, taken together, would make a considerable financial saving to the public service in Northern Ireland. One only needs to look at the situation in New Zealand — an example I often quote in the Chamber — to see how much better things can be done. However, the process has to be started at the beginning of the education cycle.

The Planning Service — another favourite example of mine — is constantly sucking in resources. It has received a considerable increase in resources over the last two or three years and is still looking for more. If the planning rules relating to rural development were tightened to the English levels, for instance, and if those relating to urban and industrial development were eased, the planning process would be considerably simplified. That would make it cheaper to administer,

and you would get the stimuli in the right places. I say that with some hesitation with my good friend Mr Savage sitting beside me. However, I also live in a rural area, and if the people who live in those areas bore the true costs of living there, most of them would not. That is something Members can conjure with for a while.

The Minister has undertaken to take full account of the Committee for Finance and Personnel's report. It is the Committee's duty to ensure that he does. When the final Budget comes forward in December following consideration of all these matters, I trust that it will reflect the issues that have been raised in the Committee's written submissions and in today's debate. I look forward to debating the matters in further detail at that time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the Draft Budget announced on 25 September 2001 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Adjourned at 7.39 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 6 November 2001

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: Prior to the debates yesterday on the motion to amend Standing Orders and on the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, I received two valid petitions of concern signed by 30 Members in respect of the motion and the vote. Therefore in accordance with Standing Order 27 no vote could be held until at least one day had passed. The Business Committee considered the matter yesterday during the suspension for lunch and unanimously agreed that the vote be placed on the Order Paper for today, and that was distributed. I remind Members that today's business is purely the conduct of the votes; it is not to provide further opportunity for debate.

A simple majority will decide the vote on the amendment, which is on the Marshalled List. The vote on the motion and the vote on the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister will be decided on a cross-community basis. The second of those votes requires parallel consent.

I have received a further petition of concern in respect of the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. The petition of concern was received within the required time, which is at least one hour before the vote. I have had to decide whether I should accept the petition of concern, insofar as it will delay the vote for a further day.

According to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, under section 42(1) and (2), petitions of concern do not require a particular delay. The Act requires that a cross-community vote be taken. That is already the case in respect of the election of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. Standing Order 27(1) requires that

"No vote may be held on a matter which is the subject of a petition of concern until at least one day after the Petition of Concern has been presented."

I must judge whether it is reasonable to accept repeated petitions of concern on the same issue, meaning that a

delay of one day could occur potentially on a repeated basis.

The purpose of a petition of concern is twofold. First, in accordance with the Act, its purpose is to ensure that the vote is decided on a cross-community basis. This vote will be on a cross-community, parallel consent basis. Secondly, the purpose of a one-day delay, provided for by Standing Order 27(1), is to permit the Assembly to consider the matter further. Therefore, the petition of concern ensures that both cross-community support and full consideration have been given.

Is it reasonable to accept repeated petitions of concern in respect of a specific question? The Speaker has a responsibility and a duty to give rulings on matters of procedure and to ensure that the business of the House is conducted properly. Having considered the question, I rule that more than one petition of concern on any matter, in order to delay matters for more than one day, is not permissible. I will not accept that.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I raised a point of order yesterday, and I quote from the Official Report:

"Can you draw our attention to the Standing Order that allows someone to make personal remarks after the winding-up speech on an amendment?" — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 12, p 468*].

To which you responded, Mr Speaker,

"Perhaps the Member can draw my attention to the Standing Order that forbids it?" — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 12, p 468*].

Regarding the matter that you are now considering, perhaps you can draw our attention to the Standing Order that forbids a second petition of concern?

Mr Speaker: I draw the attention of the Member to Standing Order 1(2):

"The Speaker's ruling shall be final on all questions of procedure and order."

I have not suggested that there is a Standing Order that forbids it but that it is for the Speaker to rule on the question. There can be little reasonable denial of that. I have made my ruling.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It seems to me that you are resting your decision on the desires of certain people. We are held up today because of a petition of concern. That petition of concern was submitted not for the purpose of concern, but to get the amendment dealt with so that there could be a change of designation. Then there would be no concern. I do not think, therefore, that you can judge the morality or the objective of the petition of concern.

You are entitled to deal with a petition of concern — I do not deny that — but the reason for tabling the petition of concern should not sway your decision. The reference in Standing Orders to petitions of concern is clear; it does not analyse it; it does not parse it; it does

not include any other consideration but stands naked on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: I trust that I have not expressed a view on the morality of the issue. I must address the question because this is the first time that petitions of concern about the same matter have been tabled seriatim. If I were to accept one further petition of concern, that would suggest that there was no reason why I might not accept it day after day. That would not be a proper way of proceeding. My ruling is not a judgement on the motivation behind either the first petition of concern or the second; it is on the question of whether repeated petitions of concern, submitted under the Standing Orders — not the Northern Ireland Act 1998 — should create a repeated delay of a day. That is not proper in this or any other circumstance.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Quite properly, you said that, in the absence of an Upper House, a petition of concern allowed Members to consider fully the implications of a motion. The implications of this motion are fundamentally important. Yesterday, a decision was taken about redesignation that may have altered the views of some Members, particularly those from the UUP. The motion can be passed only if UUP Members are determined to accept as Unionists, for the purposes of a vote, the redesignated Alliance Party Members.

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his point of order. This is not an opportunity for further speeches and debate.

Mr McCartney: I am well aware of the situation. There may be some UUP Members with a scintilla of conscience who may wish to consider at length the implications of their actions. It would be valid — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: What is the point of order?

Mr McCartney: It would be valid to allow at least two petitions of concern — not a whole line — relating to a matter of such importance.

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will deal with the points of order as they arise.

Mr McCartney has raised what is, in a sense, a political question. I have answered the simple question whether repeated petitions of concern relating to a particular issue — it can be any issue, but it must be the same one for all the petitions — should be accepted. The Member also asked whether the fundamental political nature of the matter meant that repeated questions should be put. I referred to the situation in a Parliament with two Chambers, and, of course, there have been occasions when there has been a game of ping-pong between the two Chambers in another place. However, that has not

happened simply because of the fundamental nature of the legislation at hand.

The Member has asked me to judge whether Members from a particular political party have had this matter sprung on them in such a way that they have been unable to give it due consideration.

It would be improper for me to make a judgement on that issue. However, on the procedural question of whether or not it should be permissible to have repeated petitions of concern on any specific issue, the judgement that I make is that it is not a proper use of Standing Order 27(1).

10.45 am

Mr C Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of your ruling, we appear to be approaching the point where it will be impossible to use the procedures of the House, or even the courts, to demonstrate what is quite clear. Mr Trimble has said that if he is elected under this process, it will lack credibility. Therefore, even if the House appoints Mr Trimble, it will lack credibility.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is mistaken. I see no reason why he should not consult with legal advisers about the question of the courts if he wishes. I made it clear yesterday that the Assembly is set up under statute; it is subject to the law, and I would not dream of advising the Assembly to act ultra vires. However, that is a matter outside of the Chamber.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I accept the force of your argument that it would be wrong to use the process of a petition of concern to allow the same people to delay a matter by repeatedly putting in petitions of concern. However, the people who have signed this petition of concern have not submitted any previous petition of concern on the matter. Several issues have arisen in the last 24 hours, which have given rise to concern among my Colleagues who signed the petition of concern. They want a further 24 hours in which to consider those matters.

Mr Speaker: I accept that the Member would wish to press the case. I accept that he makes an argument, which is not irrational. However, I must judge what is proper procedure. Let us be clear; Members must still decide how they will vote. As for the suggestion that they may require more time, there was no particular requirement that the sitting be held today. Standing Order 27(1) states:

“at least one day”.

If the Business Committee had judged this matter to be of such a fundamental nature that it required consideration over two days, three days, or a week, it would have been at liberty to make such a decision yesterday. To my knowledge, that suggestion was never raised,

and the Business Committee agreed to hold the sitting today. That is not the question. The question is one of procedure, which has not arisen before, and on which I believe I must rule. Is a petition of concern on the same issue, which is brought forward subsequently, a facility for delaying proceedings under Standing Order 27(1)? I accept that the Member has made a particular argument, but I have had to make a ruling, and I am persuaded that it is correct. I make it clear that the ruling does not apply solely in these circumstances; it sets a precedent.

Mr P Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be sufficient reason for you to consider this petition of concern if there had been an attack on a Member's property, and that a Member, who is unable to come here today, had been threatened?

Mr Speaker: To raise questions of that kind, given the circumstances that exist here in respect of all types of votes, would not be a wise course to follow.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Why? Do you want to hide it?

Mr Roche: Why not?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Although some Members are conducting a thoughtful and serious discussion on the merits of the procedure, it is inappropriate for other Members to make flippant remarks from a sedentary position.

PETITION OF CONCERN: AMENDMENT TO STANDING ORDERS

Motion proposed [5 November]:

From 5 November 2001, until the commencement of a review under paragraph 36 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement, Standing Order 3(8) has effect as if it read:

"A Member may change his/her designation of identity. Any such change takes effect immediately after notification in writing is submitted to the Speaker. Any subsequent change shall take effect seven days after the day of such notification."

[Mr J Wilson]

[Mr E McGrady]

Amendment proposed [5 November]:

Delete all after "Speaker" in line 6 and add:

"and the change is endorsed by a majority of those already registered to this designation."

[Mr P Robinson]

Mr Speaker: We should proceed with the business in hand, which is to vote on three issues. First, the vote on the amendment to the motion, which I remind the House — *[Interruption]*.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is a most serious matter that a Member, who was coming to the House, has been attacked. Her property was attacked in such a way that she cannot come here in time for the sitting and a wreath was sent to her home.

That is a very serious thing. I would say, Mr Speaker—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am in no way suggesting that the matter is not serious. I am very much aware that such questions have been around, and I have been conscious of them over the last day. However, my point is that if the House were to allow itself to have its procedures interfered with in that way, it would be a very serious precedent indeed. It would be quite inappropriate — *[Interruption]*.

Order. We must be duly and gravely concerned as we deal with such questions, but we should not abuse them. I do not suggest that the Members who have stood are doing so, but I sense something untoward about it.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: There is something untoward about it. I was not suggesting any attack on your character. I was making it clear that a Member coming to the House, who has been making headlines because of savage attacks on her honour made by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party — *[Interruption]*.

Members: Shame.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. It is now becoming increasingly clear that points of order about a duly grave matter are being used for political point-scoring, and that is not acceptable. I am now moving to the vote.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to resume his seat. I am not taking any further points of order, because it is becoming clear that they are being used for political point-scoring. The opportunity for debate was yesterday.

I have put the Question, but I sense slight confusion amongst Members — more cross voting than cross-community voting. I will therefore read the Question. The Question is to amend the motion to amend Standing Orders. Therefore, it is not a cross-community vote; it is a majority vote. The Question proposes to “delete all after ‘Speaker’ in line 6 and add: ‘and the change is endorsed by a majority of those already registered to this designation.’”

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 29; Noes 70.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

NOES

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mrs E Bell, Dr Birnie, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Sir Reg Empey, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Ford, Mr Foster, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Ms Hanna, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McCarthy, Mr McClarty, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMennamin, Mr McNamee, Ms McWilliams, Ms Morrice, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mr Neeson, Mrs Nelis, Mr Nesbitt, Dr O’Hagan, Mr O’Neill, Ms Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Rodgers, Mr Savage, Mr Tierney, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Question accordingly negatived.

11.00 am

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 70; Noes 29.

AYES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Ms Hanna, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMennamin, Mr McNamee, Ms McWilliams, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Dr O’Hagan, Mr O’Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Unionist

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Dr Birnie, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Foster, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Morrice, Mr Nesbitt, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Other

Mrs E Bell, Mr Ford, Mr McCarthy, Mr Neeson.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Agnew, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	99	<i>Total Ayes</i>	70 (70.7%)
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	38	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	38 (100.0%)
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	57	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	28 (49.1%)

Main Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

From 5 November 2001, until the commencement of a review under paragraph 36 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement, Standing Order 3(8) has effect as if it read:

“A Member may change his/her designation of identity. Any such change takes effect immediately after notification in writing is submitted to the Speaker. Any subsequent change shall take effect seven days after the day of such notification.”

11.15 am

RE-DESIGNATION LETTERS

Mr Speaker: I have received an envelope, with a request that it be opened immediately upon the passing of the amendment to Standing Order 3(8) — *[Interruption]*.

I am entirely at the service of the House. If Members do not listen closely, they may not find out what is in the envelope. There are three letters. The first reads:

“Mr Speaker,

In accordance with Standing Order 3(8) as amended today, I give notice that I am changing my designation from ‘Centre’ to ‘Unionist’.

In the terms of the Act that means from “Other” to “Unionist”. The letter was signed by David Ford. The second letter reads:

“Mr Speaker,

In accordance with Standing Order 3(8) as amended today, I give notice that I am changing my designation from ‘Centre’ to ‘Unionist’.

Eileen Bell.”

“Mr Speaker, In accordance with Standing Order 3(8) as amended today, I give notice that I am changing my designation from ‘Centre’ to ‘Unionist’.

Seán Neeson.”

I have not received — *[Interruption]*.

Order.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of the information that you have just given to the Assembly, and in view of the mischievous and erroneous statement by Sammy Wilson yesterday — of course, it is not the first time that Sammy Wilson has been caught with his trousers down — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I cannot hear either of the Members. Has the Member a point of order that he wishes to make?

Mr McCarthy: The Assembly Member ought to give the whole House an apology for his statement yesterday. Come on, Sammy. Be a man.

Mr Speaker: Order. If it is the case that Mr Wilson wishes to give such an apology — *[Interruption]*.

Mr S Wilson: I assume, Mr Speaker, on the basis of your ruling yesterday, that you will allow me to make a personal statement in response to Mr McCarthy’s comments. You did the same for Mr Taylor yesterday.

Mr Speaker: If the Member wishes to make a personal statement, I am happy to consider it.

Mr S Wilson: Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: However, he will know that the proper procedure for a personal statement is that he gives me in writing, in advance of the sitting, precisely what he is going to say — *[Interruption]*.

Order. At the discretion of the Speaker, a decision will be made as to whether that personal statement may be proceeded with. Given that that is clearly the way in which the Member wishes to proceed with the issue, we will now move to the next matter.

Mr S Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am taking Mr Dodd’s point of order first, if I may.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of section 16(8) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, are you satisfied on the basis of the advice given to you that the election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister beyond the stipulated period will certainly be valid, or is it your view that it may be valid? It is important to put on record that the consequences for the entire Government of Northern Ireland, and individual Departments and Ministers, if there is an election of a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister that turns out to be void, are serious. Potentially every decision would be unlawful and void. Have you therefore, Mr Speaker, come to the conclusion that it is valid to elect a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister despite the provisions of section 16(8) of the said Act?

Mr Speaker: I want to respond to that point of order before doing anything else. I then wish to make remarks in respect of the letters that I was in the process of opening when other points of order were raised. I will then take up subsequent points of order.

The Member has raised a serious question. I have given consideration to it on the two counts that he gave. First, I have considered the question of the balance of probabilities as to whether any election would be regarded by the courts in the present circumstances as being a wholly proper and acceptable one or whether there would be substantial doubt about the question. That is the burden of the point of order from the Member because, as he points out, if it were to be the case that a court subsequently struck down the election, the question would be whether any decisions taken during that interim period would be valid decisions or whether they would then be a problem.

There is another aspect that the Member needs to keep in mind. If a First Minister and a Deputy First Minister were not elected, what would be the adverse consequences of that in terms of the Administration?

Mr P Robinson: Elections are not an adverse consequence.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am simply drawing attention, quite properly, to the issues that have to be considered. I have taken the most senior advice that I possibly could from a legal point of view. It was clear from the advice that I was given, and from my consideration of the matter, that the balance of probabilities was overwhelmingly in favour of the argument that it would be not only acceptable but proper as far as a court was concerned that this Assembly had the right to so elect and that that would be a valid election.

That does not rule out the possibility, as the Member knows, of a challenge being mounted, which the court would consider. However, I am clear, and I hope this is of some reassurance to the Member and to the House, that I have given proper consideration to those questions.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Following that point of order for clarification — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. I will complete the item of business. In the light of the amendment to Standing Order 3(8) these three re-designations are valid and immediately effective.

Mr S Wilson: Further to my original point of order, Mr Speaker, you said that I could, in writing, ask to make a personal statement to the House. However, on what basis did you make the judgement yesterday that Lord Kilclooney could make a personal comment to the House without putting it in writing? *[Interruption]*.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member may be in some confusion about what I said about personal statements. I did not say that he had to make an application in writing; I said the personal statement had to be submitted in writing.

The context yesterday was different. During a debate the Member requested an opportunity to reply, in the context of the debate, to questions that had been raised about him. The only issue with regard to that was that it came immediately after the winding-up speech on the amendment, rather than immediately prior to it. That was a procedural issue and not a question of a personal statement. We are not now in a debate, so matters are different. The Member is at liberty to put all the issues in writing, and I will consider them for the next sitting.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In view of your ruling to my Colleague from North Belfast, will you put in the Library of the House the advice that was given to you as Speaker of the House? If you will not do that, is the Business Committee of the House entitled to know the basis on which you made your ruling today?

Mr Speaker: The Member is a highly experienced parliamentarian, and he is also wholly familiar with

the procedures of lawyers and the courts. He will know that it is generally regarded as inappropriate for such advice to be published. The counsel that I seek is the Speaker's counsel and not the counsel to the Business Committee. Again, I do not think that that would be appropriate. I have made the ruling that I should, but I am not able to accede to the Member's request. However, if there is a wish to challenge it, the Member knows the road to the court rather well, and undoubtedly he will take it.

Mr McCartney: You are quite right, Mr Speaker, that the privilege that exists between client and legal adviser is one which can be claimed. However, it can be claimed only by the person who has received the advice. Do I understand that you are claiming personal privilege, as Speaker, for the advice that you received?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Member for confirming the propriety of my handling of the matter legally. The consequences of my not proceeding in this way would be that this question would be raised every time I told the House that I had taken legal advice, and that would be silly.

Mr McCartney: Are you claiming it or not? You are claiming it.

Mr Speaker: The Member knows that very well.

Mr McCartney: You are claiming it; that is fine; that is the answer.

Mr Speaker: Of course I am.

I will take only one further point of order from Rev Dr McCrea. Then we must proceed to the business in hand.

Rev Dr William McCrea: Can you confirm, Mr Speaker, that in the letters you received there was no communication to the House, or to you, from the hon Member for Lagan Valley, Seamus Close?

11.30 am

Mr Speaker: I am open to the House with regard to what I have received. It would be inappropriate for me to speculate about any Members.

**PETITION OF CONCERN:
ELECTION OF FIRST MINISTER
AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

Motion proposed [5 November]:

That the Rt Hon David Trimble MP, MLA be First Minister and Mr Mark Durkan MLA be Deputy First Minister.
[*Sir Reg Empey*]
[*Mr Mallon*]

Question put,

The Assembly divided: Ayes 70; Noes 29.

AYES

Nationalist

Mr Attwood, Mr Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Courtney, Mr Dallat, Ms de Brún, Mr A Doherty, Mr Durkan, Dr Farren, Mr Fee, Mr Gallagher, Ms Gildernew, Ms Hanna, Mr Haughey, Dr Hendron, Mr G Kelly, Mr J Kelly, Ms Lewsley, Mr Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr McClelland, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGrady, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McHugh, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMenemy, Mr McNamee, Ms McWilliams, Mr C Murphy, Mr M Murphy, Mrs Nelis, Dr O'Hagan, Mr O'Neill, Ms Ramsey, Ms Rodgers, Mr Tierney.

Unionist

Dr Adamson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Beggs, Mr B Bell, Mrs E Bell, Dr Birnie, Mrs Carson, Mr Cobain, Rev Robert Coulter, Mr Dalton, Mr Davis, Sir Reg Empey, Mr Ford, Mr Foster, Sir John Gorman, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hussey, Mr B Hutchinson, Mr Kennedy, Lord Kilclooney, Mr Leslie, Mr McClarty, Mr McFarland, Mr McGimpsey, Ms Morrice, Mr Neeson, Mr Nesbitt, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr Trimble, Mr J Wilson.

Other

Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Unionist

Mr Agnew, Mr Berry, Mr Boyd, Mr Campbell, Mr Carrick, Mr Clyde, Mr Dodds, Mr Douglas, Mr Gibson, Mr Hay, Mr Hilditch, Mr R Hutchinson, Mr Kane, Mr McCartney, Rev Dr William McCrea, Mr Morrow, Mr Paisley Jnr, Rev Dr Ian Paisley, Mr Poots, Mrs I Robinson, Mr M Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Roche, Mr Shannon, Mr Watson, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr C Wilson, Mr S Wilson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>99</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>70 (70.7%)</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>38 (100.0%)</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>60</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>31 (51.7%)</i>

Question accordingly agreed to (cross-community vote).

Resolved:

That the Rt Hon David Trimble MP, MLA be First Minister and Mr Mark Durkan MLA be Deputy First Minister.

Mr Dodds: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. To see Sinn Féin/IRA Members on their feet in jubilation at the election of Mr Trimble really is not the most gratifying sight for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order [Interruption].

Order. I now ask the Rt Hon David Trimble MP and Mr Mark Durkan, who have been chosen by — [Interruption] — the Assembly as First Minister and Deputy First Minister, to come forward to affirm the Pledge of Office [Interruption].

Order. I first ask the Rt Hon David Trimble, who has been duly elected as First Minister, to make the affirmation in the form prescribed.

The First Minister (Mr Trimble): Mr Speaker, I affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 — [Interruption].

Mr Speaker: Order. If Members do not remain silent during the affirmations, they may find that they will have to wait some considerable time before they will have a chance to speak formally again. This is not proper behaviour. Mr Trimble, please proceed.

The First Minister: Mr Speaker, I affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: I now ask Mr Mark Durkan, who has been duly elected as Deputy First Minister, to make the affirmation in the form prescribed.

The Deputy First Minister (Mr Durkan): Mr Speaker, I affirm the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Speaker: The First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have been duly elected and appointed. That concludes the process for the appointment of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Adjourned at 11.45 am.

Committee Stage Records

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Monday 17 September 2001

**GAME PRESERVATION
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 15/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McLaughlin
Mr Poots
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr R Gorman) British Association for Shooting
and Conservation
Mr W Chambré) Countryside Alliance in
Northern Ireland

The Chairperson: I welcome Mr Ronan Gorman, the Northern Ireland Director for the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, and Mr Will Chambré of the Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland to this morning's Committee session. You have had the benefit of listening to the Department's contribution to the Committee, and you may wish to address the issues from your perspective. You may feel that some issues remain unanswered or are unclear. The departmental officials are still present, and they have kindly acceded to wait. If anything can be resolved this morning they will attempt to do so, or else they will clear it after further discussions with the Department.

Mr Gorman: I shall lead off on the detail of the Game Preservation (Amendment) Bill. Mr Chambré has a specific issue that he wishes to raise at the end.

I may have gained a reputation for making lengthy presentations in the past, but I can assure the Committee that I will compensate today by making a short presentation — for two reasons. Mr Murphy has outlined the background details and I have already submitted a detailed response, which I hope that the Committee has seen.

Grey partridges are sadly extinct in Northern Ireland, and the general consensus is that that is largely due to changes in agricultural practices. There can be no objection to the Bill from a conservation viewpoint. Conversely, I believe that to extend the shooting season will encourage more organisers of shoots to rear and release partridges, which may help to reintroduce them into the wild again.

The strongest argument in favour of the Bill is an economic one. Only a small number of organisers of shoots release partridges, but they are important economically in specific localities. There are one or two shoots on islands off the coast of Northern Ireland, but as they mainly take place in winter, many shooters find it almost impossible to attend. To bring the date of the gaming season forward slightly would make it easier for shooters to reach those locations. That is important, as many of those shooters travel from other parts of Europe, which can be expensive.

Partridges can be fully mature by 1 September and therefore they can be considered sporting birds. However, that depends on how they are managed. If they are released at the appropriate time and managed properly, they can become sporting birds. If not, they might never become sufficiently mature to be considered a sporting bird.

The way in which pheasants are reared and released in this country is a clear example of how the shooting community has a high level of self-regulation. The shooting season for pheasants begins on 1 October. Not all pheasants are sufficiently mature to become a shooting bird by 1 October. If they are not, those pheasants will not be shot.

Weather conditions, management et cetera influence when the shooting season begins. However, the season should be allowed to start on 1 September. With the appropriate management and self-regulation, which has been sufficiently evident in the past, the practice presents no moral or sporting difficulties. The issue is reasonably straightforward and we are in agreement with the officials.

There are conflicting pieces of legislation that relate to the shooting of rabbits in Northern Ireland. The Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928 classes rabbits as game. Provision is made to give them a certain amount of protection from hunting at night and on Sundays. The most recent legislation, the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, does not include rabbits in its definition of game.

The BASC amendment would not change any gaming practice. It would not lead to more rabbits being shot, or to an increase in the hunting pressure upon rabbits. It simply clarifies the existing legislation — aspects of which are conflicting — and brings it into line with current practice. It will not lead to a decline in the rabbit

population. Rabbits are clearly considered agricultural pests, and controls are needed to deal with them.

Other pieces of legislation are in place with which people must comply. The current firearms legislation — the Firearms (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 — makes it a serious criminal offence for anyone to be on land without the appropriate authorisation. Regardless of how the terminology changes, people will still have to comply fully with that stringent legislation. There is still a level of protection for all wild animals in legislation such as the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, which specifies certain methods by which rabbits can be captured.

This is not a free for all; it is common sense, which would bring outdated legislation into line and make it more practical, workable and easily understood. People can comply with legislation only when they understand it.

The Chairperson: Do you accept the Department's suggestion on the shooting of rabbits?

Mr Gorman: The Department has suggested the wording that I suggested to it, so we are in complete agreement on the issue.

The Chairperson: That is an unusual position to be in. However, it proves that when representations are made, they are listened to. Differences existed at the beginning of the exercise, but now there seems to be agreement.

Mr McLaughlin: Following correspondence between the Committee and the Department, the BASC's proposed amendment to section 7A of the 1928 Act would allow the shooting of rabbits at any time by any authorised person with any firearm. Does that include short arms?

Mr Gorman: The Department has paraphrased our proposed amendment. We make no reference to the use of any specific firearm. The amendment reads that rabbits can be taken at any time by "authorised persons". We do not propose the terminology "with any firearm". However, the police will only authorise certain types of firearms for the control of rabbits, namely shotguns, low calibre rimfire rifles and air rifles. Short arms, centrefire rifles, and any high calibre rifles would not be allowed. Mr McLaughlin's understanding is based on a slightly inaccurate paraphrasing of our proposed amendment.

Mr Ford: I am impressed that BASC can apparently make suggestions verbatim, and the Department will accept them. It would be useful to invite the Department back to check the formal wording.

I noticed that your submission refers to "authorised persons". To make that clear, that may need to read "landowner or person authorised by him". We are debating the precise legal form of words; we have all agreed on what we are trying to do, which is a step forward.

What sanctions would there be if someone who runs a shoot allowed the shooting of immature birds? Could the BASC take sanctions against such people? I accept that the majority of people do not act in such a way, but what would be the consequences if they did?

Mr Gorman: We have given much thought to the term "authorised persons" and the proposed amendment. We did not want to use "landowner", "occupier", "authorised by", because in Northern Ireland there are instances in which the landowner does not have the right to pursue game on his property. Therefore, an authorised person has different connotations.

The term "authorised person" is clearly defined in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Landowners and occupiers are more or less included in that definition. We suggest adhering to that definition.

There would be no legal sanctions. However, there is nothing to stop people from releasing partridges on 30 September and shooting them on 1 October. That does not happen because the main shoots are largely commercial. As in any commercial enterprise, people will pay for a good product. People will not pay for a poor product. The ultimate sanction is that shoots that do not adhere to best practice will dwindle. That has occurred regularly in the sport's recent history.

We also have a good shooting code of practice, to which all the representative bodies for shooting sports in the UK have signed up. The code of practice makes specific provision for rearing and releasing game birds, particularly partridges, pheasants and ducks. It specifies minimum ages at which birds should be shot, latest release dates and other best practice issues. That has been adhered to stringently. If the BASC become aware of any operation that does not adhere to the best practice model, we will ensure that it is not affiliated to our organisation, which is the representative body for the sport. That is a major indictment for any operation. We shall also do what we can to stamp out that malpractice. For several decades, the BASC has had a track record of doing that in Northern Ireland, but sadly there is the odd rogue.

Mr Chambré: The Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland (CaiNI) welcomes the extension of the partridge shooting season, because of the tangible economic benefits it would bring to Northern Ireland. We also fully support the BASC amendment, which would clarify existing legislation on the shooting of rabbits.

Our concerns are more general. None of the provisions, other than the extension of the partridge shooting season, was included in the Department of the Environment's consultation document on the Bill. We circulated our brief on the Bill at Second Stage and Committee members should have received a copy of that. Some Members raised the matter in the Assembly.

Two significant provisions would allow the Minister to vary the game shooting seasons by Order subject to negative resolution. That legislative process would deny the Assembly the opportunity to debate the Order. The Countryside Alliance feels that the amendment is not a technical one, as the Minister described it at Second Stage. It is significant because shortening the season could have a detrimental effect on commercial game shooting, which is worth £50 million to the economy of Northern Ireland. There is also the environmental consideration — shoots afford protection to both flora and fauna at no cost to the public purse, as we said in our briefing document.

Shoots have an incentive to preserve habitats. Any change to the shooting seasons should be debated fully in the Assembly, rather than be allowed to go through on the nod. We are prepared, at this juncture, to support the provisions in the Bill. However, we are unhappy about the lack of consultation, which allows the Department to make changes to the shooting season on the nod, with no debate in the Assembly.

The Chairperson: Do you object to the procedure?

Mr Chambré: Yes. Our objection is that the proposal that variations to the shooting season should be made by negative resolution was not included in the consultation document.

The Chairperson: Although you object to the procedures, you do not object to the individual parts of the Bill with which the Minister is proceeding.

Mr Chambré: We are uncomfortable about the idea that the Minister should be allowed to vary the close shooting seasons for game by Order subject to negative resolution. We accept that the Bill will streamline things, but we feel that that issue deserves proper debate and should have been included in the consultation document. We support the extension of the partridge season and the amendment proposed by BASC. We would not wish to see those provisions jeopardised, but the Department must ensure that MLAs and members of the public are properly consulted on any future measures.

The Chairperson: Your submission is worthy of serious consideration by the Department. We will take the matter up, because it concerns the manner in which legislation is progressed. I would like you to confirm that that is the only issue about which you are uncomfortable. I assume that you are not uncomfortable with the two other issues — the extension of the partridge shooting season and the amendment that has been proposed by BASC.

Mr Chambré: The Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland fully supports those. Our concerns are procedural and concern the fact that the other provisions in the Bill should have been included in the consultation document, especially the provisions that allow the Minister to vary the close seasons for shooting game by negative resolution. Our concern is that, if those provisions are enacted, there will be no need for a Bill such as this.

The Chairperson: I will be interested to hear what the Department has to say on the issue.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Monday 17 September 2001

**GAME PRESERVATION
(AMENDMENT) BILL
(NIA 15/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr McLaughlin
Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr B Murphy) Department of the Environment
Dr H Platt) Environment and Heritage Service,
Department of the Environment
Mr J Milburne) Environment and Heritage Service,
Department of the Environment

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, I welcome you to this morning's Committee session.

Mr Murphy: I am Brian Murphy of the Environmental Policy Division of the DOE. Dr Harold Platt is an assistant director of conservation science, and Mr John Milburne is a wildlife inspector in the Environment and Heritage Service — an agency of the DOE.

The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928 to extend the partridge shooting season to include September each year. The change will bring the open season in Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. The Bill is in response to representations made by local enterprise to extend the partridge shooting season for commercial purposes. The extension is fully supported by organisations that represent shooting interests in Northern Ireland.

There are no conservation objections to the proposal, as the native grey partridge is now extinct in Northern Ireland due to a lack of suitable habitat, and there are no plans to reintroduce it by means of a specific initiative. All partridges shot during the open season are artificially reared and introduced to the wild by shooting organi-

sations or game farmers so that they are fully acclimatised in time for the start of the open shooting season.

The Bill will also consolidate the provisions of an earlier Statutory Rule to extend the open season for snipe. The Department is also taking this opportunity to make provision in the Bill to amend section 7 of the Game Preservation Act (Northern Ireland) 1928, which prescribes the close season for game, in order to enable the close season to be varied in future by means of subordinate legislation, should the need arise.

The Bill will also make a minor amendment to section 7A of the 1928 Act, which deals with the absolute protection of game and rabbits at certain times. That section makes provision for the lawful

“shooting of rabbits on any agricultural land... by an occupier of that land or by any person resident with or employed by him.”

That will be amended to read: “any person authorised by him.”

The Bill will enable Orders made by the Minister under the 1928 Act to be subject to negative resolution of the Assembly.

A full public consultation was carried out. In addition to the Committee for the Environment and other statutory consultees, some 370 organisations and individuals were asked how they felt about the extension proposal. Those asked included the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside, which is the Department's statutory advisory body on nature conservation, and the relevant environmental non-governmental organisations, which included the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the Game Conservancy Trust, the Ulster Wildlife Trust and the National Trust. All district councils, organisations that represent farmers and landowners, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), and all licensed shooting clubs were also asked how they felt about the proposal.

We received 66 responses, the majority of which favoured the proposed Bill. Consequently, the Department decided to proceed because it was satisfied that no sound objections existed to extend the open season for partridges on conservation grounds. However, following the Second Stage debate, the BASC asked the Department to consider an amendment to further relax the provisions that control the shooting of rabbits. In effect, the amendment would apply the exemption for agricultural land to all land. The BASC amendment would allow the shooting of rabbits at any time by any authorised person with any firearm. “Authorised persons” are defined as the owner, occupier, or any person authorised by the owner or occupier of the land on which the shooting is to occur. We are satisfied that there are no conservation objections to the BASC proposals. The proposed amendment would regularise current practice.

We have sought the views of other interested Departments. There are no objections, provided that those who do the shooting are duly authorised and hold a valid gun licence. The police have confirmed that the amendment would bring the law into line with current practice and that sufficient controls are in place to ensure public safety. It is proposed to amend the Bill at Consideration Stage; the Department wrote to the Committee recently to that effect.

The Chairperson: Thank you for that concise and clear exposition. Are there any questions before the Committee hears from the other interested bodies?

Mr Ford: I am not completely clear on a few issues. I presume that the occupier includes anyone who rents land by conacre, or by any longer-term lease. Is there a definition in common law of “occupier” that corresponds with the common sense interpretation of “occupier”?

Mr B Murphy: The definition we use is similar to that used in the Wildlife (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. We are satisfied that that covers the type of eventualities that you mention.

Mr Ford: Does “authorisation” mean verbal authorisation or retrospective verbal authorisation? Can authorisation cover an indefinite period or must it be confirmed every time?

Mr B Murphy: The intention is that common sense would prevail. People have been shooting on those lands with permission and we do not envisage that situation to change. Authorisation would be given and, as that is largely custom and practice, permission would not be needed every time unless a landowner objected.

Mr Ford: I presume that the issue of those who hold shooting rights over land, rather than the ownership of the land, relates to game and, therefore, would not affect the shooting of rabbits.

Mr Milburne: The term “occupier” in the definition of “authorised persons” includes anyone who has fishing or shooting rights. Such persons are deemed to be occupiers as well. Rabbits are ground game, so if people have game rights they automatically have the right to shoot rabbits.

Mr A Doherty: Are the rights of rabbits any less than those of hares and other game? Are rabbits considered a lesser form of life?

Mr Ford: They are immigrants.

Mr Milburne: Over the past century, rabbits have no longer been classed as game in the public psyche; they are regarded as agricultural pests. The problem is

that game legislation still exists, and we must adjust it as necessary to suit that perception. However, they were classed as game when that legislation was written. Originally, it was the prerogative of the landowner and the landlord to take game, and they only.

Mr A Doherty: My other question is a practical one. What is the procedure if somebody makes a complaint about a breach of the regulations? To whom do people complain, and what will happen? Is that purely a policing matter?

Mr Milburne: Yes, that would be a policing matter. The RUC would enforce the legislation because it is criminal legislation.

The Chairperson: Are there any more questions?

Mr Ford: I have one other point. On previous occasions, Mr Leslie has raised the issue of the shooting season for partridges. He had concerns that the birds might not be sufficiently mature by 1 September. I cannot recall the comments that we have made to the Department on that issue, but do Mr Murphy and his colleagues wish to say anything?

Mr B Murphy: Our understanding is that birds would usually be mature, but the protocols that govern shooting would state that no responsible shoot would actually shoot an immature bird. That would be bad sport and bad practice, and that particular shoot would be in bad odour. Our colleagues from the BASC will be able to explain that more fully.

Mr Ford: However, the Department is satisfied that no problem exists at present?

Mr B Murphy: Yes.

The Chairperson: That concludes this morning’s questions. It has been a relatively easy question time. You will probably want to listen to the comments that the BASC and the Countryside Alliance in Northern Ireland (CAiNI) will make. Do you intend to listen to what is being said, Mr Murphy? The Department may wish to comment further after the BASC and the CAiNI have finished their statements or it may prefer to respond in writing. I wish to determine the Department’s programme.

Mr B Murphy: If there are any issues that we could address today I would be grateful for the opportunity to do so. If a matter arises that we need to consider further, we will take it away and come back to you on it.

The Chairperson: I would prefer matters or misunderstandings to be cleared up today, rather than wait to receive a written answer. That would be much better, as it enables the Committee to proceed more efficiently.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

—————
COMMITTEE FOR ENTERPRISE,
TRADE AND INVESTMENT
Wednesday 26 September 2001
—————

**INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT
BILL (NIA 18/00)**

Members present:

Mr P Doherty (Chairperson)
Mr Neeson (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Courtney
Mr McClarty
Dr McDonnell
Dr O'Hagan

Witness:

Mr P Johnston, Assembly Legal Adviser

The Chairperson: Mr Percy Johnston, the Assembly's Legal Adviser, has joined the meeting to offer help, if necessary. We have heard evidence from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and several questions were asked on particular concerns members had about the effects of the Industrial Development Bill in Northern Ireland.

The purpose of this meeting is to carry out a detailed clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill. Members will have the opportunity to raise concerns and suggest amendments. Members should read the relevant clauses and subsections in the Bill together with the related commentary in the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum.

The Bill has eight clauses and four schedules. Each clause will need to be considered in turn. The Committee can either agree with the clause as drafted or recommend to the Assembly that it be amended.

Clauses 1 to 8 agreed to.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Chairperson: Does the Committee also agree that the oral evidence from the Department and the written submissions from the Committee on the Administration of Justice be included in the overall report?

Members indicated assent.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR ENTERPRISE,
TRADE AND INVESTMENT**

Wednesday 26 September 2001

**INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT
BILL (NIA 18/00)**

Members present:

Mr P Doherty (Chairperson)
Mr Neeson (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Courtney
Mr McClarty
Dr McDonnell
Dr O'Hagan

Witnesses:

Mr G McConnell) Department of
Mr D McAuley) Enterprise, Trade
Mr P Dolaghan) and Investment

The Chairperson: Gentlemen, you are welcome.
May the Committee hear your evidence.

Mr McConnell: The Industrial Development Bill will establish a single economic development agency as a non-departmental public body (NDPB). The Minister proposed that the new body be known as Invest Northern Ireland (INI).

The Bill transfers the existing powers in the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 to INI thereby giving it the functions presently exercised by the Industrial Development Board (IDB), the Local Enterprise Development Unit (LEDU), the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU), the business support division of DETI — which was formerly part of the Training and Employment Agency — and the business support activities of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

The Bill also transfers the assets and liabilities of those bodies and amends the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 and related legislation, underpinning the existing activities of each of the aforementioned bodies.

The main purpose of the Bill is to establish INI and to transfer powers to it. Although the Bill specifies the parameters of matters such as the membership and remuneration of the INI board and staffing and

financial arrangements, it seeks only minor changes to existing powers of providing financial assistance to businesses. Consequently, the Bill does not significantly affect the policies and functions of the existing agencies. The powers in the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 are wide-ranging, and INI will therefore have considerable scope to develop new policies, which the Minister will expect it to do.

The Bill has eight clauses and four schedules.

Mr McAuley: The Bill must be read in conjunction with the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982, as the main functions of INI derive from part III of that Order.

Clause 1 of the Bill establishes INI as a body corporate and, in tandem with schedule 1, sets out its status, constitution, and procedures. Clause 2 and schedule 3 of the Bill transfer existing industrial development powers to INI. This means that from the appointed day INI will exercise the functions previously carried out by the Department and its agencies under part III of the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 and article 3 of the Energy Efficiency (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Clause 3 and schedule 2 dissolve the existing bodies. Subsections (1) to (3) effect, from the appointed day, the dissolution of the IDB, LEDU and IRTU. Clause 4 deals with interpretation; clause 5 details amendments and repeals.

Clause 6 retains in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment the powers under the Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 to offer financial assistance to the gas and electricity industries, responsibility for which will continue to rest with the Department. However, this is only a temporary saving until the issue can be dealt with fully in forthcoming energy legislation. Therefore the saving expires three years from the appointed day.

Clause 7 gives the Department the power to bring the provisions of the Bill into force by order. As Members of the Committee will be aware, it is intended that INI be established in early 2002, probably on 1 April 2002 — if that can be done.

Clause 8 gives the short title of the Bill, which is the title by which the Bill will usually be referred to. I am happy to expand on the detail of the schedules or to answer the Committee's questions.

Mr Neeson: Why can the Department not deal with energy issues?

Mr McConnell: The Industrial Development (Northern Ireland) Order 1982 gave the Department powers to assist industry. It uses those powers to assist industries, including the energy industry. The Bill will transfer all

the Department's powers to INI; this will leave the Department with no powers to assist any industry.

The Minister has decided that responsibility for energy will remain in the Department, so we must ensure that the Department has the powers to continue assisting industry. The Office of the Legislative Counsel does not like such untidiness and agrees to leave a little bit of power with the Department in the short term. However, it wants this to be tidied up in the forthcoming energy legislation. This will act as a temporary bridge for us from the day that INI comes into being by giving the Department the power to assist energy industries. However, we intend to introduce an energy Bill, probably in 2002 or 2003 to tidy up the loose ends. That is why the saving is only for three years.

Mr Neeson: Will grants and assistance come from the Department's budget or from INI's budget?

Mr McConnell: Grants to the energy industries will be part of the Department's budget.

Dr McDonnell: Energy is important. What do you expect of an energy Bill?

Mr McConnell: Sir Reg Empey's statement in the Assembly set out his energy strategy. The Bill will deal with the regulatory regime and the regulator's powers. It will also consider buying out the assets of some of the electricity contracts with a bond. That has been discussed in some detail. It will also deal with the future of renewables and the nature of the regulator's role. The Bill will be based on Great Britain's Utilities Bill, which we shall be looking at. We shall consult the Committee extensively.

Dr McDonnell: It is topical. At the moment we are looking at many energy issues.

Mr McConnell: The Committee's report on energy will be a major contribution to the deliberations on the Bill's content.

Mrs Courtney: Clause 3 (4)(a) states

"the functions of the Tourism Board in connection with the provision of financial assistance under Article 11 of the Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 (NI 3) for the purposes of providing or improving tourist accommodation are abolished"

Does that include capital build?

Mr McAuley: The power to offer financial assistance to businesses will be withdrawn from the Tourist Board and will be vested in the new body. The power to assist tourism infrastructure projects will, however, remain with the Tourist Board. For example, if councils were to make proposals for amenities in council areas, the board could still offer assistance; however, it will no longer be able to offer assistance to businesses for tourist accommodation.

Mrs Courtney: Does that include hotels?

Mr McConnell: At present, the Tourist Board provides capital grants for hotel and other accommodation projects. Hotels and tourism are businesses like any other. The thinking is that they would be better served by the vast range of Invest Northern Ireland (INI) business support services and that the Tourist Board should be left to concentrate on Northern Ireland's overall tourism. The Tourist Board will support infrastructure and will work with councils and regional tourism organisations.

Mr McAuley: The change is in response to suggestions made by the Tourist Board and the tourism sector.

Dr McDonnell: The Committee's members, laypersons though we may be, are in general happy with it. We simply want to make things happen, and we want to be as helpful and supportive as possible. Since the tragedy in New York, tourism will be a much more difficult business.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 4 October 2001

GAME PRESERVATION (AMENDMENT) BILL (NIA 15/00)

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mrs Carson
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr Leslie
Mr McClarty
Mr McLaughlin
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots

Witnesses:

Ms J Goldring) Department of the Environment
Mr J Milburne)

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Judena Goldring from the Environmental Policy Division and Mr John Milburne of the Environment and Heritage Service, both of the Department of the Environment. Thank you for joining us. Ms Goldring will give a presentation, after which we shall have questions. If you wish to comment, Mr Milburne, please feel free to do so.

Ms Goldring: We are here to talk about the amendment in front of you. With the Committee's leave, I will take a few minutes at the outset to give you some insight into the work of the Environmental Policy Division. It is very important that the Committee is fully informed and aware of the work we currently face. A few weeks ago I took up a new post with the division, having previously been director of the Office of Law Reform for five years. For the previous five years I worked as a lawyer, giving advice on policy and legislation. Therefore, I bring considerable experience of policy and legislation to this division.

The first thing I will stress to the Committee is the hugeness of the task facing us all — and when I say

“us”, I mean everyone engaged in the legislative process. The enormous volume of work is driven by the European Union, and 25 or 30 Directives must be implemented. Those are only the ones which face us now, but there are large numbers coming over the horizon constantly.

The second matter concerns the imperatives and pressures behind that work, which is absolutely necessary, for in many of those areas we are in infraction proceedings in the courts. Since the European Union is taking a much tougher stance on the issue, we have the real prospect of heavy fines; the amounts of money are huge. We shall be out on our own in many cases. There is a very substantial backlog, with new Directives coming across. We now face Directives which will cause us to be in proceedings in six months or a year unless we act on them now. Other pressures are arising to do with health and safety.

You would really need to be in the division to see exactly the kind of resourcing pressures there are, and we shall have to be exceedingly careful in the near future about how we prioritise our resources. The major priority must be to get our environmental legislation through, for we stand under the threat of proceedings on that count.

I will move on to the clause before us today. You will all have seen the draft. I am content that it puts in place what was agreed in principle. The British Association of Shooting and Conservation (BASC) amendment concerned the relaxation of the provisions that controlled the shooting of rabbits. I believe that properly implements what was agreed at the last meeting.

That is another example that seems simple at the outset, but when one goes into it, one finds that many consequential factors flow from it. We have had to amend other legislation as a result of the amendment in question, but it is all in order.

The Chairperson: Is the wording in accordance with the promise given to us?

Ms Goldring: Absolutely. It fulfils the policy agreed at the last meeting.

The Chairperson: Was it in the spirit of the representations made by the other groups at the last meeting?

Ms Goldring: They will be fully satisfied.

The Chairperson: That covers our concerns. We wished to be sure that the wording reflected what was promised to us then. If there are no questions, there is no point in continuing for the sake of it. We deeply appreciate your presence, Ms Goldring and Mr Milburne, and that you kept that promise. Thank you very much.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Thursday 4 October 2001

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL
(NIA 19/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)
Mrs Carson
Mr A Doherty
Mr Ford
Mr Leslie
Mr McClarty
Mr McLaughlin
Mr M Murphy
Mr Poots

Witnesses:

Ms C McFarland) Antrim Borough Council
Mr S Magee)
Mr P Cumiskey) Banbridge District Council
Mr W McFadden)
Mr P McNaney) Belfast City Council
Mr J Millar)

The Chairperson: Ms McFarland, Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for coming; we deeply appreciate your presence. I am sure you understand that, because of the presentation of the legislative programme for best value, we are anxious to hear the views of members and representatives of district councils. The three councils represented here were previously among a small number who replied. I can now tell you that we have had 16 replies from the 26 councils. The clear impression given to us at the time of the presentation to the Assembly was that there was practically unanimity of opinion between the Department and the councils that the substance of the Bill was a necessity. We were anxious to know whether that was true to help our deliberations. That is why our Clerk sought to ascertain your views.

A number of views have been presented to us. We shall ask Belfast City Council first to make a short presentation after which we shall come to Antrim and Banbridge Councils respectively. Please make the pre-

sentation; afterwards we can take any questions members may have.

Mr McNaney: I am Peter McNaney, Belfast City Council's director of legal services, and I shall make a short presentation on its behalf. I am accompanied by my colleague, John Millar, who is our hands-on best-value implementation officer. We have already made a detailed written submission to the Assembly Committee in our letter dated 26 September. We also made a previous submission to the Committee in your first round of consultation on the draft Bill. We are very pleased to be given this opportunity to make a further presentation today.

I wish to highlight a number of key issues, principally from the letter I sent to the Committee on 26 September. As was highlighted at the Bill's Second Stage, local government spending accounts for only £275 million of what, according to the Budget recently issued by the Assembly, was a Northern Ireland public expenditure of £6.6 billion. Large areas covered by the best value initiative in England and Wales are, therefore, obviously not addressed or covered by the present Local Government (Best Value) Bill, which applies only to local government and district councils.

In the Assembly debate the Minister of the Environment stated that Central Government already operated under a value for money, or best value, framework. In the Hansard report of the debate he specifically refers to financial regulations, a requirement to operate resource accounting, business plans and Northern Ireland Audit Office scrutiny. There is no question that such scrutiny provides a rigorous regime, examining financial probity, value for money and lawfulness of expenditure.

The key point I wish to make to the Committee is that such scrutiny does not address the primary directive of what best value is about. It is supposed to be about a more joined-up and integrated delivery of public services to local communities, which are responsive to their needs and co-ordinated in ways which minimise duplication and maximise effectiveness. It should present a concerted response to the cause of complex, "wicked issue" problems such as social exclusion, neighbourhood renewal and regeneration.

Those points were certainly made by many Assembly Members at the Second Stage. However, I suggest to the Committee that it raises the key question of what catalyst presently exists to drive other statutory and public service providers, apart from district councils, to investigate the services they provide for the public and to collaborate with others to integrate and deliver them in more joined-up and relevant ways. That is obviously a matter which will exercise the Committee, just as it exercised the Assembly during the Second Stage debate, and provide a very valuable context for my next point.

In the Local Government (Best Value) Bill there is an absence of any equivalent to sections 16 and 17, covering partnership powers, of the Local Government Act 1999 which applied in England and Wales.

There are two Acts implementing the modernising local government agenda in England and Wales. The 1999 Act imposes a best value duty on district councils and local authorities. The 2000 Act gives district councils the power to promote the economic, environmental and social well-being of their district. They are both part of the modernising local government agenda which is driving change in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland this agenda is being addressed in a piecemeal fashion. While the review of public administration will seriously impact on the role of local government, that present piecemeal response will only serve to marginalise further the role of local government in Northern Ireland. The Department's failure, despite many representations made to it, to respond positively to the introduction of equivalents to sections 16 and 17 of the 1999 Act is a grave omission that will seriously hamper councils in identifying joined-up solutions to provide best value services to the public.

At the Second Stage the Minister stated that any legislation that would impede the full implementation of the best value initiative would need to be examined and discussed in the first instance with the appropriate Department. If a decision were reached to change existing provision, the relevant Department would be responsible for any amending legislation which would be channelled through the legislative process. What he was saying is that, as opposed to having one power for local government that can co-ordinate changes to service provision as a whole, what we are going to do is take a departmental or silo-based approach, which is inconsistent with the prime directive of best value — joined-up service delivery. Therefore, we submit that in the best interests of collaboration and partnership there should be legislative provision for the removal of impediments to the delivery of best value, and the Local Government (Best Value) Bill is the legislative vehicle which should deliver that. We once again make a strenuous representation to the Committee to consider seriously proposing an amendment similar to sections 16 and 17 of the 1999 Act.

Best value is defined in clause 1 as “a combination of efficiency, economy and effectiveness”. It has been further suggested that the words “equality” and “environment” should be added to that definition. I understand the reason for that suggestion. However, local government as a public authority is already subject to the provisions of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), which require it to promote equality of opportunity in pursuance of its functions. It would not add anything to put the word “equality” in a best value duty — we have to do that anyway.

With regard to the inclusion of the word “environment”, it would be much better if the Minister and the Department were to indicate their intentions regarding the introduction of the power to permit a district council to promote the economic, environmental and social well-being of its district, which is central to the community leadership role of district councils.

We have made some detailed comments which I will go through quickly. Clause 2 contains a provision for performance indicators. In the original draft Bill it allowed for different performance indicators to be dictated for different councils. That power has now been removed, and we urge that it be put back into the Bill. If a council can show that its circumstances are different, the Department should have the legislative authority to accept differential performance indicators, although there should be some core performance indicators for all councils.

This is the final point that I strenuously want to urge upon the Committee. Clause 2(1) of the Bill states that the Department may issue guidance to councils on the carrying out of their functions under the Act. The Minister has already committed himself to the development of that guidance in collaboration with local government, and local government very much welcomes this commitment.

The Bill, however, does not say that. It states that performance indicators will be established by the Department, and it goes on to say that they will be established in consultation with councils and other stakeholders, but it does not say that about the guidance. The Committee should seriously consider the inclusion of a legislative provision in the Bill that guidance must be the subject of consultation.

There are many forms of consultation. On the one hand it is possible to have true dialogue, a meeting of minds and a natural consensus between policy-makers, implementers of policy and the public. On the other hand there may be an entitlement to make representations, which are often ignored. At present it is not known if representations are considered or if they are put in the bin or in a drawer. The reasons they have not been acted upon are not given by the Department. The Committee's role in the scrutiny of the guidance is, therefore, vital. It should seek either some legislative provision, which means that the Committee must be consulted on the guidance, or some type of firm undertaking from the Minister that he will consult the Committee on it. A situation can be envisaged in which, if the Assembly and the Committee are not here in the near future, guidance could be issued after consultation that was not all that it could have been.

In the Assembly at Second Stage, there was reference to how best value had evolved in the Scottish context. My colleague Mr Millar has informed me that the Scottish Executive have produced a consultation document on how best value has evolved on a non-statutory basis. The

Department has said that it cannot legislate for best value because it has been deferred by subordinate legislation. I have not examined that. The Assembly has its own lawyers, and perhaps the Committee may want to look at the specific legislative provision in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. As a lawyer, I must say that there are varying shades of legal advice. There is a large difference between “You must not do something” and “It is inadvisable to do something”. If someone says that it is impossible not to legislate it should perhaps be subjected to more detailed scrutiny, but that is a matter for the Committee to consider.

The Scottish consultation document on best value included contributions from all unitary district councils in Scotland and also around 50 other public bodies. Those groups all came together to talk about how best value should be delivered in service provision for the public. It was not just district councils. A series of recommendations were produced. My concern is that there seems to be a complete lack of that joined-up approach in this Administration. The only focus on best value is coming from the Department of the Environment. There may be something happening in education, social services or housing, but I cannot tell you what it is. It does not seem to be integrated through the departmental provision, but that is for the Committee to decide. The scrutiny role of the Committee is vital with regard to guidance.

I will conclude this submission with a quote. I am a great plagiarist — you should always steal what people say better than you do. The Audit Commission oversees the implementation of best value in England and Wales. The commission has reviewed the operation of best value in England and Wales in the last year in its report called ‘Changing Gear’. It is worthy of serious scrutiny. The report’s executive summary states that

“lasting and relevant service improvement to the public is rooted in dialogue, with services users and with the wider community.”

There can be no argument with that. It concludes that.

“This is a powerful lesson for us all. It is only by establishing a constructive dialogue between all of those with a stake in improved local services that we can hope to rise to the challenge of delivering excellent public services.”

That quote starkly contrasts the one-dimensional Local Government (Best Value) Bill that is now being presented that deals with £275 million out of £6 billion of public expenditure.

The Chairperson: We will move on to Antrim Borough Council.

Mr Magee: Thank you for the opportunity for me and Ms McFarland to appear before the Committee to give some thoughts on the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. There will be a lot of duplication in my submission with what was said previously, without any collaboration whatsoever.

I state with reasonable confidence that all councils have embraced best value as a welcome successor to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), which was thrust upon local government through undesirable legislation in an attempt to lower costs without adequate attention to quality of service. Antrim Borough Council is fully committed to the principles of best value and has proved its commitment even at this early stage by publishing two performance improvement plans. Because we are committed to best value we do not think that it is appropriate to introduce a Bill which does not fully embrace the principles of best value. Legislation is required to repeal CCT, but it is not understood why this must be done in tandem with best value legislation. Each could stand alone, thus extending time and trust for voluntary action by district councils.

The Minister, Mr Foster, has stated

“experience to date of the voluntary implementation of best value to date indicates that a statutory framework for best value is essential if we are to deliver the transparency, accountability and consistency that council residents and ratepayers deserve.”

The statement is demoralising when one considers the immeasurable amount of work and unsocial hours that many council employees have devoted in order to meet target dates while venturing up a steep learning curve. The Department was on a steep learning curve as well. Transparency is not apparent from the Minister’s statement with regard to negative information that is being fed into central Government without our knowledge, even at this early stage.

I can state categorically that in order simply to meet targets during the past two years of voluntary implementation it has been necessary to direct attention away from service delivery. Many services are presently freewheeling simply to allow time for preparation of paperwork for audits and publications. The recent Audit Commission report ‘Changing Gear’ clearly states

“A more integrated regime is needed that targets work in a way which better differentiates between the needs of different councils... More fundamentally, it is clear that ‘one-size-fits-all’ inspection is not the most effective means to support improvements in local services.”

If problems are evident within the audit and inspection regime in the UK, why are we including an audit regime which is clearly problematic in our legislation? Councils recognise and accept that a statutory framework will eventually be necessary, but one questions why mistrust must be directed at Northern Ireland when that does not appear to be the case in Scotland.

I also remind the Committee that indications from press reports published this week are that a three-month review of best value in Great Britain has been agreed. It might be beneficial and advisable to await the outcome of such a review on the mainland.

As a general duty one of the main issues is that best value is concerned not only with economy, efficiency and

effectiveness but also with quality, equity and the environment. That is not reflected in the duty outlined in the Bill. The Bill currently applies only to 26 councils which account for less than 5% of public expenditure — a point that was well put by Peter McNaney. As you are aware, in England best value applies to local authorities which are responsible for services such as education, health, housing, planning. Those services are currently excluded from the legislation in Northern Ireland. If the Government are fully committed to achieving best value for the users of public services in Northern Ireland, why are those fundamental services excluded? Perhaps the review of public services, which we have talked about many times over recent months, would be an appropriate time to introduce an inclusive framework.

District councils are not afraid to co-operate with or undergo scrutiny by auditors. Such measures have been with us for at least 30 years in relation to finances and value for money. However, the draft Bill sounds intimidating and displays mistrustful and schoolmasterly attitudes. The thrust concentrates on making sure that paperwork is in order without due care being given to quality of service, facilities and the consequent improvements.

Our accountability must be to citizens and ratepayers and not concentrated on meeting audit demands. It is more motivating to be a volunteer than to be a conscript. Partnership and co-operation can give rise to better accountability and transparency. It is important to recognise that audit, in itself, should meet best value principles. Hence, we should ensure that practitioners from local government audit — or, indeed, private auditors as they have in England — should be engaged.

It would be disastrous to have theorists, or persons dedicated to one discipline, scrutinising the work of experienced practitioners in local government. Councils recognise the rationale of using professional auditors. However, those undertaking the audits need to be suitably trained, qualified and to have the experience of local government necessary to properly analyse and audit the performance improvement plans. The recent advertisement for best value auditors in Northern Ireland concentrated on the three Es and added an accountancy qualification, indicating that there will be a narrow approach to the audit. Audits need to be carried out by those with an intimate knowledge of services.

I want to outline a further fear I have, which was put to your Committee in the July memorandum. The Bill indicates that auditors and inspectors will concentrate on performance improvement plans. However, clause 3 of that document states that as a result of an auditor's looking at the performance improvement plans, he may, at his discretion, decide to examine in more detail any other aspect of a council's approach to best value. That means that the spirit of the legislation has been brought out and that the auditor can come in and start from day one of best value. I shudder to think what the cost of that

would be, if an auditor decides to do it. He has the power under the legislation to look at everything, not just the performance improvement plans.

That is all I wish to say at this time. I want to introduce my colleague Ms McFarland.

Ms McFarland: Mr Magee has dealt with some of the general issues. I want to explore more fundamental matters under specific areas. The first that must be addressed is the guidelines. As you all know, the guidelines will be pivotal to the success of best value. The legislation should not only therefore prescribe for consultation but also for agreement with councils on the drafting of these guidelines. Consultation, as we have heard earlier, is not enough. We need agreement through a partnership approach.

On a positive note, the councils applaud the fact that the draft Bill is a vast improvement on what was previously advocated. Councils can meet the challenges; we can meet the statutory obligations. However, we question the haste and the camouflaged messages, particularly on enforcement. An approach to the audit of best value that is open-minded, supportive, provides advice and encouragement to councils and promotes good practice through shared experiences should be clearly reflected in the legislation. This point is raised in the Audit Commission's report 'Changing Gear'.

The next issue that must be addressed is that of performance indicators. We welcome the development of performance indicators in consultation with councils. However, we are all aware that this area has been problematic to date. We continue to be concerned that performance indicators will concentrate on cost, to the detriment of quality of service. It is essential, again, that there is not only consultation but also agreement with councils on the performance indicators.

If we are to embrace the principles of best value fully, there are two other elements omitted from the current legislation that must be addressed. These points have been raised by Mr McNaney. The first is a duty of community initiative. The best value legislation in England gives a duty to enhance the social, environmental and economical well-being of a council area. That duty should be included in the Northern Ireland legislation to empower councils to take a lead role in community planning and local integrated strategies.

The other element that is missing is what is commonly referred to as the Henry VIII clauses. The GB Bill includes at section 16 powers for the Secretary of State to give authority to councils to relax the rules constraining local government if a particular council finds a new way of delivering best value, such as by way of public-private partnerships or other options. Those powers are currently missing from the legislation, and the absence of such could seriously undermine a council's ability to deliver on best value. This must be recognised.

In summary, Antrim Borough Council is fully committed to the principles of best value, and we are happy to accept a legislative framework, but the legislative framework must fully embrace the principles. It does not do so in its current form. There are fundamental issues that must be addressed to make sure that best value can be delivered. After all, we are all working toward the same goal. Best value is about making real improvements to our services to benefit the citizens, the users and the customers. We cannot do that unless fundamental changes are made to the Bill.

Mr McFadden: On behalf of Banbridge District Council, we thank you for the opportunity to address the Committee regarding our concerns on the proposed Local Government (Best Value) Bill. My name is Wilfred McFadden, and I am chairman of the policy and resources committee. My colleague is Mr Pat Cumiskey, director of corporate services.

In 1998 we welcomed the Government's initiative to replace CCT legislation with the best value initiative. As you are aware, best value has developed on a voluntary basis for over three years. Progress has been made, and our submission will highlight concerns about replacing a voluntary ethos by a legislative framework. Mr Cumiskey will give the council's presentation.

Mr Cumiskey: I am also at risk of going over ground that my colleagues have already covered.

Northern Ireland local authorities have been committed to the best value initiative for over three years on a voluntary basis. There is no need for specific legislation at this time. We are concerned that legislation may be a retrograde step for the much smaller local authorities here and that best value can continue to be developed on a voluntary basis.

The Committee has discussed the different economic and structural bases of local government in Northern Ireland, which undermines the possible justification for a legislative framework. These include the fact that we account for just under 3% of public expenditure in Northern Ireland, compared to local authorities in Great Britain that take up in excess of 25% of a much larger purse. GB local authorities are generally large, tiered bureaucratic organisations, whereas Northern Ireland councils are much flatter, medium-sized local businesses. In GB the relationship between the Department and local government has traditionally been strained. Here it is generally constructive and facilitated by joint working groups.

It is suggested that for economic, political and structural reasons, a legislative framework may be justified in the GB context but that the smaller, more open local authorities in Northern Ireland lend themselves to creative voluntary partnerships. Our experience of the voluntary framework established in Northern Ireland by central and local government stakeholders has been broadly positive.

Based on the English and Welsh equivalents, the main stages of the framework include a corporate review to establish service performance; individual service reviews linking strategy to objectives; and service performance demonstrated in annual performance improvement plans which incorporate performance indicators, benchmarking information and reviews of consultation exercises.

This year we published our second corporate performance improvement plan and completed service reviews of all major services. A great deal of work involving councillors and senior council staff has established a valuable body of information, which has been incorporated into a management review process. Councils therefore have wide experience of the four Cs methodology — challenge, comparison, consultation and competition — which is incorporated in guidance produced by the Department of the Environment. It is difficult to see how the proposed Bill will contribute to developments under best value.

Bipartisan working groups are more likely to develop a best value approach suitable for the needs of Northern Ireland. In that respect some aspects of the four Cs methodology are more important in the Northern Ireland context than others. For example, in the wake of the failure of CCT it is no surprise that the 2000-01 report of the local government auditor mentions that there is limited evidence of councils carrying out fundamental challenge to the existence of the few significant services carried out by Northern Ireland councils. Given that customer surveys have indicated that members of the public are generally very satisfied with the quality of the services provided by councils, should this aspect of best value be so prominent in Northern Ireland?

On the other hand, the development of properly facilitated benchmarking clubs may be key to the success of the best value process in Northern Ireland. Unlike the rest of the UK, we have a very under-developed performance measurement regime with little analysis of available information, which undermines attempts to identify best practice. In his opening statement during the Second Stage debate on 18 September 2001, the Minister gave two main reasons for introducing the legislative framework. The first is the repeal of CCT legislation. However, it is clear that while the Local Government (Best Value) Bill is a convenient mechanism for repeal, it is not essential for that purpose.

The second reason given was that

“experience to date of the voluntary implementation of best value indicates that a statutory framework for best value is essential”.

We contend that the contrary is true. The Minister states that a statutory framework is required to provide consistency. There might be some merit in this if councils were in the habit of resisting central Government guidance. In general, this is not the case. Councils are aware that best value is a complex and evolving concept, and

they welcome guidance from the Department. However, the Minister cites the late submission of corporate performance improvement plans, which were requested by the Department for April 2001. Councils had not agreed this date, and, given pending elections, it was considered more useful to publish corporate performance improvement plans after the elections, including information on the new councils. In future councils wish to have a say in the optimum timetable for such local publications.

In my opening remarks I suggested that legislation might be a retrograde step in Northern Ireland. The proposed Bill is potentially detrimental for the following three reasons. First, it imposes a top-down approach to policy, with only a limited contribution from policy implementers. We suggest that the imposition of the proposed Bill is more likely to promote a monolithic, fit-all policy approach to best value, whereas a creative voluntary partnership could facilitate adjustments to suit the Northern Ireland context.

Secondly, it emphasises the policing role of the Department through local government audit at the expense of a more collaborative approach to best practice. In this context it should be noted that although the local government auditor has little recent experience of value for money auditing, such audits could be conducted within the ambit of existing regulatory legislation.

Thirdly, it excludes agencies and boards that provide the same type of services as the local authorities. Several customer surveys carried out by councils suggest that members of the public continue to identify roads, water, housing and other local services with councillors and the local council. Therefore it makes sense to align all local services with the best value regime.

Banbridge District Council recognises that the Local Government (Best Value) Bill presented to the Committee by Minister Foster goes some way to mollify concerns expressed by councils at the consultation stage. However, we think that the Bill is unnecessary and that the current review by the Environment Committee presents the Assembly with an opportunity to determine an alternative approach more sympathetic to the Northern Ireland context. Such an approach might include maintenance of a voluntary ethos rather than a legislative framework; experimentation with best value methodology; improved central guidance and co-ordination; and the development of a guidance framework to suit all local government-type services, whatever organisation provides them.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much for your presentations.

Before we take any questions, may I formally request that members of the Committee who are also councillors should declare and record their interest.

On 29 August the Committee received a departmental reply through the Assembly liaison officer. It stated:

“At the 22 August meeting members unanimously agreed that, unlike Compulsory Competitive Tendering, Best Value offered District councils the opportunity to provide quality services, with the emphasis on public consultation and with transparency, accountability and value for money as key components in procurement and service delivery. In discussing the revised Bill, local government representatives recognised the changes that had been made to the original Bill, and each endorsed the revised draft legislation as an acceptable basis upon which Best Value could be further developed.”

The best value steering group includes two representatives who are councillors and three representatives who are council chief executives, as well as officials from the Department. That causes the Committee concern because there seem to be two voices here. Are the two councillors or the three chief executives speaking on behalf of local government? Have they consulted local government? How have they unanimously agreed that best value offers district councils the opportunity to provide quality services and so forth? They each endorsed the revised draft legislation as an acceptable basis on which best value could be further developed.

Mr McNaney: Belfast City Council is not a member of that group. The council did not know that that group had been asked to comment on the Bill. The council was not asked to comment and therefore has not endorsed the Bill.

Mr Magee: Antrim Borough Council had no input either. My fellow chief executives were not in contact with me about it. I do not disagree with everything contained in the report. However, I disagree with the last sentence which states that they endorsed the draft legislation. Too much may have been read into that.

The Chairperson: If the Department were using that as a basis for presenting the Bill, and it had been found acceptable and had been endorsed, that is being used against local government. We are hearing two different voices. One is supposed to speak on behalf of local government. However, councils are writing to us with a different voice.

Mr Magee: May I ask who submitted that report.

The Chairperson: Lesley Rooney, the Assembly liaison officer.

Mr Magee: Had it come from SOLACE, I would have been embarrassed; but I am not embarrassed, because this concerns three people. There are four or five elements to the report, and I agree with all of them except for the final one — that the 26 councils could embrace the Bill as it stands.

We all agree on the need for a statutory framework. Our evidence this morning outlined other ways of doing it. We have shown, I hope, that the haste that the Minister and some civil servants suggest is not required. CCT can be repealed in two lines. Best value itself does not necessarily have to be brought into the legislation. That can be done separately.

The Chairperson: The Minister gave two main reasons for the Bill. I quote from the Hansard report on the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, Second Stage debate in the House on 18 September 2001.

“First, the requirement for CCT has merely been deferred by subordinate legislation; it remains on the statute book. Legal advice is that it cannot be further deferred in that way.”

No one seems to disagree. However, the second main reason is

“Secondly, experience to date of the voluntary implementation of best value indicates that a statutory framework for best value is essential if we are to deliver the transparency, accountability and consistency that council residents and ratepayers deserve. That strongly suggests that a statutory framework is the best way of promoting the interests of local people.”

These are given as the two main reasons. Everyone agrees with the first one. The second, however, seems to call the voluntary approach into question.

Mr Magee: That is where there is a lack of transparency. I am not aware of a good reason for the statutory framework. I can only think of my own council in Antrim and Pat Cumiskey’s council in Banbridge where the performance improvement plans have been prepared and published. If other councils are not doing that, I am not aware of it. Someone at central Government is working to a hidden agenda, and the Minister is quite right to take that up. He gives that as his second reason for introducing the legislation. Surely, however, this is taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Mr Cumiskey: I tried to examine the motivation behind this reason. The only thing I could find in the documentation is the implicit criticism of councils for not complying with the requirement to submit performance improvement plans by April 2001.

That was a difficult date for councils because of the election and the financial year-end. Councils must go through a process in order to have such documentation approved. April simply was not an appropriate time. That is the only reason we can find for the Minister behaving in this way. Perhaps the Audit Office is concerned about it, and that is where the idea came from.

Mr Millar: The local government auditor is based in Belfast city hall, and we have had discussions with him about the performance improvement plans. To my knowledge, all district councils submitted their plans. However, they were not all submitted by the April deadline because of the problems that have been outlined. It is difficult to submit the performance improvement plans in April because of the financial process within councils. It has already been recommended that June would be a more appropriate time. I am not aware of any council that is not voluntarily complying with the best value ethos in publishing the required documents.

Mr Ford: I want to go over a point made by the Chairperson; it is one that I raised in the Second Stage debate.

The Department tells us that everyone accepts that the current draft is better than the previous proposal. Councils therefore think the current draft is good, as opposed to better than disastrous. Having been consulted and having felt that some minor gestures were thrown their way, councils have felt that that is as much as they will get. However, they could consider working with the Committee to make a good Bill rather than a better-than-awful Bill. Would you agree that that is a valid interpretation?

Mr McNaney: This is an opportunity to determine whether the Assembly will make legislation that is a good fit for Northern Ireland or if it will be railroaded into making legislation that follows the lead of England and Wales. That is the crux question that Members of the Assembly will have to answer.

There should be a Northern Ireland solution for a Northern Ireland issue. In his submission Mr Cumiskey outlined the reasons for local government in Northern Ireland being different. It has had to develop a partnership approach because of the lack of functions and multiplicity of other service providers. If the partnership approach were practised more transparently in all levels of government, that would become official.

Local government is accountable because its members are elected. They therefore have to explain to ratepayers how they justify expenditure. Do we want local government to continue to be accountable to its electorate through its politicians, or do we want the local government auditor — who after all is an accountant — to determine what local government should do and what the level of provision should be? I am a great believer in the representative nature of local democracy, and I think that that is a retrograde step.

Mr Poots: Unusually for me, I agree with most of what the council officers say. Have you taken legal advice on the implementation of CCT? We have received conflicting advice. The Scottish Parliament has proceeded with voluntary best value. Have you taken advice regarding something more akin to the Scottish version of repealing CCT and going for voluntary best value?

Mr McNaney: No, and it is not usual for us to do that. If one had enough time, one might have contacted one’s colleagues in the Scottish Parliament to ask them that question. However, the Department of the Environment takes advice from the Department of Finance and Personnel’s solicitors. I am sure that that advice would state that it is improper to use subordinate legislation to frustrate something in primary legislation.

Without seeing that advice, without subjecting it to scrutiny and without assistance from someone more learned in the law than myself, I would not say the advice is incorrect. There are various levels of advice — if something is undertaken, it will be challenged and criticised by the Examiner of Statutory Rules and will put public administration into turmoil.

Mr M Murphy: The Bill seems to be directed at the Department rather than being innovative or providing best value provision to meet ratepayers' needs. Have you made representation to the Department and the Minister about that, and, if so, what was the response?

Mr Magee: We have been in consultation with the Department. There are many forms of consultation, but one wonders if the engrossment has been prepared before the consultation document goes out. However, we have not been left out of the consultation process at any stage. Three chief executives and two elected members met with representatives from central Government.

Central Government seem to be piggybacking CCT and best value. We do not see a need for that because if CCT had never existed, a legislative framework for best value might still have been required. I cannot see why CCT cannot be repealed and enough time still be given to putting the proper legislation into place. In that way not all powers will be vested in the local government auditor.

The Chairperson: Would it not be advisable for the three chief executives and the two council representatives to consult the bodies they are supposed to represent?

Mr McNaney: Scotland has COSLA, although it is experiencing difficulties, whereas Northern Ireland does not have a local government association. That issue is being addressed, and we now have a local government association in embryonic form. A united voice for local government, which would act as a centralised consulting mechanism for central Government, would be useful. It would also be useful for the Assembly to have a central body that speaks for local government.

I appreciate that the Department may have had difficulties in consultation. We can only speak in relation to our input to that consultative process.

The Chairperson: How were these councillors and chief executives appointed? Who appointed them? Did local government appoint them? Whom do they represent?

Mr McNaney: I think the chief executives were nominated by SOLACE.

The Chairperson: If they were nominated by SOLACE, should they not consult with SOLACE? It is not a large organisation. There are 26 district councils and three chief executives whom they can consult. I am sure they have meetings now and again. This is an important matter for the future of local government, and what will be placed upon it through the Bill. Councils are one reason the Bill is coming through, so they have to answer questions. If there were more time, perhaps interested parties could be brought before the Committee in order to ascertain their views.

Mr Magee: I do not agree with the final sentence you read out. I do not have difficulty with the remainder. The reduction in the number of clauses in the second draft is acceptable, but there is room for further change to get it absolutely right. I am not aware of having been told by SOLACE to take this lock, stock and barrel. We are pleased that the Department bent the knee from the previous disastrous piece of drafting.

Mr McNaney: Following the introduction of CCT, certain defined functions had to be put out to tender to enable private competition for delivery of services such as refuse collection, grounds maintenance and leisure provision. During the operation of CCT from 1992 to date, of all services put out to tender by 26 district councils, the only contract to the private sector was awarded by Down District Council. That contract ended after two years on the withdrawal of the private sector company.

An objective examination should be made of the time, energy, money and resources expended on a CCT process balanced against the intended outcomes. The outcome was that no contracts were awarded to the public sector. Is that a proper objective for public policy? It seems that no such analysis was ever made. My fear is that we are going the same way with best value. We are looking at the minimal level with no proper policy appraisal.

Mr A Doherty: Thank you for your presentation. It is obvious that there will be legislation. Unanimity on most of the points made today is important and encouraging, not only with local councils but with the host of other bodies that deliver services in partnership with them. There is also agreement that the decision to remove different performance indicators for local councils would need reconsideration. It is important to get things right.

In the feedback the Committee has had on the three Es, there is a case to be made for equality and environment. Mr McNaney suggested that equality was covered well enough elsewhere and did not need to be a major factor in the legislation.

Mr McNaney: You might like to take your own advice about that, but equality is a duty for local authorities under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Environment on its own would not be as effective as it could be if it were supported with the power to promote economic and social well-being. Environment alone might dilute the need for the Department to legislate for the promotion of economic, social and environmental well-being. That is my opinion, but others may differ.

Mr A Doherty: Mr McNaney has strong opinions about the implication of meaningful consultation. Catherine McFarland said that there is little point in consultation if agreement is not reached. We would agree with that. I will act as devil's advocate. The bureaucratic mind would put forward an argument that guidance

to councils is one way. There have been suggestions that there may be a legal duty that would make it more a directive to councils than guidance.

Ms McFarland stressed that agreement is essential. The bureaucratic mind in Government might suggest that it is highly unlikely that 26 disparate councils will ever agree. It is even less likely that they will reach complete agreement with the Government. Do you feel that, under those circumstances, consultation is critical? Could there be agreement regarding that?

Ms McFarland: Consultation, as it has been up to now, has obviously not worked. It has been problematic. Agreement is always possible. All the councils that we have spoken to are in total agreement on the principles of best value. I therefore cannot see that agreement could not be reached on guidance. Including councils before the guidance is issued is of the utmost importance.

Mr A Doherty: I must stress that the consultation up to now has not been very successful. There is an onus on councils to ensure that they work together. As a former councillor, I am concerned that eventually councils will emerge stronger and better and will provide a better service.

Mr Leslie: It has been said that the democratic process should be the arbiter. The Bill, and the legislation in England, acknowledges that that does not work. How many councils have changed hands over ratepayer issues? The answer is just about none. Clause 1, subsection (2) acknowledges that. The ratepayers must be consulted.

The crux of what you say — and I agree entirely — is that the first Bill was excessively prescriptive. That has been modified, but clauses 2, 3 and 4 are still quite prescriptive. It is arbitrary in that it is largely under the Department's power as to how that prescription manifests itself. If some sort of collective wisdom could be arrived at on how to set general benchmarks, and if that approach was reflected in the legislation, would the Bill work satisfactorily?

Mr Magee: It would be the basis for achieving something better than the current arrangements. Many people have accepted the second draft as the be-all and end-all. One spoonful of sugar will not sweeten a bottle of vinegar. It has been sweetened a little, but we must go the extra mile to make something useful for the public service to be provided by district councils in the future. I can see the divide-and-conquer scenario coming in: the report has embraced what is before us, and yet we are coming in with a different message.

Banbridge District Council made a submission earlier. Mr Cumiskey was not speaking on his own behalf. I am sure that his chief executive had some input into the presentation. His chief executive is the chairman of SOLACE.

Mr McNaney: I have one observation: politicians — not departmental officials or the local government auditor — should be the final arbitrators of how best value should be conducted. What we are expressing is a natural concern that if that guidance or the indicators were subject to the independent scrutiny of, for example, the Committee, we would be more confident that the guidance would properly represent and reflect the concerns that local authorities or councils would have. That is key to it.

When asked whether we need best value, I would make a personal, quasi-legal point. Best value, and the duty of best value, sends out a positive message from local councils that they are dedicated to serving the people who elect them. In management terms, it can act as a catalyst for change. There are organisations that do not like change, and if councillors or officers want changes, they need a catalyst to address the way that they provide services and to look at whether they could be provided in a better way. They need to tell the trade unions and the workforce that best value requires them to do that. Best value, in that sense, is positive and necessary. The fact that it must be designed to give the public what they want, rather than what departmental officials think they want, must be built into it. That is my primary concern.

Mrs Carson: It has been clearly shown that something that you are finding it difficult to grapple with, and we, as elected Members, are finding it difficult to grapple with, is that district councils are being made to jump through hoops to account for 5% of the public expenditure. Other public services that are the responsibility of councils in the rest of the United Kingdom are covered by best value legislation. However, there is a gap in Northern Ireland. What representation are you making to the Department to cover that? As elected Members, we must ask why that discrepancy in accountability exists in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cumiskey: When we were presented with the consultation process, there was a feeling of the inevitability of legislation. Although some councils told the Department that they do not think that legislation should be brought in now and put the case that the councils represent a small part of the public purse, many responses concentrated on the detail of the consultation document. The result was that when the Bill was presented, with the changes included, there was a sigh of relief that at least it was not as prescriptive as it originally had been. However, several councils would support the case we have made this morning.

Mr McNaney: I understand that other sectors are looking at best value voluntarily. Mr Millar mentioned that the education and library boards are looking at best value on a voluntary basis. I do not represent central Government, and I cannot tell the Committee how it has integrated the delivery of best value. That is what concerns me. If there is transparency and accountability in the process, why are they not telling the Committee?

The Chairperson: Are you expressing concern over the need for, and the timing of, the statutory legislative basis for best value?

Mr McNaney: I cannot answer that because I do not know how compelling the legal advice is on whether it must be replaced. I do not believe that the Department would say that councils must put everything out to tender through CCT again. It would be misconceived.

