



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Stakeholder Event on Draft Budget

26 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Stakeholder Event on Draft Budget

26 January 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Conall McDevitt
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Mr Ciaran Rogan)	
Mr David Brown	)	Translink
Ms Kellie Armstrong	)	Community Transport Association
Mr Tom McClelland	)	Sustrans
Mr Nigel Smyth	)	Confederation of British Industry
Cllr Sean McPeake	)	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Mr Aidan McPeake	)	(NILGA)
Mr Terry Mitchell)	
Ms Helen Richmond)	
Mr Gordon Best)	
Mr Aidan Mullan	)	Quarry Products Association (QPANI)
Mr John Shannon)	
Mr Tom Wilson	)	Freight Transport Association

Mrs Ann Collins)	
Ms Paula Martin)	
Ms Jacinta Magee	)	Shopmobility
Mr Alan Crowe)	
Mr Frank Caddy	)	Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory
Mr David McDonald	)	Committee (IMTAC)
Mr Kevin Doherty)	
Mr Dermot McCloskey	)	Disability Action
Mr Roger Downey)	
Mr Stuart Wightman)	
Mr Ciaran Doran	)	Department for Regional Development
Mr Tony McConnell)	
Mr Philip Hamilton)	
Mr Roddy Crilly)	
Mr Stephen Wood	)	Stephen Wood Consultancy
Mr Roger Pollen	)	Federation of Small Business
Mr Scott Kennerley)	
Mr Aodhan O'Donnell	)	Consumer Council

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain):

You are all welcome to Stormont this morning. I know that you were informed of the meeting at short notice, so the Committee appreciates that you have responded and attended. Like you, the Regional Development Committee has been disturbed about some of the issues around the draft Budget. We also share your frustration about the consultation period and how short it is for the key stakeholder organisations to give an informed response. The focus today is to listen to your views on the impact that the draft Budget will have on your organisations. The evidence that you will give us today and the interface with the Committee will help us enormously when it comes to debates in the Assembly on the draft Budget and in our responses to the Finance and Personnel Committee.

Today's format is simple. We have used it before, and it is useful for us. It is a less formal way of taking evidence, but it helps the Committee and individuals to have open debate, which we need when we are discussing such issues as this. It is intended that each of you will have a chance to talk about your organisation and how the Budget affects you. There will be discussion

between the Committee and you, and, after everyone has had their chance to say what they need to say about the draft Budget, we will open the meeting up for a plenary debate and more rounded discussion. We will hear your concerns, and the Committee will be able to ask questions and get the information that it needs. We are hoping to finish at 12.30 pm or 12.45 pm.

If you want to contribute, please catch the eye of the person with the microphone. Hansard staff are reporting the session, so please give your name and the name of the organisation that you represent for the record. A number of organisations are represented here. Please be as concise as possible when you are giving your presentation, without taking anything away from the contribution, so that everyone has a chance to speak. We want to keep focused for the time that we have here.

Does any organisation want to go first?

Mr Nigel Smyth (Confederation of British Industry):

Chairperson and Committee, I welcome this opportunity. Continued investment in the strategic roads network and public transport are high priorities for the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). We welcome the broad approach that has been taken and the investment commitment that is set out in the draft Budget. We would have liked more, but we understand the constraints. There is scope for limited investment.

We continue to support the investment to upgrade the A5, with the important support of the Irish Government, and in the A8 scheme. Both are key parts of the strategic roads network. We are disappointed that other key roads, particularly the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson project, will not proceed. Our understanding was that that scheme was ready to go. We see the A6 and the York Street flyover as priorities. We see the other two schemes that have been identified as much lower priorities.

There are a welcome number of commitments to proceed with public transport works, including the rapid transit system. We are a little surprised at the proposal to build another train maintenance facility. We do not understand the need to do that, given that one was built not so long ago. There is also concern about the suggestion of possible subsidy rates at Translink, which may translate into higher fares and discourage more people from using public transport.

The savings that are identified in the departmental draft budget are key. We are very surprised that there is no mention of administrative savings and that those have not been identified or prioritised. There is no mention of how the Department will improve its productivity or manage its pay bill over this period, and there are no proposals for more ambitious reform as regards re-engineering and outsourcing, etc. We compliment the Department on setting out in detail the savings that it has identified. I am sure that not everyone will agree with the Department, as, disappointingly, a number of the savings will impact on service provision. However, from a broad, strategic economic perspective, CBI does not believe that any of the savings will undermine the economic recovery.

