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# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 7 July 2009

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

### Ministerial Appointments

**Mr Speaker:** Having been given notice by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, I have summoned the Assembly, under Standing Order 11, to meet today for the purpose of a ministerial statement on public expenditure, the 2009-2010 June monitoring and provisional out-turn 2008-09 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Before we move to the statement, I will make a number of announcements. I was notified that the resignations of Mr Nigel Dodds as Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Gregory Campbell as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Mr Sammy Wilson as Minister of the Environment were tendered to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in accordance with section 18(9)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Those resignations took effect on 30 June 2009.

In accordance with section 18(10) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, made the following nominations: Mr Sammy Wilson to hold the office of Minister of Finance and Personnel; Mr Nelson McCausland to hold the office of Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure; and Mr Edwin Poots to hold the office of Minister of the Environment.

Mr Wilson, Mr McCausland and Mr Poots have affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office, as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The affirmations were witnessed by me, as Speaker, and by Mr Trevor Reaney, the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General, in my office on 30 June 2009.

Therefore, I confirm that Mr Wilson has taken up office as Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr McCausland has taken up office as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and Mr Poots has taken up office as Minister of the Environment.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister notified me that they have appointed Mr Robin Newton to replace the Rt Hon Jeffrey Donaldson as a junior Minister in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Mr Newton has affirmed the terms of the Pledge of Office as set out in schedule 4 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The affirmation was witnessed by me, as Speaker, and by Mr Trevor Reaney, the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General, in my office on 1 July 2009. Mr Newton has taken up office as a junior Minister.

## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

### Presumption of Death Bill

#### Royal Assent

**Mr Speaker:** The Presumption of Death Bill has received Royal Assent. The Presumption of Death Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law on 2 July 2009.

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

### Public Expenditure: 2009-2010 June Monitoring and Provisional Out-turn 2008-2009

**Mr Speaker:** I now move to the business to be transacted today in accordance with the notice that was given to me under Standing Order 11. I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make a statement on the June monitoring for 2009-2010 and the provisional out-turn for 2008-09.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson):** I thought that I would make myself popular in my new post by asking everybody to come back from their holidays. It is nice to see that so many Members have not yet left the country and have been able to attend this afternoon. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Northern Ireland Departments' spending performance of last year and on the Executive's decisions on the management of the public expenditure position for the current financial year as part of the June monitoring round.

I will begin by addressing the provisional out-turn for 2008-09. During 2008-09, concerns were expressed that the Executive faced a substantial funding gap, with the result that there would be a shortfall in the level of public spending against the plans set out in the Budget. However, on the basis of the provisional out-turn position reported to my Department, I am pleased to inform Members that the Executive have delivered record levels of spending on our public services in 2008-09; that is, £8,600 million in current expenditure and £1,500 million in net capital investment. The latter figure is an increase of 32% on the equivalent figure for 2007-08, while the overall spend by Northern Ireland Departments has exceeded £10,000 million for the first time in our history of departmental expenditure limit spending.

In addition, despite the shortfall in capital receipts, Northern Ireland Departments were still able to take forward £1,700 million in gross capital investment — the net capital investment plus capital receipts — in 2008-09, which is equivalent to a 20.1% increase on the previous year. That strong performance is a result of the proactive decisions that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) made in 2008-09 and of the significant reduction in end-year underspend that Departments declared. The overall level of underspend by Northern Ireland Departments was £43.8 million in 2008-09, which equates to a rate of 0.5% compared with 2.1% in the previous year. There are further details of those figures in the statement.

The position on capital expenditure is somewhat distorted, given that the Department for Regional

Development incurred a significant overspend because of additional costs resulting from the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had an overspend on the farm nutrient management scheme. The Executive were aware of the potential for further costs to be incurred in both those areas, and that was reflected in the headroom that was incorporated into the spring Supplementary Estimates for the two relevant Departments. As a result, Northern Ireland Departments have declared a total overspend of £16.6 million in capital investment. However, the flexibility for the Executive to switch Budget cover from resource to capital means that the capital expenditure overspend is offset by the current expenditure underspend.

The overall outcome is a total underspend of only £27.2 million, or 0.3%, of planned spend. In other words, we spent 99.7% of the Budget in 2008-09. That is a vast improvement on the performance of local Departments under direct rule. For example, in 2005-06, almost £380 million, or 4.4%, of the total resources was left unspent.

In the current challenging economic situation, the best way in which the Executive can provide support to local families and businesses is to deliver against the plans that are set out in the Budget and the Programme for Government. Although the level of public spending is only one piece of the jigsaw, the performance of Departments last year on that measure provides clear evidence that the Executive are making a real difference to the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Further confirmation comes from the end-year delivery report for the Programme for Government for the period 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2009, which was the subject of a written statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 30 June 2009, with details placed in the Assembly Library. That assessment illustrates that progress on the vast majority of targets was broadly on track or better. A major risk to delivery was identified in only five of the 66 key goals and commitments, and in 27 of the 331 public service agreements.

However, despite the strong overall spending performance, it has been disappointing that some Departments have breached the public expenditure limits set by the Executive. Although there are mitigating circumstances in some cases, it is, nevertheless, essential that accounting officers and Ministers recognise the importance of those controls and the requirement that they live within them. In the coming months, my officials will work with Departments to gain a full understanding of the reasons for such breaches and of the remedial actions that will need to be put in place to avoid a reoccurrence.

The 2008-09 provisional out-turn position also has implications for our future management of public expenditure, because the improved levels of underspend in Departments clearly indicate that we must reduce our use of overcommitment as a tool for planning and managing public expenditure.

That brings me to the Executive's decisions on the June monitoring round, which is the first monitoring round of the 2009-2010 financial year. The role and purpose of the in-year monitoring process is to allow the Executive to make optimal use of the resources at our disposal by reviewing departmental expenditure plans in light of the most recent information available. The opening position for 2009-2010 reflects the fact that the plans that are set out in the 2008-2011 Budget were predicated on an overcommitment of £80 million in respect of current expenditure and zero for capital investment.

Since the Budget was agreed, a number of changes in the level of resources that are available to the Executive have been made, including Barnett allocations from the 2008 UK Budget and pre-Budget report; shortfalls in central receipts as a result of the economic downturn in relation to the work of the capital assets realisation team; and the reduced requirements that were declared as part of the strategic stocktake. In addition, as part of the first monitoring round of the year, it was necessary to confirm the Budget cover for the previous spending commitments into which the Executive entered before any spending bids that were submitted by Departments could be considered.

