

Northern Ireland Assembly News – January 2015

Ministerial Statements

- [Tourism: Review of the NITB and Wider Tourism Structures](#)
- [North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine](#)

Executive Committee Business

- [Regeneration Bill: Second Stage](#)

Committee Business

- [Budget 2015-16](#)

Answers to Written Questions

- [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development](#)
 - [Forest Service Update](#)
 - [Breaches of Cross-Compliance](#)
- [Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment](#)
 - [Proposed changes to the NIRO](#)
 - [PfG Renewal Energy Target](#)
- [Minister of the Environment](#)
 - [Impact of the 2015/16 Budget](#)
 - [Incineration Plant](#)
 - [Arc 21- Impact of RPA](#)
 - [Farm Dwellings & PPS21](#)
 - [Changes to the Carrier Bag Levy](#)
- [Minister for Regional Development](#)
 - [Bike Racks on Buses](#)
- [Minister for Social Development](#)
 - [Affordable Warmth Scheme](#)

Oral Answers to Questions

- [Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development](#)
 - [Wind Energy](#)
- [Minister of the Environment](#)
 - [Climate Change](#)
- [Minister for Social Development](#)
 - [Boiler Replacement Scheme](#)
- [Office of The First Minister and deputy First Minister](#)
 - [Departments: Reduction in Number & Reduction in MLAs](#)

Ministerial Statements

Tourism: Review of the NITB and Wider Tourism Structures (20 January)

[Full Statement](#)

The DETI Minister updated Members on the review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and wider tourism structures. She explained that the outworkings of the review will take NITB, and make it stronger, with a new name, new leadership, new partnerships and a future new strategy. The Minister had accepted the review recommendations, which fall broadly into the three themes of setting the strategic direction for tourism; building relationships in the tourism sector; and closer alignment with Invest Northern Ireland. She plans to work with the tourism industry to bring forward a new strategic plan for tourism that will coordinate the work of key partners in the industry and in central and local government which will be crucial in achieving her long-term goal and that of the industry to make tourism in Northern Ireland a £1 billion industry by 2020. The Minister has decided that the name of the organisation should be changed to Tourism Northern Ireland and that by implementing the review recommendations, Tourism Northern Ireland will have a much greater presence at a local level and will develop strong relationships and increase its knowledge of the needs of local tourism partners. That is particularly important given the imminent changes in local government, with increased powers for the new councils and their responsibility for community planning, including local economic development. The review also recommended the development of a tourism growth fund jointly supported with the new councils and the Minister will work to establish such a fund in the next Budget period.



North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine (13 January)

[Full Statement](#)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development made a statement on the twenty-sixth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in aquaculture and marine sectoral format held on 5 December 2014. At the meeting the chief executive of the Loughs Agency outlined the key objectives for the agency in 2014-2016. The Council noted the key objectives and benefits of the agency's investment strategy for local and community initiatives in the Foyle and Carlingford areas. Ministers welcomed progress on the activities of the Loughs Agency, including an update on the management agreement and were told that the interdepartmental group on jurisdictional issues met on 29 October 2014, with a further recent exchange of views between the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In parallel, the Loughs Agency continues to engage with other relevant agencies in developing a management agreement. The agreement will address the practical and operational issues that will arise from the transfer of aquaculture licensing and development functions to the agency. As previously noted, any such operational agreement could not be implemented prior to the resolution of the jurisdictional issue. The Council received an update on the agency's ongoing work commitments, such as its responsibilities under the water framework directive and the habitats directive. Water quality and biological monitoring programmes continue to provide valuable information for the management of the systems. Ministers heard about the upward trend in conservation limits. In 2005, the main rivers, on average, were only meeting 50% of their conservation limits, and in 2014 the average was approximately 97%. Ministers also noted the progress on the IBIS project and the ongoing partnership with the Queen's University Belfast and Glasgow University. The Council noted the report on the funding opportunities available to the Loughs Agency and future plans for funding applications that would benefit the Foyle and Carlingford catchments.