There is disappointment at the proposal to transfer £6 million from the capital to revenue budgets. We ask that that proposal is challenged and question why the Department is not looking at administrative savings instead. Two key sources of revenue-raising are identified: increased car parking charges and a dividend from the ports. We believe that both of those proposals are proportionate and sensible.

It is vital that we continue to invest at a high level in water and sewerage assets. We are concerned about the very significant cuts in capital spend in years two and three. The Utility Regulator recommended a spend of about £190 million per annum. We are seeing a cut of 15% from that recommendation. We put a lot of this down to the fact that the Executive have continued to defer water and sewerage charges. That is where options lie. By deferring those charges, we are making life a lot more difficult not only in respect of funding for water, sewerage and transport but for the broader package.

Mr Gordon Best (Quarry Products Association):

Thank you very much for the opportunity to make a presentation. I support a lot of what Nigel said, and I will not cover all the points that he made.

We recognise the constraints against which the draft Budget is set, particularly the 40% cut in the capital budget. The Department's current investment spending plans and, in particular, the roads structural maintenance allocation, as set out in the draft Budget, are understandable given the current state of our roads network and the significant damage that has been done to it by the severely cold weather over the past two years.

The allocation of £94 million for structural maintenance in the first year of the Budget period is to be welcomed. However, it is still far short of what Roads Service says is required annually. It estimates that around £112 million needs to be spent on the roads network. Indeed, over the four-year period, there will be a shortfall of £168 million, which will add further to the historic underspend of which the Committee is aware. We have to keep in mind that the £94 million will not go as far as it would have gone in other years. The costs of fuel and bitumen have increased, and the aggregates levy in particular will add significant costs to the Budget. That £94 million will sustain 1,200 jobs in the construction industry.

I welcome the commitment on the capital spend on the A5 and A8 projects in particular. We are still very supportive of the A5 project. However, if the money from the Irish Government is not forthcoming following the Irish general election, funds will have to be reallocated to strategic programmes and schemes across Northern Ireland that will maximise the positive effect on jobs. In our paper to the Committee we have set out those schemes that we believe are a priority.

We recognise and support the need to reduce transport carbon emissions. However, we would argue that it is not roads that create carbon emissions, but the fuel that vehicles use. It is our view that Northern Ireland does not have the population to support and finance a profitable and efficient train network. We believe that a well-funded, bus-based, park-and-ride, integrated public transport network that is fuelled by low-carbon fuels is the way forward for Northern Ireland. We are very supportive of the proposed Belfast rapid transit system. We also support Government incentives for the tax system, particularly on fuel, to encourage the use of low-carbon fuels.

We welcome the continued investment in the water and sewerage network in order to meet European water quality standards and to ensure that what happened during the recent severe freeze does not happen again.

We welcome a more focused approach to minor maintenance activities in the Department's savings delivery plans. We note the Department's comment:

“As maintenance functions within the Resource block are already funded to optimum levels savings can not be achieved without an immediate impact on service delivery.”

We would suggest that many of those maintenance activities should be outsourced to the private sector. We also recommend a rise in the qualifying age for concessionary fares charges from 60 to 65. We also welcome the proposed release of value from the harbour of £15 million and the rationalisation of Roads Service depots and section offices across Northern Ireland. I urge Roads Service to continue to identify opportunities for savings that can be delivered to front line services. We also call for the introduction of water charges to pay for our water network.

The Chairperson:

The Committee is concerned about the social cost of some of this stuff. We cannot divorce the economic consequences from the social consequences. The big drivers for the Committee are issues such as environmental improvements and sustainable transport. Those objectives will be destroyed by this Budget. We are going to spend less money on park-and-ride schemes and discourage people from using public transport. There will be a lesser service, and it will be more expensive, both by rail and road.

There will be more cars on the road, and parking charges will be increased. The time during which people can be charged for parking will be extended. On-street parking will be encouraged. There is a social cost to all of that. You cannot state the economic facts; everyone knows what they are. There is a balance between that and the social costs. The Committee is concerned about the social cost, in a monetary sense and in an environmental sense.