The Chairperson: It has not stopped Departments in the past.

Mr McNaney: The existence of the Assembly may fundamentally change the way Departments do things.

The Chairperson: What do you think the Department should do in the light of Stephen Byers's statement? When the Government announced a three-month review of best value he said:

"It will aim to ensure that best value reduces bureaucracy ... We will review the statutory guidance on best value to focus on higher standards and not just lowest cost."

The Government acknowledge that best value has brought bureaucracy, and they are now having a three-month review to reduce bureaucracy. Why would the Department rush ahead with that now when Minister Byers has said that it has created bureaucracy? This must be examined, and there must be a focus on the guidance to best value. Surely it would be better to await the outcome of the three-month review rather than go ahead without listening to and learning from the experience of others.

Ms McFarland: We referred to that issue in our presentation. The Audit Commission report 'Changing Gear', which was published on the web no later than last Friday, makes very interesting reading. It indicates that there are fundamental problems with the best value regime. A three-month review would make sense. It would certainly make sense to wait for the outcome of a review, particularly when it is considering the guidance. The information should be available before legislation is rushed through.

The Chairperson: What do you think about an amendment suggesting that CCT should be repealed by 1 April 2002 and that best value should commence on 1 April 2003? That would give the Government an opportunity to get the guidance and process right before it became a duty of accountability.

Mr Cumiskey: That undermines the potential for a creative voluntary approach. Inevitably, many people will wait to see what the Department produces. When there are no talks, something else fills the gap. Unfortunately, it will not be action.

Mr Magee: I am inclined to go along with your suggestion. It gives a year's breathing space. However, it does not mean that the legislative framework must be in

place by April 2003. The framework would be examined with a view to introducing it in April 2003. The argument is not just as compelling. If there was a statutory position that made people do it, it might encourage those who are not presently in line to become so.

After a year we will all be better educated on best value. We will also know what is happening in GB. We are well aware of what appeared in 'The Irish News' yesterday. It was partly from the Labour Party conference, but if the Government are holding a review, they have obviously found mistakes. Let us take advantage of that.

Mr McNaney: I have a mixed view — a lawyer sit-on-the-fence view. We need a best value Bill. I can understand the thought behind the delay in the implementation of the duty; that is helpful. I would prefer to see some political oversight of the implementation, which will be delivered primarily through the guidance. I would like to see the Bill addressing the role of the Assembly in overseeing the guidance. I do not know how that could be done, but stakeholders' views must be taken into account. Mr Cumiskey put it very well: the view of the implementers is important. On a practical point, we are three years into our five-year best value review programme and we have learnt an enormous amount. We will continue to learn, and the best way to do that is to build flexibility into the guidance.

The Chairperson: Are you concerned about what will be in the guidance?

Mr McNaney: I am concerned about what is in the guidance in relation to how that is interpreted by the local government auditor. I do not want to criticise the auditor because he is doing what he is told in the context of the legislative provision. However, in the delivery of public services, especially at local council level, there are issues of public choice and quality that impact to a large degree on issues such as effectiveness.

For example, I read a report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' two days ago about Derry City Council and the airport, which stated that a report by the local government auditor questions whether local authorities should be involved in airports. My view — a lawyer's view — is that in a local authority there is statutory provision which states that airports can be provided. As long as the money is spent properly and there is no imprudence or fraud, surely it is a political choice for members to decide whether they want to spend their electorate's money on an airport? What has that got to do with an auditor? That is the issue, and that is my concern.

The Chairperson: In a sentence, what is the last line that you want to leave with us?

Mr McNaney: I want a Bill with a power which will permit councils to form partnerships with Henry VIII powers and with powers in guidance, scrutinised by the Assembly or stakeholders.

The Chairperson: The Minister has said:

“I am committed to examining this broader issue in detail. However, this will involve extensive consultation and I would not propose to delay the Best Value Bill pending the resolution of that free-standing, though related, issue.”

Mr McNaney: That is a matter for the Minister and the Assembly to work out. However, from my experience of seeking wider economic development powers for local councils, there was a political commitment given by the Minister in 1997 to find a suitable legislative vehicle to provide such power. Such a vehicle has not been found. My personal view is that that is departmental official intransigence rather than a formal policy position. Given that that is their view, I still want some oversight of the guidance at a very minimum.

The Chairperson: Are you saying that you want the Bill now, or do you want a Bill that properly reflects the views of local government?

Mr McNaney: I would prefer the repeal of CCT and a future Bill that looked at best value properly in the context of the review of public administration. If I cannot have that, I will take a Bill that at least gives a greater degree of political scrutiny over the guidance and a greater input by local government into the agreement of that guidance.

Mr Magee: I fail to understand why there cannot be a marriage of the power of general competence and best value as opposed to the marriage of CCT and the best value framework. I view the former as more important because we should have the power of general competence as quickly as possible. However, to get that right, we should get CCT repealed in the meantime and work on the proper framework.

Mr Cumiskey: In principle, we have no objections to a Bill. However, it would add nothing to best value as it stands at present, and if it goes ahead in its present guise, it will work against the progress of the voluntary arrangements we have worked out over several years. I agree with my colleagues that if there is to be a review of the Bill, it is something for the future. However, the existing Bill does nothing for best value.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I trust that you think the Committee is taking this matter seriously and attempting to examine the issue closely. I hope you are aware of the Committee’s previous strong representations in negotiations with the Department on the original Bill. We shall take your comments this morning into consideration in deciding how we go forward.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

—————
**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Thursday 11 October 2001
—————

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)

Mrs Carson

Mr A Doherty

Mr Ford

Mr Leslie

Mr McClarty

Mr McLaughlin

Mr M Murphy

Mr Poots

Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr D Barr) Department of the Environment

Mr D Starritt)

The Chairperson: We welcome Mr David Barr and Mr Donald Starritt from the Department of the Environment.

The Committee Clerk: Committee members have before them a letter dated 10 October from the Minister of the Environment to the Committee Chairperson. The letter is a response to the need for a back-to-back introduction of the repeal of compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) and of best value within a statutory framework. That letter may be referred to during this morning's discussion.

The Chairperson: Mr Barr, have you read the letter?

Mr Barr: Yes, I have. I will give an introduction, and the Committee members may then ask questions.

Thank you for the welcome and the opportunity to give further evidence on the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I am the acting director of the Local Government Division of the Department of the Environment and Mr Starritt is also from that division. We are grateful for the information that the Committee has forwarded to us in the past few days as a result of its consultation with district councils. We received late last night the transcript of the presentation that the three district councils

made to the Committee. We are grateful to the Committee Clerk for ensuring that we got that transcript before today's discussion.

I had hoped that Committee members would have had time to study the Minister's letter, but that has not been possible. Much of what the Minister has said will, no doubt, come up in the discussion, and there will be other matters that the Committee will wish to raise with us.

I shall read an extract from the Minister's letter, which is fundamental to our discussion and which conveys the Minister's, and the Department's, views on the matter.

"Drawing on my experience as a Councillor, I believe that it would be right to promote further transparency and accountability in the use of Council resources and the provision of local services. Best Value is designed to ensure that ratepayers and residents are given the information to shape local service provision. Councils must ensure that they provide local people with all the relevant information they need to evaluate Council performance. A Best Value framework, enshrined in primary legislation, is the most effective way to provide local people with a local government service that is transparent and accountable.

I am mindful though of the need to allow for some flexibility to enable councils to address local conditions and I have already given the Committee and the Assembly my assurance that guidance resulting from Best Value legislation will address this important requirement.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that Best Value is designed primarily for the benefit of ratepayers and residents. While I am committed to avoiding the imposition of unnecessary bureaucracy on Councils, the views of Councils should not be given precedence over the rights and needs of ratepayers and residents."

Other issues are addressed in the letter that are more specific to the queries raised. Do you wish me to discuss those now?

The Chairperson: We are happy for you to address those issues now. However, before continuing, I would record that those members who are also district councillors have declared that interest.

Mr Barr: Ideally, we would like to have had more time to consider the councillors' comments in full, as they are important, but we will endeavour to respond to your questions as best we can in the circumstances. We will continue to examine the councils' comments after this session, taking on board the views and comments of the Committee today.

The Minister's letter addresses the key questions that were raised in the Committee Clerk's letter of 8 October. The Minister's letter sets the scene as to why we are proceeding with the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I will address the Committee's specific questions. First, I refer to the Committee Clerk's letter at paragraph 4, which states:

"The Department's response of 12 September 2001 to Dr Doran appears to conflate the issues — in particular, paragraph 4 of your letter. ... The Department's response appears to suggest one of two things".

In response to that, the Minister says:

“As explained on previous occasions, CCT can only be repealed through the use of primary legislation, hence one of the main reasons for taking forward the Best Value Bill. Subordinate legislation was used to defer CCT so that Councils could immediately make arrangements for Best Value without the statutory requirements to further procure services under CCT. Legal advice is clear that this arrangement cannot be sustained beyond 1 April 2002, as this would be tantamount to a repeal of the primary legislation of CCT by subordinate legislation.”

More specifically, paragraph 4(i) of the Committee’s Clerk’s letter raised a scenario. The response to that was:

“There are no statutory requirements preventing the repeal of CCT without a replacement procurement process.”

That is quite clear.

“However, as I have indicated above, it is essential to the interests of ratepayers and residents that a statutory framework exists”.

That is why we are developing a best value Bill at the same time as we propose to repeal CCT.

In paragraph 4(ii), the Committee Clerk suggested that by our saying that CCT had to be repealed by a certain date, we were perhaps using that as some form of lever. The Minister’s response was:

“This is most certainly not the case. When District Councils signed up to Best Value in 1998, an agreed policy objective was the repeal of CCT at the earliest opportunity.”

We are now taking that opportunity.

“It has to be remembered ... that most key services are under contract within the CCT statutory framework until 31 March 2002”.

Paragraph 5 of the Committee Clerk’s letter states that

“The Committee noted paragraph 6 of the Department’s response of 12 September to Dr Doran. However, the main point of interest to the Committee for the moment is simply that CCT can be repealed using primary legislation. Could the Department confirm or clarify that there is no legal or legislative obstacle, in principle, to the introduction of primary legislation, which would have the sole purpose of repealing CCT (without reference to the statutory approach to Best Value)?”

That has been answered in the earlier response at paragraphs 4 (i) and 4(ii).

Paragraph 6 of the Committee Clerk’s letter states:

“Furthermore, the Department is asked to comment on the following:

(a) In the event of the introduction of a short Bill with the sole purpose of repealing CCT, Local Government could, in principle, continue to implement and develop Best Value on a voluntary basis”.

The Minister’s response was:

“In principle, this could be done. But, in practice, this would not serve the interests of ratepayers and residents who use Council services.”

It is the Minister’s view, and our view, that

“A statutory framework for Best Value is the only effective means of assuring local people that their Councils are obliged to act transparently, and independent audit is a crucial part of that assurance. It also places an onus on Councils to meet key targets within the framework, where such consistency is fundamental to meaningful benchmarking with each other.”

We are all agreed that one of the main issues in best value is to engage local people meaningfully in the process, and that is what we have to achieve through the Local Government (Best Value) Bill.

“Any Council failing to act transparently is, in an important sense, failing its local community, and local people need an independent assessment of performance to help them exercise their democratic rights.

It has been claimed that the voluntary arrangements are proving successful.”

There have been many positive aspects of what has been achieved over the past couple of years of working in partnership with district councils. We have several working groups in which we have worked closely with chief executives and elected representatives to further promote best value through guidance, performance indicators and customer surveys. Those have proved very successful, although there is still a lot of work to be done. We also have a best value steering group, and its members include chief executives and district councillors.

We appreciate the work of the various chairmen of those working groups — all are chief executives of councils. They have produced sterling work for, on behalf of, and with the Department. I want to commend the work of those chief executives through the auspices of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE). They have been instrumental in this and have worked closely with the Department. With the creation of the recently formed Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), we look forward to further promoting the partnership approach. I spoke at the inaugural meeting of NILGA a couple of weeks ago, and I said that the Department looks forward to working with it. We hope to bring NILGA on board in further working groups and the best value steering group. That is essential.

Paragraph 6(b) of the Committee Clerk’s letter says:

“The introduction of Best Value (on a statutory basis) could, in principle, be delayed until a consensus is reached on how Best Value is to be integrated into the process of reform of public administration and, in particular, Local Government reform in Northern Ireland”

The Minister’s reply states:

“Again in principle this could be done. But for the reasons stated under paragraph 6 (a) this would not be in the interests of ratepayers and local residents, particularly as implementation of the outcome of the Review of Public Administration is clearly some years away.”

That is outside the remit of the Minister of the Environment: it is for Ministers in the Executive to agree the shape and format of any review of public administration. At present we are not aware of what form that review might take, but it is clear that even if the review were to go ahead immediately, or in the next few months, it would be some time before its outcomes could be put in place. We feel that it would not be fair on the rate-

payers to delay the Local Government (Best Value) Bill until a review of public administration takes place.

Best value can apply regardless of the structures of local government and the number of councils in local government. The Bill should not, therefore, be delayed.

Paragraph 7 is a summary of what the Committee Clerk was looking for the Department to respond to. The Minister is saying that he has responded to the issues that were raised in the earlier paragraphs. The Minister's general observations follow that, and I read those to the Committee earlier.

The Chairperson: Thank you. Page 2, paragraph 4(i), of the Minister's letter states — and you have repeated it this morning — that

“There are no statutory requirements preventing the repeal of CCT without a replacement procurement process”.

You said that that was quite clear. Your two words “quite clear” are interesting because it has not been quite clear until now. The impression that was given to the Assembly and to the Committee was the opposite — it could not be done. It was not until we drew matters out, similar to drawing teeth, that we got a response, and it now turns around the impression that was clearly given on every other occasion that the question has been asked. It was not answered clearly before.

Mr Barr or Mr Starritt, did you know this before? The question has been asked many times before and has never been properly answered. Did you know the answer, or are you finding it out only now? A very different impression has been given to this Committee and on the Floor of the House. You can see that if you look at the Minister's statement in Hansard. That was not the impression that was given clearly in the House when the matter was debated. I want to know if you knew the answer. Why was it not made clear before? It is clear now, but, in the whole of the discussion, this is the first time that we have a clear answer. We have had to press and press for it. The Committee Clerk was instructed to specifically bring you here on the answer to this question. It was hedged around until now, and I want to know if you knew, and why we were not told before.

Mr Barr: I am not sure whether the question was directly asked of the Department — whether this could happen — until now.

The Chairperson: Yes, it has been asked before.

Mr Barr: The Department and the Minister have clearly indicated that it is in the interests of the ratepayers and residents that they should have a —

The Chairperson: Mr Barr, that is not an answer to the question that you are being asked. When did you know that there was no statutory requirement preventing the repeal of CCT without a replacement procurement

process? Forget about this political statement about whether it is in the best interests of ratepayers. When did you know that that was possible? Why were we not told before?

Mr Barr: Neither the Department nor the Minister intended to suggest to anyone that we knew about this and that we were trying to disguise that fact. That is the line that we have taken all along. It has been discussed with district councils through the best value steering group. Chief executives were aware that there was no statutory requirement to replace CCT immediately with best value. It remains, however, that we were of the opinion that best value should be put in place at the same time as the repeal of CCT.

We need primary legislation to repeal CCT. In doing that we were taking the opportunity to introduce a regime of best value under primary legislation that is essential to secure transparency and accountability within the best value procurement process. There was no intention to disguise that fact. Chief executives and others were aware of the situation.

The Chairperson: I will open the discussion to the other members.

Mr Ford: It is clear from the record of the Second Stage debate that a number of concerns have been floating around for some time and that those are being addressed only today.

I want to mention paragraph 6 (a) of the Committee Clerk's letter. The response to that seems to be symptomatic of the Department's attitude. We asked why best value could not continue on a voluntary basis. The reply was that it could be done in principle. That was followed by a set of unsubstantiated assertions as to why the Department does not see that as the best course.

Attached to that is the report of the Chief Local Government Auditor. I assume that he did not issue a report on 25 May this year that was full of grammatical, spelling and typographical mistakes. It appears, therefore, that we have been given a badly scanned copy of that report, and that nobody in the Department has had the decency to turn it into grammatical English for us. It is rather difficult to find any substantiation in that report.

It is so bad that I managed to read only the first page. There is a reference to the involvement of council members. I have previously raised that in relation to members' determination of priorities. There appears to be an assertion by the Department that the district auditor is unhappy about member involvement and that therefore we must have prescription. Some of us have asked whether it should not be for the councillors to set the priorities for their local authority rather than for the district auditor. To date that has not been answered.

Mr Barr: I apologise for the standard of the extract from the auditor's report. We were asked to respond

quickly to the Committee's letter, and we wanted to get the Minister's letter to you as soon as possible. We had to scan the document, and that resulted in some mistakes appearing.

Mr Ford: There are mistakes that make the meaning of certain paragraphs unclear. The quality of the report is unacceptable, particularly because it has been with you, presumably, since 26 May.

Mr Barr: The report is in the public domain, and it has been possible to view it since May. I will provide the Committee with a proper photocopy of the extract. We were pressed for time in getting the information to the Committee, and we did our best to do so.

The Chairperson: You have not replied to the main point of the question.

Mr Barr: The reference to the engagement of members is valid. It is essential that council members be engaged in best value in its fullest sense. That has always been the case in service provision by district councils. They have engaged councillors, and they have done an excellent job over the past 30 years, and longer. Nevertheless, there is also a critical role to be played by the public. Best value is about consulting local people about their opinions.

Councillors can represent local people as well. There is no doubt about that. There are, however, many people who do not vote in local government elections and therefore do not have councillors representing their wishes fully — but that is their concern. They should be voting, but they are still entitled to have some say in how local government is run. They may not go to their local councillor for information, advice or representation but, as ratepayers, they are investing in their local council and are entitled to some say in how services are provided.

I do not wish to speak on the Local Government Auditor's behalf, but he would not wish to set an agenda for any council in respect of performance improvement plans. It is up to each council to explore and come up with its own priorities and proposals as a result of consultation with the public. An auditor may examine the performance improvement plan to see whether the council has complied with direction provided by the Department, but in no way would he want to influence how a council goes about its business in terms of engagement of its members.

Mr Poots: If the performance indicators of the Department's local government division were based on openness and transparency on this issue, you would be found wanting. The Chairperson has already raised an issue with you, but I want to mention the fact that this Committee was led to believe that virtually all councils were signed up to best value and supported what the Minister proposed. When the Committee carried out its own investigation, it discovered that that was not the case.

What is the Department's fascination with performance indicators for local councils? Why should they be so highly accountable to the public? No other Government Department has to do that. In the past week, we have heard about problems in the Health Service with regard to heart surgery and cancer and neurology treatments. This morning, we heard that chief executives and leading lights in the health trusts are giving themselves a so-called performance-related £500,000 pay rise.

Councils are responsible for only 3% of the total spend in Northern Ireland, yet your Department is forcing them into a difficult and repetitive scheme that involves a lot of box-ticking. Indicators that are not applicable to all councils are causing confusion. You cannot lift bins in Moyle District Council for the same price as you can lift them in Lisburn or Belfast. A lot of this is irrelevant and will not tell the ratepayer much. What is your fascination with the local councils? Why are no other Government Departments being subjected to this?

Mr Starritt: The concept of performance indicators seems to be accepted by councils. The difficulty is in finding a set of indicators that apply across local government. We agree that the consultation process proved that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to get unanimous agreement on any performance indicator. We accept that councils will have their own local indicators that are of specific relevance to them, and we want councils to use those.

However, the other point that must be made is that it is useful to have a common set of indicators that small councils in particular can use to measure its performance against others, without having to duplicate the efforts of bigger councils.

Mr Poots: You have not answered the question. Why is it being imposed on local authorities alone? Why are the local authorities being affected by this and not every other Department?

Mr Barr: The Department of the Environment is open and transparent in what it does with local government. It is working in partnership with the various working groups and with the best value steering group. It has a good working relationship with the councils, and I, personally, have a good relationship with the chief executives. The Department wants to promote that further, as I indicated earlier, through NILGA.

The Department of the Environment is introducing a best value regime for local government and district councils — that is its remit. I know that the education and library boards, through the Department of Education, will also engage in legislation for best value. I am not sure of the timing of that, but I know that the process is under way. District councils are not the only organisations that will be subjected to best value. Other authorities are undertaking best value, perhaps under a different guise or name, but we cannot speak on their behalf.

Central Departments are subjected to a form of best value because they are accountable through such things as the Government accounting manual, audit scrutiny, resource accounting, a budgeting programme for Government, corporate and business plans and the Public Accounts Committee. Those in turn transcend down to individual performance improvement plans for each division and individual. Each Department is subjected to similar scrutiny, but we cannot speak on behalf of other Departments.

You queried the fact that we had indicated that all district councils had signed up to best value. They did. There was a public consultation with all district councils in 1998. All of the councils signed up to best value. I value recognise, however, that some councils have experienced difficulties with the best value process. We hope to address those difficulties through further guidance. Others have expressed concerns with the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, and, again, we hope to address those.

The Chairperson: Mr Barr, have you read any of the evidence that was sent to the Committee?

Mr Barr: We read the evidence in the short time that was available.

The Chairperson: You gave the wrong impression in your statement by saying that all councils support best value. However, they do not believe that now is the time to introduce legislation for best value. They do not believe that they should be singled out and made different from others. They believe that it should work in a voluntary manner until many of the other challenges, such as waste management, which will be deviated from, are faced. The idea that all councils are for best value is not true. We can give you the Hansard report that shows the evidence from the Committee's last meeting.

Mr Barr: I followed up my statement by saying that many councils still have certain problems with the context of best value and that some councils have difficulties with the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I did not make a bland statement saying that they are all in favour of best value, full stop. Some councils have difficulties, and that is clear from the correspondence that we have received from the Committee. We hope to address the concerns that have been expressed.

Mr A Doherty: It seems to me — and due to my untutored mind, I may have misunderstood or misinterpreted what I heard — that the Department sees itself galloping to the rescue of the public and the ratepayers to save them from the councils that are riding roughshod over them, ignoring their wishes and keeping them in the dark.

Your Department claims that this approach is in the best interest of the ratepayer. Can you tell us how the alternative approaches, suggested by this Committee and

most of the councils, are against the best interest of the community, and the ratepayers in particular? You are clearly not satisfied that the suggestions made by the councils or this Committee are worthy of consideration.

Mr Starritt: We have looked at the letters from individual councils. Two points have been made. One is the idea of a general duty to promote continuous improvement, which, as councils see it, would give them a lot more freedom and flexibility to do their own thing. Balanced against that, another point is that best value can be extremely expensive, particularly for smaller councils.

We feel that there are clear benefits to be learned from councils working together and learning from one another. However, to create some element of a common approach you need at least a broad framework. The consultation marked up that the initial legislation probably created quite a prescriptive framework. The redrafted Bill has addressed that, diluting the framework to some extent. However, we still feel that councils need to be progressing in the same direction, more or less, particularly if councils are to learn from the lessons of others and avoid duplication of effort. That is why we need a common framework for best value.

Mr Barr: We have been accused of not listening to responses from councils and this Committee, but the opposite is true. Originally the Bill had 19 clauses — it is now an 11-clause Bill. A substantial amount of change has been made in response to representations made, for which we are grateful.

Mr A Doherty: The major concerns are still in the 11-clause Bill.

Mr Barr: What are the major concerns?

Mr A Doherty: Back-to-back repeal of CCT is a major issue. Nobody, including the Department, has given a satisfactory response to that, and the Chairperson has made that clear.

Mr McLaughlin: There have been responses from the Minister, other officials and yourselves. I acknowledged that in the discussions at Second Stage.

Back-to-back legislation is clearly the fundamental issue. The Minister, in his address, acknowledged that up to 60 MLAs have a dual mandate. He was recognising the degree of opposition — in some cases outright hostility — to the idea of best value legislation on the pretext of a necessity to repeal CCT and replace it with something else. That was the presentation. The view clearly expressed is that there is support for best value, and there is a well-established voluntary best practice regime. Nobody is arguing that this should continue to be voluntary. They simply argue that we should develop the experience and the partnership benefits that arise and get a strategic perspective on how to deliver best value.

The Minister, on a number of occasions, talked about transparency and accountability — and properly so. The Department and the officials made a fundamental mistake of deciding that they knew best, which possibly is part of the rollover from direct rule work practices. They thought that they would get both measures introduced simultaneously.

If the fundamental contradiction is that in addressing local government we are talking about 5% of public expenditure. People do not believe that there is openness, transparency and accountability in the other 95% of expenditure. Therefore we look to the review of public expenditure as an opportunity to create structures to deal with all public expenditure, including local government expenditure. That would perhaps include a review and restructuring of local government to deliver best value.

That would be the practice of best value in itself. I cannot see any benefit in taking a piecemeal approach. Addressing best value for 5% of public expenditure would be horrendously inefficient, given that we are dealing with such a small percentage of the overall budget. We are committed to seeking an early opportunity to address the review of public expenditure in total.

Mr Barr: All public expenditure is audited, regardless of whether it is local government or central Government. A robust auditing regime operates throughout the public sector. The application of best value to local government, that is to say district councils, is a new system and it requires time to bed in. The Department and the Minister feel that it is in the interests of residents and ratepayers to proceed with a Bill that will replace CCT. The new framework will allow councils to recognise that it is their statutory duty to undertake consultation with the public, undergo reviews of services and produce performance improvement plans. Ultimately, it is good housekeeping. Councils do those things already, to a large degree. The Bill does not ask them to do anything that they are not already doing voluntarily. All we are asking is that their performance is improved.

The annex to the Minister's letter suggests that some councils are performing well, others must work a little to catch up, and a few are still struggling with the concept. The Department is not happy with that situation. It wants to work closely with councils to identify those that are not performing as well as they could, to discuss the problems that they are encountering, and to try to deal with problems using guidance that will be produced. The Local Government (Best Value) Bill provides a framework, but the important thing is the guidance that would arise from it. The Department would work in total partnership with local government to produce guidance with which we know we can both work.

Mr McLaughlin: I do not know any public representative who believes that the problems in local govern-

ment are so horrendous that we must legislate immediately for it, or who believes that the checks and balances in the audit procedures for the remaining 95% of public expenditure are so effective that we do not have a problem with best value. I do not know anyone who is convinced by that argument.

We could go into detail on the argument, and, if we must, we will do so. It may be in the interest of the Department to calculate whether it has any chance of getting this legislation through the Assembly. It is a totally unconvincing proposition. People want to see the whole problem addressed, not a piecemeal approach.

Mr Barr: I cannot speak for other sectors of central Government. I cannot speak about the review of the Administration. It is not in my remit — (*inaudible due to mobile phone interference*).

We feel that the Local Government (Best Value) Bill is the best way to provide a framework for best value, so that councils can say: "This is our statutory responsibility; let us work to it."

The most important thing is the guidance that will flow from that framework. I stress that we will work closely with local government to ensure that the guidance will aid councils in their pursuit of best value.

Mr Leslie: I wish to reiterate an earlier point that I made. There has been a classic mistranslation, which happens quite a lot, in that because best value was introduced for English councils, it was assumed that it should be introduced to councils here, which are a completely different size and structure. The nearest equivalent here to an English council would be the Executive and the Assembly.

I also sit on the Finance and Personnel Committee, where I am observing the ongoing procurement review and the code that is being drawn up. The proposed Audit Reorganisation Bill is also coming to consultation soon, following the Sharman report. Those examples provide further evidence that the cart is before the horse here.

I have no particular difficulty with clause (1) and (2) — and possibly (3) and (4) — of the Bill. The difficulty arises in clauses 2 and 3, which give the Department considerable discretion to set parameters, and the Comptroller and Auditor General is also given considerable powers. Reinforcing what Mitchel McLaughlin said, the Comptroller and Auditor General is auditing anyway. Why does he need extra powers for best value? This is not all meshing together. It has started in the wrong place. Looking at what is happening to accountability in Government expenditure generally, instead of starting at the bottom and driving up, there is enough going on further up that can be made to trickle down in a suitable way.

My arguments reinforce the points that are being made continually that this legislation is coming in the

wrong place at the wrong time. Elements of that may emerge in due course, but the timing is wrong. Could you not run with the first clause of the Bill, which sets out the general principles, without provisions to the same extent as in clauses 2 and 3?

You said that the Department shall decide what guidance to issue. That is all very well as long as it is all right. The problem arises when it is not right. I can see why the Department might want a common parameter — that makes common sense — but different councils are in different situations.

Mr Starritt: On the extra powers for the Local Government Auditor, the legislation empowers him to audit council accounts. He has, in practice, gone beyond that with councils by looking at the performance improvement plans that they have prepared voluntarily. That has been done on a goodwill basis. As things stand, there is no legislation that specifically empowers the auditor to go beyond the accounts. That is the reason for taking specific powers for auditing.

A point was made about a shortened Bill to give a general duty of continuous improvement. The Bill as it currently stands gives effect to what councils are already doing voluntarily. The Department made the point that some councils are better at that than others. However, the Bill does not impose anything on councils that they do not already do.

With regard to the framework, we must establish a common approach so that councils can learn from one another. People have frequently made the point that guidance is needed. The absence of guidance might be part of the reason why some councils have not produced performance improvement plans. Councils might not be clear about what is expected of them. The Department accepts the need for guidance and the fact that the guidance must be developed in partnership with councils. That has always been the Department's intention and it has given that commitment to the best value steering group, which has accepted that.

Mr Barr: In response to the Committee's criticism that the Department has followed what has been done in Great Britain, best value has been in place here since 1997 or 1998. Obviously, there was no local Administration at that time to discuss the matter. The Department discussed it with district councils, which were glad to see the end of CCT. No one disagreed with that process. Councils and the Department agreed that we should go down the road of best value, and that is being done. The Department is flexible enough to realise that there must be a Northern Ireland context for best value.

I had an interesting discussion with a colleague from Scotland yesterday who confirmed that Scotland is following a similar legislative route for best value. Indeed, Scotland's Bill might be more prescriptive than Northern Ireland's is at present. He wished that Scotland's Bill

had been drawn up earlier because a statutory framework for councils in Scotland will make it easier than it is, in a voluntary situation, for them to benchmark with each other. That is because there is consistency in the production of performance improvement plans, and so on. The common approach and consistency should ensure that the councils that do not perform as well would be able to learn from the larger councils. That should ensure continuous improvement. I was interested in what my colleague told me, and I am hopeful that, in time, the councils here that do not perform well will be able to network with those councils that do. That should result in improved performances.

Mr Leslie: A Scottish council is a bigger entity than a Northern Ireland council. I am sure that Glasgow City Council needs a best value regime, and I am sure that the Scottish Parliament knows that Glasgow City Council needs quite a draconian best value regime. However, that does not necessarily translate into the situation here. That is my concern. It translates more readily further up the line. I acknowledge what Mr Barr has said, but we must be careful to consider that what might be appropriate for a council of that size over there might not be appropriate here.

The Chairperson: The Bill that is before us is different from the first draft. The Committee appreciates the changes, but the question is whether the Bill is acceptable. The idea was expressed that the Bill was to be given the green light, having been considered by district councils and the councillors that were working with the Department and its officials. However, that is not representative of the views of all councillors or the chief executives. I will quote some of the evidence that the Committee heard. The evidence that was given to us says:

"We think that this Bill is unnecessary";

"The proposed best value Bill is potentially detrimental";

"There is no need for specific legislation at this time" — a statement made in the light of the reorganisation of local government;

"This draft Bill sounds intimidatory tones and displays mistrust and a school masterly attitude";

"Someone at central Government is working to a hidden agenda";

"It is taking a sledgehammer to crack a nut"; and

"The existing Bill does nothing for best value."

Those statements come from evidence that we received from just three councils. Quite a number of other councils want to give representations here. However, we were given the impression that local government and councils, through their councillors and chief executives, were supportive of the legislation.

I am glad that you said that you are flexible, for we will test that. You said that ultimately it is good house-keeping, and then you said: "We believe". The letter to the Minister says:

“The views of councils should not be given precedence over the rights and needs of ratepayers and residents.”

Who is making that judgement? Do the elected representatives believe, and does their work in the Department convince them, that the Department, above the district councils, is best placed to judge the rights and needs of ratepayers and residents? Having listened to the debate in the House and the questions this morning, do you believe that you will get this Bill through?

Mr Barr: It is not fair to ask me that question. We hope that we will be able to convince the Assembly that the Local Government (Best Value) Bill is in the interests of ratepayers and residents.

The Chairperson: Has the Assembly commissioned the Committee to shadow your Department and to help with that judgement?

Mr Barr: That is correct.

The Chairperson: You wrote to another Committee to see if it could circumvent the decision of this Committee, because there was no support in the Assembly. After the debate in the Assembly, advised by his officials, your Minister wrote to another Committee to see if it could intervene.

Mr Barr: It is correct to say that the Minister wrote to another departmental Committee. Accountability extends beyond the interest of the Department of the Environment — it extends to the Department of Finance and Personnel and to others with an interest in public accountability and procurement. Therefore the Minister was entitled to sound out the views of other learned people.

The Chairperson: The Department seems to think that it is the final arbiter on this matter. If this Committee ceases to exist, some officials could perhaps push this legislation through. However, when the Committee comes back into existence, it could seek to remove that legislation if it were seen as bad. I am asking you and your officials to take to your Minister and Department the fact that the fears of this Committee have not been allayed by anything that you have said. The Minister’s letter acknowledges that CCT can be removed without taking forward the best value legislation, and that is surely the best way forward. The Assembly will take the matter seriously when it has the opportunity.

Mr Barr: We will relay your comments and views to our Minister, and he will be given a copy of the transcript that is produced.

The Chairperson: Thank you.

**NORTHERN IRELAND
ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE FOR
THE ENVIRONMENT**

Thursday 18 October 2001

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(BEST VALUE) BILL
(NIA 19/00)**

Members present:

Rev Dr William McCrea (Chairperson)

Mrs Carson

Mr A Doherty

Mr Ford

Mr McClarty

Mr M Murphy

Mr Watson

Witnesses:

Mr Des Murray) Association for

Mr Jim Kennedy) Public Service Excellence

The Chairperson: We welcome Mr Des Murray and Mr Jim Kennedy of the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE). We are examining the Local Government (Best Value) Bill, about which we have also heard representations from district council officials.

Mr J Kennedy: Thank you for giving us a second opportunity to address the Committee on the Local Government (Best Value) Bill. I am an officer with Belfast City Council but I speak today in my role as the Northern Ireland secretary of APSE.

Mr Murray is a full-time officer with APSE. He is based in the Glasgow office and is responsible for the Northern Ireland and Scotland regions of APSE. The Northern Ireland chairperson of APSE, Belfast City Councillor, David Brown, is unable to attend and sends his apologies.

APSE has a membership of over 200 local authorities from throughout the United Kingdom. Nineteen of the 26 councils in Northern Ireland are members. APSE is unique as a forum in that it has equal membership of officers and members of local authorities throughout the UK. The association consults, develops, promotes and advises on best practice in the delivery of public services.

It strongly supports the process of continuous improvement in service provision in local authority areas.

I commend members of the Environment Committee on their contributions to the debate of the Second Stage of the draft Local Government (Best Value) Bill on 18 September. We were pleased by the relevant comments made by Committee members and other Members, reiterating the concerns that we expressed to the Committee some months ago. However, one point of concern, which I noted in Hansard, was the Minister's response to a question by the Chairperson of the Committee who asked whether all councils were happy with the redrafting of the Bill

"The draft Bill has been circulated to all councils, and they have not advised me of any particular problems. That does not surprise me, as the redrafted Bill addresses their key concerns." — [*Official Report, Vol 12, No 4, p100*].

As a representative of 19 of the 26 local authorities, we believe that that statement is inaccurate, because several key concerns about the Second Stage of the Bill remain. Bearing in mind the time constraints on the Committee, I will hand over to Mr Murray who will outline those concerns.

Mr Murray: As Mr Kennedy mentioned, I am responsible for the APSE regions of Scotland and Northern Ireland. I have a unique perspective, given my involvement with the development of best value legislation at the Scottish Parliament.

APSE is committed to the development of best value and the association fully supports the drive for continuous improvement. We welcome the proposal to repeal compulsory competitive tendering (CCT) in Northern Ireland. As you know, CCT has already been repealed in England and Wales, and at present an extended moratorium is in place in Scotland. CCT will not be reinstated there until best value legislation is implemented.

After carrying out detailed consultation with our members, we extended our consultation beyond the 19 member councils in Northern Ireland to include all councils and unions. Representatives of those bodies attended a meeting last week, which took the form of a full debate on the evidence that we are presenting to you today. A generally expressed opinion, and a key recommendation, was that the timing is not right for a best value Bill in Northern Ireland, in the light of continuing concerns about the legislation and the announcement of a three-month review of best value legislation in England and Wales.

Yesterday we received information on the three-month review to the effect that indeed new best value legislation for England and Wales may be explored. It is therefore recognised that the legislation is flawed. That is important information, and I will pass it to the Committee Clerk after the meeting.

Scotland carried out an open consultation on best value, involving the councils, the Executive and bodies such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). That resulted in the passing of the Scottish Local Authorities (Tendering) Bill earlier this year, a simple one-clause Bill that removed the date relating to the reintroduction of CCT for 1998 Act services. That allowed for an indefinite moratorium so that best value legislation could be developed to its full potential. The best value legislation was delayed; it was expected this year but a time extension was necessary.

We propose that the Committee and the Minister consider introducing a similar Bill in Northern Ireland. That would ensure that future legislation is correct and that it meets its full potential. Also to be considered is the very important secondary issue of local government reorganisation in Northern Ireland, which must be taken into account when developing any legislation that affects district councils only. I ask the Committee to bear that in mind.

We fully welcome the repeal of CCT. Councils across Northern Ireland have been working voluntarily to the ideals of best value under guidance from the Department of the Environment. There is no reason why that cannot continue until the concerns that remain are addressed. I am aware that you have a full copy of the APSE evidence, so I will not go through all the points individually. Should it be the case that a simple repeal of CCT is unacceptable to the Committee and the Minister, there are, as Mr Kennedy has said, continuing concerns about the legislation.

Much of the legislation is supported, accepted and widely welcomed, but key areas of it need to be strengthened. There is a need to include equality and the environment in the general duty of best value — going beyond the three Es of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, and going beyond value for money. That would replicate what is happening in England, Wales and Scotland. It does Northern Ireland an injustice to not include those two factors in the legislation.

Secondly, on the duty to consult, there is a need to go further than saying that the Department of the Environment will consult with district councils. Councils in Northern Ireland would like the legislation to include an obligation on the Department to consult them and to reach agreement with the majority of councils before issuing supplementary guidance on best value legislation.

Thirdly, there is the complex but important area of section 16 and section 17 powers under the Local Government Act 1999 in England and Wales. Those powers allow councils and bodies involved in delivering services to the public sector more freedom to form partnerships, to deliver joined-up government, services, et cetera. There is no real reason why that cannot be included in the Bill for Northern Ireland. We expect

those provisions to be included in the Bill for Scotland, and councils in Northern Ireland should have those powers. Such powers would, of course, operate under guidance from the Department of the Environment and, if you so wish, the Environment Committee itself.

The Chairperson: Were you aware that there is nothing to stop the Minister from presenting the repeal of CCT without adding anything about best value legislation at this time? The impression given to us previously was that the two had to run in tandem — that CCT needed to be repealed and that we needed best value legislation in place. After we pressed the issue, we got a clear instruction that the two do not have to run in tandem at all. CCT can be repealed without the existence of best value legislation. Do you regard that as the preferable way forward?

Mr Murray: That is very similar to the situation in Scotland. The CCT moratorium for services included in the 1988 Act, such as environmental services and those delivered by councils in Northern Ireland, was due to end on 31 December 2001. We were never going to have best value legislation in Scotland by that date. The Minister is right to highlight that legislation is required to repeal CCT, but as demonstrated in Scotland, that can consist of a simple one-clause Bill to remove the date from existing legislation. That allows time for the further development of best value legislation. That is exactly what is happening in Scotland.

The Chairperson: Before proceeding, I should say that Committee members who are also council members have recorded that interest. Do you feel that it would be detrimental to local government if the legislation for best value were implemented now?

Mr Murray: There is a good reason why a three-month review is being carried out in England and Wales. There are problems with the current legislation and the guidance under which councils operate. The Government recognise that some areas need to be improved, hence the announcement of the review.

Mr J Kennedy: Local authorities are keen to have CCT repealed. However, that does not mean that best value legislation needs to be implemented post-haste. After the legislation was introduced in England and Wales, serious flaws became apparent. We might be well advised to hold back in Northern Ireland until we see how those flaws are ironed out, and what new legislation, if any, will be needed. Department of the Environment officials, notably John McConnell, have consistently applauded local authorities in Northern Ireland for voluntarily adopting and applying the principles of best value.

For the past three years local authorities have been developing best value principles; they have been consulting with ratepayers to determine the type of services that they want. They have developed performance

improvement plans and submitted them to Department of the Environment officials, who are currently scrutinising them and will then discuss the matter with the councils. The general belief is that local authorities have adopted the principles of best value very effectively. We do not therefore see a need to rush through legislation with the possible effect that it would be seriously flawed and in need of revision. APSE would prefer that the Department took its time and took care in developing legislation that will benefit those who use council services.

The Chairperson: Why is the Department keen to rush through the legislation?

Mr J Kennedy: That is a difficult question. There was an apparent view that if best value legislation were not put in place we would have to revert to CCT with effect from 1 April 2002. It has now become clear that that is not the case, because CCT could be repealed as a single exercise in a single-line Bill. The councils could then continue to proceed voluntarily with best value principles. We are following very closely the Local Government Act 1999 in England and Wales. However, APSE greatly prefers the Scottish approach, where, even at this point, the moratorium on CCT is being extended to create the opportunity to learn from the mistakes that resulted from the legislation that was enacted in England and Wales. We should sit back until we are fairly confident that the legislation is right and that it will deliver continuous improvement in public services.

Mr A Doherty: You represent 19 of the 26 councils. Do any of those councils have a different opinion to yours, or are you unanimous in your opinion?

Mr Murray: APSE is a member-based organisation. However, in the last two months we have opened up all information and correspondence on the development of the Bill in Northern Ireland to members and non-members. Our members include representatives from the Housing Executive, the boards, et cetera. We represent a wide cross-section of Northern Ireland. Over 40 representatives attended last week's meeting, and 23 local councils were represented. There was unanimity of opinion on the issues discussed. The document that you have before you was prepared as a result of those discussions.

Mr A Doherty: Will you respond to the Chairperson's suggestion that the Minister and the Department seem to be intent on introducing the legislation back-to-back?

You argued that a simple one-clause Bill would allow for the development of the proposed best value legislation. Do you envisage any stronger argument by the Minister or his Department in support of the introduction of the legislation back to back?

Mr J Kennedy: There are several omissions in the current Bill. If we press ahead with the best value legislation, without taking those omissions into consid-

eration, the legislation will be much more watered down. For example, local councils lack powers like those provided in section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999. That point has been raised by Members during the Second Stage of the Bill in the Assembly. The Bill, as it currently stands, makes it virtually impossible for local authorities to deliver proper best value because they are restricted in the formation of partnerships with private, voluntary and other sectors and in the delivery of efficient, cost-effective quality services to the ratepayers. We will not have proper best value legislation until those elements are included in the Bill.

Several weeks ago someone from a private sector organisation called my council offices to ask if the council would be prepared to carry out grounds maintenance work on its football pitches. From the ratepayers point of view it would have made sense to agree to do it. We have the necessary equipment and employees, and we would have recovered all of our overheads. We could easily have taken on that work and generated additional income for the city council. Unfortunately I had to say to that individual that under the Local Authorities (Goods and Service) (Public Bodies) Order 1998, I cannot enter into any partnership or agreement to undertake that work. The city council was disadvantaged as it was unable to generate that additional income, and the private sector organisation was disadvantaged because it had to look elsewhere to get the work done. If we are to fully embrace best value and all that it entails, we must be able to enter into proper and effective working partnerships with a range of public, private and voluntary organisations, outside of local authorities. I have read Members saying time and again in Hansard that we must have the powers to deliver best value. Until then, our hands are tied.

Mr Ford: I cannot find the papers to confirm this at the moment, but I certainly remember being told that the Scottish Parliament believed that voluntary arrangements were not working and, therefore, legislation was required. The impression that I got from Mr Murray's presentation was that Scotland is going down the legislative route very slowly and on the basis of full consultation. That is why Scotland has abolished CCT ahead of the introduction of best value legislation. Can you confirm that that is Scotland's position, and how long will the consultation process that will eventually lead to Scottish legislation last?

Mr Murray: I can give a definite answer for I am directly involved in the process. The draft Bill for Scotland will be published next month, but the consultation and the parliamentary process will not start until next year to allow time for the findings of the three-month review, and so on to be considered by the Parliament. The word "delay" has been used, but it is perhaps not accurate in this case.

To date, the consultation process on the legislation in Scotland has been very open, and the publication of the Bill is eagerly awaited. The councils, and all bodies subject to best value in Scotland, are very clear about what the Bill will contain, thanks to the detailed consultation process. We now have the opportunity to build in the developments from the three-month reviews in England and Wales. That is a welcome opportunity and is essential to the process of the legislation.

The Chairperson: How could the Department be so wrong about the consultation process when it said that everyone was happy?

Mr J Kennedy: In his submission the Minister referred to consultation that had taken place outside the best value process. The first draft Bill came out for consultation in early December. Local authorities were given until 7 February to respond to it. That was the minimum period that could be allowed for consultation. It took in Christmas and the new year. Therefore local authorities had a time-limited period of three weeks to consider the draft Bill. I tried to contact Mr Murray in Scotland to organise a meeting of local authorities to discuss the draft Bill and to come up with an agreed response to the Department. The time-scale was tight.

My experience of consultation with the Department has not filled me with enthusiasm about its willingness to take on board the views of local authorities. The Department set up a working group, on which I sat, to look at performance indicators. After much deliberation the group's recommendations were fed through to the Department. Few of those recommendations and comments were taken on board when we finally received the performance indicators that were required by the Department from local authorities, with effect from 1 April 2000. Local authorities are concerned that the Department is paying lip service to consultation.

The draft Bill refers to statutory guidance and circulars in relation to matters such as performance improvement plans. We are concerned about how that consultation will be managed and how much notice will be taken of the outcome, from local authorities and others. With regard to statutory guidance and circulars, we are keen for those matters to be brought before the Committee for deliberation. The Minister and the Department could therefore be questioned about how much heed was being taken of the opinions of the local authorities.

There is a fair degree of scepticism. Experience gleaned over the years leads local government to point out that if something is to be taken out of the draft Bill and circulars and statutory guidance issued instead, we need to know how will that be developed. We are unclear on that.

The Chairperson: The Committee received a letter from the chairman of SOLACE, in which he says

“On a personal note I would say that there was a feeling of the inevitability of Best Value legislation as the Department seemed determined to follow the example of England and Wales. Consequently Councils in their responses were mainly concerned about the detail of the Bill.”

The Department gave the impression that it would push ahead with the Bill regardless of what anybody said. The district councils, therefore, were concerned about its content.

Mr J Kennedy: I think that is a fair comment from SOLACE.

The Chairperson: Do you agree with the Department's response that the views of councils should not be given precedence over the rights and needs of ratepayers and residents? That is why we emphasise the benefit of best value.

Mr J Kennedy: I agree with that comment. However, how do you marry that with a situation where auditors working for the Department have the right to tell council members, who have been elected by local ratepayers and are responsible for delivering services, what type and range of services they can provide? Local political decision-making must be taken into account. Your comments have hinted, as has the draft Bill, that officers in the Department, particularly in the audit section, could make a case for local authorities not being allowed to provide services, for example. That gives cause for concern.

Mr Ford: You talked about the problems with guidance being issued and the question of consultation on it. It has been suggested that one difference between the Department's original proposals and the current Bill is that subordinate legislation is being replaced by guidance that is less prescriptive. You seem to be suggesting that there would be even less consultation over guidance than would be required, at least with this Committee, if there were the matter of subordinate order to go through. What are your views on that?

Mr J Kennedy: I agree with what you say. It is not subordinate legislation; it is guidance. One should look at the CCT situation. On the back of the CCT legislation there was all sorts of guidance by way of Department of the Environment circulars. Local authorities ignored those circulars at their peril. Therefore I am more concerned about circulars because they are issued by the Department, and local authorities are under an obligation to implement what is in those circulars.

Circulars have very little democratic mandate if they do not come through the likes of the Committee for the Environment or if they are not consulted widely upon. History has shown that, to date, circulars have not been widely consulted upon.

Mr Murray: The suggested amendment is that such guidance — whilst more welcome than prescriptive

legislation — is sought through agreement with the key stakeholders.

The Chairperson: I draw your attention to the letter I sent, on behalf of the Committee, to the Minister on this matter. I made it clear that rushing ahead with this legislation would certainly meet with resistance. Whether that happens now or, if circumstances changed and the

Committee were not sitting, when the Assembly would sit again, we will be looking afresh at this issue. We feel pretty strongly about it.

Thank you for your representation this morning. The Committee will take it into consideration when coming to its final conclusion.

Written Answers

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 14 September 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Fugitives From Justice

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether it has received for consultation proposals from Her Majesty's Government in respect of fugitives from justice. (AQO 84/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: We have not received for consultation any proposals from Her Majesty's Government in respect of fugitives from justice.

Study of Obstacles to the Mobility of Persons

Mr Dallat asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on the follow up to the recently completed North/South Obstacles to Mobility Study. (AQO 100/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The report on the Study of Obstacles to the Mobility of persons, in either direction, between North and South on the island of Ireland has not yet been finalised.

The study should be completed in October. The study has taken slightly longer to complete than planned to enable the Steering Group to take into account the findings from two public consultation conferences, which had to be rescheduled because of the outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease. The Steering Group had also sought clarification from the consultants on a number of issues raised in an earlier draft of their report.

However, we are pleased to say that the consultants delivered their draft final report to the Steering Group on Friday, 31 August. The Steering Group is now considering the draft report, which has also been circulated to Government Departments for comment by 28 September.

The study will make recommendations on obstacles to mobility in the areas of:

- Taxation, Social Security and Pensions
- Health and Childcare
- Housing
- Transport
- Education, Training and Employment, and
- Telecommunications, Banking and Insurance.

When the study is finalised, the Steering Group will report to an early meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council.

Co-operation Ireland

Mr Fee asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the level of consultation there has been with Co-operation Ireland and outline how the work of this organisation can assist the wider objective of North/South economic and social development. (AQO 105/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: There are a number of levels of consultation between Co-operation Ireland and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, including community relations funding and cross border developments. With regard to the latter the organisation wrote to both of us earlier this year seeking support with regard to proposals for funding various North/South initiatives. Our officials hope to meet Co-operation Ireland's Chief Executive soon to explore, without commitment, this request and its associated objectives in more detail.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, given the fresh outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease in England, to detail if the Executive have contingency arrangements in place to prevent the recurrence of the disease in Northern Ireland. (AQO 88/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The Executive have detailed contingency plans in place to deal with any recurrence of foot-and-mouth disease in Northern Ireland should that happen. There are extensive controls in place at all the entry ports and airports to ensure that the disease is not re-introduced from Great Britain. These controls are regularly reviewed to take account of the prevailing disease risk.

Community Relations: Flashpoint Areas

Mr Byrne asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the Executive's

proposals in relation to promoting better community relations in flashpoint areas of Northern Ireland.

(AQO 32/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: Our office, working through the Community Relations Council, is supporting efforts to promote local dialogue aimed at resolving disputes in community interface areas such as North Belfast.

More generally, the Programme for Government includes a range of actions aimed at tackling the fundamental divisions within society, which are at the root of problems within interface areas. This includes a review of community relations policy and the development by 2002 of an inter-departmental strategy aimed at delivering measurable improvement in community relations.

Composition of Party Delegations

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to indicate if any departmental Ministers are included in the proposed Sinn Fein delegation visit to meet President Fidel Castro.

(AQO 86/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The composition of party delegations is not a matter for the devolved Administration. If any Minister is included in a party delegation, that participation could not be in a ministerial capacity.

Children's Commissioner

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline what consultation has been undertaken concerning the appointment of a Children's Commissioner.

(AQO 102/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: A consultation paper entitled 'Protecting our Children's Rights: A Consultation Paper on a Commissioner for Children for Northern Ireland' was published on 9 August 2001. The consultation period will run from that date until 8 November, after which responses will be analysed and we will decide on the appropriate way forward for Northern Ireland. Publication of this consultation paper marks the culmination of six months of information gathering, research and discussion with key statutory and non-governmental organisations working in the field of children's rights.

12,000 copies of the document are being distributed widely throughout Northern Ireland to interested individuals and organisations, and copies are available from the Department on request or can be accessed via the internet. A dedicated website has been launched – www.allchildrenni.com

255,000 information leaflets have been distributed to GPs surgeries and libraries and to the general public through the three main daily newspapers to raise awareness of the consultation. Special versions for children, young people and facilitators have been produced and are being distributed to all schools in Northern Ireland and widely throughout the youth sector, as we particularly welcome responses from children and young people themselves.

A summary version of the main consultation paper together with the children's and facilitators' versions have also been produced in Irish, and the information leaflet is being translated into Cantonese for distribution to the Chinese community. Other special versions are available on request.

School Children: North Belfast

Mr Cobain asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline how it would ensure that the disgraceful scenes of school children being escorted to school in North Belfast can be avoided in the future.

(AQO 83/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: Our office, working through the Community Relations Council, is supporting efforts to encourage local dialogue aimed at resolving both the current dispute at Holy Cross Primary School and the underlying disputes between the two communities in North Belfast.

We will continue to do all we can to make progress.

Sectarian Attacks

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether they have jointly initiated any response intended to bring an end to the Loyalist sectarian attacks; and to make a statement.

(AQO 60/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: We condemn sectarian attacks from whatever source. The responsibility for law and order is a matter for the Secretary of State.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Peace Maze, Castlewellan

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the level of expenditure on the Peace Maze at Castlewellan, including additional resources committed to its upkeep.

(AQW 20/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Payments to the end of August total £506k, with an estimated further £67k still to be paid.

Ongoing maintenance requirements will be met from within the existing Forest Service budget, and no additional funding is required.

Animal Slaughtered in Co Antrim

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 2090/00, to detail (a) the precise location in County Antrim where the animal was slaughtered on 8 February 2001, (b) the farm of origin in Northern Ireland (c) the date of birth of the animal and (d) any other information contained on the removal permit. (AQW 63/01)

Ms Rodgers: The animal in question was born on 16 September 1997 and was subsequently slaughtered at Langford Processors, Crumlin on 22 January 2001 having been permitted from the herd of origin in the Cookstown area on the normal MC2 movement permit used for moving animals for a farm premises to a meat plant for immediate slaughter.

I regret to say that the date of slaughter previously quoted in Assembly Question AQW 2090, i.e. 8 February 2000, was incorrect.

As the animal was over 30 months at time of slaughter, it came under the Over Thirty Months Scheme whereby animals are killed and the carcasses disposed of, and no part of the animal entered the human food chain.

Animal Slaughtered in Co Antrim

Mr Clyde asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 2090/00, to detail (a) if the carcass of the animal slaughtered in County Antrim was sold on or processed, (b) if processed, how it was labelled, (c) if it entered the Northern Ireland food chain and if so did it state the country of origin, (d) whether there was any humane reason for slaughter and (e) if any part of the animal was condemned. (AQW 64/01)

Ms Rodgers: The animal in question was born on 16 September 1997 and was subsequently slaughtered at Langford Processors, Crumlin on 22 January 2001 having been permitted from the herd of origin in the Cookstown area on the normal MC2 movement permit used for moving animals from a farm premises to a meat plant for immediate slaughter.

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CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Threats Made to Fishery Conservation Offices

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to indicate the nature of the threats made to the lives of bailiffs working on behalf of the Fisheries Board at Glenarm in late August 2001. (AQW 21/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): A telephone call was made to the Headquarters of the Fisheries Conservancy Board on 30 August 2001 from someone purporting to be from the IRA, alleging that one of the Board's Fishery Conservation Officers had assaulted a young person at Glenarm and that unless the officers were withdrawn, the IRA would be sent in.

Following the recent escape of a substantial number of farmed salmon from a sea cage in the bay, the level of angling at Glenarm has increased considerably. The Board's officers have been undertaking enforcement duties there to prevent illegal fishing activity occurring. The threat made to the Board's officers, and the considerable verbal and physical abuse that they have endured at Glenarm, is deplorable and must be roundly condemned. The Board has my full support for its current operations at Glenarm.

Protection of Salmon: Glenarm

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the action taken by his Department to protect those salmon which escaped recently from the Northern Salmon Co fish farm in Glenarm; and to make a statement. (AQW 22/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Fisheries Conservancy Board is responsible for the conservation and protection of the salmon and inland fisheries in Northern Ireland other than the fisheries of the Londonderry and Newry areas which are the responsibility of the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

Following the escape of farmed salmon, the Board's Fishery Conservation Officers carried out patrols of the bridge, harbour and beach areas in Glenarm. A number of alleged fishery offences have been detected and files are being prepared for prosecution.

I share the concerns about the recent salmon escape expressed by my ministerial colleague, Ms Rodgers,

in the statement she issued on 3 September. My Department has contributed to the introduction of measures to protect wild salmon stocks. The situation at Glenarm will continue to be monitored over the next few months.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Training Allowances

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to explain the situation in respect of training allowances for further education courses involving cross border students. (AQW 7/01)

The Minister of Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): Training allowances are not paid to students following further education courses. However such allowances are paid to young people participating in the Jobskills programme. I have previously given an undertaking that I will review the issue of payment of training allowances to young people from Republic of Ireland participating in the Northern Ireland Jobskills programme on completion of the labour mobility research commissioned by the North/South Ministerial Council.

That remains the position.

Training and Employment Courses: Irish Language

Mr Attwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will make a statement on the provision of training and employment courses through the medium of Irish language. (AQW 47/01)

Dr Farren: In recent years the number of children and young people in Irish medium primary and secondary education has grown. Those young people are beginning to enter the labour market following compulsory education and will be seeking access to Irish medium vocational education and training opportunities. I have therefore asked officials in my Department to undertake a policy review of provision for this group and to report to me as soon as possible. I will expect officials to consult with amongst others Irish language groups such as Foras Na Gaeilge, Ultach Trust and Forbairt Feirste to take account of practice in Republic of Ireland and elsewhere.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Gap Funding

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications for

Gap Funding from community groups by (a) geographical area and (b) amount. (AQW 8/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The DETI received a total of 13 Gap Funding applications from not for profit organisations covering both the Building Sustainable Prosperity and PEACE II Programmes. The locations of the applicants and amounts requested are as follows:

Location	Total Amount Requested
Belfast – 6	£1,024,763*
Derry – 5	£140,874
Ballymena – 1	£7,504
Castledearg – 1	£21,490

* In real terms this figure has subsequently been reduced to £376,153 following consultation with one applicant who submitted the same funding package under both programmes.

Attraction of Foreign Direct Investment

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to state how the present instability is hampering efforts to attract and win significant overseas investment for Northern Ireland. (AQW 29/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The attraction of new foreign direct investment remains a vital part of the economic development of Northern Ireland. Each new investment must be competed for, on a project-by-project basis, against a wide range of alternative locations many of which have not had the negative international exposure from which Northern Ireland has suffered in the last 30 years.

Undoubtedly Northern Ireland's ability to attract and win significant overseas investment has been hampered in the past through investors' perceptions of instability in Northern Ireland, but it is difficult to quantify on an individual basis the extent to which individual investors may have been deterred. However Northern Ireland's international image has improved significantly over recent years due to the political developments.

The global economy is currently experiencing a major downturn, and there are fewer internationally mobile projects for which to compete. It is vital that Northern Ireland is able to project an image of a stable and profitable location for business. The current instability, and indeed the recent violent scenes on our streets broadcast around the world, undoubtedly has a detrimental effect on Northern Ireland's ability to attract new investment.

Portuguese Employees

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (a) how many Portuguese employees work at (i) Dungannon Meats, Granville

(ii) Moy Park, Seagoe and (iii) Moy Park, Coolhill; and (b) how many employees have lost their jobs in the past six months at each of these three businesses.

(AQW 48/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The DETI does not have a breakdown of employees at these companies. There is no record of any reported redundancies at these companies and the most recent available employment returns indicate an increase in employment at two of the locations and a marginal decrease at one.

Unemployment Statistics

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how many persons are presently unemployed in (a) Dungannon and (b) Craigavon District Council areas. (AQW 49/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The information requested is available in the DETI monthly publication, Northern Ireland Labour Market Statistics (Section 3, Table 3.8), copies of which are placed in the Assembly Library.

ENVIRONMENT

Waste Recycling: Lagan Valley

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of the Environment if there are any plans to introduce increased recycling of waste to protect the environment in the Lagan Valley constituency. (AQO 68/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department's Waste Management Strategy sets targets for increased recycling of waste throughout Northern Ireland between 2005 and 2020. The strategy also provides for the production by District Councils of Waste Management Plans. It is these plans which will indicate how councils intend to meet the recycling targets and will inform the policy for Lagan Valley and indeed the rest of Northern Ireland.

The councils within the Lagan Valley constituency now belong to either the Eastern Region Waste Management Group or the Southern Waste Management Partnership. Both of these are developing Waste Management Plans which will include proposals for the establishment of an integrated network of facilities within their respective areas. The plans will be subject to public consultation.

Telecommunications Mast: Corgary, Newry

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current position regarding the proposal to

remove the telecommunications mast from its present location at School Road, Corgary, Newry. (AQO 2/01)

Mr Foster: Crown Castle, agents for One 2 One, have informed the Department that they intend to replace the mast with two smaller roadside masts. Two roadside sites have been identified, and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service has confirmed that the sites are contained within the adopted road boundary. Crown Castle will now proceed to submit prior approval applications for these masts.

I understand that the aim is to erect and commission the new masts and then to remove the existing mast immediately.

While, at this stage, I am unable to state exactly when the mast will be removed, I hope that the situation will be resolved as quickly as possible. My officials will, of course, continue to monitor the situation.

Telecommunications Masts: Height Restrictions

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy to restrict the overall height of communication masts to under 15 metres; and to make a statement. (AQO 108/01)

Mr Foster: Planning legislation does not place any restriction on the height of telecommunications masts. However, there are two principal procedures for determining whether permission should be granted for such development. Under current legislation, telecommunications masts up to 15 metres in height are permitted development and subject to a prior approval procedure. Masts over 15 metres in height are subject to the full planning process.

I intend to amend planning legislation to require full planning permission for all new telecommunications development, but I have no plans to introduce a restriction on the height of masts.

Our current policy seeks to minimise the visual impact of mast developments. But the height of a communications mast in a particular case will depend on a variety of factors, including the telecommunications system in question, the number of proposed antennae, the area to be covered and local topography. Additionally, the height of masts may be determined by other matters that affect radio signals, for example, surrounding tree and building height.

In considering planning applications for mast development, we seek to ensure that developers restrict the height of a mast to that necessary for the efficient operation of the particular communications system.

West Tyrone Area Plan

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the progress he has made to date on devising the new West Tyrone Area Plan. (AQO 34/01)

Mr Foster: As set out in the Programme for Government, my Department is engaged in a programme of preparation of Development Plans covering all 26 District Council areas. This is a very demanding programme, and it is my intention to have in place full and up to date plan coverage for all of Northern Ireland by 2005.

Under the current Development Plan Programme the new West Tyrone Area Plan work is scheduled to commence during 2002. An Issues Paper should be published before 31st March 2003, and the plan should be adopted during 2005.

Contaminated Land: Legislation

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of the Environment what progress has been made toward introducing tougher legislation regarding contaminated land; and to make a statement. (AQO 97/01)

Mr Foster: The enabling powers to provide for a new system for dealing with contaminated land, similar to that already in operation in Great Britain, are contained in Part III of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. However, other steps, including the preparation of further regulations, are required before any new system can be put into operation.

I am not able to say when these regulations will be prepared, as this will depend on the necessary resources. As a result of the Budget last year, my Department was allocated substantial additional resources, mainly to deal with the heavy backlog of work needed to achieve compliance with EU Directives on environmental issues. At present, policy on contaminated land does not have an EU dimension and I am giving priority to meeting EU obligations.

However, I appreciate the significance of the issue, and my Department has registered this in the Executive's Position Report on the 2002/03 Budget.

Review of the Planning Process

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to speed up the planning process when economic and job creation benefits are likely to arise from the application. (AQO 23/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is currently reviewing the planning process as part of its Programme for Government commitments. While the review is not specifically aimed at speeding up the planning process

for any particular type of planning application, it will, nevertheless, be directed at improving overall efficiency and timeliness.

My aim is to issue a paper for public consultation in late autumn which will cover the 3 key planning business areas, namely: operational planning policy; development planning; and development control, including the processing of planning applications.

In addition I can report that my Department has established new administrative arrangements, involving dedicated teams of staff, to process the most major planning applications, which are dealt with under the Article 31 procedures. The aim of this change is to ensure that such applications are dealt with as expeditiously as possible consistent with the need to ensure full and proper consideration of the applications.

Progress has also been made in clearing the backlog of planning applications, with a 17% reduction in the backlog achieved in 2000/01. This is against a trend of year in year increases in application numbers.

Extracting Water From Bore Wells

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of his recently launched policy for the protection of groundwater in Northern Ireland, to detail how he proposes to monitor/control the activities of commercial undertakings extracting water from bore wells for sale; and to make a statement. (AQO 80/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's powers under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 came into operation on 24 August this year. The Order contains powers to enable the Department to control water abstraction by regulations. We will consider what regulatory controls, including a licensing scheme, may be necessary to protect Northern Ireland's surface and ground waters from abstraction and will bring forward proposals for consultation during 2002. These will cover all forms of water abstraction, including the abstraction of water by bore wells for sale, and it will also cover the requirements of the EC Water Framework Directive.

Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment to make it his policy that the Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978 becomes the responsibility of his Department as opposed to local councils. (AQO 10/01)

Mr Foster: The provisions of Part II of the Pollution Control and Local Government (NI) Order 1978 dealing with waste are being progressively replaced by the

new provisions in Part II of the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997.

This will result in the transfer from district councils to my Department of responsibility for waste regulation issues such as the licensing and monitoring of waste disposal sites. Responsibility for operational issues such as the collection and disposal of waste will remain with district councils.

The purpose of the new arrangements is to ensure that there is a clear division of responsibility, between the Department and the district councils, for regulatory and operational matters and to provide a waste management system which meets fully the requirements of the relevant EU Directives.

I have no plans to change the responsibility for any of the other functions carried out by district councils under the 1978 Order.

Planning Permission

Mr Close asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to make it an offence to commence building any structure without first obtaining planning permission and building control permission.

(AQO 24/01)

Mr Foster: I propose to bring a Planning (Amendment) Bill before the Assembly in this session. One of the primary aims of that Bill will be to strengthen existing enforcement powers and introduce new procedures, which will enable my Department to respond more speedily and effectively to those cases which raise public concern. The issue of making it an offence to commence building any structure without first obtaining planning permission was raised recently with my Department by the Environment Committee.

My Department is currently considering this, but the issues are complex and far reaching. I want to consider them fully and carefully, and in the context of existing and proposed enforcement powers, before deciding whether such a change should be made.

Responsibility for building regulations lies with the Department of Finance and Personnel, but I am advised that it has no plans to create such an offence in regard to building control approval.

Telecommunication Mast: Ganaway, Millisle

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to explain why the application by mobile phone company One 2 One for a telecommunication mast at Ganaway, Millisle was processed within 20 days despite the large number of registered objections. (AQO 38/01)

Mr Foster: The application for consent under the Department's prior approval procedure for the erection of this mast was received by the Planning Service on 26 July 2001. Under current regulations, the Planning Service has a period of 42 days to notify the applicant of its decision.

The proposal was advertised in the local press on 9 August 2001, and local residents were notified in writing. Three letters of objection from local residents and a petition of objection containing 106 signatures were received, raising visual impact and health concerns. After full consideration of the application, and the various objections received, the Planning Service concluded that it should grant consent. A formal letter to this effect issued on 16 August 2001.

I am satisfied that the application was processed consistent with all standard procedures and that all objections and representations were fully considered.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Land Registers: Performance Targets

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the performance targets that have been set for the Land Registers of Northern Ireland for 2001-02. (AQW 37/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): For 2001-02 the following targets have been set for LRNI:

- To achieve a customer satisfaction rate, based on customer surveys, of at least 90%.
- To achieve a registration accuracy rate of at least 98.5%.
- To process regular Land Registry dealings in an average of 20 days.
- To process regular Registry of Deeds dealings in an average of 7 days.
- To process regular Statutory Charges Registry dealings in an average of 15 days.
- To process pre-completion land information applications in an average of 4 days.
- To achieve a weighted unit cost target of £30.00 (inclusive of PFI costs).
- To process 140 application units per member of staff per month.
- To cover Agency costs out of fee income.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Environmentally Friendly Transport

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his policies to promote environmentally friendly transport. (AQO 59/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): A draft Regional Transportation Strategy is currently under development. One of its objectives will be to reduce the adverse environmental impact of transport and contribute to sustainable patterns of development and movement through support for public transport, walking and cycling and a more responsible use of the car.

Earlier this year, I extended the scheme providing a rebate to bus operators in respect of fuel duty to include all of the duty paid on liquefied petroleum gas and compressed natural gas. The scheme also provides a 75% rebate on the duty paid on ultra low sulphur diesel fuel. The purpose of this measure is to encourage bus operators to use cleaner fuels, thus contributing to the improvement of air quality in our towns and cities.

The Department of the Environment is monitoring developments in Great Britain on the promotion of environmentally friendly transport and is expected to bring forward recommendations relating to a reduction in the emission of pollutants. My Department will take account of any new standards in developing its policies.

My Department is also taking a more strategic approach to raising public awareness about alternative and environmentally friendly modes of travel.

This approach involves the promotion of travel plans, where all sectors in the economy are alerted to the alternatives to the private car, particularly in the journey to work. This involves the promotion of walking, cycling and public transport use. Working groups have been established with the specific objective of encouraging walking and cycling, and appropriate infrastructure is being provided and improved to support these modes.

Liscurry Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement on the current status of the road infrastructure at Liscurry Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane. (AQW 56/01)

Mr Campbell: In circumstances in which my Department has, through the Planning process, determined the standards etc for the construction of streets, it is the responsibility of developers to bring roads and sewers up to those required standards, for adoption by the Department. Where such roads and sewers are provided to the prescribed standards, they are adopted promptly.

The developer at Liscurry Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane has not yet completed the necessary road works in any of the four phases of the development to adoption standards. There are also service strip infringements which require to be removed from some gardens before the Roads Service could consider adoptions.

Despite the efforts of the Roads Service to persuade the developer to complete the necessary works, they remain outstanding. I have therefore asked officials to contact the developer again, and those frontagers responsible for the service strip infringements, in an attempt to resolve the outstanding issues so the roads in the development can be completed and adopted as soon as possible.

Road Improvements: A8 Belfast/Larne Road

Mr R Hutchinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to improve the A8 Belfast to Larne Road; and to make a statement. (AQO 54/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service intends to carry out a package of improvements costing some £12 million to the A8 Belfast to Larne road. The improvements include:

- a 1.4 mile dual carriageway linking new roundabouts at Doagh Road and Coleman's Corner;
- a new 0.5 mile link road and roundabout at the A57 junction;
- 2 climbing lanes totalling 1.4 mile at Ballynure;
- traffic calming measures in the Ballynure area; and
- new roundabouts at Millbrook and Antiville.

As the Member will appreciate it is not possible to commence all elements of the scheme at the same time. I am pleased to say, however, that I have been able to secure funding for some elements. Subject to the successful completion of the statutory procedures and the acquisition of the necessary land, I hope that the Roads Service can commence construction by the spring of 2002. I will continue to press for additional funding to be made available.

Closure of Alleyways

Mr S Wilson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to look at the provision of gates for alleyways. (AQO 61/01)

Mr Campbell: Under current legislation, the only mechanism available to my Department's Roads Service by which an alleyway can be closed off is by formal abandonment under the Roads (NI) Order 1993. However, as formal abandonment means that the Roads Service no longer has a duty to maintain the alleyway, this option

is generally not acceptable to the adjoining owners who would have to assume responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of it.

In instances where the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) own the bed and soil of an alleyway, the Roads Service would expect it to take the lead in dealing with a request for closure by processing an Extinguishment Order under its legislation which would have the same effect.

I understand that the position is similar in Great Britain but that at least one local authority has made representation to the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions to have current legislation amended to allow alleyways to be secured whilst remaining part of the public road network.

My officials are looking at both the legal position and the nature and extent of the problem and at other places where similar problems have been addressed both in NI and GB.

Road Schemes: 10 Year Plan

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when he expects to bring forward the road schemes to be included in the 10 year plan.
(AQO 52/01)

Mr Campbell: It is my intention to write to MLAs and councils within the next two weeks advising of the detailed consultation arrangements to be used in preparation of the schedule of projects.

This will indicate that MLAs and councils will be invited to make representation on those specific schemes which they consider should be included in the 10-year forward planning schedule. I believe that this will be a welcome addition to the existing consultation arrangements on this important programme.

Concessionary Fares Scheme: Companion Free Travel

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will make it his policy to provide companion free travel to those eligible for free travel on public transport but who for health reasons or infirmity require assistance to do so.
(AQO 3/01)

Mr Campbell: While I can appreciate and sympathise with the needs of people with impaired mobility, the position has not changed since I answered the Member for South Down's question on 5 February. The resources currently available to me for the Concessionary Fares Scheme would not permit the inclusion of companion free travel.

I have previously announced my intention to review the Concessionary Fares Scheme within 12 months of the introduction of free travel. Of course, any extensions to the Concessionary Fares Scheme would require additional funding from the Assembly. If additional resources were available, it would be my aim to extend concessionary travel, either free travel or half fare travel, to more groups of people.

Resurfacing of Roads and Footpaths: Lagan Valley

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans for resurfacing of roads and footpaths in the Lagan Valley constituency for the year 2001-02.
(AQO 70/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service plans to resurface a number of roads and footways in the current year in the Lagan Valley constituency.

I have a list of all the schemes but consider it would be more appropriate if I provide the details to the Member in writing.

Enterprise Express: Lisburn Halt

Mr Davis asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to have the railway station at Lisburn designated as a stop for express trains from Belfast to Dublin.
(AQO 89/01)

Mr Campbell: The Enterprise is essentially an Inter-City express service between Belfast and Dublin. Translink has advised that to introduce any further stops along the line would lengthen the journey times between Belfast and Dublin and would also have other timetabling implications. Translink therefore has no plans to consider Lisburn as a stop for the Enterprise service. Translink has, however, pointed out that there are already good public transport connections from Lisburn to both Portadown and Belfast for onward connection to the Enterprise.

Provision of Motorway Traffic Information

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to improve the provision of information to motorway drivers.
(AQO 56/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has recently completed a £6 million project to:

- install a data communications network along the motorway network;
- replace the motorway emergency telephone system; and
- extend motorway control facilities.

The latter comprised the provision of 3 new motorway gantries on the northbound carriageway of the M2 foreshore motorway. Each gantry is equipped with direction signs, individual lane control signals and driver information signs. Subject to the availability of funds, the Roads Service will continue to install driver information and motorway control facilities along its motorway network.

I recognise that the provision of accurate and timely traffic information is an increasingly important aspect of effective management of the roads network, and the Roads Service is a partner in two European funded projects which aim to ensure that road users across the Trans European Road Network have access to travel information services of a consistent quality and standard.

Road Gritting: School Routes

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail, by division, what additional resources are available to expand road gritting operations on school routes not previously covered by the Roads Service.

(AQO 106/01)

Mr Campbell: In my statement to the Assembly on 3 July 2001, I announced a package of enhanced measures for winter service which could cost up to £0.5 million in an average winter. These include an increase in the salting schedule of about 4% which could cost up to £125,000. At that time, I explained to Members that it would not be practical to include all school bus routes in the schedule. I intend to bid for additional resources to cover this expenditure but, in the meantime, the cost of providing the Roads Service winter operations will continue to be met from the current, inadequate roads maintenance budget.

Concessionary Fares Scheme: Qualifying Age

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to extend free public transport to include all pensioners from aged 60. (AQO 20/01)

Mr Campbell: The Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme currently provides half fare travel for persons aged 65 or over. My first priority has been to introduce free travel on public transport for this group, and I am pleased that this will become a reality from 1 October 2001.

I have already announced my intention to review the Northern Ireland scheme within the first 12 months following the introduction of free travel for the over 65s. Of course, the Assembly would have to allocate additional resources for the Concessionary Fares Scheme before I could extend its scope. If I could obtain more resources, one of the options I would consider would be to lower the qualifying age for free fares to 60.

I have been advised that it would be discriminatory to lower the qualifying age to 60 only for state pensioners ie women or for all pensioners including men with occupational pensions.

M1/Westlink: Improvements

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Regional Development to make a statement about his plans to improve the M1 and the Westlink. (AQO 121/01)

Mr Campbell: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have completed their analysis of the inspector's reports on the Public Inquiries into the Environmental Statements for Stages 1 and 2 of the M1/Westlink project, and I expect to be in a position to make a detailed statement within the next ten days.

Comber Bypass

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how he proposes to progress the application for the Comber Bypass in the light of the one objection that has been lodged. (AQO 35/01)

Mr Campbell: As you state my Department's Roads Service has received one objection in response to the recently published Notice of Intention to Make a Vesting Order in respect of the Comber Bypass scheme. This objection has delayed progress with the scheme. Officials have had meetings with the objector to seek to resolve the issue.

If this objection can be dealt with quickly, construction can begin in a matter of months.

Concessionary Fares Scheme: Operator's Licence

Mr P Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the audit requirements he expects to be met before a private operator can be included in the free fares for the elderly scheme and, in particular, to state how he will exclude those black taxi firms who have links with paramilitary organisations. (AQO 75/01)

Mr Campbell: The Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme is available on scheduled bus services operated by holders of Road Service Operator's Licences issued by the Department of the Environment. Before granting a licence, DOE is required under Section 6A (1) of the 1967 Transport Act to satisfy itself that the applicant is of good repute, has appropriate financial standing and is professionally competent.

To be eligible to participate in the Concessionary Fares Scheme, an operator must satisfy the Conditions for Payment of Concessionary Fares Reimbursement,

which have been developed in line with best practice to safeguard the proper payment of grants from the public purse.

In order to satisfy the conditions the operator must:

1. hold a current Road Service Operator's Licence for the stage carriage journeys which it operates;
2. provide completed registration documents including operator details, full bank details, authorised signatures etc.;
3. agree to the payment of concessionary fares grant to any branch of any bank in the UK using the bankers automated clearing system (BACS);
4. provide the Department with a copy of the operator's published timetable;
5. be able to demonstrate a clear audit trail of supporting documentation for all claims i.e.:
 - retain a record of the serial numbers for each different type of ticket issued (including full fares);
 - retain a record of cash received for each different type of ticket issued; and
 - a daily record of total cash received and lodged to bank account;
6. confirm on an annual basis the accuracy or otherwise of the details contained in the concessionary fares registration form; and
7. resubmit a completed copy of the concessionary fares registration form in full, to the Department, at least once every five years or in the event of a change of registration details.

The Department will admit to the scheme any operator who can fully satisfy all of the conditions. In order to avoid the dangers of fraud, the terms and conditions are kept under review.

Taxis services are not included within the Concessionary Fares Scheme.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Support Agency: Accuracy Targets

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to ensure that the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency achieves his target of

cash value accuracy and to state his target for the current monitoring year. (AQW 16/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The Child Support Agency is committed to improving the cash value accuracy of its maintenance assessment decisions. To facilitate the drive for improvement the agency has developed and implemented a quality and accuracy strategy. Central to the strategy is the Agency Quality Council chaired by the Chief Executive to oversee the delivery of the quality improvement plan.

I have set a target for the current year of 78% accuracy on the last adjudication for all assessments checked. This is in line with that of the rest of the United Kingdom.

Child Support Agency: Standards of Accuracy

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the level of inaccuracy revealed within the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency's maintenance assessment decision making process for the 2000-01 period based on the report of the Independent Joint Standards Committee (NIA 57/00).

(AQW 17/01)

Mr Morrow: I accept that there has been a significant decline in standards of accuracy in the past year. My target for maintenance assessment accuracy was set at 80%; 67% was achieved. This is disappointing, but in many respects it was unavoidable. It has been caused directly by the unprecedented turnover and recruitment of staff. Since November 1999, when the agency began its rebuilding programme to prepare for the forthcoming Child Support Reforms, nearly 600 permanent new staff have been recruited, 380 of them in the past year.

This represents 40% of the total workforce and nearly 60% of the clerical grades from which the decision makers are drawn. This, coupled with the complexity of the maintenance assessment formula and the time taken to train decision makers to an acceptable level of proficiency, is to where the origins of the decline in standards can be traced.

I am confident that there will be an improvement in standards during this monitoring year as staff gain in proficiency and experience. I have set the Agency a target of 78% for cash value accuracy, and the early indications are that the target is being achieved.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 21 September 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels

Rev Dr Ian Paisley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail when the Northern Ireland Executive Office will open in Brussels. (AQW 10/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels has been operational in its permanent premises since the end of May. The office is now fully staffed and providing advice and information to the devolved Administration as a whole on EU matters relevant to Northern Ireland, as well as promoting Northern Ireland's wider interests in Europe.

A reception to mark the official opening of the office had been scheduled for 18 September, but, regrettably, it has had to be postponed. It is expected that the official opening will now take place later in the year.

Assembly Bills

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to list those Bills that have been passed by the Assembly since devolution occurred and say how many flowed from recommendations made in the Programme for Government. (AQW 11/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: Twenty one Acts have been made since devolution, and a list of these is available in the Assembly Library.

