

Northern Ireland Assembly Disability Monitor



MONDAY 5 OCTOBER 2009
**Centre on Human Rights for
People with Disabilities**

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A Last Week's Assembly Business

Private Members' Business

Social Tariff System

Jennifer McCann (Sinn Fein) begged to move that “this Assembly calls on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department for Social Development to bring forward a proposal to the Utility Regulator, NIE Energy and Phoenix Gas to introduce a Social Tariff System to help people who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty.”

During the debate Jennifer McCann argued that the money to alleviate fuel poverty would be saved in other areas, such as services that deal with people's health and well-being. Jennifer McCann also noted that in the South, the Government operates a system of free gas and electricity units as part of a household benefits package, which is available to low-income and elderly households, all people over the age of 70, carers and people with disabilities. Recently, the amount of gas and electricity that is provided free of charge increased. As part of the welfare system in the South, the Government funds a national fuel scheme, which is a means-tested benefit that provides a weekly fuel allowance to low-income households that are in receipt of certain qualifying payments. The allowance is payable for 29 weeks, from the end of September until the middle of April.

Jennifer McCann continued that the scheme that operates in the South has been highlighted by organisations such as National Energy Action, which used the scheme to bolster its campaign for the Government to become more involved in regulating social or affordable tariffs. The National Energy Action campaign is based on its concern that the matter is being left to the discretion of the energy industry.

The Government must be more proactive in developing social or affordable tariffs, which should not be left solely to the energy companies. Some of the energy companies in Britain have admitted that even the extra £225 million that they have pledged for social assistance is inadequate. Organisations that represent the elderly,

such as Age Concern, have called for the introduction of a mandatory social tariff to help the most vulnerable households.

Given that energy companies make huge profits here and that energy prices here are higher, those companies have a corporate social responsibility to offer social or affordable tariffs to the households that need them. Whatever Members want to call such tariffs, we need to ensure that, this winter, those who are most vulnerable to fuel poverty are given the help that they need. Although I would like to see that assistance being given this winter, it might take some time. I want to see negotiations with the energy companies start now.

Jennifer McCann stressed that individual Ministers who have the responsibility for identifying vulnerable households, such as the Minister for Social Development, and for energy policy, such as the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, must enter into negotiations with NIE Energy and Phoenix Natural Gas to take this forward. In addition, all of the Assembly have a social responsibility to help those most disadvantaged in society. Energy companies and the larger commercial customers should pay for this, rather than other domestic customers. Social tariffs, taken in isolation, will not eradicate fuel poverty, but as part of an overall package they will definitely help vulnerable households this winter.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment submitted that the framework acknowledges that the Government are, as the Member pointed out, already working hard to ensure access to secure, competitively priced and sustainable energy supplies, while — and this is important — supporting economic growth as well. The framework also acknowledges that the era of cheap energy is over — something that we are all acutely aware of — that we must be more energy efficient and that we must seek to reduce our energy consumption.

The Minister acknowledged that because direct-debit customers receive a 4% reduction on the standard tariff, the prepayment method was not, in effect, a social tariff. The Minister emphasised that Northern Ireland have a better system than the one that is available in Great Britain, because there is at least an incentive to prepay. Other schemes include Firmus Energy's firmuscare scheme and the

Phoenix Supply Ltd energy care scheme. The latter is aimed at the over-60s, the disabled and the chronically ill.

The aim of social tariffs in the energy sector is to enable low-income and vulnerable customers to access competitively priced energy tariffs. Given the level of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, the Minister empathised and assured that she understood that the concept of social tariffs merits further investigation as an appropriate policy response.

David Simpson (DUP) mentioned the £150 one-off payment that was made last winter. That was provided for in the Financial Assistance Act 2009. The Assembly recognised that fuel poverty is a big issue; that one-off payment went a long way towards alleviating difficulties for many people who were facing hikes in gas and electricity prices.

