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Private Members' Business

Used Tyres (19 September)

[\(Full debate\)](#)

Mr Oliver McMullan moved: *That this Assembly notes with concern the dangerous emission of toxic fumes and gases into the atmosphere from the public burning of used car tyres; notes that the residue is sent to landfill and still poses an environmental danger; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to establish a used-tyre register to help to regulate and monitor the disposal of used tyres.* The proposer highlighted how 'more and more tyres are being dumped illegally for burning or just being dumped illegally around the countryside' and the problems associated with the cleaning up of the residue of burning at illegal dump sites. Members also heard how burning tyres generate extremely toxic fumes and by-products that are very dangerous to human and animal health; how tyre fires can be extremely difficult to extinguish and have been known to burn for many weeks; how when waste tyres are stockpiled, leaching of chemicals onto land and into rivers may also occur, posing a big risk to animal and human health and to our waterways, and yet no used-tyre register to help to regulate and monitor the disposal of used tyres existed. Mr McMullan's motion received support from across the Chamber.

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Japanese Knotweed (20 September)

[\(Full debate\)](#)

Pam Cameron moved: *That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to bring forward proposals for a regional programme to eradicate Japanese knotweed.* The proposer highlighted that since its introduction, it has spread ferociously, particularly on waste ground and along watercourses. It has become rapidly established in tall thickets, preventing the growth of native species. In doing so, it chokes waterways and hedgerows and greatly reduces local biodiversity. The blight of invasive species is among the greatest threat to biodiversity and ecosystems globally and is viewed as a major hazard to the character of our heritage, the environment and, of course, the benefits that a diverse ecosystem provides. In addition the impact that it can have on the built environment is also of great concern. Japanese knotweed can penetrate concrete and tarmac and cause structural damage to buildings. While Japanese knotweed is classed as an invasive species under schedule 9 to the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, which makes it an offence to plant or grow it. However, there is currently no legal requirement for landowners to control or remove Japanese knotweed growing on their property. Furthermore identifying the responsibilities for containment, treatment and disposal is a massive grey area. The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs confirmed that at present, there is no statutory mechanism to compel an owner or an occupier of premises or land to control invasive alien species such as Japanese knotweed. Given the current legislative provision in Northern Ireland, the advice received from Departmental Solicitor's Office is that cases where species such as Japanese knotweed are spreading from one property to another are civil matters between landowners. The general concept of a regional eradication programme for Japanese knotweed does have merit. However, the practicalities of delivery, given the statutory basis, the likely resource costs and the possible societal expectation that government agencies will intervene with other similar or nuisance species, are something that we need to consider very carefully. The motion received supported across the Chamber.

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Answers to Written Questions

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ban on Microbeads (21 September)

[AQO 292/16-21](#)

The Minister was asked whether she plans to introduce a ban on microbeads. 'Microbeads' are tiny pieces of plastic used as an exfoliating or scrubbing agent in products such as facial cleansers, shower gels, toothpastes and other household products. She replied that it is not within the legislative competence of the NI Assembly to ban the use of this product. On 3 September 2016 Defra Environment Secretary, Andrea Leadsom, announced plans to ban the sale and manufacture

of cosmetics and personal care products containing microbeads in the UK. It is intended that the ban will extend to Northern Ireland. The Minister is content to support the proposed ban and welcomed the opportunity to say so publically.

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Challenge Fund (21 September)

[AQO 291/16-21](#)

The Minister revealed that over £4.6 million of Carrier Bag Levy revenue has been issued through the Challenge Fund since its inception in 2011 and almost 600 environmental projects have been completed across the breadth of Northern Ireland. Of this approximately £4 million has gone to over 300 Community Groups to deliver around 450 projects. The programme has enabled communities and schools, at a grass roots level, to become engaged in the enhancement of our shared environment through the delivery of local environmental projects. These have included a diverse range of projects that have helped wildlife, created green spaces, provided learning experiences and cleaned up the local environment.