The Programme for Government covers the period from April 2001. Since April 2001, the following Acts have been passed. These will all support the plans and priorities set out by the Executive in its Programme for Government. The Acts are:

- Street Trading Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Family Law Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Defective Premises (Landlord's Liability) Act 2001
- Adoption (Intercountry Aspects) Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Electronic Communications Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Trustee Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Department for Employment and Learning Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Product Liability (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2001
- Budget (No 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2001

Victims

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 1774/00 and the Bloomfield Report, to state the current position in respect of this matter. (AQW 33/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: Deloitte & Touche was commissioned by the Victims Unit within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to carry out research into the services needed by victims and the current level of service provision. A report on the findings of that research will be completed shortly and a summary will be sent to all those who took part in the exercise, along with other interested parties.

It is proposed that an action plan will also be issued to indicate how the findings might be taken forward. The research will also help to inform the development of a victims strategy.

Northern Ireland Bureau

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail which Department or government agency is responsible for funding the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, USA. (AQW 87/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The Northern Ireland Bureau is part of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and is funded by our Department.

Northern Ireland Bureau

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the annual budget of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, USA. (AQW 89/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Mallon MP: The budget for the Northern Ireland Bureau for the current year is £640,000. This will reduce to just over £590,000 from April 2002.

In July 2001 the Northern Ireland Bureau moved from the British Embassy to new offices in downtown Washington. This is in line with paragraph 6.6 of the Programme for Government which undertook to strengthen and reorganise the structure and working of the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington.

The figure of £640,000 includes £50,000 in one-off moving costs.

The budget figure also includes £127,000 for rent, £110,000 for United Kingdom-based salaries and allowances and £105,000 for activities related to the Bureau's objectives as outlined in the Programme for Government.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Irish Auctioneers and Valuers Institute Conference

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her reasons as to why she is unable to attend the Irish Auctioneers and Valuers Institute conference on 8 September 2001.
(AQW 19/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I was unable to attend the Irish Auctioneers and Valuers Institute conference on 8 September due to personal circumstances.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what steps will be taken to recover any monies that are claimed falsely for sheep premiums.
(AQW 58/01)

Ms Rodgers: Where any farmer receives payment of subsidy to which he is not entitled, he is required to repay that money. If appropriate it may be deducted from other payments due to be made to him.

In relation to the advance payments of 2001 sheep annual premium to farmers in the foot-and-mouth disease cull areas, these have been made on the basis of the comparison of cull data against subsidy claims. Consequently, no overpayments have occurred on these claims and no recovery of payments should be required.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of money that was involved in the alleged falsified claims for sheep premium.
(AQW 59/01)

Ms Rodgers: The total shortfall in sheep identified in the foot-and-mouth disease cull areas was worth around £57,000 in sheep annual premium.

The farmers concerned have been given the opportunity to explain the apparent shortfall. The final amount of subsidy involved in over-claims will not be known until the Department has completed a full review of all the claims.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the geographical areas from which farmers have allegedly completed false returns for sheep premium.
(AQW 60/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development carried out a cull of animals in response to the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in South Armagh, Ardboe and the Cushendall/Cushendun areas. An analysis of the cull data against claims for 2001 sheep annual premium showed a shortfall in the South Armagh and Cushendall /Cushendun cull areas.

Game Shooting

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, taking into consideration the restrictions placed on game and rabbit shooting as a result of foot-and-mouth disease, to detail the steps she is taking to ensure that game shooting can continue when the season starts on 1 October, especially with regard to private and syndicate shoots.
(AQW 62/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am pleased to inform you that I have reviewed the risk associated with game shooting with my veterinary advisors, and I have decided to lift the prohibition on game shooting. The necessary legislation will be completed as soon as possible, and shooting will be able to commence on the opening of the game season on 1 October 2001.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what steps will be taken to review payments for sheep premium to verify that no other alleged false applications have been made.
(AQW 68/01)

Ms Rodgers: The subsidy claims lodged by all farmers whose animals were culled because of the foot-and-mouth disease outbreak have been compared with the cull data. Advance payments of 2001 sheep annual premium have been made in accordance with the findings of this analysis.

In relation to the sheep annual premium scheme as a whole, the Department undertakes an annual programme of unannounced on-farm inspections to verify subsidy claims in accordance with the European Commission Regulations. Individual problem cases identified through these checks are dealt with under the provisions of the scheme. In the light of the particular problems which have emerged this year, the Department is considering how the arrangements for checking and inspecting claims for sheep annual premium might be strengthened.

Fraudulent Claims

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how many farmers have been prosecuted for making fraudulent claims over the last three years. (AQW 69/01)

Ms Rodgers: For the three-year period ending 31 March 2001, i.e. financial years 1 April 1998 - 31 March 2001, 77 farmers were prosecuted for making fraudulent claims.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail whether any prosecutions have taken place against farmers who have allegedly completed false returns for sheep premium. (AQW 70/01)

Ms Rodgers: As a result of investigations in the light of the information from the foot-and-mouth disease culls, nine cases have been referred to the Director of Public Prosecutions. A further eight cases are currently under investigation with a view to referral.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost associated with the running of the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 1/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Northern Ireland Events Company has a total budget of £1.6 million in the current financial year. This comprises provision of £1.5 million to support

events and £100K for administrative costs. All of this funding is provided through the Department of Culture Arts and Leisure.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail funding from his Department to the Northern Ireland Events Company, by year, from 1999. (AQW 2/01)

Mr McGimpsey: DCAL has had direct responsibility for funding the Northern Ireland Events Company for the past two years, ie 2000-01 and 2001-02. Funding in 2000-01 totalled £1.1 million and in 2001-02 £1.6 million.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the application and assessment criteria of the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQW 3/01)

Mr McGimpsey:

Strategic Context

The strategic context, rationale and authority for the work of the Events Company derives from the report of the Events Strategy Group entitled "A strategy for attracting major events to Northern Ireland", which was endorsed by the then Secretary of State.

Strategic Aim

The strategic aim of the company is:

"To support the promotion of major events in Northern Ireland which have the potential to:

Impact positively on the image of Northern Ireland and in particular on its external image;

Create opportunity for greater social cohesion;

Bring direct or indirect economic benefits to Northern Ireland."

In pursuit of this aim, the Company has defined its role as being:-

'To contribute to improving the social and economic status of Northern Ireland, for the benefit of all the people, by supporting events, consistent with its aim, which would be unlikely to happen in Northern Ireland without the intervention of the company.'

In assessing funding applications, the company applies the following criteria:-

a) Essential Criterion:

- Each project must be in a position to provide at least 50% of funding;

b) Desirable Criteria:

- The extent to which the event achieves international media coverage
- The extent to which the project is likely to attract attendance from the different communities and different social classes
- The extent to which the project is likely to generate economic activity
- The extent to which the event is likely to attract overseas visitors
- Job creation potential
- The audience which the event is expected to attract
- The extent to which the event attracts viewers or attendees from other countries who have disposable income to spend in Northern Ireland
- The extent to which the performers are regarded as “world class”
- The level of funding required
- The extent to which the promoter has a successful track record in promoting/managing major events.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the distribution of funding from the Northern Ireland Events Company, by year, since its inception. (AQW 4/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Events Company has been operational since the financial year 1999/2000, and the distribution of funding in this and each subsequent financial year is as follows:

EVENTS SUPPORTED 1999-2000

State of the World Forum	£ 141,800.00
Senior British Open Golf	£ 360,000.00
Festival of Racing	£ 164,999.74
Pavarotti Concert	£ 125,000.00
Belfast Festival at Queen's	£ 150,000.00
World/European Junior 3-Day Event	£ 10,000.00
UK Ice Skating Championships	£ 20,000.00
NI v France	£ 50,000.00
Total	£1,021,799.70

EVENTS SUPPORTED 2000-01

Senior British Open Golf	£395,000.00
Young at Art	£ 64,200.00
Belfast Festival at Queen's	£100,000.00
Festival of Racing	£180,000.00
Cinemagic	£ 90,000.00

World Student Golf	£ 10,000.00
Feet of Flames Concert	£100,000.00
Ice Hockey	£ 7,000.00
Total	£946,200.00

EVENTS SUPPORTED 2001-02

World Indoor Bowls	£ 5,000
Young at Art	£ 31,000
World Amateur Boxing Championships	£ 119,000
Eagles at Stormont	£ 100,000
Milk Cup	£ 90,000
Senior British Open	£ 400,000
Bryan Adams in Derry	£ 30,000
Les Miserables	£ 100,000
European Agriculture Conference	£ 25,000
Total	£ 900,000

Motorcycle Road Racing

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans to make motorcycle road racing a safer sport. (AQW 78/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As you will be aware I recently secured £100K as a contribution towards safety works at the province's road race circuits. This contribution was based on the costings that were provided by the public utilities (British Telecom, Northern Ireland Electricity and Department of Regional Development) and the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (Private Land Owners) to remove/relocate items of roadside 'furniture' which constituted a serious risk and which were specifically highlighted in the Road Race Task Force Report. My Department is providing funding (within the £100k limit) for all safety related elements.

Work is now underway to action the required improvements. The Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI), who have been given responsibility for time-tabling and prioritising these improvements, have focused action, up to now, on the circuits which held events this year (namely the Mid-Antrim and Dundrod circuits) and the North West 200. The safety improvement programme is now to be “rolled out” across the province to address the safety needs at all other courses.

EDUCATION

CCEA

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Education to outline what action has been taken to ensure that children have

access to adequate advice and counselling after their disturbing experiences as the result of the mistakes made in the marking by the CCEA in a Home Economics examination; and to make a statement. (AQO 99/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness):

Post-primary schools regularly have teachers available when examination results are announced to provide help and guidance to individual pupils. Where a school feels that further counselling support is necessary, it can be made accessible to pupils through the education and library boards' educational psychology or education welfare services.

CCEA's investigation into this matter is still ongoing, and I will be studying the report when completed to ensure that sufficient steps are taken to prevent similar mistakes occurring in the future.

**Holy Cross Primary School:
North Belfast**

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Education if he will make a statement on the situation at Holy Cross Primary School in North Belfast. (AQO 43/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I am extremely disappointed that the situation in North Belfast was not resolved in time for the beginning of the school year and dismayed at the situation which innocent young children have had to face. It is the fundamental right of every child to be able to travel unhindered to school and be educated in an environment in which he feels safe and secure and able to learn. Protests of any sort affecting school-children are completely unacceptable and must stop.

School Crossing Patrols

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to detail the steps being taken to ensure that adequate numbers of school crossing guards are available to ensure the safety of children on their way to and from school. (AQO 41/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In order to assist in the prevention of accidents to children, my Department approves the schemes which set out the measures education and library boards may take to provide school crossing patrols where particular traffic hazards have been identified. In considering the need for such a measure, boards carry out a survey, assess traffic flow and consult with relevant authorities, including Road Safety Officers of the DOE.

Primary School Provision: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail if he has any plans to amend primary school provision in West Tyrone. (AQO 69/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Any decision about the future of primary school provision in West Tyrone is a matter for the Western Education and Library Board in the first instance. The board has long recognised the need for a rationalisation of the schools in the Beragh/ Six-milecross area because of declining enrolments at two schools plus the unsatisfactory nature of the accommodation. Difficulties have, however, arisen regarding an agreed location for a new school. The board is therefore currently involved in a second consultation exercise with the various school interests to determine a preferred site for the new school as part of an economic appraisal. The board will then initiate a development proposal process which will provide a further opportunity for all interested parties to express their views before a final decision is taken by the Department.

CCEA

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Education if he proposes to take any action to address the situation in which the CCEA is both a curriculum and a validating authority as well as being an examining body. (AQO 93/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The three aspects of the CCEA's role were established to reflect the distinctive local needs. The CCEA is required to comply with regulations set out in a Code of Practice drawn up by the regulatory bodies, and participates in scrutinies that are conducted by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to ensure that procedures are adhered to and that there is comparability of standards. The CCEA is also inspected regularly by the Education and Training Inspectorate. With these checks and balances in mind, I remain to be persuaded that there is a need for action in this area.

Moneydarragh Primary School

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education to outline the progress that has been made in completing the economic appraisal for the capital works at Moneydarragh Primary School. (AQO 47/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Moneydarragh Primary School is one of a number of schools which will be the subject of an economic appraisal process during the present business year. Work has started on this exercise but before progressing further the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools has asked for further discussions at local level. A meeting involving the CCMS, school trustees and the Department will take place shortly following which Department officials will arrange for a site visit to initiate a feasibility study.

Linguistic Development: Minority Groups

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Education to detail the action he is taking to strengthen the linguistic

development of children and young people from minority groups. (AQO 12/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The provision of education for children and young people from ethnic minority groups is set within the framework of the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 which makes it unlawful for schools to treat a pupil from a particular racial group less favourably than other pupils and requires education authorities to ensure that facilities for education are provided without racial discrimination. Under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 there is also a duty placed upon public authorities to promote equality of opportunity among persons of different racial groups.

The provision made for the education of children and young people from ethnic minorities attending primary or secondary schools normally takes the form of a more generous staffing ratio and/or the use of support teachers including those specialising in teaching English as a second language where the need for this is identified.

In the current financial year it is estimated that more than half a million pounds will be allocated by the education and library boards to provide support to schools with pupils whose first language is not English. In addition, all boards provide support to schools through their Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) to assist with the education of pupils for whom English is a second language. This additional support, whilst important, cannot be quantified in money terms.

The Department has also successfully bid for support from the Executive Programme Funds (EPF) for a project to improve access to the curriculum and promote social inclusion for children from ethnic minority backgrounds where their first language is not English and for traveller children.

Special Education Needs: ICT

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education to outline the present provision of ICT for children with special educational needs in each of the education and library boards; and to make a statement. (AQO 71/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Children with special educational needs in all types of schools have access to the same ICT facilities as non-statemented pupils. Additional ICT equipment may be provided for certain classes in special schools and for the personal use of individual pupils in all types of schools as specified in their statements.

Free School Transport

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Education to explain why, to obtain free school transport, parents must

nominate the nearest school as their first preference whether their child intends to attend that school or not. (AQO 115/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The current transport arrangements were introduced in 1997 to constrain the escalating costs of home to school transport and to release resources to safeguard funding for the classroom. The revised arrangements restrict transport provision to pupils who have been unable to gain a place in all suitable schools within statutory walking distance of their home (2 miles for primary school age pupils and 3 miles for others). Suitable schools are defined as the established educational categories of controlled, maintained, integrated, Irish-medium and, in the grammar sector, denominational and non-denominational schools.

Schools may not include the order of preference within their admissions criteria so parents and children are not disadvantaged under the revised procedures.

Parents who disregard the arrangements and send their child to a school of their choice should understand that they may render themselves ineligible for transport assistance.

Teaching Vacancies

Mr Close asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of current teaching vacancies in primary and post-primary schools. (AQO 14/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Information on current teaching vacancies is not held by the Department of Education nor collated by the relevant employing authorities. Employers have not reported to the Department any large scale problems with teacher shortages here.

Saintfield High School: Enrolment Statistics

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of applications for enrolment in Form 1 at Saintfield High School for the school year beginning September 2001, (b) how many were successful and (c) the total enrolment at this school. (AQW 147/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Saintfield High School received 87 applications for admission to Form 1 for the school year beginning September 2001. 65 applicants were admitted. The school's total enrolment figure is 337.

St Patrick's High School, Downpatrick: Enrolment Statistics

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of applications for enrolment in Form 1 at St Patrick's High School, Downpatrick for the academic year beginning September 2001, (b)

how many were successful and (c) the total enrolment at the school. (AQW 148/01)

Mr M McGuinness: St Patrick's Grammar School, Downpatrick received 133 applications for admission to Form 1 for the school year beginning September 2001. 112 applicants were admitted. The school's total enrolment figure is 709.

Down High School: Enrolment Statistics

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of applications for enrolment in Form 1 at Down High School for the school year beginning September 2001, (b) how many were successful and (c) the total enrolment at the school. (AQW 149/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Down High School received 149 applications for admission to Form 1 for the school year beginning September 2001. 129 applicants were admitted. The school's total enrolment figure is 884.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Foreign Workers: Employment Rights

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the action he has taken against firms/employers and employment agencies who have sacked foreign workers without adequate notice or reason and without the provision of P45s. (AQW 23/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): My Department has not been advised of any instances of such behaviour on the part of employment agencies. If you can provide information to me regarding the circumstances of this allegation, I shall ensure that my officials investigate the matter. With regard to the violation of individuals' employment rights, foreign workers should be advised to seek legal advice from the appropriate body. I have asked officials to provide you with contact details directly.

European Directive on Part-Time Workers

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how the European Workers Directive applies to part-time members of the Royal Irish Regiment. (AQW 35/01)

Dr Farren: The European Directive on Part-time Workers was implemented in Northern Ireland by Regulations which came into operation on 1 July 2000. I understand that the Ministry of Defence's view is that the Regulations do not apply to part-time members

of the Royal Irish Regiment (Home Service), since they are employed on wholly different terms and conditions to full-time members of the Regiment.

Jobskills: Cross-Border Mobility

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give an update on the issue of cross-border mobility for Jobskills trainees. (AQW 46/01)

Dr Farren: Young people from the Republic of Ireland who meet the eligibility criteria for Jobskills presently have access to that programme. I have previously given an undertaking that I will review the issue of payment of training allowances to these young people on completion of the labour mobility research commissioned by the North/South Ministerial Council. I understand that that research work is close to finalisation, and I have therefore asked my officials to begin discussion of the issue of training allowances with the appropriate authorities in the Republic of Ireland.

ENVIRONMENT

Radioactive Waste Management Consultation Paper

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when the Radioactive Waste Management Consultation Paper will be launched in Northern Ireland. (AQW 65/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): The Radioactive Waste Management Consultation Paper will be launched simultaneously in Westminster and by the three devolved Administrations. It is envisaged that the launch date will be 12th September. This consultation paper is the first stage in the process, which will ultimately result in the creation of a radioactive waste management strategy capable of embracing widespread support from the general public and the scientific community.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Census 2001

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) the response rate to the Census 2001, (b) the percentage of replies which are still outstanding and (c) the estimated date of publication of the various sections of the Census 2001 report; and to make a statement. (AQW 119/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): Several major elements of the Census process have now been successfully completed with the vast majority of Census forms received back by Census Office and data processing underway. Some late returns are still being received after last reminders, and where possible these forms will also be processed. An estimated response rate of around 98% has been achieved, but an exact figure for the number of people counted in the 2001 Census will be available in late summer 2002 when all the information, including the results of an independent Census coverage survey to assess the extent of any under-enumeration, has been analysed.

The first outputs – detailed population counts by age and sex – will inform the 2001 mid year estimates of population, which will be published in late summer 2002 in parallel with results for England, Wales and Scotland. These will be followed in late 2002 and early 2003 by more detailed Census outputs on the complete range of topics covered by the Census. Results will be provided for a range of geographic area levels such as district council, ward and sub ward. Census results will be made available in a range of formats including a series of printed reports, electronic supplements on CD and via the Internet.

Law Society: Registry of Deeds

Mr Leslie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what action he proposes to take following the concerns expressed by the Law Society that, as a consequence of the computerisation of records at the Registry of Deeds on 17 June 2001, the situation has developed where solicitors are advising lending institutions that they can no longer certify title.

(AQO 95/01)

Mr Durkan: I understand that the Law Society is now content following the introduction of additional quality control measures by Land Registers NI. The Registry of Deeds should be back within target by the end of September.

PEACE II Funding

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when he expects the first round of Peace II funding to be released.

(AQO 78/01)

Mr Durkan: Under the new Peace Programme there are various implementing bodies tasked with administering the Programme funds, Intermediary Funding Bodies, Local Strategy Partnerships, the SEUPB and Departments. All of these implementing bodies have different timescales for issuing calls for projects and the delivery of funds within the Programme, although some have already started and I can confirm that the

Intermediary Funding Bodies contracts have now been agreed.

Senior Civil Service Review

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the purpose, scope and timetable for the senior civil service review and specify if the review encompasses all senior civil service grades, including those who are seconded to the Northern Ireland Office.

(AQO 65/01)

Mr Durkan: The purpose of the review is to open, to independent scrutiny, the current policies and procedures concerning appointment to, and promotion within, the NICS Senior Civil Service. These policies and procedures relate to all senior grades in the Northern Ireland Civil Service and will apply to all SCS staff including those seconded to other organisations such as the Northern Ireland Office. However, as the Northern Ireland Office is a UK Exchequer Department, the review does not apply to the NIO itself.

Through the terms of reference, I have specifically asked the review team to consider the appointment and promotion procedures for the Senior Civil Service to ensure that they facilitate the business objectives of Ministers and Departments; to address any identified obstacles to fair participation by all sectors of the community; and to promote the NICS goal to be fully representative of the community which it serves by tackling under-representation. However, the terms of reference for the review have been cast broadly to maximize the opportunity and scope that the review provides.

As agreed by the Executive, the review team will report to me in the autumn. I will then bring the report, with my recommendations, to the Executive for final decisions.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Fire Service: Composition of Western Command

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by grade and seniority, the religious composition of the Western Command area of the Fire Service.

(AQW 9/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): The present make up of Brigade personnel by religious affiliation in the Western Command Area is as follows. The groupings of ranks/

grades etc. is necessary in order to protect the anonymity of individual staff.

Wholetime Officers (Station Officer and Above)	Number Employed
Protestant	7
Catholic	9
Other	0
Total	16

Wholetime Firefighters (Up to Sub Officer Rank)	Number Employed
Protestant	73
Catholic	65
Other	4
Total	142

Retained Firefighters	Number Employed
Protestant	134
Catholic	147
Other	7
Total	288

Admin & Manual	Number Employed
Protestant	13
Catholic	8
Other	0
Total	21

Totals by each Perceived Religious Category	Number Employed
Protestant	227
Catholic	229
Other	11
Total Employees	467

Seo a leanas an miondealú faoi láthair den fhoireann Briogáide de réir a reiligiúin i gCeantar Cheannas an Iarthair. Tá na grúpaí de ranganna/ghráid srl. riachtanach chun ainmneacha oibrithe indibhidiúla a chosaint.

Oifigigh Lánaimseartha (Oifigeach Stáisiúin agus Níos Airde)	Líon Fostaithe
Protastúnach	7
Caitliceach	9
Eile	0
Iomlán	16

Comhraiceoirí Dóiteáin Lánaimseartha (Suas go Rang Fo-Oifigigh)	Líon Fostaithe
Protastúnach	73
Caitliceach	65
Eile	4
Iomlán	142

Comhraiceoirí Dóiteáin Coinneáilte	Líon Fostaithe
Protastúnach	134
Caitliceach	147
Eile	7
Iomlán	288

Riarachán & Obair Láimhe	Líon Fostaithe
Protastúnach	13
Caitliceach	8
Eile	0
Iomlán	21

Suímeanna de réir gach Catagóir Reiligiúnach Sonraithe	Líon Fostaithe
Protastúnach	227
Caitliceach	229
Eile	11
Líon Iomlán Fostaithe	467

Ulster Hospital: Shortage of Beds

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to alleviate the shortage of beds in the Ulster Hospital by providing immediate finance to (a) improve staffing levels and facilities in the Accident and Emergency Department and (b) improve the range and quality of care in the community facilities in the North Down area.

(AQW 25/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) Demand in health and social services is far outstripping supply, and the difficulties encountered in a number of our hospitals are a symptom of a service that has been seriously under funded in the past. There has been a history of under investment at the Ulster Hospital since it was built in 1962, the effects of which cannot be reversed overnight. However, the major redevelopment programme that I announced on 31 July, will ensure that the population served by the hospital receives the highest standards of treatment and care for many years to come.

The strategic development plan that I endorsed includes a proposal to extend the Accident and Emergency Department to provide additional capacity and upgrade to meet statutory standards. I have also allocated £2 million for the reinstatement of 20 adult inpatient beds in the Jaffe Ward, to address the problems of bed capacity at the hospital and reduce the unacceptable number of trolley waits. I shall be continuing to make the case to my Executive colleagues that the pressures on health and social services will only be relieved if additional resources are made available.

- (b) The responsibility for providing community care facilities in a particular area rests with the individual trust. However, I recognise that there are problems in the delivery of community care services here and that is why I have commissioned a comprehensive review of the implementation of community care policy. The review will consider the effectiveness of the current arrangements for delivering community care services and will report to me by 30 September 2001.

- (a) Tá an ráchairt ar sheirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta go mór ag sárú an tsoláthair, agus is comhartha ar sheirbhís a fomhaoineadh go dona roimhe seo iad na deacrachtaí a bhí ag roinnt dár n-otharlann. Tá claonadh stairiúil d'fho-infheistíocht in Otharlann Uladh ónar tógadh sa bhliain 1962 í a raibh éifeacht aige uirthi nach féidir a athrú thar oíche. Cinnteoidh an príomhchlár athchóirithe a d'fhógair mé ar 31 Iúil go bhfaighidh an pobal ar a riarann an otharlann na caighdeáin is airde de chóireáil agus de chúram leis na blianta fada.

Sa Phlean Straitéiseach forbartha ar aontaigh mé leis, tá moladh le cur leis an Roinn Timpistí agus Éigeandálaí chun toilleadh agus athchóiriú breise a sholáthar ar dhóigh a gcomhlíonfaidh caighdeáin reachtúla. Dháil mé £2 milliún fosta d'athchur ar fáil 20 leaba d'othair chónaitheacha fhásta i mBarda Jaffe le dul i gceann na bhfadhbanna a bhaineann le toilleadh leapa agus le líon doghlactha na ndaoine ag fanacht ar thralaithe. Beidh mé ag áitiú ar aghaidh ar mo chomhghleacaithe san Fheidhmeannas go maolófar na brúnna ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta ach acmhainní breise a chur ar fáil.

- (b) Is é an iontaobhas indibhidiúil é féin atá freagrach as soláthar áiseanna cúraim phobail i gceantar ar leith. Admhaím áfach go bhfuil fadhbanna ann i soláthar seirbhísí cúraim phobail anseo agus sin an fáth ar choimisiúnaigh mé athbhreithniú cuimsitheach ar chur i bhfeidhm an pholasaí chúraim phobail. Déanfaidh an t-athbhreithniú machnamh ar éifeacht na socruithe reatha do sholáthar seirbhísí cúraim phobail agus tabharfaidh sé tuairisc domsa faoi 30 Meán Fómhair 2001.

Rape Crisis Centre: Financial Assistance

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what financial assistance she can offer to the Rape Crisis Centre in order to prevent it from closing. (AQW 27/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has provided funding every year since 1989 to the Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre towards its core administrative costs. In the current year, this funding amounted to £33,120.

Earlier this year, in order to assist the centre to strengthen its financial position, my Department made available an additional grant of £11,300 to the organisation to enable it to improve its business and strategic planning processes through the development of a strategic plan.

Thug an Roinn s'agamsa maoiniú gach bliain ó 1989 d'Ionad Éignithe agus Drochíde Gnéasaí Bhéal Feirste chun a chroí-chostas riaracháin a chlúdach. I mbliana, is é £33,120 an maoiniú san iomlán a tugadh.

Níos luaithe i mbliana, chun cuidiú leis an Ionad a staid airgeadais a neartú, chuir an Roinn s'agamsa deontas breise de £11,300 ar fail don eagrás chun cur ar a chumas a phróisis phleanála gnó agus straitéisí a fheabhsú trí fhorbairt phlean straitéisigh.

Carrickfergus Community Service: Meals-on-Wheels

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of the meals-on-wheels service currently provided at no public cost to the South and East Antrim area by Carrickfergus Community Services, to detail the cost of providing such a service should it cease trading and to say if she has any plans to provide additional funding to assist this essential service. (AQW 92/01)

Ms de Brún: The meals-on-wheels service to which you refer is funded by the Community Business Programme and Carrickfergus Borough Council.

I have been informed that, although Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust sent a grant application form to Carrickfergus Community Services in May of this year, the form has not yet been returned to the trust.

If Carrickfergus Community Services should cease trading, the trust will assess those clients currently receiving meals-on wheels from Carrickfergus Community Service and make alternative arrangements.

Maoinítear an tseirbhís béilí ar rothaí dá dtagraíonn tú ag an Chlár Gnó Phobail agus ag Comhairle Buirge Charraig Fhearghais.

Cé gur chuir Ionntaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Homefirst foirm iarratais le haghaidh deontais chuig

Seirbhísí Pobail Charraig Fhearghais i mBealtaine na bliana seo, tuigim nár cuireadh an fhoirm ar ais chuig an iontaobhas go fóill.

Dá scoirfeadh Seirbhísí Pobail Charraig Fhearghais de bheith ag trádáil, déanfaidh an t-iontaobhas measúnú ar na cliaint sin atá ag fáil béilí ar rothaí ó Sheirbhísí Pobail Charraig Fhearghais agus déanfaidh sé socrúithe eile.

Meals-on-Wheels

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of people aged 65 and over who receive meals-on-wheels per 1,000 population for each trust area (and the Northern Ireland average) during 1999-2000 and 2000-01 and (b) to give her assessment of any divergence between trust areas in the number of people receiving such meals. (AQW 93/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below. Figures refer to the position at 31st March in each year.

PEOPLE AGED 65 AND OVER IN RECEIPT OF MEALS-ON-WHEELS PER 1,000 POPULATION BY TRUST

Trust	2000	2001
Armagh & Dungannon ⁽¹⁾	0.0	0.0
Causeway	9.2	8.8
Craigavon & Banbridge	25.3	24.6
Down Lisburn	13.8	13.7
Foyle ⁽²⁾	30.7	30.4
Homefirst	4.2	3.9
Newry & Mourne ⁽³⁾	31.3	31.7
North & West Belfast	11.7	7.0
South & East Belfast ⁽⁴⁾	25.3	25.2
Sperrin Lakeland	34.8	36.3
Ulster Community & Hospitals	28.8	26.7
Total	18.3	17.5

⁽¹⁾ Armagh & Dungannon Trust does not provide a meals-on-wheels service. However, it does provide meals via the home help service where there is an assessed need.

⁽²⁾ Foyle Trust is unable to provide an age analysis and therefore figures for numbers of people aged 65 and over have been estimated.

⁽³⁾ Figures for Newry and Mourne for 31st March 2000 have been estimated.

⁽⁴⁾ Figures for South and East Belfast are for a chilled meals service.

(b) It is a matter for each health and social services trust to determine the need for services in the Trust area.

(a) Miondealaítear an t-eolas seo sa tábla thíos. Tagraíonn na figiúirí don riocht ar 31 Márta i ngach bliain.

DAOINE 65 BLIAIN D'AOIS AGUS NÍOS SINE A FHAIGHEANN BÉILÍ AR ROTHÁÍ DE RÉIR 1,000 DUINE AN DAONRA AGUS DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS

Iontaobhas	2000	2001
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn ⁽¹⁾	0.0	0.0
An Clochán	9.2	8.8
Creag na hAbhann & Droichead na Banna	25.3	24.6
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	13.8	13.7
An Feabhal ⁽²⁾	30.7	30.4
Homefirst	4.2	3.9
An tÍúr & An Mhuirn ⁽³⁾	31.3	31.7
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	11.7	7.0
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir ⁽⁴⁾	25.3	25.2
Sliabh Speirín & Tír na Lochanna	34.8	36.3
Otharlanna agus Pobal Uladh	28.8	26.7
Iomlán	18.3	17.5

⁽¹⁾ Ní sholáthraíonn Iontaobhas Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn seirbhís 'béilí ar rothaí'. Soláthraíonn sé béilí áfach trí sheirbhís chabhróra tí áit a measúnaítear a bhfuil riachtanas.

⁽²⁾ Ní féidir le hIontaobhas an Fheabhail anailís ar aois a sholáthar agus mar sin de, measadh figiúirí do líon na ndaoine de 65 bliain d'aois agus níos sine.

⁽³⁾ Measadh figiúirí don Íúr agus Mhúrn do 31 Márta 2000.

⁽⁴⁾ Tá na figiúirí do Bhéal Feirste Theas agus Thoir do sheirbhís bhéilí fuara.

(b) Is ceist do gach iontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta í cinneadh a dhéanamh ar an ghá le seirbhísí i gceantar an Iontaobhais.

Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh: Review of Surgical Beds

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3678/00, to detail the result of the review which was scheduled for the end of August 2001 in relation to the configuration of surgical beds needed at Tyrone County Hospital, Omagh. (AQW 118/01)

Ms de Brún: I can confirm that the Sperrin Lakeland Trust has now completed its review of surgical beds at Tyrone County Hospital and has shared this analysis with the Western Health and Social Services Board. The following proposals have been put to the board for consideration.

A total of 34 beds would be available for surgical services.

20 of these beds would remain open on a 7 days per week basis with the remaining 14 beds available from

5.00pm on Sunday evening through to 12 midday on Saturday.

The trust will continue to monitor the surgical bed complement on a twice daily basis.

Tig liom a dhearbhu gur chríochnaigh Iontaobhas Shliabh Speirín agus Thír na Lochanna a athbhreithniú anois ar leapacha máinliacha in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus gur chuir sé an anailís seo in iúl do bhoird Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair. Cuireadh na moltaí seo a leanas faoi bhráid an Bhoird le haghaidh machnaimh.

Bheadh 34 leaba san iomlán ar fáil do sheirbhísí máinliacha.

Bheadh 20 de na leapacha seo ar fáil go fóill 7 lá sa tseachtain agus bheadh na 14 leaba eile ar fáil ó 5.00i.n. tráthnóna Dé Domhnaigh go dtí 12 meán lae Dé Sathairn.

Leanfaidh an tiontaobhas ar aghaidh monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar chuóta na leapacha máinliacha dhá uair sa lá.

Regional Breastfeeding Co-ordinator

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail when she expects to appoint a regional Breast Feeding Co-ordinator.

(AQO 16/01)

Ms de Brún: The process of appointing a Regional Breastfeeding Co-ordinator is well underway. Applications for the post are due to be shortlisted on 21 September. The interviews will be arranged in early October, and I hope that the position will be filled before the end of the year.

Tá an próiseas le comhordaitheoir réigiúnach ar bheathú ciche a cheapadh faoi lánseoil. Tá iarratais don phost le cur ar ghearrliosta ar 21 Meán Fómhair. Socrófar na hagallaimh go luath i mí Dheireadh Fómhair, agus tá súil agam go gceapfar duine éigin sa phost roimh dheireadh na bliana.

Operations and Procedures: Cancellations

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to indicate the number of operations and procedures cancelled by each of the hospital trusts in advance and on the day arranged in the last five years; and to make a statement.

(AQO 107/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is not available in the form requested. However information does indicate that 1% of elective operations are cancelled on the day they are scheduled to take place.

Níl an t-eolas ar fáil san fhoirm a iarradh. Léiríonn an t-eolas, áfach, go gcuirtear 1% d'obráidí toghaí ar ceal ar an lá a leagadh amach dóibh.

Royal Hospital Trust: Millennium Garden

Mrs E Bell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) whether the £1.4 million of general public funds, spent by the Royal Hospital Trust on a millennium garden in the period 1997/9, was based on the submission, and approval, of an acceptable business plan; (b) whether the expenditure had the approval of her department and of the full board of the Hospital Trust itself; and (c) whether the £1.4 million expenditure fully met the matching funding criteria of the National Lottery. (AQO 11/01)

Ms de Brún:

- A business plan for the millennium garden project was prepared by the Trust and submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund.
- This plan, including use of public funds, was not submitted to the Trust Board, nor to my Department.
- As a result, I am unable to comment on whether the Trust met the matching funding criteria of the National Lottery.

I am unhappy with how the Trust dealt with this matter involving significant public funds. My Department will be pursuing with the Trust deficiencies in its governance procedures.

- D'ullmhaigh an t-iontaobhas plean gnó do thionscadal ghairdín na mílaoise agus cuireadh seo faoi bhráid an Heritage Lottery Fund.
- Níor cuireadh an plean seo, lena n-áirítear úsáid maoinithe phoiblí, faoi bhráid bhord an iontaobhais ná faoi bhráid mo Roinne.
- Mar sin, ní féidir liom a rá cé acu ar chomhlíon an t-iontaobhas na critéir do mhaoiniú comhoiriúnaithe An Chranachuir Naisiúnta nó nár chomhlíon.

Tá mé míshásta leis an dóigh ar láimhseáil an t-iontaobhas an t-ábhar seo ina raibh maoiniú suntasach poiblí i gceist. Beidh mo Roinn, i gcomhar leis an iontaobhas, ag dul sa tóir ar na heaspaí ina nósanna rialaithe.

Primary Care System

Mr McFarland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline when she expects to issue her plan for a new primary care system in Northern Ireland. (AQO 72/01)

Ms de Brún: I expect to make an announcement about the future arrangements for primary care within the next few weeks.

Tá sé ar intinn agam fógra a dhéanamh faoi na socruithe don chúram phríomhúil sa todhchaí faoi cheann na chéad chúpla seachtain eile.

Access to Hospital Services

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline her plans to ensure that all citizens have equality of access to hospital services. (AQO 33/01)

Ms de Brún: The acute hospitals review group has made recommendations about the future development of hospital services and I have issued the group's report for a period of public consultation which lasts until 31 October. Following that, and after discussion with other Ministers and Departments, I intend to issue a consultation paper setting out proposals for the future development of hospital services. Any changes proposed will be subject to an equality impact assessment in line with section 75 of the Equality Act.

Tá moltaí déanta ag an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarotharlanna ar fhorbairt seirbhísí otharlainne sa todhchaí agus d'eisigh mé tuairisc an ghrúpa le haghaidh tréimhse comhairliúcháin phoiblí a mhairfidh go dtí 31 Deireadh Fómhair. Ina dhiaidh sin, agus i ndiaidh caibidlí le hAirí eile, tá sé ar intinn agam páipéar comhairliúcháin, a leagann amach moltaí d'fhorbairt seirbhísí otharlainne sa todhchaí, a eisiúnt. Athraithe ar bith a mholfar, cuirfear iad faoi mheasúnú iarmhairte ar chomhionannas ag teacht le Mír 75 den Acht Comhionannais.

Development of Hospital Services: Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail measures she has put or will be putting, into place to enhance the provision of services at Tyrone County Hospital. (AQO 50/01)

Ms de Brún: The acute hospitals review group has submitted a report about the future development of hospital services and I have issued it for a period of public consultation, which lasts until 31 October. Following that, and after discussion with other Ministers, I intend to issue a consultation paper setting out the proposals for the future development of hospital services. In the meantime, I am informed that the additional resources allocated to the western board from the June monitoring round will enable services at Tyrone County to be sustained in the current year.

Chuir an grúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarotharlanna tuairisc ar fhorbairt sheirbhísí otharlainne sa todhchaí faoi mo bhráid agus d'eisigh mé í le haghaidh tréimhse comhairliúcháin phoiblí a mhairfidh do dtí 31 Deireadh Fómhar. Ina dhiaidh sin, agus i ndiaidh caibidlí le hAirí eile, tá sé ar intinn agam páipéar comhairliúcháin a leagann amach moltaí d'fhorbairt sheirbhísí otharlainne sa todhchaí a eisiúnt. Idir an dá linn, insítear domh go gcoinneoidh na hacmhainní breise a dáileadh ar Bhord an Iarthair ó bhabhta monatóireachta mhí an Mheithimh seirbhísí ag dul ar aghaidh in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain sa bhliain reatha.

Waiting Lists Versus Waiting Times

Dr Hendron asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to move from "waiting lists" to "waiting times" as a measure of delay in delivery of healthcare. (AQO 119/01)

Ms de Brún: I am already concerned not only about the overall number of people waiting for treatment but also about how long some of them have to wait. For that reason, I introduced last year a two-week deadline within which suspected breast cancer patients should be seen by a consultant and, this year, have asked boards and trusts to reduce by 50% the number of people waiting for longer than the charter standards for all treatments.

Tá inní orm cheana féin ní amháin faoi líon na ndaoine atá ag fanacht le cóireáil ach fosta faoina fhad agus a chaithfidh cuid acu fanacht léi. Dá bharr sin, thug mé spriocdháta dhá sheachtaine isteach anuraidh inar chóir d'othair a mheastar ailse chíce a bheith orthu dul chuig dochtúir comhairleach. I mbliana, d'iarr mé ar bhoird agus ar iontaobhais líon na ndaoine atá ag fanacht níos faide ná caighdeán na cairte le gach uile chóireáil a laghdú faoi 50%.

Acute Hospitals Review Group Report: Consultation

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the action, including the timetable, she proposes to take following the consultation on the Hayes report on acute healthcare. (AQO 117/01)

Ms de Brún: I have issued the acute hospitals review group's report for a period of public consultation ending on 31 October. Following that, and after discussion with other Ministers and Departments, I intend to issue a consultation paper setting out proposals for the future development of hospital services. I hope that it will then be possible to bring forward an implementation plan for hospital services in the course of 2002. Any changes proposed for the long-term future of our acute

hospitals will be subject to an equality impact assessment.

D'eisigh mé tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarotharlanna le haghaidh tréimhse comhairliúcháin phoiblí a chríochnóidh ar 31 Deireadh Fómhair. Ina dhiaidh sin, agus i ndiaidh caibidlí le hAirí agus le Ranna eile, tá sé ar intinn agam páipéar comhairliúcháin a leagann amach moltaí d'fhorbairt sheirbhísí otharlainne sa toadhchaí a eisiúint. Tá súil agam gur féidir plean feidhmithe do sheirbhísí otharlainne a chur amach le linn 2002. Athraithe ar bith a mholtar do thodhchaí fhadtéarmach ár ngéarotharlann, cuirfear iad faoi mheasúnú iarmhairte ar chomhionannas.

Waiting Times: MRI Scans

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures she is taking to reduce the waiting times for MRI scans for neurology patients. (AQO 30/01)

Ms de Brún: A number of measures have been taken to reduce waiting times for MRI scans for neurology patients and others who require such scans. Last December, I initiated an imaging modernisation programme which identified, as a key priority, the expansion of MRI provision. I also announced funding for an MRI scanner at Altnagelvin Hospital and the procurement process for this scanner is now under way, with tenders and evaluation due shortly. The new opportunities fund's decision earlier this year to fund three additional MRI scanners, which will be sited at the Ulster, Antrim, and Craigavon Area Hospitals, will also have a significant effect.

In the meantime, a mobile MRI unit had been providing a scanning service for the northern and western board areas to help reduce waiting lists there. Additional scanning capacity from a mobile unit is also continuing at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Rinneadh roinnt beart le hamanna feithimh do scanadh MRI a laghdú d'othair néareolaíochta agus do dhaoine eile a bhfuil a leithéid de scantaí de dhíth orthu. I Nollag na bliana anuraidh, chuir mé tús le clár nuachóirithe íomháithe, a d'aithin, mar eochairthosaíocht, leathnú an tsoláthair MRI. D'fhógair mé fosta maoiniú do scanóir MRI in Otharlann Alt na nGealbhan, agus tá an próiseas leis an scanóir seo a fháil ar siúl anois; beidh tairiscintí agus measúnú le fáil ar ball. Beidh éifeacht thábhachtach fosta ag cinneadh an Chiste Deiseanna Nua níos luaithe i mbliana trí scanóir MRI breise, a bheidh suite in Otharlann Uladh, Aontroma agus Otharlann Ceantair Chreag na hAbhann, a mhaoiniú.

Idir an dá linn, bhí ionad taistil MRI ag soláthar seirbhíse scanta do cheantair Bhord an Tuaiscirt agus an Iarthair le cuidiú le liostaí feithimh ansin a laghdú.

Tá cumas scanta breise ó ionad taistil ar fáil go fóill fosta in Otharlann Ríoga Victoria.

Down Lisburn Trust: Bridging Funding

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline discussions she has held with the chairperson and members of the Down Lisburn Trust concerning the provision of bridging funding; and to make a statement. (AQO 48/01)

Ms de Brún: I have not had discussions with the chairperson and members of the Down Lisburn Trust concerning the provision of bridging funding. The matter has been the subject of correspondence between officials and I understand an offer to discuss the matter has been made at official level to the trust.

Ní raibh caibidil ar bith agam le cathaoirleach agus le baill Iontaobhas an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach maidir le soláthar maoinithe eatramhaigh. B'ábhar comhfhreagrais idir oifigigh í an cheist seo, agus tuigim gur tairgeadh don iontaobhas an cheist a phlé ag leibhéal oifigiúil.

Ambulance Response Times

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to report any planned or achieved improvements in ambulance response times in rural areas and specifically in South Armagh. (AQO 42/01)

Ms de Brún: Following the report on the strategic review of the Ambulance Service, an implementation steering group has recently produced a detailed and fully costed set of proposals for implementation, including measures designed to achieve improved response times in all areas. These are currently being subjected to an equality impact assessment and, when this has been completed, I will be consulting widely before coming to a view on the way ahead. In the meantime, I can assure you that the Ambulance Service is continuing to look at ways to improve response times in rural areas.

De thoradh na tuairisce ar athbhreithniú straitéiseach na Seirbhíse Otharcharr, chuir grúpa stiúrtha feidhmithe amach roinnt mionmholtaí lánchostáilte le haghaidh feidhmiú, lena n-áirítear bearta le haghaidh amanna freagartha i ngach réimse a fheabhsú. Tá siad faoi mheasúnú iarmhairte ar chomhionannas faoi láthair, agus nuair a bheidh sé seo réidh beidh mé ag dul i gcomhairle go forleathan sula ndéanfaidh mé cinneadh ar an bhealach chun tosaigh. Idir an dá linn, dearbhaím duit go bhfuil an tSeirbhís Otharcharr ag scrúdú bealaí go fóill le hamanna freagartha i gceantair thuaithe a fheabhsú.

Consultant Cardiac Surgeons

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many cardiovascular surgeons are currently employed by the Health Service. (AQO 81/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently there are five consultant cardiac surgeons employed by the health and social services. With effect from 19 September, Mr Sarsam will cease to be an employee of the trust and the number of cardiac surgeons employed will decrease to four. I have been informed that the Royal Group of Hospitals will shortly be initiating steps to recruit a replacement for Mr Sarsam.

Tá cúig mháinlia chairdiacha chomhairleacha ar fostú faoi láthair ag na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta. Éireoidh an tUasal Sarsam as a fhostaíocht leis an iontaobhas ar 19 Meán Fómhair, agus titfidh an líon máinlia cairdiach atá ar fostú go ceathrar. Insíodh domh go mbeidh an Grúpa Ríoga Ospidéal ag glacadh céimeanna gan mhoill le duine a earcú le áit an Uasail Sarsam a líonadh.

Waiting Times

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of and waiting times for (a) a cataract removal; (b) a heart bypass; (c) a hernia operation; and (d) a knee replacement compared to the rest of the United Kingdom. (AQO 18/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested by the hon Member is very detailed, and it would be impractical for me to deal with this question here. I have therefore arranged to have this information on waiting times for the operations placed in the Assembly Library.

Information on costs for particular operations is not available.

Tá an t-eolas a iarrann an Comhalta Onórach iontach mion, agus bheadh sé neamhphraiticiúil agamsa plé leis an cheist anseo. Mar sin de shocraigh mé go gcuirfí an t-eolas seo ar amanna feithimh do na hobráidí i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Níl eolas ar chostais obráidí áirithe ar fáil.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Limavady Bypass

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development in respect of the tendering process for the Limavady Bypass, to detail (a) whether he considers the process resulted in best value for money; (b) the

number of tenders received; (c) the religious background of firms tendering; (d) the number of tenders shortlisted; and (e) the shortlisting criteria applied in this process.

(AQW 5/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised me that:

- (a) the tendering process used for the Limavady Bypass was entirely compatible with current HM Treasury and EU guidelines on procuring best value contracting. As such, therefore, I am confident that the process will result in best value for money;
- (b) four tenders were received for the contract;
- (c) they have no information about the religious background of those firms who tendered for the contract and there is no requirement to seek such information;
- (d) four firms made submissions for prequalification for the contract. All four were assessed and found to be suitable to be invited to tender; and
- (e) during the prequalification process, firms that were interested were requested to submit team structure and company details including financial standing, relevant experience and technical suitability. All firms were informed how their submissions would be assessed.

During the tender process, the prequalified tenderers were asked to provide a quality submission, a financial submission and make a presentation to the tender assessment panel. All tenderers were informed how their submissions would be assessed.

Sewage Infrastructure: Drumahoe

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to upgrade the sewage infrastructure in the Drumahoe area. (AQW 6/01)

Mr Campbell: The Drumahoe wastewater treatment works consistently meets the discharge standards set by the Department of the Environment. However, my Department's Water Service is very conscious of its responsibility to ensure that its infrastructure will be able to meet future needs and regulatory requirements. It has carried out detailed studies to assess the impact of future development on the Drumahoe works and the sewerage network.

In view of these studies it is proposed to eventually discontinue full wastewater treatment at the Drumahoe works and instead pump the wastewater to the Culmore wastewater treatment works. However, the existing stormwater treatment facility at Drumahoe will be retained. The scheme is estimated to cost some £500,000 and will be undertaken in tandem with the upgrading

of the Culmore works. Upgrading work at the Culmore works is currently programmed to commence in late 2002 and will take two years to complete, at a cost of some £14 million.

A number of improvements to the sewerage system are also proposed. These include the upgrading of pumping stations and improvements to the main and local sewers. These improvements are programmed to be carried out on a phased basis, from 2002, as part of sewer network upgrading in the Londonderry area. The overall cost is in the region of £3.5 million.

The Water Service's capital investment programme is currently the subject of a major review. However, I will inform the Member if any of the programme dates for upgrading sewerage infrastructure in Drumahoe are altered.

Footway: Castleroe Corner, Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made towards the widening of the footpath and a crossing provision at Castleroe Corner in Coleraine. (AQW 31/01)

Mr Campbell: I am pleased to advise you that a scheme to widen the existing footway on Castleroe Road, in the village of Castleroe, near Coleraine, is included in the Roads Service minor works programme for the current financial year. The scheme also involves extending the footway a short distance southwards towards the nearby school. When completed, this will provide a safer road crossing point for pedestrians away from Castleroe Corner.

I have to advise you, however, that some difficulties are being experienced in acquiring the necessary land for the scheme. The district valuer's office is in negotiations with the relevant landowner and his agent in an attempt to reach agreement to allow the scheme to proceed.

A29: Completion of Repairs

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the estimated date of completion of repairs to the Desertmartin Road from Moneymore and whether this work will be completed within the estimated timescale for the project. (AQW 32/01)

Mr Campbell: The A29 between Desertmartin and Moneymore has been the subject of a series of reconstruction schemes over the last 18 months, to improve its general alignment, width and strength.

The original road closure for the latest scheme at Ruben's Glen was for five weeks ending 3 September 2001. Additional finances subsequently became available which allowed a further scheme south of Carmean Lane

to be started. The road closure was therefore increased by four weeks to 1 October 2001. Pending any unforeseen delays there should be no further road closures. However, completion of some ancillary work is likely to take a further four to six weeks.

This will complete the existing programme of improvement works for this road.

Toome Bypass

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the current position in respect of the Toome Bypass contract. (AQW 34/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has completed the environmental and planning procedures for this scheme. An objection has however been received to the proposed Vesting Order. To date, that objection has not been resolved.

As you may know, I have been successful in securing Executive Programme Funds for this scheme and, if the objection to the vesting order can be resolved shortly, work on site could commence early next year.

Free Travel Scheme: War Pensioners

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to make it his policy that the free travel scheme for senior citizens will be extended to include disabled war pensioners irrespective of their age. (AQW 36/01)

Mr Campbell: All war disabled pensioners currently qualify for half fare travel on public transport. From 1 October war disabled pensioners over 65 will qualify for free travel, in common with all other people over 65. War disabled pensioners under 65 will, unlike most other disabled people under 65, continue to qualify for half fare travel. However, I have already indicated that I intend to carry out a review of the concessionary fares scheme within the next year to consider how it could be extended, if the Assembly allocates the necessary additional resources.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Sale of NIHE Stock: Ballysally Estate, Coleraine

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the current position in regard to the selling off of Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock to private developers in the Ballysally Estate in Coleraine. (AQW 30/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): This is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, whose chief executive has advised me that, at this stage, no stock is being sold to private developers. The Housing Executive is currently preparing an estate-based strategy for the Ballysally Estate in Coleraine. It will probably be early 2002 before consultation with local residents is complete and detailed proposals are developed.

Social Security Benefits: Mid-Ulster

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to his press release of 31 August 2001 detailing statistics on claims for incapacity benefit and severe disablement allowance, to carry out a study to determine why the number of incapacity benefit recipients in mid-Ulster is approximately one third higher than the Northern Ireland average; and to make a statement. (AQW 44/01)

Mr Morrow: There is at present insufficient information available on take-up levels for social security

benefits, to indicate what variations may be present or to permit research into the reasons behind any variations. Accordingly, the focus on research at present is to establish overall levels of take up for all benefits. The family resources survey, which is the major source of information on this subject for Great Britain, will commence in Northern Ireland in April 2002, with first results for 2002-03 available in late 2003.

Incapacity Benefit: Qualifying Conditions

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the medical conditions affecting people in mid-Ulster which allowed them to qualify for incapacity benefit. (AQW 45/01)

Mr Morrow: The qualifying conditions for incapacity benefit are the same for all customers throughout Northern Ireland. The Social Security Agency does not hold a breakdown of the medical conditions affecting incapacity benefit customers and this information could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 28 September 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Programme for Government

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the progress made on the implementation of the recommendations made in the Programme for Government. (AQW 13/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Executive continue to carefully monitor progress against all the Programme for Government actions.

Good progress is being made in each of our priorities set out in the Programme for Government with the great majority of actions on target for completion within the set timescales and slippage reported in just 30 out of the some 250 actions.

Victims Groups: Funding

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give details of those victim support groups who received funding in 1998, 1999 and 2000. (AQW 76/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: During the financial year 1998-99 the Community Relations Unit (CRU) within the Department of Finance and Personnel provided funding to the following victims groups:

Families Acting against Intimidation and Terror	£ 32,556.30
Families Acting for Innocent Relatives (FAIR)	£ 2,000.00
Victims and Survivors Trust (VAST)	£ 1,771.00

This is the only direct funding provided by the CRU during the years mentioned.

The Community Relations Council also provided grants to various victims groups from the annual funding

provided by DFP and latterly OFMDFM since its inception as follows:

1998-1999	£ 42,795.00
1999-2000	£ 43,280.00

Details of individual groups funded are available in the annual report of the Community Relations Council which is available from the council. In addition, in 1999-2000 the CRC established a Victim Support Grant scheme funded by the Victims Liaison Unit of the NIO with a value of £200,000. Again details of this scheme are produced in the CRC annual report.

The Victims Unit has not provided any funding during the years mentioned.

Northern Ireland Bureau: Washington

Mr Weir asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail how many staff are employed by the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington, USA. (AQW 88/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: There are five staff in total. That is a senior civil servant and a Grade 7 who are supported by one locally employed public relations manager and two secretaries.

Victims' Strategy

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assurance that the review and possible changes in the delivery of front line services envisaged in the consultation paper on a victims' strategy will be subject to the provisions of equality legislation. (AQW 101/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: In line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 any proposed changes to the delivery of services resulting from the victims' strategy will be implemented with due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations.

The consultation paper on a victims' strategy contains an equality impact assessment which aims to identify whether, within each Section 75 category, the policy under consideration creates differential impacts between groups or has the potential to enhance equality of opportunity between groups.

In the view of the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister there will be no adverse differential impact and, in addition, the development of a victims' strategy has the potential to enhance equality of opportunity between groups by taking action to redress disadvantage.

Draft Programme for Government: Promoting Equality

Mr Attwood asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail how the revised Programme for Government will reinforce the equality obligations inherent in the Good Friday Agreement.

(AQO 155/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The draft Programme for Government restates the Executive's commitment to promoting equality of opportunity and that the core principles and values of equality and human rights are fundamental to its work.

A key advance in reinforcing the equality obligations inherent in the Belfast Agreement in terms of the draft Programme for Government has been the development of a more comprehensive pre-consultation phase.

For example, in June the Executive's Position Report on the Programme for Government and the Budget was published and circulated widely. In August, in association with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, a round table discussion was held involving the stakeholders and officials from this Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel.

These consultations, in conjunction with departmental assessments of the overall equality impact of the various sub-priorities within the draft Programme on the Section 75 categories, have informed an assessment of the equality impacts, and that document will form an annex to the draft Programme when it goes out for consultation.

Draft Programme for Government: Consultation

Ms Hanna asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to make a statement on planned consultation with relevant Assembly Committees on the revised Programme for Government. (AQO 152/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: We will later this afternoon present the Executive's draft Programme for Government for the coming year to the Assembly. In the course of the next few weeks, we expect that each Assembly Committee will take the opportunity to look carefully at our plans and priorities as set out in the draft Programme for Government and accompanying public service agreements and will provide us with their views.

Following presentation of the draft Programme for Government to the Assembly, we will also be circulating it widely among our social partners in business, trade unions and the voluntary and community sector and will be making it available to other interested individuals and groups.

We would like to underline the importance we attach to the process of scrutiny by the Assembly Committees and to the wider consultation. The comments we receive through this process will influence the final document which we will be bringing back to the Assembly for approval towards the end of the year.

Commissioner for Children

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to indicate when it is hoped to appoint a Commissioner for Children for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 153/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: Consultation on our proposals will continue until 7 November. Following that, we intend to introduce legislation to the Assembly by the end of the year, with a view to appointing the Commissioner by next Spring.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

BSE: Regionalisation for Northern Ireland

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give an update on attempts to achieve regionalisation for Northern Ireland in respect of BSE.

(AQW 77/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I have been keeping the EU political situation in relation to BSE under review to assess when we might take our case to the EU again. We, in keeping with the rest of the EU, are currently engaged in a number of surveys of different categories of cattle to verify the true incidence of the disease in our cattle population. It is likely to be a few months yet before comparative results are available in the rest of the EU, and until such time as they are, we are unlikely to be able to persuade the other EU countries of the strength of our case for the relaxation of the beef ban.

I remain fully committed to a relaxation of the ban for Northern Ireland, and I will raise the case with the EU as soon as conditions are right.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Decontamination at Ports

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) what mechanism is in place to monitor foot-and-mouth decontamination measures at all air and sea ports and (b) what contin-

gency plans are in place in the event of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in either Northern Ireland or the Irish Republic. (AQW 102/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are extensive controls in place at all entry airports and seaports in Northern Ireland to ensure that foot-and-mouth disease is not re-introduced from Great Britain. These controls are reviewed regularly in the light of the current disease situation. My Department is ready to re-activate the measures we took earlier this year in the event of any recurrence of the disease in either Northern Ireland or the Republic of Ireland.

Agriculture: Restoring Profitability

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to restore profitability to Northern Ireland agriculture. (AQW 109/01)

Ms Rodgers: Profitability in the Northern Ireland agricultural industry is influenced by a huge range of factors, the vast majority of which are beyond my control or the control of any Government. Currency fluctuations and consumer responses to food scares are just two such examples. However, I can assist the industry to respond to these challenges and seize any opportunities that are presented. Since becoming Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, I have introduced numerous measures to help the industry in this respect. A prime example is the Rural Development Regulation Plan, with its significantly enhanced provision for LEA support, environmental measures and afforestation of agricultural land. I have also secured funding for environmental and business training, the Farm Waste Management Scheme, the Pig Industry Restructuring Scheme and the Beef Quality Initiative, to name but a few, and have lobbied successfully for the payment of substantial sums of agrimoney compensation. The new Rural Development Programme will be launched very soon, as will various measures under the Programme for Building Sustainable Prosperity. I am also pursuing initiatives such as the case for the relaxation of beef export restrictions to help the industry move forward.

You will be aware of the Vision exercise aimed at developing a strategic plan for the development of the agri-food industry over the coming decade. The Vision Group will be delivering its report to me within the next few weeks, and this will mark the beginning of a major consultation exercise, involving all stakeholders, on the future of the industry.

I hope that this provides a flavour of the broad range of new measures and initiatives that I am pursuing, which are in addition to the many programmes already in place, to help the development of the industry.

Number of Farms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the numbers of small, medium and large farms in Northern Ireland in each of the last ten years. (AQW 180/01)

Ms Rodgers: The numbers of small, medium and large farms in Northern Ireland between 1991 and 2000 were as follows:

Year	Number of farm businesses classed as:		
	Small	Medium	Large
<i>Old series</i>			
1991	11,039	3,020	429
1992	10,928	3,068	454
1993	10,844	3,073	470
1994	10,566	3,120	485
1995	10,467	3,094	487
1996	10,359	3,215	538
<i>New series</i>			
1997	11,386	3,322	551
1998	11,362	3,377	608
1999	10,766	3,257	616
2000	10,547	3,153	656

A break in series occurred between 1996 and 1997 when the basis of the June agricultural census, from which these figures are derived, was changed.

The measure of farm business size, used in the production of these statistics, is determined by calculating each farm's total Standard Gross Margin (SGM).

The total SGM for each farm is calculated by multiplying its crop areas and livestock numbers by the appropriate SGM coefficients and then summing the result for all enterprises on the farm.

The gross margin of an enterprise is its total output less the variable costs, which are directly attributable to it. Standards or norms have been calculated for all major enterprises, and these are the bases of the coefficients referred to above.

In Northern Ireland agricultural statistics, business size is described in terms of four SGM size bands, determined at EU level. These are:

Very small	under €9,600
Small	€9,600 to €48,000
Medium	€48,000 to €120,000
Large	over €120,000

To show year-to-year changes in business size, the enterprise SGM coefficients are held constant for a number of years. The current series is based on the average prices during the period 1987-89. Because the

system of classifying business size was developed for use within the EU statistical network, SGMs are measured in euros.

Classification of Farms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the criteria used by her Department to classify farms into the categories of small, medium and large. (AQW 181/01)

Ms Rodgers: The numbers of small, medium and large farms in Northern Ireland between 1991 and 2000 were as follows:

Year	Number of farm businesses classed as:		
	Small	Medium	Large
<i>Old series</i>			
1991	11,039	3,020	429
1992	10,928	3,068	454
1993	10,844	3,073	470
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To show year-to-year changes in business size, the enterprise SGM coefficients are held constant for a number of years. The current series is based on the average prices during the period 1987-89. Because the system of classifying business size was developed for use within the EU statistical network, SGMs are measured in euros.

Farm Income

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the average income of farms within the categories of small, medium and large in each of the last ten years. (AQW 182/01)

Ms Rodgers: The farm income information requested is provided on the attached tables. As there are few farms in Northern Ireland classified as large, and 75% of these are dairy farms, the income information for large farms relates to dairy farms only.

NET FARM INCOME BY SIZE AND TYPE OF FARM 1990/91 - 1999/00

SMALL (8-39.9 ESU)

Business Type	£'000 per farm									
	1990 /91	1991 /92	1992 /93	1993 /94	1994 /95	1995 /96	1996 /97	1997 /98	1998 /99	1999 /00
Cereals	3.0	-0.8	8.0	6.5	13.5	11.4	2.3	-0.3	-0.2	4.8
General Cropping	-5.8	3.5	6.6	16.6	37.8	10.8	-6.3	*	11.0	*
Pigs and Poultry	12.4	11.6	18.0	6.1	15.5	20.7	11.6	6.1	-16.1	1.0
Dairy	5.9	7.8	11.8	11.1	12.4	14.0	6.8	2.3	-0.7	-1.6
Cattle and Sheep (LFA)	2.8	3.2	5.3	5.6	5.3	5.8	5.8	0.5	0.4	-1.7
Cattle and Sheep (Lowland)	1.6	-1.0	2.8	0.8	2.0	-2.3	-3.1	-6.3	-7.3	-1.5
Mixed	2.5	4.7	8.2	3.8	9.8	14.8	6.0	-2.4	-3.4	-3.9

* Insufficient farms in sample to justify publication

MEDIUM (40-99.9 ESU)

Business Type	£'000 per farm									
	1990 /91	1991 /92	1992 /93	1993 /94	1994 /95	1995 /96	1996 /97	1997 /98	1998 /99	1999 /00
Cereals	4.7	9.0	17.5	8.3	29.9	44.5	17.5	1.8	-3.4	3.4
General Cropping	*	*	6.0	42.7	33.9	24.0	2.2	6.0	50.8	1.2
Pigs and Poultry	50.8	37.7	39.0	0.6	21.6	38.2	60.8	*	-34.2	*
Dairy	14.5	18.5	26.6	27.7	28.5	38.6	25.3	14.7	12.0	11.4

	£'000 per farm										
Cattle and Sheep (LFA)	9.4	12.0	16.4	19.1	21.8	22.1	16.0	8.9	-1.9	0.6	
Cattle and Sheep (Lowland)	8.0	19.8	11.0	10.0	7.1	13.0	18.6	*	10.8	*	
Mixed	13.3	15.5	4.5	11.1	20.3	21.7	14.3	-3.7	-0.7	-7.0	

* Insufficient farms in sample to justify publication

LARGE (100+ESU)

	£'000 per farm										
Business Type	1990 /91	1991 /92	1992 /93	1993 /94	1994 /95	1995 /96	1996 /97	1997 /98	1998 /99	1999 /00	
Dairy	26.0	41.0	42.0	57.0	69.5	91.7	68.0	45.6	34.2	28.0	

Employment on Farms

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of people employed on farms on a full-time and part-time basis in each of the last ten years. (AQW 183/01)

Ms Rodgers: The numbers of farmers and other workers employed on a full-time or part-time basis in each of the last ten years were as follows:

	Numbers of farmers and other workers employed:	
	Full-time	Part-time
1991	32,881	22,715
1992	32,228	22,621
1993	31,178	22,780
1994	30,677	23,496
1995	29,602	23,787
1996	28,723	24,543
1997	28,068	24,239
1998	28,075	23,661
1999	27,150	23,316
2000	26,020	23,001

These figures are derived from the annual June agricultural census. Those working on a seasonal or casual basis are excluded.

Agri-Environment Schemes

Mr Close asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to make a statement on the uptake of agri-environment schemes. (AQO 144/01)

Ms Rodgers: The three Northern Ireland agri-environment schemes are the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme, the Countryside Management Scheme and

the Organic Farming Scheme. All three schemes were re-submitted, with only minor changes, to the EU Commission as part of the Northern Ireland Rural Development Plan.

Since the inception of the Environmentally Sensitive Areas Scheme in the early 1990s, some 4,700 farmers have entered into 10-year ESA management agreements. The scheme re-opened for new applicants on 10 September 2001, and over 100 applications are currently being processed.

The Countryside Management Scheme came into effect on 20 March 2001. Since then 334 applicants have entered into management agreements with the Department. Under the terms of the Scheme, first payments are made following completion of each year's undertakings.

The Organic Farming Scheme came into effect on 1 March 2001. Since then 39 applications have been processed. These are in addition to 24 existing scheme members.

Tie-Up Scheme for Fishing Vessels

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what discussions she has had with the European Commission regarding a tie-up scheme for fishing vessels. (AQO 146/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have not been in contact with the European Commission regarding a tie-up scheme for fishing vessels. It has not been UK policy to provide compensation for reductions in quotas or closures. However, an assessment is being carried out on the impact in Northern Ireland of the cod recovery programmes with a view to informing future discussions with my GB ministerial colleagues on the question of compensation.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: All-Island Approach

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline whether co-operation continues between her department and the Department for Agriculture, Food and Rural Development in the Republic of Ireland over foot-and-mouth disease. (AQO 137/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have said before that the question of tackling a disease such as foot-and-mouth disease does require an all-island approach because diseases do not recognise political borders. As such I have been in regular and close contact with Joe Walsh on how to handle the situation and last month, under the aegis of the North/South Ministerial Council, we agreed that sustained co-operation was essential. We have set in train a work programme to develop a strategy for the

prevention, containment and eradication of future epizootic disease outbreaks on the island.

Vision Group

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail when she expects the Vision Group to report and the estimated length of the consultation period. (AQO 139/01)

Ms Rodgers: I expect to receive the Vision Group's report on 4 October. I will then begin an appropriate consultation period of at least three months. The consultation period will include a conference to which all of the major stakeholders will be invited. Once the consultation period ends, I will issue an action plan.

I expect the contents of the Vision Report to provide the strategic framework for the development of the agri-food industry over the next five to 10 years.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Sport Related Deaths

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of sport related deaths over the last five years. (AQW 71/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The information you have requested is not readily available. The Sports Council, which has the responsibility for the promotion of sport in the province, has suggested that the only way to ensure an accurate rather than an incomplete, and perhaps anecdotal, return of such information would require it to contact each one of the some 80+ governing bodies of sport individually. This information could only be collated at disproportionate cost.

Could I therefore suggest that if you have a sport(s) that you are specifically interested in, you contact me again, and I will ensure the necessary research is undertaken and the relevant information provided.

Motorbike Road Racing: Funding

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the level of funding that has been made available to motorbike road racing in this financial year. (AQW 79/01)

Mr McGimpsey: As you will be aware I recently secured £100K as a contribution towards safety works at the province's road race circuits. This contribution was based on the costings that were provided by the public utilities (British Telecom, Northern Ireland Electricity and Department of Regional Development) and the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (Private Land

Owners) to remove/ relocate items of roadside "furniture" which constituted a serious risk and which were specifically highlighted in the Road Race Task Force Report. My Department is providing funding (within the £100k limit) for all safety related elements.

Work is now underway to action the required improvements. The Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI), which has been given responsibility for timetabling and prioritising these improvements, has focused action, up to now, on the circuits which held events this year (namely the Mid-Antrim and Dundrod circuits) and the North West 200. The safety improvement programme is now to be "rolled out" across the province to address the safety needs at all other courses.

The Sports Council has also provided a financial contribution, through a Sports Lottery Fund grant to the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland, of £23,500 towards safety related equipment — £10,250 towards the purchase of removable protective barriers and £13,250 towards medical equipment.

Local Museums and Heritage Review

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his assessment of the Local Museums and Heritage Review document; and to make a statement. (AQO 129/01)

Mr McGimpsey: You will be aware that the Local Museums and Heritage Review was commissioned by my Department and that of my ministerial colleague, Sam Foster.

The report of the review steering group was distributed widely at the beginning of July. Officials from both Departments are currently preparing a draft response to the report, and we propose to consult widely on the response when it has been completed. I am very conscious that the response will not be available within the timescale that I originally envisaged.

However, the review raises major strategic issues for the museum and heritage sectors, and it is absolutely vital that we take the time that is needed to ensure that our response best serves Northern Ireland's needs.

Given that the joint response by the two Departments will effectively be an assessment of the review, I am not in a position to go further at this stage.

EDUCATION

Disruptive Pupils

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Education to detail his policy on supporting schools in dealing with disruptive pupils. (AQW 107/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr McGuinness): The current policy on supporting schools in dealing with disruptive pupils is set out in 'Promoting and Sustaining Good Behaviour: A Discipline Strategy for Schools' published in February 1998. This established the framework within which the education and library boards are developing support services to schools and pupils. Implementation is ongoing, and services continue to improve and expand as resources permit. The Department issued guidance on 'Promoting Positive Behaviour' to all schools in June. Copies of this practical advice are currently being distributed to all teachers and classroom assistants. A copy of the guidance and the discipline strategy have been placed in the Assembly Library.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Fee Remission

Mr Bradley asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will make it his policy to waive the tuition fees for people in receipt of Incapacity Benefit who wish to study at colleges of further and higher education. (AQW 73/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): In pursuit of my policy to widen access to further and higher education I recently introduced a revised £65 million student support package, which includes fee remission for over 19s on full-time vocational courses at further education colleges, including those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit. I believe that this package addresses the wide-ranging needs of students in Northern Ireland.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Euro Preparations Strategy

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the strategies to assist businesses to adapt to the new trading arrangements created by the introduction of the euro. (AQW 43/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Northern Ireland Euro Preparations Forum has been actively implementing a regional euro preparations strategy designed to help local businesses, particularly SMEs, prepare to trade in the euro. The forum, which is led by local business representatives, and co-ordinated and financed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, is engaged in the organisation of an intensive series of Northern Ireland

wide euro preparation events over the next few months to January 2002 when the new euro notes and coins are introduced. The forum also provides information on how businesses can prepare for the euro through its website (www.euroforum-ni.org.uk), case studies, fact sheets and regular newsletters.

Promoting Tourism Development: Sperrin Area

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans, in conjunction with other Executive Departments, to promote local regeneration strategies based on tourism in the Sperrins area. (AQW 55/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Sperrans Tourism Limited is a partnership of tourism interests representing the public, private and voluntary sectors. Funded by NITB, local authorities and DARD, it will provide an integrated mechanism for promoting tourism development in the Sperrins area and sourcing support funding under the forthcoming Peace II Programme.

Within the Rural Development Programme the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has advised that it will be announcing the Natural Resource Rural Tourism Programme in October. The programme targets five designated areas within the Province one of which is the Sperrins. Established partnerships in the designated areas have been invited to submit their applications.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has advised that it has established a Cultural Forum comprising senior officials from district councils, education and library boards, cultural agencies and the Department itself. It has provided direct assistance to local authorities, including those in the Sperrins area, in the preparation of cultural strategies in the context of local integrated plans. In preparing these strategies councils have been encouraged to take into account the close linkages between culture and tourism.

Job Creation: Funding

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of funding provided for job creation by district council area in each of the last three years. (AQW 81/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Expenditure by IDB and LEDU are detailed in the booklet 'DETI AND ITS AGENCIES/NDPBs – A Statistical Synopsis' distributed to all MLAs earlier this year, a copy of which is also available in the Assembly Library.

Figures for the year ended 31 March 2001 will be incorporated in the IDB and LEDU annual reports for

the y/e 31 March 2001, which are due to be published towards the end of October 2001.

Expenditure By LEDU/IDB

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of expenditure of (a) the Local Enterprise Development Unit and (b) the Industrial Development Board by constituency for each year between 1997 and 2001. (AQW 170/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Expenditure by IDB and LEDU is detailed in the booklet 'DETI AND ITS AGENCIES/NDPBs – A Statistical Synopsis' distributed to all MLAs earlier this year, a copy of which is also available in the Assembly Library.

Figures for the year ended 31 March 2001 will be incorporated in the IDB and LEDU annual reports for the y/e 31 March 2001, which are due to be published towards the end of October 2001.

Home Heating Oil

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what steps he will take to ensure that all distributors have access to heating oil in light of the recent atrocity in America. (AQW 194/01)

Sir Reg Empey: My Department is in regular contact with the importers/wholesalers of oil products (including home heating oil) in Northern Ireland, and there has not to date been any difficulty with supplies into the Province. Despite unusually high levels of demand over the past 10 days, importers continued to fulfil normal orders from their major distributors. I am aware of some difficulty being experienced downstream within the supply chain particularly by a small number of local distributors who found it difficult to obtain supplies from major distributors.

The market for retail oil is totally free and unregulated, however, I have asked my officials, together with the General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, to prepare for my consideration a report detailing any apparent failure of the supply/distribution chain which might have resulted in localised shortage of home heating oil.

In the meantime, sufficient oil to meet all demands is being received into Northern Ireland storage facilities.

ENVIRONMENT

Erection of Telecommunication Masts

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to prohibit the erection of tele-

communication masts/antenna within a 500 metre radius of schools, hospitals and residences. (AQW 50/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department issued a consultation paper on 10 November 2000, seeking views on possible changes to planning legislation for the control of development by licensed telecommunications code system operators and on the terms of a draft Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications development.

Following a decision of the Executive Committee, my Department is currently preparing legislation, which will require full planning permission for all new telecommunications development. All new mast development will then be subject to the full rigour of the planning process. At the same time my Department is revising the draft Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications development taking advice, on health issues, from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. As part of that revision, my Department is considering the issues raised by the Member. I will, of course, advise the Member of the outcome of that process.

Removal of Election Advertisements

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) how long may political posters and displays may remain in public areas after polling day (b) what action he has taken to have such displays removed from the Glengormley area; and to make a statement. (AQW 84/01)

Mr Foster: Regulation 4(2) Schedule 2 Class F of the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulation (NI) 1992 requires that an advertisement relating specifically to a pending Parliamentary, European, Northern Ireland Assembly or district council election is removed within 14 days after the close of the poll in the election to which it relates.

My Department wrote to all political parties on 5 June, 22 June and 2 July 2001 advising of the statutory regulations for the display of election posters, including the requirement that they must be removed within 14 days of the close of the relevant poll. While the vast majority of posters in relation to the parliamentary elections have been removed, my Department continues to monitor the situation and on receipt of specific complaints has written to the individual parties concerned.

I have asked my Department to contact you to seek more details about your complaint and to take any action necessary to ensure the removal of the posters.

Retail Development College Street, Armagh

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment, in respect of planning application

0/2000/0779 for commercial retail development at College Street, Armagh, to detail (a) on what date the planning application was submitted, (b) why the planning decision has not been issued, (c) whether Armagh City Council supported this application and (d) whether there is any detrimental effect on inward investment as a result of the delay; and to make a statement.

(AQW 85/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) The planning application was submitted to my Department on 15 August 2000. However, amended plans and a supporting statement to enable my officials to continue processing the application were not submitted by the applicant until October 2000. A separate application for consent to demolish buildings within a conservation area was also submitted in October 2000.
- (b) After careful consideration of the proposed development, my Department wrote to the planning consultants on 30 November 2000 raising concerns about the design and massing of the Lonsdale Road frontage and the College Street frontage and the proposed demolition of a building on the College Street frontage, which was constructed in 1997 as part of the Lonsdale Road Comprehensive Development Scheme. My officials suggested a meeting to discuss these concerns. The consultants did not make themselves available for this meeting until May 2001. My officials requested revised design plans for the scheme during this meeting, which were not received until 26 July 2001. However, these revisions still fall short of what is expected for such a prominent corner site, situated partly within the Armagh Conservation Area and adjacent to the Mall and Courthouse. My Department informed the consultants of this by letter dated 13 September 2001. The current position is that my officials are awaiting a response to this correspondence. I am advised that the demolition of a building is no longer an issue if an alternative replacement building of an acceptable design is agreed. The divisional planning manager attended an Executive Committee meeting of Armagh City and District Council on 28 August 2001 to discuss the scheme. The committee supported the Planning Service's position on the proposal, especially in relation to design requirements. The Planning Service has no objection, in principle, to the proposed retail use for the site, and there are no outstanding roads/car-parking related issues.
- (c) My Department is mindful of the need to attract investment to the city and especially its commercial centre, but it also has a responsibility to ensure that new developments enhance its unique architectural and historic character. This is the balance my

Department has sought to achieve in this case. If an acceptable revised design is submitted, my Department will seek to progress the proposal and present an opinion to the council as quickly as possible.

Planning Service: Enforcement Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many enforcement notices have been issued by the Planning Service in each of the last three years.

(AQW 90/01)

Mr Foster: This information is set out below:

1999	83
2000	51
2001	(to date) 49

Planning Service: Stop Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many stop notices have been issued by the Planning Service in each of the last three years. (AQW 91/01)

Mr Foster: This information is set out below:

1999	2
2000	2
2001	(to date) 5

Fish Kills

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of pollution incidents leading to fish kills, (b) the estimated number of fish killed and (c) the nature of the pollutant attributed to fish kills over the past twelve months. (AQW 112/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) During the period 1 September 2000 to 17 September 2001, 48 pollution incidents resulting in fish kills were investigated by Environment and Heritage Service.
- (b) An estimated total of 22,982 fish have been killed in these incidents. The lowest recorded kill involved 10 fish, whilst the highest estimated number of individuals in one fish kill was 5,679.
- (c) During this period, agriculture was identified as the cause of 15 fish kills, sewage (including illegal discharges to sewage treatment works) as the cause of seven. Industry was found to be the cause of eight of the fish kills, and natural causes (including disease and stress associated with the spawning process) have been implicated in eight cases. There were 10 cases where the source of the fish kill incident was unidentified.

Out of Town Shopping Centre Development

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his current policy in regard to out of town shopping centre development. (AQW 116/01)

Mr Foster: My Department's policy on out of town shopping centre development is contained in paragraph 36 of its Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) entitled 'Retailing and Town Centres', which states that proposals for major retail development in the countryside, outside the development limits of settlements, will not be acceptable. I enclose a copy of PPS 5 for your information.

The Department for Regional Development is set to review PPS 5 in the near future. As part of that process, views and comments will be invited and welcomed. The matter will also be the subject of discussion with the Assembly Committees (Environment and Regional Development) to ensure that all relevant aspects of retailing are fully considered.

In the meantime the Planning Service must work in the policy context provided by PPS 5 and, where appropriate, statutory development plans.

Planning Regulations: Display of Election Posters

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3559/00, to detail (a) the results of monitoring by his officials in relation to a breach of regulation 4 (2) and schedule 2 class F of the Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations (NI) 1992 and (b) what action has been taken against those still in breach of these regulations. (AQW 117/01)

Mr Foster: Monitoring by my officials of the situation regarding any breaches of the regulations in relation to the display of election posters, following the elections held on 7 June 2001, has resulted in the removal of the vast majority of posters.

I am aware that a small number of posters remain on display, and my Department continues to monitor the situation. On receipt of specific complaints, my Department has written to the individual parties concerned requesting the removal of these posters.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

EU Structural Funds Programmes

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail what action he has taken to improve the quality of EU Development Programmes. (AQW 52/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): In order to improve the quality of the 2000-06 round of EU Structural Funds Programmes compared with those of previous rounds, a number of changes have been made in their development and management.

Extensive consultation took place involving a wide range of regional interests which informed the decisions taken by the Executive as to the focus and context of the programmes. These were then refined and confirmed during our negotiations with the European Commission on the content of the programmes.

The structure and composition of the monitoring committees which supervise the progress of implementation of the programmes has been changed to improve its representation and function. New monitoring committees' structures have both a greater focus on the involvement of social partners and a more carefully balanced membership to give a broader, more local representation. These changes reflect the requirements of the new Structural Funds Regulation which places a greater emphasis on the involvement of broad partnerships in the development and monitoring of the new Structural Funds Programmes.

I chair the Community Support Framework Monitoring Committee with the two junior Ministers in OFM/DFM sitting as Deputy Chairpeople. The committees will have the support of a range of working groups which can call on specialist expertise from outside their membership.

The programme complements of the EU European Structural Funds have also been the subject of a rigorous review by their monitoring committees, especially the mechanism for selection of projects and the development of indicators to monitor performance. The monitoring committee agreed the programme complement at the end of June 2001.