David Simpson also mentioned the tight profit margins on which the energy companies operate. He asked whether social tariffs would lead to reduced profits for those companies. However, the energy companies do have quite high profits. Jennifer McCann said that NIE Energy made a £120 million profit.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, spoke about the use of keypads as a form of social tariff. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said that there were concerns that people who pay by direct debit get a 4% reduction in their electricity prices, whereas keypad users only get a 2% or a 2.5% reduction. The Chairperson also made a point about asked whether energy generators should pick up some of the costs of having a social tariff system.

Mention was made in the debate that 70% of households here use oil, the supply of which is totally unregulated. Some Members pointed out that the oil companies bear no responsibility whatsoever to bring in any energy efficiency measures. In addressing fuel poverty, we must think outside the box in determining how people on low incomes, elderly people and disabled people can pay less for their electricity. The Minister mentioned benefit uptakes and check-ups, and energy efficiency measures in the home, such as cavity-wall insulation and loft insulation.

Other Members, including Billy Armstrong (UUP), mentioned the warm homes scheme. Declan O'Loan (SDLP) said that more money has been invested in that scheme recently. Those measures can reduce fuel poverty, but there are still pensioners and people on low incomes who will suffer high levels of fuel poverty. As was said, it is unacceptable that approximately 2,000 elderly people here die every year as a result of fuel poverty.

Claire McGill (Sinn Fein) asked how the Utility Regulator and the Minister can move the social action plan forward. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has also discussed that issue. The Utility Regulator is considering the issue of social tariffs, and how NIE Energy and Phoenix Natural Gas, among other energy providers, can help to alleviate fuel poverty and reduce the bills that people here are paying.

Alex Easton (DUP) said that we must be more energy efficient in our homes. He spoke about inadequate loft insulation and about how high energy prices impact on the most poor and vulnerable in society. That has been the theme of the debate. Although we may not agree on how to deal with fuel poverty, particularly among low-income families and the elderly, who are dealing with high electricity and gas prices, we all agree that we need to make it a priority for the Assembly to reduce gas and electricity bills.

The Minister stressed the need to examine how measures can be introduced to help alleviate fuel poverty as part of the strategic energy framework. Paul Butler (Sinn Fein) requested that the Minister weigh up the social tariff and decide whether it will form part of that framework as her main focus in the current economic climate is on helping businesses and driving the economy forward.

The Minister is concerned that businesses should not pick up the tab for any social tariff that is introduced. It was made clear during the debate that the main thrust of the motion has been that neither other customers nor the business community should have to pay for social tariffs. Energy providers such as NIE Energy, Phoenix Natural Gas and others have a responsibility.

Paul Butler acknowledged that those companies have some social responsibility; indeed, they have introduced some measures in past years. Controversy surrounds the discounts offered to electricity customers who use the keypad system, but that type of meter has been popular with many customers. Grants have also been provided, but more needs to be done, given the high levels of fuel poverty from which this society suffers.

It was resolved that that the Assembly, being mindful of the alarmingly high levels of fuel poverty in Northern Ireland and the negative impact high energy prices have on the fuel poor, calls on the Minister for Social Development to work with her Executive colleagues to obtain an accurate assessment of actual need in respect of fuel poverty; notes that social tariffs could result in higher prices for a significant number of households and businesses; and urges consideration of a range of options to assist people most vulnerable to fuel poverty.

B This Week's Assembly Business

Wednesday 7 October 2009

Committee for Education

1. Briefing to be given by NIA All Party Group on Autism and Autism NI

Witnesses: Dominic Bradley MLA (SDLP) – Chairperson APAGA

Arlene Cassidy – Secretary APAGA

C Written Answers to Questions, Week ending 2 October 2009

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Projects in the North Antrim Constituency

Daithi McKay (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) what projects his Department has funded; and (ii) the amount of money provided by his Department, in the North Antrim constituency, since May 2007. (AQW 461/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Spending which is relevant to people with disabilities -

Arts Council of Northern Ireland

PROJECT	AMOUNT (£)
STart Up – 'Sensory Mural for Disability Playground', Moyle (Place & Identity Art)	5,000

