

**Web chat with the Minister for Regional Development
Conor Murphy MP MLA
19.05.09**

joanne-stuart: Hi everybody, we are at Parliament Buildings doing the final set-up



May 19 2009, 2:02 PM

conor-murphy: Test



May 19 2009, 2:05 PM

joanne-stuart: Hello everybody and welcome to our 3rd online discussion



May 19 2009, 2:05 PM

joanne-stuart: I am pleased to welcome Conor Murphy, Minister for Regional Development



May 19 2009, 2:06 PM

joanne-stuart: Hello, Minister and thanks for agreeing to the online discussion



May 19 2009, 2:06 PM

conor-murphy: Thank you very much for the invite from NI Crunch Talk. I am glad to be here to answer any questions you may have.



May 19 2009, 2:06 PM

joanne-stuart: Thank you, Sean will you start off the discussion



May 19 2009, 2:08 PM

joanne-stuart: While we are waiting, lets start off with the balance between capital projects and maintenance projects



May 19 2009, 2:09 PM

conor-murphy: Joanne - there is always a balance between capital and maintenance budgets. Our difficulty is here that we are trying to address an under investment in capital which means that for many decades we now have to make a significant investment in both Roads and Rail infrastructure....



May 19 2009, 2:10 PM

conor-murphy: We are actually in the last three years have spent more on maintenance in Roads than on capital.



May 19 2009, 2:11 PM

conor-murphy: However it is now secret that the Roads maintenance budget is not as much as we would like. It has not been cut. In fact the maintenance budget this year is greater than last years. However, it is certainly not sufficient to keep the roads to the standard we would require. Nevertheless we have to stretch that budget as best we can over the vast Roads network we have here.



May 19 2009, 2:11 PM

joanne-stuart: With the current economic situation, are the maintenance projects front ended?



May 19 2009, 2:13 PM

conor-murphy: Joanne - well the maintenance budget is obviously declared at the start of each year. We try and get the work out the ground as quickly as possible. That budget is generally supplemented throughout the year with monies returned from other Departments that have not been spent. However last year we did not receive very much at all through this process and as a result, we had less than perhaps roads had anticipated.



May 19 2009, 2:13 PM

joanne-stuart: Thanks Minister, do we have another question for the Minister?



May 19 2009, 2:14 PM

sean-mccreedy: Good afternoon Minister, a nice easy question to start of. How and where will the department manage the differential required between the capital for growth and the actual revenue required for up keep? Taking for example the road and rail network, thank you. Sean



May 19 2009, 2:14 PM

joanne-stuart: Sean, we have just covered that, do you have another question?



May 19 2009, 2:14 PM

Nevin (guest): "The Department for Regional Development's website is experiencing technical difficulties. We are currently providing a reduced service whilst addressing the problem." What's the problem, Minister?



May 19 2009, 2:15 PM

joanne-stuart: Let's move onto the Regional Development Strategy



May 19 2009, 2:15 PM

joanne-stuart: Minister, what is the current status of the strategy?



May 19 2009, 2:16 PM

conor-murphy: Joanne - The existing RDS strategy does not take account of the Executive's Programme for Government. The increased dynamic in North/South activity and the growing concerns over environmental issues



May 19 2009, 2:17 PM

conor-murphy: so we wanted to substantially revise the existing Strategy and in doing so engage with the widest possible audience to ensure that not only was there a buy-in across all government departments, but from across local government and other stakeholders.



May 19 2009, 2:18 PM

conor-murphy: We have had a substantial number of engagements across all these sectors and we are moving towards producing a draft document for consultation.



May 19 2009, 2:18 PM

joanne-stuart: Thank you Minister, do we have any comments/ follow up questions?



May 19 2009, 2:19 PM

RichardBuchanan (guest): Good afternoon Minister. You have mentioned an under investment in capital and you also refer a shortfall in the maintenance budget for roads and rail. Given that situation, how can you justify the statement you made recently that water charges should be deferred until at least 2012? If that happens, how are we ever going to find the resources we need to top up these budgets?



May 19 2009, 2:19 PM

sean-mccready: Good afternoon Minister, does this cover the Public Transport reform paper, thanks



May 19 2009, 2:19 PM

claire-higgins (guest): Hello Minister, how will the RDS fit in with the proposed new Regional Transport strategy to ensure they align to each other?



May 19 2009, 2:19 PM

Robert-Pue: The Minister has just recently rejected a Private Sector proposal for a Light Rapid transit system for Belfast and the £250 million to construct it. Can the Minister tell us exactly what that proposal contained and on what grounds it was rejected?



