

Anna Lo (Alliance), Committee for the Environment

Hello. I'm Anna Lo, MLA for South Belfast from the Alliance Party. I'm also the Chair of the Environment Committee. The role of the Environment Committee is mostly about scrutinising legislation, holding the department and its minister to account. So we scrutinise the performance and the budgeting of the department over the years.

Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill

The proposal of the bill to introduce learner drivers to start learning from the age of 16-and-a-half, and to take a whole year to go through their period of learning. At the committee, again, we took evidence from stakeholders. We also had an online survey with young people and a workshop with young people in order to take their views on board, and we felt that one year was too long and starting at 16-and-a-half maybe is a bit too early. So we suggested to the department then... to remain the same, like what the current situation is, to start the learning period from the age of 17, but the learning period is only for six months, not for a whole year. So I think that would suit a lot of young people.

Certainly, the bill would be very useful, I think. It makes a number of improvements for learner drivers. For example, now they will not be restricted to drive only at forty-five miles an hour during their learning period. That will enable them, for example, to learn driving on the motorway. So, you know, that's something, I think, frightens a lot of young people when they're learning to drive. And then once they pass the test, then they suddenly find themselves on the very fast road at 70 miles an hour.

Wind Energy Inquiry

One of the roles of the Environment Committee is that we can conduct inquiries. So we recently completed our inquiry into wind energy. Now, the Programme for Government has set a target of 20 percent of electricity consumption through renewable energy by 2015. We are very supportive of that target. But we are well aware-- made aware by some local residents about maybe the over-reliance on wind power, wind energy, in their area. That's in the west of Northern Ireland, in West Tyrone.

So we agreed to conduct an inquiry into wind energy on three aspects. First one is about planning whether there is strategic look at planning approvals in Northern Ireland. Another issue we look at was on engagement with communities. The third issue is a bit more technical, and that's on noise and the separation distance from the wind turbines to residential homes.

We received a large number of written submissions from stakeholders and individuals. We also took oral evidence from different organisations and we had a stakeholder event. We took visits to a couple of sites to look at the location of the wind farms. And we also commissioned an expert on acoustics to help us with the technical aspects of noise. And in the end then we made 20 recommendations to the department, and we are now looking forward to certainly working with them to the implementation of the 20 recommendations.

Environment Week

So, the last thing I want to tell you is about the Northern Ireland Environment Week. We've never had an Environment Week ever before in Northern Ireland. But in September this

year, we have had our first Environment Week in Stormont, in partnership with the voluntary sector who are very interested in environmental issues. We hosted a series of events, both inside and outside of the building here. And we worked in partnership with a number of organisations to really highlight the importance of the protection of the environment, and about the wonderful diversity of habitats and of species we have here in Northern Ireland.

It was a great opportunity for politicians to meet up with the community and the environment sector. And I also launched a Species Champions initiative, which enabled politicians to become a champion of a rare or endangered species in their constituency. And they need to be working, in the next year, to promote this species, to work with organisations to see how we can do something to help to save these species, and to really raise awareness about such species here in Northern Ireland.