Land Registers of Northern Ireland

Mr Leslie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the Land Registers of Northern Ireland to detail (a) the number of entries to the Land Registers which are currently outstanding, (b) the number of such entries which have been outstanding for more than one year, (c) the number of entries processed in each of the last three years for which figures are available and (d) the number of items received for registration in the most recent year for which figures are available. (AQW 86/01)

Mr Durkan:

- (a) The Registry has approximately 23,745 applications for registration awaiting processing. Approximately 15,602 of these applications are overdue in terms

of internal target times, which the Registry uses to monitor the progress of work (See Note 1 below).

- (b) Some 5,457 applications are one year old. There are 1,684 applications which have exceeded target times by one year.
- (c) No of entries processed;
- | | |
|-------------|--------|
| 1998 – 1999 | 37,534 |
| 1999 – 2000 | 40,960 |
| 2000 – 2001 | 40,252 |
- (d) Year 2000 – 2001
- | |
|--|
| 50,027 – received for registration |
| 2,707 – rejected at reception (See Note 2 below) |
| 47,320 – accepted for registration |

Note 1

The reference to entries has been assumed to relate to applications for registration.

Note 2

An application may be rejected because, for example, the fees are incorrect, cheques are not lodged or signed and/or there is incorrect documentation lodged.

Aggregates Tax

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (a) what representations have been made, on behalf of the Executive, to HM Treasury in respect of the introduction of the Aggregates Tax to Northern Ireland and (b) the impact the tax would have on the quarry industry and local economy.

(AQW 179/01)

Mr Durkan:

- (a) Earlier this year the First Minister and Deputy First Minister met the Chancellor of the Exchequer to press the case for a derogation of the Aggregates Tax. I met with representatives of the Quarry Products Association in August to discuss their concerns, and a meeting with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury is being arranged. Discussions between HM Treasury and NI continue at an official level.
- (b) Aggregates currently produced in Northern Ireland have an average price of around £2.60 per tonne. The £1.60 per tonne tax will increase costs by around 60% and thus reduce the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland aggregates market. Greater traffic from Southern processors penetrating the Northern Ireland aggregates market and the potential of unprocessed material being extracted in Northern Ireland, exported South and re-imported as processed materials without attracting the tax will all combine to produce harmful environmental consequences. The tax also has the adverse potential of threatening the employment levels in the quarrying and related

industries. It is estimated that several thousand jobs are at risk, and the losses will occur in areas where they will not easily be replaced.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Bowen's Close, Banbridge Road, Lurgan

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3225/00, to detail the order dates for curtains, soft furnishings and other household necessities included in the expenditure of £8,000 per house for Nos. 2 and 3 Bowen's Close, Banbridge Road, Lurgan. (AQW 38/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust ordered the required household items on 26 February 2001.

D'ordaigh Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Phobal Chreag na hAbhann agus Dhroichead na Banna na hábhair tí a bhí de dhíth ar 26 Feabhra 2001.

Bowen's Close, Banbridge Road, Lurgan

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the legal expenses incurred to date and the projected legal expenses in relation to the ongoing litigation in respect of Nos. 1, 2 and 3 Bowen's Close, Banbridge Road, Lurgan. (AQW 39/01)

Ms de Brún: There have been no legal expenses incurred to date by Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust in respect of numbers 2 and 3 Bowen's Close. There are currently no known projected legal expenses.

Níor tharraing Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Phobal Chreag na hAbhann agus Dhroichead na Banna costas dleathach ar bith air féin go dtí seo maidir le huimhreacha 2 agus 3 Clós Bowen. Faoi láthair, níl costais dhleathacha réamh-mheasta ar an eolas.

National Institute of Clinical Excellence: Multiple Sclerosis Medicines

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what policy she will pursue in relation to the recent guidance produced by National Institute of Clinical Excellence regarding the use of beta interferon; and to make a statement.

(AQW 42/01)

Ms de Brún: The document that has recently been issued by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence

(NICE) represents a provisional appraisal of four medicines used in the management of multiple sclerosis. It is a consultation document only and does not at this stage constitute fresh guidance on the use of beta interferon.

I am aware that the draft recommendations have given rise to considerable concern about the future availability of beta interferon. I have already met with the Multiple Sclerosis Society to listen to its views and, more recently, I have met with health professionals who are actively involved in the management of MS.

As you may be aware, NICE guidance applies only in England and Wales, but I may wish to consider the local implications of the guidance when it is formally published later this year.

In the meantime, patients with MS here will continue to receive drugs such as beta interferon for as long as their consultant neurologists, having discussed the risks and benefits of treatment with them, consider that they are likely to benefit from the treatment, having taken account of the evidence of effectiveness, departmental guidance and the guidelines of the Association of Neurologists.

Is measúnacht shealadach de cheithre chógas úsáidte i láimhseáil ilscléaróise í an cháipéis seo a d'eisigh an Institiúid Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Chliniciúil (INFC) ar na mallaibh. Níl ann ach cáipéis chomhairleach agus ag an am seo, ní thugann sí treoir úr ar bith ar úsáid beta interferon.

Tá sé ar eolas agam gur thionscain na dréachtmholtáí eisithe ar na mallaibh ag an Institiúid Náisiúnta um Fheabhas Chliniciúil (INFC) an bhuaire mhór faoi infhaighteacht beta interferon sa todhchá. Bhuaile mé leis an Chumann Ilscléaróise cheana féin le héisteacht lena gcuid tuairimí agus níba dhéanaí, bhuaile mé le gairmithe sláinte atá rannpháirteach go gníomhach i láimhseáil IS.

De réir mar is eol duit, baineann treoir an INFC le Sasana agus leis an Bhreatain Bheag amháin, ach is féidir gur mian leat machnamh a dhéanamh ar impleachtaí áitiúla na treorach nuair a fhoilseofar go foirmiúil níos moille i mbliana í.

Idir an dá linn, gheobhaidh othair anseo le IS drugaí ar nós beta interferon go fóill a fhad is a shíleann a néareolaí comhairleach, i ndiaidh dó/di baoil agus tairbhí na cóireála a phlé leis an othar, gur dócha go mbainfidh siad tairbhe as an chóireáil, i ndiaidh dó/di cruthú a héifeachtachta, treoir na roinne agus treoirlínte Chumann na Néareolaithe a chur san áireamh.

Specialist Nursing Provision: Southern Board Area

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline what plans are in

place to provide a full time specialist nurse in the Southern Board area for patients suffering from epilepsy. (AQW 66/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that the Southern Health and Social Services Board has no plans to provide a full time specialist nurse in the Southern Board area for patients suffering from epilepsy. The board has, however, recently provided funding to allow patients suffering from epilepsy and other neurological conditions to attend a specialist nurse-led review clinic at Craigavon Area Hospital. This clinic runs alongside the consultant neurology clinic and has the specific aim of reducing waiting times for new patients who attend the consultant clinic.

In addition, the board has also funded paediatric epilepsy nurse input into two outpatient clinics in Armagh Community Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital.

Cuirtear in iúl dom nach bhfuil sé ar intinn ag Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Deiscirt sainaltra lánaimseartha a fhostú i gceantar Bhord an Deiscirt d'othair a fhulaingíonn ó thitmeas. Chuir an bord maoiniú ar fáil ar na mallaibh áfach chun ligean d'othair ag fulaingt ó thitmeas agus ó riochtaí néareolaíochta freastal ar chlinic athbhreithnithe, a bhfuil sainaltraí i gceannas air, in Otharlann Ceantair Chreag na hAbhann. Feidhmíonn an clinic seo in éineacht leis an sainchlinic néareolaíochta agus is í a aidhm fhollasach amanna feithimh d'othair nua a fhreastalaíonn ar an sainchlinic a laghdú.

Ina theannta sin, mhaoinigh an bord ionchur altraí ar thitmeas phéidiatraiceach i ndá chlinic éisothair in Otharlann Pobail Ard Mhacha agus in Otharlann Ceantair Chreag na hAbhann.

Accident and Emergency Waiting Times

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail accident and emergency waiting times at acute hospitals for 1998, 1999 and 2000; and to make a statement. (AQW 74/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.

Occupational Therapists: East Antrim Area

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what action is being taken to increase the number of occupational therapists in the East Antrim area. (AQW 82/01)

Ms de Brún: I have identified £0.5 million to enable health and social services boards and trusts to increase the number of occupational therapists by at least 20 by

March 2002. Homefirst Community Trust's share of the target is three therapists, of whom two will be deployed in the Larne and Carrickfergus areas. Recruitment is underway.

Fuair mé £0.5m chun cur ar chumas bhoird agus iontaobhais shláinte agus sheirbhísí sóisialta líon na dteiripithe saothair a mhéadú faoi 20 ar a laghad faoi 20 Márta 2002. Is é 3 teiripí, 2 díobh a bheidh ag obair i Latharna agus i gCarraig Fheargais, sciar iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst den sprioc é. Tá earcaíocht ar siúl cheana féin.

Occupational Therapy Waiting List

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 322/99, to detail the action being taken to target patients who are waiting 15 months or more on the waiting list for occupational therapy in the East Antrim area.

(AQW 83/01)

Ms de Brún: Occupational therapy waiting list figures for Homefirst Community Trust show a reduction of 6 % between December 2000 and June 2001. This reduction is partly due to the implementation, in March 2001, of the recommendations of the joint Housing Executive/Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety review of the housing adaptation service. Deployment of the two additional therapists referred to in response to AQW 82/2001 should make a significant impact in reducing waiting lists.

Léiríonn figiúirí na liostaí feithimh le haghaidh teiripe saothair d'iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst laghdú 6% idir Nollaig 2000 agus Meitheamh 2001. Tá an laghdú seo de bharr chur i bhfeidhm moltaí Chomhathbheithniú an Fheidhmeannais Tithíochta/na Roinne Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí ar an tseirbhís oiriúnú tithíochta i Márta 2001 go pointe áirithe. Ba chóir d'fhostú 2 teiripí breise saothair a ndéantar tagairt dóibh i bhfreagra ar AQW 82/2001 tionchar mór a bheith aige ar laghdú i liostaí feithimh.

Cardiac Surgery Waiting List

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to reduce the waiting list for cardiac surgery and to state whether she achieved her targets in the last financial year.

(AQW 99/01)

Ms de Brún: In September last year I commissioned a review of cardiac surgery. The review report has now been finalised, and it is my intention to issue the report for public consultation in the near future. The report sets out a range of recommendations aimed at reducing the waiting list and waiting times for surgery.

Immediate action to improve recruitment and retention of staff, particularly nursing staff in cardiac surgery, is a priority if waiting times are to be reduced. I have allocated additional funding for supernumerary nursing posts in cardiac intensive care to support the existing staff and allow additional nurses to receive the specialised training. This will help increase bed capacity and facilitate an increase in the number of operations possible.

The four health and social services boards have been purchasing cardiac surgery at units elsewhere for some patients who are able and willing to travel. This practice will need to continue until the number of procedures conducted at the Royal increases.

No target was set for the reduction of cardiac surgery waiting lists for the last financial year. I have set a target for the current financial year of reducing by 50% the number of people waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery and the elimination of such long waits by March 2003. By the end of the first quarter of the current financial year the number waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery had reduced by 9.5%.

Choimisiúnaigh mé athbheithniú ar mháinliacht chairdiach i mí Mheán Fómhair na bliana anuraidh. Tá bailchríoch ar an tuairisc anois, agus tá sé ar intinn agam an tuairisc a eisiúint le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí ar ball. Leagann an tuairisc réimse moltaí amach atá ag iarraidh an liosta feithimh agus amanna feithimh do mháinliacht a laghdú.

Caithfidh gníomh a dhéanamh láithreach le hearcú agus coinneáil foirne a fheabhsú, go háirithe foirne altranais i máinliacht chairdiach má tá amanna feithimh le laghdú. Dháil mé maoiniú breise le haghaidh post altranais breise i ndianchúram cairdiach le tacú leis an fhoireann atá ann faoi láthair agus le ligean d'altraí breise an tsainoilíúint a fháil. Cuideoidh sé seo an líon leapacha a mhéadú agus líon na n-obráidí is féidir a dhéanamh a éascú agus a mhéadú.

Bhí na ceithre bhord sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ag ceannach máinliacht chairdeach in ionaid eile do roinnt othar atá ábalta agus toilteanach taisteal. Ní mór an cleachtadh seo a leanstan ar aghaidh go dtiocfaidh méadú ar líon na ngnáthamh máinliachta a dhéantar san Otharlann Ríoga.

Níor leagadh sprioc amach do laghdú na liostaí feithimh do mháinliacht chairdiach don bhliain airgeadais seo caite. Leag mé sprioc amach don bhliain airgeadais seo go laghdófaí líon na ndaoine atá ag fanacht le máinliacht chairdiach le níos mó ná 12 mí faoi 50% agus go gcuirfí deireadh lena leithéid seo d'fheitheamh fada faoi Mhárta 2003. Faoi dheireadh na chéad ráithe den bhliain reatha airgeadais, tháinig laghdú 9.5% ar líon na ndaoine a bhí ag fanacht le máinliacht chairdiach le níos mó ná 12 mí.

Drugs Strategy

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to combat the growing drug problem. (AQW 104/01)

Ms de Brún: As well as the drugs strategy, which was launched in 1999, a Strategy for Reducing Alcohol Related Harm was launched here in September 2000.

In April 2001, a paper entitled 'Model for the Joint Implementation of the Drug and Alcohol Strategies' was presented to the ministerial group on drugs for consideration. The ministerial group approved the model, and on 17th May it received endorsement from the Executive. The structures include all key interests including local communities and will allow for a concerted approach.

The joint implementation of both strategies is now underway.

The new model includes the formation of six working groups to cover the following areas: treatment, education and prevention, communities, information and research, social legislation and criminal justice.

The first meetings of the working groups are planned for November 2001.

The six working groups will create action plans based on the key output areas detailed in the Joint Implementation Model. These key outputs are based on the targets contained in the drug and alcohol strategies.

Additional resources have been allocated to each of the four drug co-ordination teams to employ an extra worker to help with the increasing workload.

Recently £6.23 million has been transferred to the Executive for allocation through the Drug and Alcohol Implementation Steering Group. Discussions are underway to determine how these resources can be deployed most effectively.

Chomh maith le Straitéis Drugaí, a lainseáladh i 1999, lainseáladh An Straitéis Chun An Dochar A Bhaineann Le hAlcól A Laghdú anseo i Meán Fómhair 2000.

Cuireadh/páipéar dár teideal 'Eiseamláir do Chomhchur i bhFeidhm Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil' i láthair an grúpa aireachta ar dhruaí le haghaidh machnamh air. Cheadaigh an grúpa aireachta an eiseamláir, agus ar 17 Bealtaine fuair sé formhuiniú ón Fheidhmeannas. Sna struchtúir seo beidh gach eochairspéis, pobail áitiúla san áireamh, rud a cheadóidh cur chuige dian.

Tá comhchur i bhfeidhm den dá straitéis faoi lánseol anois.

San áireamh san eiseamláir beidh bunú sé ghrúpa oibre leis na hábhair seo a chlúdach: Cóireáil, oideachas &

cosc, pobail, eolas & taighde, reachtaíocht shóisialta agus dlí coiriúil.

Táthar ag súil leis na chéad chruinnithe de na grúpaí oibre a reáchtáil i Mí na Samhna 2001.

Cruithóidh na sé ghrúpa oibre pleananna gnímh bunaithe ar na hachair eochair-aschuir atá breactha síos san Eiseamláir Chomhchur i bhFeidhm. Tá na hachair eochair-aschuir bunaithe ar na spriocanna sna straitéisí drugaí agus alcóil.

Dáileadh acmhainní breise ar gach ceann de na ceithre Fhoireann Comhordaithe Drúgaí chun oibríthe breise a fhostú le cuidiú leis an ualach oibre atá ag dul i méid.

Aistríodh £6.23m ar na mallaibh chuig an Fheidhmeannas le dáileadh tríd an Ghrúpa Stiúrtha ar Chur i bhFeidhm na Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil. Tá díospóireachtaí faoi lánseol le haimsiú cad é an dóigh is éifeachtaí leis na hacmhainní seo a úsáid.

Cardiac Surgery Procedures

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to support staff in the cardiac surgical unit at the Royal Hospitals Trust to achieve the target of 1,100 cardiac surgical operations each year. (AQW 110/01)

Ms de Brún: In September last year I commissioned a review of cardiac surgery to assess the level of need for these services in the light of developments in interventional cardiology, emerging clinical practices and changing incidence of heart disease. The report has now been finalised, and it is my intention to issue it for public consultation in the near future. The report contains a range of recommendations aimed at increasing the number of cardiac surgery procedures performed while simultaneously maintaining or enhancing the quality of the service.

Immediate action to improve recruitment and retention of staff, particularly nursing staff, in cardiac surgery is a priority if we are to increase the number of procedures performed. I have allocated additional funding for supernumerary nursing posts in cardiac intensive care to support the existing staff and allow additional nurses to receive the specialised training. This will help increase bed capacity and facilitate an increase in the number of operations possible.

Choimisiúnaigh mé athbhreithniú ar mháinliacht chairdiach i mí Mheán Fómhair na bliana anuraidh le leibhéal an riachtanais leis na seirbhísí seo a mheas mar gheall ar na forbairtí i gcairdeolaíocht idirghabhálach, ar chleachtais chliniciúla atá ag teacht chun cinn agus ar athrú i dtarlú galair chroí. Tá bailchríoch ar an tuairisc anois agus tá sé ar intinn agam an tuairisc a eisiúint le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí ar ball.

Leagann an tuairisc amach réimse moltaí atá ag iarraidh líon na ngnáthamh máinliachta cairdí a dhéantar a mhéadú agus ag an am chéanna cáilíocht na seirbhíse a choinneáil agus a fheabhsú.

Caithfidh gníomh a dhéanamh láithreach le hearcú agus coinneáil foirne a fheabhsú, go háirithe foirne altranais i máinliacht chairdiach, má táimid líon na ngnáthamh máinliachta a dhéantar a mhéadú. Dháil mé maoiniú breise le haghaidh post altranais breise i ndianchúram cairdiach le tacú leis an fhoireann atá ann faoi láthair agus le ligean d'altraí breise an tsainoilíúint a fháil. Cuideoidh sé seo an líon leapacha a mhéadú agus líon na n-obráidí is féidir a dhéanamh a éascú agus a mhéadú.

Royal Hospitals Trust: Cardiac Operations

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy to require the Royal Hospitals Trust to publish monthly statistics in relation to the number of cardiac operations performed in that hospital. (AQW 111/01)

Ms de Brún: I can appreciate the basis of this proposal, and I will address it as part of my wider response to the cardiac surgery review report, on which I will be consulting shortly.

Tig liom bunús an mholta seo a thuiscint agus rachaidh mé i gceann air mar chuid de m'fhreagairt níos fairsinge ar thuairisc an athbhreithnithe ar mháinliacht chairdiach, ar a mbeidh mé ag dul i gcomhairle ar ball.

Reducing Alcohol Related Harm

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail those measures she is taking to combat alcoholism among young people. (AQW 113/01)

Ms de Brún: Last autumn, I launched the Executive's strategy for reducing alcohol related harm. This commits us to three broad objectives: first, to encourage a sensible approach to drinking; secondly, to promote effective treatment services; and, thirdly, to protect individuals and communities from the damage that alcohol misuse can cause.

In April 2001, a paper entitled 'Model for the Joint Implementation of the Drug and Alcohol Strategies' was presented to the ministerial group on drugs for consideration. The ministerial group approved the model, and on 17 May it received endorsement from the Executive. The structures include all key interests including local communities and will allow for a concerted approach.

The joint implementation of both strategies is now underway and the new model includes the formation

of six working groups to cover the following areas: treatment, education and prevention, communities, information and research, social legislation and criminal justice. The six working groups will create action plans based on the key output areas detailed in the joint implementation model. These key outputs are based on the targets contained in the drug and alcohol strategies.

Under the alcohol strategy, work will be taken forward to develop a health promotion and education programme targeted at children and young people, as well as providing training for teachers, other educators and youth workers.

As one element in implementing the Alcohol Strategy, we will be reviewing the adequacy of the current controls on underage purchasing. Where they are clearly inadequate, we will work with the relevant parties to strengthen them.

Lainseáil mé an Fómhar seo caite an straitéis chun an dochar a bhaineann le halcól a laghdú de chuid an Fheidhmeannais. Geallann seo dúinn do thrí chuspóir: sa chéad áit, cur chuige siosmadach a spreagadh i dtaobh ólacháin, sa dara háit, seirbhísí éifeachtacha coireála a chur chun cinn; agus sa tríú háit daoine aonair agus pobail a chosaint ar an damáiste is féidir a bheith ann mar gheall ar mhí-úsáid alcóil.

In Aibreán 2001 cuireadh páipéar dar teideal 'Eiseamláir do Chomhchur i bhFeidhm na Straitéisí Drugaí agus Alcóil' os comhair an grúpa aireachta ar dhrugaí chun machnamh a dhéanamh air. Cheadaigh an grúpa aireachta an eiseamláir, agus ar 17 Bealtaine fuair sé formhuiniú ón Fheidhmeannas. Sna struchtúir beidh eochairspéiseanna agus pobail áitiúla san áireamh a cheadóidh cur chuige dian.

Tá comhchur i bhfeidhm den dá straitéis faoi lánseol agus san áireamh san eiseamláir beidh bunú sé ghrúpa oibre leis na hachair seo a chlúdach: coireáil, oideachas & cosc, Pobail, Eolas & Taighde, Reachtaíocht Shóisialta agus Dlí Coiriúil.

Cruthóidh na sé ghrúpa oibre pleananna gníomhachta bunaithe ar na achair eochair-aschuir atá breactha síos in eiseamláir chomhchur i bhfeidhm. Tá na hachair eochair- aschuir bunaithe ar na spriocanna sna straitéisí drugaí agus alcóil.

De réir na straitéise alcóil, tabharfar an obair le clár cur chun cinn sláinte agus oideachais dírithe ar pháistí agus ógánaigh a fhorbairt, chomh maith le oiliúint a sholáthar do mhúinteoirí, oidí eile agus oibríthe ógánaigh.

Mar ghné amháin le Straitéis Alcóil a chur i bhfeidhm déanfaimid athbhreithniú ar leorgacht na rialaithe láithreacha ar cheannach ólachán faoin aois dhleathach. Mura leor iad ar bhealach suntasach, oibreoidimid leis na páirtithe bainteacha chun iad a neartú.

Multiple Sclerosis: Drug Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail whether the new drugs for multiple sclerosis, beta interferon and copaxone, are available within any of the health boards.

(AQW 120/01)

Ms de Brún: Beta interferon and copaxone are currently available within the four health and social services boards here for the treatment of multiple sclerosis.

Patients here with multiple sclerosis currently receive beta interferon and copaxone if their consultant neurologists, having discussed the risks and benefits of treatment with them, consider that they are likely to benefit from the treatment, having taken account of the evidence on effectiveness, departmental guidance and the guidelines of the Association of Neurologists.

Tá beta interferon agus copaxone ar fáil faoi láthair laistigh de na ceithre bhord sláinte, seirbhísi sóisialta agus sábháilteachta poiblí anseo chun ilscléaróis a chóireáil.

Faigheann othair anseo le hilscléaróis beta interferon agus copaxone i láthair na huairé má mheasann a néareolaí comhairleach, i ndiaidh dó/di baoil agus tairbhí na cóireála a phlé leis an othar, gur dócha go mbainfidh an t-othar tairbhe as an chóireáil, i ndiaidh dó/di cruthú a héifeachta, treoir na Roinne agus treoirlínte Chumann na Néareolaithe a chur san áireamh.

Multiple Sclerosis: Drug Treatment

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria for the distribution of the new multiple sclerosis drugs, beta interferon and copaxone, within the local health trusts.

(AQW 121/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to the answer given to AQW 120/2001.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 120/2001.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Sewage Treatment Works: Portaferry

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will ensure that the Water Service will provide a new sewage treatment works in Portaferry on a site away from residential properties. (AQW 40/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): A new wastewater treatment works will

have to be provided for Portaferry by 31 December 2005 in order to meet the requirements of the Urban Waste Water Treatment Regulations (NI) 1995. The Water Service is currently in the process of selecting a site for the proposed works, using its normal site selection criteria.

The Water Service is aware from public meetings and correspondence of the strength of local feeling about the two sites recommended by the environmental analysis, and the apparent preference by many residents for the site known as Site 2, which is adjacent to the Walter's Rocks.

No final decision has been taken regarding the siting of the proposed works, and indeed none can be taken until all the required studies have been completed. The studies will include detailed environmental impact assessments of the two recommended sites and Site 2, which will closely examine environmental issues, including those influenced by distance from existing properties.

Ultimately, it will be for the Planning Service to decide whether to grant planning approval for the chosen site, and the planning process will provide a further opportunity for individuals and other interested parties to comment on the proposal. However, irrespective of which site is eventually chosen, the scheme will be designed sensitively and will incorporate measures aimed at mitigating any adverse impact on the environment.

Significant public consultation on the siting of the works has already taken place, and I understand that the Water Service has arranged to make a presentation to the Ards Borough Council External Affairs and Planning Committee on Tuesday 9 October 2001. I can assure you that the views and concerns of the public and their representatives will be taken into account along with all the other relevant factors in the final decision on the siting of the works.

Control of Dwellings in the Countryside

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when he intends to bring forward a policy statement on dwellings in the countryside; and to make a statement. (AQW 41/01)

Mr Campbell: I recognise the difficulties currently being experienced in rural areas and acknowledge fully the importance of countryside issues. Those issues have been highlighted in the Rural White Paper in Great Britain, the work of the Rural Task Force in the UK and the recently published Rural Development Programme Strategy 2001-2006 of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

As far as the policy in relation to the control of dwellings in the countryside is concerned, that is a matter for the Minister of the Environment. My role,

and that of the Department for Regional Development, is, in the context of the Regional Development Strategy, to provide regional planning guidance for the countryside.

Following the Assembly's agreement of the Regional Development Strategy my Department, in consultation with DOE, DARD and other Departments will commence work on preparing regional planning guidance on matters affecting the countryside. That guidance will include the issue of dwellings in the countryside.

Finally, it is important to note that the preparation of this guidance constitutes a significant body of work and will involve wide and detailed consultation with all the major stakeholders. Given the likely extent and scope of this work, I anticipate that it will be completed by September 2003.

Road Infrastructure: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to improve the road infrastructure of West Tyrone. (AQW 54/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service plans to undertake a number of major and minor road schemes to improve the road infrastructure in West Tyrone.

The major road schemes are the construction of bypasses of Newtown Stewart and Strabane (Stage 2) and a throughpass of Omagh (Stage 3). Work on the former scheme (estimated cost £8 million) commenced in August 2001 and is expected to take approximately 18 months to complete. Subject to the successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures and the availability of funds, the Roads Service hopes to start work on the Strabane bypass (estimated cost £4 million) in early 2002 and on the Omagh throughpass (estimated cost £5 million) in early 2003.

Also, you will be aware from my recent letter that the Roads Service has identified a number of other major works schemes which will be assessed for possible inclusion in its 10-year forward planning schedule. The schemes include some in West Tyrone, and the chief executive of the Roads Service will write to you shortly to seek your comments on those schemes.

In addition to the above major works schemes, the Roads Service delivers an annual programme of minor works schemes, such as transportation, accident remedial, traffic calming and minor road improvement schemes. In the current year, the Roads Service plans to spend some £600,000 on minor works in the West Tyrone area.

Public Transport to Airports

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to improve the availability of public transport between Belfast Inter-

national and Belfast City Airports and the North and North West areas. (AQW 72/01)

Mr Campbell: Airporter, a private company, operates a stage carriage service from Londonderry, serving both Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport. This service is provided under a Road Service operator's licence issued by the Department of the Environment and currently consists of six services in each direction, Monday to Friday, three in each direction on Saturday with two in each direction on Sunday. I understand that the Department of the Environment would consider any request for an increase in service frequency if such a request were made by the existing operator. Any such request would obviously only be made if there was sufficient passenger demand. Translink also provide very frequent services from the North and the North West to both airports, via Belfast. As with all its services, Translink will continue to monitor the demand for airport services. Again, any possible service enhancements would only be considered if there was sufficient passenger demand.

Electronic Signage: M1

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when the new electronic signage along the M1 will become operational. (AQW 95/01)

Mr Campbell: I assume that this question relates to the work that is presently being undertaken by my Department's Roads Service to erect electronic signs on the central median of the M1 motorway between Belfast and Moira. This work is part of an ongoing Roads Service project to extend driver information and motorway control along the motorway network. It is expected that the new signs will become operational during early November 2001.

Public Transport: Mid Ulster

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to make it his policy to increase the provision of public transport to elderly people living in isolated areas of Mid Ulster. (AQW 97/01)

Mr Campbell: I readily acknowledge the importance of public transport to elderly people living in isolated rural areas. My Department seeks to address their needs through the Rural Transport Fund, which aims to improve access for rural dwellers to services and facilities. Through the fund my Department has provided revenue support for additional Ulsterbus services in rural areas, including 14 routes in the Mid Ulster area.

The fund also supports four Rural Community Transport Partnerships in the Mid Ulster area, which provide complementary services to the public transport

network. The partnerships operate community car schemes, group hire and door-to-door minibus services.

From 1 October 2001 my Department will fund free travel on scheduled public transport services for those aged 65. This will also contribute to improving the mobility of elderly people in the Mid Ulster area.

Utilities Road Works

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development, in the light of continuous and repeated road works by various agencies and private contractors, to detail whether his Department has enforced re-instatement penalties and, if so, what revenue has been generated. (AQW 98/01)

Mr Campbell: There is no specific legislation which allows my Department to apply reinstatement penalties where utilities have not completed their road works to the required specification. No revenue has therefore been generated by this means.

Free Travel Scheme: Disabled War Pensioners

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail whether the free travel scheme for senior citizens will be extended to include disabled war pensioners irrespective of their age. (AQW 125/01)

Mr Campbell: All war disabled pensioners currently qualify for half fare travel on public transport. From 1 October war disabled pensioners over 65 will qualify for free travel, in common with all other people over 65. War disabled pensioners under 65 will, unlike most other disabled people under 65, continue to qualify for half fare travel. However, I have already indicated that I intend to carry out a review of the Concessionary Fares Scheme within the next year to consider how it could be extended, if the Assembly allocates the necessary additional resources.

Priority Road Schemes

Mr Davis asked the Minister for Regional Development to list his priority road schemes costing more than £2 million that are budgeted for in the current and subsequent financial year. (AQW 191/01)

Mr Campbell: I should explain that expenditure on major road schemes is generally spread over a number of years because of the time required to acquire land and to carry out design and construction work. In 2001-02 and 2002-03, my Department's Roads Service has budgeted for expenditure on the following major road schemes each costing more than £2 million:

Schemes within the Current Construction Programme

- Motorway Telecommunications and Control;
- Tillysburn Railway Bridge Replacement;
- A5 Newtown Stewart Bypass; and
- A2 Limavady Bypass.

Schemes Anticipated to Commence Construction (Subject, Where Appropriate, to the Completion of Necessary Statutory Procedures)

- M1 Kingsway/Black's Road (Bridge Strengthening);
- Foyle Bridge, Londonderry (Bridge Strengthening);
- Toome Bypass*;
- Strabane Bypass Stage II;
- Comber Bypass Stage II;
- Skeoge Link, Londonderry;
- Rathfriland Road Junction on the A1 at Banbridge;
- A8 Belfast to Larne Road*;
- Hillsborough Road Junction on the A1 at Dromore; and
- A1 Loughbrickland to Beech Hill*.

*Executive Programme Funds have been allocated specifically to these schemes.

I should point out that, if there is undue delay in the completion of statutory procedures for any of the above schemes which have not been allocated Executive Programme Funds, their progression into the construction programme will be dependent on the funding position at that stage.

In addition, expenditure on design work for a number of other major road schemes costing more than £2 million will be incurred during the period in question.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Urban Regeneration: Funding

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to widen access to regeneration finance. (AQW 53/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): My Department is currently engaged in an extensive consultation process on a new comprehensive strategic approach to urban regeneration across Northern Ireland, focusing on the renewal of neighbourhoods experiencing the most serious social and economic deprivation.

The strategy acknowledges that some communities have been unable to benefit fully from previous urban regeneration initiatives because of a lack of capacity

to contribute to, and engage effectively in, the renewal process. The strategy recognises the specific problems and disadvantages of these communities and will seek to direct efforts and resources at those objectively defined as being in the greatest need.

I would welcome the Member's contribution to the debate on the future direction of urban regeneration policies and programmes in Northern Ireland. However, my Department continues to work closely with other regeneration programmes and organisations, such as the International Fund for Ireland and the European Union, not only to maximise access to funding by those most in need but to maximise the impact of that funding.

Leckpatrick Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the Housing Executive's plans in regard to unoccupied and boarded up house units in Leckpatrick Gardens, Artigarvan, Strabane. (AQW 57/01)

Mr Morrow: The chief executive of the Housing Executive has advised me that an estate strategy, which will include a range of options, is being formulated for the area and should be available within the next four months.

Housing Executive Properties: Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many three bedroom bungalows are currently owned by the Housing Executive in Newtownards. (AQW 61/01)

Mr Morrow: The chief executive of the Housing Executive has advised me that it owns 99 three bedroom bungalows and 14 three bedroom ground floor flats in the Newtownards district.

Housing Executive Properties: Newtownards

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of applicants who have applied for Housing Executive three bedroom bungalows in Newtownards over the last three years. (AQW 67/01)

Mr Morrow: The chief executive of the Housing Executive has advised me that the information you require for this period is not available. However, I am advised that at present, there are a total of 17 households on the Newtownards district waiting list requiring three bed ground floor accommodation. Of these, eight are new applicants and nine are seeking a transfer from existing accommodation.

Urban Regeneration

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how much was spent on urban regeneration by district council area in each of the last three years.

(AQW 80/01)

Mr Morrow: Expenditure on urban regeneration by district council area in each of the last three financial years is set out in the accompanying table.

District Councils	1998/1999	1999/2000	2000/2001
Antrim	448'888	975'928	258'931
Ards	386'435	129'158	40'960
Armagh	807'402	1'052'956	907'777
Ballymena	87'676	504'074	333'366
Ballymoney	132'829	104'813	360'030
Banbridge	588'930	284'490	161'485
Belfast	38'700'523	25'429'960	24'258'300
Carrickfergus	46'882	110'861	524'883
Castlereagh	NIL	NIL	NIL
Coleraine	378'186	256'330	88301
Cookstown	425'491	546'689	196'306
Craigavon	396'699	804'167	973'633
Derry	4'739'000	4'744'000	5'285'000
Down	605'368	967'832	868'838
Dungannon	1'818'131	1'358'188	1'403'601
Fermanagh	1'558'681	1'773'025	1'066'288
Larne	671'113	172'129	412'439
Limavady	329'754	376'186	10'630
Lisburn	2'236'000	2'123'000	1'932'000
Magherafelt	442'042	966'137	1'378'622
Moyle	110'372	189'404	582'724
Newry & Mourne	1'323'756	973'193	434'682
Newtownabbey	777'000	750'000	667'000
North Down	NIL	25'000	33'247
Omagh	345'924	900'551	774'472
Strabane	450'073	532'973	1'054'459
Total	57'807'155	46'051'044	44'007'974

The above covers expenditure on a range of urban regeneration programmes and schemes supported by my Department through mainstream funding and contributions from other sources such as the European Union and International Fund for Ireland

The figures do not include programmes and schemes funded under the auspices of the Northern Ireland Partnership Board that has a broader remit than urban regeneration.

Improvements and Upgrading to Private Sector Housing

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail his plans to make additional resources available to assist in carrying out improvements and upgrading to private sector housing. (AQW 105/01)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Housing Executive, which sets the budget for private sector grant aid each year, taking account of anticipated demand for grants and existing commitments. The grants budget for the current financial year is £42m.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Paper Used in Parliament Buildings

Mr Ford asked the Assembly Commission to detail the steps it is taking to reduce the amount of paper used in Parliament Buildings. (AQW 75/01)

The Representative of the Assembly Commission (Mrs E Bell): I am responding to you on behalf of the Assembly Commission.

It is unclear from your question whether you wish to have detail on the Commission's current policy and practice on the recycling of paper or on the use of information technology and therefore I have attempted to address both issues.

On 26 June 2001 the Assembly Commission approved a Recycling and Energy Management Strategy which

included detailed proposals for the recycling of paper. Guidelines on recycling arrangements within Parliament Buildings (copy attached) issued to Members and staff on the 3 July 2001. In addition, the Printed Paper Office, as the largest distributor of printed material within the Northern Ireland Assembly, advise that papers provided through the Stationery Office are manufactured from 100% post consumer waste and meet the Nordic Swan Classification for environmental friendliness.

The use of information technology by the Assembly, its members, their staff and the staff of the Assembly Secretariat is widely facilitated and encouraged. Email is the main vehicle for written communications within the Assembly and the Intranet and Internet services offer alternative (to paper) means of disseminating information about Assembly business to internal and external users respectively.

The planned development of the Intranet will further reduce the dependency on the use of paper by offering electronic forms services for the transacting of business e.g. requests for information, supplies and services, expense claims etc. The Internet will also offer alternative means of communication between the Assembly and public.

The Assembly Commission's Information Strategy, set out in the paper titled 'The Assembly's Vision for Exploiting Information', sets the scene for the increased use of electronic media for the dissemination of information both within and out with the Assembly.

A copy of the Commission's Information Strategy is attached for your information. I hope this response addresses the issues which you have raised.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 5 October 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Commissioner for Children

Mr Armstrong asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to give an assurance that a parent's role in respect of guidance and discipline towards their child will not be put under threat by the remit awarded to the new Children's Commissioner.

(AQW 103/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: Our office's consultation document on a Commissioner for Children for Northern Ireland was published on 9 August 2001. The document emphasises that parents are almost always the best people to look after children and that the family is the main place where children's needs are met. Our proposals suggest that the Commissioner for Children should not become involved in specific, individual disputes between a child and his or her parents or guardians. Nor should the Commissioner for Children become involved in disputes between parents or guardians concerning the exercise of parental responsibility unless, after a thorough assessment of the situation, the Commissioner believes that the interests of the child will be neglected.

Responses to the consultation document are invited before 8 November 2001.

Obstacles to Mobility

Mr McMenamin asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the timetable for publication of the North/South study on obstacles to mobility.

(AQO 154/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The steering group that was established to oversee the study is presently considering a draft report. The report has also been circulated to Departments, North and South,

for comment by 28 September 2001. It is possible that the consultants will be asked to incorporate some final changes to the text. When the report is finalised a decision will be taken on publication.

The study has focused on a range of obstacles that make it difficult for people to study, work and move to live across the border, and it will propose solutions to address these barriers. Removing these barriers will assist in improving economic efficiency and will assist both parts of the island of Ireland to enhance competitiveness.

When the steering group is satisfied with the results of the study, it will report to an early meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Livestock and Meat Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the assistance which has been given to promote Northern Ireland's lamb industry through the Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 132/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for the development and implementation of generic marketing initiatives for Northern Ireland (NI) beef and lamb. In addition to monies derived from levies to the LMC in respect of all cattle and sheep slaughtered in NI, the LMC's marketing activities are funded by resources obtained from the European Quality Beef (EQB) programme and the Red Meat Strategy (RMS) monies obtained from DARD and the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund. A total of £140,280 (60% of agreed expenditure) was obtained under the EQB in the year 2000. A total of £4.9 million is being spent on the RMS, which covers both beef and lamb, over a 3-year period commencing January 1999. Further funding of £125,580 (i.e. 60% funding) is currently being sought under the EC Beef Information Campaign.

Promotional activity is undertaken by the LMC on a NI, GB and international basis. The benefits of such activities will relate to all producers and processors in Northern Ireland including those within the constituency of Strangford.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease: Northumbria

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the steps she is taking

as a consequence of the recent foot-and-mouth outbreaks in Northumbria and (b) whether precautions taken at the ports last year are going to be reinstated.

(AQW 133/01)

Ms Rodgers: The recent outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease in Northumbria highlight the need to maintain precautionary controls in Northern Ireland. To this end, Northern Ireland remains a “controlled area”, and certain prescribed restrictions will continue to be in force while there is a risk of FMD being re-introduced from GB. Specific measures remaining in place are the 20-day standstill period for all susceptible livestock, a licensing system for the movement of sheep, separation of sheep and goats from other livestock and the maintenance of bio-security precautions on farms.

With regard to the precautions at the ports that have been in place from the start of the FMD outbreaks, these are being maintained and are constantly reviewed. In addition, there has been a ban on the import of all susceptible animals from GB since 21 February 2001, and this continues to be in place. All meat and meat products from GB can only be imported into Northern Ireland in accordance with EU legislation designed to prevent the spread of FMD.

Lamb Production

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) which area of Northern Ireland produces the largest amount of lamb and (b) how much lamb is produced by that area. (AQW 134/01)

Ms Rodgers: Statistics are not maintained on the geographical distribution of sheep coming forward for slaughter. However, some impression of production may be gained from the attached table (Annex A) giving the numbers of ewes by each district council and from the attached map (Annex B) showing the distribution of total sheep by district council area.

(Copies of Annex A and B are available from the Assembly Library.)

Livestock and Meat Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps being taken to ensure that the constituency of Strangford is receiving support for the promotion of its lamb industry.

(AQW 135/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for the development and implementation of generic marketing initiatives for Northern Ireland (NI) beef and lamb. In addition to monies derived from levies to the LMC in respect of all cattle and sheep slaughtered in NI, the LMC’s marketing activities are

funded by resources obtained from the European Quality Beef (EQB) programme and the Red Meat Strategy (RMS) monies obtained from DARD and the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund. A total of £140,280 (60% of agreed expenditure) was obtained under the EQB in the year 2000. A total of £4.9 million is being spent on the RMS, which covers both beef and lamb, over a 3-year period commencing January 1999. Further funding of £125,580 (i.e. 60% funding) is currently being sought under the EC Beef Information Campaign.

Promotional activity is undertaken by the LMC on a NI, GB and international basis. The benefits of such activities will relate to all producers and processors in Northern Ireland including those within the constituency of Strangford.

Livestock and Meat Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the steps being taken to ensure that the constituency of Strangford is receiving support for the promotion of its beef industry.

(AQW 136/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for the development and implementation of generic marketing initiatives for Northern Ireland (NI) beef and lamb. In addition to monies derived from levies to the LMC in respect of all cattle and sheep slaughtered in NI, the LMC’s marketing activities are funded by resources obtained from the European Quality Beef (EQB) programme and the Red Meat Strategy (RMS) monies obtained from DARD and the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund. A total of £140,280 (60% of agreed expenditure) was obtained under the EQB in the year 2000. A total of £4.9 million is being spent on the RMS, which covers both beef and lamb, over a 3-year period commencing January 1999. Further funding of £125,580 (i.e. 60% funding) is currently being sought under the EC Beef Information Campaign.

Promotional activity is undertaken by the LMC on a NI, GB and international basis. The benefits of such activities will relate to all producers and processors in Northern Ireland including those within the constituency of Strangford.

Cattle Production

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) which area of Northern Ireland produces the largest amount of beef and (b) how much beef is produced in that area. (AQW 171/01)

Ms Rodgers: Statistics are not maintained on the geographical distribution of cattle coming forward for slaughter. However, some impression of production

may be gained from the attached table (Annex A) giving the numbers of beef cows and total cattle for each district council area and from the attached map (Annex B) showing the distribution of total cattle by district council area.

(Copies of Annex A and B are available from the Assembly Library.)

Livestock and Meat Commission

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the assistance given to promote Northern Ireland's beef. (AQW 172/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) is responsible for the development and implementation of generic marketing initiatives for Northern Ireland (NI) beef and lamb. In addition to monies derived from levies to the LMC in respect of all cattle and sheep slaughtered in NI, the LMC's marketing activities are funded by resources obtained from the European Quality Beef (EQB) programme and the Red Meat Strategy (RMS) monies obtained from DARD and the EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund. A total of £140,280 (60% of agreed expenditure) was obtained under the EQB in the year 2000. A total of £4.9 million is being spent on the RMS, which covers both beef and lamb, over a 3-year period commencing January 1999. Further funding of £125,580 (i.e. 60% funding) is currently being sought under the EC Beef Information Campaign.

Promotional activity is undertaken by the LMC on a NI, GB and international basis. The benefits of such activities will relate to all producers and processors in Northern Ireland including those within the constituency of Strangford.

Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the current position with regard to the decommissioning of fishing vessels. (AQW 184/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am pleased to advise that I am announcing the introduction of a £5m Fishing Vessel Decommissioning Scheme today.

Tie-up Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what steps she is taking in the current financial year to ensure a tie-up scheme is available to fishermen. (AQW 185/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have not discussed the possible introduction of a tie-up scheme with colleagues in other devolved legislatures. However, an assessment is being

carried out on the impact in Northern Ireland of the stock recovery programmes with a view to informing future discussions with my GB ministerial colleagues on the question of compensation.

Cod Recovery Programme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what action has been taken by her Department to facilitate a meeting between fishermen and scientists to debate the Cod Recovery Programme. (AQW 186/01)

Ms Rodgers: A meeting is being organised by my officials at which both fishing industry representatives and scientists will be present. One item on the agenda for discussion will be the Cod Recovery Programme.

Port Facilities

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail her plans to improve the port facilities at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. (AQW 187/01)

Ms Rodgers: In addition to the Kilkeel Integrated Development Plan, the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority has put forward a number of additional development projects at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. Currently discussions are taking place with the harbour authority on these additional projects in relation to their funding and prioritisation.

Recruitment to the Fishing Industry

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail what steps are being taken to help with the recruitment of fishermen into the fishing industry. (AQW 188/01)

Ms Rodgers: I understand a task force involving the Sea Fish Industry Authority and fishermen's organisations in the UK has been set up to address recruitment to the fishing industry. Its objective is to review recruitment issues for the fishing sector with the aim of arriving at a strategy for dealing with recruitment.

Tie-up Scheme

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her discussions with other devolved legislatures in relation to the introduction of a tie-up scheme. (AQW 196/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have not discussed the possible introduction of a tie-up scheme with colleagues in other devolved legislatures. However, an assessment is being carried out on the impact in Northern Ireland of

the stock recovery programmes with a view to informing future discussions with my GB ministerial colleagues on the question of compensation.

Livestock Marts

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to foot-and-mouth disease, to detail (a) what compensation payments have been paid to the agri-business sector, (b) whether payments were made to livestock marts and (c) whether livestock marts will be eligible for rate relief as a result of enforced closure. (AQW 200/01)

Ms Rodgers: Compensation payments totalling around £7.2 million have been made to the agri-business sector for animals and materials destroyed during the foot-and-mouth disease outbreaks.

Livestock marts are not eligible for such compensation payments but, because they were prohibited from carrying on their business between 1 March 2001 and 31 July 2001, are eligible for rate relief for that period under the Help for Business Scheme.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Regional Motor Sports Facility for Northern Ireland Report

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the recommendations contained in the report 'Regional Motor Sports Facility for Northern Ireland' particularly those concerning the termination of local races such as the Carrowdore 100. (AQW 173/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): I recognise that some of the recommendations of the report are contentious, but it would not be appropriate for me to offer a specific comment in advance of the further consideration that will be given to this issue by the governing bodies and the Sports Council during the course of a strategic review, which should be completed by the beginning of next year.

International Motor Sports Ltd

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what expertise "International Motor Sports Ltd" has in the field of road racing. (AQW 174/01)

Mr McGimpsey: International Motorsports Limited (IMS) is the commercial arm of the Royal Automobile

Club Motor Sports Association (MSA), the governing body of motor sport for the United Kingdom.

It has a wide spread of motor sports expertises and the variety of activities undertaken by the company include circuit safety and design, circuit operation and motor sport consultancy management.

EDUCATION

Telecommunications Masts: School Property

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy to have telecommunication masts removed from school property. (AQW 155/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The erection and removal of telecommunications masts is a matter for individual school authorities, and I have no plans to change this.

Grade Guarantees

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of pupils who achieved the required 11+ grade to gain entry into the grammar school of their choice but were refused a place due to over-subscription. (AQW 166/01)

Mr M McGuinness: No grade guarantees admission to a grammar school. Some schools can only admit Grade A applicants; others can admit applicants with lower grades.

Figures for admission to grammar school in September 2001 are not yet available. In September 2000 admissions there were 10,043 applications; 8,998 were admitted to grammar schools; 1,045 applicants did not obtain a place.

Antrim Stadium: Sports Activities

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) those schools that currently use the Antrim Stadium for sports activities and (b) the amount of financial assistance he allocates to the Stadium. (AQW 203/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department does not collect any information on the use by schools of the Antrim Stadium for sports activities, nor is it responsible for funding the stadium.

Local Specialist Courses

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education to make it his policy to support local specialist courses which

enhance the educational provision for children, such as the MSc (Teaching Visually Impaired Learners) course at Queen's University, Belfast. (AQO 183/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has been supporting, in conjunction with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, Queen's University, Belfast and the education and library boards, a pilot project involving this M Sc course which started in September 2000 and is due to finish in August 2002. In consultation with the boards my Department will also be considering the need for and viability of other local specialist courses.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Enrolment Figures

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the current enrolment figures at the Ards Institute for Further and Higher Education. (AQW 175/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): Enrolment figures for the 2001-02 academic year are not yet available. During the 2000-01 academic year there were 1,944 (737 full-time and 1,207 part-time) enrolments at the Newtownards campus of the North Down & Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education.

Further Education Colleges

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what steps are being taken to attract students to enrol at the Ards Institute for Further and Higher Education. (AQW 197/01)

Dr Farren: The marketing and promotion of further education colleges in order to attract students to enrol is a matter for each individual college. However, my Department has established a Marketing Working Group to look at the wider issues surrounding the marketing of the FE sector.

Student Poverty

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what plans he has to alleviate student poverty in view of the introduction of tuition fees. (AQW 201/01)

Dr Farren: Because of changes which I introduced this year, over 50% of Northern Ireland higher education students will not pay any tuition fees at all, and many more will pay less than before. I will also introduce next year bursaries of up to £1,500 for students from less well off families. The access funds of higher education

institutions continue to provide help for students in financial difficulties.

Basic Skills Strategy

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the estimated timetable for publishing the Basic Skills Strategy; and (b) the timetable for implementing the strategy. (AQO 180/01)

Dr Farren: (a) The draft strategy will be published for consultation in December 2001 and finalised in April 2002. In tandem with the consultation exercise there will be extensive pilots of the new curriculum and standards. The timetable for full implementation is September 2002.

Number of Erasmus/ Socrates Students

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline recent trends in the number of Erasmus/Socrates students in terms of both those coming to Northern Ireland higher education institutions and those leaving to study elsewhere in Europe. (AQO 167/01)

Dr Farren: In the last four complete academic years the number of Erasmus students coming to NI has remained at a fairly constant level of circa 500 each year. The number of Erasmus students leaving NI has also remained at a fairly constant level of circa 300 each year.

University Places

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the number of available places for first year undergraduate students at the University of Ulster in 2001-02; and (b) how many students have enrolled. (AQO 174/01)

Dr Farren: The number of available places for first year undergraduates at the University of Ulster is 4,529. Enrolment is currently taking place so a figure is unavailable, but the university expects to fill all places.

Business Renewal Programme

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many businesses in the tourist and hospitality sector have received training through the North/South training programme. (AQO 176/01)

Dr Farren: I presume that the question relates to the Business Renewal Programme, which is one of three initiatives announced by the NSMC in tourism. This programme has now been completed, and a total

of 74 businesses have participated, ranging from hotels, restaurants and guesthouses to cruise hire and visitor attractions.

Student Accommodation

Mr McGrady asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the governing bodies of universities concerning the shortage of on-site halls of residence; and to make a statement. (AQO 172/01)

Dr Farren: I have not held any discussions on this issue with the universities' governing bodies. In line with UK practice my Department does not provide funding for student accommodation.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Business Start Programme

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the steps he is taking to ensure job growth in rural areas. (AQW 178/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): The Business Start Programme, currently in the final stages of development, is intended to target those interested in self-employment and will for the first time accommodate part-time businesses. This development is specifically to address the potential of part-time businesses in rural areas. We are working closely with DARD on the Leader+ Programme to ensure the efforts of both Departments to stimulate the rural economy are complementary.

Compensation Measures for Small Retail Businesses

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail his plans in relation to the provision of compensation measures for small businesses within South Belfast due to the influx of large supermarket developments. (AQW 199/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The focus of my Department is on firms in the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors. I do not have any plans for compensation measures for small retail businesses.

NI Euro Preparations Forum

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what assessment he has made in relation to retailers and tourist promotional agencies

displaying and advertising their products in sterling and euros; and to make a statement. (AQO 170/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The initial findings of a survey, commissioned recently by the NI Euro Preparations Forum, show that there is still a worryingly low level of euro preparedness amongst Northern Ireland businesses, particularly small businesses in the retail and hospitality sector.

Advice on euro preparedness, including dual pricing in euros and pounds, will be given to local businesses in a series of euro roadshows being organised by the forum over the next few months.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications: South Belfast

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his policy with regard to the proliferation of planning applications seeking approval for the erection of apartments within the constituency of South Belfast. (AQW 165/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department has a duty to determine applications submitted and cannot refuse to accept or consider properly made applications. It has accordingly no control over the volume or growth of applications for any particular type of development including apartments.

My Department has been endeavouring to strengthen policy coverage in dealing with proposals for new housing development within established residential areas. We consulted with the Department for Regional Development in the preparation of the Regional Development Strategy. In consequence the RDS, while supporting the need to increase brownfield housing development, also flags up the need to ensure that this does not result in "town cramming". The strategy states that the aim of achieving an overall increase in town densities must not however be interpreted as a broad mandate to try to force over-developed and unsympathetic housing schemes into established residential areas.

For our part, my Department has published PPS7 "Quality Housing Developments". This sets out the Department's policies for achieving quality in new residential developments and highlights that the key themes of quality and sustainability must be demonstrated to secure planning permission. Policies in PPS7 state that in established residential areas proposals for housing development will not be permitted where they would result in unacceptable damage to the local character, environmental quality or residential amenity of these areas.

It also requires proposals for new residential development to take account of the specific circumstances of each site, and developers, in preparing layouts, will have to have greater regard to the site context, in particular the characteristics of land form and the townscape or landscape setting, and the need for these elements to be integrated into the overall design concept. PPS7 also makes provision for development plans to identify local design requirements for new residential development.

I also understand that the Department for Regional Development intends to provide further guidance on this subject through a proposed Regional Planning Policy Statement, 'Housing in Settlements'. My Department is also in consultation with that Department on the preparation of this statement, which is expected to issue for public consultation early next year.

My Department has also published for public consultation a draft Development Control Advice Note 8 on small unit housing development. This sets out supplementary planning guidance to intending applicants on the Department's planning policies as they apply to proposals for apartment and other small unit housing development within established residential areas.

Finally, my Department has started work on a new Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan. This will consider the scale and location of new housing development in the South Belfast area. We hope to publish an Issues paper for consultation and discussion later this year. The plan preparation process will afford the opportunity for the public to raise locational issues for consideration by the plan team.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

EU Structural Funds: North Belfast

Mr Dodds asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount of EU structural funds that were spent in the constituency of North Belfast in each year from 1997 to 2001. (AQW 168/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The amount of EU structural funds that were spent in the constituency of North Belfast were:

1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
14,821,270	7,071,180	9,271,156	2,943,257	1,732,899

- Figures are not finite as expenditure on PEACE I still on-going.
- *In 1997 £7,171,603 of total spend fell under the single programme document and relates to the Belfast Sewage Treatment Works Stage 3.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Service: Private Sector Involvement

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any evaluations that have been or are currently being carried out in respect of the benefits of private sector involvement in the Health Service. (AQW 108/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Evaluation of private sector involvement in the provision of health and social services is undertaken to explore the potential for private investment in specific projects. The private sector offers only one of the options for procurement in the health and social services, and a detailed financial evaluation is made to demonstrate value for money and transfer of risk against procurement from within the public sector.

Déantar measúnú ar pháirt na hearnála príobháidí i soláthar seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le hionchas na hinfheistíochta príobháidí i scéimeanna ar leith a scrúdú. Ní hí an earnáil phríobháideach ach ceann de na roghanna leis na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta a sholáthar agus déantar mionmheasúnú airgeadais le luach an airgid agus aistriú an bhaoil in éadan soláthair ó laistigh den earnáil phoiblí a léiriú.

Home Helps

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of home helps currently employed by each trust. (AQW 151/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is detailed in the table below. Figures refer to the quarter ending June 2001.

HOME HELPS BY TRUST

	Number with Pay ¹
Armagh & Dungannon	824
Causeway	375
Craigavon & Banbridge Community	394
Down & Lisburn	471
Foyle Community	637
Homefirst	1137
Newry & Mourne	383
North & West Belfast	537
South & East Belfast	622
Sperrin Lakeland	543
Ulster Community & Hospital	303
Total	6226

¹ This relates to the number who worked during the quarter.

Miondealaítear an t-eolas seo sa tábla thíos. Baineann figiúirí leis an cheathrú ag críochnú Meithimh 2001.

CUIDITHEOIRÍ BAILE DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS

	Líon le pá ¹
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geainn	824
An Clochán	375
Pobal Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	394
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	471
Pobal an Fheabhail	637
Homefirst	1137
An tÍúr & Múrn	383
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	537
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	622
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	543
Pobal & Otharlann Uladh	303
Iomlán	6226

¹ Baineann seo leis an líon a d'oibrigh le linn na ceathrún.

Home Helps

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many home helps are provided for the purpose of making hot food. (AQW 152/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach.

MRI Scans

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of patients currently awaiting MRI scans and (b) what action is being taken to cut the waiting time. (AQW 153/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) At 1 August, 2130 patients were awaiting MRI scans.
- (b) A number of measures have been taken to reduce waiting times for MRI scans for patients. Last December, I initiated an Imaging Modernisation Programme which identified, as a key priority, the expansion of MRI provision. I also announced funding for an MRI scanner at Altnagelvin Hospital and the procurement process for this scanner is now under way, with tenders and evaluation due shortly. The New Opportunities Fund's decision earlier this year to fund an additional three MRI scanners, which will be sited at the Ulster, Antrim,

and Craigavon Area Hospitals, will also have a significant effect.

In the meantime, a mobile MRI unit has been providing a scanning service for the Northern and Western Board areas to help reduce waiting lists there. Additional scanning capacity from a mobile unit is also continuing at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

- (a) Ar 1 Lúnasa, bhí 2130 othar ag fanacht ar scantaí MRI.
- (b) Rinneadh roinnt beart le hamanna feithimh le haghaidh scantaí d'othair a laghdú. I mí na Nollag anuraidh, chuir mé tús le Clár Nuachóiriú Íomhánna, a shonraigh fairsingiú soláthar MRI mar phríomhthosaíocht. D'fhógair mé maoiniú fosta do scanóir MRI in Otharlann Alt na nGealbhán agus tá an próiseas leis an scanóir seo a fháil faoi lánseol anois, le tairiscintí agus measúnú le teacht ar ball. Beidh tionchar mór fosta ag cinneadh Chiste Deiseanna Nua, a rinneadh níba luaithe i mbliana, le trí scanóir MRI breise a bheidh suite in Otharlann Uladh, Aontroma agus Chreag na hAbhann, a mhaoiniú.

Idir an dá linn, bhí ionad gluaisteach MRI ag soláthar seirbhíse scanta do cheantar Bhord an Tuaiscirt agus an Iarthair araon chun liostaí feithimh ansin a laghdú. Tá áis bhreise scanta á soláthar go fóill fosta ó ionad gluaisteach in Otharlann Ríoga Victoeria.

Telecommunication Masts: Hospital Properties

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy to have telecommunication masts removed from hospital properties. (AQW 154/01)

Ms de Brún: The research programme recommended in the Stewart Report, to which I referred in my previous answer (AQW 2236/00), is going ahead, and I will keep this issue under review in the light of the research findings.

Tá an clár taighde molta i dTuairisc Stíobhaird, a ndearna mé tagairt di sa fhreagra roimh ré a thug mé ar (AQW 2236/00), faoi lánseol agus coinneoidh mé an cheist seo faoi athbhreithniú mar gheall ar thorthaí an taighde seo.

Sperrin Lakeland Trust: Occupational Therapists

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3538/00, to indicate if additional occupational therapists have

yet been deployed on housing adaptation assessments by the Sperrin Lakeland Trust and, if so, how many.

(AQW 160/01)

Ms de Brún: Sperrin Lakeland Trust advises that additional occupational therapists have not yet been deployed on housing adaptation assessments. It expects two additional therapists to be in post by the end of January 2002.

Cuireann Iontaobhas Speirín Tír na Lochanna in iúl nár cuireadh teiripeoirí saothair breise isteach ar mheasúnuithe ar oiriúnú tithíochta go fóill. Tá sé ag súil go mbeidh beirt bhreise de theiripeoirí fostaithe roimh dheireadh Eanáir 2002.

Doctors

Rev Robert Coulter asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy on determining how many doctors, by specialty, are trained in teaching hospitals for employment in the Health Service.

(AQW 167/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department determines the numbers of doctors in higher specialist and GP vocational training to assure the supply of consultants and GPs. The Department conducts regular reviews of consultant and GP numbers, examines levels of demand and seeks specialist advice on future developments with a view to matching output from the training programmes with the HPSS requirements for career grade doctors.

An Roinn a dhéanann cinneadh ar líon na ndochtúirí i sainoilíúint níos airde agus in oilíúint ghairmiúil ghnáthdhochtúra chun soláthar lianna comhairleacha agus gnáthdhochtúirí a chinntiú. Déanann an Roinn athbhreithnithe rialta ar líon na lianna comhairleacha agus na ngnáthdhochtúirí, scrúdaíonn siad leibhéil na ráchairte agus iarrann siad ar chomhairle ó shaineolaithe ar fhorbairtí amach anseo de gheall ar aschur ó na cláracha oiliúna a mheaitseáil le riachtanais na SSSP do dhochtúirí grád gairme.

Homefirst Community Trust

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether she could confirm that Homefirst Community Trust has been instructed to live within its means and told that no further overspend or bail out monies will be allowed and, if so, to detail the trust's contingency plans to live within its existing budget.

(AQW 236/01)

Ms de Brún: All trusts must achieve financial stability and live within the resources available so that my Department, like others, does not spend more than its departmental expenditure limit. Several trusts, including Homefirst Community Trust, have been involved in

the preparation of financial contingency plans to achieve this aim. My Department is currently evaluating these plans and, since they have not yet been approved, it would be inappropriate of me to detail the proposals at this time.

Ní mór do na hiontaobhais uile seasmhacht airgeadais a bhaint amach agus gan a mála bheith níos mó ná an soláthar atá ar fáil, sa dóigh nach gcaithfidh an Roinn s'agamsa, cosúil le Ranna eile, níos mó ná a cailc rannach chaiteachais. Bhí roinnt Iontaobhas, Iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst san áireamh, páirteach ag ullmhú pleananna teagmhasacha airgeadais leis an aidhm seo a bhaint amach. Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ag measúnú na bpleananna seo faoi láthair agus ar an ábhar nár formheasadh go fóill iad, bheadh sé mícheart domsa mionchuntas a thabhairt ar na moltaí ag an am seo.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) any meetings he has had with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) in the past twelve months and (b) any planned meetings with NIIRTA in the next six months.

(AQW 114/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): In the last year I received one request for a meeting with Northern Ireland Independent Retail Association. That request was conveyed to me in a letter from Brian Gray the Chief Executive of the Association on 21 May 2001. In my reply of 6 June, I confirmed that I would be willing to meet a delegation from the association, but because of diary pressures I explained that it was unlikely that a meeting would be arranged before the summer break.

I suggested, therefore, that officials from the Department would meet with the association to listen to its views on issues across the retailing spectrum and to brief them on the new regional planning policy guidance for retailing and town centres. I understand that a meeting took place on 21 August and that it followed up two previous meetings on 14 November 2000 and 27 February 2001.

All of these meetings were constructive. The last meeting in particular was timely in providing the Department with valuable input from the association prior to the preparation and commissioning of the retail research project, which will ultimately shape future policy.

Officials have kept me informed of these discussions.

Although I have not yet arranged a meeting with the association, I will take the opportunity of updating it on the progress of the retail research project, which is due to be completed around March next year. The association, along with other interested parties in the sector, will have an opportunity to comment on the outcome of the research project.

Finally, may I take the opportunity of saying that it is extremely important that my officials and I continue to listen to the views of all stakeholders in preparing and formulating the key policy guidance flowing from the RDS.

Northern Ireland Independent Retail Association

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any requests received for meetings with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Association in the past twelve months. (AQW 115/01)

Mr Campbell: I would refer the member to the answer that I gave to AQW 114/01.

Car Parks

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of car parks owned and operated by his Department in each Roads Service division. (AQW 126/01)

Mr Campbell: I have answered Written Assembly Questions AQW 126/01, AQW 127/01, AQW 129/01 and AQW 130/01 together. The details requested in these questions are contained in the attached table.

Car Parks

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of pay and display car parks operated by his Department in each of the Roads Service division. (AQW 127/01)

Mr Campbell: I have answered Written Assembly Questions AQW 126/01, AQW 127/01, AQW 129/01 and AQW 130/01 together. The details requested in these questions are contained in the attached table.

Car Parking Facilities

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of on-street car parking facilities operated by his Department in each of the Roads Service division. (AQW 128/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service provides on-street car parking facilities in all cities, towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland. These facilities are provided with and without restrictions. Charged on-street car parking facilities are, however, only provided by Roads Service Eastern Division in Belfast. These facilities comprise 1360 charged car parking spaces in 92 streets in the city centre.

Car Parks

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of barrier operated car parks operated by his Department in each Roads Service division. (AQW 129/01)

Mr Campbell: I have answered Written Assembly Questions AQW 126/01, AQW 127/01, AQW 129/01 and AQW 130/01 together. The details requested in these questions are contained in the attached table.

Car Parks

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of free car parks owned by his Department in each Roads Service division. (AQW 130/01)

Mr Campbell: I have answered Written Assembly Questions AQW 126/01, AQW 127/01, AQW 129/01 and AQW 130/01 together. The details requested in these questions are contained in the attached table.

CAR PARKS OWNED AND OPERATED BY DRD ROADS SERVICE

Division	AQW 126/01		AQW 127/01	AQW 129/01	AQW 130/01
	No. of car parks owned by Roads Service	No. of car parks operated by Roads Service ⁽¹⁾	No. of pay and display car parks operated by Roads Service ⁽²⁾	No. of barrier car parks operated by Roads Service ⁽²⁾	No. of free car parks owned by Roads Service ⁽³⁾
Northern	82	83	23	8	52
Eastern	76	83	20	28	35
Southern	119	121	15	18	87
Western	73	73	18	-	55

⁽¹⁾ Includes car parks owned and leased by Roads Service. The car parking tariffs in these car parks are determined by Roads Service.

⁽²⁾ Includes car parks managed by external contractors on behalf of Roads Service.

⁽³⁾ Roads Service also leases one car park in Southern Division which is free to members of the public.

Railway Halt at Scarva

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any steps being taken by Translink to upgrade the rail station at Scarva and to develop its use by rail travellers from Banbridge and the surrounding area. (AQW 138/01)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that while it will continue to maintain the railway halt at Scarva to a safe operational standard, it has no plans to upgrade it. Translink will, however, continue to monitor passenger demand for upgrading the halt and developing its use.

Helm Corporation Limited

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the number of staff from Helm Corporation Limited working within the Roads Service and (b) how many of those have been successful in gaining employment directly with the Roads Service. (AQW 139/01)

Mr Campbell:

- (a) There are currently four staff from Helm Corporation Limited working in the Roads Service – two are employed on a part-time consultancy basis, and the other two are employed as an interim arrangement to cover vacant accountancy posts; and
- (b) No-one from Helm Corporation Limited has been successful in gaining employment directly with the Roads Service.

Helm Corporation Limited

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much money was paid to Helm Corporation Limited in the last five years. (AQW 140/01)

Mr Campbell: In the last five years, the Roads Service has paid a total of £700K to Helm Corporation Limited for its services.

Helm Corporation Limited

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Roads Service staff who are currently on secondment to Helm Corporation Limited. (AQW 141/01)

Mr Campbell: There are currently no Roads Service staff on secondment to Helm Corporation Limited, but I understand that two members of staff, on career breaks, have been working with the company.

Liscurry Gardens, Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 56/01, to detail, including dates, the action that the Roads Service has taken to persuade the developer to complete the necessary works at Liscurry Gardens, Strabane; and to make a statement. (AQW 159/01)

Mr Campbell: In addition to carrying out site visits and convening several meetings with the developer of Liscurry Gardens, my Department's Roads Service has written to the developer on eight occasions to remind him of his responsibility to complete the outstanding road works within the development so that the roads can be adopted. The letters were dated 28 February 1991, 7 October 1991, 11 November 1991, 22 February 1993, 16 January 1995, 6 February 1995, 10 June 1998 and 19 September 2001. I am now pleased to report that, subsequent to the most recent letter, the developer contacted Roads Service to advise that he will carry out emergency remedial works commencing on 1 October 2001 and begin work on the other outstanding road works by the end of October 2001.

Ednagee Road, Castlederg: Resurfacing

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3539/00, to explain why the scheme to resurface Ednagee Road, Castlederg has not yet commenced. (AQW 161/01)

Mr Campbell: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have advised that the scheme to resurface Ednagee Road did not commence as originally programmed because of plant difficulties experienced by the contractor. I understand that these difficulties have now been resolved and that the contractor hopes to carry out the scheme in early October 2001.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Accommodation: 15/16 Year Olds

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what accommodation is available for 15/16 year old children who are put out of their own homes. (AQW 162/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): While the Housing Executive has responsibility for housing the homeless it does not provide accommodation specifically for 15/16 year olds. As a general rule under the Housing Selection Scheme an applicant must have attained the age of 18 years at the date of application.

There are however, some exceptions to the general rule where an applicant is aged at least 16 and:

- a. is leaving care;
- b. is a person, in relation to whom a duty is owed under Article 46 of the Children (NI) Order 1995;
- c. has a dependant child or children;
- d. is married with no children;
- e. has an essential need for specific, independent living accommodation, because without that particular accommodation, the applicant will have to refuse:
 1. a specific offer of substantial training; or
 2. a specific offer of employment.

Other accommodation for under 18s may be provided by voluntary sector bodies for example Barnardos Leaving Care Project, Simon Community, Starting Point, Mulholland House and Christians Providing Care. There are a number of on-going initiatives in particular the supported Lodgings Scheme which operates in the Craigavon/Banbridge Health and Social Services Trust area. In addition a small number of 16-year olds may get accommodation from other social housing providers.

The need for further provision of this type of "supported" accommodation, the development of joint protocols between housing providers, social services and the voluntary sector are key issues under the Housing Executive's review of its Homelessness Strategy which was launched, for consultation, on 24 September.

Housing Executive: Waiting List

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people, within the Housing Executive district of Castlereagh, who appear on the waiting list for housing as a result of intimidation. (AQW 189/01)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Housing Executive, but I am advised that the number is 22.

House Sales: Belvoir Estate, Belfast

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive houses that have been sold within the Belvoir Estate, Belfast. (AQW 190/01)

Mr Morrow: This is a matter for the Housing Executive, but I am advised that the number sold is 689.

Glenalva Family Unit: Funding

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Social Development to increase the level of funding made available to

the Salvation Army's Glenalva Family Unit in order to provide for childcare assistance. (AQW 193/01)

Mr Morrow: My Department does not fund this project.

Housing Executive: Workforce

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to detail, by gender, the religious breakdown of the administrative workforce in the Housing Executive. (AQW 213/01)

Mr Morrow: As you will appreciate the collection of data relating to religion is a sensitive issue and is collected solely to meet an employer's monitoring obligations. The table below shows the position at 1 August 2001. The figures comprise permanent salaried staff and include staff seconded out as well as those staff on career break.

Male		
Protestant	Catholic	Not Known
677 (26.0%)	666 (25.6%)	16 (0.6%)
Female		
Protestant	Catholic	Not Known
613 (23.5%)	621 (23.9%)	9 (0.4%)

Housing Executive: "Code of Conduct"

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development to state whether he has sought legal opinion regarding what organisations should be declared as secret societies under section 7.6 of the Housing Executive's Code of Conduct. (AQW 214/01)

Mr Morrow: I have not sought a legal opinion, nor has the Housing Executive, which drew up the code. That particular paragraph was taken directly from the model Code of Conduct for Local Authorities prepared by the Local Government Management Board, now Local Government Employers Organisation. The Local Government Staff Commission has also adopted this provision as part of the model which it recommends to local authorities within Northern Ireland.

Housing Executive: Recruitment

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister for Social Development, in respect of the recent level 4 (publicly advertised) recruitment exercise in the NI Housing Executive, to detail (a) how many persons applied for these posts; (b) how many male Protestants applied for these posts; (c) how many persons were successful; and (d) how many male protestants were successful. (AQO 161/01)

Mr Morrow: While this is a matter for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive you will also appreciate that the collection of data relating to religion is a sensitive issue and is collected solely to meet an employer's monitoring obligations. The impact of the level 4 recruitment exercise on the composition of the Housing Executive's workforce as a whole will be reflected in the annual monitoring return to the Equality Commission.

I can, however, tell you that the total number of applicants was 1,325. Of these, 30% were male, 13% were male Protestant and 11% of the male Protestants were successful. The number of successful male Protestant applicants was broadly proportionate to the numbers applying.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 12 October 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

EU Non-Structural Funds: North Belfast

Mr Dodds asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the amount of EU funds, apart from structural funds, that were spent in the constituency of North Belfast in each year from 1997 to 2001. (AQW 169/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP:

NORTH BELFAST – EU NON - STRUCTURAL FUNDS

Calendar Year	Total £
1997	22,000.00
1998	68,000.00
1999	151,817.67
2000	185,496.66
2001 (To Date)	38,018.66

North/South Study: Obstacles to Mobility

Mrs Courtney asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to indicate what plans are in place to implement the recommendations of the North/South Study on Obstacles to Mobility. (AQO 233/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The steering group that was established to oversee the study is due to meet this month to consider the draft report. It will also consider the responses to the report from Government Departments, North and South. The consultants may be asked to incorporate some final changes to the text before the report is finalised.

The steering group is due to report to the next plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on the outcome of the study, and at that stage consideration will be given to implementation of the recommendations.

Equality Commission

Mr Poots asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) if any cases have been taken against a senior Commissioner of the Equality Commission under employment legislation; and (b) if there are any cases pending. (AQO 246/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: We understand no complaints have been made against a senior Commissioner of the Equality Commission in their capacity as senior Commissioner. Complaints to the Fair Employment or Industrial Tribunal under employment and anti-discrimination legislation are a matter of public record.

Ministerial Code of Conduct/Pledge of Office

Mr Hussey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail whether any Minister within the Executive has failed to comply with the terms of the Ministerial Code of Conduct and/or the Pledge of Office. (AQO 208/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: Whether a Minister has failed to comply with the Pledge of Office and the Code of Conduct, and so no longer enjoys the confidence of the Assembly, is a matter for the Assembly

Civic Forum

Mrs E Bell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the current status and operation of the Civic Forum; to report on its current activities; and to make a statement. (AQO 240/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Civic Forum continues to operate and has met in plenary session on seven occasions at locations throughout Northern Ireland. The most recent plenary meeting was held on Saturday 6 October at the Whitla Hall at Queen's University. A number of sub-committees and project teams meet on a regular basis.

In July the Forum made a positive and constructive response to the Executive's Position Report on developing a Programme for Government and the Budget for 2002-03. Ministers Nesbitt and Haughey have now written to the Civic Forum to seek its views on the recently published draft Programme for Government and the Executive's budget proposals.

The Forum is currently considering three consultation documents. These are the Department for Employment and Learning's consultation paper, Employability and Long-term Unemployment, our own Department's paper on the Review of Community Relations Policy and the draft Bill of Rights that was published recently by the

Human Rights Commission. In addition to this work, the Forum has five other major projects at different stages of development. These are on life long learning, combating poverty, towards a plural society, entrepreneurship and creativity and creating a sustainable Northern Ireland.

Trans European Network

Mr McGrady asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the consideration given by the Executive to the cross border element of the Trans European Network from Larne to Rosslare.

(AQO 243/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Executive's Programme for Government clearly recognises the importance of the strategic roads network to the economy. It is necessary to take strategic decisions on key infrastructure issues because of the budgets involved and, for that reason, the Executive has set aside £40 million over a number of years to ensure that the Trans European Network Route from Larne to the border south of Newry is developed coherently. The major investment in the A8, the Westlink and the Newry-Dundalk road will strengthen the competitiveness of the ports of Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint and help to improve our economy. The dualling of the proposed Newry to Dundalk road will have a significant contribution to make to cross-border trade and mobility.

Farmers in West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what measures are in the Programme for Government to achieve social inclusion for farmers and workers' groups in West Tyrone.

(AQO 212/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Programme for Government highlights the Executive's commitment to a society in which people can share in growing prosperity and in which there is equality of opportunity and justice for all. This commitment applies to all groups of people in all parts of Northern Ireland.

We are very much aware of the particular difficulties facing the farming community and other sectors, and the draft Programme which we presented to the Assembly on 24 September recognises this. The draft Programme also restates our commitment to implementing all targets and actions in Departments' New TSN action plans, actions that are designed to tackle social need and promote social inclusion. It includes specific commitments on provision of help for those seeking employment and for those seeking to maintain and enhance their own employability.

The draft Programme for Government also commits the Executive to taking forward an action plan for the strategic development of the agri-food industry for the next decade – work that will be influenced by the very comprehensive report from the Vision for the Future of the Agri-food Industry group – and to training programmes to help farmers adapt to changing business practices and consumer demands.

It is, of course, important to point out that we are in the process of consulting with Assembly Committees and others on the Executive's draft Programme. If the Member has ideas that he wishes to submit on the areas he has highlighted, we would be very glad to have these.

Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) Forum

Ms Lewsley asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline the consideration given to representation on the Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) Forum.

(AQO 232/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Forum was established on an ad hoc basis to contribute to the development of proposals for the Commissioner for Children and a children's strategy.

The current membership of the Forum was drawn from the core members of the 'Putting Children First' campaign as this includes the major children's organisations and umbrella groups for the smaller children's organisations across the country. Umbrella organisations in relation to disability and ethnic minorities were also included in order to ensure that these particular issues are considered with respect to children.

We have received representations from a number of organisations, suggesting that membership should be more broadly based, notably from faith-based organisations and organisations working with disabled children. The Forum itself has also asked us to review its composition.

We therefore intend to review the composition of the Forum in the very near future and, in doing so, we shall give careful consideration to the representations made to us.

OFMDFM: Quangos

Dr McDonnell asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the number of quangos within the responsibility of the Office; (b) the cost of each; and (c) any plans to review them.

(AQO 199/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Office currently has responsibility for four quangos, which are:

- Northern Ireland Economic Council
- Statute Law Committee for Northern Ireland
- Planning Appeals Commission
- Water Appeals Commission

The cost of each is as follows:

Northern Ireland Economic Council	£500k per annum
Statute Law Committee for Northern Ireland	Nil
Planning Appeals Commission	Joint Cost of £1.2 million per annum
Water Appeals Commission	

A review of the Economic Council has just been completed and its recommendations are being considered by Ministers. There are no plans to carry out a review of the Statute Law Committee and a quinquennial review of the Planning Appeals Commission and Water Appeals Commission is being considered for the current financial year.

Draft Programme for Government

Mr Gallagher asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to outline what account has been taken of the responses from Assembly Committees in drafting the Programme for Government and, in particular, the response from the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. (AQO 229/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: We were pleased with the constructive and comprehensive response we received from Assembly Committees to the Executive's Position Report on the Programme for Government and Budget. These responses were considered very carefully by all Departments and helped shape the development of the draft Programme that we presented to the Assembly on 24 September 2001.

The Committees generally supported the Executive's five priorities and, in the light of this support, these priorities have remained unchanged in the draft Programme.

In response to specific comments made by the Health Committee and echoed by other groups, the draft Programme includes a much stronger focus on meeting the needs of children; on accident prevention; on moving forward on hospital services in the light of the Report of the Acute Hospitals Review Group; and on improved cross-departmental collaboration.

Community Relations Unit

Mr Maskey asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the steps the Equality and Community Relations Units have initiated to combat sectarianism. (AQO 225/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Community Relations Unit of our office tackles

sectarianism by providing grants to the Community Relations Council and to the district councils under the District Council Community Relations Programme. The unit also provides assistance toward the building of neutral venues for local communities.

The unit, through the Community Relations Council, was responsible for the administration of the Pathways to Reconciliation measure of the European Peace I Programme (EUSPPR) and will be also for the Reconciliation for Sustainable Peace measure of the European Peace II Programme. It also administered directly, in conjunction with the Department of Education, the Community Relations Measure of the EU Physical and Social Environment Sectoral Programme.

The Research Branch within Equality and Social Need Division also funds community relations research projects.

In developing a cross-departmental community relations strategy, we shall include measures to tackle the underlying causes of community division, sectarianism and racism as well as measures to ensure an effective and co-ordinated response to sectarian and racial intimidation.

As a first step, we are examining current practice throughout the devolved Administration for responding to such intimidation and how this could be improved on and taken forward.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Ice Hockey UK

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether consultation had taken place with all relevant parties in relation to granting a licence to Ice Hockey UK to become the National Governing Body. (AQW 122/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): [*holding answer 2 October 2001*]: Licenses are not granted to enable governing bodies for a particular sport to operate. Ice Hockey UK (IHUK) was formed by a democratic process in 1997 to take over from the British Ice Hockey Association (BIHA). Members of the BIHA (which included England and Scotland, but not Northern Ireland) were involved in this process.

Ice Hockey UK

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail whether the rules of Ice Hockey UK are available for inspection and consideration. (AQW 123/01)

Mr McGimpsey: [holding answer 2 October 2001]: The rules of Ice Hockey UK are currently being amended but they should be available for inspection from the beginning of December 2001.

