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## Special Committee Meeting

### 2015-16 DOE Budget (30 March)

[Minute of meeting](#)

The Environment Committee met with the Environment Minister in a special meeting to discuss the intended cuts to the eNGO sector. The main outcome of the meeting is that the Minister undertook to 'urgently' meet with NGOs, NIEA and the Committee to address the issues raised. The Minister indicated that there were additional funds to be allocated primarily from the Carrier Bag Levy and he in consultation with NIEA and the NGO sector will prioritise this additional funding. The Committee plan to write to the Minister requesting him to report back to them by the end of April. It was also revealed that although 466 DOE employees had indicated an interest in the civil service retirement scheme they cannot predict what the actual savings will be from this process. The actual number of staff departures will not be known until June with the money saved from this process not available until September at the earliest. The amount of money potentially available from the salary reduction is around £5 million for this financial year - but this money may be used to ease other Departmental pressures besides the eNGO sector.

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## Committee Business

### Wind Energy Inquiry Report (3 March)

[Full Debate](#)

The Chair of the Environment Committee moved: *That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for the Environment on its Inquiry into Wind Energy in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of the Environment to implement the recommendations contained in the report.* The Committee initiated the Inquiry in response to local groups who were concerned about the impact on rural dwellers of the increasing number of wind turbines in the countryside. The inquiry was confined largely to planning matters and other areas which fall within the remit of the DoE. The Committee took evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, visited a wind farm site and took advice from a specialist acoustician on noise. Although the Committee was fully supportive of the Executive's commitment to promote renewable energy and the need to meet the Executive's Programme for Government target for 2011-2015, they felt that they needed to investigate how these objectives are being implemented in relation to wind energy. After consideration of the evidence, the Committee recommended that DoE should take a more strategic approach to the siting of wind turbines, as well as carrying out an urgent review of current noise guidelines. DoE should also ensure that those involved in producing electricity from wind power should engage more effectively with local communities and the planning authorities. The Committee's main concerns were in relation to safety, noise, property values and about impact on the landscape. The Committee recognised the efforts made by the industry to engage with local residents, but believed it was evident throughout the Inquiry that people living near to current or proposed wind developments do not believe that they have been adequately informed or listened to. The Committee therefore hoped that the recommendations in this report will lead to a more meaningful form of engagement between the wind industry and the communities whose concerns gave rise to this Inquiry. In response the Minister welcomed the report and was content to consider further and address the Committee's recommendations that fall within DoE's remit. He stated that he recognised that in the future it is important that the right balance is struck between facilitating development in appropriate locations to meet renewable energy targets and protecting the exceptional quality of our natural environment adding that *'These are matters and issues that I am addressing in finalising the SPSS'*.

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### Cycling: Benefits to the Economy (23 March)

[Full Debate](#)

The Chair of the Regional Development Committee moved: *That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into the benefits of cycling to the economy; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and other relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations contained in the report.* The report makes 23 recommendations highlighting that cycling has been seen as marginal for too long, and

establishes that cycling spending has some of the best payback on transport expenditure. The report sets out a positive vision for cycling in Northern Ireland where people from all sectors of the community cycle for transport and enjoyment. It also recommends that targets are set to allow for meaningful measurement of the success or otherwise of the bicycle strategy and of progress against other Executive commitments, such as a reduction in obesity levels and in greenhouse gases. It also makes clear that we need to see ring-fencing of appropriate levels of funding for the strategy's delivery and to establish the scale of expected cost-benefit return for the provision. It also makes an important recommendation about connecting the existing greenways. The report also recommends that, where cycling provision in urban centres is being considered and designed, there should be an emphasis on providing some form of segregation from other vehicular traffic and recommends that Translink should establish targets in its corporate plans to increase the number of bicycles accessing trains and buses for integrated transport, and that a Cycle to Work scheme be compulsory in the NI Assembly. In response the Minister stated that the Committee's decision to undertake the inquiry was timely and opportune and assured the Committee that he would make a detailed formal response to the report.

