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## Committee Business

### European Scrutiny Priorities 2015 (13 April)

[Full Debate](#)

During a debate on the report of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on Assembly Committees' Priorities for European Scrutiny in 2015, the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Anna Lo stated that the Committee agreed its priorities from the European Commission work programme for 2015. The first priority that the Committee identified is the strategic framework for the energy union, while much of the focus of the framework falls under the remit of DETI, it also includes the revision of the EU emissions trading system as part of the legislative framework post 2020. The second priority relates to the communication on the road to Paris regarding the multilateral response to climate change. A new international climate change agreement between UN countries is to be developed and adopted at the Paris climate conference at the end of 2015 and implemented from 2020. The Committee will monitor the way in which the DoE proposes to prepare for the implementation of an agreement that sets targets beyond the timescales of current NI action plans and programmes. The Committee's third priority relates to evaluations that were carried out under the REFIT programme. REFIT will carry out an evaluation of existing legislation, covering a number of areas, which include a reduction of CO2 emissions from light duty vehicles; fuel quality; drinking water; environmental noise; and the birds and habitats directives. The Committee will monitor the Department's input to those evaluations, particularly in relation to the current evaluation of the birds and habitats directives, and any possible legislative changes resulting from the programme.

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## Answers to Written Questions

### Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

#### Capacity Building- Rural Development Programme (3 April)

[AQW 44231/11-15](#)

As part of the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, DARD will establish a rural network which will bring together organisations and administrations with an interest in rural development. Networking activities will include informing potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities and increasing their involvement in rural development. The network will be run by a support unit who will provide training and networking for Local Action Groups and set up groups to engage with beneficiaries on specific themes. The network support unit will also help with capacity building by gathering and disseminating examples of good practice in rural development. DARD officials are currently working on setting up the network.

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### Minister of the Environment

#### Hedge Cutting–Closed Period (17 April)

[AQW 44338/11-15](#)

The Environment Minister stated that all nesting birds in NI are protected under the terms of the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985. Disturbance of nesting birds is a criminal offence, and investigation of potential offences is the responsibility of the PSNI who enforce this legislation. It should be noted that the Wildlife Order 1985 does not define any 'closed period' for nesting birds. As such, under this legislation, there is no legal impediment to cutting hedges at any time of year, so long as nesting birds are not disturbed. DARD under the Good Agriculture and Environmental Conditions regulations (GAEC) sets a closed period for hedge management (1st March-31st August) and enforces any breaches of its regulations, with DARD inspectors responding to reports of hedge cutting within the 'closed period'. All reports of wildlife crime are forwarded to the PSNI.

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#### DOE Projected Staff Reductions 2015/16 (24 April)

[AQO 7938/11-15](#)

The 2015-16 Budget allocations for DoE will have significant adverse implications for the services provided and for its clients, stakeholders and staff. The scale of the reduction in the financial

resources available next year made it inevitable that expenditure on many grant programmes and contracts will be terminated or significantly curtailed in the course of next year. Significant staffing reductions would also be required to deliver the required savings. DoE have now finalised their opening Budget position and based on this work it is estimated that the reduction required in DoE’s workforce numbers will be just under 400, full-time equivalent, posts during 2015/2016. The actual number of staff who leave the department in 2015-16 under the Civil Service Voluntary Exit Scheme will depend on the numbers deemed eligible to leave under the terms of the scheme, and the numbers who finally accept an offer to leave.

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## Minister of Finance and Personnel

### EU Funding & Sustainable Development (3 April)

[AQW 43482/11-15](#)

The Minister explained that the INTERREG VA programme was approved by the EU Commission in February 2015 and it is expected the PEACE IV programme will be approved later this year.

Applicants to both programmes will be required to demonstrate how their proposed project contributes to the principles and objectives of Sustainable Development. DFP have received input on the Sustainable Development issue from DoE and there will be further engagement if required.

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### EU Funding – Departmental Drawdown (17 April)

[AQW 44275/11-15](#)

The Minister revealed how much funding Executive Departments have received from the European Union over the last five years. Details of EU structural funding received in the last 5 years through NI Government departments is detailed in the table below.

