
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

October Monitoring Outcome

Monday 5 November 2007

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On 15 October 2007, the Assembly debated a motion concerning the process for the creation of a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. During that debate, a DUP Member made a contribution during which she named at least 12 individuals. At the time, I raised a point of order with the Deputy Speaker to seek a ruling as to whether it was in order for those comments to be made. The Deputy Speaker said that that was in order because Assembly Members enjoy limited privilege.

I ask that that matter be given further consideration. In my view, and in the view of many people and organisations in the human-rights community, it was not in order for those comments to be made, and it is a breach of the limited privilege that Members enjoy to make such comments in respect of people who have no opportunity to reply. Mr Deputy Speaker, I urge you and your colleagues to consider this matter further.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The issues of the authority and protection of the House in respect of defamation have been raised with the Speaker, who has received correspondence on this matter. The Speaker will make a further statement at a later date.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the Speaker to be called on to return to a matter on which he has already decided?

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a separate issue, Dr Paisley. The Speaker will return to the matter because of the correspondence that he has received from a number of different quarters. The Speaker will make a further statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement on public expenditure in 2007-08 following the October monitoring round.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr P Robinson): With permission, I wish to make a statement on behalf of the Executive on public spending in 2007-08, following the conclusion of the October monitoring round. As Members will be aware, the monitoring process exists to help the Executive to make the most of the resources at their disposal.

A key element of that is the identification, by Departments, of resources allocated in previous budgets, which, for a variety of reasons, will not be spent in this financial year.

The normal approach in the monitoring process is to reallocate such sums to pressure points identified by Departments. It is not surprising that such flexibility and pressures emerge during the course of a financial year, in view of the fact that budgets are determined a considerable period in advance of the actual spend being incurred, and when a range of forecasts and assumptions have underpinned the position. In addition, unforeseen issues emerge; for instance, the recent incidents of flooding, which, I am sure that Members will agree, could not have been anticipated by those setting budgets for the current financial year.

In my view, this approach to in-year monitoring is the sensible and pragmatic way to deal with the uncertainty that is inherent when setting budgets. However, as Members will be aware, following my statement on the June monitoring round, our position in this financial year is different given that we have inherited it from our direct rule predecessors.

The key issue is that the direct rule team adopted an aggressive approach to overcommitting budgets, which meant that allocations in the budget process were higher than would otherwise have been the case. However, the corollary of that is a significant reduction in the level of in-year flexibility, and, as Members will be aware, the Executive were unable to make any additional allocations to Departments in the June monitoring round, notwithstanding that Departments had identified around £11 million in reduced requirements.

I have to report to the Assembly that that inherited overcommitment position pervades the in-year financial position. However, as a consequence of the steps that we took in the June monitoring round, and through our ongoing work with Departments, the Executive are in a position to make some reallocations to Departments. I will say a little more about those shortly.

Reduced requirements declared by Departments in this monitoring round amount to £60.2 million for current expenditure and £42.6 million for capital investment. That level of reduced expenditure by Departments is in keeping with the levels that would be expected at this time of the year, and will go some way towards reversing the relatively low levels declared by Departments in the June monitoring round.

Many of the reduced requirements declared by Departments have arisen through a combination of a service, or function, requiring less than its existing provision, changing price assumptions, or from delays in implementing policies. However, the most notable of the reduced requirements are the £14.5 million of capital previously set aside as funding for the integrated development fund, against which no further projects have been identified, and the £15.1 million of current expenditure, which was allocated originally to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in the current financial year in relation to a planned Government intervention to reduce electricity costs for businesses. That application was withdrawn because of difficulties encountered with the European Commission around the original proposal's state-aid implications.

A £14.5 million current expenditure easement on the second major roads PFI scheme has arisen because of a change in accounting treatment. Details of all the reduced requirements declared by Departments are set out in table 1 of my statement, which is available to Members.

Against those declarations, Departments have submitted current expenditure bids amounting to £92.2 million and capital investment bids amounting to £171.6 million. Focusing on current expenditure, despite more than £60 million of reduced requirements being declared by Departments, my analysis is that, given the ongoing need to manage the inherited overcommitment position, there is scope for only £23 million of allocations to Departments. For capital expenditure, the position is different, in that in addition to the £42.6 million reduced requirements identified by Departments, there has been a range of issues where early slippage identified by Departments has resulted in further scope for allocations at this time.

In total, there is capacity to make additional capital allocations of £71.3 million. Details of the additional allocations agreed by the Executive are set out in table 2 to my statement, which is available to Members. I do not propose to explain each item in detail. However, I shall outline some of the more significant items.

For current expenditure and capital investment, the largest allocations are to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for water and sewerage services. Additional amounts have been allocated for current expenditure and capital investment of £11.7 million and £32 million respectively. Those amounts are to

meet the agreed costs of Northern Ireland Water, which were unable to be funded in previous budget-setting exercises. That additional allocation highlights the ongoing strain that the funding of water and sewerage services from public expenditure causes for other Government services. Had those services been fully self-financed at this time, those amounts would have been available to the Executive for reinvestment in front-line public services to meet the needs of the community.

Other current expenditure allocations amount to: some £2.8 million to the Department of Education (DE) to underpin the issue of home-to-school transport; and £1.5 million to the Department of the Environment (DOE) in respect of the Executive's response to the recent flooding. That money will be paid in the form of relief to district councils. Other notable current expenditure items relate to internal costs: £2.3 million to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for the additional costs associated with the restoration of devolution; and £3.2 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for the costs associated with the ongoing extensive Civil Service-wide reform programme.

The Executive have agreed an additional capital investment allocation of some £20.4 million to the Department for Social Development for social housing. That allocation underpins the comments that I made when I launched the draft Budget about the importance of that issue and the need to find sufficient funds, where available, for that necessary and important public service.

Other significant capital allocations are: £10.7 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel, which is linked to the Civil Service reform programme; and £8 million to the Department for Regional Development for the purchase of land in connection with two separate road schemes. Although that land is not needed for immediate use, the opportunity has now arisen to purchase it. Given the ongoing significant inflation associated with the purchase of land, the Executive have concluded that it makes sense to make use of this opportunity and purchase the land at this time rather than at a future time when the land may have been developed and exposed to a further period of significant inflationary growth and, therefore, a higher cost to the Executive.

There will be a further opportunity to review the in-year position in December. That may provide further scope to consider any remaining pressures that Departments still face. However, I stress that that is subject to all Departments undertaking a thorough review of their in-year requirements, with the early identification of all slippages or potential underspends for current expenditure and capital investment. This necessary and fundamental requirement of the in-year monitoring process will allow us to make the best use

of the resources at our disposal and maximise the level of spend on public services in a time of constrained public expenditure.

I highlight the difficulties that the inherited overcommitment position is causing us. However, in looking to the future, I highlight the position set out in my recent draft Budget statement, where I have initiated a phased reduction of the overcommitment position over the next three years. I am confident that that position, aligned with our ongoing work to improve the level and quality of financial management across all Departments, will pay dividends in better departmental financial performances at all levels. I commend the October monitoring position to the Assembly.

12.15 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement; it demonstrates the ongoing process whereby the Assembly is inserting itself more and more in relation to the management of its available resources. I commend the statement as very clear evidence of that.

In his statement on the June monitoring round, the Minister expressed concern that only £11 million had been declared in reduced requirements at that time, against a previous pattern of much higher figures — of the order of £30 million or £40 million. At that time, the Minister emphasised the need for Departments to declare all reductions in September. Subsequently, the September monitoring round was delayed. Is the Minister now content that all available reduced requirements have been declared?

In that same statement in June, the Minister said that last year's underspend on priority funding packages would be reallocated this time. Will the Minister comment further on that reallocation?

Mr P Robinson: We did put off making any announcements in June because there were not sufficient funds to allocate and because of the overcommitments with which we were faced. We also put off the September monitoring round for those reasons, to allow more funds to accumulate. The Member asks specifically whether I am content that all Departments have declared all underspends — the honest answer is that I am not. I believe that there is still more money to be declared, and the fact that we will come round in December to more money's being declared indicates that there is a tendency within Departments to leave it as late as possible, in case they might be able to spend those resources. However, from the point of view of "Northern Ireland plc", the earlier those declarations are made, the better and more valuable the spend can be.

It is an important point, and the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee can be very helpful.

His Committee will have a role in looking not just at the amounts declared in-year, but also the out-turn in May, and will be able to judge how carefully each Department has been monitoring its spend and ask the necessary questions of those Departments — including DFP — if there is any significant underspend at the end of the year.

The Member also asked about the programme funds. Obviously, I can only reallocate money when Departments announce that they are not using it. There are two such elements in the reduced requirements: £1.4 million from the centre in respect of unallocated science and skills money, and reduced skills and science funding under DETI. Some Departments, therefore, have offered up money from the Executive programme funds. I suspect that there may be more in the December or later monitoring rounds.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for making this statement. Given that this monitoring round would usually have occurred in September, can the Minister advise Members of the timescale for the two remaining monitoring rounds? In particular, when will we have a more accurate picture of the potential underspend of the Departments and the likely requirements for end-year flexibility?

Also, given that the Minister's room for manoeuvre has clearly been limited by the level of overcommitment set by the direct rule Administration, can he give us some indication of what level of overcommitment he is planning for over the next three years?

Mr P Robinson: I did put off the September monitoring round until October, but I am planning that the two further monitoring rounds in the financial year should take place at their normal times — December and February. I hope that Departments will look seriously at their expenditure and offer up any funds that they do not believe can be used within the financial year. Again, that is a point that was raised by the Chairman of the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Mr Storey also referred to end-year flexibility. I assume that he means automatic end-year flexibility for Departments, as was previously the case. I must point out that end-year flexibility is no longer automatic; we have to bid for end-year flexibility with the Treasury. Therefore, Departments should not assume that there will be automatic end-year flexibility, which will require more and better planning by each Department in that area of activity. As Members will know, in the draft Budget, I used end-year flexibility because there was an agreement with the Treasury, and that is already underpinning spend within the financial year. It is important that Departments do not rely on end-year flexibility, except in some very special circumstances in which it has to be so. End-year flexibility is no longer automatic.

The Member will be aware that the direct rule Administration left us with an overcommitment of £160 million in the year, which I thought was excessively high. In the three-year draft Budget, I sought to taper off that level of overcommitment. It will be reduced to £100 million in the first financial year, £80 million in the second and £60 million in the third. Members will see that under the draft Budget plan, there will a considerable reduction. It is necessary to do it in that way because Departments will have in-year pressures that cannot be predicted.

If there is not that degree of flexibility in the funding arrangements, we would be in trouble if there were a pandemic, for example, and we did not have the funds to give to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to deal with it. The flooding was another instance where we were able to free up money. It is an important part of the fiscal process that there is that flexibility, and that is why it is being reduced in the way that I have suggested.

Mr Beggs: The monitoring statement shows no significant new money. I see that the figure for the Chancellor's Budget for 2007 is -£0.6 million. Is that further admission by the Minister of Finance and Personnel of his failure to receive any significant funding package, in particular, the £1 billion package that was promised?

Mr P Robinson: The Member seems to have a fixation on that issue — he talks of nothing else. Given that he talks about it as often as he does, one would expect him to get his facts right. If he wants to compare the package that was negotiated at St Andrews, he needs something to compare it with. The trouble is that the Ulster Unionist Party got nothing by way of a package to compare it with. The outcome of this package was a very significant change in the way that the reinvestment and reform initiative was handled, which allowed us in the draft Budget to be able to propose a freeze on the regional rate, whereas his party's proposals would have resulted in a 19% increase in the regional rate. The public will have a different view of the benefit of the package, which allowed us to use £70 million to stave off the cost of water charging in this financial year. Another £30 million will be used for innovation funding.

The Member will also be aware that we have succeeded not only in getting the end-year flexibility allowances that were made by the Chancellor, but in securing a substantial increase in those end-year flexibility figures to allow us to use it, front-loaded, for the next financial year. On top of that, we now have access to asset sales. In the draft Budget, I was able to identify over £1 billion of asset sales that we will benefit from directly as part of that package. I could go on, but I do not want to further embarrass the Member.

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Minister for his substantial statement. We probably all share rather contradictory points of view about that issue. On balance, we prefer that programmes operate as planned and that there does not have to be a release of funds. However, a release of funds gives flexibility to reallocations, and that is welcome.

I am sure that all sides of the House will welcome the social housing allocation of £20.4 million. Furthermore, I welcome the £10.7 million for reform of the Civil Service. Perhaps that will not attract as much public attention; however, it is a spend-to-save issue, since the benefits to the public, with regard to the quality of service of Government and the eventual gains in efficiency, are substantial.

In light of his earlier comments that end-year flexibility is by no means automatic, can the Minister give the Members confidence that the capital reallocation of £71.3 million at this stage of the year will be spent in the current financial year?

Mr P Robinson: In an ideal world, we could operate as planned; however, there is no such thing as an ideal world. Programmes will always run late; legal issues will arise, causing problems and delays; and pressure will be applied to the Executive to find funds that are not otherwise available. In-year monitoring is, therefore, required. It is not new money; it is a reallocation of resources, but in a way that ensures that the Executive use up all of their money. As the Member said, there is no automatic ability to carry money forward to the next financial year; it goes back to the clutches of the Treasury, and is released according to Treasury — not Assembly — programmes. It is, therefore, important that we get as close as possible to spending all our resource and capital in the financial year and in the best possible way.

I welcome the Member's comments on the funding allocated to housing, which should allow the building of approximately 200 new homes. I suspect that if he were to ask his colleague the Minister for Social Development the question that he asked me, she would say that she would make a very good fist of spending all the £20 million on housing in the financial year. He is, however, right — money not spent becomes an underspend under end-year flexibility, and we then have to bid to get our own money back. Far better that we spend it initially. I hope, therefore, that all the Committees will examine the funding available to their Departments, and try their best to ensure that Departments use that funding within the set time.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his statement. In his first answer to Mr McLaughlin's question, he expressed some doubt as to whether all underspends had been declared. The capital figures show that the only two significant departmental sums relate to DETI

and the Department for Social Development (DSD). DSD's figure concerns house sales, and I am sure that all of us welcome the fact that three times as much money has been put back into social housing as has been released from house sales.

However, in general, it is clear that the capital sums are different from the out-turn at the end of the last financial year, when there were significant capital underspends in some Departments. That has been the historic position over several years. Could the Minister, therefore, give us an assurance that he will ensure that the projected rounds in December and afterwards will be rather more accurate than, perhaps, are the figures today?

Mr P Robinson: I welcome Mr Ford's comments; we are on the same page about the matter. I can reallocate money only as it is given up by Departments. Having benefited considerably, as a one-time spending Minister, from the largesse of the leader of the SDLP in that respect, I know that spending Departments hold on to money for as long as they can. No Department wants to give up its allocation of money until there is absolute certainty that it cannot be spent — that is a natural human instinct. Departments must appraise more realistically what they can do.

The Member is correct; the significant sums left unspent at the end of a financial year could be allocated to functions for which Ministers are crying out for resources.

12.30 pm

It is important that we allocate those funds, and it is the Committees' job to do so. I will allocate from my end by continuing to pressure Ministers; however, Committees also have a role to play in that they will want to ensure that the money that is allocated to their Departments is spent by those Departments in the period in which it was given.

