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Oral Answers to Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise the House that question 2 has been withdrawn.

Environment

Planning Service: Staffing

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of the Environment how many jobs are likely to be lost as a result of the redeployment of Planning Service staff. (AQO 1203/10)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): The Department and its Planning Service are experiencing a difficult financial position in 2010-11, with a shortfall in the Planning Service budget of more than £8 million. A report has been prepared on how the Planning Service can live within its opening budget allocation. That report identifies 271 posts that are now considered surplus on account of affordability. I have considered the report and released it to the Committee for the Environment, TUS and all staff in the Department.

Today, senior staff from the Department are commencing a series of face-to-face briefings with staff in each Planning Service office. Before the formal process of redeploying staff in the Planning Service can commence, a number of stages must be completed, including consultation with the Committee for the Environment, DFP's corporate HR division, the TUS, affected staff, and other Departments that will be importing DOE staff. Now that I have considered the report prepared by the Department, the process will gain momentum.

The Northern Ireland Civil Service should be able to manage the workforce reductions in the Planning Service without the need for redundancies. Surplus staff will be redeployed to other suitable posts either in the Department, in so far as possible, or in another Department. The NICS has available a range of measures that are being used as required to help to minimise or avoid the need for redundancies.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Along with other members of the Committee for the Environment, I witnessed

a presentation on this matter from Planning Service officials today. The picture that they and the trade union painted was of the Planning Service in crisis. We should be mindful that a fit-for-purpose Planning Service is needed if we are ever to get out of the present economic quagmire. Redeployments will undoubtedly lead to redundancies. Does the Minister recognise that a grave mistake has been made and that, in light of the fact that the decision will result in a Planning Service that is not fit for purpose and will lead to further crises affecting the economic recovery, the decision should be reviewed?

The Minister of the Environment: There is a difference between redeployments and redundancies, and, on Thursday 29 April, when Planning Service staff were protesting about redeployment, it was notable that 200 people in Quinn Insurance had just been told that they were to be made redundant. There is a considerable difference between redeployment and redundancy. My prompt action will, as far as possible, protect staff against redundancy and ensure that people who work in the Northern Ireland Civil Service remain in it with the pay and conditions that they currently enjoy. In very difficult circumstances for all concerned, that is positive for individuals.

Mr Dallat: Of course we accept that there is a difference between redeployment and redundancy, and I wish good luck to the Quinn Insurance people who are losing their jobs. Nevertheless, many people in the Planning Service obtained academic qualifications and have a vocation to do what they do. Given that they are to be redeployed, is the Minister sure that adequate resources remain to ensure that another Audit Office report will not describe the Planning Service as not fit for purpose?

The Minister of the Environment: The Audit Office report was carried out with the staff in place. Consequently, we are seeking to challenge how the Planning Service has been doing things. We are introducing planning reform initiatives, and we want the Planning Service to work smarter than in the past. I have no apologies to make for wanting to drive through an agenda of change in planning, because such an agenda is absolutely necessary.

With respect to individuals with planning expertise who will be redeployed elsewhere, when the economy begins to recover and there is an upturn in planning applications, we intend

to be in a position to offer planning jobs to those who wish to come back.

Therefore, we want to retain them in the Civil Service and to have the opportunity to avail ourselves of their planning skills in the future.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the Minister for the fact that we are looking at redeployment as opposed to redundancies. Given that a large number of planning applications are being held up under PPS 21, would bringing forward its review secure at least some of those Planning Service jobs for longer? Will the Minister update Members on why it is taking so long to review PPS 21?

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service has a deferred income. The more cases that are cleared, the more income there is — it is a chicken and egg situation. About £4.5 million in deferred income is outstanding.

I put PPS 21 to go before the Executive Committee at the end of last year. It is out of my hands and in the hands of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The First Minister has given it his clearance. The only thing holding back the putting in place of a better planning policy for rural dwellers is the deputy First Minister's office, and he can explain for himself why that is.

Planning Applications

3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what percentage of the target set for the processing of planning applications is currently being met by the Planning Service.
(AQO 1205/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The Planning Service made significant improvement towards achieving public service agreement (PSA) and business plan targets. Statistics that were published for the third quarter up to December 2009 showed that the agency met and exceeded PSA 2011 and 2009-2010 agency business plan targets for processing intermediate applications — 79%, up from 65% in 2008-09. Minor applications stood at 81%, up from 68% in 2008-09. The service achieved 46% towards the major target of 50% of applications determined within 23 weeks, compared to 40.5% at the end of 2008-09. Early indications are that there has been continued improvement in the major category, which should be highlighted in the end-of-year position to be published in July this year.