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## Answers to Written Questions

### Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development

#### Spreading Poultry Waste (10 March)

[AQW 43075/11-15](#)

The Minister provided an update on talks with the DETI, Invest NI, Strategic Investment Board and Moy Park, regarding alternatives to land spreading of poultry waste. DARD officials are working with DETI, InvestNI and the SIB on the Sustainable Use of Poultry Litter (SUPL) Project. The project aims to help the local poultry sector find long-term sustainable solutions for dealing with poultry litter. The first stage of the SUPL project was a Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) Competition to identify sustainable ways to better utilise local poultry litter. The SBRI funded nine projects for proof of concept/feasibility stage work in 2013 and has encouraged the technical development of solutions to utilise poultry litter. Building on the success of the SBRI process, the project team developed the SUPL Loan Scheme. The Loan Scheme was launched in July 2014 and allows for a total funding package of up to £12M from InvestNI to co-fund the capital costs of at least two 'demonstrator projects', each treating a minimum of 20,000 tonnes per annum of poultry litter. The loans will be at commercial rates, with the maximum loan to any project not exceeding 40% of the capital costs. A second call opened in January 2015 and is due to close on 24 April 2015. Following consideration of the proposals and assuming that one or more of them is deemed satisfactory for a formal offer of loan from InvestNI, it is anticipated that plants could be operational in late 2016/early 2017. The project team have been liaising regularly with Moy Park during the SUPL Project. The goal is to have long term sustainable and viable options to deal with poultry litter.

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#### TB Strategic Partnership Group (11 March)

[AQW 43138/11-15](#)

The Minister provided an update on the work of the TB Strategic Partnership Group. Since its establishment on 30 September 2014, the TBSPG has met formally, as a group, on 8 occasions. The members of the Group (other than the DARD ex-officio members) have also met separately with the Chair on a number of occasions, both together and as individuals. While the Minister has not yet met with the TBSPG members, she understood that the Group plans to request a meeting with her as it develops its Interim Report. It is anticipated that the Group will issue an Interim Report for consultation in June 2015, with the aim to produce a final strategy by December 2015. While the TBSPG is independent of DARD, the Chief Veterinary Officer and the Director of the Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division attend the Group meetings as ex-officio members. DARD officials ensure that the Minister is kept up-to-date with any developments, as necessary. The Group has been tasked to act in the public interest to develop a long term strategy for the eradication of TB in cattle here. It has been encouraged to fully and independently engage in strategic thinking in order to do so. The Minister anticipates receiving the Group's Interim Report in June and its Final Report in December.

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### **Replacement of trees lost to Ash Dieback Disease (11 March)**

[AQW 43090/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined the steps taken to replace the trees that were lost as a result of Ash Dieback Disease. In June 2013 the Minister announced grant support under the Rural Development Programme for woodland owners of recently planted ash trees affected by Chalara ash dieback to replant their woodland with alternative tree species. Forest Service grant aided three woodland owners to reinstate 23 hectares of Chalara affected woodland. Some suppliers of infected plants have acknowledged their commitment to their clients by reinstating a significant area of affected plantation at their own expense. Grant support for replanting is now closed following the end of the Rural Development Programme 2007-13 and 2014 transitional measures. Under the draft Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 a scheme has been submitted to Brussels to support prevention and restoration of damage to woodland from natural disasters and catastrophic events such as tree diseases.

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### **Coastal Erosion and Marine Conservation (20 March)**

[AQW 43464/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that DARD has no legislative remit for coastal erosion. DOE consulted directly with DARD Rivers Agency on the NI Marine Plan developed in 2014, in which coastal erosion was highlighted as a key issue. Rivers Agency is also represented on the Inter Departmental Marine Group which is chaired by DOE and serves as a forum for discussion on new and ongoing marine policy, legislation and implementation projects.