Therefore, allocation is a job for the whole Assembly and not simply for the Finance Minister. Essentially, however, each Minister will make the final decisions for his or her Department. There must be an honest appraisal of the funds, particularly as we near the December monitoring round — even the February monitoring round makes it difficult to spend that money if it is reallocated. December is the last occasion on which a reasonable stab can be made at allocating money, particularly for capital expenditure, and on which Departments can be expected to use it usefully. I therefore hope that each Department and, indeed, each Committee, takes on board the Member's message.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I welcome the statement. Has an assessment been made of the likely amount that will be made available in the December monitoring round? Does the Minister have any views

about what the level of overcommitment should be following that allocation?

Mr P Robinson: Taking the Member's second question first, at the beginning of the financial year, the overcommitment was £160 million. Using my best judgement, I have deemed that the £90 million overspend at this point is sufficient for us to be able to allocate some funds to deal with the pressures that various Departments face, while being able to make up the remaining £90 million over the two further monitoring rounds. It would be normal for approximately £50 million to £70 million to have been given up in December. However, there is no guarantee that that is always the case — I base that judgement on past experiences. I suspect that we might want to hold back £20 million or £30 million of those funds to reduce further the overspend at that period. Who knows? I do not want the figures to be quoted back to me in December, but perhaps Departments will identify £50 million to £70 million and perhaps around £30 million will be allocated.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I too thank the Minister for his statement. The Committee for Finance and Personnel was briefed on DFP's planned submission to the October monitoring round. Will the Minister comment on the outcome of DFP's bids and how that will affect his own Department's priorities?

Mr P Robinson: Members will see from the two tables that were attached to the statement that the DFP bids relate to the reform programme. Those are not unique to DFP; they cover the entire Civil Service. Therefore, each Department will benefit. DFP did not have all its bids met, but no Department ever does. It is an important element of the Executive's programme to proceed with reform in the Civil Service. It is therefore vital that we meet those bids that in turn, will help each Department to meet the reform programme and to secure greater efficiency in the Civil Service.

Mr Hamilton: Although sizeable reduced requirements have been identified, an overcommitment obviously remains. Will the Minister explain to the House why the new level of about £90 million that he has revealed from the October monitoring round is deemed appropriate at this stage in the financial year?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister to respond, I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones. Someone has his or her phone switched on, and it is causing interference with the sound.

Mr P Robinson: At the end of the day, this is a matter of judgement, and my view — which the Executive endorsed — was that £90 million was a sufficient amount at this time. The only basis upon which the judgement was made was past experience. Certain amounts had been offered in the December and February monitoring rounds, and if we keep to the

averages of those rounds in this financial year, we should be able to pull back that £90 million.

Of course, we could have used the additional £23 million to reduce further the degree of overcommitment. However, Departments were experiencing serious pressures, so, in the knowledge that we could deal with the overcommitment position in the final two monitoring rounds, we felt it necessary to relieve some of those pressures.

Mr Kennedy: Given that there is concern in many quarters about the overall cost of government to the Northern Ireland taxpayer, can the Minister provide a more detailed breakdown of the additional £2.3 million that was awarded to OFMDFM for costs associated with the restoration of devolution? Can he confirm whether additional staff will be employed in that Department as a result of its receiving that additional money?

Mr P Robinson: I am glad that OFMDFM has been able to hold its staffing level or reduce it from the level that was experienced under the previous Executive. Staffing levels must be taken very seriously, not only in OFMDFM but in every Department. OFMDFM's considerable functions go beyond the functions of its ministerial private office; for example, it is responsible for economic policy and equality. Therefore, OFMDFM must carry out functions over and above those that it carries out on behalf of the Executive as a whole, the principal one of which is undertaken by its central freedom of information team. OFMDFM carries out functions that have no equivalent in the Prime Minister's Office or in the Department of the Taoiseach, both of which have a very set role. OFMDFM carries out departmental functions that its equivalents do not.

The additional £2.3 million is being used to build up private offices as a result of devolution. Private-office staff will be a charge set against OFMDFM, although I think that those staff will have come from other parts of the Civil Service.

The Member will note that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister gave back moneys over the course of the monitoring round, so the additional funding equates to a net increase of over £1 million.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for making a statement on behalf of the Executive. I sympathise with his having to use money to curb overcommitment — money that would otherwise have been available for significant reallocation. That remedial curb is necessary, for all the reasons that the Minister has outlined.

I correct the Minister on the reference that he made to the 19% rate increase. If he checks back, he will find that the direct rule Administration's justification for that increase had nothing to do with the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) but was for the purpose of

making it easy for incoming Ministers to proceed on water charges without there being a significant rates increase.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment understands the reasons behind some reductions. However, as Chairperson of that Committee, I ask the Minister whether he can offer some assurance that the significant reductions in selective financial assistance, land acquisition, the renewable energy budget and skills and science funding should not be read as underperformance on the part of Invest NI.

Mr P Robinson: The Member makes a good point. In many cases, it is unavoidable that those reductions occur. I do not blame any Minister for that. I far prefer that Ministers say that, for one reason or another, funds will not be used in a financial year because they can be better used. Each of the Departments has been making bids for funds to be used in different ways. It is one thing for a Department to deal with a large overcommitment when it has growth in its spend, but if it has a tight financial framework to adhere to and a large overcommitment, it is in a very difficult position indeed.

As far as the Member's apology about the 19% rate increase is concerned, I would be more convinced about that were it not for the fact that the direct rule Administration had increased the regional rate by 62% in the past five years and 37% in the past three years. That seems to have been a necessary trend, because they could not borrow from the RRI unless they kept ahead of increases in Great Britain, which were considerable over those years.

Mr McQuillan: How many claims for flood relief have been approved, and how was the figure of £1.5 million determined?

Mr P Robinson: Flood relief was an area in which the people of Northern Ireland saw the benefit of devolution. The Assembly was able to respond immediately to a crisis in the community and alleviate the hardship caused by flooding of approximately 1,160 people. The Department of the Environment was allocated £1.5 million, of which roughly £300,000 will go to district councils for implementation of the scheme.

Mr S Wilson: I welcome the statement by the Minister, particularly concerning two points. Given previous delays in building social housing — which housing associations have blamed on planning delays, tendering, land acquisition and so on — is the Minister convinced that the £20.4 million in additional funding made available at this late stage can be spent by the end of the financial year?

Schools may be thrown into chaos again in two weeks because of the classroom assistants' dispute. Has the Minister of Education made any application for additional funding in this monitoring round to resolve that?

Mr P Robinson: How is it that the most awkward questions come from one's own colleagues?

The Minister for Social Development bid for the additional funds for social housing, and therefore believes that they can be spent in this financial year. We have to assume that the Minister has schemes that are ready to run, where land acquisition has already taken place and planning has already been approved. As the Member knows, if the Minister has to wait for planning permission the financial year will be over. Therefore, I suspect that the schemes identified by the Minister are ready to run.

The Minister of Education has identified a potential pressure in the classroom assistants' dispute, but — as the Member knows — that dispute has not yet been resolved. Consequently, at this stage, the Executive do not know whether the boards can deal with that on their own, whether they will need assistance from the Department, or whether the Department will need assistance from the centre. Those matters can be dealt with in the December monitoring round.

The Member provided me with another good opportunity to highlight the benefits of not over-committing and of having funds available for in-year monitoring. There are funds available to deal with any emergencies that occur; therefore, if the centre is required to deal with that dispute, it too will be dealt with in the December monitoring round.

Mr Burns: I welcome the monitoring round, especially the £20.4 million for new social housing. How much money is going into co-ownership to help young first-time buyers get on the property ladder?

Mr P Robinson: The Minister for Social Development is better suited to answer that question. However, I have found that the main issue in co-ownership is its current level, which is something that the Minister must examine. Undoubtedly, if the Minister does do that, she will come back to me saying that I should fund it because it was my idea. It is of real benefit to the community if people have a stake in their own property. I welcome the Member's remarks about the money for social housing. I indicated in the draft Budget speech that I thought that the Executive would have to revisit that area if they can free more resources through asset sales.

The Minister for Social Development has targets, which were set down in the Semple Report, and she and I will be keen to get close to, if not beyond, those targets as the years develop.

12.45 pm

Mr Ross: Two weeks ago, the Minister set out the draft Budget with departmental allocations. Will he inform the House what percentage of their initial allocations Departments have spent in recent years?

Mr P Robinson: I will not detail the underspends of each Department, because they vary considerably. However, Departments such as the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Health are capable of spending close to their limits. The Department of Health, for instance, can spend its money by allocating funds to trusts, and the Department for Regional Development can spend a lot of its money in areas such as maintenance. Therefore, the underspends of those Departments are low. In the past financial year, 95% of resources were spent and 5% were not. That equates to a considerable resource underspend of approximately £370 million. I make that point because I have read reports in the newspapers of people who would have liked more money for one Department or another. It would be a good start if the Departments would spend the money that they have.

Mr McCarthy: I am particularly interested in what the Minister has just said. I welcome his statement, his determination and his encouragement of his ministerial colleagues to make sure that they properly spend their funding allocations. Will the Minister assure the House that changes as a result of each monitoring round are taken in consultation with the Executive to ensure a strategic — rather than piecemeal — approach to reallocations? Will he outline what steps were taken to ensure that that approach was taken in this monitoring round?

Mr P Robinson: First, my officials talked with officials from the Departments, who attempted to identify projects and programmes that are not moving at the expected speed and from which, therefore, money could come forward. Secondly, they invited bids from each of the Departments, and they looked at the pressures faced by each Department: the more inescapable pressures were, obviously, dealt with first. Finally, my statement went before the Executive, who unanimously endorsed it — and I am one of the Ministers who accepts Executive decisions and works within the Executive's authority.

Mr Attwood: I welcome the Minister's statement. There are two issues that I want to raise, the first of which relates to unfinished business. On 25 June — when the Minister outlined his previous quarterly report — there was some tension between his recorded figure for the Department for Employment and Learning and that which the Committee had been given. Subsequently, I asked an Assembly question about that matter and raised it at a Committee meeting. I was advised that an answer was being prepared, but to date no answer has been forthcoming. I remind the Minister that he said:

“I will ask my officials to look back at the available information, and if the Committee has come across an issue, I will write to the Member about that.” — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 23, p5, col 2*].

To avoid doubt and to reconcile the figures, it would be helpful if the Minister could confirm what the situation in June was as soon as possible.

On 25 October, with regard to end-year flexibility, the Minister said:

“I have also been able to secure the significant front-loading of those resources to enable us to address the costs that Departments will face as we move to restructure and reform the way in which we organise and deliver public services.” [*Official Report, Bound Volume 24, p 492, col 2*].

Considering those comments and the new arrangements regarding end-year flexibility, will the introduction of new initiatives, say, by the Health Minister — who was here a moment ago — on access to fertility services in Northern Ireland, which might arise following last week’s debate, be precluded? The Minister says that the end-year flexibility money will be for restructuring and reforming the way in which our public services are organised and delivered.

Mr P Robinson: If an issue that the Member raised at a previous debate has escaped my attention, I will tie a knot in my hanky and ensure that he receives a response that will reconcile — if possible — the figures that he believes do not marry.

By its very nature, end-year flexibility is a one-off expenditure and, therefore, cannot be used for recurrent purposes. That means that, first, we must identify issues that can be dealt with in the financial year in question, and, secondly, those matters cannot be dealt with again in future financial years. Therefore, end-year flexibility is somewhat restricted. However, if Departments worked cleverly, they could identify other areas for consideration and for which a one-off expenditure would be necessary.

There has been a fair bit of controversy about the health budget. I cannot understand the reason for that, given the greater-than-average increase that it received in the draft Budget. However, no Department will ever have enough money: every Department could use more funds if they were available. The Executive must look at the needs of all Departments when they prepare their Budget, and they must be able to allocate resources fairly. That was done in the case of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That Department has been taking a larger chunk of the Budget year on year, so that by the end of the three-year cycle that was referred to in the draft Budget, it will have received up to 48% of all the money that comes to Northern Ireland through the block grant. That is a considerable sum, and it is more than any Health Minister has ever been allocated in the history of Northern Ireland. That means that the percentage of the Northern Ireland Budget that goes to health is greater than ever.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he share my concerns, and those of the wider

community — particularly the construction industry and its sister services — about the failure to deliver the £14.5 million of capital that is in the integrated development fund (IDF)? Will the Minister further break down the cost of those projects? Will he commit to having a review of the delivery mechanisms to see whether they are fit for purpose?

Mr P Robinson: The fund was set up by the Secretary of State and allocations could be made only where projects were submitted for consideration. All the projects that were submitted were dealt with. That being the case, there is not much more that Ministers can do: if projects are not being submitted, that may mean that there is limited use for that kind of funding and the money could be put to better use, which is what we are attempting to do.

I have had several conversations with construction industry representatives, and in recent discussions I have spoken with every element of the construction industry. More than anything, that industry needs a continuity of spend by the Executive, and it is seriously concerned about massive capital underspends. The industry needs a steady flow of funds throughout the years to enable it to manage properly its end of overall business, which is an important function that it carries out for Government. Systems must be developed in order that each Department can judge more accurately when it will spend money. That will ensure that there is no waste and no consequent damage to the construction industry.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister say whether the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety submitted any bids? Is there any specific allocation for the provision of services for those who have mental-health problems and learning disabilities? That is the most under-resourced area of health provision, yet it has the most potential to make a positive impact on all areas of society.

Mr P Robinson: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety submitted two bids: one to accelerate the comprehensive spending review’s efficiency action plan; and another that went under the heading of dealing with pressures in health and social care trusts.

It was judged that the pressures from other Departments were greater. The pressures on DRD went beyond its allocation, which meant that it did not get the full allocation that it sought.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Accelerated Passage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

The Bill will repeal article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. An emergency protection order (EPO) issued by the courts under that legislation gives the applicant — usually a health and social care trust — the power to remove a child to a safe place in the event of an emergency. EPOs are used only in exceptional circumstances, such as when a child is at immediate risk of harm, and are short-term measures allowing investigations to take place and alternative arrangements to be made.

Under current legislation, parents or others may apply to have an EPO discharged; however, the case cannot be heard until three days have elapsed. During recent judicial review proceedings, a judge determined that a three-day delay in conducting such a hearing breached articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights: the right to a fair trial, and the right to respect for private and family life.

Having taken the advice of professionals in the Department and in the voluntary sector, I am satisfied that the removal of article 64(8) would not result in any reduction in the levels of protection available to vulnerable children. Therefore, Members should act swiftly to repeal the offending provision. I am requesting accelerated passage for the Bill because it is essential that our legislation be consistent and compatible with human rights legislation.

In such a case, I consider it preferable that the legislature be given the opportunity to remedy the situation by passing the required Bill. A failure to take prompt action might result in the European Court striking down the offending article.

I recognise the importance of the role played by the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Assembly in scrutinising draft legislation, and I regret that these unique circumstances necessitate accelerated passage for this Bill. I hope that the Assembly will accept my assurance that such a procedure is appropriate only in the most exceptional of circumstances.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): On 11 October, the Minister attended a meeting of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

in order to explain his reasons for requesting accelerated passage for the Bill.

As Chairperson of that Committee, I am aware of the significance of the Committee Stage in passing legislation, the importance of examining proposed legislation in detail, and, where appropriate, the ability to summon witnesses and listen to the views of interested parties. However, in exceptional circumstances, it may be necessary to proceed more urgently. In such cases, of course, there is still an opportunity for Members to debate the issues in a plenary sitting.

The Minister explained to the Committee — as he has done today — that, in a recent judicial review, the High Court determined that article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was incompatible with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This short, two-clause Bill will remove that incompatibility by repealing article 64(8) of the 1995 Order.