*12.15 pm*

The most significant spending commitment for 2009-2010 arises from the Executive's decision in November 2008 to defer the introduction of domestic water charges for a further year. The resulting loss of income has led to a pressure of some £170 million for the Department for Regional Development. However, that will be offset by the fact that the planned reduction in the regional rates to mitigate the impact of water charging will no longer be required.

There are a number of other previous spending commitments, including the reduction in regional rates income as a result of the decision to freeze non-domestic rates in cash terms; the return of funding to Departments in respect of proactive slippage during the 2008-09 December monitoring round; the Executive's agreement in the Budget 2008-2011 that the costs of funding shared services for all Departments would be made available as part of the in-year monitoring process; funding for integrated development fund projects that was previously committed in principle, which includes education initiatives in west Belfast and the greater Shankill area and the Centre of Excellence in Intelligent Systems projects in the north-west; and,

finally, the funding requirement to meet the running costs of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Overall, as a consequence of decisions that were previously taken by the Executive, £123 million in current expenditure allocations and £91.5 million of capital investment have been made to Departments as part of the June monitoring round.

Departments have declared reduced requirements of £18.7 million in respect of current expenditure and £20.2 million in respect of capital investment as part of the June monitoring round, which are over and above those that have already been declared in the strategic stocktake and are set out in table B, which is attached to the printed version of my statement.

The Executive have allowed Departments to move resources across spending areas where the movement reflects a proactive management decision to enable Departments to manage emerging pressures within their existing allocations. The most significant of those relates to the significant transfer of funding that I agreed with the Minister for Social Development to allow her Department to fully deliver in 2009 against the public service agreement target for new social housing units.

In their June monitoring returns, Departments identified £187 million of current expenditure pressures. In respect of capital investment, Departments have submitted bids of £206.5 million, with the majority of those pressures arising in the Department for Regional Development and the Department for Social Development. Details of all bids that have been submitted by Departments are set out in table C. Those bids for additional resources need to be seen in the context of improved spending performance by Departments in 2008-09, which means that it is necessary to significantly reduce the level of overcommitment with which we conclude each monitoring round, compared with the approach that was adopted in previous years.

In light of the relatively small amounts that have been declared by Departments as reduced requirements, the overall financial position meant that the Executive were, unfortunately, not in a position to make further allocations at present, over and above the £215 million that has been made available for existing commitments. The one exception relates to social housing, for which the Executive agreed a £20 million capital allocation. That will provide immediate further assistance in the area with the dual benefit of allowing necessary maintenance work to proceed while providing important support to the construction sector in these difficult times.

On the basis of decisions that have been taken as part of the June monitoring round, the Executive will conclude the round with an overcommitment of £43.2 million in current expenditure and £70.4 million in capital investment, and that will need to be managed

downwards in future rounds. The level of reduced requirements that was surrendered by Departments in previous years indicates that that is a sustainable position at present.

It should be noted that, although lower levels of underspending on the part of Departments may curtail our ability to make additional allocations, it means that financial management is improving and that Departments are delivering on planned programmes. That is, of course, a positive achievement in these difficult times. I therefore commend the June monitoring position and the provisional out-turn 2008-09 to the Assembly.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister, and I congratulate him on his appointment. Tá fáilte romhat. I thank him for the briefing that I received on this morning's statement. His remarks on the economic downturn at least indicate agreement on a change in the economy's climate. However, it is clear that we have much work to do.

I also commend the statement and the performance on the underspend that it reflects. That was not just an achievement of the targets that were set out in the Programme for Government; in fact, those targets were exceeded. It must be acknowledged that, given the history, that took a considerable effort across all Departments.

During evidence sessions on the Budget stocktake, departmental officials informed the Committee of ongoing negotiations with Treasury on end-year flexibility to access the £358 million that Departments failed to spend in 2007-08 and that has been returned to the Treasury. Will the Minister inform the Assembly of the outcome of those negotiations? When will the position be known about access to the Executive's unspent moneys, which was announced today? The greatly improved performance still leaves an underspend of almost £44 million.

Finally, will the Minister comment on the overall target for efficiency achievements? The Committee is aware of the potential difficulties that are developing for Departments in achieving efficiencies in 2009-2010, given the economic downturn. The Committee requested the outcome of DFP's analysis of individual Departments' efficiency plans earlier in the year. That has not yet been received, but I hope that it will be soon. When will the analysis be available to the Committee and the Assembly? What role will DFP play in ensuring the achievement of efficiency targets in the current year? Most significantly, when will more information be available to the Assembly and the Departments on the additional efficiencies for 2010-11, which were threatened in the Chancellor's Budget statement?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I thank the Chairperson for his remarks, and I look forward to working with him and the Committee over the next number of years. He referred to my views on climate change. Not only is the climate not heating up, but the economy has cooled a little. That has caused all kinds of issues for Northern Ireland.

The report on the review of departmental efficiencies will be coming to me. I know that there has been a delay in the Committee's receiving that report, but hopefully it should be available to the Committee shortly after the Assembly returns in the autumn.

The Chairperson also mentioned end-year flexibility. Discussions are ongoing with the Treasury about access to that flexibility. I hope that I will receive some indication from the Treasury about that, and, as soon as I have, which will be in the autumn, it will be communicated to the Committee. I have only just been informed of the position for 2009-2010 on the Budget and the efficiency savings. I will have to look at it in detail to see what the implications are for Departments before returning to the Committee on that issue after the summer recess.

**Mr I McCrea:** I welcome the Minister's statement. He will be aware of my concerns about the Minister for Social Development's decision to stop funding housing replacement grants and of the personal circumstances of one of my constituents, who was close to taking her life because of that decision. Will housing replacement grants be reintroduced now that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has given a financial commitment to the Minister for Social Development? Will he confirm that the decision to make that commitment was based on the inability of the Minister for Social Development to use her money wisely and that the Department of Finance and Personnel should not have been blamed for that problem?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In my statement, I recognised that we have given considerable attention to the housing budget and that we appreciate its importance. I also recognised that many Members have raised housing issues, whether they have been about grant allocations or the social housing programme. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has had significant pressures, which is one reason that we considered it for the extra money. A high proportion of the newbuild programme and the social housing programme was dependent on the sale of assets, which, because of people's difficulties in getting mortgages, has hit the Department's budget significantly. As a result, I have made £20 million in capital available to the Minister for Social Development, which should enable her to make moneys available for grant uptake. In return, in her current spending, she is looking to move money to housing maintenance and to Egan projects.