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### **Number of trees lost to Ash Dieback Disease (23 March)**

[AQW 43463/11-15](#)

The first finding of Chalara ash dieback was in November 2012 and Statutory Plant Health Notices requiring destruction of affected ash saplings and associated plant debris were issued to reduce the risk of disease spread. Forest Service provided assistance to ensure the sites were dealt with as swiftly as possible and around 18,800 ash saplings were destroyed as a result of outbreaks at 23 premises in 2012. As part of trace forward exercises and specific surveys of recently planted ash for symptoms of the disease, DARD officials confirmed outbreaks at a further 68 premises in 2013 and around 73,300 ash saplings were destroyed. Surveillance in 2014 confirmed only two new outbreaks and around 1,900 ash saplings were destroyed. No further outbreak sites have been detected in 2015 to date.

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## **Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure**

### **Lough Neagh Salmon Netting Licences (18 March)**

[AQW 43161/11-15](#)

The Minister stated that Salmon were withdrawn for the Lough Neagh draft net licence from 1 March 2014. Salmon are not a major target species for commercial fishermen on Lough Neagh and catch returns submitted to DCAL confirm that they caught very few salmon in the years prior to 2014. Consequently DCAL did not deem it appropriate to consider loss of earnings payments for those fishermen. This conservation measure was introduced to prohibit the commercial exploitation of wild Atlantic salmon in Lough Neagh tributaries as many of the rivers in the catchment have not met their conservation limit. This step would be viewed as a positive action by facilitating more salmon to move into tributary rivers to spawn.

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### **Long Term Plans for the Salmon Research Station (23 March)**

[AQW43577/11-15](#)

DCAL operates a fish farm and hatchery at the River Bush Salmon Station, which provides assistance to the River Bush Salmon Research Project. The project was set up in 1972 and is a long term programme of research investigating both the sea water and fresh water phases of the lifecycle of the wild Atlantic salmon (*salmo salar*). The long term dataset established is a key component of the management of salmon rivers in the DCAL area. The research programme has led to the recognition of the River Bush as an index river by the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). The Minister stated that DCAL places a high priority on continuing this research, however the long

term funding and support for the Research Station will be dependent on the provision of an annual budget allocation to the Department.

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### **Report on European eel fish kill at Ballyshannon (24 March)**

[AQO 7868/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined DCAL's input into the content of the report on the elver kill at the Electricity Supply Board facility at Ballyshannon on 22 April 2014. The report provides details on the background to elver collection, the circumstances of the incident and recommendations to avoid similar incidents occurring in the future. One of the recommendations in the report is the implementation of a new protocol agreed by ESB, Inland Fisheries Ireland and DCAL, which defines roles and responsibilities for the capture and transport of elvers around the dams at Ballyshannon on the River Erne. The new draft protocol has been developed and agreed by the three parties and was in place for 17 March 2015, the official beginning of this season's elver migration into the Erne catchment. A site visit has also taken place to see the new upgraded elver collection facilities at Ballyshannon, as agreed in the new protocol. The Minister stated she will shortly be meeting with her counterpart in the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources to formally sign off on the new protocols, which will make significant progress in minimising the possibility of the loss of elvers on the scale of the incident in April 2014.

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### **Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment**

#### **Update - Moyle Interconnector (16 March)**

[AQW 43457/11-15](#)

Mutual Energy, owner of the Moyle Interconnector, has recently entered into a contract for the manufacture and installation of two new low voltage submarine cables which will restore the Moyle Interconnector to its previous capacity and reliability by late 2016.

