

## **MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**

### **Review of Public Administration**

**Mr Speaker:** I have received notice from the Minister of the Environment that she wishes to make a statement regarding the Review of Public Administration.

**The Minister of the Environment (Mrs Foster):** I welcome the opportunity to announce decisions on the future shape of local government. It has been a long, and sometimes difficult, journey since I launched the review of local government aspects of the Review of Public Administration (RPA); however, the reform package agreed by the Executive on 13 March represents a solid foundation for the development of strong, effective local government that will deliver a broader range of services for all our citizens.

The Review of Public Administration was set up by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2002 to deliver wide-ranging and comprehensive modernisation and reform to the public sector. The full range of RPA decisions was included in two announcements in November 2005 and March 2006. Following the restoration of devolved government on 08 May 2007, the Executive reviewed the progress that had been made in implementing the RPA. An integral element of the process was the consideration of the strategic direction of the implementation programme. In that context, it was agreed that I would implement a review of the previous Administration's decisions on local government. That review, to consider what we expect local government to deliver in the context of a fully functioning, devolved Assembly and Executive, and in the context of the strategic direction of the Review of Public Administration, was launched on 06 July 2007.

The work of the review was supported by desk research undertaken by consultants last summer to establish the characteristics of local government in Northern Ireland, the other United Kingdom jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and further afield. The consultants facilitated several stakeholder interviews and events to test the findings of that research. In parallel, the Executive Committee's sub-group comprising me and my ministerial colleagues from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) met on three occasions to consider the structural reform of the sector. In addition, I held several bilateral meetings with Executive colleagues.

That work culminated in the emerging findings report published on 19 October 2007. The publication of the report was followed by a valuable process of stakeholder engagement, which provided the opportunity for representatives from councils and other organisations to engage in facilitated discussions on the initial proposals at one regional and four sub-regional events. Stakeholders also had the option of submitting written opinions; and the Department received 59 responses.

The views expressed in the written responses, those collated from the focused process of engagement, those expressed in the House during the take-note debate on 13 November 2007 and those of the Committee for the Environment were shared with relevant Executive colleagues and the Executive subcommittee. The consideration of those views facilitated further discussion of what the final recommendations of the subcommittee should be. The recommendations were agreed by the Executive at our meeting on 13 March 2008.

We recognise that it is important that local government should be closer to citizens and that a balance of responsibility between the Assembly and local government is necessary. Local government plays a clear role in providing strategic civic leadership and acting as a consistent advocate to ensure that local needs are met through more extensive engagement with the community in the planning of services; improvements in economic, environmental and social well-being, choice and customer service; and in the achievement of more sustainable development.

Therefore, our vision is of a strong, dynamic local government that creates vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable communities that have the needs of all citizens at their core. Central to that vision is the provision of high-quality, efficient services that respond to people's needs and continuously improve over time. That vision resonates with the Executive's Programme for Government and its strategic priorities. It also reflects the strong desire that central and local government should work in partnership to deliver the Programme for Government and the vision for local government.

Successful local councils must be effective local champions that respond to the aspirations and concerns of their communities and guide — in partnership with others — the future development of their area. Strong civic leadership must be at the heart of the new council arrangements. Effective, inclusive local democracy is an essential foundation for strong community leadership and improved service delivery. Elected councillors play a unique role in linking the delivery of services with local people's needs and ambitions.

An effective, statute-based community planning process — led and facilitated by the new councils — will be critical to that delivery. Local government must be at the heart of the process and must operate as a junction box for public services in the locality. Community leadership exercised by elected representatives, acting in partnership with statutory bodies and a range of private-, voluntary- and community-sector agencies can breathe new life into local democracy and respond to the needs and aspirations of local communities. Councils will be required to consult all their constituents about issues that affect their lives and allow people to have a say on development in their area.

The Local Government Taskforce has already produced a report on community planning, which has been agreed by the five main parties. During the implementation of the agreed reform package, I will introduce legislative proposals to embody that report's recommendations. The legislative proposals will ensure that a clear statutory requirement is placed on other public bodies — including policing, health and education bodies — to participate in and support the community planning process. A clear duty will be placed on councils to engage with local communities to produce a community plan.

Councils will also have a new statutory power of well-being to assist them in the delivery of community planning. That new power will allow councils to take any action that is not already the responsibility of another agency, linked with the community plan, to improve the well-being of the local community or local area.

Such a power allows greater flexibility and, coupled with the additional functions that will transfer from other parts of the public services, will enable councils to respond creatively to local needs to ensure accessibility and people-focused services that will make a real difference to people's lives. Our aim is to put community leadership at the heart of every council and in the hands of every councillor in order to bring together public agencies and key stakeholders to act in partnership to secure excellent and efficient services and to address local problems.

The overarching aim of the Executive's Programme for Government is to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society in Northern Ireland that has respect for the rule of law. We expect local government to help to deliver on that aim. A report on governance arrangements, agreed across the parties, has already been provided by the Local Government Taskforce. That provides a starting point to develop new governance models. An integral and urgent part of the work of that Taskforce will be to develop a range of models with appropriate checks and balances that can be piloted and evaluated. Those

models will be designed to be mindful of the need to ensure effective and inclusive local democracy, to protect the rights of minorities, to prevent any direct or indirect discrimination and to promote the need of equality of opportunity. Those will include arrangements to allocate council chairs, deputy chairs and positions on council committees and to facilitate cross-community decision-making.

As I have indicated previously in the House, I intend to embody the new council governance arrangements in statute after their agreement by the Executive. That will ensure the protection of all rights of the people of Northern Ireland and also provide for fair, transparent and efficient decision-making.

In order to deliver the agreed vision for local government, the current configuration of 26 council areas will be rationalised to create 11 new council areas. In considering the three 11-council models on which views were canvassed in a further consultation on the Review of Public Administration in March 2005, the Executive agreed that model 11b provides the optimal grouping of existing councils into an 11-council model. The ability of councils to connect with, and deliver for, their communities, is central to our vision for local government. That number of councils strikes a balance between reducing some of the diversity among existing areas in terms of population characteristics and rating wealth, and promoting the ability of councils and their communities to identify and interact with one another.

In examining the structural reform of local government, we also considered the number of councillors that will be required under the new arrangements. We examined the need for appropriate representation against the background of a fully-functioning Assembly and Executive, and the need to ensure efficient working and decision-making. We weighed those factors and came to the view that Belfast should retain an upper limit of around 60 councillors and that the remaining councils would have an upper limit of around 40 councillors. The determination of the precise number of councillors for each new local government district will be informed by the report from the independent local government boundaries commissioner on the number of wards in each new district.