There is a double dunt there, as it were, in the form of the additional capital money and because money in the current departmental budget is being moved for housing maintenance. That will be welcome news to tenants, to people who rely on funding from the Housing Executive for grants or housing maintenance, and, of course, to numerous owners of small building firms in Northern Ireland. The multiplier effect of that on local economies will be very significant.

**Mr McNarry:** We all know why we are here, which is that papers could not be presented on time previously. I am sure that the new Minister will have noted that and will ensure that it will not happen again. I welcome him warmly; one hopes that he has better luck in identifying holes in his balance sheet than he has had heretofore in finding evidence of a hole in the ozone layer.

Given that the asset sales board is a main plank of the United Kingdom Government's autumn financial strategy, will the Minister clarify the current status of any potential receipts, particularly from assets on property sales, given that those are not included in the June monitoring round? What is the current in-year situation on the level of income from anticipated receipts?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I know that this answer has been given before, but it bears repetition. As I said, I appreciate that so many Members have come back from their holidays to hear me speak on this issue. The monitoring round could not be presented before the end of the previous session because of the Member's party. That is why the Assembly was recalled. The Member's own Ministers would not agree — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr McNarry:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. There are no points of order during a statement. I am happy to take a point of order after the statement.

12.30 pm

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Member appears to know as much about the rules of this House as he does about the Budget.

Let me make it clear: this statement was not presented before the end of the last Assembly session because the two Ulster Unionist Party Ministers would not agree to the paper, and, indeed, asked for extra time to examine it. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order, order.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Of course, they were in exactly the same position as all other Ministers. My predecessor agreed to allow Ministers extra time to consider the paper, yet now we are criticised for that. The Ulster Unionists cannot have it both ways. If allowing extra time to read the

paper creates a delay, so be it. I know that the Ulster Unionist Party does not like that answer.

I am sure that we will hear more in the debate about holes in the balance sheet, but let me remind Members what happened: we set out a programme for spending of which we spent 99.7%. We invested £1,700 million in capital in the Northern Ireland economy, which means jobs in the construction industry. If that is a hole in the balance sheet, I do not know where the Member is coming from. We should be celebrating success, not looking for spurious criticism.

Mr McNarry asked about the realisation of capital assets. The Member will know — I made it clear in the statement — that we are in difficult economic times. This is probably not the best time to sell capital assets. I know that the Ulster Unionist Party likes to sell Northern Ireland short, but let us not sell it short on capital assets, too. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether that was someone choking, Mr Speaker.

We will sell assets to realise capital when market conditions are most appropriate.

**Some Members:** Oh.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I hear “Ohs” from the Ulster Unionist Party. Would we want it any other way? Even though it has been difficult to raise the full value of capital assets, we had record capital investment last year. If we want to retain those levels of investment, we will look for opportunities to realise capital assets.

I will answer the Member’s question about assets, and I hope that I have the figures right. We had hoped to obtain more than £400 million from the release of capital assets; however, as a result of the economic position, the current market value would be less than half of that. Therefore, we will have to choose our time to realise the money from such assets, and that will have implications.

**Mr O’Loan:** I thank the Minister for his statement and wish him well in office. The Assembly wants to know whether there will be a new approach from the Minister to deal with the economy, construction, housing and unemployment. The handling of this monitoring round has been a debacle. There was an attempt to bypass the Assembly. The previous Minister of Finance and Personnel had to be forced to allow this statement to be presented to the Assembly, and I welcome the new Minister here today.

The former Minister put his faith in monitoring rounds when a fundamental revision of the Budget was needed.

I welcome the £20 million that has been put into housing maintenance. Will the Minister commit to following the lead that he has started and to revising the Budget substantially to invest in the areas that will have the most rapid and most effective economic benefits?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Mr Speaker, do I look like someone who has been forced to come here this afternoon? I am enjoying the opportunity to make a statement. I thought that I would not get my first outing as Minister of Finance and Personnel until September. I assure the Member that I have not been dragged into the Chamber screaming or shouting. I welcome the fact that we have had the opportunity to come here this afternoon. I know that the Members opposite thought that they would have to get 30 signatures to enable the plenary sitting to take place. However, that was not necessary, because it was volunteered to have the meeting. Of course I believe that the issues should be subject to scrutiny.

The SDLP has long been pleading for a review and almost a new budgetary process. Indeed, it has put forward its proposals for what should be included in that budgetary process. The odd thing is that, when I look at it, the new approach would have enabled us to have a radical re-examination of the Budget. The full sum of the SDLP’s spending proposals would have been to reallocate £220 million in 2009-2010 and another £187 million next year. Mr Speaker, I know that you like answers to be kept short, but I would love to go through all the issues and point out the ways in which the SDLP said that it would raise that money. Members would find that it would be substantially short of £220 million or £187 million — very far short. Indeed, the SDLP would be taking money away from sources that are important for investment in the economy and for improving the infrastructure of the economy, which is the very thing that it wants to do.

Let us look at what happens. Somehow or other there is a myth that we stuck the Budget in concrete after 2008 and that there has been no change, and, therefore, as economic situations changed, we remained almost fossilised in our budgetary process. However, a look at the in-year monitoring process over the past two years, which has been much criticised by the SDLP, shows that it has led to a reallocation not of £220 million but £800 million. Therefore, the in-year monitoring rounds have enabled us to redirect resources around Departments and around the system to respond to the very pressures that the Member spoke about. Before we go down the route of saying that we need a new Budget, we must ensure that we have certainty and flexibility, and a three-year budgetary process with in-year monitoring rounds provides both.

**Dr Farry:** I welcome the Minister to the Assembly. When looking through the June monitoring bids, it is remarkable to note how many of them do not relate to the economy. However, the Minister said that we still have a cold in our economy.

What has happened to the Barnett consequential of some £60 million that arose out of the April 2009 UK Budget? The Minister mentioned only the 2008 Budget.

