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Ruane gave Assembly 'a misleading answer'

BY STEPHEN DEMPSTER
Political Editor

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CAITRIONA Ruane has been given the "benefit of the doubt", after she provided misleading information to the Assembly.

The Education Minister has been caught out providing a wrong answer to an MLA, when she was asked how much the testing of the pupil profile scheme had cost the taxpayer, before it was ditched late last year.

She told the SDLP's Tommy Gallagher, in the Chamber on Monday, that the figure was £180,000.

But a Freedom of Information request by Parental Alliance for Choice chairman Stephen Elliott and a News Letter query has established that the project actually cost more than half a million pounds (£581,000).

This has left the minister potentially open to accusations of misleading the House - a serious infringement of her duty.

The SDLP has already accused First-Minister Peter Robinson of deliberately misleading the Assembly this week, a charge he strenuously denied, but one which must be assessed by the

Speaker and in some circumstances can lead to resignation.

But after the Department of Education said Ms Ruane had not knowingly provided the wrong figure, Mr Gallagher said he was inclined to believe this was case.

Though it still highlighted a wider problem with the minister's approach to the House, he said.

A department spokesman explained the Ms Ruane was replying to a supplementary question on the cost of the pupil profile, that is: an additional query for which she would not have had a prepared answer.

She quoted the figure of £180,000 in costs for pupil profiling - a system which was being tested as replacement for the annual reports based system - for the years 2007/08 and 2008/09, using information she had available at the time.

"There was absolutely no attempt to mislead members," said the spokesman, "the minister will write to the member to clarify that the total cost of developing, trialling, training and implementing the pupil profile was £581,000."

Mr Gallagher, however, said that if she did not have the correct answer, the minister should have said she would provide it to him later, as he had heard her do before and as is

common practice.

He added: "I didn't think, at the time, that the figure was right and if I didn't the minister surely shouldn't have but regardless of that there is a wider issue, in relation to how she conducts herself and the length of time she is taking to answer questions.

"As public representatives, we have been elected to ask questions, on the public's behalf, and they are entitled to answers, and they are not getting them, when the minister takes so long with her answers that time runs out for the queue of MLAs wanting to quiz her."

The issue has been raised in the Assembly, and the Speaker and Committee on Procedures at Stormont is looking at this complaint - also made by the Education Committee at Stormont, when Ms Ruane appears before it.

This week, in the Assembly SDLP MLA Alex Attwood raised a point of order on Ms Ruane's behaviour.

As an example, he said: "At Question Time on November 24, 2008, the Minister of Education addressed questions for oral answer. On that occasion, questions to the Minister of Education lasted 29 and a half minutes, but 23 and a half minutes of that time were spent by the minister in answering members' questions."

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