Linked to the rationalisation of the number of councils and councillors, I will introduce a severance scheme in order to recognise the contribution of long-standing councillors who opt not to stand for re-election and to facilitate the modernisation and renewal of local government. The development of the detail of the scheme will be informed by the report and recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group, which reported in June 2006.

In addition, I intend to work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office in order to introduce legislative proposals to end the dual mandate of those councillors who are also Members of the Assembly and / or Parliament. In order to facilitate a smooth transition over a period of time, and in keeping with the desire that the Review of Public Administration should result in savings, I will also work with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office to introduce transitional legislative provisions to provide for any vacancies in local government that result from the ending of the dual mandate to be filled on the basis of co-option rather than by-election.

We acknowledge that the 11 council model presents challenges for the promotion of efficient and effective delivery of services and will not provide for 1:1 coterminosity with other major service providers such as health or education. It will require the development of innovative and creative models of service delivery that will promote modern and efficient practice in a way and on a scale hitherto unseen by grouping councils together for the delivery of significant services such as planning, regeneration, building control and environmental health. We propose that those groups should provide the basis for the development of coterminosity with other service providers. That will enable local government to play its part in achieving the Programme for Government strategic priority of delivering modern, high-quality and efficient public services.

While there is some evidence that local government has been willing to promote the efficient delivery of services, there is scope to do much more.

12.15 pm

Central Government will support the sector in driving towards that through the development, in partnership, of appropriate performance management systems, and by developing proposals for a modernisation challenge fund that will support innovative and efficient practice. The Budget announced by my colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, on 22 January 2008, allocated all of the funds available to the Executive. Clearly, therefore, we will need to take into account the implications for the amounts currently allocated to other public services when developing a modernisation challenge fund model.

Regarding each function that will transfer to local government, options for models of service delivery will be explored and developed, including the delivery by and to groups of councils, ensuring the efficient and effective delivery of such services. In addition, regional shared service arrangements will be developed to deliver common back-office services, such as ICT, accounting, payroll and procurement, across all of the 11 new councils.

It is recognised and accepted that, if local government is to begin to realise the potential of our shared vision and take on the role of leader and shaper of communities, it requires direct responsibility for a family of services.

The Executive has carefully considered the functions that should transfer from central to local government. On the one hand, emphasis has been placed on the key objectives of strengthening local government and developing the principle of subsidiarity that seeks to ensure that powers are delegated to the most local level possible. On the other hand, the need to ensure effective and efficient service delivery has also been an important consideration. However, it must be acknowledged that the strengthening of local government will be a process and not an event; the speed and extent of which can only be dictated by whatever secures excellence in service delivery. A balance has had to be struck.

In order for the new councils to fulfil their roles in place shaping, they will have responsibility for local development plan functions, development control and enforcement. Responsibility for regional spatial planning will remain with central government. However, I will want to discuss with the Minister for Regional Development the roles of DOE and DRD in discharging that function at the centre, not only in the context of RPA implementation but also regarding planning reform.

Responsibility for the public-realm aspects of local roads functions will also transfer to local government. The local road public-realm responsibilities include Roads Service work in relation to: streetscaping; town and city centre environmental improvements; grass cutting and weed spraying; gully emptying; street lighting; off-street parking; pedestrian permits; maintenance of amenity areas; alley-gating, which involves making traffic regulation orders facilitating alley-gating to avoid antisocial behaviour; permitting local events to be held on roads; and the salting of footways.

Responsibility for mainstream local road functions will be retained by the Department for Regional Development. However, there will be a formal and direct input by new councils to decision-making on local roads, and an enhanced accountability framework, within which the Roads Service relationship with local government will operate. That could take the form of an appropriate statutory framework setting out the respective roles and responsibilities of Roads Service and the new councils. It is also proposed that Roads Service will implement structural arrangements to facilitate coterminosity with the new council boundaries.

Proposals about public transport responsibilities are being considered by the Regional Development Minister, in the light of the decision to retain

responsibility for mainstream roads functions within DRD, and taking into account the undesirability of separating those responsibilities. As with the local roads functions, mechanisms for ensuring local government input to decision-making on public transport will be developed.

Linking back to our vision for local government, the urban regeneration and community development delivery functions due to transfer include: those associated with physical development, such as environmental improvement schemes, comprehensive development and urban development grants; area-based regeneration, such as neighbourhood renewal; some community development programmes; and support for the voluntary and community sector. Some of the Department for Social Development's funding programmes for those functions are already delivered through councils. Possible methods of further strengthening partnership-working will be explored through pilot projects during the transitional phase in the run-up to the full transfer of those functions. That will provide a valuable learning experience, and inform and support the wider transfer. Those partnering arrangements can be used to test the feasibility of transferring some of those functions in advance of the establishment of the new councils.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive will remain as the strategic housing authority. The Housing Council, which was to be abolished under the RPA proposals of the previous Administration, is to be retained. That will ensure that local government will have a continuing involvement in strategic housing issues.

Some housing functions will, however, transfer. These are the registration of houses in multiple occupation and housing unfitness responsibilities, including repair and demolition notices. Although the Housing Executive will maintain its statutory role as the home-energy conservation authority, the new councils will take the lead on energy conservation at a local level. They will also have responsibility for travellers' transit sites with the Housing Executive retaining responsibility for permanent housing, group housing and serviced sites for travellers.

In order to facilitate local government in driving forward local economic development a number of functions will transfer from Invest NI. Those include Start a Business programme and enterprise shows, which are focused on supporting businesses that operate primarily in the local market; youth entrepreneurship such as the Prince's Trust and Shell Livewire, activities that involve the promotion of entrepreneurship within the younger community; the social entrepreneurship programme; Investing in Women — a programme specifically targeting female entrepreneurship; and neighbourhood renewal funding relating to enterprise initiatives.

Also for transfer are the local tourism functions covering small-scale tourism accommodation development; local tourism marketing; local tourism product development; visitor servicing; providing business support including business start up advice along with training and delivery of customer-care schemes; and providing advice to developers on tourism policies and related issues.

Other new or enhanced functions for and responsibilities of local government are: the delivery of the EU rural development programme; the authority to spot list — that is, to issue a temporary building preservation notice — to enable councils to add a building to the statutory list on a temporary basis, subject to ratification by my Department; the authority to draw up local lists of buildings that are of architectural and/or historic interest; Armagh County Museum; local water recreational facilities; local sports; functions of the Northern Ireland Museum Council; local arts; local festivals, which was announced by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in this House on 4 December 2007; and Donaghadee harbour.

In addition, consideration is being given to proposals for the extension of local government responsibilities for civil contingency arrangements and to proposals to place an additional duty on councils to produce good relations plans and strategies.

