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## **Assembly Recess**

### **Christmas 2016**

The Assembly is now in recess from 10 December 2016 to 8 January 2017. The Business Committee will reconvene on the 10 January 2017 and the next Plenary Sitting will be on 16 January 2017.

## Executive Committee Business

### Water Meters Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016

[Full Debate](#)

The Minister for Infrastructure sought and gained agreement: *That the draft Water Meters Regulations (NI) 2016 be approved.* These remove the requirement on NI Water to install water meters at domestic properties connecting for the first time to the public water supply. He stated that the practice of installing meters currently costs the public purse around £200,000 a year, and, given that they are not used, *it is a nugatory expense, and one that cannot be sustained in the current financial climate.* The Executive has committed not to bring in water charging and to continue to bear the cost of water charges, on behalf of domestic customers, for the next five years. In addition the Minister has instructed his officials to prepare the necessary legislation to extend powers to pay the subsidy to NI Water up until March 2022. The Alliance and Green party did not support the motion.

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## Answers to Written Questions

### Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

#### Bottle Return Scheme (29 November)

[AQW 7290/16-21](#)

When asked whether she would consider implementing a bottle return scheme, the Minister replied that she understood that the potential for the introduction of a Deposit return system for drinks containers here had been considered previously. It was concluded that it would not be feasible to introduce a mandatory scheme on a Northern Ireland only basis. It was accepted that a deposit return system could help reduce litter and add to recycling rates. However, any system could have had a financial impact on local retailers and could duplicate Council household waste collections. While it was not feasible to introduce a mandatory scheme on a Northern Ireland only basis it was felt that this could be reconsidered if there were proposals from other jurisdictions on a wider system.

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#### GM Crops (8 December)

[AQW 6850/16-21](#)

The Minister stated there is no general prohibition on the cultivation of genetically modified (GM) crops here. However, the former Environment Minister, Mark Durkan, put in place a limited ban under the terms of the transitional arrangements of Directive 2015/412/EU. His decision applies only to six specified crop varieties that were in the EU approvals process at that time and which were not commercially attractive to growers here. This was an administrative arrangement permitted under the Directive, and because this decision has no material effect on growers here, the Minister has no plans to revisit it. She added that while she is open to the principle of GM crops being grown here, it is essential that coexistence measures are in place before this happens to protect the interests of all agricultural growers.

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#### Environmental Crime (8 December)

[AQW 6601/16-21](#)

The Minister outlined how NIEA deals with Environmental Crime. Following the Mills Review Report (2013) and the Criminal Justice Inspection Report (2015), NIEA has implemented the majority of the recommendations made which, in combination with a range of other changes. Specifically, the following have been achieved:

Enforcement - NIEA has established an Assessment Unit which collates all information and intelligence on waste crime. NIEA has employed a dedicated Crime Analyst. Strategic assessments of waste crime are carried out on a bi-annual basis, helping NIEA to understand the problems and direct resources accordingly. An Enforcement Liaison Group has been established, which assists in spreading learning and good practice. A renewed focus on partnership working has led to significant gains through joint work with partners such as PSNI and HMRC. In addition, partnership work is

being improved through, for example, the newly established Four Nations Waste Crime Group. A new Enforcement Policy has been approved and brought into use. Procedures are in place to direct resources to more proactive waste crime investigations, based on risk and harm.

**Regulation** - A new compliance assessment model is in use for licensed and permitted sites which is showing positive signs of improved observance. A dedicated 'volume crime team' has been established within the Regulation Unit to investigate lower level incidents with a view to taking appropriate prompt action. Staff skills and professional development has been improved, with a robust technical development and training framework in place. The Resource Efficiency Division of NIEA has been re-structured to align business units, including in the area of regulation. A joint Local and Central Government Waste Working Group has been established with local Councils to support more effective handling of municipal wastes.

**General** - In May this year, the Environmental Crime Unit secured its first ever cash seizure of £32,700 using powers under the Proceeds of Crime Act. Officers from the Environmental Crime Unit have been extending their use of seizure powers and have seized a number of vehicles, with a view to disrupting the activities of suspected environmental offenders. The Minister stated her commitment to ensuring that as the threat of waste crime develops and our understanding advances, 'we' too continue to cultivate our responses.

