



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Draft Budget 2011-15:
Departmental Briefing**

19 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Draft Budget 2011-15:
Departmental Briefing**

19 January 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Billy Armstrong

Mr Cathal Boylan

Mr Allan Bresland

Mr Billy Leonard

Ms Anna Lo

Mr Ian McCrea

Mr Conall McDevitt

Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Geoff Allister)

Mrs Doreen Brown) Department for Regional Development

Mr Roger Downey)

Mr John Mills)

The Deputy Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):

We move to further scrutiny of the draft budget, including departmental spending allocations and savings delivery plans for 2011-15. That information is included in members' packs. This follows on from the evidence session with officials at the Committee's meeting on 12 January 2011, and from the Committee's closed session yesterday and this morning. I refer members to papers tabled by the Committee Office, which include notable points arising from those meetings

on 12 January and 18 January.

I welcome departmental and Roads Service officials; Mrs Doreen Brown, Mr Geoff Allister, Mr John Mills and Mr Roger Downey. John, I appreciate that you have been here for the past two hours. If you would like to take a few minutes, we will defer any questions to you for the next five or 10 minutes.

Mr John Mills (Department for Regional Development):

You are very kind.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you; please commence, Mr Allister.

Mr Geoff Allister (Department for Regional Development):

Thank you for inviting us back again. The Chairperson has introduced the team, and kindly excused John for a few moments. Malcolm, the permanent secretary, gave the Committee a fairly detailed introduction to the Department's budget proposals last week, which I do not propose to repeat. I will detail a couple of issues that have arisen since then.

Our draft budget spending and savings proposals have been published on the internet. Those proposals are out for consultation until 16 February 2011. In addition, the draft equality impact assessment (EQIA) has been finalised. I think that it was sent to the Committee this morning, and we intend to publish it on the website today. That is also out for consultation until 16 February.

Without further ado, we are happy to try and answer any questions that the Committee may have on the proposals.

The Deputy Chairperson:

What information do you have about the amount of money that has been ring-fenced for the A5 and A8 roads and what are the implications of that ring-fencing?

Mr Roger Downey (Department for Regional Development):

If members recall, annex 3 of the papers that we supplied the Committee with last week set out the proposed allocations across the Department and the elements that were ring-fenced by the Executive. The A5 and A8 programmes are ring-fenced, as are elements of the structural maintenance allocation. They have been ring-fenced by the Executive, which means that the Executive have allocated those funds for that specific purpose, and the Department does not have the flexibility to take money from those programmes to give to others. The figures supplied to the Committee for years 2 and 3 of the proposal demonstrate that quite a significant proportion of funding has been ring-fenced, which is why there is less flexibility to put money into other programmes in those years.

The Deputy Chairperson:

If those programmes slip or do not proceed, would that money go back into a central pot and would DRD would have to bid again?

Mr Downey:

Take year 2 as an example; we will probably not know until the first monitoring round of that year whether that will be the case. At that stage, we would be able to engage with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to see whether there was an opportunity to move money about. However, at this stage, the money is ring-fenced and there is no movement within that.

The Deputy Chairperson:

The papers you provided include dividends of £15 million from the ports in years 2 and 3 of the savings delivery plan. In his statement, the Finance Minister said that funding from other sources

was being explored and was not included in the draft Budget proposals, yet this was included. Is there a difference in how that matter was approached by the Department?

Mrs Doreen Brown (Department for Regional Development):

No; we are exploring options for getting the £30 million from Belfast Port. I know that there was also reference to further money possibly coming from the port, but that has not been built into any of the figure work and is speculative. There is work at the moment involving the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, and the Department looking at options for getting the £30 million, but that has not been worked through yet. We are not even clear on the options for getting the £30 million, let alone anything further.

The Deputy Chairperson:

When is it likely to be finalised?

Mrs D Brown:

We hope that a paper will be available for the Budget review group in February. That is the sort of timescale to which we are working.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Is it likely that that will be approved by DFP? You are obviously working alongside DFP in relation to securing the money.

