

Northern Ireland Assembly News – February 2015

Executive Committee Business

- [Budget Bill: Second Stage](#)

Answers to Written Questions

- [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development](#)
 - [Rural Development Programme 2014-2020](#)
 - [Organic Farming](#)
 - [Rural Borewells Scheme](#)
- [Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment](#)
 - [European Investment Fund](#)
- [Minister of the Environment](#)
 - [Remarkable Trees](#)
 - [Raths](#)
 - [Impact of the 2015/16 Budget](#)
 - [Clean up operation at Campsie](#)
 - [Guidelines for Hydro-Electric Schemes](#)
- [Minister for Regional Development](#)
 - [Integrated Constructed Wetland](#)
 - [Subsidising NI Water](#)

Oral Answers to Questions

- [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development](#)
 - [Fisheries Task Force](#)
 - [Horse Mussel Beds: Strangford Lough](#)
- [Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure](#)
 - [Art and Artefacts: Storage](#)
- [Minister of the Environment](#)
 - [Solar Farms: Planning](#)
- [Minister for Regional Development](#)
 - [Public Transport: Passengers](#)
- [Office of The First Minister and deputy First Minister](#)
 - [Departments: Reduction in Number](#)

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage (16 February)

[Full Debate](#)

During debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill, Anna Lo stated that when DoE officials briefed the Committee for the Environment on 5 February, they were advised that, after meeting inescapable expenditure, the Department had only £1.4 million to fund a range of programmes and projects being carried out by councils and the private and voluntary sectors. The shortfall is over £8 million, although officials stated that the Minister would look at the £4.2 million from the carrier bag levy to see whether any money could be reallocated. This will be limited, given the already committed funding for projects and the restriction on how receipts can be spent. Anna Lo's contribution is provided below in full:

Seeing projections from officials, it looks like the axe will fall mostly on activities that are currently undertaken by NGOs. I cannot emphasise enough the importance of the NGO sector in getting value for money for us by delivering government objectives in a cost-effective manner. Funding for this sector can bring significant added value through match funding and co-funding, accessing the passion and energy of volunteers, the involvement of students and people of all ages, and managing significant areas of land for public benefit. The environmental sector is also of value to Northern Ireland in the retention of skilled and qualified young people. DOE cuts would inevitably contribute further to the Northern Ireland brain drain. I understand from the Northern Ireland Environment Link that, within natural heritage grants alone, DOE funds around 50 organisations through grants and contracted services. Total funding in 2014-15 to those organisations is approximately £3.5 million. That is over 110 posts affecting more than 130 individuals. Within that relatively small government input, those NGOs tap into a volunteer workforce of over 350,000, manage over 314,000 acres of land for government benefit, spend over £20 million in the Northern Ireland economy and leverage in £3.20 for every £1 invested in core funding. The potential loss of those jobs in some of those organisations will have a detrimental effect on the local economy. Those organisations tend to be small and lack resources and they are likely to find it difficult to navigate through a period of sudden budgetary loss that may result in their closure. The kind of activities that will be affected are managing natural and built heritage sites; providing access to sites; education programmes; managing and improving habitat; protection of wildlife; developing research and knowledge; monitoring sites, wildlife and access; and enabling the public to access and understand the natural and built environment.

NGOs in Northern Ireland have been very successful in accessing non-government funds. A good example is the Heritage Lottery Fund landscape partnerships, of which there are now at least seven in Northern Ireland. They all draw in significant leverage. The leverage is, on the one hand, evidence of the quality and potential of the Northern Ireland environment and, on the other, a good example of what will be lost if the NGOs that have leveraged that input are lost. Furthermore, there are clear linkages between what the NGOs deliver in Health, Education, Agriculture and Rural Development, Regional Development, Enterprise, Culture and Leisure, and the community development aspects of OFMDFM. The same issue emerges in all those areas.

The environment is the foundation for our society and economy, yet it is taken for granted and not treated as the key resource upon which future well-being and prosperity depend. A relatively small investment in the environment sector could lead to significant savings across all those Departments. The environment sector has advised me that it strongly encourages DOE to look at ways to develop those relationships and to work in partnership with NGOs on delivery.

According to departmental officials, for them to fund the current programmes that are contracted out to councils, the private and voluntary sectors, as well as road safety campaigns, DOE would have to lose 500 posts to save £8 million from salaries. That is a third of the workforce. That is impracticable, if not impossible. As a voluntary exit scheme will not start being implemented until at least autumn 2015, the Department is unlikely to find the necessary money through staff reduction within six months of the next financial year. It does not make sense for the Department to lose one

third of its staff, who are mostly professional or technical staff carrying out the Department's vital functions and services. It is most likely, therefore, that the non-ringfenced areas of departmental expenditure limit will not have the necessary funding and that this will impact mostly on the NGO sector.