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### **Sentencing for Waste Crime (8 December)**

[AQW 8079/16-21](#)

Sentences available in Northern Ireland for waste-related offences are in alignment with those available in other UK jurisdictions. The key offences and penalties in relation to waste crime in Northern Ireland are contained within the Waste and Contaminated Land (NI) Order 1997. They range from fixed penalty notices of around £300 to fines of up to £50,000, dependent on the nature and scale of the offence committed. In addition to fines, more serious offences may lead to imprisonment for up to 5 years.

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### **NI Greenhouse Gas Emissions (13 December)**

[AQW 8270/16-21](#)

Greenhouse gas emissions are reported annually in the UK GHG Inventory. Each year is extended and updated and the complete historical data series revised to incorporate methodological improvements and new data. Once the latest year's Inventory is published, the previous versions effectively become redundant. Only the latest Inventory provides a single consistent data series which can be used to examine trends stretching back to 1990. The table below provides Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions per million tons carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO<sub>2</sub>e) for the last ten years and the percentage reduction per year against the 1990 baseline.

**Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Emissions 2005 to 2014**

Year	Emissions per million tons carbon dioxide equivalent (MtCO <sub>2</sub> e)	Percentage reduction per year against the 1990 baseline of 24.61 MtCO <sub>2</sub> e
2005	23.54	4.3
2006	23.90	2.9
2007	22.66	7.9
2008	22.41	8.9
2009	20.83	15.3
2010	21.75	11.6
2011	20.43	17.0
2012	20.71	15.9
2013	20.95	14.9
2014	20.33	17.4

The latest projection based on the 2013 greenhouse gas inventory estimates a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of 34.1% by 2025 against the 1990 baseline. The draft PfG, currently subject to consultation, contains an indicator to reduce GHG emissions supported by a draft delivery

plan, with input from all departments. The Executive will agree the final content of the Programme for Government early in the New Year.

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### **Independent input/ scrutiny of NIEA Board (13 December)**

[AQW 8139/16-21](#)

The Minister stated her belief that there should be independent input and scrutiny of the NIEA Board. She has therefore instructed her officials to initiate a process which will commence with an external advertisement inviting applications from suitably experienced applicants to become Independent Board Members (IBMS) on the Agency Board. She believes the IBMS can make an important contribution to the workings and business of the Board by providing constructive advice and a challenge function across all of the Board's business. It is planned to recruit two members to be in post by the start of the new financial year (April 2017).

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### **Nature and Location of River Pollution Incidents (13 December)**

[AQW 8039/16-21](#)

The Minister detailed the nature of the river pollution incidents using six descriptors: Farm, NI Water, Domestic, Industry, Transport and Other. The incidents are broken down into River Water Bodies to provide information on where the incident occurred. Incident severity is also provided. A low severity incident is one that has minimal effect on water quality, a medium severity incident has a significant effect on water quality and a high severity incident is one that has a major effect on water quality.

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## **Minister for the Economy**

### **Energy Generation from Renewables (1 December)**

[AQO 320/16-21](#)

The latest official figure published by NISRA shows that during the 12 month period between April 2015 and March 2016, 25.4% of our electricity consumption was from renewable sources such as wind, solar photovoltaic, combined heat and power and hydro. With a further 700 megawatts of committed renewables projects with grid connection offers, plus 200 megawatts of offers still to be made, the Minister is confident the Executive's 2020 target of 40% can be achieved over the next few years.

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### **Local Electricity Generation Capacity (5 December)**

[AQW 2387/16-21](#)

Generation capacity at our three conventional power stations, existing interconnection including the restored Moyle Interconnector with Scotland, and the additional 250 megawatt capacity at Ballylumford which became available in January of this year, ensures *we have enough capacity to meet all electricity demand forecasts to 2020*. The Economy Minister stated his Department is working closely with the Utility Regulator and the system operator SONI to consider how best to ensure security of supply after this point, and if considered necessary, he will agree further actions to safeguard our electricity supply.