Mrs D Brown:

At the moment, DFP is not part of that work, because it involves exploring options. When the preliminary work has been done, DFP will come back into the picture, so that anything that goes to the Budget review group will have been seen and, hopefully, endorsed by DFP.

Mr I McCrea:

Yesterday I met representatives of Shopmobility in respect of its budget. They are not sure exactly where they feature. I believe that a reference has been made to those schemes that are underperforming. What are the criteria? For example, there are some schemes that have been operational only since last August and have not completed a full financial year but that may have over-performed on the targets they set themselves. What criteria do you use to deem those schemes to be underperforming?

Mrs D Brown:

It is basically down to the usage of the scheme. If schemes are not generating usage but are using resources then they are not going to be high in the league table of value-for-money schemes. That is basically what we will be looking at. We will obviously take account of how long a scheme has been in existence, and I do not believe that it is our intention that a scheme that has just been set up will suddenly have its funding swiped away. We will be looking at schemes where there is a history of low usage and, therefore, a lack of value for money.

Mr I McCrea:

Is there a genuine commitment to ensuring that these schemes will continue to be in operation, and funded by the Department? They are valuable schemes in the towns in which they operate. Nothing is immune from taking some form of a hit by the cuts, but these are valuable schemes, and I know that there is a need for them in the community.

Mrs D Brown:

I do not think we would be volunteering to make cuts in those schemes unless we had to, but when all parts of our provision need to take a share of the pain, we will have to look at the least well-performing Shopmobility schemes and those in other areas that our proposals cover. I cannot specify today what schemes will be at the bottom of the list and therefore most vulnerable. All I can say is that we will look at them all carefully and that decisions will be made on the basis of usage.

Mr I McCrea:

Is there an opportunity for someone close to the bottom of the list to enter into discussions with the Department? Is there an appeal mechanism, or, if they are deemed to be underperforming according to the criteria that you set out, is that it?

Mrs D Brown:

We will have to have discussions with the schemes. I do not think it is a decision that we will just take behind closed doors in an office in Clarence Court without discussion and consultation with those operating the schemes. However, at the end of that process, decisions will have to be made, because we really do have to squeeze money out of that budget.

Mr I McCrea:

One other issue is the rural community transport network. I know that there are plans in my area to amalgamate three networks; Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt. However, it is important to ensure that there is some form of base in each area; perhaps not the administration element, but certainly some place for drivers to come to. There is a wide network of people who volunteer in cars who, I fear, will be lost to the project if they do not have a base or contact point in each town. I appreciate that sometimes things need to be amalgamated to reduce running costs, but it is important to retain the local identity of the schemes. Once you lose that, sometimes you lose the heart of the schemes, which, in many cases, are the volunteers.

Mrs D Brown:

That is a fair point. I do not have the detail of how schemes are being amalgamated, but I will certainly take that back and ensure that it is looked at as part of the process.

Mr Boylan:

Geoff, as regards the impact on the budget due to the recent burst mains and the rehabilitation process of fixing roads due to the damage that has been done, is there emerging funding to deal with that? What way does it work?

Mr Allister:

Are you talking about the after-effects of the recent severe weather?

Mr Boylan:

Yes.

Mr Allister:

No, we have to make provision for that from existing funding, and it will therefore largely come from our structural maintenance budget. Members will be aware that, in the first year of the period going forward, that budget is, fortunately, quite high at £94 million, which is considerably higher than it has been for some time. It is running at about £70 million this year. We will be able to cope with the work that we are doing to identify the worst parts of the network and the remedial action we are planning to carry out as a result.

We are doing work at the moment, before the end of the financial year, on this year's allocations. We made a prudent call earlier in the year when we saw what the weather for the winter was likely to be, and we knew that we were going to face something like that during the winter. We have contingency sums, which are being put into place at the moment.