May 19 2009, 2:20 PM

Robert-Pue: Good afternoon Minister



May 19 2009, 2:20 PM

conor-murphy: Richard - the Executive took a decision to defer water charging as part of our response to the Economic downturn and the pressures being placed on families who

were suffering financially. That situation has not changed and I have proposed that the Executive continue this position for the next couple of years.



May 19 2009, 2:21 PM

conor-murphy: This will obviously have consequences for the amount of money available for the Executive to spend but that has to be balanced against the burden we place on families who are already struggling with the deepening economic downturn.



May 19 2009, 2:22 PM

conor-murphy: Sean - the reform of public transport is a separate exercise but obviously we want to ensure that any policies which emerge from the Department and indeed all Departments are consistent with the Executive's RDS.



May 19 2009, 2:23 PM

ZoeAnderson: Good afternoon Minister; hi everyone. I work for Access to Benefits and time and time again, when we are out meeting older people across NI, we are asked why they can't use their SmartPasses on community and rural transport schemes. The Pass is of little use to them when there is no standard public transport available. Has the Department any plans to address these issues?



May 19 2009, 2:23 PM

Tim (guest): The investment in transport infrastructure is a bottomless pit. Is there any thinking about innovative alternatives that would encourage home working, and incentivising businesses to reduce the cost of transport both financially and environmentally?



May 19 2009, 2:23 PM

conor-murphy: Claire - the RTS will flow from the agreed outcome of the RDS. A review of the RTS will follow the RDS exercise.



May 19 2009, 2:24 PM

conor-murphy: Robert - The proposal did not stack up. Simple as that.



May 19 2009, 2:25 PM

conor-murphy: Zoe - Yes. The reform of public transport which I referred to earlier is intended to better integrate public transport provision. We want to ensure that as wide a section as possible have access to the benefits of free travel.



May 19 2009, 2:25 PM

Nevin (guest): Minister, will there be compensation for the private operators on the Rathlin ferry route? One operator said his business was 'decimated'.



May 19 2009, 2:25 PM

conor-murphy: and so we will look at the issue of the use of Smart passes on community transport in that exercise.



May 19 2009, 2:25 PM

ZoeAnderson: Many thanks - I look forward to contributing!



May 19 2009, 2:26 PM

Ken_Sharp: The department holds a key role in delivering tourists to Northern Ireland (and indeed out of NI) and moving them around once they get here. I am not sure if this is specifically part of his remit but I was wondering if there was any update the minister could share on the likelihood of a Ballycastle/Campbeltown ferry. The Scottish Press seem to be blaming the NI side for delays at the minute.



May 19 2009, 2:27 PM

conor-murphy: Tim - the issue of home working in one for the Civil Service as a whole which would be dealt with by the Department of Finance and Personnel but we are strengthening the resource within our own Department that deals with sustainable transport and through travel wise, our promoting a range of initiatives with employers to encourage more sustainable ways of working..



May 19 2009, 2:27 PM

conor-murphy: For employers who want to engage in this, you should visit the travel wise website for more information.



May 19 2009, 2:28 PM

conor-murphy: Nevin - Our responsibility is to provide an efficient and effective public ferry service for the islanders and that is what I believe we have done.



May 19 2009, 2:29 PM

conor-murphy: Ken - This issue is the responsibility of DETI. Any enquiries should be forwarded to them.



May 19 2009, 2:29 PM

Ciaran (guest): Minister - Have you given up on your party's pledge to oppose water charges? Is the introduction now inevitable? Surely when the NI Executive chooses to pay it for us, we are all still paying for it through the loss of other services?



May 19 2009, 2:30 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - We have always paid for water through our rates. The Executive undertook to find a fair system to finance the necessary investment in water and sewerage services. I am proposing that the Executive continue to carry that burden for the foreseeable future.



May 19 2009, 2:31 PM

joanne-stuart: In your corporate plan published recently £177M what is this for



May 19 2009, 2:31 PM

Ken_Sharp: Thank you. How much attention and indeed weighting does the Department give to tourism when planning strategy?



May 19 2009, 2:32 PM

joanne-stuart: Sorry, loan of £177M to NI Water



May 19 2009, 2:32 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - The investment that the Executive are making through NI Water is to upgrade the infrastructure. This is very necessary to undo decades of neglect. The Department is the whole shareholder of NI Water and therefore we can ensure that any public money that is spent by them is done so to produce a much better and more effective water and sewerage system.



May 19 2009, 2:33 PM

conor-murphy: Ken - The RDS will place, I believe, a much greater emphasis on gateways to and from our region. I think this will underpin the Executive's central drive to sustain and promote a stronger economy. Obviously tourism is a key part of that strategy going forward.



May 19 2009, 2:33 PM

Ciaran (guest): Minister, in response, why can't we just have a clear section on our rates bill that shows the total we pay for water? Why does the Executive need to pay these separate bills for us?