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## **Minister for Infrastructure**

### **Protection of AONBs (29 November)**

[AQW 7210/16-21](#)

The Minister for Infrastructure was asked whether he plans to bring forward planning legislation equivalent to the rest of the UK to protect Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Currently AONBs are designated by DAERA under the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (NI) Order 1985. Under the provisions of Article 14 of that Order DAERA may, in relation to an AONB it has designated, formulate proposals for conserving or enhancing the natural beauty or amenities of that area; conserving wildlife, historic objects or natural phenomena within it; promoting its enjoyment by the public; and providing or maintaining public access to it. DFI's Strategic Planning Policy Statement stipulates that development proposals in AONBs must be sensitive to the distinctive special character of the area and the quality of their landscape, heritage and wildlife, and

be in accordance with relevant plan policies. In assessing proposals, including cumulative impacts in such areas, councils and DFI will take account of Landscape Character Assessments and any other relevant guidance including AONB Management Plans and local design guides. The Minister therefore considers the current planning policy framework satisfactory and has no plans to bring forward any further planning policy or legislation.

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### Dutch Style Roundabouts (29 November)

[AQW 7138/16-21](#)

The Minister stated that he was very keen that his Department develops better and safer bicycle infrastructure to give more people the freedom and confidence to use the bicycle for everyday journeys. The most recent schemes in Belfast, have been informed by the London Cycling Design Standards. As a result they have introduced innovative features such as low level bicycle signals and hi-visibility wands to improve the segregation between those people who wish to cycle and those who drive. The London Cycling Design Standards make reference to ‘Dutch’ roundabouts as trial measures. The Transport Research Laboratory has recently trialled these in an off-street environment. Following the outcome of those off-street trials the Minister will consider whether such innovative approaches might be trialled here.

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### Funding to Councils for Greenway plans (28 November)

[AQW 7134/16-21](#)

The Minister revealed how much grant funding has been provided to each of the ten local councils for the development of the Greenways plans under the Small Grants Programme for Greenways competition:

Council		Grant Funding
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
Ards and North Down Borough Council	For 3 Feasibility Studies	£ 24,000.00
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council Borough Council	For 4 Feasibility Studies	£ 32,000.00
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
Derry City and Strabane District Council	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	For 2 Feasibility Studies	£ 16,000.00
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
Mid Ulster District Council	For 2 Feasibility Studies	£ 16,000.00
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	For 3 Feasibility Studies	£ 24,000.00
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (Ards and North Down Borough Council)	For 1 Feasibility Study	£ 8,000.00
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£ 160,000.00</b>

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### **Third Party Right of Appeal (7 December)**

[AQW 7742/16-21](#)

The Minister stated that he was aware of previous calls for a system of third party right of appeal (TPRA) in the planning system and views were sought on this issue as part of the recent planning reform and transfer initiative. This work led to the reform of the planning system and the transfer of the majority of planning functions to our new locally-elected district councils. This, in itself he believes, has enhanced local accountability and decision-making. He also believes the reformed two-tier system is front-loaded with enhanced opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement early in the planning process which supports much greater third party participation than was previously the case. He concluded therefore that it would be appropriate to allow the new planning reforms introduced in April 2015 to bed in and be subject to assessment before he would consider the merits or otherwise of introducing TPRA.

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### **Expenditure per head of Population for Cycling (13 December)**

[AQW 8117/16-21](#)

The estimated spend per head of population on cycling in this year (2016/17) is £1.45 based on a population of 1.87 million and spend of approximately £2.7 million. This includes expenditure on on-road infrastructure (some segregated off-road provision), the promotion of cycling and walking, the Greenways Programme and the funding of the Active School Travel Programme. The attribution of spend to cycling specifically is not a precise exercise as many projects have benefits for cycling even if not carried out specifically for that purpose. Equally, there are cycling-related projects which have benefits for walking and other active travel modes additional to the cycling benefit. Other Departments such as the Department for Communities have invested in measures that promote cycling, through public realm schemes and the Department of Health with Health Promotion measures including support for the Active School Travel Programme. The current population is estimated at 1.87 million using the 'Population Clock Northern Ireland'.