In addition to the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of services, a number of my ministerial colleagues are also proposing to strengthen the relationship between their Departments and local government in delivering services. They are considering, or proposing to enhance, the involvement of local government elected members in the governance arrangements for bodies within their areas of responsibility.

Indeed, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already announced in this House, on 04 February 2008, that his proposals for health and social care reform would ensure greater potential for democratisation with public representatives as members of local commissioning groups and on the board of a new regional public health agency, as well as having an active role within the future proposals for patient, client and carer representation. Those proposals are now the subject of public consultation, which will conclude on 12 May 2008.

Legislation is currently going through this House to establish a single library service for Northern Ireland under a new body, the library authority, which as a regional body will be accountable to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, and to the Assembly. A proposed amendment to the legislation provides for reserved places on the board of the authority for elected members of district councils. Subject to the passage of the legislation, the

library authority will come into effect in April 2009. To ensure that the library service reflects local needs, management responsibilities will be established on an area basis, and consultative arrangements will be established, involving chiefly councils but also other statutory and voluntary bodies. The consultative arrangements will apply until the community planning responsibilities of the new councils are in operation. The effectiveness of these liaisons and consultative arrangements will be reviewed after a year of operation.

In education, legislation is currently being drafted to establish a single education and skills authority that, as a regional body, will be accountable to the Minister of Education and this House. The Minister of Education is currently considering whether to provide for reserved places on the board of the authority for elected members of district councils.

In addition, the Minister of Education is considering the arguments about the transfer of youth services to district councils. The informal education and development services that are provided by the Youth Service are an important and integral part of the education system as a whole. However, the Minister of Education proposes to establish in the education and skills authority regional structures that will be coterminous with the new council delivery groups. Mirroring the approach that has been suggested for library services, the Minister proposes to develop consultative arrangements that involve councils, as well as other statutory and voluntary bodies, to ensure that the services that are provided by the education and skills authority reflect local needs. Those arrangements will apply until district councils' community planning responsibilities are in operation, and their effectiveness will be reviewed after one year.

It has been acknowledged that there is a need to make the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority more accountable to local government. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will, therefore, explore the options that are available in order to create a greater role for local government in fishery harbour management within existing structures.

The family of functions that will transfer to local government currently accounts for annual expenditure of some £116 million and involves about 1,070 staff. That constitutes a 25 percent increase in the budget of local government and an increase of almost 12 percent in its staff complement.

However, as I indicated, strengthening local government will be a process, not an event. Ongoing developments, such as the review of non-departmental public bodies and quangos, the outcome of the deliberations of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and any implications that arise from the restructuring of Departments, will, clearly, have an impact on that process.

Against that background, the Executive will review the functions that are to be delivered by local government 12 months after the new councils become operational and periodically thereafter.

Considerable challenges lie ahead in implementing the structural and functional changes to local government. As I said in the take-note debate on 13 November 2007, my aim is to implement the agreed structural reform package by 2011. That timescale is extremely challenging, and significant risks are attached to it. The full and active cooperation of our colleagues in the Assembly, local government, the Northern Ireland Office and the Electoral Commission is needed if that aim is to be achieved.

The immediate priority is the appointment of an independent local government Boundaries Commissioner to draw up the proposed boundaries for the 11 new local government districts. Therefore, as a matter of urgency, I will introduce a local government (boundaries) Bill to provide for that appointment. Given the tight timescale, if elections to the new councils are to be held in 2011, that Bill will need to be progressed by accelerated passage. When I meet the Environment Committee this week, I will outline in detail the reasoning for such an approach. I will also move quickly to establish detailed implementation structures, building on the work of the Local Government Reform Taskforce and the agreement that the previous Administration had with local government and the political parties on those structures. I do not propose to reinvent the wheel. The work of the sub-groups of the previous Administration's Local Government Reform Taskforce will be taken as our starting point. Where there was agreement between the parties and the previous Administration on how particular policy issues would be effected, such agreement will be the firm basis for implementing the reform package in question.

I also need to integrate our continuing work on modernising local government into the implementation arrangements to ensure that we drive forward that modernisation as an integral part of the process of reforming the sector structurally. Our focus will be on driving out inefficiencies and delivering to the public high-quality services that improve over time. Central to the implementation strategy will be the development of service-delivery structures that are efficient and appropriate. One priority will be a detailed analysis of the delivery options in order to ensure efficiency and best value. That analysis will be carried out in close cooperation with the sector, colleagues in the Department of Finance and Personnel and transferring function Departments.

The reform package is fundamentally different to that announced by the previous Administration, and the cost-and-benefit analysis that was prepared at that time is no longer relevant. My officials will, therefore, work closely with

the Department of Finance and Personnel, the transferring function Departments and the sector to deliver a robust cost-benefit model for the programme.

Building the capacity of local government elected members and officers and preparing those in transferring functions for the transition to local government through the delivery of a comprehensive and effective capacity-building programme will be a critical part of the implementation programme.

We need to equip local government elected members, in particular, and officers with the skills that they will need to manage the change process and to deliver effectively the functions for which they will be responsible. The Local Government Taskforce has been developing detailed proposals for a capacity-building programme for elected members and officers. It will require substantial investment, both by central government, subject to funding, and local government, and is integral to our work in developing a modernisation challenge fund.

12.30 pm

The Local Government Staff Commission will be a key part of the change process. I will shortly be initiating a review of the commission to ensure that it is resourced appropriately to provide much-needed support during the implementation of the decisions on the future shape of local government.

Whatever challenges lie ahead, central and local government are committed to working in partnership to deliver the change. That relationship has already been critical to delivering the outcomes of this review, with decisions being informed by an exchange of experience and information. Like all effective relationships, our partnership must be based on mutual trust, respect and confidence. We are committed to reinforcing and renewing the relationship in the years ahead, in pursuit of our shared goal of serving all the people of Northern Ireland and placing their needs at the heart of all that we do.

I recognise that our decisions on the future shape of local government may cause concern for people working in the sector and those working in the Northern Ireland Departments on functions that will be transferred. As we take forward the implementation of the reform and modernisation programme, every effort will be made to address these concerns. We will consult as appropriate with the relevant trade unions and staff associations and have due regard to the Public Service Commission's guiding principles to ensure the smooth transfer of staff to new organisations. I will also wish to engage fully with the Environment Committee throughout the programme.

As I said at the beginning of my statement, it has been a long and sometimes difficult journey since I launched the review last July. I would not have been able to complete it without the support and cooperation of my ministerial colleagues on the subcommittee.