**EU STRUCTURAL FUND RECEIPTS IN £M STERLING**

YEAR	ERDF	ESF	EAGGF	FIFG	TOTAL
2010/11	52.881	19.425	4.662	0.000	76.968
2011/12	53.051	0.000	0.000	0.148	53.199
2012/13	83.201	19.487	0.000	0.000	102.688
2013/14	45.575	38.764	1.835	0.000	86.174
2014/15	120.836	12.294	0.000	0.000	133.130
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>355.544</b>	<b>89.970</b>	<b>6.497</b>	<b>0.148</b>	<b>452.159</b>

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### Civil Service Voluntary Exit Scheme- Update (24 April)

[AQW 44550/11-15](#)

The Finance Minister revealed that when the NICS Voluntary Exit Scheme closed for applications at 5pm on Friday 27 March 2015, 7,285 applications had been received. DFP officials are now working closely with departments to manage the process of selection, in line with the published selection criteria. The number of staff that can be released will depend on the amount of money available to fund the Scheme. DFP anticipate those selected to leave under the Scheme will do so in tranches between 30 September 2015 and 31 March 2016. All staff that applied will be advised of the status of their application around the end of May and at that stage will receive one of three notifications:

That they have been selected to exit in the first group to leave, with a leaving date of the end of September; That they have been selected to exit in a later tranche, with a date still to be confirmed; or That they have not yet been selected. Staff who are selected to leave and given an exit date will receive a written quote from DFP Civil Service Pensions setting out their compensation amount, based on their date of leaving. They will then have 10 working days to decide whether to accept the offer of early exit or to withdraw from the Scheme.

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## Minister for Regional Development

### Departmental Spend - Cycling Provision (3 April)

[AQW 44136/11-15](#)

Details of expenditure on cycling measures covering the last three financial years are set out in the table below:

<b>Expenditure on Cycling Measures in the Last Three Years</b>			
<b>Financial Year</b>	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
<b>Expenditure on Cycling Measures (£k)</b>	1,101	367	910

Whilst the outturn for the 2014/15 financial year is currently being finalised, it is estimated the projected figure for investment in cycling infrastructure will be in the region of £6.8 million.

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### Funding-Active School Travel Programme & Bicycle Strategy (3 April)

[AQW 44135/11-15](#)

The Active School Travel Programme is funded jointly and equally by DRD and the Public Health Agency. The cost for 2015/16 will be £400,000. £2 million capital funding has been earmarked for schemes to support the Bicycle Strategy in 2015/16.

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### DRD – EU Funding (17 April)

[AQW 44335/11-15](#)

The Minister revealed that DRD has received a total of £41,776,482 of funding from the European Union from a range of European Programmes, including the *Trans European Network – Transport (TEN-T)*, *INTERREG IVA* and the *European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland*, over the last five years. The distribution is as follows:

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Value</b>
2010-11	£1,571,458.43
2011-12	£3,417,789.00
2012-13	£6,637,205.00
2013-14	£10,355,264.00
2014-15	£19,794,765.89
<b>Total</b>	<b>£41,776,482.32</b>

This has, as opposed to guaranteed or grant aided funds, been secured through competitively designed application processes. As such, DRD's performance has been a major factor in the achievement of the Executive's PfG commitment to increase drawdown of competitive EU funds.

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### Installation of Water Meters (17 April)

[AQW 40628/11-15](#)

Given the intent of the Assembly to oppose water charges and his recent budgetary restraints, the Minister was asked whether he plans to order NI Water to stop the installation of water meters with immediate effect. He replied that Under Article 81 of the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006, NI Water is required to install meters on properties being connected to the public water supply for the first time. This requirement relates to both new domestic properties and existing properties obtaining first time water services. It is the Minister's intention however to amend this legislation through the forthcoming Water Bill. The Committee for Regional Development has been advised about the proposal and the Executive approved it on 15 January.

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## Minister for Social Development

### Warm Homes Scheme-Update (3 April)

[AQW 43967/11-15](#)

The Warm Homes Scheme has been DSD's main tool in tackling fuel poverty. Since its inception in 2001 over 127,000 households have had energy efficiency improvement measures installed. The current Warm Homes Scheme contract was due to end in July 2014 and was extended to 31 March 2015 to allow for the new Affordable Warmth Scheme to become established and embedded in the new council structures. The Affordable Warmth Scheme is a new area based approach to tackling fuel poverty. It is a targeted approach which will find and assist those households in severe or extreme fuel poverty using a targeting tool that has been developed by the University of Ulster. Even with the level of homes that have been helped already by Warm Homes, research carried out by University of Ulster highlighted that over 33,000 households in Northern Ireland are in severe or extreme fuel poverty, that is, they need to spend more than a quarter of their household income on energy costs. These are the households which the Affordable Warmth Scheme will find and help as a priority. All of the energy efficiency measures available under the Warm Homes Scheme will be retained under the Affordable Warmth Scheme, with some additional new measures added. A package of energy efficiency and heating measures will be offered to each household.