Mr Roger Pollen (Federation of Small Businesses):

I am the head of external affairs in the Federation of Small Businesses. The two contributors who spoke previously said a lot of what I would like to say, so I will try to avoid repeating what they said and will touch on a couple of points that the Chairperson raised.

If business is to lead the recovery here, infrastructure is one of the keys. However, it is not only the infrastructure; it is the perception of that. A number of the points that have been made about delivering quality infrastructure are well made, but it is also about how it comes across. The Northern Ireland Water situation sends a poor signal. We are also disappointed at the ruling out of structural options, such as privatisation. I am not saying that we feel that privatisation is the option, but we are disappointed that some options have been ruled out without alternatives being put forward. That seems to be limiting the discussion and the scope for going forward, not least because the failure to address it will mean that there will have to be a myriad of ways of

raising revenue throughout the economy. Our concern is that they will add a lot of stealth charges to the cost of living and doing business in Northern Ireland while ignoring one of the key ways that that gap could have been closed. It is important that that debate is brought forward quickly.

We encourage more innovative thinking about the way in which the infrastructure is used, such as using technology for reversing the direction of road lanes at certain times of the day to make better use of the existing infrastructure. That touches directly on the point that you have just raised, Chairperson. There are somewhere in the region of 100,000 car movements into Belfast every morning, and the outward routes are, for the most part, lying empty at that time. There are examples around the world, such as in Washington, where the capacity on roads can be alternated. We think that that might be a good way of trying to reduce the impact on the environment of traffic, which is going to be there until there is a better or alternative public transport system to make use of.

We also question how the proposal for increased parking charges fits with the Department for Social Development's (DSD) intentions for town centre regeneration. From the point of view of the Federation of Small Businesses, that is a big debate that does not seem to be squaring up. The various parts that are coming forward do not seem to be meshing cohesively.

The point on road maintenance has been well made. I want to touch on the Irish Government's commitment to invest in the road network. We would question whether the UK Government have made the loan that they have offered to the Republic conditional upon the continuation of that commitment. If they have not, we would urge the Department to engage with the UK Treasury on the issue to try to ensure that there is continuity of investment in Northern Ireland.

We have concerns on the dividends from the port, simply from the point of view of adding to the cost of doing business — importing and exporting. We urge that the economy, not merely economy, is kept at the heart of government.

Mr Tom McClelland (Sustrans):

Thank you for the kind invitation to this morning's event. Sustrans is a cycling organisation, with the blessing of the Cyclists Touring Club (CTC), a cycling organisation, and the Northern Ireland Cycling Initiative (NICI), a local cycling organisation.

I am glad that you mentioned social justice. I am here to talk about not only social justice but equality and freedom. Congestion accounts for only one third of transport costs. That was highlighted in a Cabinet Office paper that was published in November 2010. There are other issues, such as linkages to health. In November, the Health Committee reported that over 50,000 people in Northern Ireland are eligible for bariatric procedures, which is a procedure in which the patient gets their gut shrunk. Each of those procedures costs between £10,000 and £15,000. Since we do not have an active travel strategy or any encouragement to active travel, it will end load the Northern Ireland Budget over the next five to 10 years. It is important that we make the relationship between active travel and health by encouraging people to walk, use public transport and cycle. Sixty-three per cent of all journeys in Northern Ireland are of less than five miles, and those sorts of distances can be accommodated easily by those modes.

On the subject of social justice, the measures on road safety, traffic calming, pedestrians and cycling were virtually eliminated from the first version of the Department's budget so that eastern division ended up with around only £8,000 to spend. It is about trying to get the balance back so that we incorporate active travel into the Budget and look at the health benefits that arise from it.

I am a travelling substitute, because I was not expecting to be here this morning. I have mentioned that over 60% of all journeys are within five miles, and I have highlighted the issue of obesity and the fact that there are other health gains from active travel, which seems not be mentioned in the Budget. The other important thing to bear in mind is that cost-benefit analysis shows that tremendous gains can be made through spending money on infrastructure that encourages active travel. Investment in building the A5 shows a financial gain of only 1:1.75, whereas investment in cycling and walking shows a financial gain of anything between 1:5 and 1:10.

Greenhouse gas emissions have been mentioned in passing. We also have to remember that a surprising number of households, particularly in Belfast, do not have access to a car, so building roads without considering public transport or other issues of road safety is not particularly just. We ask that, in considering its budget, the Department re-examines the safety measures that benefit children, people who do not have access to a car and people who use benign modes of travel.