Will he tell us whether that money has actually arrived with us and, if not, why not? If it has, will he explain where that money has gone and whether it has been used to simply offset the potential efficiency savings that we have been asked to provide? If that is the case, does the Minister agree that that shows a total lack of imagination by the Executive and a failure to follow the lead of the UK Government in further investments to help the economy, whether that is through energy efficiency, renewable energy or social housing?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Perhaps the Member asked that question out of ignorance, or perhaps he is trying to score a cheap political point. A total of £69 million is available as a result of Barnett consequential, and we have sought to use it imaginatively. Looking ahead, we know that there are significant pressures on the Budget for 2010-11 as a result of efficiency savings of £122 million that we have to find.

We are aware of those pressures and have looked for one-off expenditures that are due to occur in 2010-11 that would put unbearable pressure on next year's Budget. We are seeking to bring those forward, and we are talking to Departments. The money from the Barnett consequential will be used to relieve pressures and to anticipate the pressures that we know will arise next year because of the efficiency savings that Departments will have to absorb. I cannot give the Member an answer regarding particular projects at the moment. I hope that the Committee will have sight of some of the projects when we have finished talking to Departments.

I reject the accusation that we have not sought to use the money imaginatively or to plan ahead. Indeed, we may live to regret it if we were to follow the Member's suggestion and spend the money in a knee-jerk way on propositions that appear attractive at the moment. We have sought to look ahead and ascertain how the money can be used imaginatively. Members will be notified when we know what the money will be spent on.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton):** I welcome the Minister to the Chamber in his first appearance as the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Although he has been in post for only a couple of days, has he given any consideration to or is his Department preparing for some of the public expenditure cuts that are expected in 2011-12 and beyond? Those are cuts that the Labour Party may introduce and that the Conservative Party is likely to introduce.

**Mr Kennedy:** That is a planted question.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I assure Members that I never receive planted questions. I prefer surprises to planted questions.

We have to look ahead, but it is very difficult to anticipate exactly what will happen after 2011. We

know that there will be reductions in real spending, although we expect that there will be marginal increases in cash terms. Nevertheless, there will be challenges for Departments. We thought that the current period would be much tougher than it has been. However, we need to look ahead, and we know, for example, that there will be big reductions in capital spending.

We should not simply consider the issue as a budgetary exercise. We should consider what we can do as an Executive and a Department to shape the entire economy. That is one reason why we are seeking to grow the private sector of the economy. We expect that there will be consequences for public sector finances. The real investment, which peaked this year, may be affected by the decisions that the Labour Government or any future Administration make to deal with the UK's huge debts.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is good to be here voluntarily and that the 30 signatures of Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party were not needed. The Ulster Unionist Party did not provide signatures, but it does not let that get in the way of a good sound bite.

**Mr Kennedy:** Partners in government.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Happy birthday for yesterday, Danny.

It would be worthwhile for the Minister to repeat his assurances regarding the budget for housing maintenance, repair, adaptation and contractual arrangements, particularly for tenants who are in dire need, such as those to whom Ian McCrea referred. The Minister for Social Development is buying off-the-shelf housing, and, in one area, more than £1 million was spent on six homes. Is the Minister content that that represents value for money?

12.45 pm

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I shall take the Member's second question first. There is an obligation on Departments to seek value for money, as in straitened economic circumstances the Executive want all Departments to receive the maximum amount of money. I am not aware of the specific issue to which the Member referred; however, if she believes that we are not receiving value for money in purchasing social housing, she should take the matter up with the Minister for Social Development.

In relation to the provision of the extra £20 million to the Department for Social Development, I have made it clear that that is capital money. The maintenance and repair of houses is taken from the current expenditure element of that Department's budget. However, the extra capital money should ease some of the pressures on the Minister, and it has been agreed that she will find money in her Department's budget to pay for

housing maintenance and the Egan contracts. There has been significant lobbying in those areas.

DSD has had particular problems with its budget due to the fact that a high proportion of its capital spending was to be garnered from capital receipts. As I said in an earlier answer, those receipts have not been realised to the extent that was hoped, and the Executive decided to release additional capital funding to that Department, which should, in turn, release money for grants and adaptations. The Member stressed the importance of such expenditure, and, as constituency representatives, many Members regularly receive representations on that issue.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hilditch):** On behalf of the Committee, I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement of the additional capital expenditure allocation of £20 million; it will bring welcome support to the construction industry at this difficult time. The Minister for Social Development left very quickly after the statement was made; I hope that she has gone to begin work on using that money. However, most Members will accept that the Department's budget is limited and that the Minister has limited room for manoeuvre.

The Department for Social Development's June monitoring round submission referred to capital projects that were expected to be delayed. What is the Minister's view on the future allocation of funding from delayed DSD capital programmes, such as the Royal Exchange project? Furthermore, will the funds from future monitoring rounds be allocated to social housing developments or Housing Executive refurbishment work?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** How moneys are managed in Departments is the responsibility of each individual Minister.

The fact that the Royal Exchange project will not be going ahead will, I believe, lead to a significant release of resources. I should have the exact figure, but I cannot remember it off the top of my head. A significant amount of money should become available later. That is why — perhaps this will answer Mr O'Loan's question — it is important to have regular monitoring rounds so that when pressures reduce and money becomes available it can be reallocated either in the Department's budget or in the overall Budget.

**Mr Gardiner:** Like other Members, I congratulate the Minister on his new post and look forward to co-operating with him.

I am sure that the Minister is aware that the swine flu pandemic is unfortunately beginning to take hold in Northern Ireland and that there will be a cost to that. Will the Minister confirm that the Department of Health will be provided with the funds that it needs to

meet that pandemic so that we can deal with it without putting pressure on other areas of the Health Service?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I wish that I had a magic wand. However, there may have been and could still be an opportunity to do exactly what the Member asks. Indeed, that is my objective, because it is a serious issue and we will have to fund it when the pressures come.

My objective is to fund the response to swine flu without hurting other Departments. However, that has not been helped by the crass way in which the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who has become the maverick Minister of this Assembly and Executive, has dealt with the issue.

I would love, on some occasion, to give Members an economics lesson on opportunity cost. The concept is that resources that are used for one purpose are not available for another, unless a way can be found to obtain additional resources. The Welsh and Scottish Administrations made that their aim, as did the Northern Ireland Administration. That was until the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety decided to go on a solo run. Although he has spent only about £10 million in connection with the outbreak, he demands that £52 million be made available immediately. The only way in which that money could be made available immediately is if it were taken from other Departments' budgets. If that were to happen, what leverage would remain to us when we went to the Treasury?