Mr Boylan:

So, you have made contingency for that, OK. Thank you. Perhaps my figures are wrong, but it seems to me that the rural transport fund and the transport programme for people with disabilities are going to be hit heavily. We need to be trying to protect those. Am I right to say that it will be £1.7 million over the period, and then £2.3 million? Is that correct? That is what it says in this document.

Mrs D Brown:

Yes, that is right.

Mr Boylan:

Obviously, that is a significant amount of money in relation to single operations. Will you define that for us clearly? I know that Mr McCrea asked about rural community transport. That is a big amount of money to be cutting, especially from the disability sector.

Mrs D Brown:

Savings will be achieved across a range of elements of the programme. The rural transport fund covers the costs of the Community Transport Association (CTA), group transport, Translink services in rural areas and administrative savings that would be achieved by amalgamating partnerships.

Mr Boylan:

You call them savings, but let us put them down as reductions in the provision of services. Can we talk about that element of things? I know that you are talking about amalgamations, but I want to know specifically about the reductions in service provision?

Mrs D Brown:

There will be some reductions in services. Some savings are administrative and will not impact on services to users. However, there will be an impact on services. For example, in rural transport, the impact will be on group transport and the extent to which the rural transport partnerships will be able to provide group transport in the future. There will also be some impact on some services that Translink provides in rural areas that are subsidised by the Department. So, those are the two areas where services will be impacted on in rural areas.

As regards transport for people with disabilities, I mentioned Shopmobility schemes, where the aim is to make savings by withdrawing funding from the poorest performing schemes. Similarly, some Easibus services will be reduced, but we expect door-to-door services to be able to pick up some of the impact of that. The last time I was here, I said that door-to-door services could be more constrained; they could operate more in the daytime and there would be a

reduction in evening travel. Again, in urban areas, there would be a reduction in the facility for group transport.

So, there will be some impacts, but the impacts in urban and rural areas will primarily mean stopping group travel as opposed to stopping travel for individuals.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will you quantify the breakdown of the reductions in those different areas? If you cannot do that today, could you send the figures to us?

Mrs D Brown:

Yes, it would be better to send them to you. I have some figures, but I am not sure that they are comprehensive. We can send those figures to you.

Mr Boylan:

Have you been consulting throughout this process?

Mrs D Brown:

We have to have a process of engagement with the groups now. We are working on the basis of draft budget figures; we do not know if those will be the figures that we end up with. We have plans for engagement with the urban and rural groups to talk through how the savings can best be achieved with the least damaging impact on services.

Mr Boylan:

I hope that you look at it from the point of view of a reduction in services as opposed to savings. That is the bad thing about commitment *[Inaudible.]* I am just handing the research paper to

Hansard in case they need it for the figures.

Mr Leonard:

You are welcome. I have a load of stuff to ask and time is against us.

Geoff, you mentioned the roads structural maintenance expenditure being £94 million in the first year of the Budget period, but it then plummets to £52million and £56 million in years 2 and 3 before going back up to £82 million in year 4. I have already raised this point, so I can only reiterate it; if there are not going to be additional funds, there will have to be maximum flexibility between structural maintenance capital and structural maintenance through revenue. After you left last week, we were saying that depending on the nature of the scheme something might be classed as capital project rather than a minor work, or whatever way you class it, Geoff. There is no sense in going on about it again. If those are the final figures, there will be a problem. To alleviate the problem, maximum flexibility will be required.

With respect to transport, the economic rubber is hitting the road, which is a wake-up call to a lot of people. Given all the cuts in your documents, now is the time to become imaginative. People lobby us, and I am sure that you are not hearing anything new. Health, education and public transport systems are all running around the same areas, and I do not mean that to sound glib, because they have their jobs and their routes to do. Have we reached the stage where we are going to have to look at pooling resources for maximum efficiency? Is that on the radar, or will it be on your radar? What are the practicalities? Perhaps you will deal with that before I move on.