Mr McCartney: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. In light of his earlier answer on the redeployment of staff, does he expect those percentages to increase or decrease as a result of redeployment?

The Minister of the Environment: I expect them to increase. I am demanding better service from the Planning Service because that is what the public demand. I know that staff will be under greater pressure, they will have to work harder and smarter, and all of that. That is what we expect of our public servants. This country is in a financial crisis. We have suffered the consequences of a global downturn. The public sector is not immune from that. Therefore, we must have higher expectations of everyone in the private and the public sector if we are all to see our way through and emerge from that crisis in better shape.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister advise Members whether all statutory agencies, such as the Environment Agency and Roads Service, are now delivering their responses to the Planning Service within the appropriate time frame?

The Minister of the Environment: Both agencies that were mentioned and others have considerably improved, but, in my opinion, they can improve further. So, yes, I will seek to put further pressure on those agencies to respond quicker. To turn the economy around and get the appropriate planning decisions out at an appropriate time, everyone will have to pull their weight including the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Roads Service.

Review of Public Administration/Local Government

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of public administration.
(AQO 1206/10)

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the local government aspects of the review of public administration.
(AQO 1207/10)

12. **Mr Savage** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the reorganisation of local government.
(AQO 1214/10)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose to answer questions 4, 5 and 12 together.

I am continuing to take forward the Executive's decision to reshape local government in the most effective and efficient manner possible to create a strong sector that will deliver tangible benefits to ratepayers at no additional cost. At a recent meeting of the strategic leadership board, the local government sector provided me with a good foundation to take forward the creation of a service-delivery model that will provide efficiencies through regional collaboration.

It is through ongoing dialogue with the sector that, I believe, we are making positive inroads towards the reform of local government. I have been speaking to representatives of Executive parties, and, on Thursday, I will put firm proposals to the Executive with options on a way forward to deliver a local government reform programme.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. It is useful to get an update at regular intervals. I am aware that the Minister will put forward proposals at this week's Executive meeting and that he probably does not want to go into much detail on that — I am probably giving him a way out of answering my question — but will he confirm whether next year's local government elections will be contested on the current 26-county model, including the six? [Laughter] I thought that I would slip that one in. I meant to say 26-council model. Will the Minister confirm whether next year's local government elections will be contested on the basis of the current local government boundaries or the proposed 11-council model?

The Minister of the Environment: As is the case mathematically, six into 26 does not go, and I am not sure whether I can give away whether 26 into 11 will go on this occasion. A paper is going to the Executive. It is an absolute certainty that local government elections will be held next year. I am very keen to ensure that further powers are vested to local government, where local people can make those decisions, and that we deliver on the collaboration, which will ensure that there are real savings to the public.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is widely expected that the 2011 elections will have to proceed under the old boundaries. As the Minister well knows, those date back to 1992 and are well out of date. How can the Minister justify that under the principle of equality of votes in many constituencies?

The Minister of the Environment: Those boundaries are a matter for the Northern Ireland Office, so the question should be referred to the Northern Ireland Office Minister. Now that the Alliance Party has a Member of Parliament, it has the facility to do that.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. I was interested to hear him say that the results of the review of public administration would be a tangible benefit to ratepayers with no additional cost. I sat in on today's meeting of the Environment Committee, and we heard about the Planning Service and the difficulties that it faces with regard to income, trying to balance the books and the redeployment of staff. Can the Minister assure the House that there will be no extra costs as a consequence of the transition from the Planning Service to the new councils as part of the review of public administration?

The Minister of the Environment: That is exactly the case. We have to live within our means, and if we are going to transfer powers to local government, those powers have to be transferred with an appropriate and applicable budget. If we are to transfer, as is my intention, the budget to support the numbers of staff whom we are transferring does not exist. Immediately, therefore, we would have been imposing an additional tax on the hard-pressed ratepayers across Northern Ireland and in every individual council. That is not something that I am prepared to do. If I am to transfer the Planning Service to local authorities, I will seek to meet the costs of that transfer, as they currently exist, and to do so within my budget.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will recognise that the staff are an important part of any change in the review of public administration and that there has been uncertainty up to now as to whether there will be 11 or 26 councils. Will the Minister give an assurance that the staff will be informed as early as possible of whether there will be 11 or 26? Will he also detail what the work of transition committees will be if the 26-council model is maintained?

3.15 pm

The Minister of the Environment: As soon as the Executive agree the way forward, the councils and their staff will be informed. I recognise that the period of flux has been

somewhat unfair on council staff, many of whom are very good hard-working people. It is important that they are shown the proper degree of courtesy and respect and are made aware of the decisions on staffing as soon as possible.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to the planners, and I am interested in how people with that specialised skill set could be transplanted into other clerical or administrative jobs. He may or may not wish to answer that.