Given that High Court decision, I accept the need for urgency, and, in the circumstances, the Committee supports the Minister's request that the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill be granted accelerated passage.

1.00 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The circumstances, as outlined by the Members who have spoken, point to the fact that we can do little else except support the Minister, and I hope that everyone in the House will accept that position and allow the legislation to go forward.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Members who contributed to the debate for their remarks about this important piece of legislation. I welcome their support for the granting of accelerated passage to the Bill, and I am pleased that it can now move to its Second Stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill proceed under the accelerated passage procedure, in accordance with Standing Order 40(4).

Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill

Second Stage

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill (NIA 6/07) be agreed.

The Bill repeals article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. I have outlined the background to the Bill, but, to recap, an emergency protection order (EPO) is a court order under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 which gives the applicant the power in an emergency situation to remove a child to a safe place. Such orders are used only in exceptional circumstances, when a child is at immediate risk of harm, and are a short-term measure while an investigation takes place or alternative arrangements are made.

Under the current legislation, parents or others can apply to have the order discharged, but the case cannot be heard for three days. However, in recent judicial review proceedings, a judge has determined that delaying the hearing for three days is a breach of articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, interfering with the right to a fair trial and the right to respect for family life. Therefore, the judge is minded to strike down article 64(8).

Having taken the advice of professionals in the Department and the voluntary sector, I am satisfied that removing that article will not result in any reduction in the levels of protection available for vulnerable children. Therefore, the Assembly should act swiftly to repeal the offending provision. The sole purpose and effect of the Bill is to remove article 64(8) of the 1995 Order, which is the element that delays for three days the hearing of an application to discharge an emergency protection order.

The explanatory and financial memorandum states that any financial implications are likely to be minimal, as the amendment merely enables cases to be heard in a shorter time; that a preliminary equality impact assessment has identified no potential adverse impacts on any of the nine equality categories; and that a regulatory impact assessment did not produce any evidence that repealing the offending provision would have an adverse impact on competition, nor that it would incur additional costs for employers or those in the voluntary or community sectors.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): As I said during the debate on accelerated passage for this Bill, the Committee has accepted the Minister's explanation of the need for the legislation to be taken forward urgently. It is based on the outcome of a recent

judicial review in the High Court, which determined that article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 was incompatible with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The legislation centres on the right of a parent to seek legal redress where a child has been removed from his or her care under an emergency protection order. At present, under article 64(8), that cannot happen until 72 hours after the making of the order.

The Minister has assured the Committee that the repeal of that particular article will not affect in any way the power of social services, or the police, to seek an emergency protection order where it is considered necessary. The change will simply mean that a parent or guardian will be able to seek legal redress immediately, rather than having to wait for three days.

I am sure that all Members agree that to remove a child from his or her parents is one of the most traumatic and serious actions that social services, or the police, can take. I am sure that Members also agree that that power should be used only in the most exceptional circumstances, in cases in which there are serious concerns about a child's safety.

I support the Bill, which will give a parent or guardian the right to challenge such an order without having to wait for three days.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My party and I support the Bill's being granted accelerated passage. The legislation is a step in the right direction. Further to what the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety has said, I welcome the fact that the Minister attended Committee meetings at the earliest opportunity to explain the purpose of the legislation.

The Bill contains a technical amendment to The Children Order 1995. As I have said, neither I nor my party has any difficulty in supporting the Bill's provisions. The effect of the amendment, which the Committee Chairperson and, indeed, the Minister have already explained, will be to remove the three-day bar on a parent's applying to a court for the discharge of an emergency protection order.

It is appropriate that parents have access to courts for an earlier hearing, particularly as some EPOs may initially have been made without parents being there. The Bill recognises the rights of parents in that regard.

I do not want to sound too negative, but I wish to place on record my disappointment that this Bill is the first piece of legislation that affects children to come before the House. The new safeguarding arrangements for children, which were referred to as part of the consultation that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety participated in last year, should have appeared in a new children's Bill. However,

in saying that, I accept the reasons behind the Minister bringing this Bill to the Assembly, and because of the judgement I agree that there is a need to get this legislation through the Assembly quickly. I welcome and support the Bill.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank those Members who have contributed to the debate for their remarks. The repeal of article 64(8) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 will remove the incompatibility that exists with articles 6 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, pursuant to section 3 of the Human Rights Act 1998.

In response to Ms Ramsey's point, I, too, accept and regret that the first piece of legislation that has been introduced on children's matters is to receive accelerated passage. Both Mrs Robinson and I have expressed that view. However, we are where we are. A court order is pending on which I must act. As I explained to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety last month, that is why I am taking this action.

Once again, I am grateful to those who have contributed to a helpful debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Children (Emergency Protection Orders) Bill [NIA 06/07] be agreed.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board

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

After the Order Paper was issued, concerns were expressed about the motion's competence. Unamended, it would not give the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure the authority to act. The Members who tabled the motion were alerted to that difficulty and have duly tabled an amendment, which I have selected for debate. If the amendment is made, it will address the motion's competence. If the amendment is not made, I will not put the Question on the motion. On that basis, we shall proceed.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to appoint a commissioner, or senior civil servant, to manage the Fisheries Conservancy Board in an effective manner, until legislation is made to provide for his department to take over the running of the Board.

I also beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "Leisure" and insert

"to assist the Fisheries Conservancy Board in its management, and calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation abolishing the Fisheries Conservancy Board and transferring its responsibility to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a matter of urgency."

I thank my colleagues from across the three other main parties for their support and co-sponsorship of the motion and the amendment. It is fair to say that had five names been allowed on the Order Paper, the Alliance Party would have joined us in adding one of its Members' names.

The key to the original motion calling for a commissioner or civil servant of senior rank to be appointed to take over management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) lay with the decision, under the review of public administration (RPA), for functions of the FCB to transfer into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Provision for that is included in the draft Public Authorities Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. However, this is unlikely to pass all the legislative stages before the spring of 2008 at the earliest. Therefore, action is unlikely to be taken in the foreseeable future.

The FCB is not properly fulfilling its main role of fisheries protection and is falling short of its other responsibilities. I can report to the Assembly the concerns of the Ulster Angling Federation on a number of fronts.

Those issues have been brought to the notice of all the parties — hence the unity behind the amendment.

Not all the co-sponsors of the amendment are in the Chamber, possibly because business has proceeded so speedily. Perhaps someone could bring the other co-sponsors into the Chamber to help out. It is not my job to serve as Whip for other parties, but they may be listening to the debate. However, I welcome the presence of Pat Ramsey of the SDLP.

The Ulster Angling Federation brought a report to the Department of Culture, Art and Leisure in July 2006, only to be advised that its concerns were unfounded and that everything in the FCB was entirely satisfactory. However, two months later, anglers advised the Department that the number of boat patrols on Lough Neagh stated to have been made by the FCB, had not taken place. The FCB workforce of 15 has been reduced to 10, as one third of the staff are absent on long-term sickness. The board's equipment has not been maintained, and the boat destined to patrol the east coast is not even seaworthy. Perhaps the Minister would consider, as the most appropriate action, an inventory of all the boats held by the FCB, to find out how seaworthy they are and, indeed, where they are. My understanding is that they are not available for use.

For those reasons, and others that I will convey later to the House, the motion was tabled. I appreciate the early notice passed on by the Minister that has necessitated the amendment. The advice was that the motion was not competent since the Minister is unable to make the appointment that it called for.

That necessitated the amendment, which I commend to the House. That amendment is competent and deals with the problem effectively and efficiently. It seeks to address the problems of the FCB. I look forward to hearing from the Minister that he will pursue the Executive on the legislation required to abolish the FCB, thus enabling the transfer of responsibility for its functions to his Department to proceed as an urgent matter. Perhaps he will indicate the urgency with which he views the matter and therefore how soon, after Executive approval, legislation for the transfer of responsibilities from the FCB to the Department can be completed. The sooner that happens, the better. The FCB desperately needs to have its management functions and responsibilities brought into line and improved. That can be achieved if the amendment is agreed and acted upon.

1.15 pm

I understand that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a role to play in introducing the legislation to the House before Christmas. If that is the case, it should give the transfer issue serious consideration and progress it urgently and with the support of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Indeed, it is notable that the proposers of the motion are all members of that Committee.

Given that it appears that the issue will be dealt with in a manner that our angling fraternity will roundly welcome, I give a cautious, but sincere, appreciation to the Minister's apparent need to act urgently and in line with the amendment. My caution is in anticipation of the delivery of any legislation that will abolish the FCB and transfer responsibility to the Department. I will not, at this stage, discuss the serious, unsatisfactory aspects of the functioning of the FCB unless there is a default in processing the amendment, which I do not anticipate. However, it is best to be clear.

In conclusion, it is my pleasure to commend the amendment to the House and seek its full approval.

Mr McCausland: The previous Member to speak identified several shortcomings of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. For example, there are too few bailiffs, almost no prosecutions for illegal fishing, and anglers have no confidence in the current arrangements.

The board will be abolished under the review of public administration, and its functions and staff will, in due course, be transferred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The appointment of commissioners, which was contemplated at one stage, would require amending legislation. However, legislation has been drafted to abolish the board, and that is the fastest method of dealing with what is currently a very unsatisfactory situation. Provisions to abolish the board are included in the draft public authority reform Bill, which is scheduled for consideration by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We hope that that will be introduced as quickly as possible.

In abolishing the board, it is important that stakeholders — particularly anglers — are included in the process and that their input is heard when the Department takes control. To that end, it would be helpful if a forum were constituted for those who have a particular interest in angling. I encourage the Minister to develop such a proposal. Not only would it be good to have stakeholders involved by keeping them well informed about events, but their expertise, insight and knowledge would improve plans for the future.

Additional support would be required in order to manage the amalgamation of the Fisheries Conservancy Board with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The chief executive officer of the FCB will need additional support to implement the many changes that will be required, and we must support the board to ensure that any such changes will be made effectively and efficiently. Indeed, that has been highlighted in our amendment, to which I am sure the Minister will refer in due course.

The FCB is facing a funding crisis. It was set up to be financially self-sufficient, and to derive its income

through agency work and from the sale of fishing licences. However, the board now faces financial difficulties that have been caused by the loss of agency work that it had undertaken on behalf of the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS). As a result, 11 board staff were made redundant in May 2006. At present, the board can function only with substantial Government funding.

It is clear that the angling community does not have confidence in the board to carry out its remit, which includes bailiff duties and bringing forward prosecutions. It is well known that there have been serious difficulties and shortcomings in the organisation. That must be borne in mind as progress is made. It would be helpful if those internal problems were kept in mind as the FCB's responsibilities are transferred to DCAL. There is little point in transferring the board's existing problems to DCAL. Therefore, there must be a process that ensures that the board is not simply transferred in its current state. There is a need for substantial change and, perhaps, for new personnel to be involved in future work.

I am happy to support the motion, which represents the best way forward. I am sure that DCAL will provide the resources that are required to support the FCB and to bring it properly, effectively and efficiently under the Department's responsibility in order to ensure a good future for angling in Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: I am grateful to Mr McNarry for proposing the motion, to which many parties have signed up. Mr McNarry has raised several points about staffing and about boats that are not seaworthy. I am aware of one such boat.

The serious problems of understaffing and under-resourcing must be dealt with, and I wish to make some arguments in favour of that. Naturally, everyone is concerned about conservation and the condition of rivers. In the light of the Executive's emphasis on the economy, it is worth making strong economic arguments for investment in the conservation of rivers.

The recent job losses in Limavady have highlighted people's vulnerability to sudden economic shock. The long-term answer to that is to build as diverse an indigenous economy as possible. In order to do that, and for the economy to become as self-reliant as possible, every available resource must be harnessed. Clearly, tourism is one industry that can grow in the North. High-value-added tourism, in particular, is attracted by high-quality leisure activities. That is one reason why the Culture Arts and Leisure Committee is so committed to sports, as is the Minister. I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate.

Fishing can contribute hugely to the economy. There is no doubt that anglers and clubs across Northern Ireland have invested hugely in their own stock, which must be protected. However, that is not being protected

at present. In the Republic of Ireland, it is estimated that the angling industry contributes €55 million a year to the economy. The river-fishing industry must be taken seriously. There is no doubt that there would be a good return on such investment.

As MLA for Foyle in Derry, I feel fortunate that the Loughs Agency is responsible for Lough Foyle as well as for Carlingford Lough. That is a highly visible, properly resourced and well-managed organisation and its work brings great benefits to those regions. The fact that it is a cross-border organisation and that it operates under identical legislation North and South means that it can look after complete river systems. The border is totally transparent in the agency's conservation and enforcement work. Indeed, the Loughs Agency has been so successful that the rivers that are under its control are the only ones in Ireland where salmon can be fished because the stocks are so healthy.

The Minister, with his counterpart in the Republic, must give strong consideration to ensuring that all cross-border rivers are similarly protected by a single cross-border agency that operates under a single piece of legislation. That would make sense from a practical environmental-protection point of view and would pave the way for future changes in the way that the Fisheries Conservancy Board is set up and funded. Perhaps those matters should also be considered. There are specific problems that relate to cross-border rivers that are outside the remit of the Loughs Agency and cannot be resolved properly by two separate organisations that work under different environmental-protection legislation in separate jurisdictions.

There have been problems about the way in which the Fisheries Conservancy Board has operated and been resourced. It is unfair to lay blame on anyone in particular. However, a new management structure and a properly funded organisation must be put in place, and I acknowledge the amendment. Nevertheless, we need a firm commitment from the Minister that the necessary legislation and new structures will be put in place with immediate effect. If there is to be a delay, interim measures must be taken and put in place to ensure that, in the meantime, the waterways are protected.

The timing of the matter is hugely important, given that anglers — many of whom are in the Public Gallery today — are given some comfort by, and respect from, the Department as regards their investment. Given that there is consensus among the parties on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, it is right and fitting that the Minister introduces that legislation immediately. If not, the Minister must appoint a commissioner to manage the asset that is already there, because it is deteriorating and becoming dilapidated.

Mr Burnside: Will the Member agree with me, and bring to the attention of the Minister, that, in addition

to the matter of a new administration and management of fisheries, poaching still poses a great threat to many of Northern Ireland's rivers, especially the River Foyle? Will the Member agree with me that the Minister should liaise with all authorities, including the Police Service, so that poaching is brought to an end? In the past, there has not been enough manpower to tackle the problem.

Mr P Ramsey: I agree with the Member. The Ulster Angling Federation, which represents many fishermen across Northern Ireland, is deeply worried. The proposers of the motion are also worried. Fishing stocks must be protected by properly resourced bailiffs or whoever is responsible for them. At present, sufficient resources are not available; the manpower and boats needed to protect fishing stocks are not there.

I am grateful that David McNarry proposed the motion. It is an issue on which there is unanimity and consensus among members of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, which I hope will continue.

Mr McCarthy: Much has already been said on this important subject. During the Assembly's first mandate, I was a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that undertook a major inquiry into angling and fishing across Northern Ireland. I am disappointed that we are no further forward on the matter now than we were back then. Angling and fishing are major tourism attractions. During the previous inquiry into the matter, I was amazed to be told that on Saturday afternoons, as many people are fishing and angling in Northern Ireland as are attending FA football matches. That being the case, it is incumbent on the Minister and the Department to ensure that every effort is made to encourage and advance the sport in every way possible. Angling and fishing bring much enjoyment to many people. There should be no excuse for a Department that fails in its duty to promote what is best for the fishing and angling community in Northern Ireland.