In closing, I want to quote Sir Winston Churchill:

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

[Interruption.]

It is not the quote about fighting on the beaches.

To some, the review of local government aspect of the RPA has been a long time in gestation. At long last, we have truly begun, and I look forward to the functions that I have set out today creating strong, effective local government at the heart of vibrant, safe and sustainable communities delivering coordinated services for all our citizens.

**The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone):**  
Go raibh maith agat. We recently met officials from the Department to discuss the Review of Public Administration. I thank the Minister for presenting us with that detailed statement on the shape and form of local government to come; it has addressed some of the issues that were raised at that meeting. However, I am sure that the Minister will agree that it would be useful if there were an indicative timetable for the implementation of the changes that are likely to come before us.

The Minister touched on another issue that has come before the Committee, which is the concern about potential job losses in local government. There will have to be some movement on the issue soon to address that concern, as there is a lot of misinformation out there about what may or may not happen as a consequence of these changes.

Other issues that were mentioned in the Minister’s statement, and have also come before the Committee, include the need for legislative protection of the rights of minorities and individuals against discrimination. The Minister referred to the need for checks and balances to provide equality, particularly — but not exclusively, obviously — in regard to the issue of planning, which is likely to be transferred. It is vital that the excesses of the past are not visited on future generations.

The other issue that has come before the Committee is the need for some detail about a statutory code of conduct for councillors. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Committee Chairman for his comments. He and I had an opportunity to discuss the statement, briefly, before I released it today. It is appropriate that he began his remarks with a comment about staff, because people are listening to and watching what is going on today. It is important that we address those issues.

All staffing issues will be considered within the framework of the Public Service Commission's guiding principles and consultation with staff representatives and staff commissions. A lack of certainty about the progression of the Review of Public Administration is one of the issues that staff have been communicating to me for some time. However, we have now begun on a road, and the staff will thank us for that, but they will be concerned about their positions. We will work closely not only with the trade unions, but with the staff commissions, on that issue.

Mr McGlone also mentioned the need for equality. Equality issues have been an integral part of the Review of Public Administration. We need to demonstrate equality in every decision, and the new council structure must reflect the needs of everyone in society. There will be a system of statutory safeguards to ensure fair and transparent decision-making and to protect the rights of minority groups.

Proportionality will be the touchstone of all that we are doing on equality, and we look forward to presenting that. Between now and 2011, we intend to run some pilot schemes on the different ways in which that can happen, with a view to introducing statutory safeguards for all councils in 2011.

The Chairman also mentioned that planning will become the responsibility of local councils. That will be welcomed by many of the councillors who complain about some of the decisions of the Planning Service; it is now over to them. However, we will ensure that the appropriate codes of conduct and best practice arrangements are in place. It is important to protect councillors and planning officers from unfounded allegations, but it is also important that the public be assured that the system is open, fair and transparent. The Department will work to ensure that those assurances will be made. I am working with officials to establish what planning safeguards will be put in place. The Department will retain a call-in power for cases that become particularly difficult.

The Strategic Leadership Board has carried out some work on a statutory code of conduct for councillors. As I said in my statement, I do not propose to

reinvent the wheel; where there is five-party support for an issue, I will take it forward in legislation.

**Mr Weir:** I declare an interest as a Vice-President of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, and in light of these proposals, I should, perhaps, say that, for the moment, I am a member of North Down Borough Council.

I thank the Minister for her lengthy and detailed statement. When I saw her ten page, closely typed text, I thought that I had wandered into the wrong announcement. I thought that it was a statement from the Finance Minister, because such lengthy statements are more his forte — restricting himself to 10 pages is a difficulty for him.

I thank the Minister for what, I think, is one of the most important announcements to be brought before the Chamber. She mentioned governance arrangements and the protections that have been put in place. Can the Minister assure the House that the interests of nationalists in the east and north of the Province and of unionists in the west and south of the Province will be protected? In both cases, they are likely to find themselves in the minority.

Although there is, rightly, protection in place by way of proportionality and the requirement for cross-community decision-making and appropriate checks and balances, can the Minister confirm whether there is a commitment to any particular governance model, particularly d'Hondt or any form of mandatory coalition?

**Mr Kennedy:** Jim Allister wants to know that.

**Mrs Foster:** I should have thought that Danny would probably provide Mr Allister with an answer; he is good at that.

The statutory safeguards are for everybody in Northern Ireland. I am clear about that, and everybody in the House should be clear about that. Regardless of where one lives, it is right that everyone should have equality of opportunity and access.

There is no reference anywhere in the statement to d'Hondt: this is about proportionality being the touchstone. It is right that different models of proportionality be tried out through pilot schemes, which will be rolled out in the implementation plan in order to ascertain the best way forward to ensure statutory safeguards for everybody in Northern Ireland.

**Mr A Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement, which demonstrates clearly the complexity of the issues that must be dealt with. For too often and on too many occasions in the past, the number of councils seemed to be the most taxing issue for some people, including Members of this House. However, I thank the Minister for the commitments that she gave in the discussions leading up to this decisions being made and for those that she made in the Chamber this morning.

Given her commitments on the need to have inclusive local democracy, will the Minister reaffirm that the governance arrangements, in particular, will be placed on a statutory basis? That is essential to support her commitment that the proposals for new local government arrangements will be based on principles of absolute fairness. Above all else, there must be fairness in this process, because whatever may be said about the number and functions of local councils, the manner of the governance arrangements of local government and the way in which they are delivered are central to the debate. I, therefore, ask the Minister to reaffirm that commitment, and I also declare an interest as a councillor.

**Mrs Foster:** I am happy to affirm that, because a statutory system of safeguards will be implemented when the new councils are elected in 2011. Between now and then, we will be rolling out different models and pilot schemes. The Member will be aware that proportionality arrangements already operate in various councils and those will be examined to see how they are working and whether they have any gaps. There will most certainly be statutory safeguards to ensure fair and transparent decision-making, which I think the public will welcome.

**Mr Armstrong:** I welcome the Minister's aspirations for her 11 council local government model; it will perhaps work in some way or other.

The Review of Public Administration has been ongoing for nearly 10 years, and although I welcome the progress that has been made towards finding a solution, I am disappointed that the 15 council model has not been adopted. Outside Belfast, that model would have enabled councillors to be elected to councils in the same constituencies to which both MLAs at Stormont and MPs at Westminster are elected — 14 councils representing 14 parliamentary constituencies and one council representing the four Belfast parliamentary constituencies.

Will the Minister tell the House why the 15 council model was rejected in favour of the 11 council model? Had the 15 council model been adopted, the potential for voter confusion could have been minimised and boundaries that

are already universally accepted and regarded as free from any hint of gerrymandering could have been used.