Ice Hockey UK

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he could confirm that Ice Hockey UK has the sole licence for ice hockey and playing teams in Northern Ireland. (AQW 124/01)

Mr McGimpsey: [holding answer 2 October 2001]: Ice Hockey UK is the recognised voice of ice hockey in the UK at international level. It represents the playing interests of UK teams within the world body – the International Ice Hockey Federation and provides the structures within which ice hockey is played on a competitive basis.

US Funding

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any indication of the withdrawal of US funding for projects overseen by his Department as a result of the US Administration's reaction to the recent terrorist atrocity in America. (AQW 192/01)

Mr McGimpsey: There are no projects overseen by my Department which receive US funding and as such I have no indication of any withdrawal of funding.

South Stand, Windsor Park

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail his plans in relation to the redevelopment of the South Stand at Windsor Park, Belfast. (AQW 198/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I am fully aware of the condition of the South Stand at Windsor Park. However the final report on the soccer strategy is expected to recommend that Northern Ireland should have a stadium that meets international standards for football. Any further development at Windsor Park will, therefore, have to be considered in the light of this recommendation.

International Motor Sports Ltd

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to meet the clerk responsible for the road-racing events held at Carrowdore, Tandragee, Cookstown, Mid Antrim and Dundrod 150. (AQW 211/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I assume that your question arises out of the IMS Report recommendation that consider-

ation should be given to the cessation of national road races in the province.

I do not have any plans to meet with individual related groups at this time. It is ultimately a matter for the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland (MCUI), who represent the road racing community, to determine the future for their sport.

The MCUI has recently signed up to a strategic review process for motorsport, alongside all other motorsport governing bodies. The review will provide the MCUI with an opportunity to respond formally to the IMS Report recommendations – including articulating the concerns of individual clubs. I can assure you that this process, which is being facilitated by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland, is founded on the basis of consent, rather than imposition, and, in short, places the future of road racing firmly in the hands of the Motor Cycle Union of Ireland.

International Motor Sports Ltd

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) the role undertaken by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland in the International Motor Sports Ltd road racing report and (b) whether the Sports Council has considered the impact that this report will have on road racing. (AQW 222/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland commissioned, on my behalf, International Motor-sports Ltd to undertake a study to review the current state of the province's existing short circuits and to determine the demand, viability and feasibility of establishing a regional motorsports facility.

The Sports Council recognise that some of the recommendations of the report are contentious and have caused some difficulty for the motorcycle road race community, but they are not in a position to offer a specific comment in advance of the further consideration that will be given to this issue by them and the governing bodies during the course of a strategic review, which should be completed by the beginning of next year.

International Motor Sports Ltd

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (a) those people who were asked to provide evidence by International Motor Sports Ltd (IMS) in respect of their report on road racing and (b) how wide was their contact with those clubs that organise the five road races recommended for closure by IMS. (AQW 224/01)

Mr McGimpsey: International Motor Sports consulted with motor sports governing bodies, the related interested parties and the general public during their evidence

gathering period. Although the consultants did not meet with individual clubs, all motorsport clubs were asked to offer their views, through a questionnaire, meetings were held with governing bodies and potential developers/circuit owners, and market research was undertaken to gauge the views of the wider community.

International Motor Sports Ltd

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to give his assessment of the International Motor Sports Ltd report on road racing and say if he is aware of concerns expressed by local clubs and enthusiasts in respect of the report. (AQW 225/01)

Mr McGimpsey: I recognise that some of the recommendations of the report are contentious and have caused some difficulty for the motorcycle road race community, but it would not be appropriate for me to offer a specific comment in advance of the further consideration that will be given by the governing bodies and Sports Council.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to identify events supported by the Northern Ireland Events Company which generated a profit. (AQW 227/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The policy of the Northern Ireland Events Company is that it does not provide funding support for events which make a profit. The company does provide underwriting facilities for events where there is any potential to make a profit but funding is dependent on the event operating at a loss and is capped by the limit of the underwriting given.

The relationship between my Department and the Northern Ireland Events Company is governed by a standard financial memorandum which requires the company to adopt business practices and procedures which are consistent with all relevant public sector policies. With specific regard to New Targeting Social Need for all those events that meet all the specified core criteria an appraisal is undertaken which includes consideration of New Targeting Social Need objectives.

The Northern Ireland Events Company does not run events. It provides the minimum level of funding required to enable events to take place, which would not happen without the Events Company support. The company sets individual performance targets for each event, which relate to its funding, but it does not necessarily have comprehensive information on revenue generated per event.

The company did, however, commission an external appraisal of the impact made by events supported

during 1998-99 and 1999-2000. This indicated that total funding of £1.6 million on these events generated a return of £11 million to the local economy.

Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps taken to ensure that funds distributed by the Northern Ireland Events Company reflects the Department's commitment to Targeting Social Need. (AQW 228/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The policy of the Northern Ireland Events Company is that it does not provide funding support for events which make a profit. The company does provide underwriting facilities for events where there is any potential to make a profit but funding is dependent on the event operating at a loss and is capped by the limit of the underwriting given.

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Northern Ireland Events Company

Mr Adams asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to quantify the revenue per event generated by the Northern Ireland Events company since 2000. (AQW 229/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The policy of the Northern Ireland Events Company is that it does not provide funding support for events which make a profit. The company does provide underwriting facilities for events where there is any potential to make a profit but funding is dependent on the event operating at a loss and is capped by the limit of the underwriting given.

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EDUCATION

Departmental Funding: Nursery and Pre-School Playgroups

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail the capital cost per child that has been invested in (a) the nursery education sector and (b) pre-school playgroups for each of the last three years. (AQW 219/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): The Department of Education funds places in pre-school playgroups on a recurrent basis through the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme. It does not allocate capital funding to them.

The capital cost per child invested by my Department for the expansion of the statutory nursery sector over the last three years is £2,555.00. It is more appropriate to make an assessment over the three-year period rather than on the basis of individual years as capital expenditure on nursery schools and units can straddle financial years.

Departmental Funding: Pre-School Playgroups

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail what assessment was carried out to determine that there must be a minimum of eight children in the immediate

pre-school year to enable play groups to qualify for departmental funding. (AQW 231/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The curriculum for pre-school children is designed to promote their personal, social and emotional development. It is the assessment of the Education and Training Inspectorate that a peer group of at least eight children is required in order for the curriculum to be delivered in an effective manner.

Pre-School Education

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail how recent inspection reports are taken into consideration should pre-school play groups have less than eight children in the immediate pre-school year when determining suitability for continued departmental funding. (AQW 232/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The curriculum specified by the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme is designed to promote children's personal, social and emotional development, and in order to facilitate this development the minimum group size has been set at eight. This requirement is a fundamental aspect of the programme and is not affected by inspection, which reports on whether the education offered in pre-school centres meets the programme's quality standards.

Pre-School Education

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education to detail how the number of children enrolled in a pre-school play group is taken into consideration should there be less than eight children in the immediate pre-school year when determining suitability for continued departmental funding. (AQW 233/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is considered essential that, in order to promote personal, social and emotional development, children learn and play as part of peer group of at least eight. Where a playgroup has less than eight children in the immediate pre-school year, and therefore does not fulfil the requirements for funding under the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, my Department does not take the total number of children enrolled into consideration.

Dyslexia

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Education what provisions are available for mainstream secondary school pupils who have been diagnosed as dyslexic. (AQW 256/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The emphasis is on early identification and intervention for children with dyslexia which means that resources are mainly concentrated at

primary school level. Support for dyslexic secondary school age pupils with statements of special educational needs consists of additional teaching by peripatetic, outreach and part-time teachers. Advice and support is also given to teachers.

Pre-School Education

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education if he has any plans to review the current criteria to determine eligibility of pre-school play groups for departmental funding as it may, inadvertently, lead to groups that are sustainable in the long term having to close.

(AQW 266/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Under my Department's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, the voluntary and private playgroup sector is, for the first time, able to access funding for places which have in the past been funded largely from parental contributions or other sources. I am satisfied that the eligibility requirements that currently pertain contribute significantly to ensuring that all settings in the programme offer a high standard of educational provision, and I have no plans to review the current criteria.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Equality in Higher Education

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline exactly how he intends to ensure equality of provision in relation to higher education as outlined in the draft Programme for Government.

(AQW 247/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): My student support proposals, especially the introduction of means-tested bursaries and my support for a range of actions by the universities and NUS-USI, are designed to enhance the opportunities of those from poorer backgrounds to access higher education on an equal basis. I will, in addition, be introducing a Special Education Needs Bill, which will require institutions not to treat students with disabilities less favourably than those who are not disabled.

Redundancies at Shorts Bombardier

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action will be taken, in terms of re-training schemes, as a result of the recent announcement of redundancies at Shorts Bombardier. (AQW 275/01)

Dr Farren: My officials based in the dedicated JobCentre in Interpoint and throughout the JobCentre network will help all who are made redundant from Shorts Bombardier. Services will include help with jobsearch and the identification of suitable retraining options. Each individual's needs will be separately assessed and appropriate support provided.

Job Losses in Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he will take to ensure that those job skills gained through employment at Shorts Bombardier will not be lost to the industrial sector. (AQW 308/01)

Dr Farren: JobCentre staff will collect information about the skills of workers being made redundant at Shorts Bombardier and will help them to find alternative employment, wherever possible, with other companies in the industrial sector requiring their skills.

Job Losses at Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps are being taken to ensure that the design and technology skills attained at Shorts Bombardier are not going to be lost as a result of the pending redundancies. (AQW 337/01)

Dr Farren: JobCentre staff will collect information about the skills of workers being made redundant at Shorts Bombardier, including design and technology skills, and will help them to find alternative employment, wherever possible, where their skills can be fully utilised.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Assistance for Entrepreneurs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail what help or assistance is available for entrepreneurs to develop business ideas or inventions. (AQW 226/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): My Department, through LEDU and IRTU or indirectly through enterprise centres and specialist organisations, currently operates a number of schemes and services that assist entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs to develop business ideas and inventions.

For example, LEDU, through its regional Technical Clinics, brings in individuals with relevant technical expertise to advise individuals regarding their new ideas

and reviews such ideas and inventions with a view to providing financial assistance to enable further development, via the Business Innovation Link (BIL).

LEDU also operates schemes, through the Local Enterprise Network and a number of councils to stimulate new ideas. Programmes such as Ideas Generation, Products into Practice and IT Ideas for Business help people refine their ideas, consider the commercial potential and the individual's desire to set up in business.

LEDU's Enterprise Excellence Programme is designed to target knowledge-based ideas from universities and research institutions, and as these ideas tend to be more technical, LEDU works alongside IRTU to progress these.

IRTU, through the SMART Programme, offers financial assistance to individuals and small companies to develop new products or processes and, in conjunction with the International Fund for Ireland, financial assistance is available under the RADIANCE Programme to those individuals who wish to develop new products or processes in a joint venture with a US, Canadian or European Union company.

IRTU also provides a wide range of support both technical and financial for ideas and inventions from the business community, and entrepreneurs can now also seek a place in research-linked incubators, which provide business development support and access to the university science and engineering research base.

Terrorist Events in US: Effect on NI's Economy

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assessment he has made of the impact which the atrocities in America may have on current and future employment levels. (AQW 253/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Even before 11 September, the global economy was experiencing a downturn, and this had already begun to adversely affect the Northern Ireland economy, particularly within the ICT sector. This global slowdown has been compounded by the terrorist events in the US, and the immediate fallout, in terms of employment, has been borne by the airline / aerospace industry. The recent announcements by Bombardier, British Airways and Aer Lingus could cause the loss of more than 2,200 well-paid jobs with hundreds more employees in downstream businesses also vulnerable. However, my Department and its agencies, together with the Training and Employment Agency, are examining the steps that they may be able to take, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium, to assist and safeguard employment in the many smaller companies in this important sector.

The areas of the Northern Ireland economy that are most vulnerable at present are foreign direct investment

(particularly aerospace and ICT), exports and tourism. Future employment prospects, in these areas, will be largely dependent upon a global economic recovery and the restoration of confidence in the airline industry. My Department will continue in its efforts to attract investment and promote trade and tourism.

ENVIRONMENT

Ards/Down Area Plan

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when the proposals for the Ards/Down Area Plan will be published; and to make a statement.

(AQW 202/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department intends to publish the draft proposals for the new Ards/Down Area Plan in March 2002.

Timber Remains: River Mourne, Strabane

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the significance of timber remains recently discovered in the River Mourne at Strabane (b) any plans that the Environmental and Heritage Service may have for their preservation and/or display and (c) what liaison has taken place to date on this matter with Strabane District Council. (AQW 215/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) I understand that the timbers were found during development works on the riverbank. They have been examined by the Centre for Maritime Archaeology in the University of Ulster, Coleraine. The timbers have been dated to the late 17th century, and it is thought that they may have formed part of an early bridge or jetty at a traditional fording place of the river.
- (b) The conservation and display of the Strabane timbers is not a responsibility of my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), although its staff may provide specialist advice.

I should add that the timbers were discovered during development work. It was a condition of the planning approval for this development that a programme of archaeological works be agreed with my Department and implemented by the developer. However, the development proceeded before any programme could be agreed or implemented; as a result no archaeologist was present to observe the discovery of the timbers, to investigate

the site where they were found, or to look for other evidence which might increase our knowledge and understanding of the remains. In such circumstances, the interest of these timbers is limited to what may be speculated about them.

My officials are currently considering the issues raised by this case in view of the fact that development took place without agreement on or implementation of a programme of archaeological works.

- (c) I understand that members of Strabane District Council have raised this issue with the Planning Service. Meanwhile, EHS staff have spoken with council staff and are offering advice on the potential for preservation of the timbers.

Extraction of Lignite

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of the Environment how the proposed licences, under the Mineral Development Act (NI) 1969, for lignite extraction at Coagh and Stewartstown will affect Areas of Special Scientific Interest in the Lough Neagh area and what restrictions he will consider to ensure the protection of Areas of Special Scientific Interest in the Lough Neagh area with regard to the aforementioned licences.

(AQW 257/01)

Mr Foster: I am advised by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) that no licences for the extraction of lignite at Coagh or Stewartstown are being considered. Applications for two prospecting licences are being considered by DETI, but, even if these licences were granted, they would not permit the company to extract lignite in commercial quantities.

A prospecting licence entitles an exploration company to undertake a programme of work agreed with DETI. If the company is encouraged by the results of that programme, it may decide to apply for a mining licence but is under no obligation to do so. Any application for a mining licence would be subject to a further, separate consultation process. Moreover, the company would have to apply for planning permission and, as part of this, prepare an environmental statement.

DETI is now undertaking consultation on the prospecting licences, and comments are invited by 14 October 2001.

My Department will be responding to this consultation. My officials will give DETI details of sites designated for nature conservation purposes within, and in close proximity to, the areas covered by the applications. This will include designations affecting Lough Neagh. This information will assist DETI in assessing the potential impact of the licences on the environment.

BNFL Sellafield

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what monitoring takes place of emissions from BNFL Sellafield and if the data is available for the general public.

(AQW 290/01)

Mr Foster: Discharges into the Irish Sea from BNFL Sellafield are authorised by the Environment Agency for England and Wales. While my Department has no jurisdiction over Sellafield, it has a comprehensive monitoring programme in place to assess the impact on the Northern Ireland coastline.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service arranges for samples of seawater, seaweed, sediments, fish, nephrops, mussels and winkles to be collected quarterly and forwarded to the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science Laboratory in Lowestoft for analysis. This programme has been continuing since the 1970s.

The levels of radioactivity measured indicate that they are of negligible radiological significance.

The Environment and Heritage Service also monitors the gamma dose rate in air over intertidal sediments in each council area that has a coastline. The results indicate minimal radioactive deposition and are consistent with normal background levels.

The Northern Ireland results are published annually in a report entitled 'Radioactivity in Food and the Environment' issued by the Food Standards Agency and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency in the Northern Ireland Abstract of Statistics and in the biennial report of my Department's Chief Radiochemical Inspector.

BNFL Sellafield

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what communication has taken place between his Department and management at BNFL Sellafield.

(AQW 291/01)

Mr Foster: The Department's Industrial Pollution and Radiochemical Inspectorate has visited the site on several occasions over the last 10 years to familiarise themselves with the operations carried out there.

Apart from those visits there has been no contact with the management at BNFL Sellafield.

Discharges from the Sellafield site are authorised by the Environment Agency in England and Wales. The Agency keeps the Department's Chief Radiochemical Inspector fully informed about developments on the Sellafield site.

My Department's Environment and Heritage Service has a very comprehensive monitoring programme in

place to assess the impact of discharges into the Irish Sea on the Northern Ireland coastline, and the results are published annually.

The monitoring programme is reviewed on an annual basis to ensure its effectiveness and is modified as necessary to reflect changes in the Sellafield operations.

Nendrum and Whithorn

Dr Adamson asked the Minister of the Environment what steps the Environment and Heritage Service has taken to publicise the connection between the British church at Whithorn in Galloway and the monastery at Nendrum in East Ulster. (AQW 303/01)

Mr Foster: The view of my Department's Environment and Heritage Service is that there is no strong connection between Nendrum and Whithorn other than the fact that both are important and well-known early monastic sites. It has therefore taken no steps to publicise any connection.

EHS archaeologists have had professional contact with Whithorn archaeologists and have visited the site.

Housing Development Occupancies: Coleraine

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of apartments in the Coleraine planning district which have received planning approval and have been completed but remain unoccupied. (AQO 239/01)

Mr Foster: I cannot answer the question as framed by the Member, as my Department does not maintain information on housing development occupancies. My Department does conduct an annual survey on completions, but the most recent survey has not yet been completed. I will write to the Member when information is to hand.

However, as regards approvals granted by my Department, I can inform the Member that, from September 1998, 103 applications for apartment developments totalling 1,160 units have been granted planning permission in the Coleraine sub-divisional planning area covering the boroughs of Coleraine, Ballymoney and Moyle. During the same period, 27 applications for apartment development totalling 224 units were refused.

Waste Management Strategy

Ms Hanna asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) what plans he has to assist the three council groups in formulating the waste management strategy and (b) whether adequate funding and help will be in

place for the consultation and education programme as well as its practical implementation. (AQO 196/01)

Mr Foster: On the first part of the question, my Department's Waste Management Strategy, published in March 2000 provided guidance on the development of their waste management plans. In addition, officials have provided guidance on the development of the partnership groups and on identification of the best practicable environmental option, along with comprehensive information on waste arisings.

My Department has also recently consulted on a draft planning policy statement concerned with planning policies for the development of waste management facilities.

Financial assistance totalling £130,000 has already been provided to the partnership groups to assist with the development of their plans. I am currently considering what further financial assistance they may need to complete their plans or to support pilot schemes in areas such as recycling and composting.

On the second part of the question, the strategy recognises the need to change public attitudes to reduction, recycling and recovery of waste. My Department will be mounting public awareness and education campaigns to address this need. Some £500,000 is being allocated to these campaigns in this financial year, of which approximately £100,000 will be for education. The campaigns will be planned to coincide with public consultation on council waste management plans.

My Department will be appointing specialist consultants to assist with the development and implementation of effective campaigns. Part of the specification will be the production of generic promotional materials for district councils to use as part of their own public consultation programmes.

Planning Applications: Derry City Council Area

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of applications under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 that have been lodged by developers in the Derry City Council area in each of the last five years. (AQO 237/01)

Mr Foster: I should first of all explain that planning applications are not submitted under Article 31 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991. It is the role of my Department to determine whether the development for which approval is being sought falls within any of the criteria described in Article 31 of the Order and, if so, to apply the special procedure described in the Article for processing the application.

My Department has applied the Article 31 procedure in the Derry City Council area to two applications submitted by developers in 1997 and 1998 respectively. No applications submitted by developers have been designated as Article 31 since then.

Conservation Area Grants

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment to detail when he intends to reinstate conservation grants; and to make a statement. (AQO 195/01)

Mr Foster: My Department continues to make conservation area grant payments. Grants being made to individuals arise from commitments made before a moratorium on new grant applications was imposed in 1998. Grants are also made to groups taking forward schemes under the Townscape Heritage Initiative, which is run and part funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. In 2000-01 the total grants paid out by my Department to individuals and groups amounted to £718,000.

Lifting the moratorium on new applications depends on there being a grant budget available to meet demand. However, the current commitments to individual property owners and to Townscape Heritage Initiative schemes are continuing to place pressure on my Department's annual budget. The budget in 2001-02 is £518,000 and I have bid for an additional £150,000 in the September monitoring round. I would also have liked to allocate further funding, but this could not be accommodated in the Executive's recently published draft Budget.

I cannot therefore lift the moratorium on new grant applications from individual property owners. However, I will continue to make the case for funding in this area, and I will be happy to lift the moratorium should additional funds become available.

Development Plans for District Councils

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment to detail whether the development plans for the 26 district council areas are proceeding according to schedule. (AQO 221/01)

Mr Foster: As set out in the draft Programme for Government, my Department's target is to adopt six development plans and publish seven draft development plans by the end of March 2003 and to have full development plan coverage of all district council areas in Northern Ireland by the end of 2005.

My Department is currently on schedule to meet this commitment, with the exception of the Dungannon and South Tyrone Area Plan. This has been delayed significantly due to uncertainty by the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service about the proposed line for the Dungannon through pass.

New Housing Developments: Sewage Facilities

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of the Environment to advise how the Planning Service, in zoning land for housing development, takes into consideration the environmental impact of subsequent requirements for providing emergency sewage overflows.

(AQO 200/01)

Mr Foster: During the preparation of development plans, my Department undertakes extensive consultation prior to plan publication with many statutory bodies. These include the Department for Regional Development's Water Service and the Environmental Health Departments of the relevant district councils. This is done in order to ensure that there are no major environmental constraints affecting lands identified for future housing development. In designating new areas for development, the capacity of existing sewage facilities is a major material consideration.

The information and advice received provides an important input to the comprehensive environmental appraisal which the Planning Service undertakes as a background to the policies and proposals contained in the plan.

My Department also undertakes consultation with both of these bodies as part of the normal processing of relevant planning applications. Where a pumping station forms part of the planned infrastructure, and an emergency overflow facility is required by the Water Service, the developer is required to liaise with both the Department for Regional Development's Water Service and my Department's Environment and Heritage Service.

As a standard practice throughout the UK, such a facility is subject to the consent of the regulator, which in Northern Ireland is my Department's Environment and Heritage Service.

Road Safety

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to advise if he has received sufficient funding from the draft Budget proposals to improve road safety.

(AQO 214/01)

Mr Foster: Since devolution I have been successful in securing significantly increased resources for road safety. The allocation in the current year has enabled my Department to appoint 10 additional road safety education officers, doubling the number of officials working with schools on road safety. I have also been able to increase the resources for my Department's road safety publicity campaigns by some 75% over pre-devolution levels.

All 10 new road safety education officers are in place, giving fresh impetus to the promotion of road safety through the schools. They have also enabled the courses for convicted drink/drive offenders to be made available throughout Northern Ireland, as well as allowing the development of new initiatives such as driver improvement schemes, practical child pedestrian safety training at the roadside and a scheme for monitoring the fitting of child safety restraints.

The additional resources for publicity have allowed new hard-hitting campaigns to be launched reinforcing the key road safety messages on drink-driving, speed and seatbelts.

This increased level of funding has been maintained in the draft Budget for 2002-03 and will allow my Department to continue to make an enhanced contribution to improving road safety through its education and promotional activities.

It is important to bear in mind that improvements in road safety depend primarily on road user behaviour but also on the enforcement activities of the police and the engineering activities of the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

Sellafield

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland to draw up a common position on the Sellafield nuclear reactor.
(AQO 222/01)

Mr Foster: I have had no discussions with my counterpart in the Republic on matters relating to Sellafield. Discharges from Sellafield are regulated by the Environment Agency in England and Wales and, consequently, neither I nor my Department has any jurisdiction in this matter.

However, Sellafield was one of the topics selected by the Environment Sector of the British/Irish Council, at its inaugural meeting in October 2000, to form part of its initial work programme. The Irish and Manx Governments agreed to lead in the preparation of a paper for consideration at a future meeting of BIC. I shall, of course, put forward any relevant Northern Ireland considerations in future BIC discussions.

I recognise, moreover, that this is a sensitive issue, and I am aware of the concerns that many people have about the Sellafield plant. My Department therefore monitors radioactivity levels from Sellafield discharges at a number of locations across Northern Ireland. It is reassuring to know that the data collected consistently demonstrate low radioactivity levels which give no cause for public concern.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Social Security Office Newry

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what progress has been made in acquiring a site for the new social security office in Newry.
(AQW 244/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The new office will be built on the site of the original building in Bridge Street Newry, which remains in Government ownership.

A number of developers responded to a developer's brief to provide a replacement building, which will also incorporate the Training and Employment and Child Support Agencies, and these proposals are currently being evaluated.

My Department will recommend a preferred Developer as soon as possible after this evaluation is completed.

Pressures on the Health Service

Mr Close asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give his assessment regarding the release of £10 million of the Department of the Environment's budget to alleviate the crisis in the Health Service.
(AQO 235/01)

Mr Durkan: Ministers will consider the views of MLAs and others in respect of proposals for modification of the Draft Budget for 2002-03, as previously confirmed to the Assembly and in accordance with the timetable set out in the Budget document laid in the Assembly on 25 September.

In the course of preparing the Draft Budget all Departments have underlined their spending needs and the implications of reduced allocations. Assembly Committees' comments on the Executive Position Report highlighted some similar points [to me]. In agreeing the Draft Budget the Executive has recognised the pressures on the Health Service by achieving spending increases above the indicative allocations agreed last December.

The Executive will be considering shortly the scope for reallocation of resources in 2001-02 in the September monitoring round.

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The Executive will be considering shortly the scope for reallocation of resources in 2001-02 in the September monitoring round.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Patients Travelling for Surgical Procedures

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her policy on patients travelling to Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland for surgical procedures as a result of extensive waiting lists in Northern Ireland. (AQW 195/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Patients who have been waiting some time for surgical procedures may be offered the opportunity to travel to hospitals in Great Britain or the South of Ireland for their operations. However, it is not always appropriate or convenient for patients to travel for such operations, and it is, therefore, a matter for boards to discuss with patients on an individual basis.

Féadtar deis a thabhairt d'othair a bhí ag fanacht fada go leor ar ghnáthaimh mháinliachta taisteal go hotharlanna sa Bhreatain Mhór nó i ndeisceart na hÉireann dá n-obráidí. Níl sé ceart nó caoithiúil i gcónaí d'othair áfach taisteal lena leithéid d'obráidí a fháil agus, mar sin de, is ceist í seo do bhoird le plé le hothair ar bhonn indibhidiúil.

Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 27/01, to specify what additional financial assistance she can offer to the Rape Crisis Centre in order to prevent it from closing. (AQW 204/01)

Ms de Brún: My officials are working with the Belfast Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Centre in a review of its financial position and management and organisational structure and are seeking to secure the appropriate level of funding to assist it with its current difficulties.

Tá mo chuid feidhmeannach ag obair leis an Ionad Éigeandála um Éigniú agus Mí-Úsáid Ghnéasach Bhéal Feirste in athbhreithniú ar a staid airgeadais agus ar a struchtúr bainistíochta agus eagraíochta, agus tá siad ag féachaint le go leor maoiniú a aimsiú le cuidiú leis an ionad na deacrachtaí ina bhfuil sé faoi láthair a chur de.

Patient Transport

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what co-ordination takes place between GP surgeries and the Ambulance Service to ensure that suitable staff and ambulances are sent out to transport patients to hospital.

(AQW 207/01)

Ms de Brún: The GP, making the request for patient transport, must advise the Ambulance Service of the condition of the patient and the timescale within which transportation to hospital is required. It is then a matter for the Ambulance Service to provide suitable and timely transport. For urgent hospital admissions the Ambulance Service will provide an Accident & Emergency vehicle with two crew members, one of whom will normally be a paramedic and the other an emergency medical technician. For routine admissions or attendance at outpatients the Ambulance Service will, depending on the condition of the patient, provide either a patient care service or high dependency vehicle, with appropriately trained staff.

Caithfidh an gnáthdhochtúir, a iarrann ar iompar d'othar, eolas ar riocht an othair agus ar an mhéid ama a bheadh iompar de dhíth a thabhairt don tSeirbhís Otharcharr. Ansin, is ceist í seo don tSeirbhís Otharcharr iompar cuí agus tráthúil a sholáthar. Le daoine a ghlacadh isteach go práinneach san otharlann, soláthróidh an tSeirbhís Otharcharr feithicil Thimpistí & Éigeandálaí agus beirt bhall den fhoireann, ar paraimhíochaineoir é/í duine díobh agus ar teicneoir éigeandála míochaine é/í an duine eile de ghnáth. Do ghlacadh isteach nó d'fhreastal rialta ag ionaid éisothar, soláthróidh an tSeirbhís Otharcharr, ag brath ar riocht an othair, feithicil sheirbhíse cúraim othair nó ardspleáchais chomh maith le foireann oilte mar is ceart.

Child Development Centre

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the business

objectives associated with moving the Child Development Centre from the Ulster Hospital to Ards Hospital.

(AQW 208/01)

Ms de Brún: I recently announced my approval of the Ulster Hospital and Community HSS Trust £98 million Strategic Development Plan for the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital. My announcement also signalled a £2 million investment to reinstate 20 adult inpatient beds in Jaffe Ward, to address problems of bed capacity and reduce trolley waits at the hospital. Relocation of the Child Development Centre from Jaffe Ward in the Ulster Hospital to Ards Hospital was essential to create the space for much needed extra beds. In addition children's services will be centralised in Ards Hospital.

D'fhógair mé ar na mallaibh gur fhorbair mé Plan Straitéiseach Forbartha £98 milliún Iontaobhas SSS Otharlann agus Phobal Uladh d'athchóiriú Otharlann Uladh. Chuir m'fhógra in iúl fosta infheistíocht de £2 milliún le 20 leaba d'othair chónaitheacha fhásta a athchur ar fáil i mBarda Jaffe, le dul i gceann fadhbanna a bhaineann le toilleadh leapacha agus leis an fhanacht ar thralaithe san otharlann a laghdú. Bhí athlonnú an Ionaid Fhorbairt Pháistí ó Bharda Jaffe in Otharlann Uladh go hOtharlann na hAirde riachtanach leis an spás a chruthú do leapacha breise a bhí de dhíth go mór mór. Ina theannta sin, neartófar na seirbhísí páistí in Otharlann na hAirde.

Child Development Centre

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the estimated cost of moving the Child Development Centre from the Ulster Hospital to Ards Hospital. (AQW 209/01)

Ms de Brún: The estimated cost, within the overall scheme cost of approximately £2 million, is £600,000.

Is é £600,000 an costas measta, laistigh de chostas iomlán na scéime de thimpeall is £2 milliún.

Child Development Centre

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any consultation that has taken place with the Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust in relation to the Child Development Centre move from the Ulster Hospital to Ards Hospital. (AQW 210/01)

Ms de Brún: The trust submitted its business case for reinstatement of 20 adult inpatient beds in Jaffe Ward, which involved relocation of the Child Development Centre to Ards Hospital. The business case was formally endorsed by the trust board and supported by the Eastern Health and Social Services Board. My

officials subjected the proposals to robust assessment before the trust was given approval to proceed.

Chuir an tIontaobhas isteach a chás gnó le haghaidh athchur ar fáil 20 leaba d'othair chónaitheacha fhásta i mBarda Jaffe, ina raibh athlonnú an Ionaid Fhorbairt Pháistí in Otharlann na h Airde i gceist. Ghlac bord an iontaobhais leis an chás gnó go foirmiúil agus thacaigh Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir leis. Rinne mo chuid oifigeach measúnú daingean air sular tugadh cead don Iontaobhas le dul ar aghaidh leis.

Pre-School Playgroups

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of pre-school playgroups that have closed, and the associated number of pre-school places that have been lost, during each of the last three years. (AQW 217/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department does not collect information on the numbers of pre-school playgroups that have been closed and the associated number of pre-school places that have been lost. Over the past three years, the number of pre-school playgroups operating and associated number of pre-school places provided here is as follows:

Year	Number of pre-school playgroups	Number of pre-school places
01/04/97 – 31/03/98	661	15,892
01/04/98 – 31/03/99	659	16,450
01/04/99 – 31/03/00	685	16,726

Ní bhailíonn an Roinn eolas ar líon na naíolann réamhscoile a druideadh agus ar líon na n-áiteanna naíolainne réamhscoile iontu a cailleadh. Seo a leanas líon na naíolann réamhscoile ag feidhmiú agus na n-áiteanna naíolainne réamhscoile iontu soláthraithe le linn na trí bliana anuas:

Bliain	Líon na naíolann réamhscoile	Líon na n-áiteanna naíolainne réamhscoile
01/04/97 – 31/03/98	661	15,892
01/04/98 – 31/03/99	659	16,450
01/04/99 – 31/03/00	685	16,726

Speech and Language Therapy Students

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2737/00, to detail any increase in speech and language therapy students to meet current needs. (AQW 220/01)

Ms de Brún: Additional funding has been made available to increase the speech and language therapy student intake level by 10 places for the academic year 2001-02.

My Department is currently undertaking a more detailed analysis of the speech and language therapy workforce, which will seek to address concerns about recruitment and retention difficulties. The outcome of this exercise will be known early in the New Year and will influence any decisions on future student places.

Cuireadh maoiniú breise ar fáil le leibhéal ghlacadh isteach mac léinn teiripe labhartha agus teanga a mhéadú faoi 10 áit don bhliain acadúil 2001-02.

Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ag déanamh anailise níos mine ar an mheitheal oibre teiripe labhartha agus teanga i láthair na huair, a dhéanfaidh iarracht le dul i gceann buarthaí faoi dheacrachtaí earcaíochta agus coinneála. Cuirfear toradh na hanailise seo in iúl sa Bhliain Úr agus beidh tionchar aige ar chinneadh ar bith a dhéanfaidh mé ar áiteanna do mhic léinn sa todhchaí.

Fracture Surgery: Waiting Times

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to reduce the waiting time for fracture surgery in Northern Ireland. (AQW 221/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware that there has been substantially increased pressure on our fracture services in recent months. I recognise that it is unacceptable for people to be waiting long periods for treatment, and I have asked the boards and trusts to continue to collaborate to minimise delays.

There remains a shortage of orthopaedic surgeons both here and in the NHS. My Department has taken steps to increase the number of trainees in this specialty, but this will clearly take time. A shortage in the number of theatre nurses has also contributed to the problem. However, I am advised that this issue has now been resolved.

A range of other measures have been taken to alleviate the current difficulties, including the protection of fracture lists at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the provision of additional theatre lists by the Royal, Green Park and Ulster Hospital Health Trusts and utilisation of spare capacity in the Duke of Connaught Unit on the Musgrave Park Hospital site.

Tá a fhios agam go raibh méadú mór sa bhrú ar ár seirbhísí briste sna míonna déanacha. Admhaím go bhfuil sé doghlactha do dhaoine a bheith ag fanacht le tréimhsí fada ar chóireáil agus d'iarr mé ar na boird agus ar na hiontaobhais comhoibriú ar aghaidh le chéile chun moilleanna a laghdú.

Tá easpa máinlianna ortaipéideacha anseo agus sa SNS ann go fóill. Rinne an Roinn s'agamsa bearta le líon na bpríntiseach sa tsainghairm seo a mhéadú ach is léir go nglacfaidh seo am. Chuir ganntanas i líon na n-altraí obrádlainne leis an fhadhb fosta. Cuireadh in iúl dom áfach gur réitíodh an cheist seo anois.

Rinneadh réimse beart eile leis na deacrachtaí atá ann faoi láthair a mhaolú, cosaint liostaí briste in Otharlann Ríoga Viteoiria, soláthar liostaí breise obrádlainne ag an Iontaobhas Ríoga Sláinte, ag Iontaobhas Sláinte na Páirce Glaise agus Otharlann Uladh, chomh maith le feidhmiú Ionad Diúc Chonnacht ar láithreán Otharlann Pháirc Musgrave san áireamh.

Statistics on Back Related Problems

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail statistical data relating to those people who are currently receiving treatment for back related problems. (AQW 230/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo.

Meals on Wheels Provision

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of persons receiving meals on wheels services supported by her Department in each (a) district council area and (b) post code area. (AQW 234/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo.

Energy Efficiency

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to make energy efficiency a priority for local trusts. (AQW 238/01)

Ms de Brún: HSS Trusts have made considerable progress in improving energy performance over a number of years, consistently meeting Government targets.

The improvement in energy performance of HSS boards, trusts and agencies to April 2000 was 20.47% compared to the base year of 1990/91, exceeding the Government's target of 20% for that period. This also resulted in a reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide of 26.77% over the same period, already exceeding the target of 20% by 2010.

My Department is developing an environmental policy and strategy tailored to the healthcare sector to allow the wide range of environmental and sustainable

development issues to be taken forward. Energy will be one of the key areas addressed.

The Department of Finance and Personnel operates a Central Energy Efficiency Fund – a fund spanning all departments to promote energy efficiency schemes. Trusts are encouraged to submit bids to the fund each year. This has resulted in schemes totalling £343,000 being funded in HSS trusts this current year.

Tá dul chun cinn mór déanta ag Iontaobhais SSS i bhfeabhsú feidhmithe fhuinnimh thar roinnt blianta, ag baint spriocanna Rialtais amach go rialta.

20.47% ba ea an feabhsú i bhfeidhmiú fuinnimh Bhoird, Iontaobhais agus Ghníomhaireachtaí SSS go hAibreán 2000 i gcomparáid leis an chéad bhliain 1990-91, ag sárú sprioc an Rialtais de 20% don tréimhse sin. Laghdú 26.77% in astúcháin dhé-ocsaíde carbóin thar an tréimhse chéanna a tháinig as seo fosta, ag sárú sprioc de 20% faoi 2010 cheana féin.

Tá an Roinn s'agamsa ag forbairt polasáí agus straitéise timpeallachta atá fóirsteanach don earnáil chúraim shláinte, chun an réimse leathan ceisteanna timpeallachta agus forbartha leanúnaí a chur chun cinn. Is é fuinneamh ceann de na heochaircheisteanna a rachfar i gceann orthu.

Feidhmíonn An Roinn Airgeadais agus Pearsanra Lárchiste Tíosachta Fuinnimh – ciste atá ar fáil do na Ranna uile le scéimeanna tíosachta fuinnimh a chur chun cinn. Spreagtar Iontaobhais tairiscintí a chuir isteach chuig an chiste gach bliain. Ba é an toradh air seo gur tugadh maoiniú de £343,000 san iomlán do scéimeanna in Iontaobhais SSS sa bhliain seo.

Hepatitis C Virus

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make it her policy to introduce a regional strategy to combat the hepatitis C virus. (AQW 239/01)

Ms de Brún: Work on a regional strategy dealing with all aspects of hepatitis C is already in progress. A report is presently being prepared for discussion at a multi-disciplinary workshop before the end of this year. The strategy will address issues under prevention, surveillance, diagnosis, treatment, services, public and professional education and counselling for affected patients.

Tá obair ar straitéis réigiúnach ag déileáil le gach gné de heipitíteas C faoi lánseol cheana féin. Tá tuairisc á hullmhú i láthair na huair le haghaidh caibidle ag ceardlann ildhisciplíneach roimh dheireadh na bliana seo. Rachaidh an Straitéis i gceann ceisteanna faoi chosc, fhaire, fháthmheas, chóireáil, sheirbhísí, oideachas poiblí agus gairmiúil agus faoi chomhairle d'othair faoi leatrom.

Health Service: Primary Care Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to improve primary care services. (AQW 240/01)

Ms de Brún: Over the past year I have consulted widely on the future role of primary care with a view to improving the service available and to enhance the role of primary care within the health and social services. This round of consultation culminated in the consultation paper *Building the Way Forward in Primary Care*. I have carefully considered the responses to the consultation, and I expect to make an announcement about my future plans in this area in the very near future.

An additional £5.4 million has been made available this year for primary care. This money will be spent on extra staff, premises and information and communications technology in general practice and on improving and developing front line primary care services. I am also keen to preserve the enhanced primary care services that are currently funded through GP Fundholding savings, and £1m has been earmarked for this purpose.

I have agreed continued funding for the primary care commissioning pilots to enable them to maintain local primary care services on, for example, care of the elderly, cardiac rehabilitation, mental health, diabetes and orthopaedic clinics.

Finally, the Chief Dental Officer has undertaken a mid term evaluation of my Department's oral health strategy. With the help of the dental profession and other health professionals, the Chief Dental Officer will prioritise and take forward recommendations from the evaluation in order to ensure continued improvements in oral health for all the population.

Le linn na bliana seo a chuaigh thart, chuaigh mé i gcomhairle fhorleathan ar ról príomhchúraim sa todhchaí de gheall ar an tseirbhís atá ar fáil a fheabhsú agus le ról príomhchúraim laistigh de na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta a mhéadú. Chríochnaigh an babhta comhairlithe seo le foilsíú an pháipéir chomhairlithe *Ag Tógáil an Bhealaigh Chun Tosaigh i bPríomhchúram*. Rinne mé machnamh cúramach ar fhreagraí a tugadh sa chomhairliú agus tá mé ag súil le fógra a dhéanamh faoi mo phleananna amach anseo sa réimse go h-an luath.

Cuireadh £5.4m breise ar fáil i mbliana le haghaidh príomhchúraim. Caithfear an t-airgead seo ar fhoireann bhreise, áitreabh, theicneolaíocht eolais agus chumarsáide i ngnáthdhochtúireacht agus ar fheabhsú agus fhorbairt sheirbhísí tosaigh príomhchúraim. Tá dúil agam fosta na seirbhísí méadaithe príomhchúraim atá á maoiniú faoi láthair trí airgead ciste-shealbháíochta gnáthdhochtúra taise a chaomhnú agus cuireadh £1m i leataobh le haghaidh an chuspóra seo.

D'aontaigh mé maoiniú leanúnach do na scéimeanna píolótacha Choimisiúnú Príomhchúraim chun cur ar a gcumas seirbhísí áitiúla príomhchúraim a choinneáil, mar shampla, ar chúram seandaoine, athshlánú cairdiach, shláinte meabhrach, dhiaibéiteas agus ar chlinicí ortaipéideacha.

Sa deireadh thiar, thosaigh an Príomh-Oifigeach Fiaclóireachta ag déanamh measúnaithe lárthearma ar Straitéis Shláinte Béal mo Roinne. Le cuidiú ón ghairm fhiaclóireachta agus ó ghairmithe sláinte eile, tabharfaidh an Príomh-Oifigeach Fiaclóireachta tosaíocht do mholtaí ón mheasúnú agus forbróidh sé iad le feabhsuithe leanúnacha i sláinte bhéil don phobal uile a chinntiú.

Maternity Services

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to improve maternity services in West Tyrone.

(AQW 241/01)

Ms de Brún: The Acute Hospitals Review Group has made recommendations about the future development of hospital services here, including maternity services, and I have issued the group's report for a period of public consultation which lasts until 31 October. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process and discussion with Executive colleagues, proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in the course of 2002.

Rinne an Grúpa Athbhreithnithe ar Ghéarotharlanna moltaí faoi fhorbairt sheirbhísí otharlainne anseo sa toadhchá, seirbhísí máithreachais san áireamh, agus d'eisigh mé tuairisc an Ghrúpa le haghaidh tréimhse comhairlithe phoiblí a mhairfidh go dtí 31 Deireadh Fómhair. I ndiaidh toradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a mheas agus caibidil a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúchán. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinntí a fhógairt i rith 2002.

Waiting List for Heart Surgery

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to reduce to 3,000 the number of patients on the waiting list for heart surgery.

(AQW 242/01)

Ms de Brún: At the end June 2001 there were 561 people on the waiting list for cardiac surgery. I have set a target for the current financial year of reducing by 50% the number of people waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery and the elimination of such long waits by March 2003. By the end of the first quarter

of the current financial year the number waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery had reduced by 9.5%.

In September last year I commissioned a review of cardiac surgery. I established this review to identify the problems facing this service and to identify solutions. As you are aware the report of the cardiac surgery review has now been finalised, and my Department has developed a proposed joint action plan for the implementation of the recommendations made by the cardiac surgery review and the review of cardiology services. I have now issued the joint action plan for public consultation.

The action plan provides a basis upon which to move forward and bring about real and meaningful change to ensure that we have a high quality, effective and timely service for those requiring cardiac surgery. However, given that some of the recommendations have significant resource implications, the speed and approach to implementation will be influenced by both the outcome of the consultation process and the availability of resources in 2002-03 and beyond

Immediate action to improve recruitment and retention of staff, particularly nursing staff in cardiac surgery is a priority if waiting times are to be reduced. I have allocated additional funding for supernumerary nursing posts in cardiac intensive care to support the existing staff and allow additional nurses to receive the specialised training. This will help increase bed capacity and facilitate an increase in the number of operations possible.

The four health and social services boards have been purchasing cardiac surgery at units elsewhere for some patients who are able and willing to travel. This practice will need to continue until the number of procedures conducted at the Royal increases.

Ag deireadh mhí Mheithimh 2001 bhí 561 duine ar an liosta feithimh le haghaidh máinliachta cairdí. Leag me sprioc síos don bhliain airgeadais seo le líon na ndaoine ag fanacht níos mó ná 12 mí ar mháinliacht chairdiach a laghdú faoi 50% agus le deireadh a chur lena leithéid d'fhanacht fhada faoi Mhárta 2003. Faoi dheireadh na chéad ráithe den bhliain airgeadais seo laghdaigh líon na ndaoine ag fanacht níos mó ná 12 mí ar mháinliacht chairdiach faoi 9.5%.

I Meán Fómhair anuraidh, choimisiúnaigh mé athbhreithniú ar mháinliacht chairdiach. Chuir mé tús leis an athbhreithniú seo leis na fadhbanna atá ag an tseirbhís seo a aimsiú agus le réitigh a aimsiú. Mar is eol daoibh, cuireadh an dlaoi mhullaigh anois ar thuairisc an Athbhreithnithe ar Mháinliacht Chairdiach agus d'fhorbair an Roinn s'agamsa comhphlean molta gnímh do chur i bhfeidhm na moltaí déanta ag an Athbhreithniú ar Mháinliacht Chairdiach agus ag an Athbhreithniú ar Sheirbhísí Cairdeolaíochta. D'eisigh mé an Comhphlean Gnímh anois le haghaidh comhairlithe phoiblí.

Soláthraíonn an Plean Gnímh dúshraith ar ar féidir dul chun cinn a dhéanamh agus fíorathrú tábhachtach a dhéanamh le cinntiú go bhfuil seirbhís ardcháilíochta, éifeachtach agus thráthúil againn dóibh siúd ag iarraidh máinliacht chairdiach. Cé go bhfuil impleachtaí móra ag na moltaí d'acmhainní áfach, beidh tionchar ag toradh an phróisis chomhairlithe agus ag infhaighteacht acmhainní i 2003-03 agus taobh thall de ar a ghaiste agus ar an dóigh a bheidh an cur i bhfeidhm.

Is tosaíocht é gníomh láithreach le hearcú agus le coinneáil foirne a fheabhsú, go háirithe foireann altrachta i máinliacht chairdiach má táthar amanna feithimh a laghdú. Dháil mé maoiniú breise le haghaidh post sáruimhriúil altrachta i ndianchúram cairdiach chun tacú leis an fhoireann atá ann faoi láthair agus chun ligean d'altraí breise an tsainoilúint a fháil. Cuideoidh sé seo le toilleadh leapacha a mhéadú agus le méadú i líon na n-obráidí is féidir a dhéanamh a éascú.

Bhí na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta ag ceannach máinliachta cairdí in ionaid eile do roinnt othar atá ábalta agus toilteanach taisteal. Is gá leis an chleachtas seo leanstan ar aghaidh go méadóidh líon na ngnáthamh déanta san Otharlann Ríoga.

Cottage and Community Hospitals

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her plans to expand cottage and community hospitals; and to make a statement. (AQW 243/01)

Ms de Brún: Following publication of the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report in June, I issued the report for a period of public consultation, which will end on 31 October. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process and discussion with Executive colleagues, proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in the course of 2002.

Nuair a foilsíodh tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarospidéal i mí an Mheithimh, d'eisigh mé an tuairisc le haghaidh tréimhse chomhairliúcháin phoiblí a chríochnóidh ar 31 Deireadh Fómhair. I ndiaidh toradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a mheas agus caibidil a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúcháin. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinntí a fhógairt i rith 2002.

Occupational Therapists

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) how many occupational therapists have been recruited in each health and social services board in the last six months and (b)

how many of these are engaged solely in assessments for disabled facilities grants. (AQW 245/01)

Ms de Brún: The information for (a) is detailed in the table below. Figures refer to the six months ending September 2001.

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS RECRUITED – APRIL TO SEPTEMBER 2001

	Number of Occupational Therapists ¹	
	Whole Time Equivalent	Headcount
Eastern Board	39.6	40
Northern Board ²	9.8	11
Southern Board ³	12.6	15
Western Board ^{4,5}	17.0	17

¹ Includes appointments to new and existing posts.

² Includes 3.5 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) temporary Occupational Therapist in Homefirst Community Trust.

³ Includes 1.0 WTE temporary Occupational Therapist recruited in Craigavon and Banbridge Community Health and Social Services Trust.

⁴ Includes 6 WTE temporary Occupational Therapists recruited in Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust.

⁵ Includes 6 WTE Occupational Therapists that had been employed on temporary contracts and subsequently secured permanent posts in Foyle Health and Social Services Trust.

(b) There are no occupational therapists engaged solely in assessments for disabled facilities grants.

Miondealaítear an t-eolas do (a) sa tábla thíos. Tagraíonn na figiúirí do na sé mhí ag críochnú Meán Fómhair 2001.

TEIRIPITHE SAOTHAIR EARCAITHE – AIBREÁN GO MEÁN FÓMHAIR 2001

	Líon na dTeiripithe Saothair ¹	
	Coibhéis Lánaimseartha	Líon
Bord Oirthearach	39.6	40
Bord Tuaisceartach ²	9.8	11
Bord Deisceartach ³	12.6	15
Bord Iartharach ^{4,5}	17.0	17

¹ Cuimsíonn sé ceapacháin do phoist nua agus do phoist atá ann faoi láthair.

² Cuimsíonn sé 3.5 Teiripí sealadacha Saothair Coibhéise Lánaimseartha (CLA) in Iontaobhas Phobal Homefirst.

³ Cuimsíonn sé 1.0 Teiripí sealadach Saothair CLA earcailthe in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Phobal Chreag na hAbhann agus Dhroichead na Banna.

⁴ Cuimsíonn sé 6 Teiripí sealadacha Saothair CLA earcailthe in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta Shliabh Speirín agus Thír na Lochanna.

⁵ Cuimsíonn sé 6 Teiripí sealadacha Saothair CLA a fostaíodh ar chonarthaí sealadacha agus a fuair poist bhuana in Iontaobhas Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Fheabhail ina dhiaidh sin. Includes 6 WTE Occupational

(b) Níl teiripí saothair ar bith i mbun measúnuithe amháin le haghaidh deontas d'áiseanna do mhíchumasaigh.

Number of General Practitioners in Service

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of general practitioners in service and (b) the expected numbers in 2003. (AQW 248/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is as follows:

- (a) at September 2001 there were 1,060 general practitioners in service;
- (b) currently the Medical Committee of the Central Services Agency considers the need for new or replacement general practitioners. The future numbers of general practitioners will be dependent upon a number of factors such as the outcome of the consultation on the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report.

Seo a leanas an t-eolas:

- (a) ag Meán Fómhair 2001 bhí 1060 Gnáthdhochtúir ag obair;
- (b) faoi láthair, síleann an Coiste Míochaine den Lár-Ghníomhaireacht Sheirbhísí go bhfuil gá le gnáthdhochtúirí nua nó le hionadaithe. Braithfidh líon na ngnáthdhochtúirí sa toadhchá ar roinnt fachtóirí amháil toradh an chomhairlithe ar Thuairisc an Ghrúpa Athbheithnithe ar Ghéarotharlanna.

Failure to Keep Outpatient Appointments

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to reduce the number of patients who fail to keep outpatient appointments. (AQW 250/01)

Ms de Brún: Under the *Framework for Action on Waiting Lists* which I issued last year, health and social services trusts are required to monitor the number of patients who do not attend or cancel their outpatient appointments. Trusts are also required to establish protocols to assist those patients who cancel their appointments repeatedly. This may include, where appropriate, patients being returned to the care of their GP for alternative care or treatment to be considered.

Faoin *Chreat Gníomhaíochta i leith Liostaí Feithimh* a d'eisigh mé anuraidh, caithfidh iontaobhais sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta faireachán a dhéanamh ar líon na n-othar nach fhreastalaíonn ar choinní d'othair sheachtracha nó a chuireann ar ceal iad. Caithfidh iontaobhais prótacail a bhúnú le cuidiú a thabhairt do na hothair sin a chuireann coinní ar ceal arís agus arís eile. Is é a bheadh i gceist, dá mba chúí, go gcuirfí

othair ar ais faoi chúram an Liachleachtóra Ghinearálta atá acu le go gcuirfí cúram nó cóireáil eile san áireamh.

Statistics for Punishment Beatings and Shootings

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3489/00, when hospital statistics for services used to treat punishment beatings and shootings will be collected and collated. (AQW 258/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no plans to collect this information.

Níltear ag brath an t-eolas seo a bhailiú.

Orthopaedic Services

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, in monetary terms only, the resources used by the orthopaedic departments for the years (a) 1997 (b) 1998 (c) 1999 (d) 2000 and (e) 2001 to date. (AQW 259/01)

Ms de Brún: The figures in the table below represent total expenditure by health and social services trusts on orthopaedic services, for the 1997/98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000 financial years. Expenditure figures for 2000-01 and the current year to date are not yet available.

Financial Year	£
1997/1998	34,272,439
1998/1999	40,307,714
1999/2000	44,190,022

Is é atá sna figiúirí sa tábla thíos caiteachas iomlán na niontaobhas sláinte agus seirbhísí sóisialta ar sheirbhísí ortaipéideacha do na blianta airgeadais 1997-98, 1998-99 agus 1999-2000. Níl figiúirí caiteachais don bhliain 2000-01 agus don bhliain seo ar fáil go fóill.

Bliain Airgeadais	£
1997/1998	34,272,439
1998/1999	40,307,714
1999/2000	44,190,022

Orthopaedic Services

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of beds used by patients receiving orthopaedic treatment

for the years (a) 1997 (b) 1998 (c) 1999 (d) 2000 and (e) 2001 to date. (AQW 260/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on the average number of occupied beds in the specialty of trauma and orthopaedic surgery for the financial years 1996-67 to 2000-01 is available and is detailed in the table below.

AVERAGE OCCUPIED BEDS IN THE TRAUMA AND ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY SPECIALTY, 1996/97 - 2000/01

1996/97	273.2
1997/98	282.2
1998/99	276.4
1999/00	272.8
2000/01	259.3

Tá eolas ar mheánlíon na leapacha in úsáid i speisiacht tráma agus na máinliachta ortaipéidí do na blianta airgeadais 1996-67 go 2000-01 ar fáil agus miondealaítear sa tábla thíos é.

MEÁNLIÓN NA LEAPACHA IN ÚSÁID I SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA AGUS NA MÁINLIACHTA ORTAIPÉIDÍ, 1996/97 - 2000/01.

1996/97	273.2
1997/98	282.2
1998/99	276.4
1999/00	272.8
2000/01	259.3

Fire Authority Board

Mr Davis asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain why the independent members of the Fire Authority have been appointed for a two year term rather than the four year term normally associated with these positions. (AQW 293/01)

Ms de Brún: The four-year term of office of all Fire Authority members expired on 30 September 2001. To ensure continuity of Fire Authority Board business, I considered it prudent to re-appoint some board members for a further term of office. However, to avoid a potential situation in four years time when all board members might have to be replaced at the same time, I decided that these re-appointments should be for a two-year period. This will stagger the terms of office of the new Fire Authority Board and therefore ensure ongoing continuity and good governance.

Bhí deireadh le téarma feidhmeannais gach ball den Údarás Dóiteáin ar 30 Meán Fómhair 2001. Le leanúnachas obair an Údaráis Dóiteáin a chinntiú, shíl mé go raibh sé críonna cuid de na baill a athcheapadh go ceann téarma eile. Bíodh sin mar atá, le drochstaid

ionchasach a sheachaint i gceann ceithre bliana nuair a d'fhéadfadh sé go mbeadh gach ball an bhoird le hathrú in aon am amháin, chinn mé gur athcheapadh téarma dhá bhliain a bheadh ann. Fágfaidh seo na téarmaí feidhmeannais den Bhord Nua Údaráis Dóiteáin scaipthe ó chéile ag cinntiú, mar sin de, leanúnachas agus dea-rialú.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Schemes: Strangford

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) what major road schemes are proposed within the constituency of Strangford over the next three years and (b) what is the estimated cost of each contract. (AQW 156/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): My Department's Roads Service proposes to carry out one major road scheme, namely Stage 2 of the Comber Bypass, in the Strangford constituency over the next three years. The scheme is estimated to cost £3.1 million.

In addition, a new £2.7 million purpose-built ferry vessel for the Strangford Lough ferry service is due to come into operation in mid-late November 2001.

Bus Usage

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3435/00, to detail the extent of usage of bus services for all towns named and to explain the methodology used in calculating the figures. (AQW 157/01)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised it does not have figures to indicate the extent of usage of bus services in the towns named in AQW 3435/00. However, Translink has supplied the following figures indicating the usage of bus services by depot in Northern Ireland, excluding Belfast, in terms of the total number of passenger journeys in 2000-01. The figure for the Omagh depot includes passenger numbers for Strabane.

Depot	Usage (passenger journeys)
Antrim	1,590,319
Armagh	1,648,434
Ballymena	1,924,701
Bangor	2,094,014
Coleraine	3,531,608
Downpatrick	1,506,831
Dungannon	1,490,743
Enniskillen	1,117,946

Depot	Usage (passenger journeys)
Larne	1,918,124
Lisburn	2,874,117
Magherafelt	1,887,883
Newcastle	2,109,474
Newry	2,571,572
Newtownabbey	1,452,033
Newtownards	2,943,595
Omagh	1,531,998
Portadown	3,250,331
Londonderry	5,865,413

Traffic Calming Measures in West Belfast

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail each traffic calming measure, including its cost, that is in place in the constituency of West Belfast. (AQW 212/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that, since traffic calming measures were introduced in Northern Ireland in 1995, 20 traffic calming schemes, comprising 134 streets, have been completed in the constituency of West Belfast. Details of these schemes are provided in the attached appendix.

TRAFFIC CALMING MEASURES COMPLETED IN WEST BELFAST SINCE 1995

Scheme	Measures	Cost (£k)	No. of Streets
1995/96			
Clonard	Road humps	20	6
Cavendish St	Road humps	27	5
Lenadoon Ave	Road humps	16	1
	Total	63	12
1996/97			
Riverdale Park area	20 mph zone and associated measures	10	6
Bingnian Drive	Road humps	6	5
New Barnsley	Road humps	14	3
Iveagh Area	Road humps	20	5
Whiterock area	Road humps	24	6
	Total	74	25
1997/98			
	None-Allocation for Traffic Calming was allocated to a major scheme in the Holylands area	453	
1998/99			
Albert Street	Road humps	68	10
Ballymurphy/Glenalina Rd	20 mph zone and associated measures	47	24

Scheme	Measures	Cost (£k)	No. of Streets
Ladybrook Pk/Brooke Drive	Speed cushions, road humps	12	3
Glenveagh Drive	Road humps	18	2
	Total	145	39
1999/2000			
Summerhill Road Twinbrook	Central islands and road markings	35	1
Pembrook Loop Poleglass	Raised junctions, speed cushions	37	2
Glenbawn Ave Poleglass	Road humps	6	1
	Total	78	4
2000/2001			
Turf Lodge	20 mph zone and associated measures #	76	22
Twaddell Avenue	Central Islands and Road markings	18	2
	Total	94	24
2001/2002 (To Date)			
Edenmore Drive area	20 mph zone and associated measures #	70	26
Gardenmore Rd Twinbrook	Road humps	20	2
Summerhill Drive Twinbrook	Road humps	30	2
	Total	120	30
Total expenditure / No. of streets treated in West Belfast since 1995		£574K	134

20 mph zones will be introduced following the completion of the legislative processes.

Railway Station Adjacent to Aldergrove Airport

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to develop a railway station on the Knockmore line adjacent to Aldergrove Airport. (AQW 216/01)

Mr Campbell: The budget approved by the Assembly in December 2000 did not include provision for the continued operation of the Antrim to Knockmore railway line. Unfortunately, therefore, its continued operation is still under consideration. I do not want the line to close, but the Assembly will need to provide additional resources to enable me to keep it open. However, even if the line can be kept operational, it is doubtful if the number of passengers who would use a railway station adjacent to Aldergrove Airport would justify the capital investment required to develop such a facility. There are, therefore, no plans at present to develop a station on the Knockmore line adjacent to the airport.

Utilities: Co-ordinated Approach

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail what plans are in place to improve co-ordination between the roads, water, electricity, telephone services and other utilities in undergrounding essential services. (AQO 226/01)

Mr Campbell: I refer the Member to my response to his Written Assembly Question (AQW 3072/00) on 6 June 2001 on this subject. As I explained at that time, my Department's Roads Service:

- has introduced a computer-based Northern Ireland Street Works Register and Notification System; and
- has published a Code of Practice for the Co-ordination of Street Works and Works for Road Purposes and Related Matters, which requires co-operation between utilities.

Cullaville: Traffic Issues

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to (a) outline what traffic-calming measures were (i) considered (ii) rejected and (iii) installed at Cullaville, County Armagh; and (b) give an account of the accident history at Cullaville crossroads. (AQO 227/01)

Mr Campbell: Traffic calming measures are aimed at reducing traffic volume and speed and thus reduce the number of road traffic collisions and the severity of resulting injuries. While a number of traffic calming measures are available, these must be tailored to meet the individual requirements of each site.

In respect of the road layout at Cullaville crossroads, the use of measures such as ramps and chicanes were not considered appropriate for a road of this nature, as they may give rise to drivers using alternative less appropriate routes in order to avoid them. The measures currently being implemented include entry gateway signage and rumble strips at the 40 mph limits, red textured surfacing and road marking at the 40 mph repeater signs, central hatching to emphasise the junction and a new pedestrian island. I understand these measures were agreed following consultation with the local community groups and various elected representatives, including yourself.

As regards the accident history at Cullaville crossroads, I must advise that the provision of information in relation to road accidents is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Road Opening Ballygowan

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development what the status is of the new opening

onto the Belfast/Ballygowan Road opposite The Crescent in Ballygowan; say if this opening was approved by the Roads Service; and to make a statement.

(AQW 345/01)

Mr Campbell: On investigation it has been revealed that an opening has recently been made onto Belfast Road, Ballygowan, prior to planning permission for the housing development, into which it gives access, being granted.

The Department of Environment's Planning Service and my Department's Roads Service are now considering what appropriate action should be taken in this case.

Resource Allocation West of the Bann

Mr P Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the proposed breakdown of resource allocation west of the Bann. (AQO 219/01)

Mr Campbell: To approximate to the area "west of the Bann" for the purposes of this answer, I have collated what information there is in relation to the nine local government districts in Counties Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone. This area has 27% of the total NI population. In approximate terms some 32% of the Roads Service road maintenance budget and 23% of the Water Service operations budget are specifically allocated to this area for 2001/02. Capital allocations can vary more from year to year depending on the particular schemes being undertaken, but over the past six years of the order of 24% of the roads capital budget has been allocated "west of the Bann". This percentage will rise to 26% this year. Over the same period Water Service capital expenditure "west of the Bann" has averaged about 25% of the capital budget, and this is planned to rise to 30% over the next three years.

Most resources allocated to public transport services are allocated on a network basis rather than on a geographical one, and Translink maintains a comprehensive network of services throughout Northern Ireland, to some extent by cross subsidising loss making services, often in rural areas, from profitable services. However, figures on a geographical basis are available for the Rural Transport Fund, and an estimated 44% of the resources available will be spent in areas "west of the Bann" this year. This area has approximately 40% of Northern Ireland's rural population.

Belfast Drainage System

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Regional Development to make it his policy to replace the decaying sewage and rainwater drainage system in Belfast at an early date; and to make a statement. (AQO 197/01)

Mr Campbell: It is my Department's policy to replace or refurbish drainage infrastructure which is no longer able to provide satisfactory service.

This work is prioritised on a Province wide basis taking account of a range of key factors including the condition of the infrastructure, available finance and other essential projects for water treatment, wastewater treatment and infrastructure for development.

I am pleased to confirm, however, that the major scheme to upgrade the Belfast sewerage system remains a high priority. It is currently programmed to commence in 2003 at an estimated cost of some £100 million.

In the meantime work is continuing to identify and provide interim solutions to out of sewer flooding problems at 12 locations in the Belfast City Council area. I have secured an allocation of £1 million from the Executive Programme Funds for this work in the current financial year. A further £4.5 million of the Executive Programme Funds will be spent on interim flood alleviation measures in Greater Belfast and across the Province over the next two years.

Roads in South Armagh

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) what improvements have been made to rural roads in South Armagh in this financial year; and (b) what further plans he has for the improvement of roads in that area. (AQO 228/01)

Mr Campbell: For the purpose of this reply I have taken South Armagh as being that area of County Armagh, south of Armagh City, which contains part of Armagh City and District, and Newry and Mourne District, Council areas.

My Department's Roads Service plans to spend some £268,000 on minor road improvement schemes in this area during the current financial year. Of this amount, approximately £30,000 is earmarked for very minor schemes at six different locations, only one of which, the provision of a lay-by at Berna Park, Meigh, has been completed. The remaining £238,000 will be spent on four larger schemes involving:

- road widening and realignment at Sturgan Brae, Camlough;
- junction improvement and provision of forward sight distance at Annaghmare Road, Crossmaglen;
- road alignment at Newtownhamilton Road, Ballymacnab; and
- road widening and verge improvement at Derrynoose Road, Keady.

Subject to the successful acquisition of the necessary land, all of these schemes should be completed by the end of this financial year.

With regard to future minor works programmes, you will be aware that Roads Service consults with all councils in the spring and autumn of each year about the minor works schemes proposed for their areas. As part of this process, the Divisional Roads Manager will be visiting Newry and Mourne District Council later this month, and Armagh City and District Council early in November 2001.

Clearing Animal Carcasses from Roads

Mr Savage asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate who has the responsibility for clearing badgers and other wildlife that have been killed on the roads. (AQO 203/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is responsible for clearing animal carcasses from the motorway network. In the case of all other roads, responsibility for this task lies with district councils.

Lisburn Area Plan 2001

Mr Poots asked the Minister for Regional Development to indicate how he will assist in the development of the Lisburn North Feeder road in view of the adoption of the Lisburn Area Plan. (AQO 245/01)

Mr Campbell: As stated in the Lisburn Area Plan 2001, the development of lands in north Lisburn will only be permitted in accordance with an agreed comprehensive plan to provide the necessary public infrastructure, including the proposed North Lisburn Feeder Road and the proposed extension of Prince William Road. These schemes will be considered as part of the longer-term transportation and road infrastructure needs of the Belfast Metropolitan Area, which includes the Lisburn Borough Council area, and will be dealt with in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan (BMAP) and the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP).

Work on both these plans is already underway. It is anticipated that the BMTP will be completed by the end of 2002 and that a draft BMAP will also be published at that time.

Trans European Network

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline what capital roads investment has taken place on the designated TENS (Trans-European Networks) across Northern Ireland. (AQO 216/01)

Mr Campbell: Over the past five-year period (1996-97-2000-01), my Department has invested some £33 million on major capital road schemes across the country's Trans European Network routes.

The above expenditure does not include investment on minor capital road schemes on these routes. My Department's Roads Service has advised that this detail could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Roundabouts on A2 Clooney Road

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any plans he has to construct roundabouts on the Clooney Road, near the City of Derry Airport, and to give the proposed time scale.

(AQO 242/01)

Mr Campbell: In my letter to you dated 26 September 2001, I advised of the procedure I propose to use in the preparation of the Roads Service 10-year forward planning schedule. The schedule will contain a number of major road schemes which, together with those in the major works preparation pool, I would expect could be funded and started within the next ten years or so. As you know, the Chief Executive of the Roads Service will be writing to you shortly to provide, inter alia, details of the schemes which will be assessed for possible inclusion in the schedule.

For your information, a scheme to provide roundabouts at the junction of McLean Road and Coolnafinney Road at Broadbridge and at the junction of Cloghole Road and Donnybrewer Road on the A2 Clooney Road is one of the schemes being considered for possible inclusion in the schedule.

A further scheme to dual the A2 Clooney Road between Maydown Road and the City of Derry Airport, providing a further roundabout at the airport entrance, will also be assessed for possible inclusion in the schedule along with a number of other worthwhile schemes.

Traffic Problems on Saintfield Road

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) discussions he is having or is planning to have with the RUC to resolve the major traffic problems associated with the Saintfield Road and (b) the measures he will take to ensure a reduction in the number of accidents on this stretch of road.

(AQO 191/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service is in regular dialogue with the RUC about traffic problems on Saintfield Road. At present, for example, it is assisting the RUC in its investigations into recent road accidents at Commons Brae.

I should point out that road traffic accidents occur for a variety of reasons, the majority of which cannot be directly influenced by engineering measures. Nevertheless, the Roads Service has already undertaken a number of schemes to improve road safety on the Saintfield Road. I can assure you that it will continue to monitor and review traffic conditions to identify any possible additional safety measures that might be appropriate along this important arterial route.

Water Service Organisational Review

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail when he expects the organisational review of the Water Service to be completed.

(AQO 231/01)

Mr Campbell: The first stage of the Water Service's organisational review, which will outline structural proposals, is due to be completed before the end of this year. Managers, their staff and trade union representatives will be consulted, and their views will be carefully taken into account.

Implementation is due to commence in spring 2002 and is expected to be completed in spring 2003.

Expenditure on Roads: Ards Borough 1991/92 - 2000/01

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the level of expenditure on roads within the Ards Borough Council area over the last ten years.

(AQO 217/01)

Mr Campbell: The table below shows the expenditure incurred by my Department's Roads Service in the Ards Borough area during the ten-year period 1991/92 to 2000-01:

EXPENDITURE ON ROADS (ACTUAL CASH PRICES)

Type of Works	91/92 £K	92/93 £K	93/94 £K	94/95 £K	95/96 £K	96/97 £K	97/98 £K	98/99 £K	99/2000 £K	2000/01 £K
Capital Works	£ 472	£ 792	£ 612	£ 558	£ 576	£ 598	£ 584	£ 645	£ 350	£ 550
Maintenance	£2,120	£1,923	£2,447	£2,925	£2,607	£2,530	£2,091	£2,314	£2,030	£2,280

Belfast/Bangor Railway Line

Ms E Bell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) what progress has been made in the upgrading of the Belfast/Bangor railway line; (b) when is the work expected to be completed; and (c) when new rolling stock will be introduced into service; and to make a statement. (AQO 241/01)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that preparatory work on the upgrading of the railway line between Belfast and Bangor commenced in April 2001. The main contract for the trackworks is due to commence on 15 October 2001, and Translink expects this work to be completed by mid-January 2002.

My Department recently conveyed approval to Translink to purchase 23 new trains at a total cost of £87 million. Translink issued invitations to tender to four train manufacturers on 22 August. The closing date for receipt of tenders is 30 November. Translink expects that the new trains will start to be brought into service during 2003-04.

Newry/Dundalk Road

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline progress on the dualling of the Newry section of the proposed Newry to Dundalk road. (AQO 220/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that work on the design and statutory procedures for this project is progressing well. It is hoped that the environmental statement and draft Direction Order will be published towards the end of this year. The expected public inquiries for both the environmental statement and the draft Direction Order should take place in summer 2002. As the statutory procedures in both jurisdictions are different, separate public inquiries will be required. Depending on the outcome of these inquiries and the subsequent vesting order process, construction work could commence in the summer of 2003 at the earliest.

This scheme has been prioritised as part of the completion of all parts of the Trans-European Network (TEN) from Larne to the border with the Republic of Ireland.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Occupational Therapy Service Waiting List

Mr Fee asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many applicants for disabled facilities

grants in each Housing Executive region have been waiting for assessment by an occupational therapist for (i) up to six months (ii) between six and twelve months and (iii) over twelve months. (AQW 246/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): The information is not held in the exact form requested and to convert it would involve disproportionate cost.

The timeframes set out below are based on those that the Housing Executive uses to regularly monitor occupational therapy (OT) service performance and used by the OT service to monitor its performance for Citizens Charter standards purposes.

At 30 September 2001 the numbers and waiting times are as follows:

Housing Executive Area	Grants	Less than 6 months	6-9 months	More than 10 months	Totals
Belfast	Belfast S/E	63	6	22	91
	Belfast N/W	85	49	180	314
North East	Ballyclare	123	44	85	252
	Ballymena	117	22	51	190
West	Derry	129	35	38	202
	Omagh	198	42	106	346
South	Fermanagh	55	18	19	92
	Newry	169	29	180	378
	Craigavon	114	23	177	314
South East	Lisburn	97	18	39	154
	Newtownards	106	23	14	143
Totals		1,256	309	911	2,476

Stakeholder Pension Funds

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if those who take out a stakeholder pension will be compelled to use their savings to purchase an annuity at the age of 75 years. (AQW 280/01)

Mr Morrow: Inland Revenue rules on tax-approved schemes mean that stakeholder pension funds will be treated in the same way as other tax-approved occupational and personal pension schemes. Under the Inland Revenue rules, where a pension scheme does not itself pay a pension, a fund must be used to buy an annuity by age 75 so as to guarantee a pension income throughout retirement.

Welfare to Work

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the support given by his Department to help people with disabilities into work. (AQW 281/01)

Mr Morrow: As part of the Welfare to Work agenda the Government introduced the New Deal for Disabled

People in April 1999. This scheme is designed to train disabled people for work as well as helping them to find and retain work. As at March 2001 New Deal for Disabled has helped over 250 people into work.

In April 2000, the Government introduced legislation to allow customers, including those sick and disabled to participate in approved work, without the fear of losing out on benefit payments.

Housing Executive Vacancies: Newtownards Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made to fill the staff vacancies at the Housing Executive office in Newtownards. (AQW 292/01)

Mr Morrow: All vacant posts have now been filled.

Pensioner Poverty

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what progress is being made in combating pensioner poverty. (AQW 317/01)

Mr Morrow: A number of measures have been introduced to help the elderly, such as the minimum income guarantee campaign and the Winter Fuel Payments scheme. These initiatives have resulted in, just over 6,000 additional pensioners receiving the minimum income guarantee, with an average extra payment of £23.00 per week. In the last financial year winter fuel payments totalling £43 million were paid to pensioners. Work will continue in this area to ensure pensioners claim and receive all the help they are entitled to.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the extent of benefit fraud in 2000-01. (AQW 318/01)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency is unable to measure the amount of fraud across all benefits on an annual basis. In 2000-01 it was established that the levels of fraud in the main social security benefits were:

- Income Support, 2.0% of benefit expenditure (£12.037 million);
- Jobseeker's Allowance, 5.1% of benefit expenditure (£6.714 million); and
- Incapacity Benefit, 1.0% (£3.277 million) of benefit expenditure.

No figure is available for the level of fraud in Disability Living Allowance in 2000/2001, but a review is well under way and it is anticipated the figure will be available before the end of the year. Levels of fraud

in retirement pension and Child Benefit were found to be minimal.

Pension/Benefit Awareness

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what action he has taken to inform older people of their eligibility for pensions and benefits.

(AQW 319/01)

Mr Morrow: A number of initiatives have been undertaken to increase awareness of benefits for the elderly such as publicity campaigns to promote minimum income guarantee, Winter Fuel Payments and the inclusion of a wide range of benefit information in the recently published guide to public service for pensioners. The Social Security Agency also works closely with a number of organisations who represent the elderly to actively encourage uptake of benefits.

NICSA: Running costs

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 17/01, which Department is responsible for the running costs of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. (AQW 328/01)

Mr Morrow: The Department for Social Development is responsible for the running costs of that part of the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency which delivers services to the people of Northern Ireland. The agency also provides "back office" services to the people of Eastern England under a contract with its sister agency in Great Britain. The Department for Work and Pensions in Great Britain funds this part of the agency's activities.

NICSA: Staff Levels

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 17/01, to detail the number and grades of staff employed within the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency who are working specifically on Northern Ireland cases. (AQW 329/01)

Mr Morrow: As of 3 October 2001 there were 298 staff employed within the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency working specifically on Northern Ireland cases. The breakdown of staff by grade is as follows:

Grade	Number
Grade 7	1
Deputy Principal	1
Staff Officer	3
Executive Officer Grade 1	11
Executive Officer Grade 2	53
Administrative Officer	194

Grade	Number
Administrative Assistant	18
Casual Administrative Assistant	17
Total Staff	298

NICSA: Staff Levels

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 17/01, to detail the number and grades of staff employed within the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. (AQW 330/01)

Mr Morrow: As of 3 October 2001 there were 1,539 staff employed within the Northern Ireland Child Support Agency. The breakdown of staff by grade is as follows:

Grade	Number
Chief Executive	1
Grade 6	1
Grade 7	6
Deputy Principal	17
Staff Officer	40
Executive Officer Grade 1	83
Executive Officer Grade 2	232
Administrative Officer	1014
Administrative Assistant	73
Casual Administrative Assistant	72
Total Staff	1,539

Register for Able-Bodied Unemployment

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment has been made of the estimated number of able-bodied persons of working age who are not registered for unemployment benefit.

(AQW 338/01)

Mr Morrow: There is no universally agreed definition of "able-bodied", nor is there up to date information on levels of disability in Northern Ireland. Persons not registered for Jobseeker's Allowance may be in work (full-time or part-time), or they may be in education, in home care or otherwise economically inactive.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 19 October 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Trans European Network

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what proportion of the £40m allocated by the Executive Funds to improve the Trans European Network is estimated to be spent on (a) dualling the Newry section of the Newry to Dundalk road (b) completing the existing dualling scheme for the A8 Larne to Belfast road and (c) upgrading the Westlink. (AQW 218/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Executive has set aside £40 million over a number of years to ensure that the strategically important Trans European Network route from Larne to the border south of Newry is developed coherently.

The Executive agreed to use the £40 million to provide specific and sufficient allocation for the existing A8 scheme, and specific and sufficient allocation for completion of the Newry/Border section, subject to the necessary procedures. A contribution would also be provided to upgrade the Westlink.

The Executive did not determine specific amounts for each of the schemes. The details, including how the relevant projects could be pursued, their phasing and procurement, will need to be explored further.

E-Government

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the level of funding allocated to encourage and co-ordinate e-government at a local government level in the financial year 2001-02. (AQW 255/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister

has a role in promoting e-government across the whole public sector in Northern Ireland. The Department of the Environment is responsible, however, for providing most of the central funding for local government. It is a matter for each council to determine the priority of providing services electronically and allocating existing resources accordingly.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Leader + Programme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to the European Commission's approval of the Leader and Initiative Programme in Northern Ireland, to detail her plans for the implementation of the programme during the 2001-06 period. (AQW 327/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): Following negotiations with the Commission on the draft NI LEADER + Programme, which have been ongoing since November 2000, the Commission adopted the Programme which was formally approved on 21 September 2001.

The LEADER + Programme will be delivered by locally based partnerships known as Local Action Groups. The Local Action Groups will develop strategies to address the needs and opportunities in their own rural areas.

The Northern Ireland LEADER + Programme anticipates around 12 Local Action Groups. The first stage of the competitive selection process for the Local Action Groups is currently under way. The closing date for applications was 28 September and I hope to be in a position to announce the results of the selection process by the end of November 2001.

Successful Groups will then be advised of the funding allocation awarded to them for supporting projects under Action 1 of the Programme. They will be asked to prepare and submit a business plan within no more than three months. The business plans will detail precisely how the Groups propose to implement their strategies.

In the interim, successful Groups will be advanced a percentage of their administration budget to allow them to operate as a LEADER + Local Action Group. The Groups will be required to provide the Department with specific information before this funding is advanced.

When Local Action Groups are awarded funding from Action 1, they will become eligible to obtain a further allocation of funding from Action 2 for inter-

territorial co-operation. Groups will be invited to submit inter-territorial co-operation strategies for the use of Action 2 funding to the Department within six months of the award of Action 1.

Following receipt, consideration and approval of the business plans by the LEADER + Monitoring Committee, the Local Action Groups will be in a position to proceed with the implementation of their approved strategies and call for project applications.

All Co-operation Strategies submitted will be considered and an allocation of Action 2 Funding awarded as appropriate.

Target timetable:

- Outcome of the selection process: End of November 2001
- Contract Agreements signed by DARD/Local Action Groups: Mid December 2001
- Advance of Administration funds: December 2001/January 2002
- Submission of Business Plans: February/March 2002
- Approval of Business Plans: March/April 2002
- Local Action Groups ready to implement approved strategies and call for project applications: April 2002
- Submission of Co-operation Strategies: May 2002
- Award of Action 2, Co-operation funding allocation: June/September 2002

Local Action Groups will have the autonomy to award grant aid to promoters of rural development projects within their respective areas under the terms of the LEADER + Programme and their approved strategies over the 2001-2006 period. Applicants wishing to obtain funding under the Programme will make application to the appropriate Local Action Group for the area.

Responsibilities of the Local Action Group will include such activities as; promotion of the programme; development work ie to issue standardised application forms and guidance notes and to assist potential project promoters in the development of suitable projects; project selection; appeals/complaints procedures; project output, result, impact and financial monitoring; programme co-ordination and management information.

The Department in consultation with the LEADER+ Monitoring Committee will be responsible for the overall management and implementation of the Programme. The Department will seek to ensure that over the period 2001-2006 the necessary management and monitoring arrangements are in place to guarantee effective implementation of the LEADER + Programme in Northern Ireland.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (a) the number of sheep and cattle culled as a result of foot-and-mouth disease and (b) how were the carcasses disposed of in each case.