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## Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

### Civic Forum (3 April)

[AQW 43008/11-15](#)

The First Minister and deputy First Minister were asked for their assessment of a Civic Forum as a realistic mechanism for promoting the views of, and engaging with, civic society. They replied that a civic advisory panel, as proposed in the Stormont House Agreement, is intended to provide a basis for engaging with civil society on key social, cultural and economic issues and to advise the Executive. The arrangements for taking forward the commitment in the Stormont House Agreement relating to the establishment of a compact civic advisory panel are currently being considered by Executive party leaders.

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### Community Planning and the Civic Forum (3 April)

[AQW 43006/11-15](#)

The Ministers were asked whether powers of community planning, as transferred to the new council structures, will create space for a Civic Forum, as outlined in Strand One of the Good Friday Agreement. They replied that the Civic Forum referred to in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement was given a statutory basis by section 56 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 with a remit of providing views to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on social, economic and cultural matters. The Forum operated between 2000 and 2002. It was not reconvened when devolution was restored in 2007. The purpose of the community planning process set out in Part 10 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014 is to identify long-term objectives for improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of a local government district and for how the district can contribute to achieving sustainable development in Northern Ireland, together with actions and functions necessary to meet those objectives. The objectives of the community planning process are substantially different from those of the former Civic Forum. The Stormont House Agreement provides for the establishment of a compact civic advisory panel as the new model for civic engagement on key social, cultural and economic issues and to advise the Executive.

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### Revised Programme for Government (17 April)

[AQW 44310/11-15](#)

The Ministers were asked when the revised Programme for Government will be published. They replied that work on an extension to the current Programme for Government, to include the 2015/16 year, is currently underway. They intend to bring forward an Executive Paper and following Executive approval and Committee notification, the revised Programme for Government will be published.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

#### Environmental Engagement (28 April)

[\(AQO 8035/11-15\)](#)

Given the new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will include the Department of the Environment's current environmental functions, the Minister was asked what consideration she has given to engagement with environmental non-governmental organisations that may be relied upon to deliver many of these functions. She replied that DARD already engages with environmental and non-governmental organisations on a wide range of issues and recognised the positive role that NGOs play in policy and delivery across DARD's existing responsibilities. She added that these are early days in the creation of the new Department, and a small team is being set up to begin to map out what needs to be done. However, going forward, she sees continued engagement with the environmental NGOs as important. The DARD permanent secretary will be meeting representatives from the NGOs in the coming weeks, and they will be discussing the implications of the departmental restructuring and the role of the NGOs in the delivery of environmental functions under the remit of the new Department.

When asked if she would give a commitment that, before finalising any details about the group for the two Departments that she referred to, there will be engagement or a public consultation on how the environment function will move forward, the Minister replied *'Yes, I can give the Member that assurance. As I said, we will begin that process of engagement with the sector, and we want to continue the strong working relationship that we have. I do not see any reason that that will change in the future. As we shape the new Department, it is key that we use the expertise in the NGO sector and make sure that it feels parts of the process. Obviously, both we in government and NGOs have a key role to play in making sure that we provide what we should be providing on the ground'*.

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#### Rural Development Programme (28 April)

[\(AQO 8040/11-15\)](#)

The Minister provided the following update: The draft rural development programme was formally submitted to the European Commission on 14 October last year. The Commission observation letter on the draft programme was received on 31 March this year. DARD look forward to being able to start the formal adoption process, with the aim of having our programme approved as soon as possible, ideally before the summer. However, given the delay in receiving the Commission's observation letter, in the worst case scenario, DARD would expect to obtain programme approval by September 2015, but ideally, the intention is to have it on the ground before the summer. The Minister subsequently stated that the Commission raised 315 observations, with a number of key issues needing to be addressed, particularly in relation to areas of natural constraint (ANC) and more detail on the programme's environmental and climate change objectives and the agri-environment climate measures. There were also some issues with some of the cross-cutting themes of the programme.

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### Minister of the Environment

#### Wind Turbines: Planning Approval (14 April)

[\(AQO 7932/11-15\)](#)

The Minister revealed that the number of single wind turbine applications approved from 2005 to 31 January this year is 2,212. This figure is for applications approved and does not necessarily equate to the number of single wind turbines constructed and operational, as DoE does not hold information on whether the permission has been implemented. The figures may also include renewals of planning permissions and changes to existing approvals, and may, therefore, equate to fewer than 2,212 individual sites. He added that applications for single wind turbines are determined by taking into account all relevant planning considerations — a wide range of factors, including the potential impact on public safety, human health, residential amenity, landscape and cumulative impacts. The details of each application, including site characteristics, locality and height of turbines, will differ. Therefore, each application is determined on its own particular location merits. A renewable energy

application over 30 MW will not be dealt at council level but retained centrally by the Department, as that would be deemed to be a major or regionally significant application given its scale.