**Mrs Foster:** I thought that the Member was going to damn me by faint praise, but he did not.

The map of Northern Ireland meant that the issues that were discussed in reaching a decision on the option 11b model were complicated. Given that, the decision to select the option 11b model was made on the basis of the necessity to have an appropriate structure that met the need to reduce the range of variants that exist between councils, while maintaining the local and community connections that make councils so effective in providing services to meet local needs.

Although there has been a great deal of talk about coterminosity where parliamentary boundaries are concerned, we need to look further than just at those boundaries. If we consider services such as the Health Service, education, policing, housing and roads services, none is provided on the basis of parliamentary boundaries. People must realise that and look at the map of the provision of all those services to decide whether we want to be coterminous with parliamentary constituencies in order that we can have a more effective delivery system. That is what citizens would want us to do and what local government wants to do. That is why I am happy to endorse the option 11b model that was decided on and that the Executive took on board when they made their decision.

12.45 pm

**Mr Ford:** Like Mr Weir, I declare that I have, for the present, an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council.

I thank the Minister for her statement, and also her officials, who attended the Committee during recess in order to give us some detail on the issue. These proposals transform the overall share of public expenditure administered by local councils by 1 percent upwards, and raise the question as to whether they genuinely produce strong, effective local government, or whether we could not have kept the existing model and given councils community planning as the only change.

The Minister has referred to coterminosity. However, she has not only ruled out one-to-one coterminosity with bodies such as health providers, but 1:2 and even 1:3 provision. All five health and social care trusts will have to deal with cross-boundary issues. That shows no attempt at producing joined-up government.

The Minister talked about governance; she referred to testing out potentially different models. Does she agree that the best form of governance is one in which, by local arrangement and negotiation, power and responsibility are shared equitably? Will she assure Members that legislation will be used as a backstop to ensure that that is the case, not as the first proviso in providing a rigid form, whatever that may be?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his questions; I will answer the last question first.

Local arrangements are best, where they can be worked out. However, I do not believe that they can be. The best way to move forward is to run out a couple of these pilot schemes between now and 2011, see what difficulties arise and move forward.

This has been a successful engagement. The members of the strategic leadership board who sit in the House know that that body has engaged meaningfully on governance issues. We have moved ahead significantly in those matters.

With respect to functions, the budget for local government has been increased by 25 percent. I am disappointed that the Member made the comments that he did. Local government was last reformed in 1973. Some 35 years on, we are discussing giving local government a 25 percent budget increase and completely new powers for community planning and well-being. In return, we ask that the number of local government units be rationalised from 26 to 11. By anyone's standards, that is a major change from the way that local government has been run in this country for 35 years.

Some Members see the glass not just half-empty but completely empty. We are moving forward into a partnership arrangement between this House and local government. I said repeatedly that this is the start of the process. I look forward to its development, as a Member of this House, and I will keep a close eye on it no matter where I am.

**Mr T Clarke:** I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council and I congratulate the Minister on her statement. She referred to a severance package for long-serving councillors. A colleague of mine will, by the end of this term, have served 28 years as a councillor. Will the Minister expand her remarks on that scheme?

**Mrs Foster:** It is appropriate that we acknowledge the contribution of long-standing councillors, who, during the past 35 years, were the only people —

apart from MPs — to represent people at local level. I pay tribute to the work that has been done by local government over that period.

A severance scheme for long-standing councillors, who have served their communities well through difficult years, but who do not want to stand at the next local government elections, is fully justified, both by the service given, and by the fact that the number of council seats available in the future has been reduced by the decisions that the Executive took on 13 March.

Provision of the severance scheme creates an opportunity to refresh the pool of councillors and to increase the current low levels of representation on councils of women and young people. Precise details of the scheme will be developed using, as a starting point, the report and recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group, which reported in June 2006. It will be a part of the implementation plan. In the near future, I hope to speak to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the National Association of Councillors to make progress on that issue.

**Mr McKay:** I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive statement. I echo what my party colleague said in welcoming the announcement as regards equality checks and balances, which will be a radical departure from how councils here have been run in the past.

Given the negative social and economic impact of the border, especially on those communities living close to it, and given that the new councils will be similar in size and composition to the county councils in the twenty-six counties and that they will be given additional powers, will the Minister outline how she intends to deliver on the opportunities for cross-border cooperation through the new community planning process?

**Mrs Foster:** The community planning process is what it says on the tin — it is for the community and elected councillors in an area, and it will be up to them to determine how they will interact with councils in the Republic of Ireland and with their colleagues in the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Mr Ross:** I thank the Minister for her statement this afternoon. During her speech, she made reference to the urgent need to appoint a Boundaries Commissioner. Will she advise the House as to when she anticipates that that will happen, what his remit will be, and when he will report back?

**Mrs Foster:** I will be speaking to the Environment Committee this Thursday about the local government Boundaries Bill. Due to the tight timescale that I indicated to the House, I am hoping that the Committee will understand the

need for accelerated passage. If that happens, I hope to bring the Bill to the House soon. Thereafter, I hope that the local government Boundaries Commissioner will be able to take up his post and report back to me within a year.

As I said in my statement, the timescale is tight, and I will need the cooperation of the Environment Committee and the Northern Ireland Office and Electoral Commission to take matters forward in the time available.

**Mr B McCrea:** I declare an interest as a member of Lisburn City Council. Earlier, the Minister said that she was worried that she might be damned by faint praise from one of my colleagues — I assure Members that she will have no such concerns about me.

The particular issue that I would like clarification on is that this appears to be a political fudge that is designed to maintain the status quo. Unless the Minister can provide coherent answers to questions about the 11 council model, I am afraid that other people will be forced to agree with me.

She said:

“The ability of councils to connect with, and deliver for, their communities, is central to our vision for local government.”

Will she explain why she thinks that the citizens of Castlereagh are more in tune with the citizens of Lisburn than they are with those of Belfast? Does that not show that this is a complete misunderstanding of the premise that local government should be about local people giving local services? Will the Minister please give me an answer to that question?

**Mrs Foster:** I, apparently, have a complete misunderstanding of local government. The Member will need to look at the local government Boundaries Bill when it is published. I have shared its contents with the two Ministers in his party, and the Bill states that the local government Boundaries Commissioner could take in the whole of, or a major part of, that council area, which means that he will not be constrained when he is considering Belfast, Castlereagh or Lisburn. He will be able to go into other areas and decide whether they should be in Castlereagh, Belfast or wherever. Yet again, the Member is jumping the gun; and one wonders why he would do that apart from the fact that he is trying to create mischief in the House.