The Scottish and Welsh Administrations did not say that they could find the money from other departmental budgets. Rather, they said that swine flu was a national emergency and a response should, therefore, be funded nationally. However, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety states that Northern Ireland should bear the burden. That would result in exactly the outcome that the Member who asked the question does not want. Swine flu is a national emergency, and the Assembly must have leverage with the Treasury.

My predecessor had contacted the Treasury about the issue, and I intend to join Ministers from the other Administrations in pleading for additional resources. However, my plea will not be helped by the headline-grabbing tactics of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** Furthermore, let me make something else clear. Mr Gardiner talked about value for money. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety presented a budget for dealing with swine flu to my Department. That budget demonstrates neither innovation nor any attempt to minimise cost. For example, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has asked for



almost £20 million for the administering of injections, which equates to approximately £10 for each person and a total cost of almost £60 million. How come Scotland has three times the population but has calculated its total cost at £100 million? The answer is that the Scottish Minister has, at least, sought to be inventive and may use school nurses or factory doctors to administer the drug. That would cost nothing. What does our Minister do? He simply assumes that doctors will administer all the drugs, they will be paid about a tenner a time for doing so and that that cost must, therefore, be included in his budget.

Money will have to be spent on tackling swine flu, but we must first find ways to obtain extra resources. It is a national issue, so let us tap into national resources. If money has to be spent, let us ensure that we get value for money, as opposed to working from the back of an envelope, as the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety appears to be doing.

**Some Members:** Hear, hear.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Attwood:** I too welcome the Minister to his new portfolio. His statement was a curate's egg, in that it was good in parts. It was good that he released extra money to DSD, and his reply to Mr Ian McCrea's question was equally good. Mr McCrea tried to beat up on the Minister for Social Development, but the Minister's response was to acknowledge that her budget is facing difficulties because it is highly dependent on the sale of assets. I hope that the Minister will build on that approach.

However, the Minister's use of language such as "celebrating the investment" was bad. The word "celebrating" will sit uneasily with many people's experiences over the past two years. As the incoming Minister of Finance and Personnel, will he send out two messages of reassurance to public sector workers? I refer not to those who receive large bonuses but to the many others. Will the Minister reassure the House that he will resist any future efforts to target the pensions of public sector workers as part of a Budget response? Can the Minister reassure public sector workers about the progress that has been made towards resolving the equal pay issue?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I will not be a pushover when people come looking for money; they will have to give a very good reason for looking for it, because we must ensure that we make the best use of resources. Additional funding was given to the Department for Social Development because there was a compelling case for it. If a compelling case is made and money is available — the latter being an important caveat — I will look at it objectively and will do what I can.

As the Member knows, the equal pay issue is ongoing. Negotiations are taking place with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). There are many complexities, with issues for the trade unions as well as for the Administration. There is a commitment to dealing with the issue, as given by the previous Minister and by his predecessor, who made the commitment after direct rule Ministers had avoided the issue. However, until all the issues that stand to be resolved are dealt with — it is impossible for me to say when that will be achieved — all that I can say is that we are committed to resolving the equal pay issue. The trade unions must co-operate equally with my Department in seeking a resolution. It should not be forgotten that it is a two-way issue: the unions and the Department have views, and we have to deal with issues that affect them both.

As far as the pensions of public sector workers are concerned, I am not sure to what the Member was alluding. All that I can say is that there are difficult times ahead; I have mentioned those already. We are subject to decisions that are made at Westminster, and we will seek to alleviate the impact of those as best we can by negotiating with the Treasury.

The investment of £1,700 million that the Member referred to is the highest in the history of public spending in Northern Ireland. It has come at a time when the construction industry is asking for it to be spent. It has an immense impact. Do not forget, it is not investment in abstract things. Within a couple of miles of Parliament Buildings, at the Ulster Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, at Titanic Quarter, at the Orangefield/Grosvenor complex, at Ashfield Girls' High School and Ashfield Boys' High School, we are spending money on schools, hospitals and tourist projects. All of that spending will have an impact on the lives of people in Northern Ireland as well as on the jobs that are created in the construction phase. I consider that to be something to celebrate and, therefore, I do not think that I used the word ill-advisedly.

**Ms J McCann:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he referred to the flexibility that the Executive have given to Departments on capital and resource spend. I hope that that indicates that the Executive are trying to spend public money innovatively.

Is the Minister aware that the credit unions organisation has approached several Ministers to outline its proposals for investing up to £100 million in the social housing programme, which, as he said, is a very important programme? Will he champion those proposals with the Executive? They represent one innovative way of providing investment in the social housing programme, something that will change the quality of life for a lot of people.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I am not aware of the proposals to which the Member referred. If credit unions have innovative ways of spending money on social housing, I would expect their first port of call to be with the Minister for Social Development, who, I know, is keen to increase the number of social housing units that are built in Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

If there are ways of attracting new finance to social housing, depending, of course, on the implications for the overall Budget, we want to look at them. Given that we are in straitened economic circumstances, we would be mad not to consider new ways to attract money to the economy that will complement the money that the Executive are spending. However, I am not aware of the details of the project to which the Member referred, and I do not know whether it has been discussed with the Minister for Social Development.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):** I, too, welcome the Minister to his new post; we wish him well in the weeks and months ahead.

Obviously, the Minister's statement has been made in the light of the difficult economic situation. Nevertheless, approximately £253 million of capital funding is available for schools and youth services. Based on the spend to date, the legal challenge to the major works framework and the Department of Education's switch from conventional, single-procurement school builds, is the Minister confident that that money will be spent in this financial year? The Committee for Education has received representation from the construction industry about delays and the lack of information about new capital projects. Secondly, has the Department of Education breached the public expenditure limits to which the Minister referred in his statement?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The answer to the Member's second question is no. The answer to the first question is that, so far, I am unaware of and the Minister of Education did not highlight in the June monitoring round any likely underspend in her capital budget. In the past, the Department of Education has been guilty of that on a number of occasions. If underspend is likely, Ministers have been instructed to bring the matter to the Executive as quickly as possible, so that we can reallocate the money. Of course, the September monitoring round will provide an opportunity to consider that matter. So far, although I am aware of the legal challenge, I am not aware that it is likely to lead to underspend on capital projects this year. During the last Budget round, it was highlighted to Ministers that significant underspend in their Department's budget would have

consequences, and the Minister of Education is well aware of that.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá ceist agam don Aire.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure surrendered £2 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel, money that was set aside for the original multi-sports stadium. Will the Minister give an assurance that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) will have a strong call on that money for future sports projects, not least improving safety at sports grounds and meeting the strategic requirements that have been identified by the three football governing bodies?