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Fish kill in Claudy: Update (21 September)

[AQW 2567/16-21](#)

The NIEA was first alerted to this incident on 1 August by a member of the public who had noted a sour smell and foaming downstream of Claudy. NIEA staff investigated and concluded that some form of agricultural effluent had entered the river although no actual source could be found that evening. The investigation continued the next morning during which time a report was made to NIEA of dead fish in the river above Claudy. Approximately two miles of the Faughan River was impacted stretching from the Killycor Bridge to Dungorkin Bridge with around 2000 fish being killed including salmon, sea trout, lamprey and eels. The Faughan is used to provide drinking water and NIEA staff alerted Northern Ireland Water to the incident during the early stages of the investigation to allow them to take appropriate action. The Loughs Agency is in the process of compiling a prosecution file in relation to this incident.

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Safety Concerns at Sellafield (21 September)

[AQW 2515/16-21](#)

In light of recent media reports of major safety concerns at Sellafield, the Minister detailed the steps taken to ensure the protection and safety of local residents, specifically on the east coast. She stated that NIEA has a comprehensive environmental monitoring programme to assess the impact of radioactive discharges from nuclear installations in GB, including Sellafield, on the Northern Ireland coastline. The programme includes checks on the radiation levels on the coastline at approximately 50 locations around Northern Ireland as well as monitoring the levels of radioactivity in seawater, seaweed, shellfish and fish. The results of the programme are published annually in a joint report "Radioactivity in Food and the Environment" published by Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Environment Agency, Natural Resource Wales, Food Standard Agency and NIEA. Results indicate that food produced in Northern Ireland is safe and that exposure of the Northern Ireland public to radiation from nuclear discharges is negligible. The 21st RIFE report, containing results from 2015, is due to be published in October and shows comparable monitoring data results to previous years. The UK has a radiation monitoring and emergency response network to detect increases in background levels of radiation. Any evidence of a nuclear incident of radiological significance for the UK would result in the appropriate action plans being undertaken.

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Minister of Education

Renewable Energy and Schools (22 September)

[AQW 3063/16-21](#)

The Minister of Education stated that his Department has no specific policy in relation to the renewable energy industry in schools, however Education for Sustainable Development is a 'key element' within the curriculum. This presents 'opportunities for teachers and pupils to explore issues in relation to renewable energy, including how this might be used in a school setting'. His Department does not endorse or recommend any particular resource or programme for use by schools. It is entirely a matter for individual schools to determine which literature, resources or

programmes they wish to use to support their delivery of the curriculum. The installation of renewable energy technologies in schools is considered on a case-by-case basis and in line with available capital budget. The Education Authority will provide schools with support and appropriate professional advice if they are interested in pursuing a renewable energy option within their school.

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Minister for Infrastructure

Lough Neagh Flooding Report: Update (23 September)

[AQW 3024/16-21](#)

The review of the 2015/16 winter floods, led by Alan Strong (an independent civil engineer), is well advanced. The review includes consideration of the current management regime to control water levels for Lough Neagh. Alan has met and corresponded with residents and businesses to hear their concerns and the effect the flooding has had on their lives. It is expected that a number of recommendations may be made to identify ways in which we can be even better prepared for future flooding emergencies. It is expected that the report will be published in late autumn 2016.

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Potential developments and Coastal Erosion (23 September)

[AQW 2956/16-21](#)

The Minister gave his assessment of the need for a moratorium on potential developments likely to be affected by coastal erosion. The susceptibility of land to coastal erosion is a material consideration (where relevant) in determining planning applications. Current strategic planning policy contained in the Department's Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) states that development will not be permitted in areas of the coast known to be at risk from flooding, coastal erosion, or land instability and this maintains the general policy approach as per the provisions of A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland, that has been in place since 1993. It also provides that councils can identify areas known to be at risk from coastal erosion and flooding in their local development plans where new development should not be permitted. Whilst the Minister is satisfied that the current policy framework referred to above provides an appropriate level of direction for the planning system (without the need for a moratorium on development), he also recognises the need for a more strategic approach to the wider issues surrounding coastal management and coastal erosion. The Infrastructure Minister has agreed to consider this issue jointly with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and they will continue to work together to assess what actions need to be taken in relation to a range of coastal management matters, including consideration of the role of the planning system going forward.