(AQW 352/01)

Ms Rodgers: The information requested is as follows:

There were a total of 41,911 sheep and 4,331 cattle culled in Northern Ireland as a result of foot-and-mouth disease.

Initially all carcasses were burnt on site. As numbers increased the carcasses of infected premises continued to be burnt and the carcasses from precautionary cull sites were rendered.

GDP in 2000

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the contribution of agriculture to the GDP for the year 2000-01 (or nearest year available) and what is the average for the previous five years.

(AQW 354/01)

Ms Rodgers: Agriculture's contribution to GDP in Northern Ireland in 2000 was, provisionally, £464 million, or 2.6 per cent of the total. The average for the five years 1995-1999 was £547 million, or 3.5 per cent.

Cull of Lambs in South Armagh, Ardboe & Cushendall

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of store and fattening wether lambs which were included in the cull in South Armagh, Ardboe and Cushendall.

(AQW 397/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Department does not have the information requested on the number of store and fattening lambs culled. However the total number of sheep culled as a result of FMD was 41,911.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Clay Pigeon Shooting

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to name the recognised governing body for clay pigeon shooting in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 326/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Sports Council recognises both the

Ulster Clay Pigeon Shooting Association (UCPSA) and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). The UCPSA retains the franchise for selecting competitors to represent Northern Ireland in the Commonwealth Games and other International competitions and the BASC promotes the activity of Clay Pigeon Shooting.

EDUCATION

Transport for Educational Purposes in Rural Areas

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Education if he has taken any steps to liaise with his colleague, the Minister for Employment and Learning, over the provision of transport for educational purposes for both schoolchildren and adults in rural areas.

(AQW 323/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): My Department will shortly be reviewing transport policy and will liaise with the Department for Employment and Learning in relation to the transport of pupils in further education.

Draft Programme for Government

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken to secure additional funding to deliver his objectives outlined in the Draft Programme for Government.

(AQW 356/01)

Mr M McGuinness: As part of its collective decisions on the Draft Budget for 2002-03, the Executive is proposing that an extra £20.5 million be allocated to the Education budget compared to previous plans, giving an overall increase of 4.8% over the current year.

New Capital Build

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the Draft Public Expenditure Plans 2002-03 announced on 25 September 2001, to detail how much will be invested in new capital build.

(AQO 254/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Draft Public Expenditure Plans for 2002-03 announced on 25 September provide £106 million for schools' capital works. This amount is to cover new capital build, on going capital works and other areas of capital expenditure. The new capital build programme will be determined early next year in light of the funds likely to be available in 2002-03 and subsequent financial years.

Joined-Up Government

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister of Education what steps he has taken to further the aim of "joined-up government" as set out in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 289/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department's responsibility for the education of children and young people has always required us to identify and develop those connections with the work of other Departments and agencies which will lead to real improvement in our services. The wide range of collaborative activity in which we are currently involved will enable us to play a full part in realising the Executive's aim.

School Transport

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has held with the education and library boards concerning the provision of school transport; and to make a statement.

(AQO 266/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department is in regular contact with the education and library boards concerning the provision of home to school transport.

Most recently my Department has sought the views of the boards on the Environment Committee's report on 'Transport Used for Children Travelling To and From School', and will take account of these views in its response to the Committee.

Pupil Teacher Ratios

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to make a statement on pupil/teacher ratios in primary and post-primary schools.

(AQO 272/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The 2000-01 pupil:teacher ratio in primary schools was 20.2 and in post-primary schools was 14.5.

Under Local Management of School (LMS) arrangements, decisions on the number of teachers to be employed in any school are a matter for the school's Board of Governors, taking account of curricular and other requirements and the level of resources available.

Conference on Human Rights in Education

Ms Lewsley asked the Minister of Education if there has been any feedback from the conference on Human Rights in Education; and to make a statement.

(AQO 282/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Feedback received so far from the conference on Human Rights in Education held on 26 September 2001 has been very positive. As I said in

my address to the Conference, my Department intends to produce a post-conference report which will focus on the issues raised by those who attended and took part in the Conference Workshops. In light of this, I will be considering what further needs to be done to raise the profile of human rights issues in education.

Review of Post-Primary Education

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) when he intends to publish the Review of Post-Primary Education and (b) the timescale for implementing the Review's recommendations. (AQO 292/01)

Mr M McGuinness: I expect shortly to receive the report of the independent review body and I will want to undertake the widest possible consultations on the issues it raises before bringing any proposals for change.

Education for Mutual Understanding

Mr J Kelly asked the Minister of Education what is being done in schools to raise awareness of issues such as unequal development, poverty and conflict within and between countries. (AQO 288/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Curriculum here includes a number of compulsory cross-curricular themes. One such theme: Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU), is about fostering self-respect, respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural traditions.

One of the key objectives of EMU is Understanding Conflict, where pupils learn about and understand the nature of conflict within and between societies, the reactions to conflict and the reduction of conflict. Pupils will learn about, in particular, the nature of conflict here, and will compare possible reasons for this with possible reasons for conflict in other parts of the world.

Through the cross-curricular theme of Economic Awareness pupils will also learn about imbalances between nations, in trade and living standards, and the effect of economic development on the living standards in different countries.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) are currently undertaking a review of the curriculum here and they will be considering how these issues will be incorporated into the new curriculum in the context of local and global citizenship.

Education for Mutual Understanding

Ms Armitage asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to encourage school visits to museums and cultural exhibitions to promote mutual understanding and community relations at a young age. (AQO 253/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Schools have for years visited museums and cultural exhibitions to promote mutual understanding and community relations at a young age. This is currently facilitated under the Schools' Community Relations Programme. I will continue to encourage these visits.

Sex Education

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Education to explain why board representatives, local churches and MLA's were not consulted in the formulation of the curriculum on sex education. (AQO 250/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Sex education is a particularly sensitive issue and as such a wide range of groups were consulted prior to the production of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) guidance for both primary and post-primary schools. Copies of the draft proposals were sent out to Education and Health Boards, Churches, schools, CCMS, teachers unions and many other organisations and individuals.

While the guidance has only been issued recently, the consultation process took place prior to the devolution of powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 December 1998. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) did, however, place a public notice in a local newspaper on 17 November 1998 inviting comments from interested individuals, groups and organisations.

Education for Mutual Understanding

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to develop further a community relations programme through Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU) at both primary and secondary level; and to make a statement. (AQO 260/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Schools' Community Relations Programme is designed to promote community relations in schools at primary and secondary level and to provide a valuable dimension to EMU in the curriculum. The Programme has now been in place for some fifteen years and, while during that time it has made a valuable contribution to enhancing relationships between different types of school, my Department has commissioned a Review, to ensure that it is continuing to meet its objectives in full. When the Review's final report is to hand, I will wish to consider the best way forward.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

University of Ulster Access to Library Facilities

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will ensure that students who have to travel

from the Magee Campus to Jordanstown for books, could be facilitated at the local campus. (AQW 313/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): The University of Ulster, like all universities in the UK, is an autonomous body responsible for its own policies and procedures. As such, I cannot intervene in its internal operations.

My officials have consulted Library staff in the University who have stated that the Library provides a comprehensive range of services to facilitate off campus access. Staff there will be more than happy to provide details of what is available and to investigate the cause of your concern if you would care to provide them with more information.

Foundation Degree Pilot Programmes

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will (a) give details of the pilot project to replace HNDs, (b) which colleges are running the pilot and (c) how many students have enrolled.

(AQW 314/01)

Dr Farren: (a) I assume that the Member is referring to the Foundation Degree pilot programmes which are being delivered by university-led consortia involving FE colleges and employers and are in leading edge industries such as Information Technology disciplines.

- (b) Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education
 East Antrim Institute of Further and Higher Education
 Newry & Kilkeel Institute of Further and Higher Education
 North Down & Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education
 North East Institute of Further and Higher Education
 North West Institute of Further and Higher Education
 Omagh Further Education College

- (c) Seventy full-time and sixty part-time students have enrolled for the 2001/02 Foundation Degrees courses. Foundation Degrees are not viewed as replacing HNDs; they are different from HND/HNC(s) because of the "Core" elements they contain which include specific skills training underpinned by rigorous academic learning; employer involvement in delivering work-relevant skills; and that the degrees should be transferable and must provide a route for students to progress to honours degree level.

Composition of FE Governing Bodies

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has any plans to extend the composition

of FE governing bodies to include the community voluntary sector and trade unions. (AQW 315/01)

Dr Farren: The term of the present Governing Bodies of further education colleges expires on 31 March 2002. My Department is presently considering the arrangements for their reconstitution which will be taken forward in accordance with the Further Education (NI) Order 1997. Schedule 3 of the Order sets out the composition of a Governing Body. Fifty percent or more are persons engaged or employed in business, industry or any profession. Other members are the Principal; one or two staff members elected by the staff; one student elected by the students, two persons nominated by the ELB for the area in which the college is situated; and not more than two persons co-opted by the other members. My Department intends to review governance of FE colleges during the next term of the governing bodies.

Travelling Community

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many members of the Travelling Community are enrolled at FE colleges and Institutes of Higher Education and what steps have been taken to encourage members of the Travelling Community to access third-level education. (AQW 316/01)

Dr Farren: In 2000/01 no students declared themselves as being from the Travelling Community at the FE colleges and the University of Ulster. Queens' University, St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College will collect this information from 2002/03. My student support proposals, especially the introduction of means-tested bursaries and my support for a range of actions by the universities are designed to enhance the opportunities of those from disadvantaged backgrounds to access higher education on an equal basis. A number of activities are in place across the further education sector related directly to the needs of the Travelling community using funding under the Access Initiative Fund as well as the Basic Skills Unit's Innovation Fund.

NVQ Level 2

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to advise of the percentage of students who gained NVQ level II and were subsequently successful in gaining full-time employment with their original training providers. (AQW 325/01)

Dr Farren: My Department does not collate data in respect of trainees who progress to employment with their original work placement provider. The latest figures, as at July 2001, indicate that of those young people who started training during the period April 1999 to

March 2000 and had gained a NVQ Level 2, 68% have subsequently been successful in gaining full-time employment. That figure includes 52% who progressed to employment in a Modern Apprenticeship.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Aerospace Subcontract Work

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if he intends to put in place any contingency plans to extend support to companies which depend largely on sub-contracted work from the aerospace sector.

(AQW 332/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): LEDU and IDB, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium, are liaising closely with those client companies which may be affected by the recent events in the United States and will consider how best their support programmes may be used to maintain their competitiveness at this difficult time.

LEDU is currently monitoring events and is in close contact with all key subcontractors to both Bombardier and the global aerospace industry to ascertain the current and future impacts of the developments, post September 11. LEDU is actively liaising and working with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium to develop a way forward for the industry.

IDB has written to the Prime Minister urging him to introduce measures which would mitigate against some of the job losses recently announced by Bombardier Shorts, and which in turn would ease the pressures on the local subcontract network.

Any business issues being raised are being actioned.

ENVIRONMENT

Display of Election Posters: West Tyrone

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 117/01, what monitoring has been carried out by his officials in the Derg Electoral area, West Tyrone and to detail the outcome of the correspondence with individuals, party or parties who were in breach of the relevant regulations. (AQW 306/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): As I previously explained, my Department wrote to political parties on 22 June 2001 and 2 July 2001 reminding them

of the statutory regulations for the display of election posters, including the requirement that they must be removed within 14 days of the close of the relevant poll.

Monitoring of breaches of the regulations is largely based on specific complaints and requests for the removal of the posters. I am not aware of any complaints regarding a breach of the relevant regulations in the Derg Electoral area.

However, if the Member is aware of posters still being displayed in the Derg Electoral area, and wishes to provide my Department with details, I will be happy to ensure my officials follow the matter up.

Landfill

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment what action is he taking to reduce the proportion of waste that is put into landfill; and to make a statement.

(AQW 351/01)

Mr Foster: My Department published a comprehensive Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland in March 2000.

The Strategy sets challenging targets which are necessary to achieve sustainable waste management through the controlled reduction of landfill, waste minimisation and a significant increase in recycling and recovery. It also restricts landfill capacity to essential interim needs while District Councils prepare, and then agree with my Department, Waste Management Plans for an integrated network of recycling and recovery facilities.

The Plans will determine how Councils propose to meet the Strategy's targets for reductions in the quantity of industrial, commercial and biodegradable municipal waste going to landfill.

Increased recycling is a key alternative to landfill. My Department is working to address the main barriers to recycling which are a shortage of local markets for recycled products and a lack of reprocessing infrastructure.

The Waste Management Advisory Board, recently set up by my Department, will oversee the introduction of a Market Development Programme to stimulate demand for recycled materials and products.

A Northern Ireland Waste Arisings Report published last month by my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) concluded that the most commonly used waste management option for waste produced by industry and commerce is still landfill.

To help companies to reduce the amount of waste which goes to landfill, guidelines have been produced by the EHS, entitled 'Guidelines for Company Reporting on Waste'; they describe the steps a business can take

to measure, manage and report on the environmental impact of its waste.

Council Meetings

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister of the Environment what guidelines he has given about the conduct of district council monthly public meetings, is he aware that members of the NUJ are concerned that they cannot report these public meetings in full, due to the increasing tendency of the minutes of council meetings being classified as "confidential". (AQW 360/01)

Mr Foster: Sections 23, 27 and Schedule 2 of the Local Government Act (NI) 1972 provide for admission of the public to council meetings. District Councils may determine, by resolution, whether meetings should be open or otherwise. There may be times when openness might not be in the best interest of the council or the public, due to the confidential or sensitive nature of the business or proceedings. No guidelines have issued from my Department on this subject. It is entirely a matter for individual councils to determine the most appropriate format.

Landfill Sites & Dangerous Waste

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of the Environment to make a statement in respect of the regulation of landfill sites and to outline his policy on the disposal of dangerous waste. (AQW 364/01)

Mr Foster: In Northern Ireland there are three necessary approvals required to operate a landfill site. These are planning permission under the Planning Order (Northern Ireland) 1991, a discharge consent under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 and a disposal licence under the Pollution Control and Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 1978.

Any conditions attached to the above approvals are monitored and enforced by the Planning Service, the Environment and Heritage Service and District Councils respectively.

With regard to the disposal of dangerous waste, the 1978 Order makes it an offence to deposit controlled waste anywhere but on a licenced site and in accordance with any conditions applying to that particular site. The district councils operate the licensing controls and it is their duty to ensure adequate arrangements are made for the disposal of all controlled waste in their districts. In addition, controls are in place under the Special Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998 requiring the keeping of records in connection with the safe management of special waste and also on restricting the mixing of different categories of special waste with waste which is not special.

General Exchequer Grant

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to his Department's letter, Ref LGD 3/4/01, to local district councils, to detail (a) the effect of his proposal to relocate £2 million from the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant across all 26 district councils, in terms of the local penny rate using 2001-02 data and (b) if he would reconsider this proposal. (AQW 368/01)

Mr Foster: (a) The likely effect of the proposal to relocate £2 million, on individual district councils which qualify for the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant, is detailed in the table below in terms of local penny rates for 2001-2002

(b) The draft budget for 2002-03 is currently out for consultation. All comments received will be considered and the position will be reviewed as necessary.

District Council	Proposed Reduction (In Penny Rate Terms)
Antrim	
Ards	2.37p
Armagh	2.72p
Ballymena	
Ballymoney	2.65p
Banbridge	2.50p
Belfast	
Carrickfergus	2.56p
Castlereagh	
Coleraine	
Cookstown	2.73p
Craigavon	
Derry	2.83p
Down	2.91p
Dungannon	2.44p
Fermanagh	2.12p
Larne	
Limavady	2.32p
Lisburn	
Magherafelt	2.25p
Moyle	2.60p
Newry & Mourne	2.82p
Newtownabbey	
North Down	
Omagh	2.55p
Strabane	2.44p

Planning Stop Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions have been brought for failure to comply with planning stop notices in each of the last three years. (AQW 374/01)

Mr Foster: This information is set out below:

1999	2
2000	0
2001	(to date) 0

Planning Enforcement Notices

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions have been brought for breaches of planning enforcement notices in each of the last three years. (AQW 375/01)

Mr Foster: This information is set out below:

1999	11
2000	9
2001	(to date) 10

Redevelopment: Glassmullin, Belfast

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment if he is aware of any plans for the redevelopment of the football pitches at Glassmullin, Andersonstown, Belfast. (AQW 377/01)

Mr Foster: My Department is not aware of any plans for redevelopment of the site.

General Exchequer Grant

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his plans for the General Exchequer Grant for local councils and will he confirm his commitment to the same level of funding as provided in the last financial year. (AQW 381/01)

Mr Foster: The Department has a commitment in the Programme for Government to review the statutory formula for calculation of the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant to district councils, to take account of relative socio-economic disadvantage. A consultation paper setting out proposals for a new methodology issued on 21 September 2001. Primary legislation will be required to introduce any change in the existing arrangement, therefore, a new formula could not be operational before 2003-04. General Exchequer Grant provision in the current financial year amounts to £44.7 million - £19 million for the resources element of the grant; and £25.7 million for the derating element. As the Executive was faced with difficult choices in

relation to the allocation of funds to accommodate other priorities, its draft budget for 2002-03 reduces the previous indicative allocation of £19.5 million to £17.5 million for the resources element and provides £27.7 million to compensate councils in full for the costs of derating. General Exchequer Grant for 2002-03 is therefore, set at £45.2 million compared to the total grant of £44.7 million in the current financial year. The Executive's draft budget for 2002-03 is currently out for consultation.

General Exchequer Grant

Mr Bradley asked the Minister of the Environment what the proposed £2m cut in the Resources Grant payable to district councils, coupled with the revised Local Government Funding Formula, will mean in monetary terms to each one of the twenty-six local authorities. (AQW 386/01)

Mr Foster: The impact of the reduction of £2 million in the previous indicative allocation for 2002-03, using those district councils which qualify for the resources element of General Exchequer Grant this year, is illustrated in the table below. This is reflected in the Executive's draft budget, which is currently out for consultation. On 21 September 2001 a consultation paper issued, containing proposals for a new methodology to distribute the resource element of the General Exchequer Grant. It has no significance for allocations next year. Any new formula will require primary legislation and could not be operational before 2003-04.

District Council	Draft Budget Reduction £
Antrim	-
Ards	186,000
Armagh	136,000
Ballymena	-
Ballymoney	61,000
Banbridge	100,000
Belfast	-
Carrickfergus	107,000
Castlereagh	-
Coleraine	-
Cookstown	82,000
Craigavon	-
Derry	342,000
Down	184,000
Dungannon	109,000
Fermanagh	127,000
Larne	-
Limavady	71,000

District Council	Draft Budget Reduction £
Lisburn	-
Magherafelt	76,000
Moyle	39,000
Newry & Mourne	236,000
Newtownabbey	-
North Down	-
Omagh	123,000
Strabane	75,000

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he will make it his policy to introduce planning regulations, similar to the Republic of Ireland, whereby planning applications are automatically approved if they are not processed within two months. (AQW 387/01)

Mr Foster: I have no current plans to introduce new planning regulations as the Member suggests. This proposal would represent a major change in Departmental policy and practices which, in Northern Ireland, differ significantly from those in operation in the Republic of Ireland.

Programme for Government: Green Issues

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to ensure all departments include "green" procurement policies in the Programme for Government. (AQW 393/01)

Mr Foster: Prior to devolution the then Northern Ireland Departments and their Agencies were committed to greening their operations as part of the UK Greening Government Initiative.

This Initiative encouraged Departments to improve their environmental performance in housekeeping a range of activities, including their procurement arrangements. In keeping with this, the Green Guide to Suppliers of Goods and Services to Northern Ireland was issued to all departments and suppliers to provide guidelines on the integration of environmental objectives into the procurement process.

As part of the Initiative a Model Policy Statement was developed for use by departments in setting their environmental commitments.

A Northern Ireland Model Policy Statement for Greening Government Operations was also developed and circulated for discussion to the then NI Departments in April 1999. This Initiative was however overtaken by devolution.

In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government "to develop proposals for implementing improvements in public procurement" the Department of Finance and Personnel, as lead Department for public procurement policy, initiated a review of procurement policy in November 2000.

The Review report is currently out for public consultation, ending on 30 November. Among the recommendations is a proposal that the current Northern Ireland Model Policy Statement should be reissued with the support of the Executive and encouragement to put it into operation in each Department.

The report also recommends the establishment of a new Procurement Board, responsible for the development of public procurement policy. The Board would be tasked with keeping under review the procurement element of the Model Policy Statement.

World Heritage Site

Mrs Courtney asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to ensure that the City Walls within Derry City Council area are recognised as a world heritage site. (AQO 331/01)

Mr Foster: World Heritage Sites in Northern Ireland are a matter for my Department. However, lead policy responsibility within the UK for the operation of UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, and therefore for World Heritage Site nominations, lies with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The current United Kingdom 'Tentative List' of World Heritage Site nominations was published by DCMS in June 1999. It contained twenty-five nominations, of which one, Mount Stewart Gardens, is in Northern Ireland.

The Tentative List is expected to remain current for some years. There are therefore no plans to seek recognition of the City Walls within the Derry City Council area as a World Heritage Site.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Civil Service Absenteeism

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 3658/00, to estimate the additional funds that would be available for public expenditure in Northern Ireland if absenteeism levels in the Northern Ireland Civil Service followed British employee averages. (AQW 276/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): I would refer to my answer to Assembly Question 277 / 01, in relation to the comparability of

absenteeism figures. I would also point out that reduced absenteeism levels would mainly contribute to better performance rather than directly saving funds.

Civil Service Absenteeism

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 3658/00, how civil service rates of absenteeism compare to CBI's surveys on absenteeism in the private sector. (AQW 277/01)

Mr Durkan: The overall absence rate for the NICS was 6.8% during 2000-01 against the comparable figure of 6.9% for 1999-2000. NICS figures are calculated in terms of the percentage of available working days lost per staff year (224 days). The figures available from the CBI's postal survey on absenteeism do not provide for meaningful comparison. First they represent absenteeism across the UK in a range of private sector organisations of varying sizes. They are calculated on a different basis from the NICS and do not allow for factors such as the gender/age profile of an organisation and volume of part-time working to be taken into account. These have been shown to have an impact on absenteeism rates. The CBI's Survey also identifies that company size is a key determinant of absence rates with the smallest firms having an absence rate some 40% less than the largest.

Scrutiny of Departmental Budgets

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken to enable the Assembly and its Committees to be in a position to undertake an effective scrutiny of Departmental budgets to ensure that the actions funded meet the priorities set out in the Draft Programme for Government and constitute value for money. (AQO 279/01)

Mr Durkan: The earlier start to this year's PFG and Budget processes, as compared to last year, has facilitated greater scrutiny of the draft PFG and Budget and will enable the Assembly to examine the links between the priorities of the Executive, departmental aims and the funds allocated to each department to achieve agreed objectives and targets.

Scrutiny of these processes and related documents, viewed alongside the Reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General, will enable the Assembly and its Committees to be in a better position to ensure the actions funded meet PFG priorities and constitute value for money.

Senior Civil Service Review

Mr McNamee asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the terms of reference for the Senior Civil Service Review. (AQO 262/01)

Mr Durkan: The Review Team has been asked "to review the effectiveness of current policies, practices and procedures concerning appointment to and promotion within the NI Senior Civil Service to ensure that they:

- Facilitate the business objectives of Ministers and NI Departments by providing for the timely and efficient filling of posts with appropriate staff;
- Promote the NICS goal to be fully representative of the community which it serves by tackling under-representation in the NICS as quickly and as effectively as possible ;
- Address any identified obstacles to fair participation by all sectors of the community; and
- Match best practice in other major public private sector bodies in Northern Ireland and beyond;

And to examine the roles of officials and Ministers in each stage of the selection process and to consider the appropriate element of independent involvement, taking account of the statutory role of the Civil Service Commissioners, in recruitment and selection processes; and to make recommendations."

Draft Budget Allocation

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has held with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the proposed budgetary allocation for the provision of health and social services; and to make a statement. (AQO 265/01)

Mr Durkan: I met with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as part of a series of bilateral discussions with Ministerial colleagues prior to the Executive finalising the draft budget allocations. The draft budget presented to the Assembly on 25 September is the outcome of thorough discussions between Ministers and represents the collective decisions taken by the Executive on 20 September.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

A&E Services: Tyrone County Hospital

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to improve Accident and Emergency Services at Tyrone County Hospital. (AQW 249/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): I refer the member to the answer I gave on 11 October to Question Number AQW 243/01.

Tarraingim aird an chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar Cheist AQW 243/01 ar an 11 Deireadh Fómhair.

Orthopaedic Patients

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients treated by orthopaedic surgery for the years (a) 1997 (b) 1998 (c) 1999 (d) 2000 and (e) 2001 to date. (AQW 261/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of inpatients in the speciality of Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery is available and is detailed in the table below.

INPATIENTS⁽¹⁾ IN THE TRAUMA & ORTHOPAEDIC SURGERY SPECIALTY, 1996/7 - 2000/01

1996/97	15,449
1997/98	15,843
1998/99	15,741
1999/00	15,988
2000/01	15,358

⁽¹⁾ Discharges and Deaths (including Day Cases).

Tá eolas ar líon na n-othar cónaitheach i speisialtacht Tráma agus na Máinliachta Ortaipéidí ar fáil agus miondealaítear sa tábla thíos é.

OTHAIR CHÓNAITHEACHA⁽¹⁾ I SPEISIALTACHT TRÁMA AGUS NA MÁINLIACHTA ORTAIPÉIDÍ, 1996/97 - 2000/01.

1996/97	15,449
1997/98	15,843
1998/99	15,741
1999/00	15,988
2000/01	15,358

⁽¹⁾ Scaoilte Amach agus Básanna (Cásanna Lae san áireamh).

Equitable Life AVC Scheme

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what she intends to do by way of compensation for individuals who have sustained financial loss by investing in the NHS promoted Equitable Life AVC. (AQW 262/01)

Ms de Brún: Money Purchase Additional Voluntary Contribution (AVC) arrangements were introduced to Public Sector Pension Schemes in 1991 in order to widen members' options. Equitable Life was appointed as in-house AVC provider for NHS staff from February 1991. Following a further competitive European Commission procurement exercise Equitable was re-appointed for a further five years in 1998.

I sympathise with the predicament these staff find themselves in, however I cannot offer compensation

from the Department. HPSS Superannuation Scheme and Equitable Life literature has always made it clear that returns for these types of investment could not be guaranteed, and members were made aware of the alternatives of buying main scheme added years with guaranteed benefits, or the option of making payments to a free-standing AVC.

HPSS Superannuation Scheme management have written to members as the situation has changed to update them on the position and the options available, including stopping their AVC contributions, and have advised those uncertain of what to do to seek financial advice. The Equitable Life has also kept members informed of the situation.

Tugadh socruithe Síntiúis Dheonaigh Bhreise Cheannach le hAirgead (SDB) isteach i Scéimeanna Pinsin na hEarnála Poiblí i 1991 le roghanna ball a fhairsingiú. Ceapadh Equitable Life mar sholáthraí inmheánach SDB d'fhoireann na SNS ó Fheabhra 1991. I ndiaidh iarrachta iomaíche rathúla eile le hairgead a fháil ón Choimisiún Eorpach, athcheapadh Equitable do théarma cúig bliain eile i 1998.

Tuigim do sháinn na foirne seo, ach ní thig liom cúiteamh airgid ón Roinn a thairiscint dóibh. Chuir leabhráin eolais Scéim Phinsin na SSSP agus Equitable Life in iúl go soiléir i gcónaí nach bhféadfaí sochar do a leithéid d'infheistíocht seo a ráthú, agus cuireadh na roghanna eile le tuilleadh blianta príomhscéime le sochair ráthaithe a cheannach, nó an rogha le híocaíochtaí a dhéanamh le SDBanna neamhspleácha in iúl do bhaill.

Scríobh lucht bainistíochta Scéim Phinsin na SSSP chuig baill mar gur tháinig athrú ar an staid agus chun iad a choinneáil ar an eolas fúithi agus faoi na roghanna ar fáil, stad a chur lena síntiúis SDB san áireamh, agus mhol siad dóibh siúd nach raibh cinnte faoin rud atá le déanamh le hiarraidh ar chomhairle airgeadais. Choinnigh Equitable Life na baill ar an eolas faoin staid fosta.

Equitable Life AVC Scheme

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what monitoring of the Equitable Life AVC scheme took place before the collapse for NHS employees who had invested funds as part of their pension provision. (AQW 263/01)

Ms de Brún: The Equitable Life AVC Scheme was subject to an annual performance review by the Government Actuary's Department. This was based on an annual AVC survey carried out by Bacon & Woodrow, Pension Consultants and Actuaries. Scheme managers from HPSS Superannuation, the NHS Pensions Agency and the Scottish Public Pensions Agency also held an annual review with representatives of Equitable Life.

Since late December 1998, when HPSS Superannuation Branch became aware there was a problem with Guaranteed Annuity Rate With-Profit policies, Scheme managers have sought professional legal and actuarial advice on an ongoing basis. This initially indicated it would not be in members' best interests to part company with the Equitable. After receiving further advice from Bacon & Woodrow in August this year Scheme managers wrote to members advising that any member still contributing to Equitable with profits AVC funds should be recommended to cease payments, unless they had independent advice to the contrary.

Bhí Scéim SDB Equitable Life faoi réir athbhreithnithe bhliantúil ar a fheidhmiú ag Roinn Achtúire an Rialtais. Bhí seo bunaithe ar shuirbhé bhliantúil SDB déanta ag Bacon & Woodrow, Comhairleoirí ar Phinsin agus Achtúirí. Bhí athbhreithniú bliantúil ag bainisteoirí scéime ó Phinsin na SSSP, ó Ghníomhaireacht Phinsin na SNS agus ó Ghníomhaireacht Phinsin Phoiblí na hAlban le hionadaithe ó Equitable Life fosta.

Ó dheireadh na Nollag 1998, nuair a bhí a fhios ag Brainse Pinsin na SSSP go raibh fadhb le polasaithe Ráta Ráthaithe Bliantachta-le Brabús, d'iarr bainisteoirí scéime ar chomhairle ghairmiúil, dhlíthiúil agus achtúireach ar bhonn rialta. Chuir sí seo in iúl ar dtús nach mbeadh sé ar mhaithe le baill briseadh le Equitable. I ndiaidh tuilleadh comhairle a fháil ó Bacon & Woodrow i mí Lúnasa na bliana seo, scríobh bainisteoirí scéime chuig baill ag moladh do bhall ar bith ag cur airgid i gcéistí SDB-le brabúis Equitable go fóill gur chóir dóibh stad a chur le híocaíochtaí munar tugadh comhairle neamhspleách dóibh ar a mhalairt.

Endometriosis

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she will make it her policy to recognise endometriosis as a long-term clinical condition. (AQW 264/01)

Ms de Brún: Endometriosis is a disease where normal endometrial tissue exists in abnormal locations. The nature and duration of the disease will vary depending on the extent of disease, severity of symptoms and response to treatment. Typically it resolves after the menopause. Determining whether endometriosis is a long-term condition in any patient will be a clinical, not a policy decision.

Is galar í inmheatróis ina bhfuil gnáthfhíochán inmheatróiseach suite in áiteanna mínormálta. Athróidh nádúr agus fad an ghalair de réir mhéad an ghalair, ghéire na n-airíonna agus de réir na freagartha do chóireáil. Maolaíonn sí i ndiaidh an tsosa mhíostraithe de ghnáth. Cinneadh clínicíúil agus ní cinneadh polasaí a bheidh i gcinneadh ar bith a dhéanfar ar cé acu an riocht fadtéarmach í inmheatróis nó nach í.

Hip Joint Operations

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to reduce the number on the waiting list for hip joints to 3000. (AQW 265/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently, there are 953 people waiting for hip joint operations here and the average waiting time is 12 to 18 months.

I am concerned that this is too long. There remains a shortage of orthopaedic surgeons both here and in the NHS. Steps have been taken to increase the number of trainees in this specialty, but this will clearly take time.

I have put extra money into the health and social services to tackle waiting lists and a framework for action on waiting lists is currently being implemented. The service needs more investment if it is to meet the demands being placed upon it and I will continue to make the case for additional resources.

Faoi láthair, tá 953 duine ag fanacht ar obráidí alt an chromáin anseo agus is é 12 go 18 mí an meánam feithimh é.

Tá mé buartha go bhfuil sé seo rófhada. Tá easpa máinlianna ortaipéideacha anseo agus sa SNS go fóill. Rinneadh bearta le líon na bprintiseach sa speisialtacht seo a mhéadú, ach is léir go nglacfaidh seo am.

Thug mé airgead breise do na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta le tabhairt faoi liostaí feithimh agus tá creatlach le haghaidh gnímh ar liostaí feithimh á cur i bhfeidhm i láthair na huaire. Tá níos mó infheistíochta sa tseirbhís de dhíth má tá sí le riar ar na héilimh atá á n-iarraidh uirthi agus leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh le hiarraidh ar acmhainní breise.

Ulidia Housing Association

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3224/00, when the Craigavon and Banbridge Community NHS Trust agreed "in principle" a support agreement with Ulidia Housing Association. (AQW 268/01)

Ms de Brún: The Craigavon and Banbridge Community NHS Trust agreed "in principle" a support agreement with Ulidia Housing Association on 10 July 2001.

D'aontaigh Iontaobhas SNS Phobal Chreag na hAbhann agus Dhroichead na Banna comhaontú tacaíochta 'i bprionsabal' le Cumann Tithíochta Ulidia ar 10 Iúil 2001.

Budget Allocations

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) budget allocations

for the financial years 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03 for local trusts and (b) the current population numbers within each trust. (AQW 269/01)

Ms de Brún: The Department allocates the bulk of its budget, on an equitable basis, to the four Health and Social Services Boards, which in turn fund the Trusts for the services they provide. My Department does not, therefore, agree detailed budgets for individual Trusts. In 2000-01 the operating expenditure of each Trust was as follows:

Trust	£'000
Belfast City Hospital	125,250
Royal Group of Hospitals	184,721
Ulster Community and Hospitals	133,191
Down Lisburn	101,198
South and East Belfast	107,501
North and West Belfast	100,379
Green Park	45,730
Mater	27,484
NI Ambulance Service	23,978
Craigavon and Banbridge	45,522
Craigavon Area Hospital	64,765
Newry/Mourne	58,388
Causeway	71,598
Homefirst	121,573
Foyle	76,528
Sperrin Lakeland	92,986
Armagh/ Dungannon	64,806
Altnagelvin	62,274
United Hospitals	88,019
Total	1,595,891

As to Trust population numbers, there is no statutorily-recognised basis for such figures. The Department has, however, made an internal estimate of the population served by each community Trust, as shown in the table below:

Trust	Population (est)
Armagh & Dungannon	102,600
Causeway	96,400
Craigavon & Banbridge	118,300
Down Lisburn	174,500
Foyle	161,781
Homefirst	329,400
Newry & Mourne	86,800
North & West Belfast	154,761
South & East Belfast	198,939
Sperrin Lakeland	118,419
Ulster Community & Hospitals	146,500

Trust	Population (est)
Total	1,688,400

Acute Trusts provide services to people from different catchment areas, or drawn from the region as a whole. No meaningful attribution of population can be made for those Trusts.

Dáileann an Roinn an méid is mó dá buiséad, ar bhonn cothrom, do na ceithre Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, a thugann, maoiniú dá réir do na hIontaobhais ar mhaithe leis na seirbhísí a sholáthraíonn siad. Ní aontaíonn an Roinn s'agam, mar sin de, buiséid mhionsonraithe d'Iontaobhais aonaracha. Is mar a leanas atá caiteachas feidhmiúcháin gach Iontaobhais i 2000-01:

Iontaobhas	£'000
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	125,250
An Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	184,721
Pobal Uladh & Otharlanna	133,191
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	101,198
Béal Feirste Theas agus Thoir	107,501
Béal Feirste Thuaidh agus Thiar	100,379
An Pháirc Ghlas	45,730
Otharlann an Mater	27,484
Seirbhís Otharcharr Thuaisceart Éireann	23,978
Craigavon agus Droichead na Banna	45,522
Otharlann Cheantar Craigavon	64,765
An tLú agus Mhúrn	58,388
An Clochán	71,598
Homefirst	121,573
An Feabhail	76,528
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	92,986
Ard Mhacha/Dún Geanainn	64,806
Alt na nGealbhan	62,274
Otharlanna Aontaithe	88,019
Iomlán	1,595,891

Maidir le líon daonra, níl bonn a aithnítear go reachtúil a leithéid d'fhigiúirí. Tá meastúchán inmheanach ar líon daonra ar a fhreastlaíonn gach Iontaobhas pobail, ag an Roinn, mar atá léirithe sa tábla thíos:

Iontaobhas	Daonra (meas)
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	102,600
An Clochán	96,400
Craigavon agus Droichead na Banna	118,300
An Dún / Lios na gCearrbhach	174,500
An Feabhail	161,781
Homefirst	329,400
An tLú & Mhúrn	86,800

Iontaobhas	Daonra (meas)
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	154,761
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	198,939
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	118,419
Poabl Uladh & Otharlanna	146,500
Iomlán	1,688,400

Soláthraíonn géar-Iontaobhais seirbhísí do dhaoine ó cheantair dhifiriúla, nó ón reigiún iomlán. Ní féidir líon daonra ciallmhar a léiriú dá leithéid d'Iontaobhais.

Staffing and Service Provision: HSS Trusts

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she could confirm that staffing levels and service provision will not be affected if a trust is unable to live within its allocated budget. (AQW 271/01)

Ms de Brún: All Trusts must achieve financial stability and live within the resources available so that my Department, like others, does not spend more than its Departmental expenditure limit. To achieve this aim, several Trusts have been involved in the preparation of Financial Contingency Plans and the identification of efficiency savings, whilst minimising any impact on care services (including staffing levels and service provision). My Department is currently evaluating these plans and, since they have not yet been approved, it would be inappropriate of me to comment further at this time.

Caithfidh gach iontaobhas cobhsaíocht airgeadais a bhaint amach agus gan dul thar na hacmhainní atá ar fáil le nach gcaitheann mo Roinn níos mó ná a teorainn chaiteachais Roinne, cosúil leis na Ranna eile. Leis an chuspóir seo a bhaint amach, tá roinnt Ranna páirteach ag ullmhú pleananna teagmhasacha airgeadais agus ag aithint coigiltí éifeachtachta; ach ag an am chéanna ag laghdú na hiarmhairte ar sheirbhísí cúraim (lena n-áirítear leibhéil foirne agus soláthar seirbhísí). Tá mo Roinn ag measúnú na bpleananna seo faoi láthair, agus ós rud é nár faomhadh go fóill iad bheadh sé mícheart agam tuilleadh trácht a dhéanamh orthu ag an am seo.

Budgetary Pressures

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the conditions under which she will provide “bail out” monies in the event of overspend by local trusts. (AQW 272/01)

Ms de Brún: Increases in demand have outstripped the available resources and have played a major part in current financial problems. I am endeavouring to secure additional resources for the HPSS and any such

resources would not be used to “bail out” Trusts but to address the specific cost pressures faced by Trusts in coping with the unprecedented demand on our health and social services.

Sháraigh na méaduithe sa ráchairt orthu na hacmhainní atá ar fáil agus is mór a chuir siad leis na fadhbanna airgeadais atá ann faoi láthair. Tá mé ag iarraidh acmhainní breise a chinntiú do na SSSP agus ní úsáidfí a leithéid d'acmhainn ar bith le hIontaobhais “a tharrtháil” ach le dul i gceann na mbrúnna áirithe costais atá ag Iontaobhais agus iad ag déileáil leis an ráchairt gan réamhshampla ar ár seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta.

Bowens Close

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the document “Draft Staffing Proposals - Bowens Close Supported Living Scheme” was issued. (AQW 273/01)

Ms de Brún: The internal management paper, ‘Draft Staffing Proposals - Bowens Close’, was shared with the SHSSB Registration & Inspection Unit, SHSSB Programme Commission Group for Learning Disability, relatives of the Bowens Close tenants and staff-side organisations in July 2000.

Cuireadh an páipéar inmheánach bainistíochta ‘Dréachtmholtáí Foirne – Clós Bowen’, amach chuig Ionad Cláraithe agus Cigireachta an BSSSD, chuig Grúpa Choimisiúnú Cláir BSSSD do Mhíchumas Foghlama, chuig gaolta thionóntaí Chlós Bowen agus chuig eagraíochtaí foirne i mí Iúil 2000.

Bowens Close

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3224/00, what advice was given by the Craigavon and Banbridge Community NHS Trust to the tenants of Nos 2 and 3 Bowens Close, Banbridge Road, Lurgan in respect of “licences to occupy” given that a review was pending on the properties. (AQW 274/01)

Ms de Brún: The Craigavon and Banbridge Community NHS Trust gave no advice in respect of the “licences to occupy”, as it is an arrangement between the tenant and the Housing Association.

Níor thug Iontaobhas SNS Phobal Chreag na hAbhann agus Dhroichead na Banna comhairle ar bith maidir le “ceadúnais le háitiú” mar gur socrú idir an tionónta agus an Cumann Tithíochta é.

MMR Vaccination

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in respect of the MMR

vaccination, to detail the number of children in each board area that have developed complications or reacted to the vaccination in each of the last five years.

(AQW 288/01)

Ms de Brún: Between 3 October 1996 and 3 October 2001, the Medicines Control Agency received a total of 25 reports originating from clinicians here, of adverse drug reactions (ADRs) in association with MMR vaccines. The table below lists numbers of ADRs received from each Health and Social Services Board.

Board	No. of reports
EHSSB	15
NHSSB	2
SHSSB	2
WHSSB	6
Total	25

Idir 3 Deireadh Fómhair 1996 agus 3 Deireadh Fómhair 2001, fuair an Ghníomhaireacht um Stiúradh Cógas 25 tuairisc san iomlán ó dhochtúirí anseo faoi fhrithghníomhartha dochracha ar dhrugaí (FDDa) bainteach le vacsaíní MMR. Liostálann an tábla thíos líon na FDDa faighte ó gach Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta.

Bord	Líon na dTuairiscí
BSSSO	15
BSSST	2
BSSSD	2
BSSSI	6
Iomlán	25

MMR Immunisation

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the cost for MMR immunisation in each Health Board area for each of the last five years.

(AQW 289/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is detailed in the table below.

COST OF MMR VACCINATION BY HEALTH & SOCIAL SERVICES BOARDS, 1996/7 - 2000/01

	EHSSB	NHSSB	SHSSB	WHSSB	Total
1996/97	£165,969	£62,715	£64,825	£36,541	£330,050
1997/98	£175,225	£65,269	£48,462	£48,250	£337,206
1998/99	£137,305	£58,251	£52,576	£47,059	£295,191
1999/00	£143,666	£55,291	£50,253	£45,194	£294,404
2000/01	£94,781 ⁽¹⁾	£57,303	£51,054	£41,830	£244,968

⁽¹⁾ Relates only to the period April to December 2000.

Tá an t-eolas seo léirithe sa tábla thíos.

COSTAS VAICSÍNÍÚ MMR AG BOIRD SHLÁINTE & SEIRBHÍSÍ SÓISIALTA, 1996/7 - 2000/01

	BSSSO	BSSST	BSSSD	BSSSI	Iomlán
1996/97	£165,969	£62,715	£64,825	£36,541	£330,050
1997/98	£175,225	£65,269	£48,462	£48,250	£337,206
1998/99	£137,305	£58,251	£52,576	£47,059	£295,191
1999/00	£143,666	£55,291	£50,253	£45,194	£294,404
2000/01	£94,781 ⁽¹⁾	£57,303	£51,054	£41,830	£244,968

⁽¹⁾ Ní bhaineann sé ach leis an tréimhse ó Aibreán go Nollaig 2000.

United Hospitals Group: Delayed Discharge Patients

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number and percentage of beds that are currently blocked at United Hospitals Group HSS Trust.

(AQW 294/01)

Ms de Brún: At 31 August 2001 (the latest date for which figures are available) the United Hospitals Group HSS Trust had 820 available beds. Provisional figures show that 96 (12%) of these beds were occupied by delayed discharge patients.

Ar 31 Lúnasa 2001 (an dáta is déanaí dá bhfuil figiúirí ar fáil), bhí 820 leaba ar fáil ag Iontaobhas SSS Ghrúpa na nOtharlann Aontaithe. Léiríonn figiúirí sealadacha go raibh 96 (12%) de na leapacha seo in úsáid ag othair ar moillíodh a scaoileadh amach.

Residential and Nursing Home Care

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients in the Homefirst Community Trust area who have been assessed as requiring (a) a nursing care package and (b) a residential care package and are currently awaiting funding.

(AQW 295/01)

Ms de Brún: Provisional figures provided by Homefirst Trust for the quarter ending June 2001 indicate that there were 22 persons waiting in the community for residential care and seven persons waiting for nursing home care, for whom no funding was available.

Provisional information obtained from Departmental returns indicates that in the Homefirst Trust area at 31 August 2001, there were 23 people waiting in hospital for a nursing home care package because no funding was available, and eight people waiting for a residential home care package because no funding was available.

Léiríonn figiúirí sealadacha soláthraithe ag Iontaobhas Homefirst don ráithe a chríochnaigh Meitheamh 2001 go raibh 22 duine sa phobal ag fanacht ar chúram cónaithe agus seacht duine ag fanacht ar chúram altrachta baile nach raibh maoiniú ar fáil dóibh.

Léiríonn eolas sealadach faighte ó thuairisceáin Rannacha go raibh 23 duine i gceantar Iontaobhas Homefirst ag fanacht san otharlann ar phacáiste cúraim altrachta bhaile ar 31 Lúnasa 2001 mar nach raibh maoiniú ar bith ar fáil agus go raibh ocht duine ag fanacht ar phacáiste cúraim chónaithe bhaile mar nach raibh maoiniú ar bith ar fáil.

Care Packages

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) nursing care packages and (b) residential care packages that have been awarded per 1000 of the population in each Health Trust area. (AQW 296/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on the number of new nursing care and new residential care packages delivered per 1,000 of the population in the financial year 2000/01, and is detailed in the table below.

CARE PACKAGES DELIVERED - NEW NURSING CARE AND NEW RESIDENTIAL CARE PACKAGES PER 1,000 POPULATION BY TRUST, 2000/01

Trust	Nursing care packages delivered per 1000 pop.	Residential care packages delivered per 1000 pop.
Armagh & Dungannon	1.8	0.7
Causeway	0.3	0.3
Craigavon & Banbridge	1.3	0.7
Down Lisburn	0.6	0.7
Foyle	0.4	0.2
Homefirst	0.8	1.7
Newry & Mourne	1.4	0.2
North & West Belfast	2.9	0.7
South & East Belfast	1.8	1.1
Sperrin Lakeland	0.5	0.2
Ulster Community & Hospitals	2.0	0.9
Total	1.2	0.8

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na bpacáistí nua cúram altranais agus cúraim chónaithe de réir gach 1,000 den daonra sa bhliain airgeadais 2000/01, agus miondealaítear sa tábla thíos é.

PACÁISTÍ CÚRAIM SOLÁTHRAITHE - PACÁISTÍ NUA CÚRAM ALTRANAIS AGUS CÚRAIM CHÓNAITHE DE RÉIR GACH 1,000 DEN DAONRA DE RÉIR IONTAOBHAIS, 2000/01

Iontaobhas	Cúram altranais Pacáistí soláthraithe an 1000 duine.	Cúram cónaithe Pacáistí soláthraithe an 1000 duine.
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	1.8	0.7
An Clochán	0.3	0.3

Iontaobhas	Cúram altranais Pacáistí soláthraithe an 1000 duine.	Cúram cónaithe Pacáistí soláthraithe an 1000 duine.
Craigavon & Droichead na Banna	1.3	0.7
An Dún/Lios na gCearrbhach	0.6	0.7
An Feabhal	0.4	0.2
Homefirst	0.8	1.7
An tIúr & Múrn	1.4	0.2
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	2.9	0.7
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	1.8	1.1
Speirín Tír na Lochanna	0.5	0.2
Pobal Uladh & Otharlanna	2.0	0.9
Iomlán	1.2	0.8

Nursing Care Packages & Residential Care Packages

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) nursing care packages and (b) residential care packages that have been awarded per 1000 of the population in each Health Trust area during the last financial year. (AQW 297/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to the answer given to AQW 296/01.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 296/01.

United Hospitals Group Trust: Electric Operation Cancelled

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to advise of the number of operations and types of elective surgery that have been cancelled by United Hospitals Group HSS Trust during this financial year, and if any trends have developed in relation to the cancellation of planned operations. (AQW 298/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on numbers of elective operations in each specialty cancelled by United Hospitals Group Trust during this financial year (i.e. for the period 1 April 2001 to 31 August 2001) is detailed in the table below.

ELECTIVE OPERATIONS CANCELLED BY UNITED HOSPITALS TRUST - 1 APRIL 2001 - 31 AUGUST 2001

Specialty	
Anaesthetics	14
Cardiology	40
Dental Surgery	7
Ear, Nose & Throat	116
Gastroenterology	29

Specialty	
General Medicine	30
General Surgery	251
Gynaecology	120
Nephrology	24
Total	631

⁽¹⁾ Includes inpatients, day cases and regular day/night attendances. Does not include cancellations by patients.

It is not possible to ascertain any trends from the information available.

Miondealaítear sa tábla thíos eolas ar líon na n-obráidí roghnacha i ngach speisialtacht curtha ar ceal ag Iontaobhas Ghrúpa na nOtharlann Aontaithe le linn na bliana airgeadais seo (is í sin don tréimhse 1 Aibreán 2001 go 31 Lúnasa 2001).

Obráidí Roghnacha curtha ar ceal ag Iontaobhas na nOtharlann Aontaithe – 1 Aibreán 2001 – 31 Lúnasa 2001

Speisialtacht	
Ainéistéisigh	14
Cairdeolaíocht	40
Déidliacht	7
Cluas, Srón & Scornach	116
Gastaireintreolaíocht	29
Míochaine Ginearálta	30
Máinliacht Ghinearálta	251
Gíniceolaíocht	120
Neifreolaíocht	24
Iomlán	631

⁽¹⁾ Othair chónaitheacha, cásanna lae agus freastal lae/oíche san áireamh. Ní chuireann sé obráidí curtha ar ceal ag othair san áireamh.

TABLE 1. INPATIENTS ⁽¹⁾ AT TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL BY SPECIALTY, 1990/91 - 2000/01

Specialty	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
General Surgery	2,604	2,500	2,696	2,546	2,466	2,300	2,318	2,243	2,266	1,978	1,982
Ear, Nose & Throat	1,246	1,435	1,502	1,362	1,930	1,550	1,248	1,218	1,307	1,257	1,123
Oral Surgery	0	4	3	0	2	3	0	0	0	2	1
Anaesthetics	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	3
General Medicine	2,168	2,570	2,423	2,656	2,477	2,916	2,416	2,472	2,522	2,551	2,725
Paediatrics	0	0	5	17	11	5	737	769	659	467	954
Geriatric Medicine	276	257	246	225	213	224	242	226	232	185	293
Obstetrics	1,287	1,270	1,216	1,202	634	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gynaecology	907	1,084	981	812	599	7	1	1	7	6	2
Total	8,488	9,120	9,072	8,820	8,332	7,005	6,962	6,931	6,995	6,447	7,083

⁽¹⁾ Not including day cases

Ní féidir claonadh ar bith a aimsiú ón eolas ar fáil.

Tyrone County Hospital: Financial Pressures

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action will be taken to address the financial pressures on Tyrone County Hospital as a result of the transfer of caseload from the South Tyrone Hospital. (AQW 304/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to AQO 285/01.

Tarraingím aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQO 285/01.

Tyrone County Hospital & Erne Hospital: Treatment Offered

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) those services available on site at (i) Tyrone County Hospital and (ii) Erne Hospital for each year from 1991-2001 and (b) the number of cases dealt with, on a yearly basis, by each of these services over the same period.

(AQW 305/01)

Ms de Brún: (a) The specialties for which Tyrone County Hospital offers treatment, and the number of inpatients treated in each specialty for the financial years 1990-91 to 2000-01, are detailed in Table 1 below.

(b) The specialties for which Erne Hospital offers treatment, and the number of inpatients treated in each specialty for the financial years 1990/91 to 2000/01, are detailed in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2. INPATIENTS (1) AT ERNE HOSPITAL BY SPECIALTY, 1990/91 - 2000/01

Specialty	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
General Surgery	2,171	2,285	2,172	2,265	2,170	2,298	2,208	2,278	2,269	2,246	2,192
Oral Surgery	0	0	4	1	2	0	0	51	1	1	3
Anaesthetics	0	0	9	21	7	5	5	4	2	4	3
General Medicine	2,296	2,422	2,405	2,491	2,202	1,858	2,032	2,027	2,059	2,429	2,539
Rehabilitation	0	13	67	74	74	76	96	119	95	126	124
Dermatology	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paediatrics	0	13	63	55	231	893	902	1,002	1,050	1,401	1,607
Geriatric Medicine	562	707	677	710	644	698	561	515	496	457	437
Obstetrics	991	902	958	979	1,188	1,582	1,670	1,871	1,770	1,914	1,920
Gynaecology	878	894	905	895	1,002	1,063	1,045	1,077	1,030	1,017	1,082
Well Babies (Obstetrics)	0	0	0	767	899	293	0	0	0	0	0
Well Babies (Paediatrics)	0	0	0	0	0	881	1,162	1,273	1,210	1,246	1,289
Other	0	0	196	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	6,898	7,236	7,457	8,258	8,419	9,647	9,681	10,217	9,982	10,841	11,196

(1) Not including day cases

(a) Miondealaítear i dTábla 1 thíos na speisialtachtaí dá dtairgíonn Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain cóireáil agus líon na n-othar cónaitheach cóireáilte i ngach speisialtacht do na blianta airgeadais 1990/91 go 2000/01.

TÁBLA 1. OTHAIR CHÓNAITHEACHA⁽¹⁾ IN OTHARLANN CHONTAE THÍR EOGHAIN DE RÉIR SPEISIALTACHTA, 1990/91 – 2000/01.

Speisialtacht	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Máinliacht Ghinearálta	2,604	2,500	2,696	2,546	2,466	2,300	2,318	2,243	2,266	1,978	1,982
Cluas, Srón & Scornach	1,246	1,435	1,502	1,362	1,930	1,550	1,248	1,218	1,307	1,257	1,123
Béalmháinliacht	0	4	3	0	2	3	0	0	0	2	1
Ainéistéisigh	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	3
Míochaine Ginearálta	2,168	2,570	2,423	2,656	2,477	2,916	2,416	2,472	2,522	2,551	2,725
Péidiatraic	0	0	5	17	11	5	737	769	659	467	954
Míochane Seanliachta	276	257	246	225	213	224	242	226	232	185	293
Cnáimhseachas	1,287	1,270	1,216	1,202	634	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gíniceolaíocht	907	1,084	981	812	599	7	1	1	7	6	2
Iomlán	8,488	9,120	9,072	8,820	8,332	7,005	6,962	6,931	6,995	6,447	7,083

(1) Gan cásanna lae san áireamh

(b) Miondealaítear i dTábla 2 thíos na speisialtachtaí dá dtairgíonn Otharlann na hÉirne cóireáil agus líon na n-othar cónaitheach cóireáilte i ngach speisialtacht do na blianta airgeadais 1990/91 go 2000/01.

TÁBLA 2. OTHAIR CHÓNAITHEACHA⁽¹⁾ IN OTHARLANN NA HÉIRNE DE RÉIR SPEISIALTACHTA, 1990/91 – 2000/01.

Speisialtacht	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Máinliacht Ghinearálta	2,171	2,285	2,172	2,265	2,170	2,298	2,208	2,278	2,269	2,246	2,192
Béalmháinliacht	0	0	4	1	2	0	0	51	1	1	3
Ainéistéisigh	0	0	9	21	7	5	5	4	2	4	3
Míochaine Ginearálta	2,296	2,422	2,405	2,491	2,202	1,858	2,032	2,027	2,059	2,429	2,539
Athshlánú	0	13	67	74	74	76	96	119	95	126	124
Deirmeolaíocht	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Péidiatraic	0	13	63	55	231	893	902	1,002	1,050	1,401	1,607
Míochaine Seanliachta	562	707	677	710	644	698	561	515	496	457	437
Cnáimhseachas	991	902	958	979	1,188	1,582	1,670	1,871	1,770	1,914	1,920
Gíniceolaíocht	878	894	905	895	1,002	1,063	1,045	1,077	1,030	1,017	1,082
Leanaí Maithe (Cnáimhseachas)	0	0	0	767	899	293	0	0	0	0	0
Leanaí Maithe (Péidiatraic)	0	0	0	0	0	881	1,162	1,273	1,210	1,246	1,289
Eile	0	0	196	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Iomlán	6,898	7,236	7,457	8,258	8,419	9,647	9,681	10,217	9,982	10,841	11,196

(1) Gan cásanna lae san áireamh.

MMR Vaccination

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the cost of providing health cover for those children who have had a reaction to the MMR vaccination. (AQW 309/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my reply to AQW 288/01. Information on the costs of treating children suspected to have experienced an adverse reaction to MMR vaccine is not available.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 288/01. Níl eolas ar chostais chóireáil pháistí, measta frithghníomh dochrach a bheith acu don vacsaín MMR, ar fáil.

Acute Services at Mid-Ulster Hospital

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement regarding the delivery of acute services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital. (AQW 331/01)

Ms de Brún: Following publication of the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report in June, I issued the Report for a period of public consultation, which will end on 31 October. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process and discussion with Executive colleagues, proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in the course of 2002.

Nuair a foilsíodh tuairisc an ghrúpa athbhreithnithe ar ghéarospidéal i mí an Mheithimh, d'eisigh mé an tuairisc le haghaidh tréimhse chomhairliúcháin phoiblí a chríochnóidh ar 31 Deireadh Fómhair. I ndiaidh toradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a mheas agus caibidil a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúchán. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinntí a fhógairt i rith 2002.

Provision of Meals: Breastfeeding Mothers

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail what arrangements are in place for the provision of meals for breastfeeding mothers who must remain with their baby on paediatric and neonatal wards. (AQW 333/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that provision of meals for breastfeeding mothers who remain with their babies on paediatric and neonatal wards varies from Trust to Trust.

The practice of providing meals can be influenced by the catering contract arrangements in hospitals. I understand that some hospitals provide meals through the inpatient catering service, while others, if they are

unable to do this because of catering contract arrangements, provide parents with a voucher, which allows them to purchase a meal in the public dining room at a reduced rate.

I am informed that all Trusts that have paediatric and neonatal wards have dining facilities and a room in which the parent may rest. They are also provided with refreshments, such as tea, coffee, water and breakfast at ward level.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go n-athraíonn soláthar béilí do mháithreacha a thugann an chloch dá leanaí agus a fhanann lena leanaí i mbardaí péidiatraiceacha agus nua-naíocha ó Iontaobhas go hIontaobhas.

Is féidir le socruithe conartha lónadóireachta in otharlanna tionchar a bheith acu ar sholáthar béilí. Tuigim go soláthraíonn roinnt otharlann béilí tríd an tseirbhís lónadóireachta othair chónaithigh agus tugann roinnt eile nach bhfuil ábalta é seo a dhéanamh mar gheall ar shocruithe conartha lónadóireachta, tugann siad dearbháin do thuismitheoirí, a ligeann dóibh béile a cheannach ar lacáiste sa seomra bia.

Cuireadh in iúl dom go bhfuil áiseanna bia agus seomra inar féidir le thuismitheoirí a scíth a dhéanamh ag na hIontaobhais uile a bhfuil bardaí péidiatraiceacha agus nua-naíocha acu. Tá sólaistí amhail tae, caife, uisce agus bricfeasta ag leibhéal barda ar fáil iontu fosta.

Breastfed Babies

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of mothers who are still breastfeeding their child at the time of their (a) eight week and (b) seven month reviews compared to the UK average. (AQW 334/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not available in the form requested. However the 1995 Infant feeding Survey showed that 25% of mothers were breastfeeding at 6 weeks and 8% at 6 months. Information from the 2000 Infant feeding Survey will not be available until the end of the year. Preliminary data from this survey indicates that initial breastfeeding rates have increased from 45% to 54%.

Níl an t-eolas seo ar fáil san fhoirm iarrtha. Léirigh an Suirbhé ar Chothú Leanaí 1995 áfach go raibh 25% de mháithreacha ag tabhairt a gcíche dá leanaí ar 6 seachtain agus 8% díobh ar 6 mí. Ní bheidh eolas ón Suirbhé ar Chothú Leanaí 2000 ar fáil go dtí deireadh na bliana. Léiríonn sonraí tosaigh ón suirbhé seo gur mhéadaigh rátaí tosaigh chothú cíche ó 45% go 54%.

Breastfed Babies

Mr J Wilson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the percentage of

babies under the age of twelve months admitted to paediatric wards who are still exclusively breastfed.

(AQW 336/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo.

Occupational Therapists: Sperrin Lakeland Trust

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 160/01 and AQW 3538/00, to explain the reason for the delay in recruiting additional therapists by Sperrin Lakeland Trust.

(AQW 339/01)

Ms de Brún: Recruitment of additional occupational therapists could not proceed until the Western Health and Social Services Board's Service Investment Plan for 2001-02 was approved by the Department. Recruitment was further delayed pending the outcome of discussions within the Trust regarding its financial recovery plan.

Níorbh fhéidir gabháil ar aghaidh le hearcaíocht teiripithe saothair breise go dtí gur cheadaigh an Roinn Plean Infheistíochta na Seirbhíse do 2001 - 2002, Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Iarthair. Cuireadh moill bhreise ar earcaíocht ar fheithreamh thorthaí na gcainteanna laistigh den Iontaobhas maidir le pleananna téarnaimh airgeadais.

Waiting List Averages: Tyrone County Hospital & Erne Hospital

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail, by medical department, waiting list averages for each year from 1991-01 at (a) Tyrone County Hospital and (b) the Erne Hospital.

(AQW 341/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not available.

Níl an t-eolas iarrtha ar fáil.

Staffing: Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of (a) administration (b) medical and (c) ancillary staff, their employment status and relevant grades in Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals on a yearly basis from 1991-01.

(AQW 342/01)

Ms de Brún: The information is detailed in the tables below. Historical information in the tables will not be as accurate as up-to-date figures. Figures are at March of each year.

(A) ADMINISTRATION GRADES WITHIN ERNE HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Senior Manager		Grade 6 and above		Grade 1 to 5	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	0	0	0	0	30	9
1992	0	0	0	0	35	10
1993	0	0	0	0	36	12
1994	0	0	0	0	30	13
1995	0	0	0	0	33	11
1996	0	0	0	0	36	10
1997	0	0	1	0	39	13
1998	1	0	0	0	44	9
1999	1	0	0	0	44	8
2000	2	0	0	0	48	9
2001	2	0	0	0	42	13

(A) ADMINISTRATION GRADES WITHIN TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Senior Manager		Grade 6 and above		Grade 1 to 5	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	0	0	0	0	31	17
1992	0	0	0	0	35	17
1993	6	0	0	0	36	18
1994	5	0	1	0	38	17
1995	5	0	1	0	43	15
1996	5	0	1	0	46	15
1997	4	0	1	0	51	11
1998	4	0	1	0	47	19
1999	5	0	2	1	53	16
2000	6	0	2	1	56	16
2001	5	0	1	2	53	21

(B) ANCILLARY & GENERAL GRADES WITHIN ERNE HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Catering Related		Cleaner/Domestic		Porter/Driver /Orderly		Other	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	16	25	27	40	14	0	7	0
1992	18	19	0	59	16	2	7	0
1993	19	24	1	53	15	5	7	0
1994	19	16	0	49	13	3	6	0
1995	17	16	0	46	15	4	8	0
1996	0	0	0	0	12	5	7	0
1997	0	0	0	0	14	1	5	0
1998	0	0	0	0	12	2	5	0
1999	0	0	0	0	13	4	4	0
2000	0	0	0	0	15	1	6	0
2001	0	0	0	0	17	3	5	0

(B) ANCILLARY & GENERAL GRADES WITHIN TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Catering Related		Cleaner/ Domestic		Porter/Driver /Orderly		Other	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	9	25	11	34	12	2	15	5
1992	7	18	0	42	11	3	15	4
1993	5	29	0	44	12	2	8	4
1994	3	24	0	39	10	1	10	2
1995	3	24	0	39	10	1	12	2

	Catering Related		Cleaner/ Domestic		Porter/Driver /Orderly		Other	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1996	0	0	0	0	9	2	12	8
1997	0	0	0	0	6	0	8	2
1998	0	0	0	0	6	1	6	4
1999	0	0	0	0	5	3	5	8
2000	0	0	0	0	6	3	5	5
2001	0	0	0	0	5	4	5	7

(C) MEDICAL GRADES WITHIN ERNE HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Consultant		Staff grade		Special reg		PRHO/SHO		General/ Medical Prac		Medical Officer		Other Medical & Dental	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	0	0	0	0	1	0	24	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1992	0	0	0	0	1	0	19	0	0	2	0	0	0	1
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
1994	12	2	1	0	1	0	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1995	18	0	1	0	1	0	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1996	18	0	2	0	1	0	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1997	18	1	2	0	1	0	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1998	17	3	3	0	1	0	23	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1999	21	0	4	0	0	0	27	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
2000	17	0	5	0	0	0	26	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2001	18	1	5	0	0	0	25	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

(C) MEDICAL GRADES WITHIN TYRONE COUNTY HOSPITAL AT 31 MARCH

	Consultant		Associate Spec		Staff grade		Special reg		PRHO/SHO		General/ Medical Prac		Medical Officer		Other Medical & Dental	
	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time	Full Time	Part Time
1991	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
1992	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
1994	13	6	1	0	0	0	2	0	18	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
1995	13	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1996	12	4	1	0	1	0	1	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1997	20	1	1	0	1	0	2	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1998	15	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	17	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1999	14	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	18	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
2000	14	4	1	0	3	0	1	0	17	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
2001	14	1	1	0	3	0	1	0	20	2	0	1	0	1	0	0

Miondealaítear an t-eolas seo sa tábla thíos. Ní bheidh an t-eolas stairiúil sna táblaí chomh beacht leis na figiúirí is déanaí. Déantar na figiúirí i Mí an Mhárta gach bliain.

(A) GRÁID RIARACHÁIN LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN NA HÉIRNE AR 31 MÁRTA

	Bainisteoir Sinsearach		Grád 6 agus níos airde		Grád 1 go 5	
	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha
1991	0	0	0	0	30	9
1992	0	0	0	0	35	10
1993	0	0	0	0	36	12
1994	0	0	0	0	30	13
1995	0	0	0	0	33	11
1996	0	0	0	0	36	10
1997	0	0	1	0	39	13
1998	1	0	0	0	44	9
1999	1	0	0	0	44	8
2000	2	0	0	0	48	9
2001	2	0	0	0	42	13

(A) GRÁID RIARACHÁIN LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN CHONTAE THÍR EOGHAIN AR 31 MÁRTA

	Bainisteoir Sinsearach		Grád 6 agus níos airde		Grád 1 go 5	
	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha
1991	0	0	0	0	31	17
1992	0	0	0	0	35	17
1993	6	0	0	0	36	18
1994	5	0	1	0	38	17
1995	5	0	1	0	43	15
1996	5	0	1	0	46	15
1997	4	0	1	0	51	11
1998	4	0	1	0	47	19
1999	5	0	2	1	53	16
2000	6	0	2	1	56	16
2001	5	0	1	2	53	21

(B) GRAIDGHINEÁRALTA AGUS CHOIMHDEACHA LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN NA HÉIRNE AR 31 MÁRTA

	Bainte le Lónadóireacht		Glantóir/Freastalaí		Póirtéir /Tiomanáí/ Giolla		Eile	
	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha
1991	16	25	27	40	14	0	7	0
1992	18	19	0	59	16	2	7	0
1993	19	24	1	53	15	5	7	0
1994	19	16	0	49	13	3	6	0
1995	17	16	0	46	15	4	8	0
1996	0	0	0	0	12	5	7	0
1997	0	0	0	0	14	1	5	0
1998	0	0	0	0	12	2	5	0
1999	0	0	0	0	13	4	4	0
2000	0	0	0	0	15	1	6	0
2001	0	0	0	0	17	3	5	0

(B) GRÁIDAÍ CHOIMHDEACHA & GHINEARÁLTA LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN CHONTAE THÍR EOGHAIN AR 31 MÁRTA

	Bainte le Lónadóireacht		Glantóir/Freastalaí		Póirtéir /Tiomanáí/ Giolla		Eile	
	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha	Lánaimseartha	Páirtaimseartha
1991	9	25	11	34	12	2	15	5
1992	7	18	0	42	11	3	15	4
1993	5	29	0	44	12	2	8	4
1994	3	24	0	39	10	1	10	2
1995	3	24	0	39	10	1	12	2
1996	0	0	0	0	9	2	12	8
1997	0	0	0	0	6	0	8	2
1998	0	0	0	0	6	1	6	4
1999	0	0	0	0	5	3	5	8
2000	0	0	0	0	6	3	5	5
2001	0	0	0	0	5	4	5	7

(C) GRÁID MHÍOCHÁINE LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN NA HÉIRNE AR 31 MÁRTA

	Comhairleach		Saineolaí Comhlach		Grad foirne		Speisialach Cláraithe		OTRC/OTS		Cleachtadh Ginearálta/Míochaine		Oifigeach Míochaine		Míochaine & Déidliacht Eile	
	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha
1991	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
1992	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	19	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22	0	0	1	1	1	0	0
1994	13	6	1	0	0	0	2	0	18	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
1995	13	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1996	12	4	1	0	1	0	1	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1997	20	1	1	0	1	0	2	0	16	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1998	15	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	17	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
1999	14	3	1	0	1	0	1	0	18	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
2000	14	4	1	0	3	0	1	0	17	1	0	1	0	1	0	0
2001	14	1	1	0	3	0	1	0	20	2	0	1	0	1	0	0

(C) GRÁID MHÍOCHÁINE LAISTIGH D'OTHARLANN CHONTAE THÍR EOGHAIN AR 31 MÁRTA

	Comhairleach		Grad foirne		Speisialach Cláraithe		OTRC/OTS		Cleachtadh Ginearálta/Míochaine		Oifigeach Míochaine		Míochaine agus Déidliacht Eile	
	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha	Lánaims eartha	Páirtaim seartha
1991	0	0	0	0	1	0	24	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1992	0	0	0	0	1	0	19	0	0	2	0	0	0	1
1993	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	0	0	1	0	1	0	1
1994	12	2	1	0	1	0	17	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1995	18	0	1	0	1	0	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1996	18	0	2	0	1	0	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
1997	18	1	2	0	1	0	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1998	17	3	3	0	1	0	23	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
1999	21	0	4	0	0	0	27	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
2000	17	0	5	0	0	0	26	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
2001	18	1	5	0	0	0	25	1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Tyrone County Hospital & Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to ensure that facilities and services offered by the Tyrone County Hospital and Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust will not be diminished. (AQW 353/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to the answer I gave on 11 October to Question Number AQW 243/01.

Treoraím an Ball don fhreagra a thug mé ar Cheist Uimhir AQW 243/01 ar 11 Deireadh Fómhair.

Ambulance Service: Staffing

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of staff

currently employed in the Ambulance Service compared to the previous five years. (AQW 382/01)

Ms de Brún: The Ambulance Service currently employs 808 staff. The numbers of staff employed by the Ambulance Service for the previous five years are as follows:

Year	Total Staff
2000	790
1999	725
1998	704
1997	692
1996	675

Fostaíonn an tSeirbhís Otharchairr 808 d'fhoireann. Seo a leanas líon na bhfoirne a bhí fostaithe ag an tSeirbhís Otharchairr le cúig bliana anuas:

Bliain	Foireann Iomlán
2000	790
1999	725
1998	704
1997	692
1996	675

Downpatrick Hospital

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to explain (a) why the Eastern Health & Social Services has undertaken a further assessment of the services only at Downpatrick Maternity Hospital (b) what steps she is taking to honour her undertakings given on Monday 15 January 2001 (Hansard Volume 8 No 5 page 213) that inpatient maternity services will continue at the hospital; and to make a statement.

(AQW 462/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) I am advised that the Eastern Health and Social Services Board did not carry out a further assessment of services at Downpatrick Hospital. I understand, however, that on 6 September 2001, the Board issued a set of criteria for the identification of high risk maternity cases that would be transferred to other hospitals rather than be delivered in Downpatrick. I am advised that these criteria have been developed as part of an ongoing process with the objective of ensuring that women are not planned for delivery in units where there is a significant likelihood of the woman or newborn requiring services which are not available on site.
- (b) As I said in my response on 15 January the position remains unchanged. I am committed to maintaining safe and effective services at the Downe hospital, pending decisions regarding the outcome of the Acute Hospitals Review.

I have asked the Down Lisburn Trust and the Eastern Board to do everything possible to maintain safe maternity services at the Downe Hospital until that time. I am advised that actions taken to achieve this objective have included development of a second on-call anaesthetic rota system supported by consultants from Belfast hospitals, and the development of the transfer criteria.

- (a) Tugadh comhairle dom nach ndearna Bord Sláinte Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir measúnú eile ar sheirbhísí Otharlann Dhún Pádraig. Tuigim, áfach, gur eisigh an Bord, ar 6 Meán Fómhair, roinnt critéar le cásanna máithreachais ardbhaolacha a aimsiú a aistreoidh chuig otharlanna eile in áit iad a sholáthar i nDún Pádraig. Tugadh comhairle dom go ndearnadh dul chun cinn leis na critéir seo mar

pháirt do phróiseas leanúnach a bhfuil sé mar aidhm aige le cinntiú nach mbíonn plean déanta go mbreitheann mná in aonaid mar go mbíonn seans maith ann go mbeidh seirbhísí de dhíth do bhean nó don naíonán nua nach bhfuil ar fáil ar an láithreán.

- (b) Mar a dúirt mé i bhfreagra s'agam ar 15 Eanáir níl athrú ar bith ar na tosca. Tá mé geallta do sheirbhísí atá slán agus éifeachtach a chothabháil ag Otharlann Downe, ar fheitheamh cinní maidir le torthaí Athbhreithniú na nGéarotharlann.

D'iarr mé ar Iontaobhas an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach agus ar Bhord an Oirthir gach rud is féidir a dhéanamh le seirbhísí máithreachais slán a chothabháil ag Otharlann Downe go dtí an t-am sin. Tugadh comhairle dom gur cuireadh forbairt an dara córas uainchláir ainéistéisí ar dualgas, le tacú ó lianna comhairleacha ó otharlanna Bhéal Feirste, chomh maith le forbairt critéar aistriú san áireamh i measc na ngníomhartha a rinneadh chun an cuspóir seo a bhaint amach.

Health Checks in General Practice

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that all patients registered at local health practices receive regular check-ups so that medical care is proactive rather than reactive; and to make a statement. (AQO 259/01)

Ms de Brún: There is already a multidisciplinary proactive approach to health checks in general practice. General practitioners have certain obligations under their terms of service and are eligible for payment for some services such as health promotion and chronic disease management programmes. However, many practices do much more than this, such as adopting a proactive approach to the assessment of patients for risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke with ongoing follow-up appropriate to the needs of the individual. Decisions about priorities and how checks are undertaken can only be taken at local level taking account of the needs and wishes of the local population, service capacity to deliver, professional knowledge and skills and evidence of effectiveness.

Tá cur chuige forghníomhach ildisciplíneach i leith seiceálacha sláinte i ngnáthchleachtas ann cheana féin. Tá oibleagáidí áirithe ar chleachtóirí ginearálta faoi théarmaí a gcuid seirbhísí agus tá siad i dteideal íocaíochta do roinnt seirbhísí mar chur chun cinn sláinte agus cláir bhainistíochta galar ainsealach. Déanann go leor cleachtas áfach i bhfad níos mó ná sin. Áirítear air sin cur chuige forghníomhach a ghlacadh maidir le measúnú othar i leith fachtóirí riosca do ghalar corónach croí agus stróc agus cóireáil leanúnach ina dhiaidh sin a bhíonn cuí do riachtanais an duine aonair. Ní féidir cinnidh a ghlacadh faoi thosaíochtaí agus an tslí a dtabharfar faoi sheiceálacha ach ag an leibhéal áitiúil,

ag cur san áireamh riachtanais agus mianta an daonra áitiúil, acmhainn na seirbhíse seachadadh a dhéanamh, eolas gairmiúil agus fianaise éifeachtachta.

Primary Health Care Centre: Kilkeel

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the amended business case for the new Primary Health Care Centre in Kilkeel will be approved; and to make a statement.

(AQO 267/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department has examined the amended business case for the Integrated Primary Health Care Centre and concluded that some issues have still to be satisfactorily addressed. The Trust has been asked to look at these urgently.

I know how important this facility is to the people of Kilkeel and I assure you that my Department is making every effort to ensure that the business case is taken forward as quickly as possible.

Rinne mo Roinn iniúchadh ar an chás gnó leasaithe don ionad príomhchúraim sláinte imeastha agus tháinig sí ar an chinneadh go bhfuil saincheistean ann go fóill a chaithfear aghaidh a thabhairt orthu. Iarradh ar an iontaobhas féachaint orthu sin mar ábhar práinne.

Tuigim an tábhacht a bhaineann leis an áis seo do mhuintir Chill Chaoil agus is féidir liom a dheimhniú duit go bhfuil mo Roinnse ag déanamh gach iarrachta le go ndéanfar dul chun cinn maidir leis an chás gnó chomh tapa agus is féidir.

Reduction of Waiting Lists

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any representations she has made to the Minister of Finance and Personnel regarding the provision of additional funding to reduce waiting lists.

(AQO 286/01)

Ms de Brún: I have strenuously made the case on many occasions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel on the need to enhance services and to cut hospital waiting lists. In this year's Budget discussions, for example, I bid for £8 million to improve regional services (such as cardiac surgery) and for £12m to enhance hospital capacity. These and other bids were specifically designed to address increasing demands on the Service. I will continue to press for a level of HPSS funding which recognises the full seriousness of the need for additional resources across the health and social services in general and, in particular, to tackle the waiting list problem.

Is minic an chás déanta go láidir agam leis an Aire Airgeadais agus Pearsanra faoin ghá atá le feabhas a chur ar sheirbhíse agus le liostaí feithimh ospidéal a

ghearradh. Nuair a bhí Buiséad na bliana seo á phlé, mar shampla, d'iarr mé £8m le seirbhíse réigiúnacha (mar mháinliacht chairdiach) a fheabhsú agus £12 m le cur le cumas ospidéal. Bhí na tairiscintí sin agus tairiscintí eile leagtha amach go sonrach le haghaidh ar thabhairt ar mhéadú ar na héilimh ar an tSeirbhís. Leanfaidh mé liom ag lorg leibhéal de mhaoiniú SSSP a thabharfaidh aird ar chomh tromchúiseach is atá an riachtanas le tuilleadh acmhainní ar fud na seirbhíse sláinte agus sóisialta go ginearálta agus go sonrach le tabhairt faoi fhadhb na liostaí feithimh.

Refurbishment of Health Board Offices

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what monitoring is undertaken to ensure that spending on the refurbishment of health board offices is carried out in a cost-effective manner.

(AQO 251/01)

Ms de Brún: All capital projects require a Business Case. A formal submission, including details of the costs, must be made to my Department for approval to proceed where the estimate is above a prescribed limit, normally £500,000 for a construction project.

Guidelines are issued setting out standards of accommodation in health and social services building projects, including refurbishments. Each project must be delivered in a cost-effective manner. Quarterly reports on progress and expenditure against the agreed cost and timetable for the project must be sent to the Department in the case of all capital projects over £250,000.

Éilíonn gach tionscadal caipitil cás gnó. Ní mór aighneacht fhoirmiúil lena n-áirítear sonraí faoi chostais a chur faoi bhráid mo Roinnse le cead dul ar aghaidh má bhíonn an meastachán os cionn teorainn fhorordaithe, de ghnáth £500,000 do thionscadal tógála.

Eisítear treoirlínte a leagann amach caighdeán chóiríochta i dtionscadail tógála na seirbhíse sóisialta agus sláinte, lena n-áirítear athchóirithe. Ní mór gach tionscadal a sheachadadh ar bhealach costas-éifeachtach. Ní mór tuarascálacha ráithiúla ar dhul chun cinn agus caiteachas in éadan costais agus tráthchláir chomhaontaithe don tionscadal a chur faoi bhráid na Roinne i gcás gach tionscadail os cionn £250,000.

Free Nursing Care for Elderly

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost implications of providing free nursing care for the elderly.

(AQO 270/01)

Ms de Brún: The costs of providing nursing care free to residents of care homes who at present meet these costs from their own resources are estimated to

amount to £9.0 and £9.225 million in 2002-03 and 2003-04 respectively.

Meastar gurb iad £9.0 agus £9.225 milliún san iomlán faoi seach na costais i 2002-03 agus i 2003-04 le cúram altránais saor in aisce a sholáthar do chónaitheoirí i dtithe cúraim a sheasann na costais seo óna gcuid acmhainní féin faoi láthair.

Equitable Life AVC Funds

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the health service was promoting the Equitable Life Additional Voluntary Contributions Scheme up until the collapse of the company and who gave instructions to continue to promote the scheme within the health and social services trusts. (AQO 257/01)

Ms de Brún: Since late December 1998, when HPSS Superannuation Branch became aware there was a problem with Guaranteed Annuity Rate With-Profit policies, Scheme managers have sought professional legal and actuarial advice on an ongoing basis. This advice indicated it would not be in members' best interests to part company with the Equitable Life.

In March 2001 an announcement was made about Equitable Life being bought out by the Halifax Group and Clerical Medical being employed to administer the Equitable Life's with-profits fund. Regulators were then still of the opinion that Equitable Life continued to be solvent.