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## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

#### **Zero-waste Strategy (5 December)**

[AQO 817/16-21](#)

The Minister provided an update on her Department's waste management strategy. The strategy sets out a framework of policies and actions that contribute towards dealing with waste as effectively as possible by minimising the amount of waste we produce, increasing the amount of waste we reuse and recycle and, where that is not possible, promoting recovery ahead of the managed disposal of waste. As well as achieving substantial increases in recycling, we have reduced the amount of waste going to landfill over the past decade so that it has now fallen to its lowest ever level. Since 2004-05, the proportion of household waste that is landfilled has more than halved, down from 81.8% to 39.7% in 2015-16. The household waste recycling rate has more than quadrupled, from 10% in 2002 to 42.2% last year. Key elements of the strategy have already been implemented, including the publication of the waste prevention programme in September 2014 and the introduction of the Food Waste Regulations in April 2015. Food waste makes up around a quarter of councils' municipal waste and, on average, costs every household in NI almost £500 per year. The separate collection of food waste has the potential to significantly drive up recycling rates, as well as generating greater value from that resource. Efforts to improve waste management are also being supported by providing £2.5 million to councils through the Rethink Waste capital fund for waste prevention, reuse and recycling projects this year. However, further initiatives are required as recycling levels appear to have plateaued, especially if we are to reach the 50% target by 2020?

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#### **Birds of Prey: PAW UK Report (5 December)**

[AQO 819/16-21](#)

The Minister responded to the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime's 'Bird of Prey Persecution and Poisoning Report Northern Ireland 2014', published in November 2016. The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime in Northern Ireland (PAW NI) partners include: key Departments, including four DAERA divisions; PSNI; NDPBs; NGOs; gamekeeping groups; and

landowning interests. It affords opportunities for statutory and non-government organisations to work together to combat wildlife crime. The Minister welcomed publication of the PAW NI raptor report, as it clearly highlights a number of problem areas in Northern Ireland. The report however, only accounts for the known cases where the birds were found and tested but does indicate *'an ongoing disregard for public safety by a small number of people in our community who are placing highly toxic poisons where wildlife, livestock, pets and people could come into contact with them. Also, there are people misusing presumably legally owned firearms, either intentionally or recklessly, with a similar disregard for safety.'* The Minister added that enhancing biodiversity is a central objective of her Department and that the loss of our top predators from our ecosystems by acts of persecution is extremely disturbing and called on those responsible to cease doing so, and urged anyone who may have information about these crimes to contact the PSNI or Crimestoppers.

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### **Plans to Address Air Pollution (5 December)**

[\(AQO 821/16-21\)](#)

While, the latest report on air quality in Northern Ireland, published on 22 November shows that air quality continues to improve, we continue to have problems with emissions from road traffic at certain locations. DAERA has commenced a review of air quality policy and legislation with the intention of developing a dedicated Northern Ireland air quality strategy and revised local air quality management policy guidance. The review will consider new thinking on air quality policy across the UK and internationally, aimed at reducing emissions from all sources to protect public health, assist with climate change targets, and improve congestion. Those polices will be consulted on in due course. As well as the review, DAERA provides funding support to councils to carry out their statutory local air quality management and action plan duties. Air quality issues here are predominantly due to road traffic emissions. Therefore, the plan focuses on introducing measures relating to sustainable transport, such as the forthcoming Belfast rapid transit scheme; the development of the Belfast transport hub; and park-and-ride, as well as strategies that promote public transport, walking and cycling.

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### **Climate Change Bill (5 December)**

[\(AQO 823/16-21\)](#)

The Minister outlined again her opposition to a NI Climate Change Bill stating that she was satisfied that progress has been made on reducing greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland and was content with the plans that are in place and those that are being developed, which will reduce our emissions further. In those circumstances, she currently saw no need to introduce a Northern Ireland climate change Bill.

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## **ASSEMBLY RECESS**

### **Christmas 2016**

The Assembly is now in recess from 10 December 2016 to 8 January 2017. The Business Committee will reconvene on the 10 January 2017 and the next Plenary Sitting will be on 16 January 2017.