May 19 2009, 2:35 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - the Executive have to decide how our water and sewerage is going to be financed. From that decision, will determine whether or not bills are issued and if so whether these are part of one household bill in which the amounts are clearly identified.



May 19 2009, 2:36 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - the outcome of the independent review recommended that households do contribute to the financing of water and sewerage services through a single bill. However the Executive has decided in the current economic climate to continue picking up the cost of provision of water and sewerage infrastructure through its finances.



May 19 2009, 2:36 PM

Ciaran (guest): Minister, thanks for your answer so far. It just seems like we're really paying the double-tax already, except the Executive is taking the money under other guises. What system of billing will you be recommend to your Executive colleagues?



May 19 2009, 2:37 PM

Tim (guest): When can we expect to see the completion of the Belfast to Newry upgrade of the A1?



May 19 2009, 2:38 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - Until the Executive decides how it is going to finance water and sewerage, I will not be recommending any system of billing. We have tried through the independent review to bring a degree of transparency and openness to the Water Reform process which was absent under the proposals being developed by Direct Rule Ministers.



May 19 2009, 2:38 PM

conor-murphy: Tim - Winter 2010.



May 19 2009, 2:38 PM

Nevin (guest): Minister, has the DRD nominated its contact official as part of the EU Commission 'Pilot' fast track investigation into the Rathlin ferry contract?



May 19 2009, 2:39 PM

conor-murphy: Nevin - The Department has conducted, in association with the Audit Office, its own investigation into the awarding of this contract. The Audit Office was satisfied with the outcome of that investigation.



May 19 2009, 2:40 PM

joanne-stuart: In the Corporate Plan you have stated that the department will "ensure that procurement and other activities support local businesses" what are your plans in that area?



May 19 2009, 2:41 PM

conor-murphy: Joanne - The Executive, through the central part of its Programme for Government in supporting and developing the local economy, want to ensure that the money spent by Government here is done so in a way which supports that objective. I have asked different sections of my Department to bring forward their ideas on how the procurement strategies of the Department can also support that objective.



May 19 2009, 2:42 PM

joanne-stuart: Thanks Minister, do we have any other comments / questions?



May 19 2009, 2:42 PM

Nevin (guest): Minister, the EU Commission investigation commenced more recently. Has the DRD nominated its official contact person?



May 19 2009, 2:43 PM

conor-murphy: Nevin - we shall check this and come back to you.



May 19 2009, 2:43 PM

Robert-Pue: Minister, back to the LRT proposal: Surely at this time when we are supposed to be tightening our belts, it is silly to adopt a transportation system (A Guided bus-way) that has already been proven to be unsuccessful anywhere else, and at a cost of £150 million to the Tax-payer, when a proven and tested system of a type that is now being adopted world-wide, could be provided for Belfast at no cost to the Assembly?



May 19 2009, 2:44 PM

Shelly (guest): Minister Murphy, would your department be responsible for taxi services and PSV Licenses across the North?



May 19 2009, 2:44 PM

Ken_Sharp: Just to clarify the RDS will place a much greater emphasis on gateways to and from the region yet the Ballycastle Campbeltown ferry does not come under your remit? What is the reason for this?



May 19 2009, 2:44 PM

Michael (guest): Minister, how assured are you of the financial commitment from the Republic for the upgrade of the A5 road?



May 19 2009, 2:45 PM

conor-murphy: Robert - You have had numerous contacts with the Department and opportunities to present your case. I have to disagree with your analysis, with both the system that has been proposed and the experience throughout the world. The Department's case has been tested and both within the Department and by the Executive and the Regional Development Committee, who were all satisfied with the way forward.



May 19 2009, 2:45 PM

Nevin (guest): Minister, have you been briefed about the EU investigation?



May 19 2009, 2:46 PM

conor-murphy: Shelly - this is a DOE issue. Minister Wilson will be on line on 8 June 2009 @ 2pm.



May 19 2009, 2:46 PM

Shelly (guest): thank you



May 19 2009, 2:47 PM

conor-murphy: Ken - Discussions on this have been taken forward between DETI and the

Scottish Executive prior to return to Devolution as it is seen as a purely tourism initiative which comes under the remit of DETI.



May 19 2009, 2:48 PM

Paul_Wickens: Minister - as DRD is the shareholder for NI Water, what level of governance and influence is there on its strategy?



May 19 2009, 2:48 PM

conor-murphy: Michael we are very assured on every occasion that we have asked, we have received a firm commitment from the southern side on this issue. As recently as the CBI dinner in Belfast, the Taoiseach reaffirmed this commitment.