Libraries NI

PROJECT	AMOUNT (£)
Capital investment to Library Branches (Disability access, CCTV and other improvements)	79,940

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Projects in North Antrim Constituency

Daithi McKay (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) what projects his Department has funded; and (ii) the amount of money provided by his Department, in the North Antrim constituency, since May 2007. (AQW 457/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning:

Jobskills/Training for Success/ApprenticeshipsNI - Funding

The Department contracts with over 50 Suppliers to deliver Jobskills, Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI throughout Northern Ireland.

Six of these Suppliers are headquartered in the North Antrim constituency and, since May 2007, the Department has approved some £17.7m by way of funding and associated allowances to individual participants.

In the Further Education sector, the Department has funded a number of projects in Northern Regional College since May 2007. The total spend is £2,913,871.02, broken down as follows:

- Cultural Diversity project - £36,765.49;
- Innovation Fund project - £66,729.53;
- Joint DEL/DE Vocational Education Programme - £1.6m;
- Upgrade to Northern Regional College interconnectivity network - £31,000;
- Upgrade of IT Equipment from Information Learning Technology Capital Funding - £620,576; and
- 28 small construction projects funded through Health & Safety, Minor Works and Disability Compliance programmes - £563,000.

ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND INVESTMENT

Fuel Poverty: Social Tariff System

Michelle O'Neill (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will enter into discussions with the Utility Regulator and energy companies to bring forward proposals to introduce a social tariff system to help people who are most susceptible to fuel poverty. (AQO 122/10)

Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am conscious that one of the Fuel Poverty Taskforce proposals included a recommendation on the feasibility of introducing a social tariff scheme. Such a tariff would be extremely complex and not a panacea to the hardships caused by poverty.

The Regulator's office has nonetheless undertaken work relating to the feasibility of social tariffs and has employed consultants to undertake an analysis of the options for implementing a social tariff in Northern Ireland, including an examination of the likely impact associated with the various options. The work has raised a whole range of difficult issues particularly around targeting and to which sectors such tariffs might apply.

Social tariff charges to try and help the fuel poor could, for example, impact disproportionately on other customers, including businesses. This could ultimately have a negative impact on employment levels and so, perversely, result in increased levels of fuel poverty. Equally, without proper targeting of those most in need, overall numbers of fuel poor could actually be increased.

The next steps in the Regulator's work are likely to include a full public consultation, followed by a recommendation to Ministers on a way forward. This will include the need for any supporting policy action by key Northern Ireland Departments, including legislation.

However, I would stress that the full implications of any social tariff charges will need to be considered carefully by the Executive.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Transport Entitlements

Tommy Gallagher (SDLP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why, in the case of transport entitlements, for people with learning disabilities, the Western Health and Social Care Trust makes distinctions between adults who are in foster care and adults who are adopted; and if such distinctions are part of his Department's policies. (AQW 282/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Access to Trust transport services is provided on the basis of assessed need where an individual is assessed as requiring a Social Care service, using the eligibility criteria established in A Transport Strategy for Health & Social Care Services in Northern Ireland 2007.

The Western Health & Social Care Trust makes no distinction between adults, who were formerly in foster care placements, or adults who were subject to adoption. The needs for Social Care Services and access to transport to facilitate attendance are assessed on an individual case basis, and those needs met within available resources.

The Trust has no responsibility for transport to activities other than those provided directly, or contracted out, by the Trust.

Dementia

PJ Bradley (SDLP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if Health and Social Care Trusts are obliged to obtain all facts pertaining to people diagnosed with dementia; and if they are further obliged to inform those who prescribe and care for those people diagnosed with dementia of all the facts. (AQW 360/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Every person diagnosed with dementia receives an individual, multi-disciplinary assessment of their needs. This will be conducted by a range of professionals who will consider the service user's physical, psychological and social functioning.