Executive Committee Business

Regeneration Bill: Second Stage (20 January)

[Full Debate](#)

The Minister for Social Development sought and gained approval for passing of the Second Stage of the Regeneration Bill. The Bill will allow the conferral of powers to tackle deprivation and undertake regeneration and community development in local government and the transfer of functions relating to Laganside to the new Belfast City Council. The Bill sits in the context of the framework provided

for local government reform by the DOE's Local Government Act 2014, which received Royal Assent last year. The Minister outlined his belief that these new responsibilities will contribute significantly to the aims of local government reform and will give councils the opportunity to really shape service provision for their citizens, whom they have been elected to serve, and to adapt to the local needs of those communities. The Minister added however that due to protracted discussions it was not possible to secure the Executive's agreement in time to allow the legislation to be in place for 1 April 2015, as originally planned. Therefore, with Executive agreement, it is now planned that these responsibilities will be conferred on local government a year later, from 1 April 2016. These responsibilities include the power to carry out regeneration schemes and projects, public realm and environment improvement schemes and they will take the lead in tackling deprivation and delivering community development in their area. In a number of areas, some of that work is already being undertaken in partnership with DSD and existing councils, but, in the future, all councils will have the lead role. They will be able to decide on priorities and where the budget should be spent all within the wider context of the new duty of councils to develop community plans for their area. During the discussions that followed the Minister also revealed that there are 235 people working in DSD on regeneration and community development, 180 of whom work on areas that will transfer to councils. All of those posts will be gone from the Department after 2016. The other 55 people work on issues that will not transfer, such as social policy and EU funding. The plan is that no more posts will be created to manage the retained functions after the transfer and that things remain as efficient as possible.



Committee Business

Budget 2015-16 (12 January)

[Full Debate](#)

The Assembly debated a motion: *That this Assembly takes note of the draft Budget 2015-16 announced on Monday 3 November 2014 by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.* Ms Lo, Chair, of the Environment Committee outlined the views of the Committee on the draft Budget and referred to the information provided by DoE officials when they briefed the Committee. The Committee raised concerns about a number of issues. Most significantly, that at least 500 staff, representing around one third of the workforce, would need to be released to stabilise the Department's medium-term financial position which may result in a disproportionate loss of more experienced staff, particularly as DOE has a large number of staff at professional and technical grades, rather than general administrative staff. The Committee also considered the wider implications for the economy of the loss of those public-sector posts, particularly at a time when there are not yet sufficient private-sector posts available to compensate for the job losses. Members were also concerned to learn that no match funding for future EU programmes has been provided in the draft Budget. The Committee has been urging DoE to maximise its update of funding opportunities, and match funding is an essential element of the effective use of such opportunities. This may also impact on environmental research posts and on jobs in the community and voluntary sector. The Committee was very much aware of the Department's reliance on community and voluntary organisations and believes that this partnership results in a more effective use of the available funding. Members also expressed some reservations regarding the proposed use of financial transactions capital for the Arc21 development since this project has not yet received planning permission and so members believed that there was an element of presumption in such a specific allocation of funding by the Executive.



Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Forest Service Update (23 January)

[AQO 7295/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined the recent work of the Forest Service. The Forest Service Business Plan for 2014/15 sets out the Agency's strategic objectives and associated targets for the 2014/15 business

year. Policy aims for forestry and plant health are captured in 7 key targets and associated supporting targets. In support of the aim to encourage forest expansion, and before schemes closed in December 2014, the planting of 195 hectares of new woodland was authorised involving expenditure of nearly £1.2 million of rural development funding. Managing forests sustainably to produce an income, protect the environment and promote social use remains a priority. Receipts of over £7 million have been generated, spent £900,000 on forestry fund works to underpin forest recreation development, and work continued to deliver recreation services with operating parties drawn from local government, charitable trusts and private sector interests. Work on implementation of the all island strategic plant health programme continues and a scientific evidence review has been commissioned to appraise options to contain and eradicate ash dieback disease. Work is progressing on taking forward a programme to exploit wind energy opportunities on the forest estate and a strategy is planned for later in the year. Plans to relocate Forest Service Headquarters from the Stormont Estate to Co. Fermanagh in June of this year are also progressing.