May 19 2009, 2:48 PM

conor-murphy: Paul - We are responsible for policy in relation to water and sewerage matters. NIW are responsible for the operational outcome of that policy.



May 19 2009, 2:48 PM

Ken_Sharp: Thank you. The fact that it is being purely considered as a tourism initiative is probably part of the problem! But understand the reasoning now!



May 19 2009, 2:49 PM

LindaBrown (guest): Minister, across the departments, road and rail, there is limited capital and not enough revenue funding for potholes and rail services. How will the Department manage the difficult capital/revenue balance



May 19 2009, 2:49 PM

Ciaran (guest): Minister - How often do you use public transport? What's your opinion of the state of our bus and train network, and your view on the recent hike in fares?



May 19 2009, 2:50 PM

conor-murphy: Linda - please see question 1.



May 19 2009, 2:50 PM

Paul_Wickens: Thank you - I understand that, but what level of Board Governance does the department have as the sole shareholder?



May 19 2009, 2:50 PM

conor-murphy: Ciaran - as often as possible. Although given that I am rarely in the one place all day, it is not easy to rely on public transport for all of my business.



May 19 2009, 2:51 PM

conor-murphy: The train and bus network is improving thanks to substantial investment

from my own Department and this is being reflected in the steady growth in passenger numbers.



May 19 2009, 2:52 PM

conor-murphy: In relation to fare increases, while these are never popular, there are sometimes necessary for Translink to be able to continue to function as a business. I had rejected earlier plans from Translink for a more substantial fare increase but I also want to ensure that we are not forced into compulsory redundancies and a loss of service. Therefore the 2 and 3% fare increase was justified under the current economic circumstances.



May 19 2009, 2:53 PM

Michael (guest): Last year in the Irish News, there were speculative plans published for a railway line from Sligo, through Co. Donegal with a terminus in Derry City. Has the minister had any representations from any parties, north or south, on the issue?



May 19 2009, 2:53 PM

conor-murphy: Paul - The governance arrangements for NI Water are published in the public plan. Please access this on the NIW internet site or departmental internet site.



May 19 2009, 2:54 PM

LindaBrown (guest): Minister, What is the department doing to manage car parking - illegal on-street and off street car parks providing too many spaces and car parking tariff that do not encourage turnover - and too many civil servants with free all day parking



May 19 2009, 2:54 PM

Ciaran (guest): Thanks for your answer, Minister - Do you drive yourself or have a driver/chauffeur? Do you own a low-carbon emissions vehicle or a 4x4 style gas guzzler?



May 19 2009, 2:55 PM

ZoeAnderson: On a related note to Linda's question, will you be taking part in this week's 'Baywatch' survey, aimed at recording abuse of accessible parking bays in public car parks?
<http://www.imtac.org.uk/baywatch.php>



[IMTAC | Baywatch](http://www.imtac.org.uk/baywatch.php)



May 19 2009, 2:55 PM

conor-murphy: Michael - yes I have met with the group from Donegal Council who has been promoting this idea. I have also discussed it with the Minister for Transport in the south, Noel Dempsey. I am supportive of the expansion of the rail network across Ireland but recognise in the current financial circumstances, facing particularly the southern Government that these

plans are unlikely to be delivered in the short term. Nonetheless, I would encourage people to continue to argue the case for railway development.



May 19 2009, 2:56 PM

sean-mccready: In the future the UK government has already mentioned that they will stop a lot of our funding, do you then look at selling of some assets such as Belfast Port or how would you see the funding being provided.



May 19 2009, 2:56 PM

joanne-stuart: The Minister has to leave to attend the Assembly, so we will need to draw the discussion to a close. The Department will respond to the outstanding questions in writing



May 19 2009, 2:56 PM

joanne-stuart: Thank you Minister for your participation



May 19 2009, 2:57 PM

conor-murphy: Sorry I have to leave but I have business in the Assembly Chamber to attend to. Thanks for your questions and I look forward to doing this again some time.



May 19 2009, 2:57 PM

Ken_Sharp: Thank you Minister.



May 19 2009, 2:57 PM

Michael (guest): Go raibh maith

May 19 2009, 2:57 PM

Nevin (guest): Thanks, Minister. Thanks, Joanne



May 19 2009, 2:57 PM

joanne-stuart: Thank you Minister, and to everybody for attending and contributing to the discussion, we will upload the transcript later today. See you on 8th June at 2pm



May 19 2009, 3:01 PM

Paul_Wickens: Thank you - If it is not too late, I would like to ask a follow-up to the Department - Now that NI Water has been re-classified from a go-co to an NDPB, what specific governance arrangements will be undertaken by DRD as the parent department?



May 19 2009, 3:02 PM

Ciaran (guest): Joanne > Is the Department going to reply to any other questions here? Do we wait around?