Finally, I will raise a personal point on water and sewerage. I have a water meter at home, and I watch my water supply, but, during the recent cold spell, some of my neighbours let their taps run so that they did not get frozen pipes.

Mr Frank Caddy (Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee):

Thank you for the opportunity to make a presentation on behalf of the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), of which I am the chairperson. David McDonald, also from IMTAC, is here with me. IMTAC is a voluntary committee that advises the Department for Regional Development and other Departments on transport matters as they affect disabled people and older people.

Public transport seems to be disproportionately hit by the proposals, and it is a key issue for older people and disabled people. A far higher proportion of older people and disabled people rely on public transport than the community in general. The proposals will affect that cohort disproportionately. Transport, particularly public transport, is a key issue for health, education and employment. Our sector, particularly disabled people, need access to good public transport. The irony of the proposals is that we are investing heavily in new train sets, and the proposals will impinge on the ability of the general public, particularly older people and disabled people, to use public transport because of fare increases.

I will ask David McDonald to give detail on IMTAC's reaction to the proposals. David is an active executive committee member of IMTAC, and he has also been heavily in The Omnibus Partnership in Bangor.

Over the last decade or so, IMTAC has worked closely with the Department and Translink to ensure that Northern Ireland has one of the best regional public transport systems for disabled and older people in the UK.

Mr David McDonald (IMTAC):

I will look at some of the detail of how the proposals will affect many categories of people referred to in section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. They will affect older people, disabled people, carers' groups, people who care for disabled and younger people, and younger people themselves. Unfortunately, the proposals impact on and exclude a large proportion of the population here in Northern Ireland. I will give you some detail of how that may happen.

It looks as though door-to-door transport will be restricted to the hours of 7.00 am to 7.00 pm, Monday to Friday. That is almost saying to disabled people and older people: you do not go out at night; you do not have any leisure time; you do not go to the tech; you do not study; you do not work in the evening; and you do not go out at weekends. That is an appalling approach to take towards any group in this society, and it needs to be stopped very quickly.

The Department also proposes to no longer support what it calls “underperforming” Shopmobility schemes. Shopmobility enables many people to get around the shops. They get transport to the shops and then a scooter or wheelchair to get them around the shops. Taking funding away from Shopmobility will restrict people even further. The Department’s support for rural transport and group travel is likely to end. The subsidy for rural public transport may be cut entirely. The rural community transport partnerships will be reduced to seven, and the subsidies for Translink will be taken away.

Many disabled people’s supporting blocks are being pulled from underneath us. The proposals will affect us dramatically. They will exclude us from society, isolate us and put us back 15 or 20 years. Northern Ireland has progressed dramatically for disabled people in the last 15 or 20 years, with public transport, door-to-door services, rural transport services and Shopmobility.

The Committee must remember that many disabled people, older people and, indeed, younger people are not allowed to use cars, not because they do not want to drive but because they are not allowed to. My father is now dead, but he was not allowed to drive in the last few years of his life because he suffered from vertigo. If it had not been for door-to-door transport, my father, who lived in Newtownards, would have been unable to get to me in Bangor every week. As a disabled person, I could not get to him, so he came to me. As he was no longer allowed to drive, my 85-year-old father would have been unable to get to me without the door-to-door scheme. That was not his choice — it was the choice of our society.

Many people — from people who are blind, people who are deaf and wheelchair users to people who are not allowed to drive for a variety of reasons such as vertigo, angina and diabetes — have no choice but to use public transport and door-to-door type services. Reducing those services will immediately limit those people’s opportunities to join in our society. The Executive

are all about including people in this society, but these proposals take away from that quite dramatically. They need to be looked at urgently to get services such as door-to-door transport back into play.

I want to suggest one or two possible solutions. I mentioned the door-to-door scheme being restricted to between the hours of 7.00 am to 7.00 pm. In a month, 155 people in Bangor and 250 people in Belfast travelled on door-to-door transport in the evenings. That does not apply right across the country, but you may want to look at where that transport is being used in the evenings and weekends and continue its evening and weekend use, rather than chopping it absolutely. Look at the situation in more specific detail.