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### **Climate Change: Prosperity Agreements (14 April)**

[\(AQO 7935/11-15\)](#)

The Minister stated his commitment to bringing forward a climate change Bill in the next Assembly, and that DoE is also being proactive in seeking to address this challenge through innovative regulatory practices in advance of any legislative instruments. Prosperity agreements are voluntary agreements through which the NIEA and an organisation can realise opportunities for reducing the environmental impacts of energy and material use in ways that create prosperity and well-being. The first agreement, signed with Linden Foods, included a target to reduce carbon emissions from the company's operations by 25% through investment in new refrigeration equipment. Prosperity agreements are intended to support responsible businesses that seek to move beyond minimum compliance and harness market value from innovation. All future prosperity agreements will also include actions relating to climate change adaptation or mitigation.

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### **Arc21 Incinerator: Update (14 April)**

[\(AQO 7936/11-15\)](#)

The Arc21 planning application for the development of a residual waste treatment facility at Hightown quarry, Mallusk was submitted to DoE on 27 March 2014. The application was accompanied by a voluntary environmental statement. Consultations were carried out with a wide range of statutory bodies, including NIEA, Antrim Borough Council, Transport NI and the Public Health Agency. Following receipt of comments from consultees, a request for further environmental information was issued to the agent last July. The further information was submitted in September 2014 and was advertised in the local press. It included further information from NIEA, environmental health and Transport NI. Consultations were issued to the relevant consultees and all responses have now been received. To date there have been 3,258 objections to the proposals and no letters of support. This regionally significant planning application is still under consideration, and DoE officials are currently in the process of making a recommendation through a comprehensive development management report. However the Minister added that the number of objections to a planning application is not and never can be a determining factor.

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### **Sand Extraction: Lough Neagh (14 April)**

Topical Question 2 [\(AQT 2352/11-15\)](#)

The Minister stated that he became aware of the issue on Lough Neagh as recently as last summer. The practice or industry of sand dredging has been going on in the lough as far back as the 1930s at least, and possibly beyond, but given the recent objection to the process, DOE has issued an enforcement warning letter to many — if not all — of those involved in the practice of sand dredging, and continues to monitor the situation adding that while it is a very difficult issue of balancing environmental and economic concerns, given the very real threat of infraction proceedings from Europe, 'we have to ensure that we do everything correctly and that the environment is protected'.

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### **Carrier Bag Levy: NIEA Grants (14 April)**

Topical Question 3 [\(AQT 2353/11-15\)](#) (Reproduced in full)

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of the Environment whether he can guarantee that the recently announced £1 million from the carrier bag levy/tax fund will go to current NIEA grant-funded organisations and that, given the fact that many of those organisations are under great stress, those applications will not be lengthy or torturous.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. I can guarantee the Member that that money will be spent in a way that maximises the protection and promotion of our environment. I cannot guarantee that it will go to or be split on a pro rata basis among all the environmental NGOs that have been funded to date. I believe that a piece of work is required and is already under way with the sector itself, the NGOs affected and others, like independent environmental experts, for us to prioritise where that money should be spent. I can assure the Member that this will not be an arduous process. Time is of the essence here. It is vital that we get the certainty to these

organisations that they and their employees need. We will look very carefully through this process at how the money is awarded. I mentioned environmental priorities. We will also look at how much match funding our funding actually enables some of the organisations to draw down — and some of them are excellent at it — as well as, I suppose, the value for money and volunteer activity that some of them can generate as well. It will not be an easy task but, as I said, it is one that we have not got a lot of time to do.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. In addition to £1 million, he has further funds available in the carrier bag fund. Will he use those to create a challenge fund this year? Would he not be better actually diverting all those funds to support the NIEA organisations with which his Department has a service-level agreement?

Mr Durkan: It is projected that we will have in the region of a further £500,000, or possibly £550,000, from the carrier bag levy. However, at this stage it is my intention to use that as a challenge fund to make available to community groups, schools and other organisations to run their own, I suppose, low-level environmental projects. While they are low level, they can and do have a huge impact. The money has been generated through the carrier bag levy, and it states in legislation that money generated through that levy must be spent on community-based projects, which restricts very much how we can look at reallocating it across the NGOs. I understand the point the Member is making. I was, in fact, considering front-loading the money that I was going to set aside to run the challenge fund later in the year to now and then wait for money to become freed up through the voluntary exit scheme and use that for the challenge fund, but I am going to resist doing that. However, I spoke about the piece of work we are doing currently to see what projects we will continue funding and the rate at which we will continue funding them. Again, depending on how that exercise goes, there is a possibility that I may have to dip into the challenge fund. I am reluctant to do so, but it may become a necessary evil.

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