This information is recorded, collated and distributed to authorised persons involved in the ongoing treatment and care of the patient, when appropriate and necessary.

Mental Health Issues

Lord Browne asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many programmes, established to address mental health issues, are operating in the Greater Belfast area receive funding from his Department. (AQW 385/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department funds the Health and Social Care Board which commissions from Belfast Trust a broad range of mental health promotion, primary care, community and inpatient services and programmes to address mental health issues in the Greater Belfast area.

Mental Health Issues

Lord Browne (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to provide a breakdown of programmes established to address mental health issues within the Greater Belfast area, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 386/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to give a detailed breakdown of programmes established to address mental health issues within the Greater Belfast area. This could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for delivering a broad range of mental health services and programmes in Greater Belfast. These cover mental health promotion, primary care, community mental health provision and inpatient facilities. The Trust also commissions additional support services from the independent sector.

Mental Health Issues

Lord Browne (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who regulates the work, care and/or treatment of

programmes established within the Greater Belfast area to address mental health issues. (AQW 387/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: A dedicated team within the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority is responsible for inspecting and reviewing mental health services across Northern Ireland. Its remit covers:

- Conducting reviews into monitoring and improvement arrangements;
- Carrying out investigations and inspections;
- Recommending actions for improvement; and
- Reporting unacceptable, poor quality or insignificant failings to the Department.

Individual mental health professionals are regulated by their respective professional bodies.

Mental Health Issues

Lord Browne (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what standards of clinical excellence are applied to programmes established within the Greater Belfast area to address mental health issues. (AQW 395/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Belfast Trust, which is responsible for the provision of healthcare in the Greater Belfast area, delivers mental health assessment, treatment and care programmes in accordance with a range of quality standards laid down by my Department, professional bodies, employers, the Trust itself, legislation and the National Council for Clinical Excellence.

Mental Health Issues

Lord Browne (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what method of assessment has been applied to programmes established to address mental health issues within the Greater Belfast area to evaluate their effectiveness and lasting benefit to the patients. (AQW 396/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Programmes which the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust directly provides to address mental health issues within the Greater Belfast area are subject to clinical governance arrangements, including internal audit, to independent review and inspection by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority and to review and inspection by my Department.

Carers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many children are currently registered as carers for parents or siblings. (AQW 452/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is assumed that this question relates to the number of children who are informal carers for parents or siblings.

The information is not available in the format requested.

Mental Health Issues

Alastair Ross (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what programmes on mental health issues have been funded in the East Antrim constituency in each of the last three years. (AQW 475/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is not possible to specify these programmes, as the information is not collected on constituency basis and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Diabetes UK

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if he has had any discussions with Diabetes UK around the issue of people diagnosed with type 2 diabetes being more susceptible to hearing problems and hearing loss; and possible measures to counter these problems or help these people. (AQW 525/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have met with representatives from Diabetes UK (NI) on a number of occasions and I can confirm that these issues have not been raised in any of these discussions.

Occupational Therapy Services and Aids

Peter Weir (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what consideration has been given to increasing the level of funding for occupational therapy services and aids in the North Down area. (AQW 554/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Health and Social Care Board has agreed additional investment of £178k for occupational therapy services within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, commencing 2009/10. This additional investment will benefit service users throughout the Trust area including those of North Down. Funding requirements for Occupational Therapy aids remain subject to consideration through local commissioning arrangements.

Autism Services

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a breakdown of the costing of the independent review into autism services, led by Ken Maginness. (AQW 589/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The total cost of the Independent Review of Autism Services led by Lord Maginnis of Drumglass was £16,583.25. This comprised of £12,039.77 for Independent Review Members expenses and £4,543.48 on administrative costs.

Front Line Care

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his definition of front line care; and if he has signed off on any efficiency saving proposals which will result in a cut in front line services. (AQW 791/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I define frontline care as the health and social care services provided directly to patients and clients.