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Departmental Greenway Strategy (26 September)

[AQW 3237/16-21](#)

The Minister stated that he intends to publish the Strategic Plan for Greenways later this month. This plan will provide a framework to assist both central and local government to develop local schemes as part of a greenway network for the entire region.

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Oral Answers to Questions

First Minister and deputy First Minister

Programme for Government: Update (19 September)

[AQO 238/16-21](#)

The deputy First Minister provided an update on the Programme for Government (PfG). The draft PfG framework agreed by the Executive on 26 May 2016 set out the ambition that the Executive have for NI society. Following a public consultation to which there were over 800 responses, the Executive are now finalising their delivery plans which will then be published for further public consultation over the autumn period. It is anticipated that the PfG will be finalised by the end of the year. The Minister added that the Executive had agreed the Finance Minister's proposal for a one-year Budget as they thought this was a sensible procedure, *given the uncertainty that overhangs everything that we are dealing with at the moment as a result of Brexit.*

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Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Environmental Legislation (20 September)

[\(AQO 280/16-21\)](#)

The Minister was asked what proportion of environmental legislation in Northern Ireland derives from the European Union. She replied that it was difficult to give a precise answer given that it varies significantly in both scale and scope so ‘simple numeric figures are not necessarily helpful in this case.’ The Minister added that *‘Whatever the post-Brexit scenario, I remain committed to environmental protection. However, I am also sure that I want to consider whether there are opportunities for Northern Ireland to do this in different ways that are not burdensome on society and the business community, particularly the agrifood sector.’* When asked if she could confirm that the environmental protection currently provided by the birds and habitats directives will either remain the same or be improved on following Brexit, she replied, *‘I am committed to environmental protection regardless of where we are coming out of the debate. It is a priority for me, whether in the environment, agriculture and fishery sectors or in rural communities. I will look for the best deal for Northern Ireland and apply whatever legislation we feel is appropriate’.*

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Control of Spartina Cordgrass (20 September)

[\(AQO 283/16-21\)](#)

The Minister was asked what was being done to control Common cordgrass - *Spartina Anglica* a highly invasive species that causes extensive ecological damage to intertidal habitats, outcompeting and replacing native eelgrass, on which the light-bellied brent goose, a high-priority species for conservation action here, depends. She replied that the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985, as amended by the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011, contains powers for controlling the introduction of invasive alien species in the wider environment. It is an offence to cause to grow in the wild any non-native plant listed under schedule 9 to the order, and spartina is listed in Part II of schedule 9. The Department does not, however, have any statutory powers to compel an owner or occupier of premises or land to control invasive alien species introduced prior to the 1985 order, nor does it have the power to take control measures without the consent of an owner or occupier. But, in the context of our national responsibility to manage our specially protected sites, the Department has worked with a range of stakeholders and landowners in coastal areas to control spartina. A spartina control group, which comprises members from the Department, NGOs, stakeholders and landowners was set up in 2010 to implement a spartina management strategy. The aim of the strategy is to manage spartina by preventing its spread and, where feasible, significantly reducing the areas of common cordgrass.