Breaches of Cross-Compliance (23 January)

[AQW 40474/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that breaches of Cross Compliance are reported through a variety of channels and are commonly referred to as ‘whistleblower’ cases. Cross Compliance whistleblower inspections cover two aspects. The first of these is compliance with specific articles contained within European regulatory requirements covering the environment, climate change, public health, animal health, plant health and animal welfare. These are known as the Statutory Management Requirements (SMRs). The second aspect of Cross Compliance is a requirement that all those in receipt of payments in respect of the schemes covered by Cross Compliance maintain all their land in Good Agricultural and Environmental Condition (GAEC). The GAEC Measures address the following issues: Protection and management of water, Protection of soil and carbon stock and Minimum level of maintenance. Based on the total number of whistleblower inspections carried out over the last five years 52% of these inspections were in respect of the GAEC framework and the remaining 48% of inspections were carried out in association with the SMR’s. The following table details the total number of whistleblower Cross Compliance Inspections carried out in each of last five years and the total businesses that have incurred a financial penalty in each year.

YEAR	INSPECTIONS	PENALTIES
2014	451	131
2013	526	146
2012	354	144
2011	328	186
2010	362	175



Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Proposed changes to the NIRO (23 January)

[AQW 40570/11-15](#)

The Minister provided an update on the consultation responses on the proposed changes to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation will be available. She stated that DETI have been working through over 330 responses received as part of the consultation and she expects to issue a response in the next fortnight or so. In recognition of the impact that any delay on confirming revised Renewables Obligation Certificate (ROC) levels might have on solar photovoltaic (PV) installers and prospective generators, consultees were informed in December of the decision to retain existing ROC levels until 1 October 2015 rather than the planned change on 1 April 2015.



PfG Renewal Energy Target (23 January)

[AQW 40567/11-15](#)

The ETI Minister provided an update on the progress made on the Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15 target of 40 per cent of electricity consumption from renewable energies within five years. The PfG target is to “Encourage achievement of 20% of electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2015”. The Executive’s Strategic Energy Framework includes a target to achieve 40% of electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020. A new bi-annual statistical publication to aid reporting against the PfG target was first published by DETI on 25th September 2014. This showed that for the 12 month period April 2013 to March 2014, 19.5% of total electricity consumption in Northern Ireland was generated from renewable sources located in Northern Ireland. The next publications are due by March 2015 (covering the period January 2014 to December 2014) and June 2015 (covering the period April 2014 to March 2015).



Minister of the Environment

Impact of the 2015/16 Budget (30 January)

[AQW 40938/11-15](#)

The Minister detailed the impact of the outcome of the 2015/16 Budget, after inescapable spending commitments have been met, on each service and activity currently supported by his DoE. Under the final Budget for 2015-16, DoE’s non ring-fenced Resource DEL budget was reduced by 10.7% to £104.2 million, the highest percentage reduction of all Departments. Reductions of such magnitude will mean that 2015-16 will be an exceptionally challenging year for DoE. The financial allocations in the final Budget will have significant adverse implications for the services provided by DoE, its clients, stakeholders and staff. In order to deliver on its core statutory obligations and ensure protection of public health DoE will have to reduce activity across a wide range of discretionary functions and withdraw funding to a wide range of external bodies while seeking to implement substantial reductions in staff numbers under central Civil Service voluntary exit schemes. DoE is actively assessing which discretionary functions will be affected. It is expected that a wide range of grant and other support programmes that are aimed at supporting key environmental programmes will be affected. Further details will be provided to the Environment Committee once final decisions have been taken on the position.



Incineration Plant (2 January)

[AQW 40153/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked to detail the capacity of the incinerator granted planning permission in application Z/2012/1387/F; and for his assessment of the impact the operation of the facility at 120,000 tonnes of waste per annum will have on the toxicity of emissions released. He replied that the anticipated throughput of the approved facility is 120,000 tonnes per annum, as restricted by a condition of the planning permission and clarified that the approved development is a gasification facility, not an incineration facility. During the processing of the application, the expert advice of NIEA Industrial Pollution and Radiochemical Inspectorate and Belfast City Council Environmental Health Department was sought in relation to air quality and emissions. The regulators of a facility of this nature, NIEA IPRI, did not raise any objection to the development and advised that these facilities can be operated, managed and controlled to ensure the protection of the environment. The facility will be subject to the IPPC permitting regime which will require the use of Best Available Techniques (BAT) which is an additional measure to ensure protection of the environment. NIEA IPRI also confirmed that they accepted that the Air Quality Impact Assessment indicates that a chimney height of 51m would not lead to an unacceptable impact on air quality.