Speaking as an MLA, I ask what system of accountability is in place in the Department of Finance and Personnel to ensure that the additional money that has been allocated to housing will be spent where it is needed: on Egan contractors, maintaining Housing Executive stock and, crucially, providing Housing Executive private sector grants. How can the Minister compel the Minister for Social Development to spend that money where it is needed?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** With respect to the Member's final point, money is allocated under various heads and voted on by the Assembly. Within those heads, there is some potential for movement; however, without approval, money cannot be moved between heads.

Even in those heads, I think that departmental support must be sought and allowances made for amounts above £500,000. Departmental permission must also be sought for moving between capital and current spending. Therefore checks and balances are in place. If money is requested for a certain purpose and is allocated under a certain budget head, it can be moved around only with departmental permission.

Where money that is surrendered by DCAL is identified as not being needed at present, it is surrendered and returns to the general Budget. If pressures arise and money is needed for the purpose to which the Member referred, for example, it is up to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department to make bids. On some occasions, Departments have surrendered money when there has been reduced pressure at a particular time of the year and have looked for money later in the same year.

There is sometimes a bit of team playing when a Department recognises early that it will not use some of its money and so makes it available. That happened with several Ministers last year, and the bids that they made later were looked upon favourably.

**Mr A Maginness:** I congratulate the Minister on his appointment. I further congratulate him on his escape during the night of the long knives when the First Minister culled his MP colleagues. One wonders why Sammy Wilson escaped, but that is for another day.

I welcome the £20 million that the Minister clearly stated was for housing maintenance. As he knows, however, there is still a gap of £100 million in the housing budget, and there is also the problem of renovation grants. The £20 million does not fundamentally affect that issue. Does the Minister have further plans to remedy that persistent problem, which affects many people?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** In relation to the Member's tongue-in-cheek congratulation on my appointment, some people may say that it is not an escape at all but a punishment. However, we will see whether that is true.

I think that the Member misunderstood the statement. The £20 million was allocated on the basis of a capital allocation that was specifically for grants and adaptations. However, as a result of that money relieving the pressures on her capital budget, the Minister agreed that she will be able to move money in her current budget towards maintenance. Therefore, we have a double-dunter because capital money will be available for grants and adaptations, and, as a result of that money easing some pressure, the Minister will be able to move money in her current budget to deal with maintenance and with the Egan contractors. I hope that that is good news for the Member on both fronts.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the Minister to his new position and wish him well for the future. Many, if not all, Members who asked questions mentioned the economy and the recession. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that special programmes be put in place and supported to allow people to be reskilled and upskilled? Does he support the Department for Employment and Learning's bid to put in place phase two of the Skillsafe programme? Does he see that as a priority in the weeks ahead?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I agree that it is important that we build up our skills base not just because of the recession, which has given opportunities to people who may need to change direction as far as jobs are concerned, but for the long-term benefit of the economy. That has been one of the directions of travel for the Executive and the whole Programme for Government. As well as the promotion of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects, the building up of skills runs right through primary, secondary, and tertiary education and includes what we do with further

education and universities as well as with apprenticeship schemes.

Investment is required, and primarily that funding should be within the resources that are available to the Department for Employment and Learning. As far as I can remember — I hope that I am not proved incorrect — no actual bid has yet been made by the Minister for Employment and Learning for additional moneys. He has sought to use the available resources, which is the prudent way of dealing with those matters in the first instance.

As a society and an Assembly, we need to look at how we prioritise our spending and direct it towards the uses that will lead to the ability to grow the economy in the longer term or to improve the supply side of the economy, to use an economic term, so that we are in a position to grow the economy when the upturn comes. We also need to grow the economy in the direction of industries that have a long-term future to enable us to look internationally and not just at our internal markets.

**Mr McCarthy:** I welcome the Minister's statement this morning, and I have already offered my congratulations and good wishes to him for the months and possibly years ahead.

The Minister said that:

“the best way in which the Executive can provide support to local families and businesses is to deliver against the plans that are set out in the Budget and the Programme for Government.”

Today, many families throughout our community, particularly the rural community, have real concerns about the proposed 70,000-hour reduction in ambulance cover across Northern Ireland, which could result in lives being lost.

When the Minister circulated his statement to Members, it was accompanied by a table that detailed an underspend of £16.6 million by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety last year. Knowing the difficulties that have faced the Health Service, that seems a ridiculous figure. Will the Minister give an assurance that that will not happen again, particularly given what appears to be the current underfunding of the Ambulance Service? We want to see an efficient, safe and secure Ambulance Service provided for everyone in Northern Ireland.

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I agree that we want to ensure that services to rural communities are maintained, just as they are to urban communities. I represent a constituency that has a large rural part to it, and some of my constituents live in scattered communities, so I fully understand the point that the Member made.

The Ambulance Service is the responsibility of the Health Minister. I do not and could not involve myself

in the minutiae of every Department's spending. The Health Minister has a budget of £4,300 million. That is the biggest departmental budget, and it has grown over the past years from 43% to 50% of the total Northern Ireland allocation. It has grown faster in the past year than the budget of most other Government Departments, apart from the Department of Education.

A huge amount of resources is available at the Minister's discretion, and it is up to him to manage his budget in the best way possible. I hope that the Minister will apply the kind of principles that the Member outlined.

1.15 pm

The Member asked whether we are best served by rapid-response vehicles rather than ambulances; that is a debate for the Health Service. However, the bottom line is that we want to deliver good front-line services to people in rural and urban communities.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I congratulate the Minister and wish him well on his appointment. I hope that he raises as much temperature in his new Department as he did in his previous Department.

The Minister is well aware of the e-PIC system, for which the Department sought £3.5 million in additional capital. Given the Minister's experience from his previous role, will he outline the time frame in which the e-PIC project will roll out to ensure that we receive value for money?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** I must be careful not to assume my previous hat; the current Minister might be miffed if I did so. As the Member said, the e-PIC system is important to the efficiency of the planning system and provides information for people who make planning applications. Moreover, it will have considerable resource implications for the Planning Service's current spending, because it should free up planning officers' time.