Mrs D Brown:

This is an important issue to try to take forward. Translink is developing proposals that, through the Department, it will want to discuss with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Education (DE). Translink will want to discuss sharing transport, but also sharing facilities for things such as vehicle maintenance. That is on the table, because Translink can see that it could be to its advantage to reduce its costs or get funding from

DHSSPS and DE if, for example, it took over the servicing of their vehicles. It is a live issue.

Mr Leonard:

Essentially there are already difficulties, never mind future cuts. The difficulties just deepen; let us be honest about it. What concrete steps will be taken to investigate the viability of it all?

Mrs D Brown:

There have been discussions — informal at this stage — between Translink and some people in the DHSSPS in Belfast and in the DE at the level of the proposed Education and Skills Authority (ESA). It is fair to say that they have not gone that far at this stage. Translink approached the Department in the past few weeks to ask us to become involved in raising the matter at a higher level with the DHSSPS and the DE. Translink is working on a set of proposals that, once completed, will come to us, and we will then broker them with the other Departments.

Mr Leonard:

I know that this will run beyond the current mandate, but, obviously, the intention will be to keep this Committee and the subsequent Regional Development Committee informed. Obviously it will involve other Committees, given the nature of the three organisations. There will be a massive need to pool resources. You, quite rightly, mentioned maintenance. There is going to be a whole load of other stuff around low-cost approaches, park-and-ride schemes and all the rest of it. There are loads of issues that will really have to be looked at.

As regards water mains — and I know that we are into PC10, the regulator of NIW, and all the rest of it. We are all going to be dreaming about NIW soon, we are talking about it that much.

Mr Mills:

I already do. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Leonard:

The classification, dream standard — is it going out? We were speaking earlier about years 2 and 3, and I know that there is the idea of the amount of money that is going to water and sewerage and the stuff that is going to have to go to mains and reparations and all the rest of it. Will the Department be discussing the Budget figures with the Utility Regulator? Where are they in relation to focusing the resource? It is all right coming to us with annex 1 — and I appreciate that you have to — which shows a reduction of funding to NI Water from £145 million to £140 million in years 2 and 3, but it is about the breakdown and the direction of those resources. How does the DRD operate in that environment? Can it operate in that environment?

Mr Mills:

You are quite right; the devil is in the detail. We have a meeting arranged before the end of the month to speak to the regulator and the other players involved about how priorities can be reset in light of the draft Budget figures. I guess we will have to wait for confirmation. We have been discussing those issues and from where money can be taken to keep the really important projects going. However, the water programme is really complex, because we cannot spend money on works in one place but then decide to cut the work on the pipe that was needed to deliver the water. It is a very complex jigsaw.

Mr Leonard:

Lastly, on the broader front, are the Department's main objectives going to be redrafted? There are going to be failings, because the budget will not deliver the objectives.

Mr Mills:

There are certainly some important objectives, such as the aim to keep water quality at a certain standard: 99.7% means compliance, to be technical. Hopefully, £660 million is still a good investment, and the standard will not dip. On the sewerage side, some of the standards may dip.

Mr Leonard:

Broadening the discussion out from water to roads, with transport and sustainability, are you

really being forced to redraw the parameters?

Mr Allister:

The schemes and the programmes of work that we are going to take forward, which underpin each of the objectives, are what will suffer obviously. Therefore, there will be clear redrafting of the pace at which we can take schemes and programmes forward and in the targets that we set ourselves as part of the Budget process.

If you look at the two objectives, which are on page 5 of the Budget document, they talk about:

“Supporting the economy by planning, developing and maintaining safe and sustainable transportation networks”.

We will still be planning, developing and maintaining safe and sustainable transportation networks. On the development and planning sides, that will not take place at anything like the current pace. If you look over the page, we have been very clear and honest by saying:

“Budget allocations would help DRD to continue to improve elements of our roads, transport and water infrastructure. They would also allow us to continue to fund the majority of our existing programmes ... albeit at a much reduced level.”

Therefore, we have tried to be as honest as we can be in the document. When we get our Budget allocation confirmed, we will need to go away and work out the underpinning targets that the Minister will set for us to support the objectives. The objectives are still valid at a high level.