Arc 21- Impact of RPA (2 January)

[AQW 40029/11-15](#)

The Minister clarified the status of Arc21 following the Reform of Local Government and the inevitable implementation of the new Local Government boundaries. He stated that Arc21 is a Joint Committee comprising two councillors from each of its constituent councils. As a statutory Joint Committee, its councillors have powers similar to those of Councils for a range of activities including

financial administration, acquiring, holding or disposing of land and entering into contracts. Arc21 is currently made up of eleven councils. From 1 April 2015, the area it represents will be subsumed into six of the new councils, namely Antrim & Newtownabbey, Belfast District, Lisburn City & Castlereagh District, Mid & East Antrim, Newry, Mourne & Down and North Down & Ards. DoE has written to each of the new and existing council Chief Executives setting out the possible options for delivery of waste management services by the new councils and the lead-in time required for making any necessary supporting legislation for each of those options, and asking them to identify their preferred option. Until such times as all the new and existing arc21 councils have provided that advice, DoE is not in a position to specify what the future status of arc21 will be.



Farm Dwellings & PPS21 (16 January)

[AQW 40337/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked, pursuant to Policy CTY10 - Farm Dwellings from Planning Policy Statement 21, with regards to establishing if a farm business is active and established, whether it is necessary that a Farm Business Identification Number has been in existence for more than six years. He replied that Policy CTY 10 requires a farm business ID to prove the farm business is currently active is a key aspect of this test as is the operation of the active farm business for the 6 year period. Although an applicant for a dwelling on a farm need not personally be involved in active farming, they are required to provide the farm's DARD business ID in order to establish that the farm where the dwelling is proposed is both active and established. He advised however that planning policy and guidance cannot always anticipate all possible scenarios that may occur, therefore, it is possible that DoE may accept suitable alternative evidence of active farming. However, this will be the exception as the general position will be that applicants will be required to provide the farm's DARD business ID as evidence that the farm is both active and established. The Minister added that the draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) contains a consolidation of existing subject policies including Sustainable Development in the Countryside contained within PPS 21 and that he has given a commitment to look again at the issue of rural dwellers as part of the process of bringing forward the final version of the SPPS.



Changes to the Carrier Bag Levy (30 January)

[AQO 7386/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined the recent changes to the Carrier Bag Levy. When the levy was first introduced in April 2013 it applied only to single use carrier bags. From 19 January 2015, retailers must add the 5 pence carrier bag levy to all carrier bags with a retail price of less than 20 pence – effectively extending the levy beyond single use bags to include cheap reusable carrier bags. Data from several retailers indicate that *cheap reusable bag* sales have jumped by approximately 800% since the single use bag levy was first introduced in 2013. Extending the levy to cheap reusable bags is intended to maximise the environmental benefits by encouraging shoppers to reuse their existing bags rather than buying new ones. Retailers still have the option to operate a “bag-for-life” policy, replacing worn out reusable plastic bags free of charge – meaning shoppers who actively reuse their carrier bags won't be penalised.



Minister for Regional Development

Bike Racks on Buses (16 January)

[AQW 40274/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined what consideration has been given to piloting bike racks on buses. He explained that in launching the draft Bicycle Strategy he set out his commitment to address barriers to modal interchange, including the opportunities to enable the carrying of bicycles on public transport. Responses to the consultation made it clear that the provision of bike racks on buses is an issue for some cyclists. To move matters forward DRD officials are engaging with Translink to ensure that the delivery plan for the Bicycle Strategy addresses this issue. Officials are currently engaging with Translink and others to explore opportunities to facilitate, on a pilot basis initially, the carrying of bicycles on bike racks on buses, with a technical assessment underway to determine the potential

impact as well as the safety implications of such a pilot in Belfast. Folding bicycles continue to be permitted on all Translink bus services.



Minister for Social Development

Affordable Warmth Scheme (16 January)

[AQO 7285/11-15](#)

The Minister provided an update on the introduction of the Affordable Warmth Scheme. DSD introduced the Affordable Warmth Scheme on 15 September 2014. The scheme involves DSD working in partnership with the 26 existing local councils and the Housing Executive to target identified low income households considered to be most at risk of fuel poverty. At 6 January 2015 over 700 referrals have been made by the councils to the Housing Executive to carry out technical inspections of the properties and deliver energy efficiency improvements. The Minister confirmed that the Affordable Warmth Scheme is now operating across all local council areas. The Warm Homes Scheme has been extended to 31 March 2015 to allow for the gradual ramp up of the new Affordable Warmth Scheme.