At that time Scheme managers put in place a number of external funds operated by Clerical Medical, which members could access broadly on the terms of the Equitable Life contract. Scheme managers wrote to members to advise them of the availability of these additional funds and to advise on their options, including stopping contributions to the Equitable Life.

After receiving further advice in August 2001 Scheme managers wrote to members advising that any member still contributing to Equitable Life with - profits AVC funds should be recommended to cease payments, unless they had independent advice to the contrary.

Ó dheireadh Nollaig 1998 nuair a tháinig Brainse Pinsin SSSP ar an eolas go raibh fadhbanna le polasaithe an ráta blianachta ráthaithe le-brabús, lorg bainisteoirí scéime comhairle ghairmiúil achtúireach agus dlí ar bhonn leanúnach. Léirigh an chomhairle nárbh é leas na gcomhaltaí imeacht ó Equitable life.

I Márta 2001 rinneadh fógra go raibh an Grúpa Halifax ag ceannach Equitable Life agus go raibh Clerical Medical á fhostú le riaradh a dhéanamh ar chiste le-brabús Equitable Life. Bhí rialathóirí den tuairim ag an am sin go raibh Equitable Life sócmhainneach go fóill.

An tráth sin chuir bainisteoirí scéime i bhfeidhm roinnt cistí seachtracha a d'fheidhmigh Clerical Medical a bhféadfadh comhaltaí teacht orthu go leathan ar bhonn théarmaí chonradh Equitable Life. Scriobh bainisteoirí scéime chuig comhaltaí lena gcur ar an eolas go raibh na cistí breise sin ar fáil agus le comhairle a thabhairt dóibh faoina gcuid roghanna, lena n-áirítear scor de ranníoca chuig Equitable Life.

I ndiaidh tuilleadh comhairle a fháil i Lúnasa 2001 scríobh bainisteoirí scéime chuig comhaltaí a rá leo gur chóir a mholadh d'aon chomhalta a bhí fós ag tabhairt ranníoc do Equitable Life le brabús cistí AVC éirí as ranníocaíochtaí mura raibh a mhalairt de chomhairle neamhspleách acu.

Operations Outside UK

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to make available the option of operations, in other European Union Member States outside the United Kingdom, for those on hospital waiting lists for more than six months. (AQO 271/01)

Ms de Brún: I am aware that this judgement of the European Court of Justice has aroused a great deal of interest, particularly in view of our long waiting lists. I have asked my officials to examine the implications of the judgement and to report their conclusions to me.

Is eol domh gur spreag an breithiúnas seo de chuid Chúirt Bhreithiúnais na hEorpa cuid mhaith suime, go háirithe i gcomhthéacs ár liostaí fada feithimh. D'iarr mé ar mo chuid feidhmeannach impleachtaí an bhreithiúnais a iniúchadh agus a gcuid tuairimí a thuairisciú domh.

Patients in Rural Areas

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement regarding patients concerns over distances involved travelling to out-of-hours centres and that General Practitioners are not aware of the patients medical history in rural areas. (AQO 268/01)

Ms de Brún: The recent Southern HSS Board Evaluation of GP Out-of-Hours services at Newry and Moy acknowledged these points and the Board has committed itself to taking forward all of the recommendations from the evaluation. The Department will be looking closely at the findings of this review and a similar review conducted by the Eastern Board.

For the majority of out-of-hours consultations, general practitioners can obtain the relevant information from the patient or their carer. However, in complex cases, some medical history can be beneficial. The universally

used computer software in out-of-hours centres has the facility to record relevant significant clinical details which can be used in subsequent calls. This information system can be regularly used by the patient's registered GP to inform the out-of-hours service of potential complex problems. In addition, all out-of-hours services have a database of general practitioners' telephone numbers so they can be contacted if urgent information about a patient's medical condition is required.

D'aithin an Mheasúnacht le gairid de chuid an Bhord HSS an Deiscirt ar sheirbhísí Eis-Uaire Dochtúirí Teaghlaigh in Iúr agus i Maigh na pointí sin agus tá an Bord tiomanta na moltaí ar fad ón measúnú a thabhairt chun cinn. Beidh an Roinn ag féachaint go grinn ar thorthaí an athbhreithnithe sin agus ar athbhreithniú den sórt céanna a rinne Bord Sláinte an Oirthir.

D'fhormhór na geomhchomhairlí eis-uaire, is féidir le dochtúirí teaghlaigh an t-eolas cuí a fháil ón othar nó ó chúramóir an othair. I gcásanna casta, áfach, is féidir le stair míochaine a bheith tairbheach. Tá an tsaoráid ag an mbog-earra ríomhaireachta a mbaintear úsáid chomhchoitianta as i lárionaid eis-uaire taifead a dhéanamh ar mhionsonraí suntasacha ábharthacha cliniúla is féidir a úsáid i nglanna ina dhiaidh sin. Is féidir le Dochtúir Teaghlaigh an othair an córas eolais seo a úsáid go rialta leis an tseirbhís eis-uaire a chur ar an eolas faoi fhadhbanna casta féideartha. Chomh maith leis sin, tá bunachar sonraí d'uimhreacha teileafóin na ndochtúirí teaghlaigh ar fad ag seirbhísí eis-uaire le gur féidir teagmháil a dhéanamh leo má bhíonn eolas práinneach faoi bhail leighis othair de dhíth.

Tyrone County Hospital

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide additional funding for the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh following the increase in workload caused by the discontinuation of some services at the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon. (AQO 285/01)

Ms de Brún: Additional funding has been provided to Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust following the discontinuation of some services at the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon. In particular, the Southern Health and Social Services Board provided additional recurring funding of £50,000 in 2000-01 and £100,000 in 2001-02 to fund some 218 inpatient episodes and 82 outpatient attendances on a recurrent basis. In addition, it has also assisted Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust on a non-recurrent basis, providing a further £85,000 in 2000-01 and £40,000 in 2001-02.

Tá maoiniú breise curtha ar fáil do Iontaobhas Speiríní, Tír na Lochanna i ndiaidh scor de roinnt seirbhísí ag Ospidéal Thír Eoghain Theas i nDún Geanainn. Go sonrath sholáthair Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta

an Deiscirt maoiniú breise athfhillteach de £50,000 in 2000-2001 agus £100,000 in 2001-02 le thart ar 218 (dhá chéad ocht déag) eipeasóid othair chónaithigh a mhaoiniú agus 82 freastal othair sheachtraigh ar bhonn athfhillteach. Chomh maith leis sin, chuidigh sé le hIontaobhas Loch-cheantar Speirín ar bhonn neamh-athfhillteach i soláthar eile de £85,000 in 200-01 agus £40,000 in 2001-02.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Safety Programme: Mid Ulster

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister for Regional Development to list his road safety programme for the Mid Ulster area and to make it his policy that safety will be the decisive factor when it comes to allocating funding for road projects. (AQW 96/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): Road safety is a key consideration for my Department's Roads Service in allocating funding for all roads projects, including road maintenance schemes. In particular, the Roads Service accident remedial and traffic calming programmes are aimed specifically at reducing the number of accidents on our roads.

I have listed below the proposed schemes that are included in the 2001/2002 Roads Service accident remedial and traffic calming programmes for the Mid-Ulster area:

Accident remedial schemes

- A29 Cookstown Road/Creevagh Road, Dungannon - bend alignment scheme (estimated cost £80k);
- B42 Tobermore Road/Glenmaquail Road, Magherafelt - provision of a right-turning lane (estimated cost £85k);
- A29/B160 Sherigrim Crossroads - provision of right - turning lanes (estimated cost £130k); and
- Smith Street/Circular Road, Moneymore - sightline improvements (estimated cost £5k).

Traffic calming schemes

- Coalisland - provision of mini-roundabouts, pedestrian islands and enhanced signing (estimated cost £50/60k);
- B47/B41 St Patrick's Street, Draperstown - construction of a roundabout (estimated cost £70k);
- A29 Tobermore - provision of gateway signing and centre hatching (estimated cost £5k); and
- A29 Swatragh - provision of gateway signing and centre hatching (estimated cost £5k).

Revenue From Car Parking Fees

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the revenue raised from car parking fees in each Roads Service Division.

(AQW 131/01)

Mr Campbell: In 2000/01 the revenue raised from car parking fees in each Division of my Department's Roads Service was as follows:

Eastern Division	£3,732K
Northern Division	£1,759K
Southern Division	£1,154K
Western Division	£ 496K

Bowen's Close: Sewer Extension

Mr Carrick asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost to the public purse in providing sewage disposal facilities for three new houses, 1-3 Bowens Close, Lurgan and what further cost is anticipated.

(AQW 137/01)

Mr Campbell: A sewer extension scheme to serve numbers 1 to 3 Bowen's Close, and five dwellings in the new Knocknashane development, was completed in May 2001. The scheme can also accommodate three existing dwellings in Bowen's Lane, which are currently served by septic tanks.

The total cost of the scheme was £24,200. No further costs are anticipated.

Roads Service: Indicators of Need

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3392/00, to detail the indicators of need that Roads Service use to apportion resources across district council areas.

(AQW 158/01)

Mr Campbell: As I indicated in my answer to AQW 3392/00, the resources available to my Department's Roads Service for minor road works and road maintenance are allocated across district council areas using appropriate indicators of need.

In the case of minor road works, which includes minor road improvements, traffic calming, accident remedial and transportation schemes, the indicators of need are population, weighted road lengths and the number of road accidents.

As for road maintenance, the budget is allocated using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each of the 13 road maintenance activities (ie, resurfacing of motorways and trunk roads, resurfacing of non-trunk roads, carriageway patching, surface dressing, winter service, etc.). For example, the indicators used to allocate

funds for resurfacing of non-trunk roads network take account of the amount of travel on the network, the condition of the network and the carriageway in each council area.

Traffic Calming Measures: Kircubbin

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale to complete the traffic calming measures in Kircubbin.

(AQW 251/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the Kircubbin traffic calming scheme to provide entrance features on the main approach roads and measures to reduce the width of the carriageway (including lay-bys, central road markings, etc) was substantially completed in July 2001.

The elements of the scheme yet to be completed are the provision of kerb build-outs, coloured surfacing and signing. The delay in completing the scheme was caused by the unavailability of specialist kerbing units and of a contractor to provide the coloured surfacing. The entire scheme is expected to be finalised by the end of this month.

Road Improvements: Greyabbey

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale for the completion of the road surface at the lower part of Main Street, Greyabbey.

(AQW 252/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that progress on the improvement scheme being undertaken in Main Street, Greyabbey was delayed as a result of design changes having to be made to accommodate the requests of local residents and shopkeepers and because British Telecom had to relocate some of its apparatus.

These issues have now been resolved and work on site is due to recommence shortly. It is hoped that the scheme will be finalised by mid-November 2001.

Low Floor Accessible Buses

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to improve the number of low floor accessible buses.

(AQW 283/01)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that with the assistance of bus purchase grants from my Department it intends to purchase some 28 new buses per annum over the next three years. Translink anticipate that all these new buses will be low floor. My Department expects to provide some £1.7 million per annum towards these new bus purchases.

NI Transport Holding Company

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development how many of Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company's directors have had their three-year appointment renewed and to detail their individual length of service. (AQW 285/01)

Mr Campbell: Four members of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company have had their three-year appointment renewed for a second term.

Mr Luke Hasson and Mr Noel Stewart have served from 1 November 1995 and Mr John Freeman and Dr Maria Maloney have served from 1 May 1996. The Department is currently advertising for new appointments, which are expected to take effect from April 2002.

Parking Facilities at Train Stations: East Antrim

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his plans to provide additional car parking facilities at train stations throughout the constituency of East Antrim. (AQW 286/01)

Mr Campbell: Translink has advised that there is already a relatively considerable number of parking spaces available at train stations in the East Antrim constituency. There are 16, 120, 29 and 30 spaces provided at Greenisland station, Carrickfergus station, Whitehead station and Larne station respectively. Translink is continuing to examine other potential sites for Park and Ride facilities and is currently considering the potential for providing parking spaces at Jordantown station, Trooperslane station and Clipperstown station. Any developments will be dependent on customer demand and the availability of resources, among other considerations.

Bus Service: Carrickfergus to Antrim Area Hospital

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain what he intends to do about the ongoing delay in providing a bus service from Carrickfergus to the Antrim Area Hospital. (AQW 287/01)

Mr Campbell: The start of this service has been delayed due to a shortage of bus drivers. Translink has informed my Department that a driver has been recruited for the new service it proposes to operate between Carrickfergus and Ballyclare. This service will connect with its Larne to Antrim Hospital service. Translink hopes to begin the service before the end of the year, once the driver has successfully completed a training programme.

Newry Bypass

Mr Kennedy asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of compensation paid for each portion of land acquired from local landowners to complete the last phase of the Newry Bypass and to confirm the number of unsettled claims. (AQW 312/01)

Mr Campbell: The information you have sought is a private matter between my Department and the landowners concerned. I can however advise that, in total, my Department has paid almost £1 million in compensation for land that was acquired to complete the last phase (i.e. Stage 3) of the Newry Bypass. At present only one claim for compensation for this stage remains unsettled.

Ulsterbus Passenger Numbers

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made in relation to the decline in passenger numbers on Ulsterbus by 3% between 1999 and 2001 as published in the "Northern Ireland Transport Statistics 2000-2001"; and to make a statement. (AQW 321/01)

Mr Campbell: The decline in Ulsterbus passenger numbers from 48.2 million in 1999-2000 to 46.8 million in 2000-01 is the continuation of a long-term trend of reduced bus usage associated with increasing car ownership. In the short term I consider that the provision of free travel for older people, which I introduced on 1 October 2001, will help reverse this trend. In the longer term it is obvious that increasing traffic congestion problems will mean that the trend of reducing bus usage and increasing car usage is not sustainable. To encourage more bus usage we must provide a regular, high quality, efficient and reliable bus service. This is one of many transportation goals which I am committed to. However, substantial additional resources to enable such a service to be provided will be required.

Bus Service: Carrickfergus to Antrim Hospital

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development to explain the reason for the delay in commencing the bus service from Carrickfergus to Antrim Hospital. (AQW 324/01)

Mr Campbell: Further to the answer I gave on 11 June 2001 to AQW 3153/00, Translink has now informed my Department that a driver has been recruited for the new service it proposes to operate between Carrickfergus and Ballyclare. This service will connect with its Larne to Antrim Hospital service. Translink hope to start the

service before the end of the year, once the driver has successfully completed a training programme.

Pedestrian Crossing: Ballygowan

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) his plans to provide a pedestrian crossing on the Ballygowan/Belfast Road opposite Ballygowan Village Hall (b) the last traffic survey at this location (c) the result of this survey and (d) the proposed date of the next traffic survey at this location.

(AQW 344/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department's Roads Service has no current plans to provide a pedestrian crossing on the Ballygowan/Belfast Road at this location. The last pedestrian crossing assessment survey was carried out at the Village Hall on Tuesday 10 October 2000 and it showed that the level of pedestrian/vehicle conflict was well below the threshold for consideration to be given to the provision of a pedestrian crossing. As there has been no significant development in the area the circumstances are unlikely to have changed since the last assessment and therefore Roads Service has no plans to carry out a new pedestrian crossing assessment survey in the area.

Ownership of Pathway in Ballygowan

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development who owns the pathway in Ballygowan from the Brae down to Alexander Dickson Primary School past the medical surgery; and if he will make a statement on the ownership of this pathway.

(AQW 349/01)

Mr Campbell: The pathway in question has not been adopted into the public road network and is therefore not the responsibility of my Department's Roads Service. In the circumstances, I have no information regarding ownership of the pathway.

Regional Transportation Strategy

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline how he intends to strike a balance between the upgrading of the road network, whilst at the same time adopting a pro-active policy in encouraging car owners to use other modes of transport.

(AQW 412/01)

Mr Campbell: My Department is preparing a 10-year Regional Transportation Strategy which will identify transportation priorities over the next decade. During the course of its development there has been extensive consultation during which the relative priority attributed to different transport modes (e.g., car, public transport, taxi, freight, cycling and walking) has been debated. That included a major working conference which was

held on 28 September at which emerging strategies were considered including the balance to which you refer.

A comprehensive list of measures to support sustainable transport has been undertaken in recent years and these included measures to encourage travel by modes other than by car. The Regional Transport Programme, which was published in June 2001, outlines those measures undertaken during the last four years and sets out the proposals for 2001-02. A copy is available in the Library.

My Department is adopting a proactive policy of encouraging car owners to consider using other modes of transport. This approach involves raising the public's awareness of the critical issues such as increasing congestion as well as the health and environmental benefits of exploring more sustainable travel alternatives, including walking, cycling and public transport.

Early in the new year my Department will also be launching an Education and Awareness Communication Strategy which will seek to educate the public about the benefits of using more sustainable modes of travel and the role these modes can play in helping to address the problems associated with unrestrained car travel in Northern Ireland.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Allowances for Carers

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to raise the allowance paid to a carer who leaves work to look after an elderly relative.

(AQW 278/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Morrow): Last Autumn it was announced that a package of measures was to be introduced to enhance social security provision for carers. Two of these measures were implemented in April this year. The Invalid Care Allowance earnings limit was increased from £50 to £72 per week and the Carer Premium paid through the income-related benefits was increased from £14.15 to £24.40 per week.

Capital Limits for Pensioners

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to reform Social Security regulations governing capital limits for pensioners. (AQW 279/01)

Mr Morrow: Steps have already been taken to reform capital limits for pensioners. In April 2001, the lower capital limit in the income-related benefits for those over 60 was increased from £3,000 to £6,000. At the same time, the upper limit of the Minimum Income Guarantee and Jobseeker's Allowance for those over 60 was raised from £8,000 to £12,000.

In addition, the Pension Credit consultation paper set out the proposals for abolishing both the capital limits and the assumed £1.00 a week rate of return for every £250 of capital for pensioners.

Invalid Care Allowance

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development if he has any plans to allow new carers over the age of 65 to be eligible for Carer's benefit. (AQW 282/01)

Mr Morrow: Allowing carers over the age of 65 to claim Invalid Care Allowance requires substantial legislative changes which will be introduced as soon as possible.

Housing Executive Expenditure: Ards Borough Council Area

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of expenditure, by the Housing Executive, in the Ards Borough Council area in each of the last five years. (AQW 310/01)

Mr Morrow: The information requested is as follows:

NIHE EXPENDITURE IN ARDS BOROUGH COUNCIL AREA

	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
	£m	£m	£m	£m	£m
Response Maintenance	1.053	0.866	0.890	1.040	1.693
Planned Maintenance	2.283	1.620	2.886	1.286	1.247
Capital Improvements	2.943	3.397	1.863	1.994	2.709
Private Sector Grants	0.977	1.073	1.280	0.933	1.422
Total	7.256	6.956	6.919	5.253	7.071

Level of Homelessness

Dr Birnie asked the Minister for Social Development what statistical information is held on the level of homelessness in Northern Ireland and how does that level compare to Great Britain. (AQW 361/01)

Mr Morrow: For comparative purposes figures for the end of year 1999-2000 for Northern Ireland and Great Britain are as follows:

Region	Total H'holds in Population	H'holds Presenting as Homeless per Annum	H'holds Accepted as Homeless per Annum	H'holds Presenting as % of Total Households	Accepted H'holds as % of Total Households
England	20.2m	244,000	105,000	1.2%	0.5%
Wales	1.17m	12,500	4,000	1.0%	0.3%
Scotland	2.14m	41,000	18,500	1.9%	0.9%
N Ireland	0.63m	12,694	6,457	2.1%	1.1%

In addition some information on those presenting as homeless in Northern Ireland can be found in the Department's publication "Northern Ireland Housing Statistics 2000 - 01". The Simon Community produces figures in its publication "Annual Statistics 2000-01".

Benefit Fraud - Reduction

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to set targets for reducing benefit fraud and NIHE grant fraud. (AQW 366/01)

Mr Morrow: The Social Security Agency has, as a part of its Security Strategy, set targets to reduce the levels of fraud and error within the benefit systems. The strategic target is to achieve a 5% reduction per year in the level of fraud and error in Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Incapacity Benefit.

There are currently no targets for reducing Housing Executive grant fraud. The Housing Executive has a grants scheme fraud strategy, within which there is an extensive system of controls, audits and management and supervisory checks.

Child Benefit Policy and Administration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail whether he intends to recommend transfer of responsibility for policy and administration of child benefit to the Inland Revenue; and to make a statement. (AQW 402/01)

Mr Morrow: I have recommended that responsibility for policy and administration of Child Benefit should be transferred to the Inland Revenue. I intend to put down a Motion for debate to bring the matter before the Assembly.

Child Benefit Policy and Administration

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development if it is his intention that employees involved in processing Child Benefit claims will remain within the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the event of any transfer of responsibilities to the Inland Revenue. (AQW 403/01)

Mr Morrow: Should the responsibility for policy and administration of Child Benefit be transferred to the Inland Revenue, Child Benefit staff in the Social Security Agency would transfer from the Northern Ireland Civil Service to the United Kingdom Civil Service.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 29 October 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

E-Government

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to advise how e-government is being co-ordinated within local government so that capabilities developed by one local council are shared with other councils. (AQW 254/01)

Sir Reg Empey and Mr Seamus Mallon MP: Responsibility for the use and co-ordination of information technology at local government level falls to district councils.

The Central Information Technology Unit, CITU(NI), within the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister has a role in promoting and encouraging co-operation on e-government across the public sector in Northern Ireland. In fulfilling that role it has been working with SOLACE(NI) (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives) to ensure that it is kept informed of developments on e-government. A representative from SOLACE(NI) has recently been co-opted, in an observer role, on to the e-Government Project Board which contributes to the formulation of e-government policy in Northern Ireland.

Recently Mr Dermot Nesbitt addressed a SOLACE ICT awareness Seminar "Transforming Government" held at the Newtownabbey Borough Council offices at the New Mossley Mill. The seminar was to promote the use of IT to facilitate access to Government services for people across Northern Ireland. The seminar was attended by councillors, chief executives and senior officers across Northern Ireland.

Responsibility for developing IT rests with individual councils, who respond to their own specific needs and circumstances. Local government has its own arrangements for co-ordination and networking which are developed as it sees fit.

CITU(NI) will continue to work with the Department of the Environment, SOLACE and the district councils to encourage the development of e-government.

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Flooding Precautions: West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what precautions and schemes have been implemented in West Tyrone to prevent such flooding as witnessed last winter. (AQW 365/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): I am conscious of concerns about flooding in West Tyrone and can assure you that Rivers Agency has been active on measures to alleviate flooding risk. Works, including culvert replacement and flood defence strengthening have been completed at a number of locations. Capital Works Schemes at Newtownstewart, Sion Mills and the Glebe are programmed for completion in the next financial year. At Burdennet works have been carried out to maintain the integrity of the embankment and the existing level of flood protection.

To assist residents, Rivers Agency maintains a 24-hour Flood Emergency Service for West Tyrone at its Omagh Office, Telephone (028) 82254900.

Foot-and-Mouth Disease Study for South Armagh Area

Mr C Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what financial assistance is being made available for a foot-and-mouth disease regeneration study in the South Armagh area. (AQW 398/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are currently no specific plans to provide any financial assistance for a foot-and-mouth regeneration study in the South Armagh area.

On a more general front you will be interested to know that I will be launching the 2001 to 2006 Rural Development Programme during November.

The intention is to create a broad and flexible programme that will offer a wide range of opportunities for the development of rural areas.

The new Rural Development Programme will consist of six main elements funded through a number of EU structural fund programmes and initiatives. The six key elements are:

- **Capacity building** - which will help to give people in rural areas the skills they need to be able to successfully develop and regenerate their own areas;

- Local regeneration projects and programmes - which will provide the funding to allow rural people to develop and regenerate their own areas;
- Sectoral development projects and programmes - which will address those problems and opportunities which can best be tackled by province-wide or regional projects rather than a series of projects in local communities;
- Natural Resource Rural Tourism - which will help disadvantaged rural areas including South Armagh to take advantage of the opportunities offered by tourism in a more stable political environment;
- LEADER+ - which will encourage local partnerships to try new ways of releasing the potential of rural areas, focusing on micro businesses (10 or less employees including small farms); and
- INTERREG III - which will address the problems and opportunities which can be best tackled on a cross-border basis.

I would encourage groups within South Armagh to consider opportunities under the new programme and other opportunities to stimulate local regeneration.

EU Vessel Modernisation Scheme

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in respect of schemes to modernise fishing vessels, to detail (a) those schemes that are currently available, (b) those schemes that have been in place over the last five years and (c) her proposals for future schemes. (AQW 419/01)

Ms Rodgers: There are no schemes currently available for any form of vessel modernisation as the EU Vessel Modernisation Scheme under the previous round of Fisheries Structural Funds closed in December 1999. This scheme provided for a wide range of measures to improve crew safety and comfort and to modernise a variety of equipment on board fishing vessels. Funding closed in December 1999.

I am planning to announce a number of schemes within the next few weeks to assist the processing sector, aquaculture and the fishery harbours. Early next year I plan to announce a further series of schemes to assist the fishing industry. These will include a scheme to improve the marketing and quality of fish on board fishing vessels. It will be focussed on improvements to hygiene and better presentation of fish on board fishing vessels.

DARD Colleges: NI & England

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given the number of local students that are attracted to Harper Adams University College in Shropshire, England, to outline the main differences between the courses offered at this college compared to colleges in Northern Ireland. (AQW 420/01)

Ms Rodgers: Harper Adams University College primarily provides Higher Education programmes. These programmes are distinctive when compared to the programmes provided by DARD Colleges in that they generally involve more specialist subject areas, which are reflective of the different requirements of the agri-food industry in Great Britain when compared to that of Northern Ireland. Examples of such programmes include Higher National Diploma (HND) and BSc programmes in Marketing, Business Studies, Land and Estate Management Leisure Studies and Animal Welfare.

Due to its size, Harper Adams University College provides a range of more specialist programmes than DARD Colleges, which will assist students wishing to secure employment in Great Britain. I am also aware that some students prefer to pursue studies outside Northern Ireland before returning home to work.

Education programmes offered by DARD Colleges are specifically tailored to the requirements of the local agri-food industry through regular reviews which involve formal consultation with industry representatives on the Colleges' Advisory Boards. The aim of DARD Colleges provision is to develop the competences which people require to successfully pursue careers within Northern Ireland's agri-food industry. Traditionally, these requirements were largely addressed through providing Further Education programmes.

In response to very significant changes within the agri-food industry during the past decade, DARD Colleges have progressively developed, through collaborating with Colleges of Further and Higher Education, Queen's University, the Open University and the University of Ulster, a much wider range of Higher Education courses to complement their Further Education provision. Examples include Higher National Diploma (HND) and BSc level courses in Agriculture, Food Technology and Equine Studies and an HND programme in Horticulture. These programmes are complemented by degree programmes offered by the School of Agriculture and Food Science, QUB.

These developments have significantly widened access to agri-food related Higher Education programmes in Northern Ireland, and have also facilitated progression from the Further Education programmes provided by DARD Colleges that was not available in the past. As a consequence, Northern Ireland students now have many more opportunities at DARD Colleges to pursue Higher Education qualifications specifically tailored to the requirements of the local agri-food industry.

Farming as a Career Choice for Young People

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to encourage young people to enter the farming profession. (AQW 421/01)

Ms Rodgers: In choosing a career, young people and their parents are very strongly influenced by future career opportunities and the image of the industry. A highly competitive and progressive industry, which is perceived as having a sustainable and viable future, will be much more successful in attracting young people to seek careers in that industry. It is for this reason that I believe that the current vision exercise is so important in providing a positive and proactive direction on which we can build a programme for future industry development.

The availability of high quality education courses and facilities is another vital factor in attracting young people of high calibre into the industry. The courses run by the DARD colleges are specifically targeted at ensuring that those entering the industry have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to contribute to the industry, while enjoying a satisfying and fulfilling career. These courses are constantly revised and improved to ensure a close match with industry requirements.

To ensure that young people of high calibre are attracted to the courses in agriculture and related subjects, my Department initiates direct contact with students and their parents through attending careers conventions and exhibiting at farming events such as Balmoral Show, the Winter Fair, the Northern Ireland Ploughing Championships and local agriculture shows. This is supplemented by advertising in the press, on radio, in cinemas and on television.

Steps are also taken to ensure that careers teachers and schools have a good understanding of the agri-food industry and career opportunities within it. DARD colleges hold regular events such as open days and seminars of relevance to schools throughout Northern Ireland.

Congress of European Agriculture: Rt Hon Margaret Beckett's Speech

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment has she made of the content of the statement by the Rt Hon Margaret Beckett, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, at the recent Congress of European Agriculture, including the impact this would have on the future of the agricultural industry in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 429/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have made no assessment of the impact on Northern Ireland agriculture of the content of the speech by Mrs Beckett. Essentially, this was a restatement of the general position of successive UK Governments on the issue of CAP reform and contained no specific proposals which could be assessed. Any future reform of the CAP will be negotiated by the EU Member States based on proposals from the EU Commission.

However, as I made clear in my own speech to the CEA, agriculture plays a vital role in the Northern Ireland rural economy and I am anxious to ensure that a viable industry remains both in the lowlands and in the hills. Therefore, while reform of the CAP is inevitable, I will be seeking to ensure that this occurs at a pace which the industry can sustain and that suitable measures are in place to help the industry through this process.

EU & Departmental Bureaucracy

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she has initiated to help reduce the level of EU and departmental bureaucracy currently facing the farming community.

(AQO 297/01)

Ms Rodgers: I think it best if I answer this question in the context of the various subsidy schemes related to IACS which are a major area of activity and financial importance for the industry.

Most of the rules and conditions are set down in EU legislation and are not easy to get changed - though we do try through the various committees and other meetings. I can though, report on a number of initiatives to ease the burden for farmers:

- The Department makes considerable use of APHIS data. In the slaughter premium scheme we provide producers with all the information necessary to claim. And consideration is being given to going a step further and doing away with claims for this particular scheme.
- APHIS data is also used extensively for extensification payments again saving producers from the burden of making complex returns six times a year.
- We have been looking closely at the forms for IACS and plan to simplify them for next year.
- together thereby reducing the time burden on farmers;
- We are implementing an appeals system which will allow producers an independent appeal where they think an incorrect decision has been made;
- We will take advantage where we can of initiatives coming from Brussels - many of which the UK is pushing for - to make life simpler for farmers (eg the small farmers scheme).

I think this shows that my Department is doing what it can within the constraints in which it must operate.

NI Beef Farmers

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what benefits can be gained for Northern Ireland beef farmers as a result of Egypt's recent decision to accept beef exported from the Republic of Ireland.

(AQO 304/01)

Ms Rodgers: The reopening of the Egyptian market to EU beef including that from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has the potential to benefit returns to Northern Ireland beef producers through reduced levels of ROI beef competing with NI beef on the GB market. Additionally firmer prices for ROI cattle would make their live importation into Northern Ireland for slaughter and processing less attractive and therefore provide the potential for increased returns for NI producers.

It should be noted however that the reopening of the Egyptian market for beef imports from the EU will be subject to the meeting of certain strict veterinary conditions and trade will not commence until February 2002 at the earliest.

Agriculture Committee's Report

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she intends to implement the recommendations of the Agriculture Committee's report "Retailing in Northern Ireland - a fair deal for the farmer". (AQO 307/01)

Ms Rodgers: This report contained recommendations directed at all links in the food marketing chain, as well as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of the Environment. With regard to those recommendations directed at my Department, I was pleased to be able to confirm in my reply to the Committee that, in most cases, DARD was already taking forward a range of initiatives aimed at addressing the underlying issues and concerns.

Tests for Bovines Aged 30 Months Plus

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how many tests were carried out over the last six months on bovines, aged 30 months or more, that were destined for the food chain. (AQO 332/01)

Ms Rodgers: I assume that the Member has in mind tests carried out by my Department. If that is the case, the answer is none. Northern Ireland bovines aged 30 months or more do not enter the food chain.

Advice Funding for Farmers

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to provide target funding for advice organisations which are presently involved in supporting farmers through provision of on-farm financial audits. (AQO 308/01)

Ms Rodgers: In Northern Ireland a long term and more sustainable approach has been taken in the form of the LFA Good Business Sense programme. This

involves the development of a tailored business recording system and associated training programme which aims to develop the business management competences of farmers, especially smaller farmers, who have been reluctant to participate in traditional training programmes. The programme will provide approximately 12,000 business development training places for farmers.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Heritage Lottery Fund: Details of Awards 2000-01

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the grants that have been awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund in the 2000-01 financial year. (AQW 433/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): During the 2000-2001 financial year 34 grants were awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to projects in Northern Ireland totalling £12,086,400. These are as follows:

Recipient	Award Amount £
Antrim Towns Development Company	10,000
Armagh Observatory - Telescopes and Domes	286,000
Armagh Public Library	37,000
Ballymena Borough Council	4,441,000
Canal Street area Heritage Partnership	1,100,000
Carrickfergus Gasworks Preservation Society Ltd Restoration	740,000
Carnlough Community Development Group	300,000
Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland	109,500
Craigavon Borough Council	69,000
Creagan Education and Research Services Ltd	100,000
Downpatrick and Ardglass Railway Co	7,800
Dromore Town Heritage Group	690,000
Dungannon District Council	500,000
Feeny Community Association Ltd	86,900
Foyle Civic Trust	10,000
Glenravel Local History Project	41,900
Glenravel Local History Project	16,200
Hearth Housing Association	151,500
Irish Association of Change Ringers, Northern District	14,700
Irvinestown Fairs and Markets Trustees	10,000
Lisburn Development Limited	700,00
Newtownabbey Borough Council	416,500
Newtownstewart Development Association Ltd	400,000

Recipient	Award Amount £
Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, Comber	88,000
North West Centre for Learning and Development	85,500
Randalstown Arches Association	490,000
Saint John the Baptist Church, Granaghan	8,700
Select Vestry of the Parish of Whitehead and Islandmagee	190,000
Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum	162,000
Sisters of Mercy, St. Josephs Home, Warrenpoint	148,000
The Irish Landmark Trust	148,000
The CoI Representative Church Body, St John's Church Kilwarlin	225,000
The Woodland Trust	228,000
Trustees of St Patricks Parish, Downpatrick	75,200

Details of all Lottery Awards made by all National Lottery Distributing Bodies across the UK can be accessed through the Awards Search on the Web Site of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Promoting Disabled Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if he has any plans to increase the role of district councils in promoting disabled sports and if funding is available for this purpose. (AQW 438/01)

Mr McGimpsey: Under Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, each District Council is responsible for securing the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational, physical and cultural activities. This includes meeting the needs of disabled people.

The Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) works closely with the Chief Leisure Officer Association (CLOA) and Disability Sport Northern Ireland in promoting sport for people with disabilities and for developing more inclusive leisure facilities at a local level. The aim of this work is to move towards a more joined-up and district council specific response to addressing the needs of the disabled.

In view of this ongoing work I do not see the need to consider increasing the role of district councils in the promotion of disabled sport at this time.

Public Relations Posts for Promotion of Disabled Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if the Sports Council for Northern Ireland has any plans to create a public relations post to promote disabled sporting events. (AQW 439/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland does not provide funding for public relations posts in any sector at present.

It is the view of the Sports Council, which is working closely with Disability Sports Northern Ireland on developing sporting opportunities for those with a disability, that priority should be given to sports development posts which ensure increased participation of those with a disability.

The Sports Council has indicated that if Disability Sports Northern Ireland is anxious to increase their public relations capacity the Sports Council's Public Relations Department would be keen to provide assistance, but both Disability Sports Northern Ireland and the Sports Council share the view at present that the need for such a post has not been clearly established.

Funding Available for Disabled Sportsmen & Women

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail any funding that is available for disabled sportsmen and women. (AQW 440/01)

Mr McGimpsey: The Sports Council for Northern Ireland, in addition to providing exchequer funding to the governing body of the sport (Disability Sport Northern Ireland), offer a number of funding opportunities for disabled athletes through their various Lottery Revenue Programmes. Talented performers with a disability are entitled to apply for Lottery Funding from any Revenue Programme, to support their performance development, where their performance level reaches the necessary standard. The Sports Council currently provides Lottery support for a number of disabled athletes through Talented Athlete and Talented Athlete (Next Generation) programmes.

Furthermore, the Sports Council Lottery Fund, can also provide funding for Major International Events. The Sports Council recently, for instance, allocated £6,300 to Wheelchair Basketball to enable the hosting of the Willie Brinkman Cup, a British Nations Event that took place in the Antrim Forum.

EDUCATION

Access for the Disabled

Ms Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of (a) mainstream secondary schools and (b) primary schools that are (i) totally accessible for the disabled (ii) partially accessible for the disabled

and (iii) what percentage of the total number of secondary and primary schools do these represent. (AQW 347/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Information in the form requested is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost. Most primary schools are generally accessible for disabled people and earmarked funding of £1.5 million last year and £2 million this year has been made available to improve access to both primary and secondary school buildings.

Teacher Costs at Irish-Medium Schools

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he could outline any difference in teacher costs at Irish-Medium Schools compared to other school sectors. (AQW 355/01)

Mr M McGuinness: At present, the numbers of teachers employed in individual Irish-medium Schools are broadly similar to those employed in controlled and maintained schools of similar size and characteristics. However Irish-Medium schools have additional requirements arising from the need to prepare curriculum materials and to meet the additional statutory curriculum requirement to teach English at Key Stage 2. Proposals included in the recent LMS Consultation Document are designed to help Irish-medium schools meet these additional needs.

LMS Funding Formula

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education if he will undertake to change the criteria for New TSN from one of "threshold" allocation to that of "per head" allocation. (AQW 357/01)

Mr M McGuinness: At present only the Belfast Education and Library Board operates a threshold as part of its LMS funding formula.

My proposals for a common funding formula for schools were set out in a consultation document published in April 2001 and do not involve the application of a threshold for TSN funding. The consultation period ended on 21st September and responses are currently being considered.

In my announcement of 4th October I indicated that the common formula will not now be implemented until April 2003 so existing arrangements will continue for 2002-03 funding allocations.

LMS Schemes

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, in respect of the consultation document "Common Funding Formula for Grant Aided Schools", to explain why children of service personnel, who frequently move

schools, are only allocated one third of the proposed funds available. (AQW 358/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The proposed allocation of an amount equivalent to £250 per pupil is in line with current funding in Board LMS schemes for children of service personnel and is designed to enable schools to provide the additional support needed by these pupils. Direct comparisons with support proposed for children from the travelling community or pupils for whom English is an additional language are not appropriate as the needs of these children and the nature of the support they require are quite different.

Responses to the consultation are currently being considered and the views expressed on all the proposals, including those for children of service personnel, will be carefully weighed before final decisions are taken.

Fund for New TSN

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education, in respect of the consultation document "Common Funding Formula for Grant Aided Schools", to explain why the fund for New TSN increased from 5% to 5.5% and what does he hope to achieve as a result of this increase. (AQW 359/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Deciding on the amount of funding to be distributed under the TSN factor requires a judgement to be made between meeting the genuine needs of schools trying to operate in very difficult circumstances, where there are high levels of social disadvantage and educational need, and ensuring that all schools have sufficient core funding to meet the needs of their pupils. A proper balance must be struck.

The proposals in the document to include educational indicators (KS2 results) alongside entitlement to FSM in the TSN indicator, would direct TSN resources more accurately to schools with pupils in need. In particular, the revised indicator would target more effectively schools with pupils who are not socially disadvantaged but who are nevertheless performing below the expected level for their age. This would address a long-standing criticism of the current TSN arrangements within LMS.

The increase in resources distributed under TSN from 5% to 5.5% of total schools' recurrent funding would raise TSN funding from £40 million to around £44 million and was widely supported by schools in the consultation. This additional £4 million would assist schools in addressing low educational achievement, regardless of social background, while also ensuring that schools currently receiving TSN funds continue to receive adequate support

The consultation period on the Common Formula has just ended and all responses will be carefully considered before final decisions are made.

Additional Funding: Queen's University, Belfast

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 3676/00, to detail how the Education & Library Boards have utilised the additional funding allocated for teachers on the MSc in Educational Psychology course at Queen's University, Belfast. (AQW 369/01)

Mr M McGuinness: Additional funding was used (1) to increase the number of teachers being supported to eleven; (2) to increase the level of support from £11,000 to £17,500; (3) to enable them to join a recognised superannuation scheme during training; (3) to allow them to receive increased travel and subsistence costs; and (4) to enable them to attend an annual conference. All the additional funding was used for the intended purpose.

Educating Against Drug Abuse

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how much money has been spent on educating school children against drug abuse in each of the last three years.

(AQW 376/01)

Mr M McGuinness: It is not possible to quantify the amount of money spent on drug education in schools, as drug education programmes are, for the most part, delivered as part of the statutory curriculum. Under the Northern Ireland Drug Strategy, additional funding of approximately £800,000 for two years was allocated to the education sector in March 2000 to enable drug education provision to be strengthened.

Guidance for Post Primary Schools

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education if the CCEA considered The Children (NI) Order 1995 in formulating the lessons and materials as recommended in their teaching guide, "Guidance for Post Primary Schools - Relationships and Sexuality Education".

(AQW 442/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) considered the Children (NI) Order 1995 in preparing its guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in as far as the Order was consistent with the Council's responsibilities. The lists of teaching materials included in the guidance have been identified during the consultation phases of the development of the guidance by teachers from both primary and post-primary schools as useful when developing an RSE policy or programme. CCEA makes it very clear that their inclusion does not imply endorsement and strongly recommends that schools review all resources to be used with pupils prior to any use.

A wide range of groups was consulted prior to the production of the guidance for both primary and post primary schools. Copies of the draft proposals were sent out to Education and Health Boards, Churches, schools, CCMS, teachers unions and many other organisations and individuals. CCEA also placed a public notice in a local newspaper on 17 November 1998 inviting comments from interested individuals, groups and organisations.

RSE is mainly taught through the Programme of Study for Science and the cross-curricular theme of Health Education. It may also be delivered through subjects such as Religious Education, Personal and Social Education, Pastoral Care, Physical Education, Home Economics and English. In producing its guidance on RSE, CCEA used as a guideline proposals drawn up by the Health Education Liaison Group (HELG) in 1997, which set out a framework and headings for developing policy and programmes.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not include a specific right or option for parents to withdraw their children from a class in which sex education is being taught. It does, however, require States to recognise the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents to provide direction and guidance to their children in the exercise of the children's rights under the Convention, including the right of the child to education. My Department has suggested that schools should explain to parents, before a programme of RSE is instigated, how they intend to approach this sensitive subject, and what aspects will be covered in the course of the programme. Schools should then take account of any parental concerns expressed to them and, as far as possible, make alternative arrangements for any pupil whose parent wishes him/her to be excused from sex education.

Guidance for Post Primary Schools

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education what consultation was carried out by his Department or the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment with churches, schools and parents prior to publishing the teaching guide "Guidance for Post Primary Schools - Relations and Sexuality Education". (AQW 443/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) considered the Children (NI) Order 1995 in preparing its guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in as far as the Order was consistent with the Council's responsibilities. The lists of teaching materials included in the guidance have been identified, during the consultation phases of the development of the guidance, by teachers from both primary and post-primary schools as useful when developing an RSE policy or programme. CCEA makes it very clear that their inclusion does not imply endorsement and strongly recommends

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Guidance for Post Primary Schools

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education if sex education for 11-14 year old children in secondary schools is conducted in the context of another lesson i.e. biology or taught as a separate and distinct lesson.
(AQW 444/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) considered the Children (NI) Order 1995 in preparing its guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in as far as the Order was consistent with the Council's responsibilities. The lists of teaching materials included in the guidance have been identified, during the consultation phases of the development of the guidance, by teachers from both primary and post-primary schools as useful when developing an RSE policy or

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Guidance for Post Primary Schools

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education if parents of 11-14 year old children, who object to the content of sex education being taught, have a right or an option under "United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" to withdraw their children from that particular class.
(AQW 445/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) considered the Children (NI) Order 1995 in preparing its guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in as far as the Order was consistent with the Council's responsibilities. The lists of teaching materials included in the guidance have been identified, during

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Guidance for Post Primary Schools

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Education what guidelines were used by the Council for Curriculum Examinations and Assessment in preparing its teaching guide "Guidance for Post Primary Schools - Relationships and Sexuality Education". (AQW 446/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) considered the Children (NI) Order 1995 in preparing its guidance on Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE), in as far as the Order was consistent

with the Council's responsibilities. The lists of teaching materials included in the guidance have been identified, during the consultation phases of the development of the guidance, by teachers from both primary and post-primary schools as useful when developing an RSE policy or programme. CCEA makes it very clear that their inclusion does not imply endorsement and strongly recommends that schools review all resources to be used with pupils prior to any use.

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EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Arts Graduates

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action is being taken to ensure that

local "Arts" graduates secure employment in Northern Ireland. (AQO 317/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): The Department's JobCentre network provides a range of services and programmes which address the needs of those seeking to secure employment, including graduates of any discipline. Graduates can access a wide range of vacancies in any JobCentre and can seek careers information and guidance if this is required.

A range of programmes is also provided by the Department's Management Development Branch. These include programmes specifically aimed at helping graduates from any discipline to develop IT and Business Management Skills.

Movement of Courses in University of Ulster

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the courses within the University of Ulster which have moved between campuses in the last and current academic year and (b) any further plans to move courses. (AQW 434/01)

Dr Farren: I am advised that no courses have been transferred between the campuses of the University of Ulster in either the last or current academic years. Following the establishment of a new faculty structure the University is currently reviewing its overall course provision with the aim of achieving the goals set out in its published Vision and Strategy 2000-2010.

Movement of Courses in University of Ulster

Mr Neeson asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) any discussions which took place with unions in respect of moving courses within campuses of the University of Ulster and (b) any provision which has been made for students whose courses have been moved. (AQW 435/01)

Dr Farren: I am advised that the University is currently reviewing provision across each faculty and each campus. Trade Unions will be consulted in line with agreed procedures when the review has been completed. Existing students will not be affected by any transfer of courses that might arise as a result of the institution-wide review process. They will be able to complete their course on the campus at which they are currently registered.

Individual Learning Accounts

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of Individual Learning

Accounts that have been activated in each (a) parliamentary constituency and (b) local district council area. (AQW 452/01)

Dr Farren: Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) are available to virtually all Northern Ireland residents aged 18 or over for a wide range of learning.

Information on ILAs is not collected in the format requested but is available on the basis of high level Postal Codes. I attach a table showing the numbers of ILAs that have been opened and activated (ie. used by the Account holder towards the cost of a course) from 4 September 2000 (when ILAs became available in Northern Ireland) to 30 September 2001.

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING ACCOUNTS OPENED AND ACTIVATED FROM SEPTEMBER 2000 TO 30 SEPTEMBER 2001

Bt Post Code	Accounts Opened	Accounts Activated	Bt Post Code	Accounts Opened	Accounts Activated
BT1	21	2	BT34	1803	697
BT2	1	1	BT35	1302	533
BT3	1	1	BT36	1652	720
BT4	533	170	BT37	692	335
BT5	539	183	BT38	1065	495
BT6	513	216	BT39	742	341
BT7	866	430	BT40	570	251
BT8	542	340	BT41	2007	977
BT9	421	127	BT42	1839	886
BT10	615	276	BT43	1362	658
BT11	1512	609	BT44	823	326
BT12	1136	422	BT45	1454	664
BT13	535	224	BT46	333	164
BT14	1122	504	BT47	2429	1068
BT15	1071	470	BT48	3199	1306
BT16	613	293	BT49	1280	593
BT17	1424	562	BT51	1080	456
BT18	480	230	BT52	708	303
BT19	1315	554	BT53	1002	405
BT20	990	442	BT54	599	269
BT21	254	92	BT55	671	306
BT22	573	252	BT56	715	329
BT23	2015	942	BT57	660	333
BT24	620	312	BT60	1411	610
BT25	409	194	BT61	523	208
BT26	355	186	BT62	907	382
BT27	809	389	BT63	680	303
BT28	1441	631	BT64	62	24
BT29	590	255	BT65	574	266
BT30	1233	512	BT66	1134	505
BT31	293	145	BT67	857	386
BT32	775	410	BT68	392	164
BT33	622	275	BT69	515	231
BT70	543	236	BT79	1516	718

Bt Post Code	Accounts Opened	Accounts Activated	Bt Post Code	Accounts Opened	Accounts Activated
BT71	1962	866	BT80	608	253
BT74	1645	898	BT81	248	113
BT75	215	128	BT82	728	274
BT76	88	45	BT92	1568	982
BT77	66	39	BT93	743	394
BT78	1572	797	BT94	1032	552
	Total	71815	32440		

New Campus for East Antrim Institute of Further & Higher Education

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he will assist the East Antrim Institute of Further & Higher Education in funding the new campus, pending the sale of existing land.

(AQW 480/01)

Dr Farren: East Antrim Institute is in the process of selling land at Larne. A smaller building on the existing site will be built. If there is a shortfall in the proceeds from the sale of the land, the Department will consider any proposal brought forward by the Institute in light of the overall resources available and other competing priorities at the relevant time.

East Antrim Institute of Further & Higher Education

Mr O'Connor asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assessment has he made in relation to the future plans for East Antrim Institute of Further & Higher Education.

(AQW 481/01)

Dr Farren: The future development of the Institute is a matter, in the first instance, for its Governing Body. Any specific plans brought forward by the Governing Body will be considered by my Department.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Job Losses at Shorts Bombardier

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans he has to assist those subcontractors who supply Bombardier Shorts, taking into consideration the likely economic effect of the job losses at the factory.

(AQW 380/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): LEDU and IDB, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium, are

liaising closely with those client companies which may be affected by the recent events in the United States and will consider how best their support programmes may be used to maintain their competitiveness at this difficult time.

LEDU is currently monitoring events and is in close contact with all key subcontractors to both Bombardier and the global aerospace industry to ascertain the current and future impacts of the developments, post September 11. LEDU is actively liaising and working with the Northern Ireland Aerospace Consortium to develop a way forward for the industry.

I have written to the Prime Minister urging him to introduce measures which would mitigate against some of the job losses recently announced by Bombardier Shorts, and which in turn would ease the pressures on the local sub-contract network.

Any business issues being raised are being actioned.

Merger of LEDU & IDB

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline his plans for local job creation post the merger of LEDU and IDB and subsequent creation of IntertradeIreland.

(AQW 409/01)

Sir Reg Empey: A body is being set up, Invest NI, to carry out the functions of the existing economic development agencies. When Invest Northern Ireland is set up, responsibility for the delivery of local economic development services will fall to it. In a letter to the Enterprise, Trade & Investment Committee on 10 October 2001, the Chairman of the Shadow Board of Invest Northern Ireland, Professor Fabian Monds, set out the strategic principles which would direct the new agency. Apart from innovation, which will be a prime focus, there will be a clear emphasis on the local delivery of services, the needs of small businesses and an increase in the number of business births. Invest Northern Ireland will pursue these objectives in the context of the overall policy framework set by my Department.

Science Park at Ulster University at Coleraine

Mr Neeson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the cost of building the Science Park at the University of Ulster at Coleraine, its estimated income and actual income to date.

(AQW 432/01)

Sir Reg Empey: The University of Ulster at Coleraine has allocated 28 acres for science park development to provide 28,000 square metres of high specification accommodation over the next ten years. Stage 1 involving

5,700 square metres of incubation space and a multi occupancy building has been completed at a cost of £6 million. Since the first buildings have just been completed there is no income to date. However projected returns from these buildings are £0.5 million per annum.

The Coleraine site is a satellite site of the Northern Ireland Science Park and that link will provide further opportunities for start-up knowledge based companies.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what action has been taken to ensure that planning applications are processed within the 12 week timescale. (AQW 388/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): There is no 12 week timescale for processing planning applications. The Department's targets are to take 65% of minor applications and 60% of major applications to the District Councils within 8 weeks of receipt and to issue decisions on all applications within 14 working days of final consultation with all relevant consultees. In 2000/01 64% (target 65%) of minor applications and 53% (target 60%) of major applications were taken to District Councils within 8 weeks and 54% (target 65%) of decisions issued within 14 working days of final District Council consultation.

I was successful in securing an additional £850,000 last year and again this year to assist in both reducing the backlog of all applications in line with its Programme for Government commitments, and in meeting the above targets.

However, the recruitment of additional staff has taken some to complete, and, in the interim, planning application numbers have also continued to rise – by 7.9% and 4.5% in each of the last two years and by 5.4% in this year to date. In addition, the foot and mouth restrictions have delayed site inspections.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Average Wage Levels of District Council Employers

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the average wage levels within each district council area for (a) men and (b) women and when was the most recent survey completed. (AQW 407/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The average gross weekly earnings for adult males, females and all employees in Northern Ireland's 26 district councils at April 2000 are detailed in the following table. The most recent survey was completed in November 2000, containing data for April 2000. April 2001 data is due to be released mid-November 2001.

AVERAGE GROSS WEEKLY EARNINGS IN N.I. DISTRICT COUNCILS, APRIL 2000

District Council	Male	Female	All	Rank (by all employees surveyed)
Belfast	477.60	327.60	404.50	1
Fermanagh	381.60	354.30	372.00	2
Newtownabbey	386.20	335.10	370.00	3
Castlereagh	383.70	310.10	352.40	=4
Lisburn	401.90	277.00	352.40	=4
Limavady	403.90	317.20	351.90	6
Ballymena	403.90	268.60	351.80	7
Coleraine	373.70	299.50	351.60	8
Ards	355.70	337.30	349.60	9
Derry	374.60	302.30	349.20	10
Larne	373.90	279.30	346.90	11
Omagh	389.90	313.20	346.70	12
North Down	391.30	252.10	340.80	13
Carrickfergus	327.60	356.70	340.60	14
Dungannon	368.30	279.80	337.50	15
Armagh	350.60	301.60	330.10	=16
Craigavon	351.40	299.80	330.10	=16
Banbridge	344.10	305.10	329.50	18
Cookstown	328.90	296.70	318.20	19
Magherafelt	320.30	304.00	315.20	20
Newry and Mourne	324.90	291.60	313.60	21
Antrim	341.90	271.80	309.20	22
Ballymoney	310.70	285.00	297.80	23
Strabane	303.50	265.00	287.70	24
Down	289.80	266.00	279.80	25
Moyle	*	*	239.10	26
Northern Ireland	393.30	307.30	360.40	

Source: DETI Northern Ireland New Earnings Survey, Sub NI Data April 2000

Note: *sample too small for statistical reliability

Trend of Personal Non-Mortgage Debt in NI

Dr Birnie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what statistical information is held on the trend of personal, non-mortgage, debt in Northern Ireland and how that level compares to Great Britain.

(AQW 428/01)

Mr Durkan: There is no statistical information currently held on the trend of personal, non mortgage, debt in Northern Ireland and how that level compares to Great Britain. Information on household financial liabilities is provided at the United Kingdom level by the Office for National Statistics. The information is provided as all personal financial liabilities attributable to both households and non-profit institutions serving households but can be used to calculate an approximation to household, non mortgage, financial liability. However, the information is not provided at a regional level.

Executive Enforcement Office

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken to create an Executive enforcement office to ensure that specific action is taken in respect of Departments that have been criticised over their operations by the Public Accounts Committee and Comptroller and Auditor General. (AQO 310/01)

Mr Durkan: I have no plans to create such an office. My officials already work closely with Departments to ensure that issues raised in reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General that are subject either to a Public Accounts Committee Hearing or written correspondence between the Committee and departments, and subsequently included in the Committee's formal reports, are addressed appropriately.

Employment of Consultants

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if the Executive has issued any guidance to Departments on the employment of consultants. (AQO 311/01)

Mr Durkan: Various pieces of guidance have been issued in respect of this issue, the most recent substantive guidance being in 1995.

In summary, the guidance defines what is covered by the term "consultancy", clarifies the roles and responsibilities of DFP and departments, and provides both a model guide and a detailed mechanism for monitoring the use, performance and cost of consultants.

Breast and Testicular Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths over the past five years as a result of (a) breast cancer and (b) testicular cancer. (AQW 437/01)

Mr Durkan: The information requested on deaths resulting from breast cancer and testicular cancer is presented in the table below.

	ICD9 174/175 Breast Cancer	ICD9 186.9 Testicular Cancer
1996	309	3
1997	267	3
1998	299	-
1999	286	2
2000	289	1
Total	1450	9

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Energy Efficient Policy

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) those local trusts that currently adopt energy efficient policies and (b) the estimated annual energy savings for each trust. (AQW 237/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): My Department's Regional Environment Group, in which all trusts participate, plays a leading role in implementing energy efficiency in the HPSS. All trusts are required to submit returns annually on energy performance, for inclusion in a Departmental annual environmental report.

The report for the year 2000-01 is in preparation, and will be completed towards the end of November 2001. An extract from the 1999-2000 report which summarises the energy performance of Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts and Agencies is shown below.

HEALTH SERVICE TRUST ENERGY SAVINGS 1990/91 – 1999/2000 TARGET 20%

Provider	Year End Energy Performance (Gigajoules Per 100 Metres ³)		% Variance
	To March 1991	To March 2000	To March 2000
Teaching Trusts			
Belfast City Hospital	114.46	101.35	-11.46
Royal Group of Hospitals	105.47	81.99	-22.27
Acute Trusts			
Green Park	99.39	83.30	-16.19
Craigavon Hospitals	96.92	70.45	-27.30
Altnagelvin	115.43	73.79	-36.07
Mater Infirmorum	74.78	65.98	-11.77
United	80.42	65.70	-18.30
Mixed Trusts			
Ulster Community & Hospitals	82.67	70.32	-14.94
Down Lisburn	69.91	53.45	-23.54

Provider	Year End Energy Performance (Gigajoules Per 100 Metres ³)		% Variance
	To March 1991	To March 2000	To March 2000
Sperrin Lakeland	80.53	57.44	-28.67
Armagh & Dungannon	58.25	50.60	-13.13
Causeway	67.14	57.31	-14.64
Newry and Mourne	75.66	59.85	-20.89
NI Ambulance Trust	39.87	57.69	+44.69
Community Trusts (With Long Stay)			
S&E Belfast	62.12	45.18	-27.28
N&W Belfast	70.55	48.88	-30.72
Foyle Community	75.85	53.37	-29.64
Homefirst Community	54.51	53.29	-2.25
Community Trusts (Without Long Stay)			
Craigavon/Banbridge Community	52.21	44.70	-14.38
Board Facilities			
Eastern Board Facilities	24.24	19.13	-21.08
Southern Board Facilities	30.03	47.03	+36.14
Western Board Facilities	29.49	23.60	-19.98
Agencies			
Central Services Agency	23.78	13.47	-43.34
Blood Transfusion*	66.47 (96/97)	54.70	-17.70

*Blood Transfusion – Base Year 1996/97

Tá príomh-ról stiúrtha, ina bhfuil páirt ag gach Iontaobhas, ag Grúpa Réigiúnach Comhshaoil na Roinne s'agam le éifeacht fuinnimh sa SSSPa chur i bhfeidhm. Ní mór do gach iontaobhas tuairisceán bliantúil a chur ar ais ar fheidmiú fuinnimh, le cur isteach i dtuairisc bhliantúil chomhshaoil na Roinne.

Táthar ag ullmhú tuairisc na bliana 2000-01 agus beidh sí réidh i dtrátha dheireadh Mhí na Samhna 2001. Tá cuid den tuairisc ó 1999-2000 a dhéanann achoimre ar fheidmiú fuinnimh Bhoird Shláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta, Iontaobhas agus Gníomhaireachtaí léirithe thíos.

SÁBHÁIL FUINNIMH IONTAOBHAIS NA SEIRBHÍSÍ SLÁINTE 1990/91 – 1999/2000 SPRIOC 20%

Soláthraí	Feidhmiú Deireadh Na Bliana (Gigighiúl An 100 Méadar ³)		% Athraitheas
	Go Márta 1991	Go Márta 2000	Go Márta 2000
Iontaobhais A Mhúineann			
Otharlann Chathair Bhéal Feirste	114.46	101.35	-11.46
Grúpa Ríoga Otharlann	105.47	81.99	-22.27
Géar-Iontaobhais			
Páirc Ghlas	99.39	83.30	-16.19
Otharlanna Craigavon	96.92	70.45	-27.30

Soláthraí	Feidhmiú Deireadh Na Bliana (Gigighiúl An 100 Méadar ³)		% Athraitheas
	Go Márta 1991	Go Márta 2000	Go Márta 2000
Alt na nGealbhan	115.43	73.79	-36.07
Otharlann An Mater	74.78	65.98	-11.77
Otharlanna Aontaithe	80.42	65.70	-18.30
Iontaobhas Measctha			
Pobal Uladh & Otharlanna	82.67	70.32	-14.94
An Dún/Lios Na Gcearrbhach	69.91	53.45	-23.54
Speirín Tír Na Lochanna	80.53	57.44	-28.67
Ard Mhacha & Dún Geanainn	58.25	50.60	-13.13
An Clochán	67.14	57.31	-14.64
An Tiúr & Mhúrn	75.66	59.85	-20.89
Iontaobhas Seirbhís Otharcharr Té	39.87	57.69	+44.69
Iontaobhais Phobail (Le Cónaí Fadtéarma)			
Béal Feirste Theas & Thoir	62.12	45.18	-27.28
Béal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	70.55	48.88	-30.72
Pobal An Fheabhail	75.85	53.37	-29.64
Pobal Homefirst	54.51	53.29	-2.25
Iontaobhais Phobail (Gan Chónaí Fadtéarma)			
Pobal Craigavon/Dhroichead Na Banna	52.21	44.70	-14.38
Áiseanna Boird			
Áiseanna Bhord An Oirthear	24.24	19.13	-21.08
Áiseanna Bhord An Deiscirt	30.03	47.03	+36.14
Áiseanna Bhord An Iarthair	29.49	23.60	-19.98
Gníomhaireachtaí			
An Lárghníomhaireacht Seirbhísí	23.78	13.47	-43.34
Seirbhís Fhuilaithe *	66.47 (96/97)	54.70	-17.70

*Bonnbhliain 1996/97 - Seirbhís Fhuilaithe

Funding Over Next Three Year Period

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to increase funding to trusts over the next three years in line with the projected demand for services.

(AQW 267/01)

Ms de Brún: The Executive's proposals for funding in 2002-03 are set out in the Draft Budget, currently before the Assembly. In light of the pressures faced by the Service, I will continue to press for an increase in the level of HPSS funding. Funding for the 2003-04

and 2004-05 financial years will be decided in the context of the next Spending Review.

Leagtar moltaí an Fheidhmeannais le haghaidh maoinithe i 2002-03 amach sa Dréacht-Bhuiséad atá faoi bhráid an Tionóil i láthair na huair. Mar gheall ar na brúnna ar an tSeirbhís, leanfaidh mé ar aghaidh ag iarraidh ar mhéadú i leibhéal an mhaoinithe do na SSSP. Déanfar cinneadh ar mhaoiniú do na blianta airgeadais 2003-04 agus 2004-05 i gcomhthéacs an chéad Athbhreithnithe eile ar Chaiteachas.

Budgets & Staff Morale

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assessment she has made in relation to the correlation between budgetary shortfalls and staff morale in local trusts.

(AQW 270/01)

Ms de Brún: I have little doubt that HPSS staff morale can suffer where funding is inadequate. My aim, of course, is to secure adequate funding for the HPSS, to help to satisfy the requirements and expectations of both service users and HPSS staff.

Níl mé in amhras go bhféadann maoiniú neamhimleor beagmhiseach a chur ar fhoireann SSSP. Tá sé de aidhm agam, ar ndóigh, go leor maoiniú a aimsiú don SSSP le cuidiú le riar ar riachtanais agus ar ionchais úsáideoirí agus fhoireann SSSP.

Residential Care for Drug Users

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to establish a unit to provide long term residential care for drug users.

(AQW 372/01)

Ms de Brún: An effective range of residential and community treatment services is already in place, and a long stay residential treatment unit would not be a priority at the present time.

Tá réimse éifeachtach de sheirbhísí cóireála cónaithe agus pobail ar fáil, agus ní tosaíocht é aonad cóireála cónaithe fadtéarmach faoi láthair.

Drug Abuse Budgets: Last Three Years

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much money has been spent on the treatment of drug abuse in each of the last three years.

(AQW 373/01)

Ms de Brún: The costs of treatment for drug abuse cannot be disaggregated from the general costs of treating individuals who have taken drugs and who seek

medical treatment in GP surgeries and hospitals. The information requested is therefore not available.

Ní féidir costais chóireáil mhí-úsáid drugaí a scaradh ó chostais ghinearálta chóireáil dhaoine aonair a thóg drugaí agus a iarrann ar chóireáil mhíochaine i gclínici Gnáthdhochtúra agus in otharlanna. Mar sin de, níl an t-eolas iarrtha ar fáil.

Ambulance Sub Station in Ards Peninsula

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to provide a new Ambulance Service substation in the Ards Peninsula and to state its location. (AQW 383/01)

Ms de Brún: There are no plans at present for an ambulance substation on the Ards Peninsula. The Implementation Plan on the Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service does make proposals for additional ambulance locations to improve response times. However, decisions on exactly where these additional locations will be, will be determined by the level of resources available to implement the proposals and the availability of suitable sites. Comments on the Implementation Plan will be invited shortly from a wide range of interests.

Níl sé meáite i láthair na huair fo-stáisiún otharcharr a lonnú ar Leithinis na hAirde. Leagann an Plean Feidhmithe ar Athbhreithniú Straitéiseach na Seirbhíse Otharcharr moltaí amach do láithreacha breise otharcharr le hamanna freagartha a fheabhsú. Déanfar socrúithe ar na háiteanna díreacha a mbeidh na láithreacha áfach de réir leibhéal na n-acmhainní ar fáil leis na moltaí a chur i bhfeidhm agus de réir infhaighteacht láithreán fóirsteanach. Iarrfar ar thráichtaí ar an Phlean Feidhmithe ar ball ó réimse leathan daoine a bhfuil suim acu ann.

Ambulance Service HQ

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of expenditure spent on the new Ambulance Service headquarters.

(AQW 384/01)

Ms de Brún: The estimated cost of the new Ambulance Service Headquarters is £912,000 which includes £265,000 for equipment and £91,000 for fees.

Is é £912,000 costas measta Cheannáras nua na Seirbhíse Otharcharr a chuimsíonn £265,000 do threalamh agus £91,000 do tháillí.

Ambulance Service

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when she expects to complete the equality impact assessment on those proposals that

have arisen from the Strategic Review of the Ambulance Service. (AQW 385/01)

Ms de Brún: An initial equality impact assessment has been completed and will be issued shortly for comment with an implementation plan for taking forward the recommendations of the Strategic Review of Ambulance Services.

Cuireadh measúnú tosaigh ar éifeacht an chomhionannais i gcrích agus eiseofar ar ball le haghaidh tráchtá é mar aon le plean feidhmithe chun moltaí an Athbhreithnithe Straitéisigh ar Sheirbhísí Otharcharr a chur chun cinn.

Number of Ambulances Purchased in Last Five Years

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many new ambulances have been purchased in the last five years.

(AQW 390/01)

Ms de Brún: The Ambulance Service has purchased a total of 137 new vehicles over the past five years.

Cheannaigh an tSeirbhís Otharcharr 137 feithicil nua san iomlán le cúig bliana anuas.

Ambulances Currently in Use and Record of Breakdowns

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline (a) the average age of the ambulances currently in use and (b) how many ambulances have broken down on the way to call outs in each board area over the last three years.

(AQW 391/01)

Ms de Brún: The average age of the Ambulance Service fleet currently in use is four and a half years for Accident & Emergency vehicles and three and a half years for Patient Care Service vehicles.

Over the past three years the number of ambulances which have broken down on their way to call outs, by Board area, is as follows:

EHSSB	14
NHSSB	18
SHSSB	23
WHSSB	16

Is iad ceithre bliana go leith d'fheithicilí Timpistí agus Éigeandálaí agus trí bliana go leith d'fheithicilí Seirbhíse Cúraim Othar meánaoiseanna scuidrín mór otharcharr na Seirbhíse Otharcharr in úsáid i láthair na huaire.

Seo a leanas líon na n-otharcharr a bhris anuas agus iad ag freagairt ar ghlaonna, de réir cheantar an Bhoird le trí bliana anuas:

BSSSO	14
BSSST	18
BSSSD	23
BSSSI	16

Bed Occupancy Tyrone County Hospital and Erne Hospital

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 3201/00, to explain the comparatively low bed occupancy rate at (i) Tyrone County Hospital and (ii) The Erne Hospital and to detail the current bed occupancy rates at each of these hospitals together with the current average rate. (AQW 399/01)

Ms de Brún: The information AQW3201/00 was based on the 1999-2000 bed occupancy figures. Figures for 2000-01 are as follows.

The current bed occupancy rates are:

- (i) Tyrone County Hospital – 75.5%
- (ii) Erne Hospital – 70.8%

The current average bed occupancy rate is 81%.

Fluctuations in clinical activity are a common occurrence. Recent figures indicate that bed occupancy rates at Tyrone County Hospital and the Erne Hospital are broadly in line with those in other rural hospitals.

Bhí an t-eolas in AQW 3201/00 bunaithe ar fhigiúirí d'úsáid leapacha. Seo a leanas na figiúirí do 2000-01.

Seo na rátaí faoi láthair d'úsáid leapacha:

- (i) Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain – 75.5%
- (ii) Otharlann na hÉirne – 70.8%

Is é 81% an meánráta faoi láthair d'úsáid leapacha.

Gnáth-tharlú is ea athruithe i ngníomhaíocht chliniciúil. Léiríonn figiúirí déanacha go bhfuil rátaí d'úsáid leapacha in Otharlann Chontae Thír Eoghain agus in Otharlann na hÉirne go ginearálta de réir na rátaí sin in otharlanna tuaithe eile.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when will digital hearing aids become available through the Health Service.

(AQW 404/01)

Ms de Brún: I plan to make digital hearing aids available as soon as the necessary funding can be

secured. As an initial step, my Department has submitted a bid to the Executive Programme Funds.

Tá sé ar intinn agam áiseanna digiteacha éisteachta a chur ar fáil a luaithe agus is féidir an maoiniú riachtanach a fháil. Mar an chéad chéim, rinne an Roinn s'agamsa tairiscint do Chistí Chlár an Fheidhmeannais.

Operational Surplus or Deficit of Each HSS Trust

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any deficit or surplus that exists in each Community Health and Social Services Trust in this financial year. (AQW 406/01)

Ms de Brún: The reported financial positions of Community Health and Social Services Trusts and integrated Trusts offering acute and community services, as at the end of August for the year to date are as follows:

Trust	Operational Surplus/ (Deficit) £m
Armagh & Dungannon HSS Trust	(0.47)
Causeway HSS Trust	(0.02)
Craigavon & Banbridge Community HSS Trust	(0.31)
Down Lisburn HSS Trust	(0.58)
Foyle HSS Trust	0.22
Homefirst HSS Trust	(1.60)
Newry & Mourne HSS Trust	(0.53)
North & West Belfast HSS Trust	0.31
South & East Belfast HSS Trust	0.06
Sperrin Lakeland HSS Trust	(0.50)
Ulster Community and Hospitals HSS Trust	(0.38)

All Trusts are aware of their requirement to break even by the end of the financial year and are working to achieve this.

Seo a leanas riochtaí tuairiscithe airgeadais Iontaobhas Sláinte Pobail agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Iontaobhas imeasetha a sholáthraíonn géarsheirbhísí agus seirbhísí pobail, ag deireadh mhí Lúnasa na bliana seo:

Iontaobhas	Farasbarr Oibriúcháin/ (Deficit) £m
Iontaobhas SSS Ard Mhacha & Dhún Geanainn	(0.47)
Iontaobhas SSS an Chlocháin	(0.02)
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal Craigavon & Dhroichead na Banna	(0.31)
Iontaobhas SSS an Dúin/Lios na gCearrbhach	(0.58)
Iontaobhas SSS an Fheabhail	0.22

Iontaobhas	Farasbarr Oibriúcháin/ (Deficit) £m
Iontaobhas SSS Homefirst	(1.60)
Iontaobhas SSS an Iúir & Mhúrn	(0.53)
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Thuaidh & Thiar	0.31
Iontaobhas SSS Bhéal Feirste Theas & Thoir	0.06
Iontaobhas SSS Speirín Tír na Lochanna	(0.50)
Iontaobhas SSS Phobal & Otharlann Uladh	(0.38)

Is eol do na hIontaobhas uilig an dualgas atá orthu teacht ar chothromaíocht airgid ag deireadh na bliana airgeadais agus tá siad ag obair leis seo a bhaint amach.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of providing analogue hearing aids and if she has any plans to pilot digital hearing aids whose cost has dramatically reduced during the last 18 months. (AQW 408/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my answer to question AQW 404/01. The cost of providing an analogue hearing aid ranges from £60 to £200.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 404/01. Tá an costas le háis analóige éisteachta a sholáthar sa réimse ó £60 go £200.

Number of Children Adopted 1995-2000

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who were successfully adopted in 1999-00 and how this compares with the previous five years. (AQW 411/01)

Ms de Brún: In the calendar year 2000 the courts notified the Registrar General of 172 adoption orders. The figures for the previous five years are as follows:

1999	144
1998	121
1997	150
1996	169
1995	163

Sa bhliain 2000 chuir na cúirteanna 172 ord uchtaithe in iúl don Chláraitheoir Ghinearálta. Seo a leanas na figiúirí do na cúig bliana roimh ré:

1999	144
1998	121
1997	150

1996	169
1995	163

Foster Parents: Vetting Regulations

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the measures which she has taken to ensure that sex offenders cannot register to become foster parents. (AQW 414/01)

Ms de Brún: Regulation 3 of the Foster Placement (Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 requires responsible authorities to obtain information on, and consider, a range of factors set out in Schedule 1 to the regulations in order to determine whether an applicant can be considered suitable to be a foster parent and whether his household is suited to the placement of a child. The factors include the applicant's previous criminal convictions, if any, and those of other adult members of his household. Such checks should be repeated at least every three years.

Iarrann Rialachán 3 de Rialacháin (Tuaisceart Éireann) um Fhagáil Páistí Faoi Chúram Altrama 1996, ar na húdaráis fhreagracha eolas a fháil agus machnamh a dhéanamh ar réimse fachtóirí leagtha amach i Sceideal 1 de na rialacháin chun cinneadh a dhéanamh ar cé acu is féidir iarrthóir a mheas mar fóirsteanach le bheith ina t(h)uismitheoir altrama nó nach féidir agus ar cé acu atá a t(h)eaghlach fóirsteanach le páiste a fhágáil faoina c(h)úram nó nach bhfuil. I measc na bhfachtóirí tá ciontuíthe coiriúla roimh ré an iarrthóra má bhí ceann ar bith ann, agus ciontuíthe coiriúla duine fásta ar bith eile dá t(h)eaghlach. Ba chóir a leithéid de scrúduithe a athdhéanamh gach trí bliana.

Autistic Children

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of children diagnosed with autism, (b) the services currently available for autistic children (c) her assessment of the autism drug Secretin and (d) if Secretin is currently available in Northern Ireland. (AQW 416/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) The information requested is not available.
- (b) The information requested is not collected centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.
- (c) Secretin is not licensed for use in autism and is not, at present, considered mainstream therapy for this condition. The evidence base for use of Secretin in autism is, at present, small and more research is needed to demonstrate its effectiveness.

(d) Secretin is not available within the HPSS for the treatment of autism, as it is not licensed for use in this condition.

- (a) Níl an t-eolas iarrtha ar fáil.
- (b) Ní bhailítear an t-eolas iarrtha go lárnach agus ní fhéadfaí é a sholáthar ach ar chostas dhíreireach.
- (c) Níl Secretin faoi cheadúnas le húsáid i gcóireáil uathachais, agus faoi láthair, ní mheastar mar an ghnáth-theiripe don riocht seo é. Tá an cruthú d'úsáid Secretin i gcóireáil uathachais beag faoi láthair agus tá níos mó taighde de dhíth lena éifeachtacht a thaispeáint.
- (d) Níl seicréitin ar fáil taobh istigh den na SSSSP mar chóireáil in éadan uathachais, ós rud é nach bhfuil sí céadúnaithe le haghaidh an reachta seo.

Languages of Departments Publications

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) those languages in which her Department currently publishes information and (b) to explain why the Department's web site does not include Ulster Scots as one of these languages. (AQW 417/01)

Ms de Brún: My Department currently makes key documents available in large print, Braille, audiocassette, Irish and Chinese and has supplied translations in other minority languages and Ulster Scots.

With the exception of the name of the Department which appears in English and Irish, the bulk of the material on my Department's website is in English and there are no plans at present to routinely include translations into other languages. At present the website also displays the flu immunisation leaflet in Urdu, Cantonese and Irish.

Cuireann an Roinn s'agamsa eochair-cháipéisí ar fáil i gcló mór, i mBraille, ar téip, i nGaeilge agus i Sínis faoi láthair agus rinne sí aistriúcháin díobh i dteangacha mionlach eiteach eile agus in Ultais.

Seachas ainm na Roinne atá i nGaeilge agus i mBéarla air, tá an chuid is mó ar líonláithreán mo Roinne i mBéarla agus níl sé meáite faoi láthair aistriúcháin i dteangacha eile a chur ar fáil. Faoi láthair tá an bhilleog ar imdhíonta fliú in Urdúis, Cantoinis agus i nGaeilge ar an líonláithreán chomh maith.

Institute for Mental Health Studies

Ms McWilliams asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make a statement on her proposals for an Institute for Mental Health Studies. (AQW 418/01)

Ms de Brún: Proposals for the establishment of an all-Ireland Institute for Mental Health Studies have been put forward and these are currently being studied by officials of my Department and the Department of Health and Children.

Cuireadh moltaí do bhunú Institiúide uile-Éireannaí um Staidéar ar Shláinte Meabhrach chun cinn agus tá siad seo á scrúdú ag oifigigh mo Roinne agus na Roinne Sláinte agus Páistí.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she plans to make digital hearing aids available free through the health service.

(AQW 426/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my answer to question AQW 404/01.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 404/01.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Berry asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans are in place to ensure digital hearing aids will be provided through the Health Service.

(AQW 436/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the member to my answer to question AQW 404/01.

Luaim don Bhall an freagra a thug mé ar AQW 404/01.

Breast Cancer Statistics Over Past Five Years

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of patients who are currently undergoing treatment for breast cancer and those who have been treated for breast cancer over the past five years.

(AQW 441/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, the following table gives the incidence of female breast cancer for the most recent 5 year period.

TABLE 1: FEMALE BREAST CANCER INCIDENCE 1993 - 1997

Year	Incidence	Crude rate per 100,000 population
1993	766	91.4
1994	811	96.3
1995	862	101.9
1996	865	101.4
1997	856	99.8

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas iarrtha go lárnach. Tugann an tábla seo a leanas áfach teagmhas na hailse cíche i mná don tréimhse 5 bliana is déanaí.

TÁBLA 1: TEAGMHAS NA HAILSE CÍCHE I MNÁ 1993 – 1997

Bliain	Teagmhas	Ráta Teagmhais an 100,000 den daonra
1993	766	91.4
1994	811	96.3
1995	862	101.9
1996	865	101.4
1997	856	99.8

Child Protection Register

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who currently appear on a child protection register and how this figure compares with the previous five years.

(AQW 450/01)

Ms de Brún: The latest date for which figures are available is 31 March 2001. At that time there were 1,414 children on the child protection register here compared to 1,400 at the same date in 1997. This represents an increase of 1% over a five year period. The complete set of figures for years 1997 to 2001 are given in the table below.

Year ¹	Number of Children
1997	1400
1998	1386
1999	1463
2000	1483
2001	1414

¹ Data is at 31 March for each year

Is ag 31 Márta atá na sonraí do gach bliain dáta is déanaí a bhfuil figiúirí ar fáil dó. Ag an am sin bhí 1,414 páiste ar chlár cosaint páistí anseo i gcomparáid le 1,400 ar an dáta céanna in 1997. Léiríonn sé méadú 1% thar thréimhse cúig bliana. Tugtar tacar iomlán figiúr do na blianta 1997 go dtí 2001 sa tábla thíos.

Bliain ¹	Líon Páistí
1997	1400
1998	1386
1999	1463
2000	1483
2001	1414

¹ áрта atá na sonraí do gach bliain

Drug and Alcohol Strategy Team

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail her initiatives to tackle the increasing drug problem in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 451/01)

Ms de Brún: In terms of administrative action, my Department has created a dedicated Drug and Alcohol Strategy Team to strengthen our capacity to tackle the important related problems of drug and alcohol misuse. In February, we appointed the first Drug and Alcohol Strategy Co-ordinator, Jo Daykin. She leads the Team and is driving forward action across Departments and agencies to implement the 1999 Drug Strategy and the more recent Alcohol Strategy.

In May, the Executive Committee adopted a model for the joint implementation of the two Strategies. In line with that model, six Working Groups have been established, covering treatment, prevention, community participation, information, social legislation, and criminal justice issues. Their membership is drawn from the statutory, community, and voluntary sectors.

We have also devoted substantial additional resources to tackling drug misuse. Since 1999, over £4.5 million extra, on top of existing baselines, has been allocated to 36 projects on the ground to help deliver the aims of the Drug Strategy. They include education and awareness raising in schools, rehabilitation, harm reduction, and improved treatment services. Full details have been placed in the Library.

A further £6.23 million will be allocated to drug misuse programmes by Executive Departments over the coming two years. Discussions are now under way to determine how this additional injection of funds can be deployed most effectively.

I dtéarmaí ghníomh riaracháin tá Foireann Straitéis Drugaí agus Alcóil sainiúil chun neartú a dhéanamh ar ár gcumas tabhairt faoi na fadhbanna gaolmhara a bhaineann le mí-úsáid drugaí agus alcóil cruthaithe ag mo Roinn. I bhFeabhra cheapamar an chéad chomhordaitheoir Straitéis Drugaí agus Alcóil, Jo Daykin. Tá sí i gceannas na Foirne agus tá sí i mbun gnímh a chur chun cinn ar fud Ranna agus gníomhaireachtaí chun Straitéis Drugaí 1999 agus ina dhiaidh sin Straitéis Alcóil a chur i bhfeidhm.