Looking beyond the next Budget, before discussions on how the DOE will be broken up and its functions absorbed by other Departments, it is important that the House again considers the urgent need to create an independent environment agency to ensure that our already neglected environment is not completely abandoned. The agency needs to be external to any Department so that it can hold all Departments to account for their policies and practices in relation to the protection of the environment, which is a responsibility for all in government.

The Minister for Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton response to the Anna Lo's comments:

Ms Lo made a very good case for investment in the environment in Northern Ireland. I have been encouraging privately, and I encourage her to take up with environmental NGOs the need to alter slightly the way in which they present their debate. ... If the Executive's number one priority is, as it has been for nearly 10 years, to grow the economy, virtually all expenditure, particularly in those areas that see themselves as a bit Cinderella-like, needs to be argued for first and foremost through an economic prism. That does not mean that there is no merit in protecting the environment or in having a good arts community and cultural infrastructure. In an environment where we have less money, the argument that will find more favour, and therefore perhaps more pounds, is the one that identifies the contribution to the economy through investment in environment or in culture.... Mr Bradley on the SDLP Benches raised the issue of heritage-led development, something that I have backed in previous Budgets and am backing again in next year's. One of the reasons for my taking a personal interest in that area is the work of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to present the argument for investment in heritage-led development from the perspective of the benefit to the economy and the jobs that it creates. Therefore I say to Anna Lo: yes, there is merit in arguing for what the Department of the Environment does to protect the environment, but there is also a need to make the argument about what investing in the environment means for our economy.

Ms Lo highlighted the concerns of the voluntary and NGO sectors in environment about Budget cuts. I say to the Minister of the Environment what I would say to any Minister: the voluntary, community or third sector should not be seen as an easy target for cuts in difficult financial times. There are some Departments and some Ministers who think that the third sector is an easy target. They think that they can go after them, because, "I do not have to worry about them. I am not responsible to them. They do not work for me. They are not in my Department, so they are an easy target for cuts." That should not be the way, particularly when those organisations are often delivering services in a much more efficient and effective way than central Government could do.

[Top](#)

Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (2 February)

[AQW 41624/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that the draft Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 was formally submitted to the European Commission on 14th October 2014 and DARD are currently waiting for the Commission's response on the content of the draft Programme. Because of a backlog in approving Programmes across Europe, the European Commission have advised that the earliest possible date for approval of our Programme is likely to be June 2015 and not April as originally planned. The Minister added that while any delay in the approval process of the RDP is disappointing, it will not affect the continuing work by officials in obtaining the necessary business case approvals and in developing the schemes for opening.

[Top](#)

Organic Farming (5 February)

[AQW 41830/11-15](#)

The Minister provided her assessment of organic farming in Northern Ireland. We have currently around 9,000ha of land certified as organic. This represents approximately 0.9% of the total area of agricultural land. Higher commodity prices in recent years have resulted in limited premiums at the farm gate for organic produce. This has led to a reduction in the number of organic producers from 224 in 2006 to currently some 150. Overall, because of the weak market, there has been limited opportunity to expand the sector. Therefore, any further development is likely to be into supplying niche markets. Under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 DARD provided financial support to 39 farmers through the Organic Farming Scheme for conversion to organic production. It also provided an organic maintenance payment to 10 farmers through the Organic Management Option within the NI Countryside Management Scheme. Ongoing technical advice and training courses on growing organic produce are available through CAFRE's Development Advisers and Technologists. There is a fully operational organic farm at Greenmount College, which farmers can visit to learn more about best practice in organic production methods. DARD Supply Chain Advisers also provide supply chain and marketing advice and DARD are currently reviewing what support for the maintenance of organic production may be possible under the new Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

[Top](#)

Rural Borewells Scheme (17 February)

[AQW 42401/11-15](#)

The Minister revealed that sixty-three borewells have been drilled for eligible applications received in 2012 and 2013. Site-works for the twenty-six eligible applications received in 2014 have also commenced. A decision on whether to open again in 2015 must take account of departmental priorities within both DARD and DRD and also the level of demand for the Scheme. A review of the Scheme is currently being undertaken by DARD and DRD officials. This review will influence the decision on future delivery of this Scheme; a decision which the Minister anticipates will be made within the coming weeks.