As far as I am aware, after some initial difficulties with the delivery of the capital project, with the amount of money being spent on it and with the actual costs, a plan is now in place, and the resources are available to deliver the plan. Indeed, parts of the e-PIC system are already up and running and will be added to in the coming months. The programme is part of the Executive's capital investment programme and is a good example of how capital investment can help to build an effective infrastructure for the economy in Northern Ireland. Planning is the gateway for many investment decisions, and the e-PIC system should provide people with more information about their planning applications and enable them to trace developments. That should speed up the system and, in turn, deliver real benefits for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call Tommy Gallagher to ask a question on the ministerial statement, I ask Members to keep their questions brief. Two Members remain on the list, and, if Members are brief, they can be accommodated.

**Mr Gallagher:** I add my congratulations to the Minister on appointment to his new position and welcome the moneys that have been allocated for housing, which will help to alleviate some difficulties that are outlined in the statement. However, I want to ask about the £179 million that will help to meet — we suspect that it will not meet — Northern Ireland Water's insatiable appetite for gobbling up money. Does the Minister accept that, to offset that £179 million, the promised reduction in the regional rate of some £160 a household will not happen? Instead, the money will go to Northern Ireland Water, because the First Minister and deputy First Minister said that they would defer water charges. Does the Minister agree that the public are not fooled —

**Mr Speaker:** I wonder whether the Member heard me.

**Mr Gallagher:** Will he recognise all this as the further advancement of water charges?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** The Member has misunderstood the purpose of the £179 million. The idea was that, if water charges were introduced, the regional rate would be reduced to offset that and to avoid a double charge.

There would have been total transparency because people would have known what they were paying for regional rates and what they were paying for water rates. If we do not impose water charges, the regional rates will not come down, because one offsets the other. That being the case, people did not expect the regional rates to be reduced.

We said that the total bill would not change. However, people knew that, had water charges been imposed, some of their bill would have been allocated to regional rates and some to water charges. That pressure of £179 million is a consequence of not imposing water charges.

**Mrs M Bradley:** I, too, congratulate the Minister on his new position. I hope that he does not lose his sense of humour while in it.

I welcome the Minister's announcement that the Executive agreed a £20 million capital allocation to social housing. I come from an area in which there are high levels of deprivation and in which people are greatly concerned about housing, because they feel as though they are living in the 1960s or 1970s. In view of that fact, does the Minister believe that the Assembly should now invest more money in social housing? As I have said before, the number of people on the waiting list for the right to a house is at an

all-time high. Therefore, should we not, once and for all, put that on a firm financial footing?

**The Minister of Finance and Personnel:** First, spending on social housing in Northern Ireland is 60% higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Over the years, our housing stock has been greatly modernised, although I understand that some houses are of a poor standard and require work. I think that spending on house building in Northern Ireland is 160% higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom. Spending on social housing per capita is 60% higher than in other parts of the United Kingdom, and I have just allocated another £20 million.

We can all highlight individual cases; however, let us not lose sight of the fact that we have spent substantial amounts of money on social housing in Northern Ireland and that, by and large, we have good social housing stock.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr McNarry wishes to raise a point of order.

**Mr McNarry:** Thank you for the opportunity to raise a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today is the second time that a different Finance Minister provided a version of the reasons why Executive papers, including one on the June monitoring round, arrived late. That version differs significantly from that which was previously raised in a point of order and subsequently put into the public domain by the Minister for Employment and Learning. Given that that has affected the House, as evidenced by today's recall, what can your office do to inform the House as to which version can be believed?

**Mr Speaker:** As I have said previously in the House, what happens in the Executive should stay in the Executive; that is not the business of the House. The same applies to Committee business. On many occasions, Members have raised problems that they have had with their Committee. Those problems should rest with the Committee and are certainly not for debate in the House.

**Mr McNarry:** I am indebted to you, Mr Speaker, and I respect what you say. However, does your office consider that to be a weakness?

**Mr Speaker:** I have gone as far as I wish to go. Executive business should stay in the Executive; it is not for debate in the House.

Having disposed of the business to be transacted today in accordance with Standing Order 11(3), the Assembly stands adjourned until Monday 14 September 2009.

*Adjourned at 1.24 pm.*



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## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

### Equality Impact Assessment

*Published on Friday 3 July 2009*

**The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie):** Further to my statement to the Assembly on 23 April 2009, I wish to update the Assembly on the outcome of the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) consultation on the Social Security Agency's Strategic Business Review implementation arrangements.

The findings from the formal EQIA consultation has identified only limited Section 75 impacts.

Having carefully considered all of the responses I am therefore content to proceed with the 'Customer First' initiative, commencing with a pilot in North District which will be operational in April 2010. The pilot will allow all of the proposed changes to be carefully tested and fully evaluated in a controlled manner. Subject to the outcomes of the pilot, I will consider how best to rollout the changes across the rest of the network.

A final report summarising the response to the EQIA on the implementation arrangements for the Strategic Business Review (SBR) within the SSA will be published (at noon) on 8 July 2009, on the Department for Social Development (DSD) internet site and can be accessed at: <http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/ssa/sbr/sbr-publications.htm>

I am grateful to all those who contributed to the public consultation and I will provide Assembly colleagues with further updates on the pilot as we progress through the testing of the proposals.

## HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

### Swine Flu

*Published on Friday 3 July 2009*

**The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey):** In my statement to the Assembly on Tuesday 30 June I advised members that I would provide a written update following my discussions with other Ministerial colleagues at the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR). I would therefore like to take this opportunity to brief members of the decisions taken on changes to the way the UK will now deal with the swine flu pandemic.

As you are aware, the number of confirmed cases throughout the UK continues to grow, with cases doubling every seven days. The vast majority of these cases continue to be generally mild but as we have seen, it is proving severe in a small minority.

There are a total of 7,447 laboratory confirmed cases of Swine Flu in the UK and sadly, three people have died, all of whom had underlying health problems. The Republic of Ireland is also experiencing an increased number, with 51 confirmed cases.

Since the emergence of swine flu, the Public Health Agency, together with GPs and other staff across the health and social care service have been working tirelessly to contain the virus for as long as possible. The response of the Public Health Agency, GPs and other healthcare staff has been tremendous and I very much thank them for their hard work and dedication.

Their efforts have enabled us to curb the spread of swine flu, which has given us valuable time to learn more about the characteristics of this novel virus. This has also allowed us to set in motion plans to develop a vaccine.