Oral Answers to Questions

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

Wind Energy (12 January)

[\(AQO 7298/11-15\)](#)

The Minister was asked whether she has any plans to examine the greater use of wind energy on her Department's estate. She replied that DARD recognises that the further development of renewable energy is a key commitment in the 2011-15 Programme for Government. In 2010, the Executive approved the strategic energy framework, committing that, by the end of 2020, 40% of electricity would come from renewable sources. DARD - Forest Service in particular - is actively investigating the opportunities to support those commitments and obtain value for money. A wind energy development manager seconded from the Strategic Investment Board is progressing work on site selection and assessment, commercial analysis, policy development and community participation and benefits. She added that a strategic outline case to support the work was approved in November 2014, and the next stages of business case development are ongoing. DARD's business plan requires Forest Service to publish a procurement strategy for the exploitation of wind farm development opportunities on its estate. In the first half of 2015, they intend to offer selected sites for the market to take forward. Those sites are on forest land adjacent to operational, consented or wind farms under development and offer the best potential to deliver projects in a reasonable timescale. In parallel, DARD intend to assess further sites on forestry land that offer significant larger-scale wind energy potential. She concluded by stating her commitment to ensuring that the work is done in consultation and in collaboration with local communities and representatives and making sure that all stakeholders benefit equitably.



Minister of the Environment

Climate Change (20 January)

[\(AQO 7374/11-15\)](#)

The Minister reiterated his commitment to working across government and with all sectors of our society to agree on measures that can help to address current and future climate change. The Minister chairs the cross-departmental working group on climate change, which is responsible for developing and implementing the wide range of policies and measures that each Department has committed to in the action plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Actions from DoE include continuing to develop and implement the EU emissions trading scheme and the carbon reduction commitment; introducing waste policies and strategies and providing support to local authorities to

help to achieve much higher recycling rates; changes to planning policy to ensure that planning decisions take account of climate change impacts before any development is approved; and the use of voluntary prosperity agreements with strategic organisations that explore novel ways to work together to deliver economic and environmental benefits. The Minister has also published the NI's first climate change adaptation programme, which sets out measures to address the highest-priority risks from climate change. The Minister concluded that further work is required and therefore is looking at how best to progress a climate change Bill as legislation *would provide greater clarity and the long-term certainty that business and industry need, creating the environment to drive and encourage innovation, to effectively plan and invest in the technology needed and to generate employment as we make the transition towards a low-carbon economy and, in doing so, deliver a better environment and a stronger economy.*



Minister for Social Development

Boiler Replacement Scheme (12 January)

[Topical Question 1 \(AQT 1901/11-15\)](#)

The Minister updated members on the success of the boiler replacement scheme launched in 2012. It provided grant funding of up to £1,000 to households with an income of less than £40,000. There was also grant funding for the replacement of inefficient boilers over 15 years of age. The latest figures show that, since the launch of the scheme, over 22,000 applications for the grant have been approved with over 17,000 households having had work completed by 2,000 different installers. The replacing of an old, inefficient boiler will, on average, save households something like £400 a year and will improve the thermal comfort of the home. The Minister added that he was considering extending the deadline for the scheme beyond March 2015, but needs to ensure that the funds are available.

Office of The First Minister and deputy First Minister

Departments: Reduction in Number & Reduction in MLAs (19 January)

[Topical Question 5 \(AQT 1945/11-15\)](#)

The First Minister stated that work to reduce the number of NI Departments has commenced and the head of the Civil Service, who is also the permanent secretary of OFMDFM had been asked to work up some options, which he had done even before the Stormont House Agreement. He has produced a paper, which has been shared with Executive colleagues and which gives a favoured option, although there are some issues in it to be clarified. Executive colleagues were asked to come back with any proposals that they might have for amendments to the document. In terms of reduction in the numbers of MLA's, the Stormont House Agreement, indicated that any change in the numbers to 90 should take place in time for the 2021 election. He added however *that does not mean that it could not take place in time for the 2016 election. Doing it for 2016 would mean that it would be done in time for the 2021 election as well. All that it requires is agreement.*