[Top](#)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

European Investment Fund (18 February)

[AQW 42536/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked for a breakdown of the £2.1 billion pound bid submitted to the European Investment Fund by her Department's Energy Division. She replied that The EU President Juncker's 'Investment Plan for Europe' published on 26 November 2014 proposed measures to increase investment across the EU, including creation of a European Fund for Strategic Investments to guarantee new lending volume by the European Investment Bank (EIB). Money from the existing EU Budget and EIB will be used as a guarantee for the proposed €315bn investment. The focus is on private investment. There remains considerable uncertainty about how the Commission intends to use EU Budget money for this purpose and where money will be reallocated from to establish the guarantee. The Commission has also published limited information on the type of projects that would be considered strategic, how they will be assessed and when. Against this backdrop DETI was asked to identify a range of energy proposals as part of the initial response to the announcement. The proposals put forward are aligned to priorities set out in the Strategic Energy Framework and cover security of supply, interconnection, gas networks and conversion, smart grid/meters, energy storage and electricity grid reinforcements. They have not been developed in any detail or been subject to assessment of costs/benefits in the absence of clarity on the EU investment proposal.

[Top](#)

Minister of the Environment

Remarkable Trees (3 February)

[AQW 41653/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked whether he has agreed to support a register of Northern Ireland's remarkable trees; and if these trees will be protected as a crucial part of the environment. He replied that he was aware that the Woodland Trust is in the process of preparing a register of Northern Ireland's remarkable trees. The register will seek to identify, celebrate and protect our

trees of special interest. The Minister recognised that many of these trees will be of great age, have seen centuries come and go, are home to many species of wildlife and have cultural value. When he receives the register the Minister undertook to give it further consideration including a consideration of how best to protect such trees.

[Top](#)

Raths (4 February)

[AQW 41734/11-15](#)

The Minister revealed that some 2,814 sites are identified as raths in the Northern Ireland Monuments and Buildings Record (MBR). He provided an overview map of these and the actual numbers as they relate to each council area (pre and post RPA). There are 524 raths in Northern Ireland which are protected by scheduling under the Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995; the majority of these are on private land. Fifteen raths are protected by being in State Care. In addition, all other recorded raths are protected by both planning and agricultural policies. MBR also contains details of 3,474 sites that have a potential to be raths but which survive now only as below ground remains. As there are no visible above ground remains to examine, only archaeological excavation could ascertain the definitive nature of these 3,474 sites.

[Top](#)

Clean up operation at Campsie (16 February)

[AQW 42381/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that the remediation and clean up solution for the Campsie waste sites has not yet been finalised and therefore the associated potential costs are not known. However, DoE initiated a new project in January 2015 that aims to collect new site data to (i) further inform the potential risks arising from the illegal waste deposits to the environment, (ii) implement necessary short-term leachate management works, (iii) implement a 12 month environmental monitoring and (iv) to identify potential remediation options to manage the environmental impacts with whole life costs. Details on these potential remediation options and associated costs are expected by August 2015. Implementation of potential remediation measures will be subject to a separate procurement and contract arrangement pending further clarification of who will pay. Who will pay for the clean-up is being investigated. Possible mechanisms for the polluter to pay are being explored with viable options to be identified for consideration.

[Top](#)

Guidelines for Hydro-Electric Schemes (17 February)

[AQW 42422/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked whether any guidelines have been produced and applied in planning applications for hydro-electric schemes in rivers; and whether restrictions, other than extraction distances, are in place regarding the number and location of dams, weirs and turbines. He replied that the policy context for the assessment of hydro-electric schemes is set out in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 18 'Renewable Energy' and the accompanying Best Practice Guidance (BPG) which were published in August 2009. The aim of the PPS is to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve NI's renewable energy targets, and to realise the benefits of renewable energy. Planning policy does not place restrictions on the number and location of dams, weirs and turbines associated with hydro-electric schemes. Each scheme is determined on its own merits having regard to matters such as the scale and location of the proposal, its siting and design, environmental and cumulative impacts of multiple schemes, impacts upon protected species, the proximity of development sites to protected areas and mitigation measures. Where necessary, this assessment will be informed by consultation with a number of bodies including the NIEA, DCAL and Loughs Agency.

[Top](#)

Minister for Regional Development

Integrated Constructed Wetland (3 February)

[AQW 41659/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that NI Water's Integrated Constructed Wetland application for the Shackleton Barracks site at Ballykelly has an estimated cost for installation of £3.4 million. Annual running costs are estimated to be approximately £45,000.

[Top](#)

Subsidising NI Water (10 February)

[AQW 42055/11-15](#)

The Minister revealed that DRD pays a subsidy to NI Water on behalf of the Executive on an annual basis. The most recent published figures are for the year 2013/14 when NI Water was paid £275.4m in the absence of domestic water charging; in addition an amount of £2.2m was paid in respect of the septic tank emptying subsidy which is unregulated. The current estimate for 2014/15 is £278.4m for domestic water subsidy plus £2.4m for the septic tank emptying subsidy.