In my Strangford constituency, a disused quarry had been used for fishing for many years. People used the facility and enjoyed it. Suddenly, the owner decided that it was no longer to be used for fishing. The quarry was drained, and the fish were lying about all over the place. I raised the matter with the Fisheries Conservancy Board, and I received a reply that almost dismissed what had happened. Although I am not an angler, I know that legislation prohibits the quarry owner's actions. Nevertheless, the Fisheries Conservancy Board was dismissive in its response to my concerns.

As a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I have great pleasure in supporting the motion. As a maximum of four names can be included on a list of proposers of a motion, my name is not included.

Mr McNarry did, however, clarify my position. I fully agree with all members of the Committee for

Culture, Arts and Leisure that something must be done, and done soon.

1.30 pm

Mr K Robinson: I support the amendment, and I thank my colleagues for raising what is an important matter.

I represent a largely urban part of the eastern seaboard. Over the years, it has been wonderful to watch the efforts that have been made to bring back to life once-dead rivers. Those efforts have been largely down to anglers, who put their hands in their own pocket, used their expertise and worked alongside the agencies as best they could, often in fairly difficult situations. The jewels in the crown are the River Foyle and other major systems, but it has been a delight to watch the eastern seaboard rivers — those shorter rivers that run into the Irish Sea — come back to life. The Three Mile Water in my constituency is about six miles from Belfast city centre. It now has salmon stocks for the first time in probably 150 to 200 years, and that is thanks to the work of the local angling club in Monkstown and the support that it received from those very overworked, and sometimes undervalued, members of the Fisheries Conservancy Board. Unfortunately, the board was never given the wherewithal to develop properly the role that it was given when it was set up in 1966. It was underfunded, and other Members have mentioned that lack of funding and how we have had to bail the FCB out in the past.

It is important that our rivers are properly bailiffed and policed, because our fishing stock faces many dangers, both natural and human. If we are ever to move our tourist industry forward, fishing must play a central role. Most of the rivers that have been mentioned run through rural areas, so an opportunity exists to develop rural economies. Rivers must be properly stocked and managed, and they must be looked after by people who have a real feel for their angling potential. Those people must be willing to share those rivers with tourists, who will pay good money to stand along the banks and successfully land salmon, trout and any other species of fish in which they are interested. The very best that the House can do is to ensure that a process is in place that allows the Minister to redress urgently a problem that is obviously detrimental to our rivers' angling potential.

I thank my colleagues who have contributed to the debate. They have covered most of the issues, so there is no sense in my regurgitating them. Thanks to everyone who looks after the best interests of angling in Northern Ireland, we at least have something to pass over to the Minister. I hope that he will have the knowledge and expertise at his disposal to allow us to solve this problem, and solve it urgently.

Lord Browne: I represent East Belfast, which Members will agree is not renowned for its inland or salmon fishing. However, I must declare an interest in the subject, because, believe it or not, I am a qualified marine biologist. That said, my knowledge of fisheries conservation is somewhat limited, as I spent three years specialising in the study of the orientation of *Talitrus saltator* and *Orchestia gammarella*. For those who do not understand or speak Latin, those are types of sandhopper. Members will understand that my knowledge is, therefore, somewhat limited.

Having said all that, as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, I support the motion as amended. It is imperative that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, which is responsible for policy, also be directly responsible for the management of the functions that the Fisheries Conservancy Board currently carries out. Those functions include the conservation and protection of our salmon and inland fisheries.

As we have heard, the Fisheries Conservancy Board carries out a bailiff service for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and it also undertakes agency work for the Department of the Environment. Surely, in the interests of cost and of efficiency and effectiveness, it makes sense for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to have responsibility for strategy and management functions.

The case for those changes is further illustrated by FCB submissions that acknowledge that there are several potential advantages in being managed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in areas such as decision-making, streamlining of decisions and procedural regulation, as well as integration of functions within wider Government networks.

My colleagues on the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have already made all the major points on matters of strategy. I ask the House to join me in supporting the motion.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who proposed the motion; I also support the amendment.

It must be acknowledged that the FCB did a reasonable job in very difficult circumstances and would have been able to carry out its duties more efficiently and effectively had it been provided with the necessary financial resources. That is the crux of the argument: essential resources have to be made available to enable us to monitor and safeguard our waterways in a professional manner.

In its response to the further consultation document on the review of public administration, the FCB stated that it had been:

“constrained by factors largely outside its control, particularly the unsatisfactory nature of its funding arrangements, and could be

radically improved by new approaches and adequate additional funding.”

In a written question, Strangford MLA Jim Shannon asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the budget currently allocated to the Fisheries Conservancy Board, and whether that budget would be increased. The Minister told Mr Shannon that the Department had budgeted £464,000 for the FCB for 2007-08, which includes payment for bailiffing services. Perhaps he will tell the House what amount of additional funding will be directed to the board upon its incorporation into the Department.

Any new arrangements must have public support, particularly among the angling community. The new arrangements must be truly transparent and provide for the participation of experienced anglers. Those people have influence in their communities and must not be excluded from the decision-making process. It is vital that fishermen and women have a real feeling of ownership of any changes to fisheries development and conservation. There must be no loss or reduction of stakeholder involvement.

Every Member can name several instances of water pollution. A couple of instances affected South Down, including one in July 2006 on the River Shimna near Newcastle in which 1,500 fish died. That incident was thought to have been caused by a discharge of sewage from a Water Service pumping station. Around the same time in County Down, another 1,500 fish died as a result of chemical pollution in the River Lagan at Donaghcloney. That incident happened after £250,000 had been spent on the enhancement of the Lagan at Donaghcloney in an attempt to reintroduce native fish. A five-to-six-year plan was wiped out overnight by the third chemical spillage to hit the river in the past six years.

Incidents of pollution such as those that I have described not only have a devastating impact on fish stocks and the biodiversity of the waterways, but on the tourism industry. Greater transparency and accountability are required, and that can only be delivered by an independent environmental protection agency that scrutinises all Departments. There must be rigorous enforcement of the laws that hold polluters to account. In order to ensure public confidence in the effectiveness of the proposed arrangements to integrate the FCB into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, it is essential that any new agency must be a powerful advocate for the environment. There must be a real emphasis on preventing damage to the environment, rather than dealing with the aftermath of pollution.

Lord Morrow: I declare an interest as a keen angler. I was delighted to listen to the Lord Browne's knowledgeable comments on the subject. I look forward to talking to him soon, because he can obviously teach me a lot. I welcome the motion.

I am pleased that the motion has gained the support of the four main political groupings in the Assembly. As ever, Mr McCarthy has delivered the support of the Alliance Party, and the DUP appreciates that. Therefore, it seems that the amended motion will have the full support of the House, and I welcome that.

That sends out a clear signal to all those who have an interest in this matter that the present arrangements are not sufficient: they are inadequate and they are not delivering. To put it in a different way, the current arrangements are not fit for purpose. I hope that the House will fully appreciate the advantages and the enormous benefit that angling can bring to the Northern Ireland economy. A large number of people participate in angling. Mr McCarthy drew a parallel with the numbers who participate in other sports, and it is true that angling is the largest participatory recreation in Northern Ireland. I hope that that fact is not lost on the Assembly or on the outside world.

The obvious spin-off that angling brings to the tourist industry is phenomenal — I do not use that word lightly; I use it properly. Northern Ireland has some of the finest rivers for salmon and trout fishing anywhere in Europe. Many tourists come from the rest of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and Europe to fish in Northern Ireland waters. Sometimes, that fact is lost on people who do not take such a keen interest in angling as a recreation. I emphasise that point, and I wish to ensure that this issue is dealt with. I am pleased that the Assembly has such a motion before it after such a short time in existence. It is vital that the motion has the full support of the House.

I am delighted that the Minister is in the Chamber, and I have little doubt that he will take a keen interest in what has been said. More importantly, I have no doubt that he will seek to reflect the views that have been articulated in the House. I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Northern Ireland boasts some of the finest destinations for angling enthusiasts. I doubt that anywhere else in Europe has the facilities or the potential for angling that exist in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it must be ensured that angling is overseen by a fit organisation. Sadly, that is not presently the case. The Fisheries Conservancy Board has done what it could, but it has reached its sell-by date and changes are necessary. Those changes must be implemented at the earliest opportunity. If changes are not introduced, angling will be hit hard and the tourist industry will also suffer. Our rivers are among our greatest natural assets, and they must be kept at the forefront of our priorities. In the past, our natural assets have not been adequately protected.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I notice that my time is up, and I am sure that you are about to inform me of that. I

commend the motion to the House and I look forward to its receiving the unanimous support of the House.

Mr P J Bradley: I support the motion, as amended. Last month, I had the privilege of attending a meeting with the Kilkeel Angling Club at the Kilmory Arms Hotel in Kilkeel.

1.45 pm

I thank David McNarry, who was at that meeting, for living up to his promise to bring this issue to the Assembly, and I thank those who endorsed the motion. As Lord Morrow said, the benefit of a cross-party motion is that it makes it easier for the Minister to take on board what is happening and to act accordingly.

Pat Ramsey said almost everything that I wanted to say. I would only change Lough Foyle to Carlingford Lough, because I live on its shores, whereas Pat lives in the Foyle area.

As Members spoke, I thought of Jim Wilson, a former Assembly Member for South Antrim. He talked about fisheries in the House, in the basement, in upstairs Members' rooms of this Building, and even when he was out socially. He has a great interest in fishing, and I am sure that he will appreciate that the motion represents progress.

I have nothing more to say other than that I wish to go on record as supporting the amendment on behalf of those who petitioned me to support their case.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Poots): I thank the Members who brought the motion and the amendment to the House, thereby enabling Members to debate the important issue of the management of the Fisheries Conservancy Board.

As has been stated, angling is not just an important recreation; it has a major role to play in the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Many people are employed as a consequence of angling and, with correct handling, opportunities for tourism can be developed.

Many of the factories that caused pollution along the rivers have disappeared. The Nitrates Directive should ensure that there is significantly less pollution of rivers from agricultural sources, and there will be further investment by the Water Service. Therefore, if well managed, the rivers should host many more fish than has been the case for many years. There is a great opportunity to promote tourism and, with proper development, to increase the potential income derived from fisheries.

In considering the motion, my uppermost consideration was the importance of conservation and the protection of salmon in inland fisheries, which is defined in legislation. The Fisheries Conservancy Board is a statutory body that was established by the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Under the provision of

that Act, the board is responsible for the conservation and protection of the salmon and inland fisheries of Northern Ireland, other than in the areas around Londonderry and Newry, which are the responsibility of the Loughs Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission. Members have referred to its work in those areas.

At this stage, I should point out that the commission employs twice as many people as are employed in inland fisheries across Northern Ireland. That decision was made by previous Administrations and remains in force today. However, perhaps that should be readdressed and a greater commitment of resources to inland waterways and fisheries should perhaps be considered.

FCB also undertakes bailiffing of the public angling estate and, until recently, carried out river monitoring and pollution investigation on behalf of the Department of the Environment. As Members have mentioned, following an investigation by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee, it was recommended that the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS) brought those functions in-house. Consequently, the FCB lost responsibility to EHS for some of the services that it had previously provided and had to lay off several staff. I understand that EHS is able to deliver the services at a lower cost. Therefore, to one extent, one Department was funding another Department, but it was, nonetheless, all public money. As a consequence, fewer people can carry out the dual role of bailiff and of examiner of water quality.

Statutory membership of the board is set out in schedule 2 to the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Members are nominated by various organisations and representative bodies, and one member is also a departmental official. The chief executive's post is provided for in the schedule.

The board is to be abolished under the review of public administration, and its functions and staff will be transferred to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Abolition of the board will create opportunities to reorganise the conservation and protection of inland fisheries. The transfer of FCB functions to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure will unify fisheries policy and functions and streamline the decision-making and regulatory processes. It will also create an opportunity to rationalise traditional enforcement with modern fishery management practice. The transfer will allow for the integration of expertise and resources in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide for a strategic approach. Plans are well advanced to ensure that functions transfer seamlessly and that work teams are established and briefed at the outset.

FCB resources and expertise will be incorporated into the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure regional operations. Area management will deploy

staff to detect and respond to reports of illegal fishing, and, as appropriate, they will work with partners and stakeholders, including private water bailiffs, fishery owners and the PSNI.

Organisational restructuring has been planned, resource needs have been assessed, and bids have been made to provide for a more integrated and strategic conservation and protection service. Policy and strategy will be reviewed in the light of priorities and emerging best practice in fisheries management to ensure that the service is consistent with public needs.

Abolition of the Fisheries Conservancy Board and the transfer of its functions to my Department can only be achieved by changing the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. Provision for that is included in the draft public authorities reform Bill, which will be taken forward by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The Bill has been included in the legislative programme for the 2007-08 Assembly session, and two Executive meetings ago, I stressed the importance of bringing it forward as quickly as possible. I would appreciate it if the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister were to bring the Bill forward in the autumn session, as opposed to the spring session, so that we can deal with the matter more quickly. I trust that today's debate will help to encourage that process.

The timing of the transfer will depend on when the Bill is passed, and I hope that Members will facilitate its passage through the Assembly as quickly as possible to facilitate a timely transfer of the functions of the FCB to my Department.

As regards management of the transition period, Members will be aware of press reports about the FCB. It continues to face serious management issues, and I remain concerned to ensure that the closure and transition to my Department should be carried out smoothly, effectively and efficiently and that any ongoing management issues in the FCB are handled professionally during the transition. A fisheries management group, chaired by a senior civil servant, has been established to oversee the closure and transfer of the FCB's statutory functions to the Department. That group has examined the structures and reporting lines required in the Department and will manage the functions, staff and operations when they are transferred into the Department.

A review of public administration working group has been established within the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and includes financial and legal representatives. The group is meeting with FCB staff regularly to discuss and plan the winding-up process. Preparations are under way to facilitate the transfer of the board's functions, with officials working closely with the board and its staff to identify and undertake

the tasks associated with the winding-up of the board and the transfer of its functions, staff and liabilities.

A consultation forum meets regularly to update FCB staff and trade union representatives on progress on the winding-up and legislative processes. The forum also provides an opportunity for staff to communicate concerns or raise issues for clarification with the Department. Quarterly accountability and monitoring meetings are held to oversee and monitor governance and financial activity, and I have asked my Department to ensure that those meetings happen monthly, with immediate effect. Fisheries Conservancy Board management is also updated at those meetings on progress on closure and transfer matters. The DCAL representative on the FCB also updates board members on an ongoing basis.

I have asked my departmental officials to ensure that conservation of salmon and inland fisheries is afforded a high priority, particularly during the transitional period. Therefore, the Department has, when possible, taken steps to support the operational activities of the board, while remaining sensitive to the legal position whereby the board has responsibility for the statutory functions set out in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. That is particularly important when legal enforcement of the fisheries by-laws is required, such as in cases of pollution or poaching.

The FCB — not the Department — is the only legal entity that can enforce such by-laws. That position cannot change without financial or legal consequences until a Bill to reform public authorities is passed by the Assembly. However, DCAL is assisting FCB staff with bailiff duties, and the Department has also asked the chairperson of the board to prioritise outstanding reinstatement work following pollution incidents and to consider buying in expertise to assist in that work when FCB staff resources are not sufficient.

Senior departmental officials are meeting the chairperson and other board members to explore how the Department can provide further support and assistance to the board during the winding up of the organisation and the transfer of its functions to the Department to ensure that it continues to meet audit, governance and accountability requirements and deliver its statutory functions in respect of the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries.