Given that the Executive have been unable to agree the boundaries in time, how can the Minister justify the cost of the RPA to date? What is the Minister's best estimate of whether there will be 11 or 26 councils next year?

The Minister of the Environment: The Department is seeking to deliver savings, and if those savings cannot be delivered, the cost expended thus far cannot be justified. However, I am determined that the Department will deliver savings. I am pressing, pressing and pressing again on that, because if those savings are not delivered, the Department will have failed. The Department must deliver savings, and that is something that I intend to force. It is a simple equation: if the savings can be delivered, the costs will be justified.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has already been answered.

DOE: Legislative Programme

6. **Rev Dr Robert Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's legislative programme for the remainder of this Assembly mandate. (AQO 1208/10)

The Minister of the Environment: My Department has four Bills going through the Assembly: the Wildlife and Natural Environment Bill; the Waste and Contaminated Land (Amendment) Bill; the Local Government (Finance) Bill; and the High Hedges Bill. I plan to bring three further Bills to the Assembly before the end of the current mandate: a planning reform Bill, a local government reorganisation Bill and the draft Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill. My Department also has an extensive programme of subordinate legislation that will be made during this mandate.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he update the House on the current position on the change to boundaries?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's supplementary question is perhaps more relevant to the previous question. If we are to change the boundaries, a local government boundaries Order must be introduced to give effect to new government districts. Subsequent to Executive agreement on boundary changes, the Department can proceed to do whatever is necessary thereafter.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's intention to bring forward those Bills. Will he outline which, if any, of those Bills are held up in the Executive, at what stage they are being held up and why?

The Minister of the Environment: The Bill to reorganise local government is the only one that is being held up. Several issues raised by the deputy First Minister's office have not allowed it to proceed. If we were to proceed with the 11-council model, that is one of the Bills that would be absolutely necessary.

Planning Service: Staffing

7. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of the Environment what consultation was undertaken by his Department on the potential redeployment of 269 Planning Service staff. (AQO 1209/10)

The Minister of the Environment: Several stages remain to be completed before the formal process of redeploying staff from the Planning Service can commence. One such stage will be the consultation with the Committee for the Environment, the corporate HR division of the Department of Finance and Personnel, the trade unions, the staff affected and the other Departments that will import Department of the Environment staff. Now that I have considered the report prepared by the Department, the process will gain momentum.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister assure the House that those who are redeployed will be given work that matches their skill sets and that all aspects of equality law will be followed?

The Minister of the Environment: All aspects of equality law will be followed. It will be interesting, and surprising, for many to discover the skills that Planning Service staff possess in addition to their degrees in planning. Redeployment can be a good experience for many people, as it widens their skill set and

offers them a new and different perspective. When the Department is in a position to bring many of those people back to the Planning Service, they will return with an even better skill set. They will have had a completely new experience, which would not have happened had they remained in the Planning Service for their entire Civil Service careers.

Mr McNarry: The issue concerns my constituency of Strangford, so I would be grateful if the Minister could explain the thinking behind workforce planning in the Planning Service. It was recruiting staff until August 2009, but it now requires a reduction in staffing of one third. He will appreciate that that is causing great concerns.

The Minister of the Environment: When I became Minister in July 2009, I became aware of financial issues in the Department. One of the early decisions was to freeze Civil Service recruitment. Previously, positions that became vacant were filled. We have not been filling positions from August 2009, otherwise we would be in a more difficult situation than at present. Nonetheless, despite the effects of the downturn, finance had come into the Department from earlier applications, and there was a stream of work. At the peak two years ago, 36,000 planning applications were in the system, and that figure has now been reduced to 20,000, so a fair amount of backlog work has been cleared up. We now need to address the difficult issues and make difficult decisions. I have worked on that since I came into office.

Mr Bell: The public can understand that a reduction from 36,000 planning applications to 20,000 means that action is needed, but I appreciate that the situation is causing much personal pain to a number of planners and administrative staff. Let us hope that the economy picks up and the number of planning applications rises again, because the construction industry needs them. If and when that occurs, can the Minister assure the House that the people who have been redeployed can come back to the Planning Service as a priority, thereby not only retaining their employment but boosting the Northern Ireland economy?