Mr McDevitt:

Wow. Objective A and objective B are valid at a high level?

Mr Allister:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

You are confident that you can deliver a sustainable transport network.

Mrs D Brown:

Yes.

Mr McDevitt:

How will this Budget reduce your carbon footprint?

Mrs D Brown:

We have not done that sort of detailed calculation. It will probably not improve the situation.

Mr McDevitt:

It will probably make the situation worse.

Mrs D Brown:

What we —

Mr McDevitt:

Hold on a second. It probably will make the situation worse, will it not?

Mrs D Brown:

I cannot say whether it will.

Mr McDevitt:

Let us look at it: you are cutting back funding for public transport; you are cutting back on the alternatives to the car; and you have absolutely decimated walking and cycling funding. It is an inevitable consequence that car usage will increase. That is the only potential policy outworking that you can draw from the draft Budget, yet you are saying that it will not have a negative impact on our carbon footprint.

Mrs D Brown:

Take the public transport and the transport services delivered by Translink. Translink is working up its proposals on how to live within the sorts of figures that are in the draft Budget. As part of that, it is looking at ways to reconfigure what it is doing in a way that keeps public transport usage high and even grows it in some areas. Therefore, there would be a different and new focus.

Mr McDevitt:

You are telling us that this is a Budget that will grow public transport?

Mrs D Brown:

No, all that I am saying is that I would not necessarily agree with you that this is a Budget that will decimate public transport.

Mr McDevitt:

I did not say that.

Mrs D Brown:

No, you said that it would decimate walking and cycling and would have a negative impact on public transport. It is too soon to say. It is certainly not the Budget that we would have wanted.

Mr McDevitt:

When are you going to calculate the carbon consequentials of this Budget?

Mrs D Brown:

We will have to see what comes from our discussions and our work with Translink, which provides the bulk of public transport, and with those who provide the urban door-to-door services and rural transport to see what exactly the impact on services would be and the impact on passenger numbers. It is only then that we will be able to do a calculation.

Mr McDevitt:

Can you give us an assurance that, before we have to make a final decision on the draft Budget as a Committee, we will know what the carbon consequence of it will be?

Mrs D Brown:

If your timescale for making a final decision is to do it by early or mid-February, I cannot give you that commitment.

Mr McDevitt:

Therefore, you are asking us to sign a blank cheque, which, in all honesty, will probably make the most polluting Department in Northern Ireland even more polluting, and we are supposed to back that?

Mrs D Brown:

What we want you to do is see whether you can suggest a better balancing of our proposals.

Mr McDevitt:

With the greatest respect, Mrs Brown, it is not our job to second-guess you guys. We do not have the resource to come up with an alternative budget for the Department for Regional Development. Our job is to test you against the parameters that you have already set yourselves — parameters of sustainability, for example, which we know to be in the regional development strategy that is out for consultation. Those all require the Department to be on a downward carbon trend: for its carbon footprint to reduce year on year over the next decade.

Mrs D Brown:

That is our long-term aspiration. I cannot tell you, and I will not be able to tell you within three weeks, what the impact of the budget will be on our carbon footprint.

Mr McDevitt:

You sent a regional development strategy out for consultation that — I may not get the wording exactly right — basically puts sustainability at the heart of everything that you do, yet you cannot tell me what the carbon consequences of your budget are.

Mrs D Brown:

We have tried to come up with a balanced way of living within the constrained resources that we have been allocated in the draft Budget.

Mr McDevitt:

It is about choices. My opinion is that we need to know what the carbon consequential of the departmental budget is, because it is a key policy objective of the Department to improve its carbon footprint, reduce its carbon output and contribute to a lower-carbon region. It seems very strange to me that we are being asked to approve a draft budget when the Department that is formulating that budget cannot tell us what the carbon consequential of it is.