When the FCB's functions are assumed by the Department, the current board will be disbanded. It will be essential that, in future, stakeholders with an interest in fisheries continue to inform policy. Therefore, I have asked officials to develop proposals for the setting up of a stakeholder consultation forum. That work is at an advanced stage.

Mr Burnside: Transitional periods are always difficult to administer, but will the Minister give a

commitment to the House that he will regularly report the number of pollution incidents that take place during the transition, particularly in respect of Northern Ireland Water? Such incidents are often made public in response to a question to the Minister. The main polluter, as we all know, is Northern Ireland Water.

Mr Poots: The FCB obviously has a role in tackling pollution, as does the Environment and Heritage Service. Ultimately, it is the role of both those bodies to ensure that pollution incidents are minimised and that everyone plays their part in that effort, including industry, agriculture, and, indeed, Northern Ireland Water. As the Member is well aware, under the current legislation on the administration of water, Crown immunity no longer exists, and therefore Northern Ireland Water can be taken to court for pollution incidents. I am encouraged that that is the case because, often, others were taken to court while the Government had immunity, but were the biggest polluter in all sectors.

I return to the measures that we can take to ensure that the transfer of responsibilities from the FCB to the Department is effected smoothly. I asked officials to consider whether we should appoint a commissioner to oversee the board in the lead-up to its abolition. That happened during the summer, and I was advised by departmental solicitors that the Department cannot appoint a commissioner to undertake that work. The Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, under which the FCB was set up, does not provide for the appointment of such a commissioner. That is unlike, for example, the case of the education and library boards, whereby article 101 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 does give such power to the Department.

2.00 pm

The structures and functions of the FCB are defined in legislation, and the Department cannot assume those functions or make permanent appointments to the FCB. There would be financial and legal consequences were the Department to assume such a role. For example, people would not be able to buy licences and could fish illegally without fear of prosecution; income would be reduced; fish stocks may be seriously depleted; and we could be in breach of the EU habitats directive and the EU water framework directive.

Board officers must be appointed by the FCB and approved by the Department. Solicitors have advised that appointments should be made only after a process of advertisement, open recruitment and interviews. Therefore, I have asked representatives of the Department, at their meeting next week with the chairperson and board members, to discuss how additional support could be provided to the chief

executive and the board until the FCB's functions are transferred to the Department.

That work, together with closer oversight and management of the process by a senior official from my Department — the chairperson of the fisheries management group — will ensure that the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries will continue to be of paramount importance.

The Department will continue to work with the chairperson and the chief executive of the FCB to manage the transfer of functions and minimise the impact on the public and on the fishing community during the transitional period.

I shall respond to some of the issues that were raised by Members during the debate. FCB auditors are examining the assets register in order to verify the existence and whereabouts of boats and will examine their condition and seaworthiness. The FCB has 19 fisheries officers, three of whom are on sick leave, and there are 11 active bailiffs.

With respect to the timing of the transfer of functions, the Department will act immediately after the legislation is in place.

I touched on the importance of the angling industry at the outset of my speech. The Department liaises with the Loughs Agency on policies and requirements for bailiffs, taking cognisance of European legislation such as the water framework directive, which requires us to work on an all-Ireland basis in many respects — which we do already. We have carried out surveys and consultations in respect of our report on the socio-economic impact of angling, which we are due to publish in early 2008.

Departmental staff attend tourism events in a number of countries each year to advertise what is available in Northern Ireland. A new website has received hits from all over the world.

The Department is prepared to examine the incident that was mentioned by Mr McCarthy, and I ask him to provide us with the relevant material.

Financing for the FCB was mentioned. In 2006-07, £200,000 was received from the Environment and Heritage Service. That funding is no longer available and has had to be provided by my Department. The total expenditure for 2006-07 was £948,000, and for 2008-09 it will be £1,055,000. Despite the fact that we have lost £200,000 of income from the EHS, we will be able to sustain, and modestly increase above the rate of inflation, the money available to the FCB.

I thank Members for raising this issue, on which the House is at one. We recognise the need to manage problems and provide a better service that is in the best interests of the angling and wider Northern Ireland community.

Mr Brolly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to give the winding-up speech on the motion and the amendment, because I come from an area where angling is very important. I would like to mention the Lough Neagh eel fishermen who have been very unhappy with the service that they have received from the FCB over the years.

I have already given a long presentation to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure on that issue, so I will not go into details. The Lough Neagh Eel Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd issues licences, for which fishermen are glad to pay because, fundamentally, they own the co-operative. They receive the service that they want, including the patrolling of the lough. The Fisheries Conservancy Board should be patrolling the lough but is not doing so sufficiently or efficiently.

I want to refer to points that Members made during the debate. I thank David McNarry for moving the motion. Mr McCausland spoke about abolishing the board but also keeping stakeholders in touch with everything that the Assembly is doing so that a body is created that is efficient and that will stand the test of time in all areas of responsibility. He said that the board is in crisis; it has lost staff and has financial difficulties, which is a sign of inefficiency. Morale is low and, as Mr Morrow, said, the organisation is reaching its sell-by date. My understanding is that it does not have the confidence of the fishing community.

Mr Ramsey spoke from a position of strength on Lough Foyle, which is not dependent on the FCB. He pointed out the importance of tourism. It was only when I attended a tourism conference a few years ago that I realised, for the first time, what a huge sport angling is and how important it is to the economy. I have not been involved in angling, although I live beside the River Roe, which is one of the best fishing rivers in the North. The economic argument is powerful, and Mr Ramsey pointed out that angling is worth €55 million to the Republic. I do not have figures for what it is worth here, but angling attracts huge interest from all over the world, not least because we are lucky to have rivers that are not only looked after well but are, as far as is humanly possible, free from pollution. Mr Ramsey also mentioned the importance of cross-border co-operation. Our rivers do not stop at the border, and it is vital to have co-operation right round the island for the measures that are required to maintain this great sport and industry.

Kieran McCarthy also spoke about the importance of angling here and how it must be encouraged by having the best possible body to promote and protect the fishing environment.

Ken Robinson complimented the fishermen on the eastern seaboard. Members may talk about boards,

statutory agencies and so forth, but sports such as fishing and angling depend on the hard work of local fishing communities, fishing councils and fishermen, who patrol the rivers as they fish. We should have a vote of thanks for such fishermen, particularly those in Ken Robinson's area, who have brought the rivers back to full use. For the first time in many years, salmon have returned.

Wallace Browne took an academic line on fishing; he is obviously a man of some erudition. He reiterated the importance of fishing and gave his full support to the motion and Members' contributions. He mentioned the need for an overseeing dispensation to replace the FCB, which he described as having reached its sell-by date. That seems to be the general consensus.

Willie Clarke emphasised the need for the proper resourcing of whatever body comes into being after the abolition of the FCB. He also mentioned pollution prevention; what generally happens with pollution is a damage-limitation exercise after the event. However, it is not difficult to prevent pollution, and we could examine areas where pollution might happen — along farm ways or near factories and huge outlets from housing estates. Many sources of pollution can be monitored carefully — and they should be. Pollution should become a part of history. I agree with Willie Clarke that pollution prevention must be a priority for the new body.

P J Bradley supported Members' contributions, based on his local information. The Minister summed up Members' contributions and gave us great hope that the transfer from the FCB to the new body will be quick and efficient, since much of the preparatory work has already been done. Like other Members, I support the motion and the amendment.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to assist the Fisheries Conservancy Board in its management, and calls on the Executive to bring forward legislation abolishing the Fisheries Conservancy Board and transferring its responsibility to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure as a matter of urgency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is Question Time for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety at 2.30 pm. Members may wish to take their ease until then.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Health Service Efficiency Targets

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the efficiency targets he has set for the Health Service over the next three years. (AQO 625/08)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): My Department is finalising challenging efficiencies amounting to £343 million by 2010-11 as part of the Executive Committee's agreed approach to the comprehensive spending review. That builds on efficiencies of £146 million that have already been achieved. Those efficiencies will be attained through a range of measures, such as improved procurement, more efficient prescribing and dispensing of medicines, improved productivity and reduced administration. My officials are working closely with Health Service professionals to develop detailed plans for the delivery of those efficiencies. Until I am assured that they are real efficiencies, and not simply cuts by another name, I will not support specific efficiency targets for the Health Service.

Mr Kennedy: Will the Minister confirm that in attempting to achieve the 3% efficiency targets, as he has just outlined, patients will still come first, and that no cuts will occur at the expense of doctors, nurses and those in the front line of healthcare?

Mr McGimpsey: Patients will always come first; that is why we have a Health Service. The efficiency targets are very challenging for the Health Service — some £340 million over three years, in addition to the £146 million that has already been achieved, which equates to 3% in efficiencies and 5% in areas of administration. Those are very stiff targets to meet, but I am confident that we can meet them where productivity, procurement, pharmaceuticals and administrative pay and related savings are concerned, although it will be difficult and challenging.

As the Health Service evolves and changes direction, there will be a change in emphasis for jobs. For example, care in the community and looking after patients at home requires a different type of support and personnel

from what is required in the acute setting, so there are going to be changes. However, the main concern is always about improving the service for patients.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister assure the House that there will not be any loss of front-line Health Service jobs due to the efficiency savings?

Mr McGimpsey: I refer the Member to the last part of my answer, where I said that I will not support the efficiencies until I am assured that they are not cuts by another name. I am not in the business of making cuts. I am in the business of making efficiencies and making the Health Service work to its absolute optimum in improved productivity, better buying and efficient prescribing, in order to support patients. Patient care comes first.

Mr Easton: In light of the efficiency savings that the Minister has outlined, will he tell the House when he will reach a decision on the review of artwork that he announced, and the possible savings of around £12 million that could go into front-line services?

Mr McGimpsey: I do not recognise the figure of £12 million, but I did order a review, because under direct rule up to 1% of the bill for new capital programmes could be spent on artwork. Artwork is a very broad term; with newbuilds, it could mean softening the environment within what are very functional buildings and structures — it is not about buying pieces of art to hang on the wall.

I will come back to the House with the findings of the review, which I ordered so that I could understand the situation better. The findings should be available in a reasonably short time.

Clostridium Difficile

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what specific action he is taking to tackle the high levels of clostridium difficile at the Ulster Hospital. (AQO 621/08)

Mr McGimpsey: On 11 September 2007, I announced that, for the first time, targets to reduce two particular healthcare-associated infections were being implemented in health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland. I am seeking a 20% reduction by March 2009 of cases of clostridium difficile in hospital patients who are aged 65 and over.

A comprehensive infection-reduction plan for 2007-08 has been produced for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and is being rolled out at the Ulster Hospital. The infection prevention and control team there has an active programme, which includes monitoring closely all episodes of clostridium difficile that occur. That action plan also includes a review of antibiotic guidelines to ensure that the prudent antimicrobial

prescription of new data that relate to clostridium difficile in the Ulster Hospital during the second and third quarters of 2007 undergo analysis. Indeed, there are clear indications that the rate has reduced.

Mr Hamilton: As the Minister will know, this issue causes great concern throughout our community. I welcome the targets that he has set to reduce the occurrences of so-called superbugs. Will he assure me that the method of recording episodes of clostridium difficile is standardised in all hospitals in Northern Ireland?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes; it is important that the collection and sharing of data is standardised throughout all the trusts so that we can monitor what is happening and that we are comparing like for like. The Member's point is very important, and I take it on board.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he is more aware than I am of the difficulty in creating real accountability in the NHS. Therefore, can he tell the House who is directly accountable for the quality of cleaning in the Ulster Hospital? Can he also advise how inspections will be monitored and recorded to ensure that improvements occur?

Mr McGimpsey: I understand that cleanliness is a concern. The Ulster Hospital has its own infection-reduction plan that includes a programme that monitors ward cleanliness; monitoring all multi-antibiotic-resistant bacteria; a medical consultant microbiologist to provide medical leadership; the introduction of the trust-wide hand-hygiene campaign; and an active auditing of hand-hygiene practice.

The Changing the Culture strategy, which applies throughout Northern Ireland, is another important element of the programme. It provides for an audit of environmental-cleanliness standards in hospitals. Therefore, an implementation group is working to deliver the strategy and share good practice. Cleaning standards in hospitals are important, and they cause great concern. As Dr McDonnell is aware, people have a right to expect not to become ill as a result of a visit to hospital. Therefore, we all need to take the matter seriously.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for meeting with me recently to discuss infections at the Craigavon Area Hospital. Does he agree that our hospitals are general thoroughfares where visitors meet and greet people, and, if so, will he consider reviewing visiting hours to ensure that every effort is made to crack down on the spread of infections?

Mr McGimpsey: The report from the second audit of environmental-cleanliness standards will be an important next step in considering areas in which we can ensure that improvements are made. One such area is regulating visiting and the movement of the public in hospitals, which are often like public thoroughfares.

A return to some of the old standards regarding visiting hours and ensuring that only those with business in the wards should be there is an important function that must be looked at, and I will certainly do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 3 has been withdrawn.

Reduced Health Budget

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the impact that a reduced budget for his Department will have, in relation to front-line services and patients. (AQO 629/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I have not agreed the Budget: I have agreed a draft Budget as a basis for general consultation with the Assembly and the public. Over the comprehensive spending review period, the draft Budget will provide an increase of only 1·1% per annum in real terms for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. That represents an increase of £455 million, although the health budget will increase to over £4·2 billion by 2010-11. Considering that I have unavoidable pressures and existing commitments of some £700 million for that year, a significant element of my efficiency savings of £343 million will have to be reinvested to meet those ongoing pressures. That leaves a mere £16 million to invest in new service developments next year. By comparison, the Department of Health in England has seen a larger rise of 3·7%.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer. The answer to the question of whether this is a draft or an adopted Budget is one that the House awaits with great eagerness, and I await the resolution — in eight weeks' time — that there is inadequate funding in all Departments.

Does the Minister agree that our Health Service needs more investment, and does he share my disbelief at recent statements from Members who have claimed that the draft Budget is good for health? Is it not the case that there would be more money available to invest in our Health Service if other Members had kept their promises on the delivery of economic packages as a precondition to entering Government?

[*Interruption.*]

Stop your yapping — you have been caught on.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is he allowed to get away with that?

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to take her seat. Points of order will not be taken during Question Time. I am happy to take points of order after Question Time.

Mr McGimpsey: It is clear — [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As Members have discussed in the House on several occasions, our need for mental-health provision is 25% greater than in England and our children's health receives 30% less funding than it does in England. There is a gap of over £300 million between our health budget and that of England's, and that is not disputed by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Over the next three years, that gap will approximately double to somewhere around £600 million. Therefore, one can see the difference between Northern Ireland and England's health provision. We are all part of the kingdom and citizens of the same country, but a second-tier Health Service is being created in Northern Ireland, and people in Northern Ireland are worse off with regard to health provision.

Mr Gallagher: As a member of the Health Committee, I welcome the Minister's robust resistance to taking any cuts in the health budget. As the Minister knows, the Committee has been receiving submissions on suicide and self-harm. Considering those submissions and the weekend's tragic events, will the Minister inform the House if the allocation to mental health — particularly to resources aimed at tackling suicide and self-harm — for this financial year will remain intact?

Mr McGimpsey: As Members are aware, the key document on mental health and learning disabilities is the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability (Northern Ireland) and its findings. Although there is a roll-out period of between 10 and 15 years for the implementation of its recommendations, it is important that we get started.

Mental health and learning disability was my number one bid in the review, after inescapables and conditions that prove fatal. For example, I bid for £17 million for mental health in year one, and the proposed allocation is for £4 million; I bid for £29 million in year two, and the proposed allocation is for £7 million; and I bid for £48 million in year three, and the proposed allocation is for £18 million — a considerable gap.