The Minister of the Environment: I trust that, within the next year, responsibility for almost all planning decisions will rest with local authorities. I expect that, as the workload rises, Planning Service will take on further numbers of staff. We are in an economic decline, but

we could be on the cusp of turning the corner. One simply does not know. When that corner is turned and planning applications start to be made in greater numbers, I have no doubt that many of those people will be redeployed in planning. The councils will be keen to get people with a particular skill set and with particular experience to help to ensure the delivery of smooth planning in council areas.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. If the redeployment of staff in the Planning Service were to lead to the local office in my constituency being closed, it would cause great inconvenience. Will the Minister make every effort to retain staff in local offices such as the one in Enniskillen, rather than inconveniencing councillors by requiring them to go to Omagh, as has happened with many job redeployments in the past?

The Minister of the Environment: At this time, there are no plans to close local offices. We are carrying out a staff redeployment, and the offices will remain intact for the foreseeable future. If the requirement to make further savings were to arise, we would have to make further decisions on how to arrive at those savings. Closing offices is not currently one of those decisions.

Planning Service: Staffing

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the staffing requirements within the Planning Service and when staff will have clarity as to their future prospects. (AQO 1210/10)

The Minister of the Environment: In 2010-11, the Department and its Planning Service experienced the difficult financial position of a shortfall in the Planning Service budget of over £8 million. A report is now being prepared on whether the Planning Service can live within its opening budget allocation. The report has identified 270 posts that are now considered surplus from the point of view of affordability. I have considered the report, and I hope to release it to all the staff in the Department in the near future. Thereafter, senior staff in the Department will embark on a series of brief meetings with staff in each Planning Service office.

Mr Beggs: There has been a reduction in planning applications since the end of the

property boom in 2007. The Minister has said already today that he has noticed the Planning Service workforce and finance crisis since coming into office. Does he accept that his predecessor, in failing to workforce-plan, created a crisis not only for existing staff but turmoil for staff who have been newly recruited and additional, unnecessary HR costs? Does he agree that it would have been much better to have managed staffing during that entire period rather than to have reached the crisis point of today, where one third of staff may be redeployed?

The Minister of the Environment: A considerable number of planning applications were in the system. Had we moved to redeploy staff earlier, we would not have been in the position in which, as I told Mr McCartney, we had a much better response time than was previously the case. The fact that more planning officers have been in post than there have been applications lodged has helped us to deal with the considerable backlog. That backlog has now been dealt with. The financial circumstances are such that we move on. The previous Minister received a ringing endorsement from the public last week, and I cannot take that away.

Road Safety: Drivers over 70

9. **Mr Bresland** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to improve road safety awareness among drivers aged 70 years and over. (AQO 1211/10)

The Minister of the Environment: I am consulting on the development of a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland, and I recognise that we cannot afford to lose sight of older people, who are among our most vulnerable road users. Over the lifetime of the new road safety strategy, the population of Northern Ireland is projected to increase from around 1.8 million in 2010 to 1.9 million by 2020, and the age profile of the population will gradually become older. The safety of older people is likely to have increasing importance to the delivery of the new strategy's objectives. We propose, therefore, to consider how we can work with partners, including the wider voluntary and community sector, to understand better the cause of collisions involving older people and develop strategies to tackle them.

Furthermore, proposed measures in the strategy, such as improvements in road

markings, signage and infrastructure, and the wider use of 20 miles per hour zones, will positively improve road safety for all road users, including older people.

I urge all those with an interest in road safety, including those who represent the interests of older road users, to consider the consultation document carefully and, in responding to the Department, to give us their views and practical proposals as to how we can make a positive contribution to the way forward for road safety. We will continue our intelligence-led, high-profile approach to addressing and improving road users' behaviours, attitudes and awareness through road safety campaigns that focus on the main dangerous behaviours that lead to serious injuries and death. We will continue to ensure that all road users receive appropriate messages about such behaviours.

Mr Bresland: Will the Minister consider the merits of a refresher course on safe motoring just before a driver reaches 70 years of age?

The Minister of the Environment: We will certainly give the suggestion consideration. However, drivers in the 70-plus category are not responsible for a large number of the accidents or deaths on our roads. Therefore, I do not want to target people in a way that may be deemed as persecuting them or making them less equal than others. Many older people may drive a little slower, but normally they drive very carefully. However, I will look at the matter, particularly in the light of road accident statistics, to ensure that all target groups are met.

Road Safety Strategy

10. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the potential savings if his Department meets the targets set out in the draft road safety strategy.

(AQO 1212/10)

The Minister of the Environment: The consultation on preparing a new road safety strategy for Northern Ireland was launched on 16 March 2010 and includes proposed targets for casualty reductions by 2020. Those targets will be measured against the average annual number of deaths and serious injuries between 2004 and 2008 of 126 and 1,111 respectively. If the first strategic target to reduce the number of people killed on our roads by at least 40% is adopted and achieved, it is estimated that