Mr Allister:

I want to pick up on one point that Mr McDevitt raised about the decimation — that is the word that he used — of the walking and cycling programme. I am not clear that it will decimate the budget for that programme at all. There will be restrictions on it and there will be significant reductions in year 2 and year 3, but there are still sums of money available to allow us to take forward those programmes. I go back to the point I made that we will continue to take forward those programmes, albeit at a reduced level.

Mr McDevitt:

Given that it comes off the back of a 98% cut in the cycling budget in Belfast, we are talking about a serious situation.

Mr Allister:

There is no evidence in the draft departmental budget of a 98% reduction in funding for cycling.

Mr McDevitt:

No, but it is coming off the back of that. That is what you have already done.

Mr Allister:

There are reasons for that, but I am talking about this Budget process.

Mr McDevitt:

You did it.

Ms Lo:

Obviously the proposed cuts in public transport will impact on some of the section 75 groups.

Given that an EQIA does not always give the desired answers and is often a paper exercise, are you actively seeking the views of stakeholder groups? What actions are you going to take to take that forward?

Mrs D Brown:

We have plans for consultation with a number of groups. For example, tomorrow we are taking part in a consultation sponsored by Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), and next week — I think that it is next Wednesday — we are leading a session on the DRD draft budget in an event organised by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA). We took part in one of those last year as a pre-Budget consultation, and we are now going back with the actual figures. That will draw in a wide range of stakeholders.

We will also be in discussions next week with the Consumer Council on the water and the public transport aspects of the draft Budget. We are also having discussions with Translink, as the main provider of public transport services, about what the draft Budget means for it. That is the extent of the consultation that we are engaged in at the moment.

Mr Armstrong:

You say that you are going to improve water treatment works. Is that improvement going to bring more water into the system, or will it be quality improvement?

Mr Mills:

It will generally not be capacity — that is, bringing more water into the system — but will be to do with the quality of the water; for instance, removing more iron or aluminium, or working towards achieving the more stringent standard on lead that will be introduced from Europe over the next few years.

Mr Armstrong:

Do you not think that we need more water? Treatment plants have not got a big enough capacity, and that might be one of the things that you need to think about.

Mr Mills:

On the hoof, that is not a proposition that I would support. The normal daily throughput of water is 620 million litres a day, and, at the height of the crisis, the throughput of Northern Ireland Water was up to 850 million litres per day. That is reasonable headroom. It seems to me that the problem was with the water spurting uselessly out of the system through leaks. You have to remember that, even if we gave Northern Ireland Water the capacity to produce 1,000 million litres of water, that will increase pressure, and it will spurt out of the system all the more quickly. It is a complex question.

Mr Armstrong:

You are going to increase the capacity of a few reservoirs, so I was just wondering where you were going to get the water to fill those reservoirs.

Mr Mills:

It depends on whether you are talking about impounding reservoirs or service reservoirs. There is plenty of available raw water in Northern Ireland — it is the ability to treat the water that is the hold-up. There is some work to improve storage, but, if water leaks massively out of the system very quickly, whatever storage capacity we have will very quickly go down, as we found in the recent emergency.

Mr Armstrong:

There is not much point in putting up extra storage tanks if there are still leaks.

Mr Mills:

That is true.

Mr Armstrong:

I will move on to the Shopmobility system. As we all know, it is very valuable in a lot of towns and villages. What happens to the areas where those schemes are not efficient? What will be done with the mobility vehicles in the areas where the system is no longer seen as viable?

Mrs D Brown:

I cannot answer that. I can find out, but I do not know what the plans would be for disposal of the vehicles that are currently available.

Mr Armstrong:

Perhaps they should be directed to areas that are profitable.

Mrs D Brown:

That is a possibility, as long as it would not result in increased costs in running the well-performing schemes, because we cannot afford to increase the amount of subsidy that we give to any schemes.

Mr Armstrong:

What about schemes that have only been in existence for a short time? When will their budget run out?

Mrs D Brown:

We will have to talk to the schemes to decide which will be funded in future. That is something

that we will have to do quite soon, once we have firm figures for the departmental budget. At the moment, the figures are still draft figures.