2.45 pm

There are major gaps, and I could mention other areas that Members have written to me about. As regards mental health and learning disability, the most graphic example is in the area of suicide and self-harm. One can see how difficult it will be to begin any kind of meaningful roll-out of the Bamford recommendations, and I find that difficult to accept. The Member is right: I do argue my case as far as the budget for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned.

Mr Ross: I have listened to what the Minister has said. However, we all know that the Minister did agree to the draft Budget at the Executive meeting.

Nonetheless, does he accept that if, as he well knows, the increasing costs of providing services means that the public purse will not be able to meet public expectation — even with allocations as high as 48% of the block grant — then it is up to him and his Department to introduce radical reforms to promote efficiency and offer incentives to service providers. His inaction thus far is failing the people of Northern Ireland. Perhaps the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: Perhaps the Minister will tell the House what cuts he would like to see in other areas?

Mr McGimpsey: Clearly, Mr Ross did not listen to what I said. I said in the first part — *[Interruption.]*

Shouting at me from a sedentary position says more about Mr Ross, and his argument, than it does about me and mine.

I will repeat what I said. I have not agreed the Budget. I have agreed a draft Budget as the basis for general consultation with the Assembly and the general public. Why would I be looking to have a consultation if the Budget were settled?

Funding and the public purse are related to need, and what that need is assessed to be. As I pointed out in my answer to the first question, we have contributed efficiencies worth £143 million so far, and further efficiencies worth £348 million will be contributed in the next three-year period. Those are major efficiencies. The issue is not about sectors or employees being resistant to radical change — far from it; it is about getting the most efficient service that we can, because that is what is best for patients and patient care.

We deal with need, and health is one of those areas in which need is assessed, and ways are then found to address that need. It is not about cutting a slice of the cake for health provision and hoping that it will be enough. If need is not met and catered for properly, lives will be harmed or even lost.

New Health Structures

5. **Mrs I Robinson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he will provide clarification in relation to the formation of new health structures, in order to address the concerns of health and social services board employees who are uncertain about their future employment. (AQO 619/08)

Mr McGimpsey: My key priority is that structural reforms should deliver better outcomes for the citizens of Northern Ireland. I inherited proposals that I had no part in drawing up, and I want to make my own decisions on the way forward. I wrote to all health and social care staff on 8 October to let them know in detail what

is happening with the change process and to outline my ambitions for the health and social care system.

I also wrote to the chairpersons of all boards and trusts to plan the way ahead and to ensure that work continues as normal. My letters made it clear that it was very unlikely that there would be any further changes to structures before April 2009 given the legislative and practical considerations involved. I also confirmed that the current trust structures — the five social care trusts and the Ambulance Service — will remain largely as they are.

Mrs I Robinson: Given all that has been said thus far, I must take anything that the Minister says with a large pinch of salt. I have no desire — *[Interruption.]*

I will ask my question. The Minister allowed other Members to speak — so he can just sit there. I do not wish to make a political football out of mental-health issues; however, every Executive Minister signed off on the draft Budget. The Minister is sitting there and is misleading this House — all Ministers signed off. Other Executive Ministers are not crying out like the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The reason for that is because he does not have the bottle to take the necessary decisions that might help the Health Service —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs I Robinson: I will ask my question. When will the Minister reduce the number of health boards from four to one and allow local commissioning groups to do what they are entitled to do? The Minister has changed those groups' positions without consulting them. What will he do about the local commissioning groups?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McGimpsey: I take issue with Mrs Robinson for accusing me of misleading the House. I repeat — for the third time: I agreed to the draft Budget as a basis for consultation with the Assembly. There is no agreement on the Budget — nor would there be. Living in denial is an unfortunate position in which to be.

Mrs I Robinson: The Minister agreed and signed off on the draft Budget.

Mr McGimpsey: I did not. I agreed as a basis for consultation.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Allow him to answer.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I realise that Members can become excitable about these matters. I will explain what is happening with the review of public administration, because that is, purportedly, what the Member's question was about. The 19 trusts have been reduced to six. Of those, 18 hospital trusts and the Ambulance Service were reduced to five plus one. They will largely stay as they are.

Further to that, there are several management functions in the Health Service that must be examined: performance management is a key factor in making efficiencies; financial management —

Mrs I Robinson: What about the boards?

Mr McGimpsey: Mrs Robinson, I am coming to the boards. Try to show a little patience — calmly, calmly, calmly. *[Laughter.]* Financial management is another key management process by which we live within our means and ensure the maximum possible return on investment. Commissioning is the process by which services are planned and resourced to ensure that the needs of the population are met and value for money is achieved.

I have added two further management functions that were not previously in the plans devised by Peter Hain and his direct rule Ministers. Under direct rule, there was a one-day-a-week Minister, and elected representatives were not allowed on the boards or to be involved in any Health Service structures. I am considering democratisation, which would give locally elected representatives a voice in the planning and delivery of services in the health and social care system.

Another key function of Health Service management that must be considered is the potential for the implementation and delivery of health services at a local level. In other words, transferring powers from the Department to local government, which would help to take account of existing health inequalities and the fact that the more disadvantaged the area in which a person lives, the more likely he or she is to have a shorter life and to suffer from greater rates of morbidity and mortality, and which could consider action zones and healthy city initiatives. That is where we are.

Currently, the main management function of the four boards is that of commissioning. In addition, the shadow commissioning organisations are in place. Under direct rule, seven local commissioning groups were proposed to correspond with the seven proposed councils. Most Members understand that there are unlikely to be seven such councils and that the number of local commissioning groups will also change.

The boards, about which Mrs Robinson was shouting at me from a sedentary position, are undergoing staff reductions, and, until the new structures are in place, their commissioning role will continue to function.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister realise that his announcement that the restructuring process will continue until 2009 has caused many staff who work

for the health and social services boards huge levels of stress and anxiety? More inequality and inequity exists, so will he clarify, for once and for all, what is happening with Agenda for Change? Can the Minister confirm that health and social services boards' staff have been given enough support? Sinn Féin believes that they have not.

Mr McGimpsey: As far as Agenda for Change is concerned, matching will be completed by the end of this year, and the new wage structures will be in place by March 2008. The process has been under way from long before I arrived on the scene. I inherited a direct rule plan that had been drawn up for a direct rule situation. The situation has changed, and it is important that the Assembly and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety work collectively to determine the best way forward. Most of the staff changes, which affect the trusts, where the bulk of staff works, have already been made, and those will not alter much. I am concerned about efficiencies rather than about any suggestion that we will alter the structures.

Mr P Ramsey: Given all our concerns about continued improvement in health, and the clearly unmet needs in the Department, did the Minister not err over the potential savings that could have been made by retaining the boards?

Mr McGimpsey: The potential saving by April 2009 was £1 million. Although the Department will not make that saving, it has offset funds to cover it. Therefore, as they stand, the plans are cost-neutral.

The boards' commissioning function will be taken over by local commissioning groups. However, it is unlikely that there will still be seven groups, as there are unlikely to be seven councils, so we must examine how the groups will tie in and what functions they will assume.

Fewer than 1,000 people work for the boards, and I understand their position. However, they comprise a small proportion of the total number of Health Service employees, and I do not want to rush the restructuring — I want to get it right. Restructuring has the potential to create real efficiencies, because the Department is examining performance management, commissioning, financial management, democratisation, and potential for implementation and delivery at local levels, all of which are functions, as opposed to structures, of management.

I mentioned April 2009, but I hope to announce the proposed decision in the House long before that. April 2009 is the date that we are looking at for the introduction of legislation.

Home Start

6. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to continue

the provision of funding, through the Children and Young People's Fund, for Home Start schemes in Armagh and Dungannon, in light of the fact that this funding will end in six months. (AQO 611/08)

Mr McGimpsey: I know about the real and lasting differences that locally based Home Start schemes are making to the lives of families with young children, and I want to be able to continue to support that important work. However, until the Budget is finalised, funding for individual projects cannot be determined. I recognise that projects need early confirmation about their future levels of funding, and I assure those involved that that confirmation will be forthcoming as soon as possible.

Mr Molloy: Does the Minister agree that mainstream funding of such projects would be better than the stop-start funding that they currently receive? Given the high number of migrant-worker families in Armagh and Dungannon, does he agree that the need is greater there?

Mr McGimpsey: I agree completely with Mr Molloy's point about stop-start funding. The matter falls under the remit of the children's fund, which the first Northern Ireland Executive created in 2001. The children's fund is an Executive programme fund that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has delivered.

3.00 pm

The proposal under the draft Budget is that from March 2008, the children's fund will disappear. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will therefore have to absorb that funding itself at a cost of £5.9 million per annum. In the present harsh financial climate, the offer for my Department under the draft Budget is £3.8 million for year one, £2 million for year two and £2.1 million for year three. That is a major deficit as far as the children's fund is concerned.

Therefore — and I know that this is no comfort — it is not just the main projects that will suffer if the draft Budget goes through. Armagh and Dungannon, Ards, Comber and —

Mr Speaker: I have to interrupt. Unfortunately time is up for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Road Mortality Hotspots

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to target road mortality hotspots in Northern Ireland; and what plans he has to deal with these areas in a co-ordinated way. (AQO 719/08)

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): I ask for Members' indulgence. It is a wide-ranging question; therefore my answer will be longer than normal.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service and I give a high priority to road safety and that we are fully committed to making a significant contribution towards achieving the casualty reduction targets set out in the Northern Ireland road safety strategy.

Roads Service receives information from the PSNI on all collisions in which someone has been injured. The locations of all those collisions are monitored, and any location with a history of four or more collisions — known as a "collision cluster" — in a three-year period is investigated to determine whether appropriate engineering measures could be introduced to mitigate against further collisions at those sites. Generally speaking, fatal collisions tend not to cluster together.

Each year, Roads Service implements programmes of collision remedial schemes across the North. Considerable success has been demonstrated with that approach, with a reduction of over 50% of target collisions at treated sites. The most recent assessment has shown that Roads Service has achieved an overall reduction of 68% of target collisions at treated sites over three years following the completion of the collision remedial schemes implemented during the 2003-04 financial year.

As the collision remedial programme has progressed, the majority of the collision-cluster sites have been treated, which has resulted in collisions being more dispersed on the road network and occurring in a more random fashion. In that instance, the length of road can be considered for what is known as "route treatment", which involves the assessment of entire lengths of roads to determine what measures are necessary to improve their overall safety records.

In July 2007, I had a successful meeting with Minister Foster and Assistant Chief Constable Toner to discuss how all of us can contribute to the forthcoming review of the Northern Ireland road safety strategy. Members will be aware that that strategy was developed to promote an integrated approach to the planning, co-ordination and delivery of the Government's road-safety activities.

Roads Service, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI work in a co-ordinated manner to promote road safety across the North, through road-safety engineering, enforcement and education measures. We all give road safety a high priority and are fully committed to making a contribution towards reducing the carnage on the roads.

The implementation of the road safety strategy has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the substantial reduction in overall injury collisions since 2000. However, so far this year, 88 people have tragically

lost their lives on our roads. Although that figure is down on the same period last year, we must not be complacent.

The level of motorcycle fatalities — 24 riders and one pillion passenger — so far this year is a major concern, and addressing that statistic is a key priority for everyone involved in road safety.

Clearly, driving at excessive speed without regard to conditions is one of the major causation factors of collisions on our roads. I will shortly be considering the review of the speed management policy, which was carried out by my officials in conjunction with the PSNI and the DOE's road safety branch. I hope that officials will be in a position to discuss that review with the Committee for Regional Development by the end of the year.

Engineering, enforcement and education all have a vital role to play in reducing road casualties in the North. However, it is a well established fact that the vast majority of collisions are due to driver error. Therefore, road users also have to play their part in reducing road casualties. Drivers and riders must, at all times, drive at the appropriate speed for the prevailing conditions and pay attention to all of the hazards that contribute to the carnage on our roads.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for his concise answer. *[Laughter.]*

On a serious note, I thank him for his comprehensive answer. As road conditions clearly have an impact on traffic accidents, will the Minister detail how often resurfacing of main roads and trunk roads takes place, and whether the time frames for resurfacing are improving?

Mr Murphy: If the Member wants a concise answer, he should perhaps ask a concise question.

Road maintenance is, of course, important to DRD Roads Service in helping to maintain safety on all of our roads.

I draw the Member's attention to statistics that have consistently indicated over the years that 81% of accidents are due to driver behaviour. Only 2% of accidents are attributed to road conditions.

Road safety is of key importance in my Department's structure and maintenance budget, and remedial work is carried out along the routes where accident clusters occur. However, the overwhelming proportion of road fatalities is caused by driver behaviour. My Department will continue to invest in addressing road conditions as far as its budget allows, and will bid for the maximum possible budget for such investment to enhance road safety. However, road condition is not the major factor that causes fatalities on our roads.

Mr P Ramsey: Given the concern of all Members about road deaths, particularly in cross-border regions,

will the Minister outline what procedures are in place to ensure that relatives are fully informed as to the causes of road fatalities? He has already mentioned driver behaviour as a cause of fatalities.

Will the Minister inform the House how the collation of information on road deaths is used in publicity campaigns that are designed to reduce deaths on the roads?

Mr Murphy: Some elements of the Member's question relate to responsibilities of the Department of the Environment. My Department is responsible for roads: their structures, surfaces and conditions. However, informing relatives of the causes of accidents, and the use of statistics in publicity campaigns, are responsibilities of the Department of the Environment. That Department is responsible for road-safety campaigns.

As I have explained, police inform the Roads Service of accidents that have caused an injury, and if a pattern emerges at a certain spot, it is deemed a collision cluster. The Roads Service will take remedial action at that spot or along the route where it lies.

Some of the other matters that the Member has queried, which relate specifically to road safety, are the responsibility of the Department of the Environment.

Mr G Robinson: Mine is a precise question. Does the Minister agree that the Frosses Road — the A26 — is a mortality hot spot and urgently requires upgrading to a dual carriageway, considering the number of tragic deaths on that stretch of road? Will he give a timescale for that work?

Mr Murphy: The Member and others have been in touch with me on a number of occasions about the Frosses Road. There is a programme of work, but I have no precise timescale to hand. However, that information has been communicated in responses to written questions and in letters to Members from that general area.

However, I have just received a note that states that — *[Laughter.]*

No; I am sorry: that note relates to a different question altogether. *[Laughter.]*

There have been fatalities on the Frosses Road, and local people and elected representatives are concerned that remedial action be taken. I do not have the precise date for the beginning of that work, but I will communicate that information to any elected representative who requests it.

Independent Water Review Panel

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Regional Development to give his assessment of the impact on the financial models upon which the proposals of the

strand one report of the Independent Water Review Panel are based, if increased affordability tariffs are proposed. (AQO 657/08)

Mr Murphy: Any assessment of the financial impact of an improved affordability tariff is subject to the independent panel's further recommendations under strand two of its review. However, my Department's preliminary assessment suggests that that could cost £6 million per annum.

The Independent Water Review Panel's strand-one report made two main points about the affordability tariff. It suggested that the proposed arrangements were efficient at helping those who qualified: in other words, the tariff lifted out of water poverty almost all those who qualified for it. However, it did not appear to adequately target working families on low incomes or pensioners who were not entitled to benefits or who failed to claim them. Consequently, the panel has undertaken to do more work on that matter, with a view to making further recommendations in its second report.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his answer. Under what he calls the current preliminary assessment, will he assure the House that, after 2009, household rates bills will not be increased as a result of the introduction of the water tax?