Sa Bhealtaine ghlac an Coiste Feidhmiúcháin le samhail do chomhfheidhmiú an dá Straitéis. Ag teacht leis an tsamhail sin bunaíodh sé Ghrúpa Oibre ag clúdach cóireála, coisc, rannpháirtíocht pobail, eolais, reachtaíocht shóisialta agus saincheistanna dlí choiriúil. Tá a gcuid comhaltais tógtha as na hearnálacha reachtúla, pobail agus deonacha.

Tá acmhainní breise substaintiúla dírithe againn ar thabhairt faoi mhí-úsáid drugaí. Ó 1999 i leith

leithroinneadh breis is £4.5 milliún eile, os cionn na mbonnlínte a bhí ann, ar 36 tionscadal ar an talamh chun cuidiú le haidhmeanna na Straitéise Drugaí a bhaint amach. Áirítear orthu sin oideachas agus cur le tuiscint sna scoileanna, athshlánú, laghdú dochair agus seirbhísí cóireála feabhsaithe. Tá na sonraí iomlána ar fáil sa Leabharlann.

Leithroinnfidh Ranna Feidhmeannais £6.23 milliún eile chuig cláir mhí-úsáide drugaí sa dá bhliain amach romhainn. Tá plé ar bun faoi láthair chun a chinneadh caidé an tslí is éifeachtaí le leas a bhaint as na na cistí breise sin.

Testicular Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients who (a) are currently undergoing treatment for testicular cancer and (b) have had treatment for testicular cancer over the past five years.

(AQW 458/01)

Ms de Brún: The information requested is not collected centrally. However, the following table gives the incidence of testicular cancer for the most recent 5 year period.

TABLE 1: TESTICULAR CANCER INCIDENCE 1995 - 1999

Year	Incidence	Crude rate per 100,000 population
1995	41	5
1996	56	7
1997	46	6
1998	41	5
1999	42	5

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas iarrtha go lárnach. Tugann an tábla seo a leanas áfach teagmhas na hailse uiríche don tréimhse 5 bliana is déanaí.

TÁBLA 1: TEAGMHAS NA HAILSE UIRÍCHE 1995 - 1999

Bliain	Teagmhas	Ráta Teagmhais an 100,000 den daonra
1995	41	5
1996	56	7
1997	46	6
1998	41	5
1999	42	5

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if she has any plans to provide free digital hearing aids through the Health Service.

(AQW 466/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to question AQW 404/01.

Tarraingim aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 404/01.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to provide digital hearing aids through the Health Service.
(AQW 473/01)

Ms de Brún: I refer the Member to my answer to question AQW 404/01.

Tarraingim aird an Chomhalta ar an fhreagra a thug mé ar AQW 404/01.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Unemployment in West Tyrone

Mr Gibson asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to help those individuals living in deprived areas of West Tyrone into work.

(AQW 363/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Campbell): The full range of my Department's programmes and services is available to help individuals in West Tyrone find work. The Jobcentres in Omagh and Strabane provide a comprehensive job-broking and advisory service; while Jobskills, Worktrack and the New Deal and Focus for Work initiatives are available to help people train and prepare for employment.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Friday 9 November 2001

Written Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Quasi Non-Governmental Organisations

Mr Savage asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail (a) the number of people who are currently serving on quasi non-governmental organisations (QUANGO's) (b) the declared party affiliation, if any, and the declared religious denominational affiliation of these individuals, by organisation and (c) the amount claimed in expenses by these individuals in each organisation.

(AQW 410/01)

Reply: The number of people serving on quasi non-governmental organisations (NDPBs) at 12 October 2001 was 1164 holding 1288 appointments. Information on declared party affiliation and religious denominational affiliation is not held by Departments. Declared political activity and community background is available for those appointed after the Commissioner for Public Appointments Guidance came into effect in July 1996.

The details available are set out below:

Number of people Serving as at 12 October 2001	Declared Political Activity	Declared Community Background	Amount Claimed in Expenses April 2000-March 2001
1164	50 UUP 32 SDLP 18 DUP 14 ALL 19 SF 26 Other 1129 None	431 Protestant 310 Roman Catholic 25 Other 522 None	£356,199.60

The figure for the amount claimed in expenses, ie travel expenses, is not available for the following bodies:

Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety

- Mental Health Commission for NI

- National Board for Nursing, Midwifery & Health Visiting for NI
- NI Council for Postgraduate Medical & Dental Education
- Mental Health Review Tribunal for NI
- Eastern, Northern, Southern, Western Health & Social Services Boards & Councils
- Health & Social Services Trusts (19)
- NI Blood Transfusion Service Agency
- NI Central Services Agency (NICSA)
- NI Guardian Ad Litem Agency (NIGALA)
- NI Health Promotion Agency
- NI Regional Medical Physics Agency (NIRMPA)
- Fire Authority

Department for Employment & Learning

- Fair Employment Tribunal
- NI Industrial Tribunals

Community Relations Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the proportion of community relations funding awarded over the past five years to each (a) local district council area and (b) parliamentary constituency. (AQW 430/01)

Reply: Information about the funding provided for community relations projects in each local district council area has only been held for the past 3 years. Total grants awarded over the 3 year period was £16,833,603.00. In addition to funding from the Department's Community Relations Unit, the total includes Community Relations Council funding and European Union funding from both the Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and the Physical, Social and Environment Sectoral Programme. A table showing the proportion of the total awarded to each district council area in each year is set out below. With regard to parliamentary constituencies the information requested is not held in this format.

FINANCIAL YEARS

District Council Area	1998/1999 %	1999/2000 %	2000/2001 %
Total	5,016,149.00	6,325,910.00	5,491,544.00
Antrim	1.30%	1.21%	1.16%
Ards	0.92%	0.76%	0.79%
Armagh	3.30%	7.80%	2.24%
Ballymena	1.27%	0.94%	1.29%
Ballymoney	1.38%	1.02%	1.32%
Banbridge	1.90%	1.40%	2.29%

District Council Area	1998/1999 %	1999/2000 %	2000/2001 %
Belfast	12.39%	11.74%	26.65%
Carrickfergus	0.98%	0.78%	0.90%
Castlereagh	0.88%	0.66%	0.64%
Coleraine	1.20%	0.96%	1.10%
Cookstown	1.59%	5.55%	2.07%
Craigavon	5.12%	5.01%	3.47%
Derry	9.03%	10.14%	8.77%
Down	7.31%	5.28%	2.58%
Dungannon	2.05%	1.62%	1.49%
Fermanagh	6.26%	8.58%	2.85%
Larne	1.17%	1.21%	1.23%
Limavady	1.07%	0.72%	0.96%
Lisburn	1.56%	1.83%	1.35%
Magherafelt	1.73%	0.91%	1.15%
Moyle	0.92%	0.83%	0.82%
Newry & Mourne	1.52%	1.21%	1.42%
Newtownabbey	1.65%	1.32%	1.00%
North Down	5.66%	0.79%	1.33%
Omagh	1.27%	3.18%	3.52%
Strabane	1.61%	1.38%	1.62%
Multi Council Areas			
(Expenditure not attributed to any specific Council Area)	24.39%	23.15%	26.02%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Community Relations Funding

Mr Beggs asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail the proportion of community relations funding over the past five years that has been awarded to (a) Nationalist community groups and (b) Unionist community groups. (AQW 431/01)

Reply: Specific details of proportions which go to Nationalist and Unionist community groups are not held. The vast majority of community relations funding is awarded to cross-community groups and projects. Only a small proportion goes to single identity groups and this is subject to strict criteria, including a requirement to demonstrate how the project will contribute to improving cross-community relations. It is also a standard condition of grant that any activity funded will not be party political in intention, use or presentation

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Brucellosis

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to state the number of cattle herds in Northern Ireland currently affected by brucellosis. (AQW 453/01)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Rodgers): The number of cattle herds in Northern Ireland currently affected by Brucellosis is 181.

Brucellosis Control

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to encourage farmers to adopt bio security measures, such as perimeter fencing, in the control of brucellosis. (AQW 454/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department continues to advise and encourage farmers to take all measures possible to improve biosecurity and has issued an advisory booklet entitled "Farm Biosecurity" which includes inter alia advice on fencing.

Brucellosis Control

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to introduce the vaccine BR51 in the control of brucellosis. (AQW 455/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department has no plans at present to introduce vaccination as a control measure for Brucellosis.

Appointment of Independent Valuers

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what criteria, other than experience in selling cattle, is laid down for the appointment of Independent Valuers under the brucellosis eradication and control regime. (AQW 456/01)

Ms Rodgers: None. Independent valuers are chosen for their expertise and experience in selling cattle.

Guidelines for Independent Valuers

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what guidelines are laid down as to the procedure to be followed by independent valuers in pursuance of their duties under the brucellosis eradication and control regime. (AQW 457/01)

Ms Rodgers: The guidelines laid down for independent valuers, include the definition of market value and instructions for recording their valuations.

Veterinary Officers Guidelines

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she has any plans to introduce guidelines for local veterinary officers under the brucellosis eradication and control regime.

(AQW 464/01)

Ms Rodgers: My Department already has guidelines for local veterinary officers under the Brucellosis Eradication and Control Scheme.

Brucellosis: Divisional Veterinary Officer Recommendations

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she is aware of any cases of brucellosis where the Divisional Veterinary Officer has recommended the slaughter of a herd and it has not been implemented.

(AQW 465/01)

Ms Rodgers: I am not aware of any cases of Brucellosis where the Divisional Veterinary Officer has recommended the slaughter of a herd and this recommendation has not been implemented.

Prevention of Scrapie and Foot-and-Mouth Diseases

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what research is ongoing into the prevention of scrapie and foot-and-mouth in sheep.

(AQW 487/01)

Ms Rodgers: There is no specific research ongoing in my Department into the prevention of scrapie and foot-and-mouth disease in sheep.

However, there is a UK Government research programme in place looking at the incidence of scrapie in the national sheep flock and the theoretical possibility that scrapie might mask BSE in sheep.

My Department's approach to scrapie has been developed within the framework of measures to address transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs) generally and reflects the best available current scientific research and knowledge.

In relation to foot-and-mouth disease, there is a continuing sheep serology testing programme being carried out in Northern Ireland. Some 86% of flocks have been tested with almost 500,000 samples having

been taken and tested. The results indicate that there is no evidence of the disease in Northern Ireland's sheep population.

Camlough River

Mr Fee asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps are being taken to ensure a sufficient flow of water in Camlough River, to help maintain the fish population.

(AQW 529/01)

Ms Rodgers: The Camlough River is a designated watercourse within the terms of the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973 and is therefore maintained by my Department's Rivers Agency as necessary for flood defence and drainage purposes. While the Agency has a duty to protect fisheries in carrying out works, the extent and control of low flows is outside the remit of the Agency. Periodic drainage maintenance work carried out on the Camlough River has no adverse effect on low flows.

I understand that a control structure is in operation from the outlet of Camlough Lake to the River, but Rivers Agency has no role in the management of that structure.

Wearing of Poppies

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her policy in respect of the wearing of poppies.

(AQW 535/01)

Ms Rodgers: I have no specific policy with regard to the wearing of poppies as in my view this is a matter of personal choice.

Brucellosis in Cattle

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment she has made in respect of the steady increase from 1996 of incidences of Brucellosis in cattle and to outline steps being taken to combat this disease.

(AQW 556/01)

Ms Rodgers: Brucellosis continues to present a problem in Northern Ireland and my Department is currently undertaking a review of brucellosis policy which will look at all aspects of the control measures being taken and consider whether or not further or different measures might be introduced to bring down the incidence of the disease.

In the meantime, in an effort to contain the spread of the disease my Department has increased blood testing from biennial to annual in the high incidence areas of Enniskillen, Armagh and Newry. My Department is also carrying out blood sampling of cull cows slaughtered under the Over Thirty Months Scheme as

well as bulk milk sampling both of which are designed to provide an early indication of infection.

Milk Quotas

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline (a) the method of allocating additional milk quotas (b) the allocation in each constituency (c) the numbers who benefited and (d) the reason for any variation in numbers.

(AQW 576/01)

Ms Rodgers: Under the Agenda 2000 agreement Northern Ireland's wholesale milk quota was increased by 12,608 tonnes in 2000-01 and 7,092 tonnes in 2001-02 which equates to a total increase of approximately 19.1 million litres or 1.2% of current quota.

Various options for allocation of the additional milk quota were considered. Essentially it was a choice between an allocation to all producers or a targeted approach. As the amount of quota was relatively small I decided that to provide maximum impact it should be allocated on a pro-rata basis to all active small producers, i.e. those with a permanent quota of less than 250,000 litres at 1 April 1999. To do otherwise would only have had minimal impact on all dairy farms. Also the basis of the award means that eligible producers received an award which was three times what it would have been if the allocation had been made to all producers, it helps small producers increase their efficiency and takes account of the Executive's commitment to the policy of Targeting Social Need (TSN).

The number of milk producers who received an award in 2000-01 and 2001-02 were 2,977 and 2,903 respectively which is some 60% of the total number of active producers. Of the 74 producers who received an award in 2000-01 but not in 2001-02, 68 had reached the 250,000 litre threshold as a result of the award in 2000-01 and the remaining 6 no longer held quota when the award for 2001-02 was made.

Figures showing the amount allocated in each constituency are not available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Disability Sports

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps are being taken by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland to set up an umbrella organisation for the disabled. (AQW 476/01)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McGimpsey): The Sports Council for Northern Ireland (SCNI) have been instrumental in the establishment of Disability Sports Northern Ireland (DSNI) as the unified governing body representing disabled sports in the province. In addition to providing funding to establish DSNI and financial support for the disability organisations represented by them, SCNI have signed up to an ongoing financial commitment of circa £30K per annum towards meeting the costs of a development officer and associated programme costs.

In addition, SCNI have also funded the development of DSNI's strategic and four year plans and provided support for a range of programmes and activities proposed by them.

Sports Development Officer

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail those sports that have a development officer funded by the Sports Council for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 525/01)

Mr McGimpsey:

- NI Athletics Federation
- Ulster Branch (UB) Badminton Union of Ireland
- Ulster Basketball Association
- Ulster Camogie Council
- NI Cricket Association
- Fitness NI
- Irish Football Association (two)
- UC Gaelic Athletic Association
- NI Amateur Gymnastics Association
- Ulster Women's Hockey Union
- UB Irish Hockey Union
- Mountaineering Council of Ireland
- NI Netball Association
- Irish Rugby Football Association (six Youth Dev Officers)
- Royal Yachting Association
- Ulster Squash Rackets Association
- Ulster Region Swim Ireland
- UB Tennis Ireland

Unless indicated, the sports listed above have one Sports Development Officer. Most of the sports also have an Admin Assistant funded by the Council.

In addition, the Irish Football Association has eight part-time County Coaches; the NI Ski Council has one part-time Coach; and the UB Irish Table Tennis Association has an Honorary Director of Coaching, all of which are funded by the Sports Council.

EDUCATION

Rathgael House: Location

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education what assessment he has made regarding the current location of Rathgael House in terms of neutrality and accessibility. (AQW 370/01)

The Minister of Education (Mr M McGuinness): Within the context of the review of office accommodation currently taking place, I have indicated my view that the location of Rathgael House does not facilitate convenient access for those staff who have neither access to a car nor live in close proximity to the building or to the Bangor-Newtonards bus route. This makes the building a less attractive place to work for those who may have to travel long distances or who may have to rely on public transport, including younger members of staff and the disabled. I also believe that the building is not sited in what can be regarded, in community terms, as a neutral area.

Rathgael House: Staffing Issues

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education how many complaints have been received from civil servants working in Rathgael House concerning (a) the neutrality of the workplace and (b) the accessibility of it's location. (AQW 371/01)

Mr M McGuinness: My Department has no formal record of complaint on these issues.

Special Schools: Minor/Capital Works

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail (a) the number of special schools in each constituency and (b) the number which require (i) minor works and (ii) capital works. (AQW 468/01)

Mr M McGuinness: The information is as follows:

Constituency	Number of Special Schools	Number requiring minor capital works	Number requiring major capital works
Belfast East	3	2	-
Belfast North	2	1	2
Belfast South	6	3	2
Belfast West	2	1	-
East Antrim	4	4	1

Constituency	Number of Special Schools	Number requiring minor capital works	Number requiring major capital works
East Londonderry	3	1	1
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	3	2	-
Foyle	2	1	1
Laganvalley	3	1	1
Mid Ulster	1	1	-
Newry & Armagh	2	2	1
North Antrim	3	2	1
North Down	2	-	1
South Antrim	1	-	-
South Down	2	-	-
Strangford	3	2	1
Upper Bann	3	-	1
West Tyrone	3	1	2

Special Schools: Capital Works

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of special schools, in this financial year, that (a) will have capital works undertaken and (b) capital works will remain outstanding.

(AQW 469/01)

Mr M McGuinness: In this financial year major capital works on two new special schools have been completed, work on another new school is under way, and work on a further three schools is due to start on site later in the year.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Mitchell Scholarships

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (a) the financial support that is provided to the Mitchell Scholarships administered by the US Ireland Alliance and (b) any Northern Ireland officials or representatives who participate in the selection of the candidates. (AQW 490/01)

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Dr Farren): My Department's contribution in the first year of the programme was £20,213. This increases at the rate of inflation in each subsequent year. No NI officials or representatives participate in the selection of candidates.

Mitchell Scholarships

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he has any plans to review his involvement in the Mitchell Scholarships given comments in the Financial Times, on 1 October 2001, by Trina Vargo President of the US Alliance. (AQW 496/01)

Dr Farren: I have no plans to review my Department's involvement in the Mitchell Scholarships. The Mitchell Scholarships were established in honour of the contribution made by Senator George Mitchell to the peace process in Northern Ireland. The stated aim of the scholarships is to attract to both parts of Ireland US students likely to become future leaders in their country. Their presence in our university system is beneficial to all concerned.

Modern Apprenticeship Programme

Mrs Nelis asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of modern apprenticeships which were awarded to young people from the North West. (AQW 497/01)

Dr Farren: Modern Apprenticeships (MA) were introduced into Northern Ireland in July 1996 and take on average 3-4 years to complete. Consequently the first cohort of young people has only recently finished the full Modern Apprenticeship programme. To date 1,160 young people have successfully completed MAs and a further 4,200 are progressing through the programme. It is not possible at present to be precise about the number of MA participants from any given area of Northern Ireland, as the information on participants is not held in that form.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Shorts Bombardier Job Losses

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what action has been taken to assist Shorts Bombardier since the announcement of large scale job losses. (AQW 522/01)

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Sir Reg Empey): I made a full statement in the Assembly on 1 October outlining the action being taken to assist Bombardier Shorts. Dr Farren also made a statement about the steps being taken by his Department. Since then I have again written to the Prime Minister emphasising the potentially serious situation faced by the company, its employees and the local sub-contract supply base. I have urged him, in addition to intro-

ducing measures which would mitigate the job losses announced by the company, to develop a co-ordinated international effort to restore confidence among the travelling business sector and public in order to re-stimulate market demand.

I have also had several meetings with the company and met with trade union representatives to ascertain their views and to clarify areas of possible government assistance. I and Dr Reid have also taken the matter up with DTI and Dr Reid has also made representations to HMT in support of the company's case.

Redundancies at Shorts Bombardier

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment detail (a) the estimated timescale for notification of redundancies at Shorts Bombardier and (b) any High Court rulings concerning Shorts PLC that may have a bearing on determining the method of redundancies. (AQW 526/01)

Sir Reg Empey:

(a) Estimated timescale for notification of redundancies

The Advance Notification of Redundancies submitted by the company to the Department of Trade and Investment on 26 September 2001 specified the date of the first proposed redundancy as being 2 January 2002 and the date of the last proposed redundancy as being 31 January 2003.

(b) High Court rulings that may have a bearing on determining the method of redundancies

The Company has taken legal advice on the selection methods to be used and has confirmed that it is not in contravention of any legal requirements.

Shorts Bombardier

Mrs I Robinson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list those Northern Ireland businesses that supply Shorts Bombardier. (AQW 527/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Some £40 million is spent annually by Shorts on local goods and services. Approximately £19 million of this relates to direct product related supplies. It would be neither practical nor appropriate for commercial reasons to release information about individual businesses. This is a matter for the company and its suppliers.

Petrol Retail Industry

Mr Armstrong asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline what action has been taken to alleviate the crisis faced by the Petrol Retail Industry. (AQO 349/01)

Sir Reg Empey: Fuel excise duty is a reserved matter. However, myself and Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon in their capacity as the First and Deputy First Ministers have made strong representations to Treasury Ministers for action to be taken to help resolve the problems facing the Petrol Retail Industry.

B/E Aerospace Factory: Kilkeel

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what further action is being taken to protect and safeguard investment and job opportunities at the B/E Aerospace factory in Kilkeel, Co Down; and to make a statement. (AQO 337/01)

Sir Reg Empey: On 23 October 2001 B/E Aerospace announced that following a review of its operations as the result of the events of 11 September there would be no job losses at the Kilkeel factory. I very much welcome this news, which is a boost for the workforce and local economy at this difficult time for the aerospace industry.

ENVIRONMENT

Waste Management Strategy

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he is taking to promote waste management throughout all the Departments and, in particular, the Departments for Employment and Learning and Enterprise, Trade and Investment. (AQW 394/01)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Foster): My Department published its 'Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland' in March 2000, which aims to achieve fully sustainable waste management by a combination of waste reduction, reuse and recycling.

Government Departments in Northern Ireland are major consumers of resources and this presents a unique opportunity to 'lead by example'. All Departments have signed up to the strategy which places great emphasis on the UK Government's 'Greening of Government' commitments. Furthermore, all departments are committed to improving the amount of office waste recovered using methods which must include recycling or composting.

In helping to take this forward, the 'Green Team' within my Department's Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) assisted the Government Purchasing Agency (GPA) of the Department of Finance and Personnel to sign a contract with SCL Waste Services Ltd (Newry) to recycle waste paper from all public sector offices in Northern Ireland. Negotiations are

proceeding with a view to extending the service to include other consumables such as plastics and cardboard.

Positive strides have also been made in the reduction of construction waste in the Department for Regional Development's Water Service contracts, notably at Belfast Waste Water Treatment Works and in the Mourne Conduit Replacement- Aquarius Project.

Purchasing policy is another area where Departments can lead by example. Government procurement in Northern Ireland amounts to over £1500 million per annum. The GPA, which deals with £250-300 million of this total figure, includes a clause relating to sustainable environmental protection in its tendering documentation.

Other stakeholders in Northern Ireland will be expected to follow the Government's lead and take similar steps to reduce quantities and improve the management of waste. They will be assisted in this process by the recently constituted Waste Management Advisory Board for Northern Ireland.

The Board will oversee a Market Development Programme for recyclates. The dearth of local markets for recycled products, coupled with the lack of reprocessing infrastructure, have been major obstacles to the expansion of recycling in Northern Ireland.

Waste Management Strategy

Mr Poots asked the Minister of the Environment what steps he has taken to encourage all Government Departments to set challenging targets for waste reduction, recycling and recovery. (AQW 395/01)

Mr Foster: My Department published its 'Waste Management Strategy for Northern Ireland' in March 2000, which aims to achieve fully sustainable waste management by a combination of waste reduction, reuse and recycling.

Government Departments in Northern Ireland are major consumers of resources and this presents a unique opportunity to 'lead by example'. All Departments have signed up to the Strategy which places great emphasis on the UK Government's 'Greening of Government' commitments. Furthermore, all Departments are committed to improving the amount of office waste recovered using methods which must include recycling or composting.

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Criteria for Location of Telecommunication Masts

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria used to assess a planning application for a telecommunication mast location.

(AQW 415/01)

Mr Foster: Planning policy for assessing a planning application for a telecommunications mast location is Policy PSU 13 of the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland which states that;

"Telecommunications apparatus which requires planning permission will normally be permitted, provided it does not detract from the natural or manmade environment or the character of its setting."

When assessing an application, my Department must seek to balance the need and demand for maintaining and developing telecommunications systems on the one hand and the protection of amenity on the other. In view of their potentially intrusive appearance, my Department seeks to control their siting and appearance in the following way-

- whenever possible, the apparatus should be sited in a position which minimises its visual impact;
- where appropriate, the equipment will be required to be coloured or painted, or its design altered so as to be less obtrusive in relation to the background against which it would be installed.

A large number of telecommunications installations do not require express planning permission and are

dealt with under the Prior Approval system as laid down in the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993. The only factors which can be taken into account under this system are siting and appearance. Guidance on the criteria used under the Prior Approval system is contained in Development Control Advice Note 14 – Telecommunications Prior Approval Procedures which states that factors which my Department will take into account concerning the appearance of a mast and ancillary apparatus include materials, colour and design. Factors which will be taken into account concerning the siting of masts include:

- the height of the site in relation to the surrounding land;
- the existence of topographical features and natural vegetation;
- the effect on the skyline or horizon;
- the site when observed from any side;
- the site in relation to areas designated locally for their scenic or conservation value;
- the site in relation to existing masts, structures or buildings; and
- the site in relation to residential properties.

The scope for landscaping and screening to reduce the impact of a development on its surroundings is also a major consideration.

You will be aware of the Executive Committee's 14 June 2001 decision to abolish the prior approval system for telecommunication masts and to subject them to full planning control. I hope to introduce the necessary amending legislation to the Assembly shortly.

My Department is also currently working towards publication of Planning Policy Statement 10 (PPS10): 'Telecommunications' which will set out my Department's planning policies for telecommunication development including telecommunication masts. The contents of the new policy statement will be taken into account in preparing development plans, and will be material to decisions on individual planning applications and appeals. PPS10, when published, will supersede policy PSU13 of the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland.

"The Nook"

Mr Paisley Jnr asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the nature of the contact between his Department and the office of the Rt Hon Baroness Blackstone, Minister of State, Department of Culture, Media and Sport, in relation to the development of "The Nook" and (b) if he will publish any relevant correspondence.

(AQW 447/01)

Mr Foster: As you are aware, "The Nook" applications concerned development on land adjacent to the Giant's

Causeway, a designated World Heritage Site. Baroness Blackstone wrote to me in her capacity as Minister with lead responsibility within the UK for the operation of United National Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention.

In her letter, she emphasised the importance of protecting the essential character and setting of all World Heritage sites, and, in particular, natural sites like the Giant's Causeway. She asked that the international importance of this World Heritage Site and its setting be given full weight when considering "The Nook" applications. Baroness Blackstone also informed me of her understanding of a proposal to ask UNESCO's World Heritage Centre whether it will consider placing the site on the world heritage "in danger" list. She expressed her concern about this, and explained that if the Centre were to be asked this question, as a first step, her Department would be asked to explain what was happening at the site.

In my response, I pointed out that I shared her concern to protect the essential character of this World Heritage Site. I also advised that permissions had issued in respect of "The Nook" planning and listed building consent applications, and that in granting these, I was satisfied that they had been processed consistent with all standard procedures, that all necessary consultations had been carried out, and the advice of consultees taken into account. I also expressed my satisfaction that the proposals could be satisfactorily integrated into their surroundings without having a detrimental effect on the Giant's Causeway or its setting. I concluded by stating that I did not believe that the granting of planning permissions and listed building consents created any objective basis for placing the Giant's Causeway on UNESCO's "in danger" list.

Finally, it is not our policy to release correspondence with Whitehall Ministers.

Downpatrick Planning Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (a) the number of planning applications received by the Downpatrick Planning Office in the last 12 months and (b) the timescale for processing these applications. (AQW 474/01)

Mr Foster: The Downpatrick Planning Office received a total of 4,127 valid planning applications during the 12 months to 30 September 2001. The average processing time for the applications determined was 14 weeks.

Downpatrick Planning Office

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline (a) the number of planning staff currently

employed in Downpatrick and (b) what assessment has he made in respect of the number of staff at this location compared to the workload of the office. (AQW 475/01)

Mr Foster:

- (a) The Divisional Planning Office in Downpatrick is staffed by a mix of both Professional and Technical (P&T) and Administrative staff. At present there are 47 P&T staff and 22 Administrative staff.
- (b) The workload of all Planning Service offices is kept under constant review both individually, and comparatively, and resources are allocated accordingly.

The Downpatrick Planning office has recently benefited from an allocation of four additional P&T staff for Development Control work, recruited following the allocation of £850K of additional resources both last year and this year to the Planning Service.

Three additional administrative staff have also recently been allocated to the Downpatrick Planning Office to help deal with correspondence and other work. These staff should be in post in the very near future.

I am therefore generally satisfied with the level of resources allocated to the Downpatrick Planning Office within present overall budgets, but as I have already stated, this is a matter which is kept under constant review.

Telecommunication Masts: New Legislation

Mr Carrick asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans, pending the introduction of new legislation on the erection of telecommunication masts, to adopt the "precautionary approach" as recommended in the "Stewart Report". (AQW 483/01)

Mr Foster: The report of the independent expert group into mobile phones and health, chaired by Sir William Stewart, suggested a number of specific precautionary actions in relation to mobile phone technology.

The most significant proposal to be adopted by the Executive Committee in Northern Ireland will be the new legislation to require full planning permission for all new telecommunications development. In addition, as the Member is aware, my Department is revising the draft Planning Policy Statement on telecommunications development, taking advice on health issues from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I have already indicated that I will advise the Member of the outcome of that process.

In the meantime, I am progressing the work on these issues as quickly as possible.

Trees & Hedgerows: Legislation on Encroachment

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to introduce legislation to protect the rights of home owners from the encroachment of trees and hedgerows in neighbouring properties.

(AQW 498/01)

Mr Foster: I have no plans to introduce legislation in this area. Encroachment of any kind onto a neighbour's property, whether it be in the form of trees or hedgerows, is primarily a matter for the owners of the respective properties.

General Exchequer Grant: District Councils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of local councils who are entitled to the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant.

(AQW 499/01)

Mr Foster: In the current financial year, 16 district councils qualify for the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant. The number of councils entitled to the grant is determined each year by application of a statutory formula. Over recent years, between 16 and 19 councils received a share of the grant available.

General Exchequer Grant: Free Transport

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to outline if the General Exchequer Grant is being used to finance free transport for the elderly. (AQW 500/01)

Mr Foster: Free transport for the elderly is financed directly by central government. It is not a function of local government. There are two elements of the General Exchequer Grant. The derating element compensates all district councils for loss of rate income, due to the statutory derating of certain properties. The resources element provides additional finance to those district councils whose total rateable value, per head of population, falls below a level determined by the Department. It is not intended to fund any specific function of district councils.

General Exchequer Grant: District Councils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment what EU directive has been used to withhold £2 million of funding from the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant and will this affect all 26 local district councils.

(AQW 501/01)

Mr Foster: No EU Directive applies to the determination by the Executive, of its draft budget. In its draft budget for 2002-03, the allocation for the resources

element of the General Exchequer Grant was set, taking account of the full range of expenditure pressures across all departmental programmes. These pressures included the need for my Department to work towards compliance with EU legislation on Waste Management and other environmental issues. As not all 26 district councils are entitled to the resources element of the grant, only those which will be eligible would be affected by the change in the previous indicative allocation for 2002-03, referred to in the draft budget.

General Exchequer Grant: District Councils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment to explain how he has allocated the reduction of the General Exchequer Grant across all district councils.

(AQW 508/01)

Mr Foster: The approximate spread of a £2 million reduction in the previous indicative allocation for 2002-03, using the data for councils which qualify for the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant this year, is illustrated in the table below. This is reflected in the Executive's draft budget, which is currently out for consultation. The actual impact would depend on the detailed application of the formula, which includes district council expenditure forecasts.

District Council	Draft Budget Reduction £
Ards	186,000
Armagh	136,000
Ballymoney	61,000
Banbridge	100,000
Carrickfergus	107,000
Cookstown	82,000
Derry	342,000
Down	184,000
Dungannon	109,000
Fermanagh	127,000
Limavady	71,000
Magherafelt	76,000
Moyle	39,000
Newry & Mourne	236,000
Omagh	123,000
Strabane	75,000

General Exchequer Grant: District Councils

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to ensure that the reduction in the General Exchequer Grant is apportioned across all district councils.

(AQW 510/01)

Mr Foster: The Executive's draft budget for 2002-03, which is currently out for consultation, implies a £2 million cut in the previous indicative allocation for the resources element of the General Exchequer Grant. This element of the grant is distributed in accordance with a statutory formula. It is payable only to those district councils, whose total rateable value, per head of population, falls below a level, determined each year by the Department. Normally 16-19 councils qualify for a share of the grant, therefore the reduction would apply only to those councils.

Legal Expenses: Bowen's Close, Lurgan

Mr Close asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the legal expenses occurred to date, and the projected legal expenses on the ongoing litigation in respect of Nos 1, 2 and 3 Bowen's Close, Lurgan.
(AQW 530/01)

Mr Foster: Litigation is ongoing in this case and the court has not yet considered the matter of costs. Costs not yet considered the matter of costs. Costs incurred to date by either the Department or the judicial review applicant will depend on the court judgement and the final award of costs by the judge. This is also the position regarding the Department's projected legal costs

National Park Designation

Mr McGrady asked the Minister of the Environment what steps will the Executive take to approve a policy to designate certain parts of Northern Ireland with National Park status; and to make a statement.
(AQW 352/01)

Mr Foster: Since my Department is responsible for National Park designation, this question has been transferred to me for reply.

I refer the Minister to the answer I gave to his oral question on 10 September 2001. I have since sent the report by my officials, to which I referred in that reply, to the Assembly Environment Committee and I look forward to receiving its views.

When I have received and have had an opportunity to consider the Committee's views, I will make a statement on the way forward.

Rural Planning Policies

Mr Gallagher asked the Minister of the Environment if he has any plans to change his rural planning policies.
(AQW 363/01)

Mr Foster: I want to emphasise the importance which I attach to the contribution of rural policies and activities

to the economic and social well being of Northern Ireland. This is also fully recognised in the recently formulated Regional Development Strategy. One of its key aims is to develop an attractive and prosperous rural area, based on a balanced and integrated approach to the development of town, village and countryside. I believe that this approach will help to sustain a strong and vibrant rural community, which is able to contribute to the overall prosperity of Northern Ireland.

In taking forward the Regional Development Strategy, my officials will be responsible for preparing detailed strategic regional planning policy guidance on a range of subjects. One key area on which guidance will be prepared is in respect of the countryside. Initial, preparatory work and information gathering has already commenced on this important regional guidance. While the final content and nature of this guidance has yet to be decided, it is likely to contain strategic rural planning policies within which Departments will be expected to structure, interpret and implement individual operational policies.

I acknowledge fully the importance of drawing together new agreed regional planning policy guidance for the countryside. I will, therefore, ensure that the Assembly, its committees and the rural communities are fully consulted as the work on this strategic planning guidance progresses.

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Litigation Costs

Mr Poots asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the litigation costs incurred by each Department in respect of those court cases concerning the failure to nominate Ministers to attend North/South Ministerial Council meetings.
(AQW 392/01)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Durkan): The costs to be incurred by Departments on behalf of their Ministers in this litigation are not yet known.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Prescription Fraud

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans she has to deal with fraudulent claims for exemption from payment of prescription charges.
(AQW 448/01)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Ms de Brún): Tackling prescription exemption fraud is a priority of my Department and part of a major programme of action to counter fraud whether perpetrated by members of the public or practitioners. Significant work has already been undertaken. For example, point of dispensing checks have been introduced, a dedicated Counter Fraud Unit was established in January this year to target the main areas of exemption abuse, and, over the last 18 months more than 100 members of the public have been successfully taken through the Small Claims Court procedure to recover the prescription charges evaded.

Next year my Department is intending to introduce Fixed Penalty Fines up to a maximum of £100, to penalise individuals who fraudulently claim exemptions from prescription payments. In addition, where individuals are proven to have repeatedly evaded payment of prescription charges, criminal proceedings for such evasion could be undertaken. This could result in a maximum fine of £2500.

Is tosaíocht de chuid mo Roinne tabhairt faoi chalaouis díolúine oideas, agus tá sé mar chuid de phríomhchlár gnímh le tabhairt faoi chalaouis, bíodh sin déanta ag daoine den phobal, nó ag liachleachtóirí, nó ná bíodh. Tá obair mhór déanta cheana féin. Mar shampla tá pointí seiceála dáilte tugtha isteach, bunaíodh Aonad Calaoise Cuntair sainiúil in Eanáir i mbliana le díriú ar príomhréimsí mhí-úsáid díolúine, agus le 18 mí anuas tugadh breis is 100 duine den phobal go rathúil os comhair nós imeachta Chúirt na Mionéileamh chun na muirir oideas a himghabháladh a athghnóthú.

An bhliain seo chugainn tá sé i gceist ag mo Roinne Fíneálacha Socraithe Pionóis go huasmhéid de £100 a thabhairt isteach, chun pionós a ghearradh ar dhaoine a éilíonn díolúintí go calaoiseach ó íocaíochtaí oideas. Chomh maith leis sin sa chás go gcruthaítear go bhfuil íocaíocht muirir oideas imghafa go minic ag daoine tionsnófar imeachtaí coiriúla fán imghabháil sin. Féadfar uasfhíneáil de £2500 a ghearradh fá sin.

Breast and Testicular Cancer

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail promotional costs relating to the prevention and early detection of (a) breast cancer and (b) testicular cancer. (AQW 459/01)

Ms de Brún: Much has been done and is continuing to be done in promoting awareness, aimed at the prevention and detection, of breast cancer and to a lesser extent, testicular cancer. Promotional work of this kind involves a great many professionals, including GPs, Breast Cancer Nurses and Health Promotion Staff working in Health Boards, Trusts, and a variety of other agencies. It is not, however, possible to disaggregate

the costs incurred in promotion of this kind from other costs incurred by these professionals in the course of their daily activities.

Rinneadh cuid mhór oibre cheana féin agus tá sí á déanamh go fóill le eolas dírithe ar chos agus ar fháil amach aise cíche, agus go pointe níos lú aise uiríche, a chur chun cinn. Tá cuid mhór gairmithe páirteach san obair chothaithe seo, Gnáthdhochtúirí, Altraí Ailse Cíche agus Foireann Chothú Sláinte ag obair i mBoird Shláinte, in Iontaobhais agus i ngníomhaireachtaí éagsúla eile san áireamh. Ní féidir áfach na costais tarraingthe sa sórt seo chur chun cinn a scaradh ó chostais eile tarraingthe ar na gairmithe seo i rith a gcuid gníomhaíochtaí laethúla.

Bedside Phones in Hospitals

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) any plans to install bedside phones in hospitals, (b) the expected call charges and (c) the steps that will be taken to keep the charges in line with normal tariffs. (AQW 472/01)

Ms de Brún: Some hospitals here have bedside telephone installations which patients may rent. Details as to charges are a matter for the private companies which supply this equipment. I am not aware of any plans to install bedside phones more widely in our hospitals. All hospitals here provide payphones, which may be fixed or mobile, to enable patients or visitors to make phone calls in private.

Cuireann roinnt Otharlann anseo teileafóin isteach taobh leis an leaba ar féidir leis an othar iad a fháil ar cíos. Baineann mionsonraí ar na costais leis na comhlachtaí príobháideacha a sholáthraíonn an trealamh seo. Ní fios dom faoi phlean ar bith teileafóin a chur isteach níos forleithne taobh leis an leaba inár n-otharlanna. Cuireann gach otharlann anseo teileafóin ar fáil, ar féidir leo bheith doghluaiste nó soghluaiste, le ligean d'othair nó do chuairoteoirí glaonna teileafóin a dhéanamh go príobháideach.

Arthroscopic Surgery

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any plans or initiatives to reduce the number of people waiting for arthroscopic surgery at Green Park Healthcare Trust.

(AQW 478/01)

Ms de Brún: A number of measures flowing from the 'Framework for Action on Waiting Lists', which I issued in September 2000, will impact on the waiting list for arthroscopic surgery. I allocated an additional £3 million this year for waiting list initiatives and last year's extra £5 million was made recurrent, leaving a

total of £8 million available this year for waiting list action.

Boards and Trusts have drawn up comprehensive plans covering the action they are taking on waiting lists. In relation to Green Park Healthcare Trust, a pilot initiative on arthroscopic surgery has been undertaken. This has resulted in an additional 20 patients being treated and thereby removed from the waiting list.

Beidh tionchar ag roinnt beart ón Chreatlach Le hAghaidh Gnímh ar Liostaí Feithimh, a d'eisigh mé i mí Mheán Fómhair 2000, beidh tionchar acu ar an liosta feithimh do mháinliacht artrascópach. Dháil mé £3 milliún breise i mbliana do scéimeanna liostaí feithimh agus socraíodh an £5 milliún breise a dáileadh anuraidh a thabhairt go bliantúil, rud a d'fhág £8 milliún san iomlán ar fáil i mbliana le haghaidh gnímh ar liostaí feithimh.

Dhréachtaigh Boird agus Iontaobhais pleananna cuimsitheacha ag clúdach an ghnímh atá siad a dhéanamh ar liostaí feithimh. Maidir le hIontaobhas Chúram Sláinte na Páirce Glaise, cuireadh tús le scéim phíolótach ar mháinliacht artrascópach. Tháinig cóireáil 20 othar bhreise aisti agus dá bharr sin, scriosadh den liosta feithimh iad.

Types of Orthopaedic Operations

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the different types of orthopaedic operations. (AQW 482/01)

Ms de Brún: I shall write to the Member with the information requested as it is very detailed. I have also arranged to have this information placed in the Assembly Library.

Scríobhfaidh mé chuig an Bhall leis an eolas iarrtha mar go bhfuil sé an-mhion. Shocraigh mé fosta go gcuirfí an t-eolas ar fáil i Leabharlann an Tionóil.

Cross Border Co-Operation

Mr McMenamin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps is she taking to enhance cross border co-operation in health as envisaged in the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report. (AQW 484/01)

Ms de Brún: Following publication of the Acute Hospitals Review Group Report in June, I issued the Report for a period of public consultation, which will end on 31 October. Following consideration of the outcome of the public consultation process and discussion with Executive colleagues proposals on the way forward can be put out for consultation. I hope to be in a position to announce decisions in the course of 2002.

Nuair a foilsíodh tuairisc an ghrúpa athbheithnithe ar ghéarospidéal i mí an Mheithimh, d'eisigh mé an tuairisc le haghaidh tréimhse chomhairliúcháin phoiblí a chríochnóidh ar 31 Deireadh Fómhair. I ndiaidh toradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a mheas agus caibidil a dhéanamh le Comhghleacaithe an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin, is féidir moltaí ar an bhealach chun tosaigh a chur faoi chomhairliúchán. Tá súil agam bheith i riocht cinntí a fhógairt i rith 2002.

Orthopaedic Operations 1997-2001

Mrs Carson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many orthopaedic operations were carried out on patients needing treatment for inflicted injuries on legs and arms for the year (a) 1997 (b) 1998 (c) 1999 (d) 2000 and (e) 2001. (AQW 485/01)

Ms de Brún: Information is available on numbers of persons who underwent operations in the Trauma & Orthopaedics specialty with a primary diagnosis of injury to the arms or legs and who also had a secondary diagnosis of assault. This information for the financial years 1996-97 to 2000-01 is detailed in the table below.

1996/97	60
1997/98	37
1998/99	42
1999/00	36
2000/01	93

Tá eolas ar fáil ar líon na ndaoine a chuaigh faoi scian sna speisialtachtaí Tráma agus Ortaipéide ar fáthmheasadh ar dtús le gortuithe ar a sciatháin nó ar a gcosa iad agus ar fáthmheasadh arís mar ionsaithe iad. Mionléirítear an t-eolas seo do na blianta airgeadais 1996-97 go 2000-01 sa tábla thíos.

1996/97	60
1997/98	37
1998/99	42
1999/00	36
2000/01	93

Patient Waiting Lists

Mr Shannon asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of patients who are currently waiting for operations and (b) of these patients the number who are on the waiting list for (i) 12 months (ii) 24 months and (iii) 36 months. (AQW 486/01)

Ms de Brún: Information on persons waiting for inpatient admission to the surgical specialties for the

quarter ending June 2001 (the latest date for which information is available) is detailed in Table 1 below. These figures are collected in time bands, the highest of which is 24 or more months.

TABLE 1. PERSONS WAITING FOR INPATIENT ADMISSION TO THE SURGICAL SPECIALTIES,

June 2001 Specialty	Time waiting (in months)									Total
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	
General Surgery	5,306	2,629	1,634	1,168	810	692	563	376	1,508	14,686
Urology	1,703	924	545	332	207	186	156	116	474	4,643
T & O	1,288	1,129	803	519	429	400	222	154	689	5,633
ENT	2,713	1,900	1,028	745	516	369	183	81	161	7,696
Ophthalmology	1,757	1,496	1,043	631	356	211	79	38	57	5,668
Oral Surgery	281	134	57	36	31	18	6	3	8	574
Restorative Dentistry	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Paediatric Dentistry	93	26	13	7	2	1	3	0	4	149
Neurosurgery	97	63	54	52	36	53	44	38	192	629
Plastic Surgery	435	245	248	175	176	153	128	109	809	2,478
Cardiac Surgery	156	120	88	41	37	42	19	12	34	549
Paediatric Surgery	265	140	80	63	31	46	23	19	12	679
Thoracic Surgery	122	43	26	15	13	12	5	4	42	282
Gynaecology	2,760	1,335	688	310	211	125	43	28	38	5,538
Total	16,976	10,184	6,308	4,094	2,855	2,308	1,474	978	4,028	49,205

Tá an t-eolas ar dhaoine atá ag fanacht ar iontráil othair seachtraigh do na speisialtóireachtaí máinliachta don cheathrú a chríochníonn Meitheamh 2001 (an dáta is déanaí a bhfuil eolas ar fáil dó) i dTábla 1 thíos. Tá na na figiúirí seo bailithe de réir bandaí ama, is é 24 mí nó níos mó an ceann is mó.

TÁBLA 1. DAOINE AG FANACHT AR IONTRÁIL OTHAIR SEACHTRAIGH DO NA SPEISIALTÓIREACHTAÍ MÁINLIACHTA

Meitheamh 2001 Speisialtóireacht	Am Feithimh (i míonna)									Total
	0-2	3-5	6-8	9-11	12-14	15-17	18-20	21-23	24+	
Máinliacht Ghinearálta	5,306	2,629	1,634	1,168	810	692	563	376	1,508	14,686
Úreolaíocht	1,703	924	545	332	207	186	156	116	474	4,643
T & O	1,288	1,129	803	519	429	400	222	154	689	5,633
CSS	2,713	1,900	1,028	745	516	369	183	81	161	7,696
Oftailmeolaíocht	1,757	1,496	1,043	631	356	211	79	38	57	5,668
Béalmháinliacht	281	134	57	36	31	18	6	3	8	574
Fiaclóireacht Athchóiritheachta	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Fiaclóireacht Phéidiatraiceach	93	26	13	7	2	1	3	0	4	149
Néarmháinliacht	97	63	54	52	36	53	44	38	192	629
Máinliacht Phlaisteach	435	245	248	175	176	153	128	109	809	2,478
Máinliacht Chairdiach	156	120	88	41	37	42	19	12	34	549
Máinliacht Péidiatraiceach	265	140	80	63	31	46	23	19	12	679
Máinliacht Thórcasach	122	43	26	15	13	12	5	4	42	282
Gíniceolaíocht	2,760	1,335	688	310	211	125	43	28	38	5,538
Iomlán	16,976	10,184	6,308	4,094	2,855	2,308	1,474	978	4,028	49,205

Occupational Therapy Assessments

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the criteria and timescale for preparing an assessment for home adaptations by occupational therapists and (b) if these targets are currently being met in each board area.

(AQW 495/01)

Ms de Brún: Charter Standards for Community Services, effective from April 1996, set the following timescales for occupational therapy assessments for housing adaptations. For priority cases, assessment will start within 2 weeks of referral. The therapist will recommend the equipment or minor adaptations needed within another week. If the therapist is familiar with the individual's needs he or she will recommend any major adaptations within 2 months of referral. If the individual's needs are not known, the therapist will make a recommendation within 6 months, where possible.

For other cases, assessment will start within 3 months of referral. The therapist will recommend equipment or minor adaptations needed within another month. If the therapist is familiar with the individual's needs he/she will recommend any major adaptations within 3 months of the start of the assessment. If the individual's needs are not known, the therapist will make a recommendation within 6 months of the start of the assessment, where possible.

Priority is given to those who are coming out of hospital and at risk; living alone and at risk; living with a carer who is disabled or elderly; or terminally ill.

Due to problems of the underfunding of the health and social services here, the targets are not being met in all cases in each board area. The available occupational therapy resources are being targeted on priority cases.

Leag Caighdeán na Cairte do Sheirbhísí Pobail, a chuaigh i bhfeidhm ó Aibreán 1996, na hachair ama seo a leanas síos do mheasúnuithe teiripe saothair ar oiriúnuithe tithíochta.

Do chásanna tosaíochta, tosóidh measúnú laistigh de 2 seachtain i ndiaidh an atreoraithe. Molfaidh an teiripí an trealamh nó na mionoiriúnuithe a bheidh de dhíth laistigh den tseachtain ina dhiaidh. Má tá a fhios ag an teiripí ar riachtanais an duine aonair, molfaidh sé/sí príomhoiriúnú ar bith laistigh de 2 mí i ndiaidh an atreoraithe. Muna bhfuil a fhios ag an teiripí ar riachtanais an duine aonair, déanfaidh sé/sí moladh a luaithe agus is féidir laistigh de 6 mí.

Do chásanna eile, tosóidh measúnú laistigh de 3 mí i ndiaidh an atreoraithe. Molfaidh an teiripí trealamh nó mionoiriúnuithe a bheidh de dhíth laistigh den mhí ina dhiaidh. Má tá a fhios ag an teiripí ar riachtanais an duine aonair, molfaidh sé/sí príomhoiriúnú ar bith laistigh de 3 mí i ndiaidh toiseacht an mheasúnaithe.

Muna bhfuil a fhios ag an teiripí ar riachtanais an duine aonair, déanfaidh sé/sí moladh a luaithe agus is féidir laistigh de 6 mí i ndiaidh toiseacht an mheasúnaithe.

Tugtar tosaíocht dóibh siúd atá ag teacht amach as an otharlann agus atá i mbaol; dóibhsean a chónaíonn ina n-aonar agus atá i mbaol; dóibhsean a chónaíonn le feighlí atá míchumasach nó sean; nó dóibh siúd a bhfuil tinneas marfach orthu.

Mar gheall ar na fadhbanna a bhaineann le fomhaoiniú na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta anseo, níl na spriocanna á mbaint amach i ngach uile cús i ngach ceantar boird. Tá na hacmhainní teiripe saothair ar fáil á n-úsáid do chásanna tosaíochta.

Anterior Cruciate Ligaments

Mr Dalton asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number of surgeons trained in the arthroscopic repair of anterior cruciate ligaments each year and (b) the amount of funds allocated to this particular training.

(AQW 504/01)

Ms de Brún: Currently three local surgeons are trained in the arthroscopic repair of the anterior cruciate ligament. This is a highly specialised procedure and the number of surgeons able to perform this operation will always be relatively small. A larger number of surgeons can perform anterior cruciate ligament repair by means of open surgery.

No specific funding is allocated for this training. To date, training in this procedure has been obtained through placement overseas. However, as such placements can be arranged in a number of ways – personally by trainees/consultants, through scholarships or through the NI Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, information on costs is not available. If arranged through the Northern Ireland Council for Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education, such placements may receive financial support from the Council.

Faoi láthair tá triúr máinlianna áitiúla oilte i ndeisiú artrascópach an bhallnaisc tosaigh chroisigh. Sainmhodh ard atá ann agus beidh líon na máinlianna atá ábalta an obráid seo a dhéanamh measartha beag i gcónaí. Is féidir le líon níos mó máinlianna an ballnasc tosaigh croiseach a dheisiú trí mháinliacht oscailte.

Ní thugtar maoiniú ar leith don oiliúint seo. Go dtí seo, fuarthas oiliúint ar an mhodh seo trí shocrúcháin thar sáile. Mar gur féidir a leithéid de shocrúcháin a shocrú ar roinnt dóigheanna áfach – go pearsanta ag printísigh/máinlianna comhairleacha, trí scolaireachtaí nó trí Chomhairle Oideachas Míochaine agus Fiaclóireachta Iarchéime TÉ - Tuaisceart Éireann, níl eolas ar na costais ar fáil. Má shocraítear trí Chomhairle Oideachas Míochaine agus Fiaclóireachta Iarchéime

TÉ iad, féadtar a leithéid de shocrúcháin tacaíocht airgeadais a fháil ón Chomhairle.

Digital Hearing Aids

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2520/00, to detail the result of her discussions with representatives of the deaf community, in particular, any discussions from April 2001 to date. (AQW 505/01)

Ms de Brún: In April 2001 I met voluntary sector organisations representing the hearing impaired community to discuss a range of issues, including the provision of digital hearing aids (DHAs). Following that meeting I asked officials to pursue funding for the provision of DHAs here. A bid, prepared in association with RNID, is currently with the Executive Programme Funds Evaluation Panel for consideration.

In Aibreán 2001, bhuaill mé le heagraíochtaí ón earnáil dheonach a sheasann don phobal lag-éisteachta le réimse ceisteanna a phlé, soláthar áiseanna digiteacha éisteachta (ÁDÉanna) san áireamh. I ndiaidh an chruinnithe sin, d'iarr mé ar oifigigh iarracht a thabhairt ar mhaoiniú a fháil hÁDÉanna a sholáthar anseo. Tá machnamh á dhéanamh faoi láthair ag Painéal Measúnaithe Chistí Chlár an Fheidhmeannais ar thairiscint a rinneadh agus a ullmhaíodh i gcomhar leis an INRDB.

Cost of Hearing Aids

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the cost and types of hearing aids currently provided by the Health Service and (b) the current cost of digital hearing aids. (AQW 506/01)

Ms de Brún: Analogue hearing aids are currently provided by the Health Service costing between £60 and £200 per hearing aid. The cost of digital hearing aids can range between £100 and £200.

Soláthraíonn an tSeirbhís Sláinte áiseanna analóige éisteachta faoi láthair a chosnaíonn idir £60 agus £200 an áis éisteachta. Is féidir le costas áiseanna digiteacha éisteachta bheith sa réimse ó £100 go £200.

Ulster Hospital A&E Department

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps she is taking to prevent patients having to wait on trolleys in the Ulster Hospital Accident and Emergency Department, as occurred on Monday 15 October 2001. (AQW 511/01)

Ms de Brún: I am advised that, as a result of the pressures on the Ulster Hospital and in particular the

volume of the trolley waits on 15 October, as a short term measure to ease the pressure, 10 additional beds in Bangor and Ards have now been opened.

I announced on 31 July 2001, a Strategic Development Plan for the Ulster Hospital, which includes measures to provide additional capacity and to upgrade it to meet statutory standards. I have also allocated £2 million for the reinstatement of 20 adult inpatient beds in the Jaffe Ward, to address the problems of bed capacity at the hospital and reduce the unacceptable number of trolley waits. I shall be continuing to make the case to my Executive colleagues that the pressures on health and social services will only be relieved if additional resources are made available.

De thoradh na mbrúnna ar Otharlann Uladh agus mhéid na ndaoine ag fanacht le tralaithe ar 15 Deireadh Fómhair, cuireadh in iúl dom gur cuireadh 10 leaba breise ar fáil anois i mBeannchar agus in Aird mar bheart gearrthréimhseach leis na brúnna a mhaolú.

D'fhógair mé Plean Straitéiseach Forbartha d'Otharlann Uladh ar 31 Iúil 2001, ina bhfuil bearta chun tuilleadh toillte a chruthú agus chun í a athchóiriú sa dóigh go gcomhlíonfaidh sí caighdeán reachtúla. Dháil mé £2 milliún fosta d'athchur ar fáil 20 leaba d'othair chónaitheacha fhásta i mBarda Jaffe le tabhairt faoi fhadhbanna thoilleadh leapacha san otharlann agus le líon doghlactha na ndaoine ag fanacht ar thralaithe a laghdú. Beidh mé go fóill ag cur in iúl do mo chomhghleacaithe san Fheidhmeannas go maolófar na brúnna ar na seirbhísí sláinte agus sóisialta ach acmhainní breise a chur ar fáil.

Security in Hospitals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action has been taken to improve security in hospitals following attacks on health care staff. (AQW 512/01)

Ms de Brún: The safety of hospital staff is a matter for each Trust. The Department requires all HPSS employers to have a health and safety policy in place and to review and develop their policy to take account of any guidance it may issue from time to time.

A number of documents containing guidance on dealing with violence have been issued to employers by the Department. These included the NHS Zero Tolerance Pack. The Department is currently undertaking a review of the steps taken by employers to implement the Zero Tolerance policy, and it is hoped that this will inform the development of further guidance.

Is ceist do gach Iontaobhas í sábháilteacht na foirne otharlainne. Iarrann an Roinn ar na fostóirí SSSP go léir polasaí sláinte agus sábháilteachta bheith acu agus a bpolasaí a athbhreithniú agus a fhorbairt le treoir ar

bith a fhéadann sí a thabhairt ó am go ham a chur san áireamh.

Tá roinnt cáipéisí ina bhfuil treoir ar an dóigh le déileáil le foréigean eisthe ag an Roinn d'fhostóirí. Iontu tá Pacáiste na SNS Caoinfhulaingt ar Bith. Tá an Roinn ag déanamh athbhreithnithe faoi láthair ar na bearta déanta ag fostóirí leis an pholasáí Caoinfhulaingt ar Bith a chur i bhfeidhm agus táthar ag súil go gcuirfidh sé seo le forbairt tuilleadh treorach eile.

Waiting Lists for Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) the number on the current waiting list for appointments with the child and adolescent psychiatrist, in the North Down area and (b) how does that compare with other areas in the province. (AQW 513/01)

Ms de Brún:

- (a) At 30 September 2001 there were 92 people waiting for outpatient appointments with the Child & Adolescent Psychiatrist at the Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust.
- (b) This information is not collected centrally and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.
- (a) Ar 30 Meán Fómhair 2001, bhí 92 duine ag fanacht ar choinní éisothair leis an Síciatraí Páiste agus Ógánaigh in Iontaobhas Phobal agus Otharlanna Uladh.
- (b) Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus ní fhéadfaí é seo a fháil ach ar chostas dhiréireach.

Numbers of Nurses in Health Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to address the current lack of nurses in the health service. (AQW 514/01)

Ms de Brún: The number of nurse training places has been increased to 640 per annum from this year – the corresponding intake for 1999 was 440 and for last year 540. Moreover, free return to practice training remains available for qualified nurses and midwives wishing to return to professional practice. So far, 269 participants have completed training, 81 are currently participating in training and 54 are on waiting lists for places.

To address recruitment and retention difficulties and ensure that properly trained staff are available, my Department provides funding for a wide range of post registration training for nurses, with particular focus on meeting identified training needs of those working

in specialist areas. Funding of £400,000 has recently been provided to Health and Social Services Boards to support a total of 38 short term supernumerary posts in pressurised areas such as Intensive Care and Theatres with a view to easing retention difficulties.

A detailed workforce plan for the nursing workforce is being produced to assist me on decisions on the future numbers of student places.

Méadaíodh líon na n-áiteanna oiliúna d'ábhar altraí go 640 in aghaidh na bliana ón bhliain seo – 440 sa bhliain 1999 agus 540 anuraidh ba ea an glacadh isteach. Ina theannta sin, tá saoirse le hoiliúint dhochtúireachta a dhéanamh arís ar fáil d'altraí agus do mhná cabhracha cáilithe ar mian leo dochtúireacht ghairmiúil a dhéanamh arís. Go dtí seo, chríochnaigh 269 rannpháirí a n-oiliúint, tá 81 ag déanamh oiliúna i láthair na huaire agus tá 54 duine ar liostaí feithimh le haghaidh áiteanna.

Le tabhairt faoi na deacrachtaí in earcaíocht agus i gcoinneáil na foirne agus le cinntiú go bhfuil foireann oilte mar is ceart ar fáil, tugann an Roinn s'agamsa maoiniú le haghaidh réimse leathan oiliúna iarchláráithe d'altraí, agus an cuspóir ar leith aige le riar ar riachtanais aitheanta oiliúna na ndaoine sin ag obair i réimsí speisialtóireachta. Tugadh maoiniú de £400,000 ar na mallaibh do Bhoird Shláinte agus Sheirbhísí Sóisialta chun tacú le 38 post gearrthéarmach sáruimhriochta i réimsí ar leith atá faoi bhrú amhail Dianchúram agus Obrádlanna de gheall ar na deacrachtaí i gcoinneáil na foirne a mhaolú.

Tá plean mion meithle oibre á bheartú don mheitheal altrachta a chuideoidh liom socruithe a dhéanamh ar líon na n-áiteanna a bheidh ar fáil do mhic léinn sa toadhcháil.

Hospital Beds: Bangor and Newtownards

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of beds in Bangor and Newtownards hospitals and, of these, how many could be made available to ease the pressures on the Ulster Hospital. (AQW 515/01)

Ms de Brún: There are 20 inpatient beds in each of the local hospitals in Ards and Bangor. Normally, 15 beds on each site are available, although in view of recent pressures at the Ulster Hospital, the remaining 10 have been opened on a temporary basis. The Ulster Community & Hospitals Trust is discussing with the Eastern Health & Social Services Board the possibility of opening these 10 beds for the duration of the winter period in order to relieve pressures on the Ulster Hospital, depending on the level of resources available.

Tá 20 leaba d'othair chónaitheacha sna hotharlanna áitiúla in Aird agus i mBeannchar. Bíonn 15 leaba ar fáil i ngach suíomh de ghnáth, ach mar gheall ar na brúnna déanacha ar Otharlann Uladh, cuireadh na 10

leaba eile ar fáil ar bhonn sealadach. Tá Iontaobhas Phobal agus Otharlanna Uladh ag plé na féidearthachta go gcuirfear na 10 leaba seo ar fáil ar feadh thréimhse an gheimhridh le Bord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Oirthir chun na brúnna ar Otharlann Uladh a mhaolú, ag brath ar an mhéid acmhainní ar fáil.

Northern Target Training Scheme

Mr Close asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (a) resources that have been allocated to the Northern Health Board to implement the "Northern Target" training scheme and (b) the steps in place to ensure this scheme represents real value for money in respect of quality training for health service staff. (AQW 550/01)

Ms de Brún: No resources have yet been paid to the Northern Health and Social Services Board by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to implement the Northern TARGET pilot training scheme. The Northern Board has committed itself financially to support the pilot, and the Department has agreed in principle to provide up to £95,000 for this financial year only to pump prime the initiative. The release of this money will be subject to the Department being satisfied about the final details of the Northern Target business plan, which will define the objectives of the pilot and how it will be evaluated. It will be for the evaluation to establish the value, including the value for money, of this innovative approach to supporting continuing professional development in primary care.

Níor íoc An Roinn Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí airgead ar bith do Bhord Sláinte agus Seirbhísí Sóisialta an Tuaiscirt le scéim phiolótach oiliúna SPRIOC Bhord an Tuaiscirt a chur i bhfeidhm. Gheall Bord an Tuaiscirt go dtabharfadh sé féin airgead le tacú leis an scéim phiolótach agus d'aontaigh an Roinn i bprionsabal gan £95,000 a thabhairt sa bhliain airgeadais seo ach leis an scéim a spreagadh. Tabharfar an t-airgead seo má bhíonn an Roinn sásta faoi shonraí deireanacha phlean gnó SPRIOC Bhord an Tuaiscirt, a shainmhíneoidh cuspóirí na scéime piolótaí agus an dóigh a ndéanfar measúnú uirthi. An measúnú a gheobhaidh amach fiúntas an chur chuige nua seo le tacú le forbairt leanúnach ghairmiúil i bpríomhchúram, luach a cuid airgid san áireamh.

HIV Infection: Intravenous Drug Use

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total number of people who have become HIV positive as a result of intravenous drug use, for the year 1999-2000 and how does this figure compare to the previous 5 years. (AQW 594/01)

Ms de Brún: The latest available information shows that in the last five calendar years from 1996 to 2000, there was one case of HIV infection here where the route of infection was believed to be injecting drug use.

Léiríonn an t-eolas is déanaí atá ar fáil go raibh cás amháin de ghalrú VED anseo sna cúig bliana deireanacha ó 1996 go 2000 ar creideadh gurbh é instealladh drugaí tarchur an ghalraithe é.

Children in Care Due to Parental Drug Abuse

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of children who are placed in alternative care by Social Services as a result of parental drug abuse. (AQW 595/01)

Ms de Brún: This information is not collected centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Ní bhailítear an t-eolas seo go lárnach agus ní fhéadfaí é a sholáthar ach ar chostas dhíreireach.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

British Airways: Withdrawal of Services

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the discussions he has had with British Airways in relation to their cancellation of services from Belfast International Airport (b) if he has asked them to reconsider withdrawing their service and (c) if he is aware of any alternative airline carrier that would be willing to undertake this service. (AQW 300/01)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr P Robinson): Air Services is a 'reserved' matter and thus is the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. Notwithstanding this, I and some of my Party colleagues met with representatives of British Airways on 17 October and voiced our concern at the company's announcement of its intention to withdraw their Belfast/Heathrow service. We also urged them to reconsider their decision. In addition my predecessor, Gregory Campbell, has written separately to the Rt. Hon. Stephen Byers MP, Secretary of State for Transport asking him to press British Airways to review their decision and suggesting that, should he be unsuccessful in this, he should use his influence to secure the existing British Airways take-off and landing slots at London Heathrow for an alternative airline service to Northern Ireland.

Since British Airways made its announcement, BMI British Midland has announced four new flights from

Belfast International Airport to London Heathrow. I understand that Belfast International Airport is examining a number of other possibilities.

Belfast International Airport: Services

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development what assurances has he received that British Midland will remain committed to providing a shuttle service from Belfast City to London in light of the British Airways cancellation of services from Belfast International Airport. (AQW 301/01)

Mr P Robinson: None. However, Sir Michael Bishop, Chairman of BMI British Midland has publicly reaffirmed that BMI remains committed to providing air services between Belfast and London's Heathrow airport. Indeed, in responding to news of British Airways' planned withdrawal of the Belfast to London Heathrow service, BMI announced that they still intend to operate four daily flights from Belfast International Airport to London Heathrow in addition to the seven daily flights from Belfast City Airport. Moreover, BMI British Midlands' involvement with Belfast City Airport is underpinned by a legally binding commercial contract.

Belfast City Airport: Services

Mr Clyde asked the Minister for Regional Development if Belfast City Airport have any plans to extend their 9.30pm deadline for landings/take offs in order to facilitate the expected increase in passenger journeys resulting from the withdrawal of British Airways services at Belfast International Airport. (AQW 302/01)

Mr P Robinson: This is a matter for Belfast City Airport to consider, however, I understand that it has no plans at present to make application to the Department of the Environment (NI) to have the present 9.30 pm deadline for scheduled air traffic reviewed. If they were to pursue this matter, this would require a change in the operating conditions attached to DOE's planning approval.

Translink: Demand for New Bus Service

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the process used by Translink to assess the demand for new bus services. (AQW 322/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it assesses the demand for new bus services by considering transport studies, feedback from Passenger Focus Groups and from weekly-completed customer questionnaires. In addition, Translink's District Managers develop close working relationships with local communities, thereby gaining a good knowledge of the requirements for public transport in each area. Translink also works closely

with the Planning Service in order to assess the likely impact of any new developments for public transport. Translink must, of course, operate within existing financial constraints, which mean that it cannot introduce a new service unless there is a reasonable prospect of sufficient passenger demand to make the service commercially viable in the longer term.

Street Lighting: Ballygowan

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase the level of street lighting at the pathway from Quarry Close to Brae Park in Ballygowan; and to make a statement. (AQW 343/01)

Mr P Robinson: I understand that there are two footpaths from Quarry Close (one from each end of the terrace, 11-18 Quarry Close) to Brae Park. These footpaths connect to, and abut, a third footpath which runs along the rear of Brae Park.

My Department's Roads Service has advised me that one of the footpaths leading from Quarry Close to Brae Park is lighted to an adequate standard. The other is not lighted but receives some back-spill lighting from a street light in Brae Park. Neither of these footpaths, nor the third footpath to the rear of Brae Park, have been adopted into the public road network and, as such, they are not the responsibility of Roads Service. I have no plans therefore to increase the level of street lighting at this location.

Traffic Census A1, A2 & A8

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the date of the last traffic census, including the volume of traffic recorded, in the following three locations (a) the road between Ballynure and Larne (b) the road between the University of Ulster, Jordanstown and Carrickfergus and (c) the main Dublin Road between Newry and the border; and to make a statement. (AQW 379/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the most recent traffic counts on the above routes are as follows:

Route	Date	Daily Traffic Flow
(a) A8 between Ballynure and Larne	January 2001	16,022 vehicles
(b) A2 between the University of Ulster, Jordanstown and Carrickfergus	March 2001	27,078 vehicles
(c) A1 between Newry and the Border	September 2000	19,036 vehicles

Whilst all three routes mentioned above are trunk roads, the A1 and A8 routes form part of the European Union's trans European network and have been designated in the Department's Regional Development Strategy as forming part of the eastern seaboard corridor. The A2 is primarily a commuter route.

Obstruction of Traffic Signs

Mr Shannon asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is taken to ensure that traffic signs are not obscured by overgrown trees and shrubs. (AQW 389/01)

Mr P Robinson: It is the responsibility of property owners, or occupiers of lands, to lop trees and cut back shrubs that obscure traffic signs or generally obstruct the passage of vehicles or pedestrians. At the start of each year, my Department's Roads Service places notices in the local press and in farming journals reminding owners/ occupiers of their responsibility.

Overgrown trees and shrubs that obscure road signing are usually identified by Roads Service staff during their routine maintenance inspections. As a first step, owners/ occupiers are identified and are requested to co-operate in removing or cutting back the offending trees or shrubs. If that fails, Roads Service has powers under Article 50 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 to serve a notice on an owner/occupier requiring them to do the work. Where an owner/occupier does not comply with the requirements of the notice, Roads Service may carry out the necessary works and recover the costs.

Dergvale Development, Castlederg: Road Adoption

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, following an on site meeting with his officials on 6 July 2001, to detail progress on the adoption of a road at Dergview Phase II, Castlederg. (AQW 400/01)

Mr P Robinson: I assume that the question relates to Phase II of the Dergvale development in Castlederg.

You will be aware that, during the meeting with the developer, local residents and departmental officers on 6 July 2001, the developer contended that there were problems in the public sewer system and that these needed to be resolved before the streetworks in his development could be completed. Water Service officials undertook to investigate the matter. I can confirm that this investigation is at an advanced stage.

As soon as the investigation is completed and, if necessary, any remedial works have been carried out, Roads Service officials will contact the developer again

in an effort to have the remaining streetworks brought up to adoption standards as quickly as possible.

Road Safety: Newcastle

Mr M Murphy asked the Minister for Regional Development if he will pursue the road safety concerns of residents of Post Office Lane, Newcastle. (AQW 405/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service is not aware of any recent road safety concerns raised by residents of Post Office Lane. However, following representations from a local resident in 1995, Roads Service considered introducing a length restriction for vehicles using the street. While this proposal was subsequently dropped, due to enforcement difficulties, an advisory HGV sign was erected at the Central Promenade end of the street for the purpose of discouraging large vehicles from using it.

Having again inspected the location with RUC Traffic Management in response to this query, Roads Service officials consider that no additional traffic management measures are appropriate. In particular, a one-way system in the street would not be feasible due to the need to maintain access arrangements to the rear of the Post Office.

Bus Service at Saintfield Road

Mr M Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the bus patronage on the Saintfield Road since the introduction of the Quality Bus Corridor and (b) for the last three years. (AQW 413/01)

Mr P Robinson: A survey, carried out before the introduction of the Quality Bus Corridor, on 9 February 2000 during the period 7.30 am to 6.30 pm counted 2,708 citybound and 2,992 countrybound passengers at the 'Inns' and 3,662 citybound and 3,380 countrybound passengers at the Ormeau Bridge. A similar survey, carried out after the introduction of the Quality Bus Corridor, on 11 October 2000 counted 3,278 citybound and 3,961 countrybound passengers at the 'Inns' and 4,512 citybound and 4,640 countrybound passengers at Ormeau Bridge. Based on these surveys there was an increase of 570 citybound and 969 countrybound passengers at the 'Inns' and an increase of 850 citybound and 1,260 countrybound passengers at the Ormeau Bridge. These survey results indicate that bus patronage on the Quality Bus Corridor has increased by an average of 22% on citybound services and 35% on countrybound services. Translink has advised that it does not have any data available on passenger journeys along the Saintfield Road in the period prior to February 2000.

British Airways: Services

Mr Close asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any discussion he has had with British Airways with a view to having its Belfast/Heathrow route transferred to one of its franchise carriers.

(AQW 423/01)

Mr P Robinson: I would refer Mr Close to my written answer to Assembly Question 300/01.

British Airways: Services

Mr Close asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he has taken to encourage British Airways to reorganise its business to reduce operating costs and wastage, as has been done at Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester, in order to return the Belfast/Heathrow route to profitability. (AQW 424/01)

Mr P Robinson: I would refer Mr Close to my written answer to Assembly Question 300/01.

British Airways: Services

Mr Close asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any discussion he has had with British Airways to encourage them to surrender its landing slots to another carrier to enable the Belfast/Heathrow route to be saved. (AQW 425/01)

Mr P Robinson: I would refer Mr Close to my written answer to Assembly Question 300/01.

New Bus Stations: Translink

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 3435/00 and AQW 157/01, explain how "in planning for new bus stations Translink consider the extent of usage of bus services to be a more relevant factor" but yet have stated that "it does not have figures to indicate the extent of usage of bus services in the towns". (AQW 463/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that at present it cannot desegregate its figures for the usage of bus services by depot to provide usage figures for individual towns within depot areas. However the introduction of a new integrated ticketing system across the Translink operating companies, including Ulsterbus, should in the future provide more detailed management information. It is anticipated that this equipment should be available in the Omagh depot around Spring 2002.

Belfast International/London Heathrow Air Slots

The Lord Kilclooney asked the Minister for Regional Development what representations have been made to secure the Belfast International/London Heathrow slots with (a) the British Airports Authority and (b) the European Commission; and to make a statement.

(AQW 467/01)

Mr P Robinson: In relation to (a), I would refer Lord Kilclooney to my written answer to Assembly Question 300/01 copy attached. As far as (b) is concerned, this is a matter in the first instance for the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions. As I indicated in my earlier response to AQW 300/01, my predecessor, Gregory Campbell has written to Mr Byers to seek his assistance in securing these slots.

Road Adoption

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail those housing developments in West Tyrone where road adoption is being delayed due to (a) non co-operation from developers and (b) other considerations. (AQW 488/01)

Mr P Robinson: As advised by my predecessor, in response to your Written Assembly Question AQW 56/01, under the Private Streets (NI) Order 1980 it is the responsibility of developers to bring roads and sewers up to the required standards for adoption by my Department.

I understand that there are approximately 230 housing development sites within West Tyrone, all at various pre-adoption stages. Many variables dictate the progress of housing developments and hence completion of the streetworks. These include house sales, popularity of areas, phasing of developments and developers' commitment to completing all outstanding streetworks.

In this context, it would be difficult to define precisely what is meant by adoptions that are being delayed due to non co-operation of developers and to differentiate those from adoptions that are being delayed because of other considerations. To attempt to do so and provide the information requested for all development sites in West Tyrone would require an analysis of the state of play in each site and would involve considerable staffing resources. As such, the information requested could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. I can assure you, however, that my Department's Roads Service will continue to work closely with developers to encourage them to bring sites up to adoption standards as quickly as possible.

Whitehead Promenade

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of Whitehead promenade,

specifically the section which has not been recently upgraded. (AQW 492/01)

Mr P Robinson: I understand that, last year, Carrickfergus Borough Council completed an environmental improvement scheme to upgrade the section of the promenade for which it is responsible. The remaining section is the responsibility of my Department's Roads Service.

In line with its road maintenance procedures, Roads Service inspects its section every eight weeks. These inspections, together with any necessary follow-up repairs, ensure that the structural integrity of the carriage-way and walkway is maintained. Roads Service considers that its section of the promenade is currently in a safe and acceptable condition.

Cycle Lanes: Carrickfergus Borough Council Area

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his strategic plan for cycle lanes in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area. (AQW 493/01)

Mr P Robinson: One of the key elements of my Department's Northern Ireland Cycling Strategy, published in June last year, is to support the development of the second phase of the National Cycle Network. The first phase of the network, which is substantially complete, comprises approximately 848 km of cycle network and the second phase will include the provision of a link from the existing network facilities at Whiteabbey to both Carrickfergus and Larne. Development of the second phase of the network will largely be dependent on the availability of European funding and tourism grants.

When the connection to Carrickfergus is completed, my Department's Roads Service intends to develop links between the network and schools, colleges, bus and rail stations and the centre of commerce. Cycle routes will also be developed through traffic calmed residential areas. Carrickfergus Borough Council, the local community and local cycle interest groups will, of course, have a major role to play in the development of cycle routes within their area.

Road Adoption: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of roads in the Carrickfergus area which have not been adopted by his Department. (AQW 494/01)

Mr P Robinson: There are many roads and lane-ways across Northern Ireland that have not been adopted into the public road network. My Department does not have details of all such roads and laneways.

It has, however, records of private streets that have been determined through the planning process where it is the responsibility of developers to bring roads and sewers up to required standards for adoption by my Department. A list detailing those private streets, which have not yet been adopted by my Department, within development sites in the Carrickfergus Borough Council area has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Concessionary Fares Scheme

Mr K Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (a) the potential additional costs incurred by extending free public transport to both men and women who are aged sixty and over and (b) what assessment he has made of the impact of current arrangements on the statutory rights of women. (AQW 516/01)

Mr P Robinson: The annual cost of extending free travel to include men and women between the ages of 60 to 64 is currently estimated at £2.3 million. More robust estimates of the likely cost will be available following the implementation of electronic ticketing in April 2002.

The Concessionary Fares Scheme complies with the Sex Discrimination (NI) Order 1976, which requires men and women to be treated equally. Any scheme providing concessions at different ages would contravene that legislation. The scheme does not impact adversely on the statutory rights of women.

Passenger Usage of Railway Stations

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of passengers using the railway stations between Larne Harbour and Ballycarry over the past five years. (AQW 518/01)

Mr P Robinson: Translink has advised that it does not have the data for the financial years prior to 1998-99.

Translink has provided the following information about passenger journeys for those stations between Larne Harbour and Ballycarry during the last three financial years.

PASSENGER JOURNEYS

Stations	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01
Larne Harbour	7,413	7,704	5,470
Larne	89,058	92,246	88,928
Glynn	2,206	2,667	2,296
Magheramourne	1,824	1,607	1,548
Ballycarry	17,025	18,227	16,821
Total	117,526	122,451	115,063

Traffic Census: Ballygawley Roundabout

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the date of the last traffic census, including the recorded volume and type of traffic recorded, on the following routes to and from Ballygawley roundabout (i) Aughnacloy (ii) Enniskillen (iii) Omagh and (iv) Dungannon. (AQW 528/01)

Mr P Robinson: My Department's Roads Service has advised me that the last Annual Traffic Census Report was for the year 1999 and includes the following information in respect of routes to and from Ballygawley roundabout:

Road and Location	Vehicles per day	% Heavy Good Vehicles
A5 Ballygawley to Aughnacloy Road, near Ballygawley.	4950	12%
A4 Ballygawley to Augher, near Ballygawley.	6390	14%
A5 Ballygawley to Omagh, at Doogary (near Omagh).	8740	10%
A4 Ballygawley to Dungannon, at Granville (near Dungannon).	14210	10%

The figures quoted in the above Report are based on the results of traffic surveys which were carried out at quarterly intervals during 1999 and were averaged for the year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Child Benefit Office: New Computer System

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development what plans he has to provide a new computer system for the Child Benefit Office. (AQW 422/01)

The Minister for Social Development (Mr Dodds): There are no plans at present to provide a new computer system for the Child Benefit Office.

Costs of Child Support Agency

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 328/01, to detail (a) the amount paid in running costs to the NI Child Support Agency by (i) the Department for Social Development and (ii)

the Department for Work and Pensions and (b) the amount of other costs incurred by the Agency. (AQW 460/01)

Mr Dodds: In 2000-01 the NI Child Support Agency incurred:

- (a) (i) running costs of £8·346 million from the Department for Social Development, which included £0·982 million for the Child Support reforms; and
- (ii) running costs of £19·745 million from the Department for Work and Pensions, which included £1·148 million for Child Support reforms. The Department for Work and Pensions spent a further £10·425 million on the Eastern Business Unit (EBU) in England which is managed from Belfast.
- (b) For the same period, the Agency incurred capital costs totalling £1·002 million. Of this, £0·553 million was attributable to the NI Agency and this was met by the Department for Social Development, and £0·449 million related to EBU, where the cost was met by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Child Support Agency: Management Grades

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 329/01, to explain the comparatively low percentage of officials at Executive Officer 1 and above employed specifically on Northern Ireland cases and if this has any impact on the ability of the Agency to achieve his target for cash value accuracy. (AQW 461/01)

Mr Dodds: The management grades above Executive Officer 1 detailed in AQW 329/01 work specifically on NI cases. There are other managers in the NI Agency who manage both NI and GB cases, for example in the area of debt management, or who have other corporate responsibilities such as personnel and financial management. This arrangement makes best use of specialist knowledge in a complex system and is in the best interests of the NI Agency in securing and maintaining the contract with GB for managing the Eastern Business Unit, but it does not imply any cross subsidy. Decision making in the Agency is at the Administrative Officer grade and is checked at both Executive Officer grades. The management structure is proportionate to that in the GB Agency and managers above the Executive Officer 1 grade do not impact on the cash value accuracy of assessments.

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