Mr I McCrea:

Will you be talking to the individual schemes, such as in Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon, or are you talking about the oversight body for Shopmobility in Northern Ireland?

Mrs D Brown:

We tend to go to the regional level.

Mr I McCrea:

OK.

Mr Armstrong:

Therefore, any scheme that feels that it is in a stressful financial situation should be talking to you?

Mrs D Brown:

Yes, and we will be talking to the schemes through the regional organisation.

Mr Armstrong:

Right, so if they are profitable, you are sympathetic.

Mr G Robinson:

I have two or three points to make. First and foremost, I concur with my colleague Ian on the

rural transport issue. He mentioned individual areas keeping their own identity, and I concur with that. That is absolutely crucial and critical. I was at a meeting about the town bus services last week, and I think that it is critical that they be kept as well, because many people in the smaller towns have not got transport, and such a sterling job is done in providing bus services. I realise that times are hard, but if you can at all, you should try to keep those the way that they are, particularly in smaller towns.

Another issue that was mentioned last night was the parking situation in towns and the possibility of a charge. I have spoken to quite a few people, particularly traders, in my town. Smaller towns are definitely going to feel the pinch — that will be a no-brainer, quite honestly. The traders in small towns, and even those in larger towns for that matter, feel the pinch as it is. I am totally against that, as would the people to whom I have spoken. I just cannot see the merit in that whatsoever. I know that the Department would say that it would rope in money, and so forth, but I think that that is one area in which it would be detrimental.

Mrs D Brown:

On rural transport, I recognise the point about separate identity, and that is something that we will try to preserve, but we will still have to ensure that savings are made. We cannot maintain a separate identity for each partnership if it means that they continue to have their existing administrative structures, because those are quite expensive, and are replicated across the 16 partnerships. We could look at ways of retaining separate local identities while still amalgamating the administrative support that those schemes need.

I can really only repeat what I said last week about town bus services, which was that I do not see that there is any way in which we can guarantee that all existing town bus services will remain in being, particularly for the smaller towns. The smaller the town, the less viable the town bus service is proving to be. What we want to try to ensure is that, if town bus services are reduced in some areas, the needs of the most vulnerable — the disabled, the elderly, and so on — would be picked up by the door-to-door service as far as possible.

Mr Allister:

On the issue of on-street parking, we are obviously in the middle of a consultation process, so your comments are very welcome. It would be useful if I outlined to you that we are hoping to make somewhere in the region of £4 million a year through extending the parking charges. It would be useful for you to understand the consequences if that money does not come in, particularly for the roads budget. The consequences for the roads budget would be very severe, in that we would have to have further cutbacks on patching — Mr Leonard referred to the importance of that — and on maintenance of our structures: traffic signals, the traffic-gathering information that we have on the network, gully emptying and street lighting maintenance. Those are the sort of areas that we are getting into. We had this debate when we were here last week. It would be particularly useful for us if you felt that that was not a high enough priority. Where in the draft budget do you see us focusing our attention on something that could be a lower priority?

On the policy of introducing on-street parking, it has always seemed peculiar to me that, if people park in our off-street car parks in towns and cities across Northern Ireland, they are parking 200 m or 400 m from the main street and paying a charge, yet they can park on the main street for free. That is polluting the main street, as there are a lot of people driving in and out of parking spaces.

The whole policy would be to try to get a turnover of parking on streets. The evidence from Lisburn and particularly Newry is that the response from traders has been positive. I am just outlining the debate that we will have to have when the consultation responses come back and showing the Committee some of the difficult choices that we have had to make in all of this.

Mr G Robinson:

That is one part of the argument.

Last week, I mentioned potholes around the Castledawson roundabout. Those have all since been repaired.

Mr Allister:

I will take that back to my people. *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you all for coming. The Committee is organising a stakeholder event for next Wednesday. That has not been confirmed as our stakeholders have not come back to us yet, but perhaps you might think about coming to that meeting as observers, because it might be useful. We will contact you with the details of that.