This is a good news story for local government, the Executive and the House. However, yet again, the Ulster Unionist Party cannot cope with good

news for the House because that means that its Members are being left behind again.

**Mr Gallagher:** I commend the Minister for her statement and for her approach in taking the matter forward quickly. I also commend the Executive subcommittee's work to which she referred.

I have two questions. First, will the Minister confirm whether, before making her announcement, she presented the contents of her statement to a meeting of the Executive subcommittee?

Secondly, the SDLP considers the protections and safeguards for minorities to be a key test of the proposals, and, in the future, it does not want any council to be in the situation in which there are permanently trapped minorities. The Minister ended her statement with a reference to Churchill. As a nationalist, I ask the Minister to ensure that dreary drones in unionist-dominated regimes, such as Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council, do not emerge in the future.

**Mrs Foster:** For a moment, I thought the Member was going to mention the dreary steeples of Fermanagh; but no, he spoke of the dreary drones of Lisburn and Castlereagh. The protections and safeguards are for everybody in the community, and it is rather tiresome to hear nationalists speak about this matter as if they were the only people to suffer as a result of past equality issues.

Edmund Burke said:

"You can never plan the future by the past."

I have no intention of looking to the past, and I want the House to look to the future for the way forward in local government.

Concerning the Member's technical point about meeting with the subcommittee before making my statement, it was impossible to get all the members together in one room. Therefore, I met each member individually in order that they would know what would be in my announcement.

**Mr Molloy:** Go raibh matih agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. As a member of Dungannon District Council, I must declare an interest. The Minister's statement is an important step in dealing with matters relating to the number of councils and the required legislation and in getting on with the job in hand.

Will the Minister confirm that the power to deal with issues that are not the preserve of Departments will not limit councils to addressing problematic situations that, in the past, those Departments perhaps neglected?

In order to ensure strong local government, will the Minister encourage her party colleagues to transfer the maximum amount of functions, which must be followed by responsibility sharing? The carrying out of such functions must be tied to resources. The danger is that local government will have responsibilities, but will not have the resources to fulfil them.

I wish to re-emphasise the issues concerning checks and balances, which are there not just to protect minorities but to ensure that every councillor has the opportunity to come forward and play an important role. With that in mind, uniform standing orders might be one way to ensure that we do not end up with local arrangements similar to those in the past, which David Ford suggested consisted of nods and winks between people and which produced the wrong solutions. We require legislation that is enforceable at local government level, and the Dungannon pilot scheme might be used in the future.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his comments about this being an important step forward. In the course of discussions about reforms to local government, many people have missed the power of well-being, which is an important new statutory power that councils will have. Indeed, some chief executives are looking forward to exercising the power of well-being in order to progress matters that are not the preserve of any other agency.

Concerning the encouragement of other Ministers to transfer the maximum amount of functions to local government, I know that the Member will encourage his party colleagues, as I will continue to encourage mine —

**Mr P Robinson:** And yourself.

**Mrs Foster:** Myself? What does the Member mean? I have given everything away. I will continue to encourage my colleagues to transfer the maximum amount of resources and powers to local government.

I share the Member's opinion that checks and balances do not just protect minorities, but also individual councillors — particularly in relation to the planning function that will be transferred — and I know that councillors will welcome that.

I hear what the Member is saying about uniform standing orders; as I said, I will listen to the opinion of the Strategic Leadership Board on all those issues, and I know that the Member will want to make his points to that body.

1.00 pm

**Mr I McCrea:** I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, and I declare an interest as a councillor on Cookstown District Council and as a member of NILGA. The Minister mentioned the functions that will be transferred from the Housing Executive to local government. Will she tell the House what functions that were originally to be transferred to local councils will not now be considered for transfer, and why?

**Mrs Foster:** The Minister for Social Development has been very helpful with the work that has been carried out since our debate on the emerging findings report and since I received the 59 written responses on the way forward. The Department for Social Development will retain certain elements for strategic reasons, and anything that can be delivered locally will be transferred to local councils. The responsibility for issues such as travellers' sites and local transit sites will fall to local councils, but the Department will retain strategic and statutory responsibility for permanent sites under the aegis of the Housing Executive. There has been a good relationship between our Departments, and, like other ministerial colleagues, the Minister for Social Development has said that she will revisit those issues after a period of time to see how they are progressing.

**Mr O'Dowd:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon District Council, and my question to the Minister concerns the dual mandate. Most Members have had to declare an interest because of their dual mandate. I welcome the end of the dual mandate, on which the Minister concentrated in her statement. When will the legislation be in place that will allow MLAs such as me to stand down and co-options to take place in the councils?

**Mrs Foster:** Some of my colleagues are keen for me to encourage the Member to stand down as soon as he can. [Laughter.]

The dual mandate creates a conflict of interest with strong local government. The removal of the ability of individuals to be councillors and Members of the Assembly or the Westminster Parliament will address the issue. We should see that development as a positive way forward. It will allow us to bring new blood into the council system, help to build capacity, and allow us to increase the number of female and young councillors. That will be part of the implementation plan, and I know that NILGA will want to work with me

closely on that; however, it will not happen overnight. The dual mandate creates capacity issues, and I am sure that the Member will acknowledge that. Many Assembly Members also serve as leaders of their council groupings throughout Northern Ireland. We must examine the capacity issue in order that we can deal sensibly with the dual mandate.

**Mr McCausland:** I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. I thank the Minister for her statement and for indicating the timescale for the boundaries review, and I ask her as a matter of urgency to pass that information to Fred Cobain in order to settle his shattered nerves. [Laughter.]

I wish to make couple of specific points. The first concerns spot-listing powers. Will the Minister assure the House that the arrangements for spot-listing will enable councils to make a swift response to situations as they arise? Urgency is a key element of the power to spot-list. Secondly, will she clarify the relationship between the salting of footways and the salting of roads?

**Mrs Foster:** If needs be, we can get clarification from the Minister for Regional Development, but as I understand it, the salting of footpaths will become the responsibility of the councils, and the responsibility for the salting of roads will remain with the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

I hear what the Member has said. However, part of the new structure between councils and DRD, the health and education bodies, among others, is that there will be a more focused local input. Indeed, DRD has indicated that it will reconfigure its local offices so that they will cover each of the 11 new council areas. One Member said that the new council areas do not directly map the boundaries of the health and education bodies. The police are also considering reconfiguring to fit in with the new council areas. We are also considering innovative ways of having shared services, and people will be quite excited about that.