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### **Minister of the Environment**

#### **Historic Monuments Refurbishment Grants (23 March)**

[AQW 43375/11-15](#)

During the 2014-15 financial year, offers totalling £1,720K have been approved for the conservation/refurbishment of listed buildings. However, given the significantly reduced budget for DoE for next year, difficult decisions will need to be taken on the future availability of funding. DoE is currently working through the final detail on allocations and when these have been finalised, officials will inform all relevant individuals and groups of the final position. It is not the case that all owners are prevented from commencing work on a project, until a grant has been agreed. There is no onus on an owner to apply for listed building grant-aid, and - providing all of the necessary planning related approvals are in place - they may choose to proceed, without applying for grant-aid. Where an owner has applied for grant-aid, then it is the policy that no work may start until permission to proceed is given, and the project must comply with the department's Schedule of Requirements (SoR). Should an owner choose to proceed without such approval, then it is at their risk, and any works carried out - prior to approval being secured - become ineligible for grant-aid. This is a control mechanism that has been in place since 1999, resulting from recommendations within an Internal Audit report. There are no plans to review the policy at this time.

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#### **List of Invasive Alien Species in NI (23 March)**

[AQW 43388/11-15](#)

The Minister listed the 50 currently recorded Invasive Alien Species (Plant and Animal) in Northern Ireland.

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#### **Sustainable Development in Peace IV and INTERREG VA (24 March)**

[AQW 43473/11-15](#)

The Minister publicly welcomed the significant funding, €82m including match funding, to be allocated to the environment through the INTERREG VA programme and the role his officials played in the development of the environmental aspects of the programme. On the wider PEACE IV and INTERREG VA programmes, his officials are continuing to work with DFP and the Special EU

Programmes Body on preparations for the application and project delivery stage. Most recently his officials have been contributing to draft guidance on Project Business Plans, including the framing of selection criteria to demonstrate that applications contribute to sustainable development.

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### **Agricultural Regulations (25 March)**

[AQW 43319/11-15](#)

The Minister outlined the eight Regulations, directly related to agriculture for which DoE has specific responsibility. DOE also has responsibility for other wider environmental legislation of which the agricultural industry must also meet the requirements. A list and guidance on wider environmental legislation and farmers obligations can be found on the NetRegs website of environmental legislation at the following address: [http://www.netregs.org.uk/business\\_sectors/agriculture.aspx](http://www.netregs.org.uk/business_sectors/agriculture.aspx) The current Regulations are: The Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013; The Historic Monuments and Archaeological Objects (NI) Order 1995; The Historic Monuments (Class Consents) Order (Northern Ireland) 2001; The Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014; The Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014; The Sludge (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1990; The Groundwater Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998; The Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006. NIEA is also a Competent Control Authority under The Common Agricultural Policy Direct Payments and Support Schemes (Cross Compliance) Regulations (NI) 2014.

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### **Planning Service definition of Unconventional Gas (24 March)**

[AQW 43403/11-15](#)

The Minister explained that unconventional gas resources include tight gas, coal bed methane, shale gas, and gas hydrates. Underground coal gasification is the process of producing synthesis gas (also referred to as syngas) by the partial combustion of coal by the injection of oxygen and steam into a coal seam. Such a process would not be regulated under the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 because in this Act: ‘“petroleum” includes any mineral oil or relative hydrocarbon and natural gas existing in its natural condition in strata but does not include coal...’. Underground coal gasification has not been carried out in the UK but would most likely be regulated under coal mining legislation. DOE Planning is not in receipt of any planning application for unconventional oil/gas exploration or extraction.

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## **Minister for Regional Development**

### **Shortfall in NI Water Budget (2 March)**

[AQW 43029/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked what plans are in place to alleviate the shortfall in the NI Water budget for 2015/16. He replied that through its work on the Price Control process, the Utility Regulator assesses the revenue requirements of NI Water. The Draft Budget allocation for NI Water Resource Departmental Expenditure Limit was £99.2 million. As a result of the consultation process he had moved to alleviate the consequential shortfall of close to £15 million by allocating an additional £10 million to NI Water’s Resource DEL allocation. Whilst this does not provide the full Public Expenditure funding which DRD has assessed as necessary to support the Regulator’s Final Determination, it has significantly narrowed the funding gap. However, as a result he had to reduce PE allocation from other DRD Business Areas. Work will still be needed to assess changes to outputs required of NI Water because funding is not at the level required by the Regulator. DRD will work closely with NI Water and the Utility Regulator to ensure the regulatory environment which provides sustainable high quality water and sewerage services to the public is maintained.