Mr Murphy: The Member should know that the issue of household rates bills is the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel. My Department has set out clearly that more work will be done on the costs that will be incurred over the next couple of years or so in the second report of the Independent Water Review Panel.

I made a statement to the Assembly on 22 October, for which I had the approval of the Executive. Then, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, as part of his Budget statement, said that there would be no increase in the regional rate. There had been some expectation that the regional rate might be hiked to meet the cost of attributing some of the money towards the cost of water, as had been the case traditionally. I assure the Member that we will continue to look closely at the matter. The financial impact over the next number of years for the Executive and the general public has been set out in my statement and in the Budget statement.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat. As regards affordability tariffs and those people who would be unable to make a one-off payment, has water metering been considered? How much difference would there be between one-off payments and metering?

Mr Murphy: Domestic metering was dealt with in the panel's report, and it is a subject on which there will continue to be diverse views. It should be obvious that metering will not make everyone's bill more affordable. Although certain households with low consumption would see a reduction in their Bills,

others would have to increase. On 22 October, in response to questions following my statement in the Assembly, I expressed my view that it would be appropriate to have a debate in the coming weeks and months about what the benefits of metering are presumed to be. Such a debate will shed more light on the subject, as there has not been a proper debate on metering. I know that other people have very firm views on the matter.

In response to the second part of the panel's report and the related consultation, in order to move forward, debate — and perhaps legislation for the Assembly to vote on — will be required.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the proposed water charges — and public confidence in them — will stand or fall on the basis of the affordability tariff? Will he assure the House that he has already discussed the issue with the review panel and has outlined his suggestions in order to ensure that any form of water charging is fair, seen to be fair, and will have public confidence?

Mr Murphy: Public confidence has already been increased as a result of how the debate has been conducted. In retrospect, there was a great lack of confidence in how the previous Administration and the direct rule Administration dealt with some of the issues. The current Administration has succeeded through the good work carried out by the panel.

The Member knows that some panel members have a significant knowledge of affordability and water poverty issues. At the start, I gave them my general view on the issues. It is not appropriate for me to suggest to the panel how it might deal with those issues. The panel is independent of the Executive, and its recommendations will be considered by the Executive and the Assembly. I assure the Member that I share his view that affordability is one of the key elements.

People should not be made to suffer or to fall into water poverty as a result of our propositions. The Executive's overriding objective, despite the poisoned commentary that I heard over the weekend, is to provide the fairest possible system within the constraints facing us and to provide a transparent system so that people can understand clearly what they are being asked to pay for and the service they will receive as a result. The proposals that we brought forward, and that the Executive agreed, set us on our way, and I look forward to the second phase of the panel's report, which will bring more light to the issue of affordability. I share with the Member and many others the view that affordability is a key issue.

New Homes

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to compel developers

to pay the full cost of connecting new homes to services.
(AQO 701/08)

Mr Murphy: Connecting all new homes to services involves the cost of making a connection to the water main or public sewer and the cost of ensuring that the local network has the capacity to meet the increased demand placed upon it.

Those costs are recovered through connection charges and the new infrastructure charges that have been introduced, on a phased basis, this year. For a relatively small number of properties there is also the cost for providing a water main or for sewer extension requisitioning. For that work the water company provides a reasonable cost allowance to the developer. The arrangement is intended to fairly apportion the costs of a requisition between the developer and the company.

In its stand-one report, the independent panel recommends that that should be reviewed, and it is my intention to initiate that review shortly.

Mr McCarthy: Recently, most developers have made huge amounts of money by building new developments and apartments, some of which are required and some that are not.

However, all of those developments need sewer and water pipes, new street lighting and, sometimes, new roads, for which the taxpayer is usually obliged to pay. Does the Minister not agree that it is ridiculous that taxpayers must, effectively, subsidise the business interests of some of the wealthiest people in society?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that, in line with the panel's recommendation, I intend to review that situation. However, last year's consultation document indicated that the annual cost of requisitions — the connection charges to which the Member refers — was around £7 million, half of which was borne by the developers under proposals that were introduced by the direct rule Administration and the other half by the water company. More recent data from the current financial year suggests that those figures may have been overestimates. Clearly, the issue must be examined further. The Department intends to review the contribution that is made by developers.

Mr S Wilson: Developers are currently required to bring the infrastructure in their developments up to adoption standards before they are handed over to Roads Service. In many cases, developments have been completed for five, six or, sometimes, seven years before the roads are brought up to standard, which causes great problems for residents. What plans does the Minister have for early activation of the bonds that developers must take out, so that people do not have to wait for years before the roads in the developments in which they live are brought up to proper standards?

Mr Murphy: I accept entirely what the Member has said. Several Members have written to me or submitted questions on the matter. I understand the frustration of people who live in such developments. Obviously, the onus is on the developer to bring roads, footpaths and other infrastructure up to an acceptable standard. Roads Service cannot adopt them until that happens. However, as a situation drags on, the question is at what stage Roads Service should take the bond and carry out the work itself. Roads Service must consider the cost of the work and whether it can take on a planned schedule of work in a particular area given the tightness of the schedule elsewhere. I am happy to consider the issue and to discuss it with Roads Service. I am aware that it is a source of frustration that has been raised by many Members right across the North. On the Member's suggestion, I am content to sit down with Roads Service senior management and discuss how progress can be made.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister ensure that any changes to connection charges do not add to the cost of social housing and that there will be provision for first-time buyers?

Mr Murphy: I am not sure how the Member makes that relation. Kieran McCarthy's proposition is that any changes to connection costs should be borne by the developer. I do not see how that would add to the costs of social housing. Perhaps, the Member refers to affordable housing or social housing that is built by developers. That is fair enough. Had he said that at the outset, his question would have been clearer. The amount that a developer charges for a house and what he or she receives is a matter for the buyer in that particular market.

The panel has suggested that a review be initiated, and people have made the case that developers are receiving a substantial amount of money for the properties that they develop. Therefore, the Department has suggested that, if there is scope for an increase or reconsideration of the cost of connection in such a way that it will not affect public funds or the money that would otherwise be spent by the water company, which is received from the general public, it is quite happy to carry out a review of the matter.

Water Bills

4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact that future revaluations of domestic rating will have on the newly proposed water bills. (AQO 646/08)

Mr Murphy: The level of water and sewerage bills under a capital-value-based regime depends on two factors that are independent of each other; first, the cost of providing the services, and, secondly, the

capital value of an individual property as a proportion of the aggregate capital value of all properties. The effect of a revaluation depends on a change in the proportion rather than in the actual capital value. Although it is impossible to predict the effects of a revaluation on water and sewerage bills at an individual level, some properties increase in value more rapidly than others for a variety of reasons. It is important to keep in mind that the individual capital values are used as a means to distribute the total cost of providing the service across all customers. It is my assessment that, provided that revaluations are carried out at frequent intervals, their impact on water and sewerage bills will generally be small.

Mr B McCrea: As the water tax proposed by the Department for Regional Development will be based on capital value, will the Minister tell us how that will affect social housing tenants who — obviously — do not own their own houses?

Mr Murphy: I dispute the Member's description of the charges as a "water tax". That assumes that a progressive tax is being imposed on people rather than a charge for service provision. I understand where, perhaps, the Member has got the idea of a water tax, because he is a member of the same party as the previous First Minister. It was something that was hatched in the plans that that First Minister had with the Treasury.

The contribution made by households will be subject to affordability tariff discussions in the second part of the panel's review. The intention of the system — as I have said to another colleague — is to have the fairest and most transparent system possible. That is a marked difference from the system that was proposed by the Member's former party leader. It is certainly a marked difference from the system that was proposed by direct rule Ministers. It is our intention that the system will be fair and transparent, and that those who can least afford to pay will be the people who are asked for the least payment.

Mr O'Loan: When a revaluation happens, will the Minister explain how he will ensure that it will be made clear that an opportunity has not been taken to increase the water component of a domestic charge? There is widespread misunderstanding about the issue of charges, and people take it for granted that, in the event of a revaluation, their bills will simultaneously increase in the same way. What is the Minister doing — and what is he doing in conjunction with the Minister of Finance and Personnel — to contribute to more public understanding about that issue?

Mr Murphy: I am happy to contribute to answering your question. We will have a debate tomorrow when — if that question arises — I will be happy to address it. The question reveals a certain misunderstanding.

The contribution made from domestic and non-domestic customers will pay for water and sewerage services — whatever those services may cost. If there is a hike in the value of property, that does not necessarily mean that there will be a hike, to the same level, in water and sewerage bills.

Charges are not based on the value of a house. Rather, charges are based on the cost of the services to people across the region. Therefore, the domestic or non-domestic customer can be charged only for that which is needed to ensure provision of water and sewerage services. There is a misconception in that people think that charges are linked to the value of property, and, as the value of property increases, so do the bills. Bills, and the contributions for which domestic or non-domestic customers are asked, will pay for service provision. That will be made apparent. That is where the system's transparency and fairness is a marked improvement on the system that was formerly proposed.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. What evidence is there for the following statement in the Independent Water Review Panel's 'Strand One Report':

"Capital value is a broadly acceptable proxy for ability to pay",

especially for those who are asset rich and income poor? Will the Minister confirm that all his colleagues in the Executive backed and supported the findings of the panel? Will the Minister recommend to his Executive colleagues that they should inform their party colleagues about ministerial decisions that they have taken in Executive Committee meetings?

Mr Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to answer.

Mr Murphy: The truth is often difficult to face. The first part of the Member's question should be addressed by the panel, because it brought forward the work. Most unmeasured regimes are based on property values, in one form or another. In Scotland, for example, water charges are based on council tax bands and command a fair degree of acceptance. Earlier work that was undertaken by my Department a number of years ago suggests that, in general terms, a capital value system directs higher charges to more affluent areas of the North.

With regard to Ms Anderson's second question, the Executive agreed a way forward on the decisions that needed to be taken for the budgetary discussions, decisions and statements that were made. That received unanimous support in the Executive. The Executive, and my colleagues in the Executive subcommittee, will wish to discuss further a number of other recommendations made by the panel. I was pleased that the Executive decided the general way forward on how the panel's report impacted on the budgetary decisions that had to be taken.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Roads Service Budget

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development what funding bid he had submitted in relation to structural maintenance in the Roads Service budget. (AQO 681/08)

Mr Murphy: The House heard the statement on the October monitoring round this morning, and we have not secured any money in that round for structural maintenance. We submitted bids totalling £22 million as part of that round. The bids submitted in the current comprehensive spending review (CRS) have been in line with the Roads Service structural maintenance funding plan, and they amount to £323 million over the three-year CSR period.

Mr A Maginness: It is disappointing that the Minister's bid in the October monitoring round has not secured additional funding. The amount of money that he mentioned — £323 million over three years — is clearly not adequate to meet the real structural maintenance demands. The likely consequence of the inadequate funding that the Minister has allowed himself to receive is that although major roads may be attended to, minor roads and drainage systems will not.

Mr Murphy: I share the Member's disappointment. He will know from his former position as the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee that structural maintenance often does not receive the allocations that the Roads Service would hope for. However, as the monitoring rounds continue, there is a tendency to make up that shortfall. Members will be aware — particularly from this morning's discussion on the statement by the Minister of Finance and Personnel — that the December monitoring round often offers the most potential for securing additional funding. We will continue to push the case for such funding, and we are very much aware of our responsibilities.

It is not the case that the larger roads are prioritised and smaller roads neglected. We try to make available as much structural-maintenance funding as possible across all the Roads Service divisions. Those divisions try to spend that money as best they can, according to their own priorities. We will continue to push the case for more structural maintenance funding, as the Department has normally been successful in securing additional funding when it becomes available in the later monitoring rounds.

Mr I McCrea: Like the Member for North Belfast Mr Maginness, I too am disappointed that the funding available for structural maintenance is nowhere near adequate. I represent the rural constituency of Mid Ulster, where money is tight, to say the least. Will the Minister assure me that when any future moneys are being made available, such areas will be given a fair share of that funding? It certainly seems that rural

areas get the lesser amounts of money, given the figures for city routes.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that whatever moneys are made available will be distributed fairly. Like the Member, I represent a rural constituency that would certainly consider itself to have been neglected over many years in respect of infrastructural funding. Many border constituencies would consider that they have likewise been neglected.

However, there is a formula for distributing the money across the various Roads Service divisions. It distributes the money as fairly as possible, and I will ensure that that fairness persists. As I said in response to the previous question, we will always continue to argue for the maximum amount of money for the structural maintenance budget, not just during the budgetary discussions at the start of the year, but during the monitoring rounds and whenever any money becomes available throughout the year.

Mr Burnside: I am sure that the Minister is aware of the statistics that emerged in the Comptroller and Auditor General's 2000 report on the state of our roads. On some 17% of our roads, anti-skidding standards were below the required threshold. Are the present standards on trunk roads throughout the Province higher or lower than that 17%? If they are lower, what are the Minister and his Department doing about it?

3.30 pm

Mr Murphy: The current standards are lower, but it depends on whether the Member considers those standards to be absolute prerequisites for road safety. They are lower than the expected standard, but less money is available to spend compared with what is available for other areas. However, we will continue to argue that road safety is a key factor of the roads maintenance budget, and we will try to spend money according to our priorities. I am aware of the statistics that the Member quoted, but the overwhelming cause of road fatalities and injuries is driver behaviour rather than the surface or structure of the road. Nevertheless, we will continue to treat road safety as a priority and, where the money is available, invest in it.

Sewage Treatment Facilities

7. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of whether or not the current sewage treatment facilities at Whitehead and Ballystrudder met the standards required under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive; and to give a timescale within which proposals to upgrade sewage treatment facilities at these locations would be implemented. (AQO 685/08)

Mr Murphy: Responsibility for determining whether waste-water treatment facilities meet the appropriate treatment requirements of the EU urban waste-water treatment directive rests with the Department of the Environment's Environment and Heritage Service, which has determined that appropriate treatment facilities are not in place in either Ballystrudder or Whitehead. I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that an option to combine flows from Ballycarry, Ballystrudder and Whitehead for discharge —

Mr Speaker: I apologise for interrupting. The time for questions to the Minister for Regional Development is up.

Mr Murphy: I will respond in writing to the Member.

Mr Speaker: We now move to questions to the Minister for Social Development. I call Mr Danny Kennedy again.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

House Prices

1. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the impact of the recent cooling of house prices on the affordable homes situation in Northern Ireland. (AQO 709/08)

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have had three firsts. I wonder what that would mean for an accumulator in the bookies. I will never know.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): Sir John Semple's review and report on affordable housing were undertaken at a time when the housing market in Northern Ireland was extraordinarily buoyant, with very high price increases and with growth in the price of land outstripping that of houses. Nonetheless, the market never stays the same, and future adjustment to a less buoyant market seems inevitable. If recent media reports are to be believed, prices seem to be steadying, and, in some cases, dropping. I hope that the market is calming, but we have yet to get concrete evidence that that is happening across the board, and not just in pockets. The panel of experts that I set up for the purpose will address those issues, and I look forward to receiving its report. Coincidentally, I will meet with the chairperson of that panel later this week, and I will raise those issues with him.

In the meantime, affordability and housing investment will remain priorities for me. I am keen to identify and explore all options, in order to allow my Department to fulfil its housing and regeneration responsibilities over the next three years, notwithstanding the Budget and

investment strategy limitations. To that end, my officials are engaging with Baroness Ford of Cunninghame, chairman of English Partnerships, to gain information and advice on how such challenges, including legislative implications, have been successfully addressed in Great Britain and Ireland.