I will finish by talking about the Belfast boundary. The Belfast council area could be expanded, and it probably should be expanded to recognise the natural growth of the city and its community boundaries in recent years. However, it will be a matter for the local Boundaries Commissioner to make recommendations on the council boundaries, and there will also be public consultation on the issue. The boundaries commissioner will be appointed in the near future, and we will be able to take the matter forward then.

**Mr Kennedy:** I thank the Minister for her statement. I declare an interest as a member of Newry and Mourne District Council. One of the major concerns

in local government is whether the money will follow the new functions. The Minister said that local government budgets will rise by 25 percent. Will that be a permanent state of affairs? What are the projected savings and staffing implications from her proposals? Will the Minister be responsible for appointing an appropriate person to act as the local government Boundaries Commissioner? When does she hope to perform that task? What powers and responsibilities will that person have?

During the Minister's discussions with NILGA and the National Association of Councillors, in respect of packages for councillors who may not wish to stand in forthcoming elections, did she form any view about whether those with broken service will be entitled to a compensatory package?

Finally, I beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker — it was a Churchillian speech, so I must attempt to ask meaningful questions. The Minister said that she would work with the Northern Ireland Office to fill local government vacancies on the basis of co-option rather than by-election. Surely that decision would depend on the opinion of the political parties and the individuals who comprise the existing councils, rather than on the opinion of those in the Northern Ireland Office?

**Mrs Foster:** I thank the Member for his many and varied points. The local government budget will increase by 25 percent. That will not be a permanent state of affairs, as I hope to increase it. As the Executive and the Assembly bed in, I hope that more funds will be released to local government, especially in connection with the ongoing institutional Assembly and Executive review.

The projected savings will be at least £15 million a year, at a rough estimate. The figure will increase greatly, because that is a minimum estimate.

In relation to the cost of the proposals, officials are working closely with my ministerial colleagues and with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the transfer of functions from Departments. They must develop a fully-costed implementation plan, and that exercise is already under way.

Like any public appointment, the post of local government Boundaries Commissioner will be filled in accordance with the public appointments procedures for Northern Ireland. As Minister of the sponsoring Department, I will have the final say on who will be appointed to the post.

The eligibility of councillors who have broken service for the severance scheme will be considered by the National Association of Councillors and

NILGA, and their recommendations will be brought to me in relation to the councillors' remuneration package.

Finally, with regard to the question about elections, by-elections and co-option, my comments were made in the context of the fact that the Northern Ireland Office retains the power over electoral law. That is why reference was made to the Northern Ireland Office. I must ask the Secretary of State to hold elections not in 2009, but in 2011, when we will hold new elections for the new councils. Having elections for the 26 councils would not be worthwhile at present. We should concentrate instead on building the capacity of councillors and officers to move forward into the new situation.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for her statement. Does she agree that although we have heard, rightly, about the interests of councillors and staff, we must ensure that we focus strongly on ratepayers' interests as we progress these issues? We must consider the implications for ratepayers of the services that are to be provided and what they will be asked to pay for those services.

As Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I wish to inform the Minister that that Committee will probably want to examine the implications of her proposals relating to social enterprise, business start-ups and youth enterprise, so that we do not end up with a rag-bag of approaches. We want to ensure that there is still a strong regional framework and that there is, at least, a coherent regional policy baseline for those matters and for tourism matters.

Will the Minister deal with one issue again?

She said that:

"The consideration of those views facilitated further discussion of what the final recommendations of the subcommittee should be. The recommendations were agreed by the Executive at our meeting on 13 March 2008."

That, and other comments in the Minister's statement, might have given people the impression that the recommendations were endorsed by the Executive subcommittee. I understand that the subcommittee has not met since Christmas and that, even when members of that subcommittee had discussions with the Minister, no decisions were made on the number of councils — certainly in the case of at least one Minister. Will the Minister clarify those points so that there is no suggestion that she has misled the House?

**Mrs Foster:** I am happy to deal with the Member's points. His first point was about the citizen being at the heart of the RPA: that is precisely why the RPA was first initiated. The RPA is not about cost; it is about making more efficient services available to citizens. People ought to remember that when examining the RPA and not always concentrate on the cost, although that must certainly be taken into account.

The Member's comments on Invest NI and the programmes that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has agreed to transfer to local government demonstrate very clearly the balance that must be struck between retaining the strategy in this place and allowing service delivery at local government level. I am glad that the Member raised that issue, because sometimes people have — very unkindly — suggested that Ministers are trying to grab all the powers and keep them at Stormont. That is not what the proposals are about; they are about having the sort of high-level strategy to which the Member referred.

1.15 pm

With respect to the subcommittee; to be frank, I had some difficulty in getting all the Ministers into a room at the one time. Therefore, I took the view that the best way to proceed was to have separate meetings with each of the Ministers who were on the subcommittee — none of them can deny that I had those meetings with them individually. Indeed, the Minister for Social Development was kind enough to give me a letter indicating her views on the range of functions and on the proposed number of councils before 13 March so that I could go to the Executive meeting with a clear understanding of her position on the proposed number of councils.

**Mr G Robinson:** I declare an interest as a member of Limavady Borough Council. I thank the Minister and I congratulate her for bringing this statement on the RPA to the Chamber. How will the proposed new councils have a greater say in decision-making on local roads? I know that the Minister made some reference to the issue but will she perhaps provide some elaboration?

**Mrs Foster:** That matter will be developed between the Department for Regional Development and the implementation group that has been established. It is hoped that local councils, in their new configuration, will be able to determine the priorities regarding the local roads in their areas, and it will then be up to Roads Service to deliver on those local priorities. That is a very significant move, because in the past — and I have been sitting in council when it has actually happened — Roads Service officials “consulted” with local councils when, in effect, all they were doing was setting out their programme for the year ahead. That is going to change, and local councils

are going to be involved more at the front end and take a pro-active role in determining priorities regarding the roads in their particular areas.

**Mr Neeson:** I declare an interest as an elected member of Carrickfergus Borough Council. First, I congratulate the Minister in having the courage to reach a decision on the number of councils; that issue has dragged on for far too long. In her statement, the Minister said that it is:

“a process and not an event”.

I know that the Local Government Taskforce, when it was looking at the issue, was considering the possibility that after the elections to the new councils, those councils would meet on an interim basis. Is the Minister considering that possibility? Secondly, will the Minister agree that having reduced the number of local councils, there is a need to reduce the number of Departments as well?

**Mrs Foster:** Absolutely. As I am reducing the number of councillors, obviously we will have to look at the number of Assembly Members as well. As regards what is normally called the shadow period or shadow council, there are advantages and disadvantages with that approach. One disadvantage, which was very clearly enunciated to me, was about the time that the Belfast Corporation became Belfast City Council. People said that they did not actually know who to go to during that period — whether they should go to the corporation or the new city council. People were uncertain as to who actually had the power at that particular time. I do not want that sort of situation arising with the new local council structures; that is something that is in the back of my mind.