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## **Oral Answers to Questions**

### **Minister of the Environment**

#### **EU Emissions Trading System (9 March)**

[AQO 7733/11-15](#)

The Minister was asked whether DoE will respond to the consultation on the review of the EU emissions trading system. He replied that the EU emissions trading system has been a cornerstone of

the European Union's policy to combat climate change, and it is a flagship tool for cost-effectively reducing greenhouse gas emissions from major industrial sources across Europe. The review is being undertaken as a result of the agreement on the 2030 framework for climate and energy, which contains a revised target for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030. While around 1,000 organisations across the UK are currently participating in the emissions trading system, there are only 23 participants registered here, and so it is vitally important to ensure that the review does not have a detrimental effect on local participants after 2020 when any proposed revisions are to be introduced. DoE officials are in regular contact with their colleagues in the Department of Energy and Climate Change on the trading system and specifically on this review. They will provide the Minister with advice later this month, following which he will provide a response on the current consultation on the review of the trading system.

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### **Waste Collection: Commingled Rubbish (9 March)**

[\(AQO 7736/11-15\)](#)

The Minister was asked what discussions have taken place between DoE and local councils regarding the proposed changes to commingled waste collection. The EU waste framework directive required member states to collect separately at least paper, glass, plastics and metal by 1 January this year. The directive was transposed into law here in 2011. When DoE was transposing the directive, it consulted councils and held stakeholder events and bilateral meetings with councils and the three waste management groups. DoE officials have also had regular discussions with the waste management groups regarding the development and implementation of the food waste regulations. The regulations require councils to provide receptacles for the separate collection of food waste from householders. Councils may continue to provide commingled collections of food and other bio-waste when they are satisfied that the amount of food waste collected is not substantially reduced. The issue of the separate collection of food waste from householders was discussed as part of the formal consultation process in 2013 and subsequently at meetings of the waste programme board, and the waste coordination group. DoE officials have also had specific discussions on the issue with the SWaMP group, the shadow Fermanagh and Omagh council and Arc21. The provisions of the new food waste regulations relating to householders come into effect on 1 April 2017. The Minister anticipates that the discussions with waste management groups and councils will ensure the appropriate implementation of the regulations by that date.

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### **EU Nature Legislation: Fitness Check (9 March)**

[\(AQO 7738/11-15\)](#)

The Minister was asked whether DoE has had any involvement with the fitness check of EU nature legislation. He stated that DOE is aware of the fitness check of the birds and habitats directives and understood that the Commission appointed consultants to develop an evidence-based questionnaire for all member states to complete. The UK and nine other member states have been selected for greater in-depth follow-up action in relation to the programme. That action is to gain more detailed information on implementing the directives. DEFRA is leading on the UK response, with all three devolved Administrations feeding into the process. The DOE, as lead Northern Ireland competent authority under the directives, has engaged with the process and has provided input to DEFRA. The initial response was due with the consultants by mid-March. It is intended by the consultants to have a 12-week public consultation on the findings starting in April. In addition detailed responses are being sought from specific bodies with experience of the directives including DECC, the National Farmers' Union and the Seabed User and Developer Group and Joint Links. It is intended that the overall exercise will be completed with a final report published by March 2016. The Minister added: *'The NGO sector is extremely important to many areas of life here in the North. The environmental NGO sector is certainly extremely important to the work that we do. It is important that we work in partnership with it. We will not always agree on everything. The environmental NGO sector here is understandably extremely keen to be involved in providing input to the Commission. To that end, Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) will be coordinating responses from local NGOs, and those responses will be fed through to NIEL's parent organisation, Environment Link. As I said, NGOs here are extremely keen, perhaps too keen in some cases, to participate, but, as I said, I welcome any participation in this.'*

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