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Environmental Farming Scheme (20 September)

[\(AQO 286/16-21\)](#)

The Minister stated that she plans to open the EFS in February 2017. However, two key steps that are needed to achieve that are business case approval and clarity on funding post-Brexit. She added that The EFS will be targeted to deliver maximum environmental benefit and has been designed to be straightforward for farmers, taking account of experience with previous schemes. The EFS has three levels. The higher level is primarily for environmentally designated sites. The wider level will deliver benefits across the wider countryside, and the group level is to support cooperative action by farmers in specific areas such as a river catchment. The EFS will offer participants a five-year agreement to deliver a range of environmental measures primarily relating to biodiversity and water quality. However, the Minister stated that *‘Last month, the Treasury announced that it would underwrite EU funding, provided that it is committed before the Chancellor’s autumn statement. Whilst funding for the EFS is not covered by that recent Treasury announcement, we are very focused on securing funding and implementing the scheme.’*

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Independent Environmental Protection Agency

[Topical Question 2 \(AQT 207/16-21\)](#)

The Minister was asked if she will take steps to establish an independent environmental protection agency that would bring together all the environment-related functions of the various Departments and be equipped with powers to enforce the highest environmental standards and efficient regulatory processes to defend and extend the environmental rights of all the people of Northern

Ireland. She replied that she was the Minister for the Environment, and was determined to make a positive impact on the environment in Northern Ireland. She therefore had no plans to hand those powers to an independent body. She has however asked her officials to look at a number of boards including the NIEA with the possibility of adding independent people to them.

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Minister for the Economy

Fishing Industry (12 September)

[\(AQO 178/16-21\)](#)

The Economy Minister outlined the importance of the fishing industry for the local economy. In 2014, the total volume of fish caught and landed by Northern Ireland-registered vessels home and abroad was 57,300 tons, worth £55.7 million. During 2015, the total volume of fish landed in Northern Ireland ports was 22,500 tons, worth £28.2 million. The fishing fleet comprises 364 vessels and, in 2015, employed 708 full-time and 151 part-time fishermen. It is estimated that gross turnover in the fish processing sector in 2015 was £76.1 million, representing 1.7% of the total turnover generated by Northern Ireland's food and drink processing sector. Export sales made by the fish and aquaculture processing sector were £41.2 million, representing 4.2% of the total food export sales. In 2015, in Northern Ireland, there were 25 registered processing facilities employing 484 full-time and 232 part-time staff and paying an average wage of £17,875.

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Update on Renewable Energy Policy

[\(AQO 312/16-21\)](#)

As around a quarter of our electricity needs are now met through renewable technology such as wind, solar, photovoltaic, combined heat and power, and hydro. With a further 700 MW of committed projects with grid connection offers, the Economy Minister is confident that the Executive's 2020 target of 40% can be achieved over the next few years. Similarly, almost 4,800 renewable heating systems have been installed in homes and businesses. Current estimates suggest that over 6% of our heating needs are provided through technologies such as biomass, heat pumps and solar thermal. Looking to the future beyond the Northern Ireland renewables obligation and renewable heat incentive schemes, The Minister will consider the future direction of renewable energy policy in the context of wider energy strategy development and ensuring that energy costs for all consumers in Northern Ireland remain as low as possible. To achieve that, he added, *we need an informed debate around wider energy policy in Northern Ireland on what we realistically expect our energy system to deliver, what aspects of it we are prepared to invest in and who pays for it. It is my intention to initiate that wider debate in the coming weeks and months.*

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Minister for Infrastructure

Ticketing: Public Transport (19 September)

[\(AQO 255/16-21\)](#)

The Minister's plans for public transport ticketing has a number of aims: to transform public transport and deliver customer growth in line with a key Programme for Government indicator; to deliver an innovative ticketing system with a focus on integration, flexibility and convenience; and to develop and deliver replacement ticketing equipment and associated systems nearing the end of their useful life, while modernising with additional operational, technical and customer-led enhancements. The Minister outlined the expected benefits to include improved bus boarding times; reduced use of cash; improved data and communication channels; integrated travel; rewards for regular passengers; and simplified and more accessible ticketing for customers. A company has recently been awarded the contract to design and deliver the ticketing system in partnership with Translink. Improvements are expected to be seen from 2018.

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