However, we have not taken a definitive view in relation to shadow councils yet, and I am quite happy to listen to council colleagues in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and the National Association of Councillors (NAC), and indeed to the Environment Committee and Members of this House, to hear what they have to say on the issue. I am concerned about the possibility of having a shadow period, but I think the Member is right: we need to prepare for that 2011 go-live date, and perhaps the way to do that is to have different pilot projects running throughout the country on different issues.

**Mr Storey:** I declare an interest as a member of the Local Government Taskforce Strategic Leadership Board, and Ballymoney Borough Council. I thank the Minister for her statement. The previous Member to speak asked the question that I wanted to pose to the Minister in relation to the shadow council and the period between 2009 and when the 11 councils will be

established in 2011. I am glad that the honourable Member for Mid Ulster Mr Molloy is in the House today; no doubt he will be glad that it will be 11 councils and not seven, and he will obviously not be receiving a severance package from his own party in regard to that particular matter.

Will the Minister comment on the names of the new councils and on who will be responsible for naming them? That issue has been a bone of contention for some time. Some of the suggestions for the names for the new councils, which were envisaged under the RPA, were unacceptable.

**Mrs Foster:** I was going to suggest that the new council in the south-west would be known as greater Fermanagh, but that would be very mischievous of me. [Laughter.]

The names of the new councils will be a matter for the Boundary Commissioner, who will make recommendations, and I will take the final decision in consultation with the Committee for the Environment. The Member is absolutely right — some of the names mentioned in the last RPA were quite Orwellian and did not inspire any sort of local identity or a civic sense of ownership. That is precisely what we are trying to inspire, so perhaps it would be a good idea to call that council greater Fermanagh.

**Mr Elliot:** I thank the Minister for bringing this information to the House. Has she considered the current debts of some council, and the high rates in some council areas compared to others? How will the merging of a council with high rates and a council with low rates actually operate? Will the councils' funds all go into the one pot, with the citizens of one area having to pay for the debt and poor management of the other?

Secondly, the Minister mentioned a letter from the Minister for Social Development. Did that Minister indicate her preferred number of local council areas?

**Mrs Foster:** I recognise the Member's point about poor management in some councils — something that is obviously reflected in the different levels of rates throughout Northern Ireland. I assure the Member that we will consider that issue proactively. Although many councils may have significant debt, I presume that they also have a significant asset base, and that issue will be considered by the implementation group.

It will be a matter for the Minister for Social Development as to whether she wishes to release to Members the letter that she sent to me. However, I believe I am correct in saying that — and the Minister will forgive me if I miss out a few words — although 15 was the SDLPs preferred number of councils,

she could understand why we had reached 11 as the number. She was happy with that, and felt that it was an improvement on seven. Furthermore, the Minister's team were clear with me in previous meetings that they could work with either 11 or 15 councils, and could work very well with 11 councils.

Therefore, as Minister of the Environment, I find the Ulster Unionist Party line in relation to the number of councils unclear. Some people are happy enough with 11, others are — [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mrs Foster:** The truth hurts.

Some people are happy with 15, and a councillor in Fermanagh wanted 26. Therefore, I do not know what the Ulster Unionist party line is, but, then, neither do its Members.

**Mr Speaker:** Declan O'Loan is not in the House; therefore Roy Beggs will ask the next question.

**Mr Beggs:** I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council.

Will the Minister explain why she seeks to pursue the enactment of this important Bill by accelerated passage? This afternoon, it is proposed that the commission for victims and survivors Bill will proceed by accelerated passage. The Bill to change local government boundaries proposes some of the most extensive changes to local government for over 35 years, and it is important to get the detail right. Will the Minister, therefore, explain why the Bill will be advanced in a timeframe that will not meet the indicated 2011 deadline? Why was the Bill not introduced earlier? Why did delays prevent proper scrutiny of this important issue?

Secondly, the Minister indicated that there would be a reduction in the number of councillors, and that she would support a reduction in the number of MLAs. Given that it is impossible to be in two, or even three, places at once, and a future reduction in the number of councillors and MLAs, does the Minister believe that there should, moreover, be a ban on a dual mandate, preventing councillors or MLAs from serving as MPs?

**Mrs Foster:** I thought that I had made it clear that I was referring to membership of both the Assembly and Parliament. Perhaps the Member was not in the Chamber when I made that point.

I do not understand how I could introduce a piece of legislation in respect of the Boundary Commission if the Executive had not first agreed on the number of councils that would be —

**Mr B McCrea:** Why did it take so long?

**Mrs Foster:** Perhaps the Member should ask his own party why it took so long, bearing in mind that it was his party that started the process in 2002 with a statement at the Ulster Unionist Party conference. The Bill is being introduced under the accelerated passage procedure to ensure that we can go to the electorate in 2011, and that we will be able to provide the electorate with the new councils at that time. I will be attending a meeting of the Environment Committee this week, and the Ulster Unionist Party's Committee members can ask me any questions that they wish about the detail of this short Bill.

**Mr Cree:** I remind the House that I am a member of North Down Borough Council. I thank the Minister for introducing the Bill and for getting the ball back in play. That has taken a long time, but not all the fault for that lies with the Ulster Unionist Party.

The Minister said that a process is under way. However, I have serious concerns about the 11b model. Will the Minister confirm that the Executive made a unanimous decision to go for that model? Were her partners on the Benches opposite of the same mind?

I had a question about the transfer of funds, but the Minister has already dealt with that matter. I assume that there is an assurance that those arrangements will be updated as time moves on.

What is the future of the Local Government Staff Commission, and what staff efficiency losses will there be? Has any decision been made on that significant point? Is there any likely date for the implementation of the MLA severance deal?

**Mrs Foster:** If some MLAs are looking for severance, I could suggest a few names. [Laughter.]

When the Executive considered the available range of council models and settled on 11 councils, we believed that that struck a good balance between reducing some of the diversity of population and rating income, and promoting and strengthening the links between councils and their communities. I was always told at the Institute of Professional Legal Studies not to ask a question to which I did not know the answer. The Member clearly knows the answer to

the question about whether the Executive's decision was unanimous because the information, including the fact that his two party colleagues felt that they could not support the Executive's 11b model, has been in the public domain. However, everyone else was happy to go along with that.

As I said in my statement, I am initiating a review of the Local Government Staff Commission, and I hope to make progress on that soon. We will work with the Local Government Remuneration Committee, NIC and NILGA to introduce the most fair and appropriate severance package available.