It is thanks to many years of planning for a potential pandemic that Northern Ireland, along with the rest of the UK, will be among the first countries in the world to receive vaccine.

The first batch of vaccines is expected to arrive in Northern Ireland by August, and vaccination should start in September. Priority groups, such as those whose medical conditions put them at risk of complications from 'flu along with frontline health service staff, will receive the vaccine first. I want to reassure Members and the general public, that there will be enough vaccine for the entire population over the course of the pandemic.

All of these actions place us in a very strong position to deal with a more serious outbreak, which experts predict is highly likely in the autumn and winter months.

However, while our efforts to limit the spread of the virus have been effective, it was always likely that we would be unable to contain such an infectious virus indefinitely.

We have seen evidence in the UK of the virus spreading more widely within communities. Clusters of cases and widespread community transmission are already prevalent in parts of Scotland, the West Midlands and London.

As I outlined on Tuesday, the present situation in Northern Ireland is different to other parts of the UK. The vast majority of our cases to date continue to be travel related. Although this has been our experience to date, it is prudent for us to plan and prepare for similar clusters here, where a growing proportion of cases will arise from community transmission rather than travel.

Health Ministers across all four Administrations have noted clear scientific advice that the majority of cases in the UK so far have not been severe. Those people who have contracted the virus have generally made a full and rapid recovery – though a small minority of cases have had more serious illness.

Following a series of discussions, the four UK Health Ministers have now agreed that we should now shift our focus to treatment only – in other words treating those people who actually have swine flu.

The move will be a step by step treatment approach, giving clinicians discretion on how best to treat a patient with swine flu. It means that people who contract swine flu will still be offered antivirals but that antivirals will no longer be used as a preventative measure. In addition, the routine testing of suspected cases and the tracing of close contacts of a symptomatic patient will be discontinued.

Ministers have also considered, as we move into the treatment phase, whether we continue to offer antivirals to all patients displaying symptoms or whether a more targeted approach should be adopted, focusing on those most at risk of becoming more seriously ill.

The Scientific Advisory Group in Emergencies (SAGE) has considered this question and reports that on balance the science points towards adopting a targeted approach, but acknowledges that this is a ‘finely balanced’ decision.

Health Ministers are also conscious that, as this is a new virus, it cannot yet with confidence be directly compared to seasonal flu. Given this, we have decided to adopt a safety first, precautionary approach. Antivirals will still be available for treatment of people with swine flu.

Expert advice emphasises the high importance of treatment with antivirals for those in the higher risk groups, such as those with ‘at risk’ medical conditions. So, we will issue clear guidance to doctors to ensure

that those at higher risk get priority access to antivirals, within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

In addition antivirals will continue to be available to other people who have contracted swine flu. This will be at the discretion of the GP or clinician who is treating the patient who will make a clinical decision on whether antiviral treatment is necessary.

The fact that many people will recover from swine flu without antivirals means it is important that individuals and GPs are able to make an informed decision about appropriate treatment.

I acknowledge this is a cautious approach, however, as we discover more about the virus and develop a more precise categorisation of risk groups, we are likely to reassess our approach and move to a more targeted use of antivirals. We will keep this matter under review, with advice from SAGE, and will provide an update when this is necessary.

Today’s move to treatment is an important step. It continues to ensure that people with swine flu receive the treatment they need. It also enables local health services to shift their energies to deal with the increased numbers of people who have contracted swine flu, while freeing up the Public Health Agency to continue monitoring the way the virus is behaving.

I would remind members and the public that we cannot do this alone. Everyone must play their part in helping to reduce the impact of this pandemic. Now that schools are closing for the summer and people are going on their holidays, I would reiterate my public health messages and for people to contact their GP when they return home, if they feel unwell. People with symptoms should not attend the GP surgery but instead contact their GP by telephone.

In addition, the public can reduce their chances of catching the virus by following these simple but effective steps. Wash your hands regularly, and cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you sneeze, then put the tissue in a bin – catch it, bin it, kill it.

We need to be prepared for every eventuality in relation to swine flu to ensure that the public has access to the right treatment – this requires the necessary funding from the Executive. I will be discussing the financial commitment required to manage our response to this emergency situation with executive colleagues today.

Mr Speaker, this Assembly and the people of Northern Ireland can be assured that I will do all in my power to respond to any emerging situation over the summer months and into the autumn and winter.



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**OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND  
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

**Westminster Draft Legislative Programme  
for 2009-2010**

*Published on 21 August 2009*

**The First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness):** We wish to draw to the attention of the Assembly correspondence which we have received from the Rt Hon Paul Goggins MP, Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office. In his letter of 27 July, he advises us of the publication of the UK Government's Draft Legislative Programme, the Bills which it is proposed should apply to Northern Ireland including those which would require provisions to be agreed by the Executive on the recommendation of the relevant Minister and a legislative consent motion to be passed by the Assembly. The Draft Programme can be found at:

[http://www.hmg.gov.uk/media/27752/legislative\\_programme.pdf](http://www.hmg.gov.uk/media/27752/legislative_programme.pdf)

The Minister of State has commented:

“Following the publication of the Draft Legislative Programme earlier this month, I thought it would be helpful if I wrote to you setting out which Bills we propose should apply to Northern Ireland and, of those, which would require provisions to be agreed by the Executive on the recommendation of the relevant Minister and a legislative consent motion passed by the Assembly.”

Of course, at this early stage such a list can only be indicative, given that a number of the Bills have yet to be finalised. Three Bills are likely to require legislative consent motions for some or all of their provisions if they are to apply (or continue to apply) to Northern Ireland:

- Child Poverty Bill (introduced on 11 June);
- Digital Economy Bill; and
- Financial Services Bill.

Also, the following four Bills, will apply to Northern Ireland, but are likely to relate only to matters that are at present excepted or reserved:

- Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill (introduced on 20 July);
- Bribery Bill
- Policing, Crime and Private Security Bill; and
- Cluster Munitions Prohibition Bill.

Devolution of responsibility for policing and justice will of course alter the boundary between reserved and

transferred matters and could therefore make it appropriate to seek legislative consent motions in other cases.

I know that your officials (and those of other relevant Departments) and mine will continue to work closely together to ensure that the process of bringing legislative consent motions to the Assembly for decision works as smoothly as possible.”

Copies of the Minister of State's correspondence of 27 July are available in the Assembly Library.