I have signed off on efficiency proposals based on assurances from the Trusts that the quality of services for patients and clients will be maintained or improved, that Priority for Action targets and commitments will be delivered and that the implications for staff affected can be managed without recourse to compulsory redundancy. In addition, each Trust has also been asked to ensure that it has the right number and skill levels of doctors, nurses, social workers and other professionals in place at the right time to provide the right service to all those who require health and social services.

All Departments must achieve challenging efficiency savings targets of 3% per annum translating to £700m in the case of DHSSPS and in that, the Executive gave no dispensation to the DHSSPS. That is why I asked the Assembly to exempt the Service from efficiency savings, which it did not do.

Contingency plans containing proposals by Trusts to recover deficits have been submitted to my Department but these are still being considered.

Autism

Martina Anderson (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that Autistic Spectrum Disorder teams in Health and Social Care Trusts have targets of thirteen weeks in which to assess and diagnose children who may have autism, (i) can he explain why the Western Health and Social Care Trust have a waiting list averaging fourteen months; and (ii) when he expects a reduction in this waiting time. (AQW 818/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health & Social Care Trust has inherited large waiting lists from the legacy Trusts. It has however already reduced waiting times from 4.5 years in 2007.

The Priorities for Action 2009/10 target for autism services states that "By March 2010, ensure that all children wait no longer than 13

weeks for assessment following referral". The Western Health and Social Care Trust is working towards the 13 week target on waiting times and has provided a waiting list reduction plan that shows that it will be 13 week compliant by Sept 2010.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Executive Management Team

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Executive Management Team viewed the proposals concerning cuts of beds; (ii) if so, on what date did this meeting take place; (iii) who was in attendance; (iv) did the proposal go to a vote, and what was the outcome; and (v) when he, or his officials, were made aware of this proposal. (AQW 845/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My understanding from the Trust is that:

(i) and (ii) a number of proposals to be included in the contingency plan were discussed by the Trust Executive team on 16 September 2009.

(iii) William McKee, Chief Executive, Wendy Galbraith, Director of Finance, Dr Tony Stevens, Medical Director, Valerie Jackson, Director of Older People, Medicine and Surgery, Nikki Patterson, Acting Director of Nursing, Jennifer Welsh, Director of Specialist Services, Marie Mallon, Director of Human Resources, Brendan Mullen, Director of Mental Health and Learning Disability, Patricia Donnelly, Director of Clinical Services, Denise Stockman, Director of Planning and Development, Catherine McNicholl, Acting Director of Performance and Planning, Ian Jamison, Head of Patient and Client Support Services, June Champion, Co-director, Risk and Governance.

(iv) the proposals did not go to a vote- that is not how the executive team works. No decision was taken. The contents of the plan remain proposals and require Departmental approval.

(v) The Department received the Trust's contingency plan detailing its proposals on 17th September 2009.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Projects in the North Antrim Constituency

Daithi McKay (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) what projects his Department has funded; and (ii) the amount of money provided by his Department, in the North Antrim constituency, since May 2007. (AQW 459/10)

Minister for Regional Development: My Department's Ports and Public Transport Division have funded the following projects within the North Antrim Constituency since May 2007:

Project	Total
Bulk storage tank - Ballymena	£80,000
Ballymena to Belfast infrastructure capacity study	£62,000
Ballymoney Station Roof replacement	£198,000
Track remedial works Ballymena to Derry	£10,733,000
User Worked Crossing telephones Ballymena to Coleraine	£3,000
Bridge refurbishment Antrim to Coleraine	£200,000
Bridge waterproofing Ballymena to Coleraine	£124,000
<u>Disability Discrimination Act and New Rail Vision compliance rail</u>	<u>£1,222,000</u>

Fuel tank Ballycastle	£41,000
Trackside fencing	£277,000
Ballymena Permanent Way store	£72,000
Underline bridges Ballymena to Coleraine	£49,000
McWhirter's crossing	£99,000
Ballymoney Footbridge	£11,000
Bridge replacement - Coleraine to Antrim	£621,000
Bridge refurbishment - Coleraine to Antrim	£78,000
Total	£13,870,000

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Disability Living Allowance Appeal Tribunals

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development what steps she is taking to prevent the deferral of Disability Living Allowance appeal tribunals due to non-availability of GP records. (AQW 611/10)

Minister for Social Development: For every Disability Living Allowance appeal received The Appeals Service ask the appellant for permission to obtain their General Practitioner records. Where consent is given, a letter is issued to the doctor's surgery three weeks before the hearing to request the records.