It is anticipated that the relevant information will cover the three areas of land, subsidy and planning. Baroness Ford has already commenced her work for me in that regard. It is necessary that that assignment is cognisant of, and dovetails with, the work of the capital realisation task force, and that emerging findings are available sufficiently quickly to inform the outcome of the final Programme for Government and Budget settlement, which, as Members know, is anticipated in January 2008.

Mr Kennedy: Again, I thank the Minister for a concise answer. It must be my questions.

How will the recent announcement in the draft Programme for Government of 10,000 new social homes in the next few years affect the demand for affordable homes? Will the Minister confirm whether she has access to any other funding streams to assist her in achieving her objective?

Ms Ritchie: The target set by the draft Programme for Government is for 10,000 houses over the next five years. The funds that I have received in the draft Budget are inadequate if we are to meet that target, because it will provide for only 300 houses in the coming year.

However, as a result of the capital-realisation task-force initiative, social housing has been factored into the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland as a priority for capital receipt. My Executive colleagues and I must be more innovative and creative about accessing funding from the private sector. I will consider alternative funding-investment models for the provision of social housing, such as: alternative methods of borrowing; private finance; land sales; and developer contributions. In that respect, I will meet with my ministerial colleague Minister Foster next week to discuss article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and the provision of social housing in the context of mixed-tenure development. I am sure that the Member will agree that the whole purpose of the exercise is to increase the supply of social housing.

All that will take time to deliver, but none of us must lose sight of the fact that a cost is associated with servicing borrowing and with private finance. Similar to a mortgage, that borrowing must be repaid with interest. Notwithstanding all that, I am charged with addressing the needs of the 36,000 people who are on the social-housing waiting list, around half of whom are in urgent housing need. There are around 21,000

homeless people. Housing is the challenge that faces everyone in the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister said that the affordable-homes situation has been factored into the investment strategy, and she talked about the impact that the cooling of house prices has had. Will she explain the impact that that will have on the social-housing waiting list, which she said comprises around 36,000 people?

Ms Ritchie: When the Executive discussed the investment strategy for Northern Ireland, I sought — and was given — an assurance from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that social housing would be a priority from the return on capital receipts along with schools and education. That will all come about from the probable successful outcome of the capital realisation task force. I am conscious, as the Assembly and Executive must be, of the high number of people who are in urgent need of housing, the high number of people who are homeless, and the fact that the current Budget, if implemented, would not deal adequately with addressing the decent homes standard, or with dealing with maintenance and fuel poverty. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that we lobby for a sufficient Budget and to ensure that social housing is given the priority that is being afforded to it in the investment strategy.

Lord Morrow: I am sure that it gives the Minister no pleasure to preside over a housing crisis, albeit one that is not of her creation. However, she is now charged with the responsibility of taking us out of that housing crisis. Will she consider thinking outside the box about the future for social-sector housing? Has she explored all options? Did she say that 36,000 people are on the waiting list for social housing and that there are 35,000 vacant homes in Northern Ireland? Surely it is time to tackle the issue of vacant homes: to date the Housing Executive has not given that the necessary consideration. Will the Minister also undertake to re-examine the delivery of social-sector housing, and in particular, examine the roles of the Housing Executive and housing associations?

Ms Ritchie: In May 2007, I told the House that I had instructed the Executive to implement an empty-homes strategy, which was one of the recommendations of the Semple Report. At that time, I was told that there were 40,000 empty homes in Northern Ireland, of which around 5,000 were in the social-housing sector and which belonged to the Housing Executive and housing associations.

In July, I received an interim report, which identified about 5,000 houses that could be improved at a reasonable cost and returned to that sector. Last week, when I met the chairperson, the chief executive and board members of the Housing Executive, they

promised that I would receive a further report, which I hope to get this week. I impressed on them that I needed the report as quickly as possible, because some void houses could be improved and made ready for use. People could subsequently be allocated suitable houses in their area of choice.

Girdwood Site

2. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Social Development to make a statement on the future of the Girdwood site. (AQO 721/08)

Ms Ritchie: The Girdwood site will be developed as part of a wider area that includes the former Crumlin Road jail. The regeneration and redevelopment of that combined site is progressing on the basis of an integrated master plan. As Members will be aware, on 16 October 2007, I announced a period of public consultation on the draft master plan for the site, which is due to end on 22 January 2008.

There has been considerable speculation about the site's potential to accommodate social housing. I assure Members that the draft master plan simply illustrates how the site might be developed. I am conscious of the Government's commitment to a shared future for all the people of Northern Ireland. In that strategic context, I hope that the site will be developed as a place where everyone can live, work and socialise.

Dr Farry: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I want to focus on social housing and, in particular, a shared future. The Minister is aware that some people, bizarrely, argue that the goal of a shared future is a reason for not having social housing on that site. Will the Minister assure the House that there is no contradiction between the provision of social housing on the land and the promotion of good relations?

Sticking to the shared-future agenda, what steps will she take to ensure that the land is open to residents from all sections of the community and will remain so in the future?

Ms Ritchie: The —

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to answer the question.

Ms Ritchie: I am acutely aware of the shortage, problems and crises in housing in north Belfast. I have no doubt that the site has the potential to meet some of the pressing housing needs there. Indeed, the advice from the master-plan consultants is that new housing of mixed tenure is a vital component of the site's regeneration. I am strongly compelled by the need for shared housing, investment opportunities and recreational space on that site, because the needs and

requirements of the people of north Belfast must be catered for.

Mr Cobain: Will the Minister tell the House how much progress she has made in discussions with the local communities about housing on the Girdwood site?

Ms Ritchie: Mr Cobain was a member of the Committee that discussed the master plan and was aware of all its work before I announced the plan for the draft consultation. He also knew about some of the problems that arose. I met the Member last week to discuss a particular housing issue in north Belfast, and I know that there are extremely long waiting lists for housing in certain communities there. I am determined that all Members of the House reach an adequate solution to the housing crisis that has been happening for years. It is an urgent issue that requires a cross-departmental resolution from me and all members of the Executive.

Ms Ni Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's answer. Her recognition of the high level of need for social housing in north Belfast is to be commended.

I declare an interest as a former member of the Girdwood advisory panel; I attended many of its meetings. I am aware of the concerns in the community. However, will the Minister reaffirm that a mix of social and affordable housing will meet the objective need of those on the housing waiting list, and that the accommodation needs of key workers around the site will be factored in, where possible?

3.45 pm

Ms Ritchie: When I launched the draft master plan, and even prior to that, I had several meetings with political representatives who are members of the steering group to take forward the plan for the Girdwood and Crumlin Road site. We must promote equality, we must address the housing needs and the acute housing crisis that has been endemic in north Belfast for several years, and we must deploy a caring, compassionate attitude to it. I am sure that everyone will invest their consultations and their work in it. I look forward to working with all parties in respect of that. There must be a shared, equal approach to the provision of housing on that site.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her reassurance that social housing will be a top objective in the plan for the Girdwood site, given the grave and chronic housing shortage in north Belfast. This is an opportunity for people — not a threat to any community — to develop the site in the interests of all the people of north Belfast, Catholic and Protestant. No one has anything to fear from the full, comprehensive development of that windfall site. I urge the Minister to continue her work to provide leadership in that direction.

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member that the Crumlin Road and Girdwood site provides an opportunity for all the people of Belfast. That is why, on 16 October, I urged all the residents of north Belfast, including those with an economic interest, whether they owned a retail establishment or had investment opportunities or wanted to invest, to make a contribution to the consultation process. I also urge all public representatives, from MPs to MLAs and councillors in north Belfast, to make a contribution to the consultation process. No one has anything to fear from a fully comprehensive development on that site, to include affordable housing, social housing, development opportunities and recreational space. We must look forward, and we must provide for the needs of the current generation and of future generations if we are to resolve the housing and investment problems and to provide a better way of life for everyone in the constituency of North Belfast.

Seimle Review

3. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the funding bid she has made to meet the recommendations of the Seimle Review.

(AQO 668/08)

Newbuild Housing Plan

4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail what alternative plans her Department has developed as a contingency, if it is not fully successful in its bid for £1.1 billion for a new build housing plan, in light of the current budget restraints and the ongoing Comprehensive Spending Review.

(AQO 693/08)

Newbuild Social and Affordable Housing

14. **Mr S Wilson** asked the Minister for Social Development what action she is taking to ensure that there is an adequate provision of affordable and social housing in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 609/08)

Ms Ritchie: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3, 4 and 14 together, in the light of the similarities between them.

A bid for £2.173 billion, which includes receipts from house and land sales, has been made available to the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI 2) for the social-housing development programme to provide 2,000 new houses each year, as recommended in the Seimle Report, over the next 10 years. In case the bid is not fully successful, methods to increase the supply of homes in the new social-housing development programme are under consideration and are being

evaluated. However, it may take time to realise the benefits of those alternative methods. We intend to maximise the developer contributions provided for in article 40 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, and my officials are working with their colleagues in DOE and DRD to advance that.

Next week, I shall meet my ministerial colleague Arlene Foster, the Minister of the Environment, to consider ways in which we can speed up the introduction of article 40 developer contributions. Several Members from all sides of the Chamber have discussed that issue with me, because we are all aware of the need to increase the supply of social housing.

Similarly, we are examining an aggressive sale of Housing Executive land to bring in much-needed capital finance. I am looking to the capital realisations task force, which was established under the auspices of the Strategic Investment Board, for a guarantee that the full receipts for the sale of any surplus lands that belong to the Department for Social Development or the Housing Executive will be retained by the Department for allocation to the housing budget.

I acknowledge the £20 million that has been given to the Department as part of the October monitoring round. That will give a much-needed lift by providing for approximately 200 starts in the social-housing development programme, and although I am disappointed that that will not allow me to reach the target of 1,500 new starts, it will still allow approximately 1,100 starts during this financial year. I will continue to make representations in further monitoring rounds to secure additional finances, because as everyone in Northern Ireland, the Assembly and the Executive knows, social housing should be a number-one priority.

I am very keen to progress the Semple recommendations on affordability, but unfortunately his work did not include any cost-benefit analysis of any of the report's 80 recommendations. I must ensure that the implementation of those recommendations will assist us in providing affordable housing — roofs over people's heads — and that they provide the best opportunity, the timeliest mechanism and value for money in delivering that objective.

The Department also funds the co-ownership scheme, which is aimed at providing those on low incomes who would not be eligible for a full mortgage to become homeowners on an equity-sharing, part-mortgage, part-rent basis.

Mr Burns: I thank the Minister for her answer. Bearing in mind that Northern Ireland is facing a housing crisis, does the Minister agree that the large banks of land that the Housing Executive holds could be sold off to fund social housing?

Ms Ritchie: I agree with the Member that there is a housing crisis, but it is not of the Assembly's making,

because Northern Ireland inherited a woefully inadequate Budget.

Notwithstanding that, we must examine all possible measures to increase the amount of money that is available to the Department in order to deal with the social-housing crisis. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive holds an extensive land bank, which it has built up in anticipation of current and future housing development. In the past three years, land and houses to the value of more than £400 million have been sold to facilitate a number of capital programmes, and this year we are planning for lands and house sales amounting to £140 million. Over the next three years, I will require the Housing Executive to sell surplus land and housing to the value of £475 million through the house sales scheme.

The Housing Executive's current land bank and housing stock has a significant value, but it also creates a significant opportunity for social and economic development, because housing is central to regeneration and improving people's lives. The portfolios of land and buildings are managed and reviewed regularly, and opportunities for disposal are considered. The Housing Executive has approximately 300 primary sites that are ready for development or earmarked for development in the near future.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister quoted a figure of £20 million for 200 new starts, which equates to £100,000 per house. Is that correct?

Ms Ritchie: As I said, I have received £20 million in the October monitoring round, which will enable 200 new starts and will allow further work to be done in the Northern Ireland co-ownership scheme.

Mr S Wilson: The Minister has talked about sale of land and developer contributions in funding new housing, although this is coming at a time when developers are going to be less likely to make contributions than they were two or three years ago. However, she has not mentioned the considerable cash assets that are lying in the bank accounts of housing associations. Those assets could release up to £120 million in cash, and against which — even if the current rate of borrowing by housing associations were considered — a further £150 million to spend on housing could be released. Has she given any consideration to using those assets, which, if properly utilised — given her own calculations a moment ago — could enable the building of another 2,000 houses?

Ms Ritchie: The Member and I have had discussions about article 40 contributions, and I take his point on board that we are now entering a phase in which developers may not find it as attractive to explore that route. However, when I have had discussions with the Member's party colleague the

Minister of the Environment, I hope that we will be able to find some new and innovative ways of dealing with that.

Cash receipts and housing association assets are, along with others, being explored by the interdepartmental affordability implementation group on the Semple Report, which I chair. We hope to be able to report by December. I am very conscious that the Housing Executive is also exploring that issue because the bottom line is that we must be able to increase the supply of social housing in order to cater for the large number of people who are homeless or who are on the waiting list — many of whom are in housing stress. I will get back to the Member on that issue.

Child Support Agency

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an update on future plans for Child Support Agency jobs in Northern Ireland.
(AQO 692/08)

Ms Ritchie: It is my intention that the existing Northern Ireland Child Support Agency should be wound up and that the delivery of its services should be brought under the direct control of my Department. In reaching that decision, I concluded that the needs of clients and staff would be best served by the agency's staff remaining under the umbrella of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The size and scale of the new child support organisation has not been determined, so I am not in a position to assess the impact on jobs.

I commend the agency's staff for the hard work that they do. They handle complex and challenging work, and do so in a caring, compassionate and sensitive manner that recognises the emotional difficulties experienced by the parents who they deal with. I am confident that the dedication and commitment demonstrated by the staff of the Child Support Agency will carry the organisation through the challenging period ahead with a continued clear focus on getting money to more children. I have written to all MLAs indicating what I have done, as well as to the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance — the trade union that represents the vast majority of the agency's staff — and to the staff in the Child Support Agency outlining what I have just said.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister must be aware of the absolute frustration endured by so many people in our constituencies because of results from the Child Support Agency. Whatever plans the Minister has for staff in the agency, they have to produce positive results in as short a time as possible — no years of agonising wait. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that she has no plans to privatise the Child Support Agency?

Ms Ritchie: I gave the assurance that I have no plans to privatise the Child Support Agency in my previous answer. I am conscious of the need to deliver a good quality service to parents throughout Northern Ireland, who have suffered undue pressure and stress.

Moreover, I have been conscious of the needs of many staff who are employed in the Child Support Agency and who work on behalf of parents throughout Northern Ireland and eastern England. That is why I decided to protect people in Northern Ireland and bring the agency within the ambit of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

4.00 pm

Mr Campbell: I am glad to hear that the Minister will consult widely before going down the route that she has outlined with regard to the Child Support Agency. That is a good principle, particularly in light of recent events. Assuming that she proceeds with her plan — and she has notified the Social Development Committee of her intention to do so — how will she address the considerable under-representation of the Protestant community in the agency when it comes within the ambit of the Northern Ireland Civil Service?

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that Mr Campbell, the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, knows that the Civil Service appoints staff on the basis of the merit principle.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of extensive concerns among staff in the Child Support Agency. What assurances can she give to those people about their jobs?

Ms Ritchie: I have arranged to meet Lord McKenzie, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Work and Pensions, later this month to discuss future working arrangements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to discuss the protection of jobs. I will write to the Member with a more detailed answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise to the Minister, but, unfortunately, time is up.

Adjourned 4.02 pm.