[Top](#)

Oral Answers to Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Fisheries Task Force (3 February)

[\(AQO 7485/11-15\)](#)

The Minister provided an update on the work of the fisheries task force. The industry task force was established last year to examine issues affecting the offshore fishing fleet. It was agreed that, initially, the task force would consider the factors affecting profitability of certain fleet segments and the future challenges faced by the fishing fleet and onshore businesses, particularly the EU landing obligation. An interim report was requested to detail priority actions to address those issues. The task force includes representatives from the catching sector, the prawn processing sector, the pelagic processing sector, fisheries science, fisheries economics, fisheries policy, producer organisations and active fishermen. The task force met five times last year, and produced its interim report on 14 January containing 12 recommendations. They concern the implementation of the EU fish landing obligation, the launch of the new European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, the assessment of the capacity of the fishing fleet, priorities for fisheries science and policy for dealing

[Top](#)

Horse Mussel Beds: Strangford Lough (3 February)

Topical Question 3 [\(AQT 2043/11-15\)](#)

The Minister provided a progress report on the restoration of the modiolus or horse mussel beds in Strangford lough. While not having the details in front of her the Minister stated that the restoration plans are in place, and Europe is 'happy with our approach' and 'Ulster Wildlife is also happy'. The Minister added that NI had successfully avoided the potential scenario of facing fines.

[Top](#)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Art and Artefacts: Storage (24 February)

Topical Question 6 [\(AQT 2176/11-15\)](#)

The Minister stated her concern that year on year, a lot of public money is being spent on preserving works of art that are in storage and had herself questioned why have they been in storage for so long and why have they remained in storage? She added that she was working with museums, libraries and the Arts Council on bringing exhibitions out to communities and was looking at the practical implications of doing that. The Minister suggested that perhaps artwork could be brought out to school assembly halls, council buildings and community facilities. She concluded by adding that she would also see whether art could be displayed by local government.

[Top](#)

Minister of the Environment

Solar Farms: Planning (10 February)

[\(AQO 7549/11-15\)](#)

The Minister was outlined how current planning provision allows for the evaluation of large-scale solar farm applications. DoE determines planning applications for all renewable energy developments on a case-by-case basis against the provisions of planning policy statement 18 on renewable energy, its supplementary best practice guidance and all other material considerations. PPS 18 provides for the evaluation of all development that seeks to harness energy from renewables, including energy derived from solar. It aims to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations in the built and natural environment. This best practice guidance for PPS 18 also provides background information and guidance on active and thermal solar technology. He stated that DoE's policy and guidance ensures that, while the wider environmental,

economic and social benefits of renewable energy developments will be given significant weight in determining whether planning permission should be granted, the environmental, landscape, visual and amenity impacts associated with such developments also need to be assessed. The Minister added that he was aware that large-scale solar energy development is a matter of growing concern and it is his intention to ensure that the final strategic planning policy statement (SPPS) provides an appropriate level of strategic direction in relation to solar energy development. The Minister has also recently instructed officials to prepare practice notes for planning staff in relation to the handling of renewable energy proposals, including wind and solar developments.

[Top](#)

Minister for Regional Development

Public Transport: Passengers (23 February)

[\(AQO 7621/11-15\)](#)

The Minister provided some positive feedback on public transport usage in Northern Ireland and reported that passenger numbers are increasing year on year. In the 2011-12 financial year, the number of passenger journeys was over 77 million, and, in the current financial year, Translink is on target to achieve 80.5 million passenger journeys, an increase of over 4.5%. That growth is most significant on the railways but, in overall terms, compares well with trends in other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. The Minister believed this success reflects DRD's investment in modernising the bus fleet and the introduction of new trains. He added that, in conjunction with Translink, he had sought to improve passenger facilities and infrastructure, provided more park-and-ride opportunities to encourage car users to access public transport for at least part of their journey and, where possible, introduced road priority measures for buses to speed up services that would otherwise be held up by traffic congestion. Given the current budgetary situation the Minister stated that any change in frequency to public transport services is of such importance that it should be and must be consulted on publicly.

[Top](#)

Office of The First Minister and deputy First Minister

Departments: Reduction in Number (2 February)

[\(AQO 7451/11-15\)](#)

The deputy First Minister provided an update on the work to reduce the number of Executive Departments prior to the next Assembly elections in 2016. The reduction in the number of Executive Departments from 12 to nine in time for the 2016 Assembly election is a commitment in the Stormont House Agreement. Subsequently, the Executive agreed to commit to implementing the measures in the Stormont House Agreement at their meeting on 15 January. A proposed nine-Department structure was presented to the Executive on 15 January, and a further discussion was held on 22 January, when the Executive agreed the number of Departments and their functions. The only exception being the functions of OFMDFM, which will be the subject of further consideration. Further detailed work on the functions allocated to each Department can be carried out whilst working through the legislative process. The Minister added that the timetable for the implementation of the reduction in Departments is 'extremely challenging' but 'presents us with a huge opportunity to streamline the Civil Service and create better cohesion between and within Departments, resulting in quality key services being provided to citizens'.

[Top](#)