If the records have not been received one week before the hearing date a letter is issued to the appellant advising them of the non receipt and suggesting they contact their doctor to ensure the records are available for the Tribunal hearing.

If the surgery refuses to release the records a letter is issued to the appellant advising them of the refusal and suggesting they contact their doctor to make alternative arrangements to ensure the records are available for the Tribunal hearing.

On the day of the hearing the Tribunal is advised of the steps taken by The Appeals Service to obtain the records.

Any subsequent decision to adjourn due to the non availability of records is an independent judicial decision over which The Appeals Service has no influence.

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development how many staff are employed in the Disability Living Allowance Branch. (AQW 702/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are 229.52* staff employed administering Disability Living Allowance. This number is based on whole time equivalents and will include a number of part time staff.

Complaints Lodged Against Examining Medical Practitioners

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of complaints lodged against Examining Medical Practitioners regulated through the medical support services, about claims for (i) Disability Living Allowance; and (ii) Attendance Allowance, in each of the last three years. (AQW 720/10)

Minister for Social Development: The total number of complaints received following a domiciliary visit by an Examining Medical Practitioner for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Attendance Allowance (AA) are provided in the table below.

Year	Domiciliary Visits	No of DLA Complaints	No of AA Complaints
April 2006 – March 2007	9813	93	NIL
April 2007 – March 2008	9713	85	NIL
April 2008 – March 2009	9640	71	NIL

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development to list (i) the sections within the Disability Living Allowance Branch; and (ii) the number of staff in each section. (AQW 765/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is set out in the table below.

Staff employed within Disability Living Allowance Branch by Section.

Section	Number of Staff
Operational Support	13.81

Contact Centre & Customer Maintenance Team	70.58
Document Handling Centre	27.74
Disability Appeals	44.76
Decision Making Team	72.63
Total	229.52 *

*These numbers are based on whole time equivalents and will include a number of part time staff

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development how many (i) desktop computers; (ii) laptop computers; (iii) fax machines; and (iv) telephones are utilised within each section of the Disability Living Allowance Branch. (AQW 766/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information requested is provided in the table below.

DLA Section	Desktop Computers	Laptop Computers	Fax Machines	Telephones
Operational Support	14	1	1	12
Contact Centre & Customer Maintenance Team	71	0	0	70
Document	28	0	0	10

Handling Centre				
Disability Appeals	45	0	0	30
Decision Making Team	73	0	0	63
Totals	231	1	1	185

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development how many active cases are currently being dealt with by the Disability Living Allowance Branch. (AQW 767/10)

Minister for Social Development: Disability Living Allowance Branch is currently dealing with 180,451 active cases, figures correct at 5 September 2009.

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development to give details of any backlog within the Disability Living Allowance Branch, including the reasons for this backlog. (AQW 769/10)

Minister for Social Development: There are no backlogs of work within Disability Living Allowance Branch; the outstanding work is well within acceptable levels.

Disability Living Allowance

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development what the average time is to process a Disability Living Allowance claim. (AQW 876/10)

Minister for Social Development: Against a Public Service Agreement target of 41 days the average clearance time for a claim to Disability

Living Allowance is 39.2 days. These figures relate to August 2009, the last month for which there are full figures available

Disability Living Allowance Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development if her Department has any plans to expand the role and remit of the Disability Living Allowance Branch. (AQW 880/10)

Minister for Social Development: Disability Living Allowance Branch is responsible for processing, maintaining and paying claims for all Disability Living Allowance customers. There are currently no plans to change this.