You need to look at how bus services are provided. Easibus is essentially being chopped completely. It was taken away from Bangor and Londonderry/Derry a while ago, and we understand that it will be taken away from Belfast very shortly. Easibus is a social service. It gets people out and about cheaply, and fewer door-to-door services are required to get people out and about, if Easibus-type services are in play. The Department needs to look at alternatives and at this in detail to see how it can create services.

There is one other big factor that is a travesty in many respects. Millions of pounds have been spent in this country, and, as Frank said, there will be 20 new trains. Millions of pounds are still being spent in this country on infrastructure, accessible buildings, accessible buses, accessible door-to-door and rural transport services and accessible trains. People are not going to be able to get on them. The Department is talking about keeping concessionary fares, but those cannot be used if the services are not available. Concessionary fares are of no use, if people cannot get onto a bus or a train. That needs to be revisited, and the detail must be looked at to make sure that the most vulnerable, such as disabled people, older people and many younger people, are not left out.

Councillor Sean McPeake (Northern Ireland Local Government Association):

I am vice-president of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and a former member of the policy panel C, which was involved in examining the transfer of certain local road functions, among other things, through the review of public administration (RPA). I am supported by two officers from the technical advisors' group, Terry Mitchell and Aidan McPeake.

Due to the timescale of the consultation, we have not had as much time to develop a detailed response to the draft Budget as we would have liked. Therefore, our response is focused on key issues that could directly affect local government. The impact proposals in the draft Budget should not be considered in isolation from the other departmental cuts, not least the cuts in the Department of the Environment, for example, in which there is a proposal to cut the grants to the poorest councils by some £1.2 million.

NILGA recognises the challenges that we face in the current economic climate, and we understand that difficult decisions will have to be made. That said, I am sure that the Committee will appreciate the potential impact on the viability of the 27 towns in which it has been proposed to introduce on-street car parking charges. Many town centres are already struggling, because of the recession. Introducing additional parking charges could put people off popping into their local town and force them to use the out-of-town shopping outlets, where car parking is often free. If local businesses are going to survive the economic difficulties, they need as much help as they can get. We urge the Committee to further explore the impact of that proposal. There is also a risk that illegal parking will increase, thereby resulting in traffic congestion in our towns. The proposal coincides with the proposed reduction in traffic attendants, which could mean that access to our towns would be severely affected. That would also adversely affect the local economy.

Although the overall reduction in the roads maintenance budget will reduce, costs in the short term may not cause immediate problems, but maintenance will end up costing more in the long run. Patching and filling potholes, for example, deal with the symptom but they do not deal with the cause. Filling potholes is costly compared with a planned preventative maintenance programme.

The Department for Regional Development (DRD) admits that there will be a reduction in service delivery. Local government is concerned about the negative impact that reductions in maintenance activities will have for local government and the possible impact on ratepayers.

We can recall a number of major flooding incidents in the past few years. Reductions in the maintenance and gully-emptying budgets could further exacerbate that problem, with more localised flooding after heavy downpours. All local councils have a major co-ordinating role in planning what to do in emergency situations and in helping the community to recover from major

incidents. We oppose any actions that would increase the incidence of such emergencies.

Other hidden costs are being passed to councils. DRD is proposing to reduce the frequency of grass cutting, weed killing and litter picking. Those services are currently augmented by the local councils. A reduction in the number of grass cuts paid for by DRD is likely to increase the burden that will fall to councils to fund the extra grass cuts, weed killing and litter picking, etc, that are required to maintain the appearance of a district or borough. I am sure that the Committee will agree that that service is important on a number of fronts, including safety, amenity and tourism. Local government could incur significant costs if it were to be expected to enhance those services.

We welcome the proposal to secure a better deal for the supply of street lighting energy. We are, however, very concerned to note that one of the contingencies, if that deal is not secured, is the suggested dimming or removal of street lights or the shortening of burning hours. There is a paradox in that proposal. A key objective of the Department is to contribute to the health and well-being of the community. Experience elsewhere shows that better street lighting helps to improve road safety as well as reducing crime and the fear of crime. It also helps to create happier and healthier communities and promotes social inclusion and more sustainable patterns of transport by encouraging people to walk or cycle. Local government asks that further research be done on that action on street lighting before taking it any further.

Local government is also concerned about the impact that the budget reductions will have on the car parking function, which, it is proposed, would be transferred to local government under the review of public administration (RPA) at some point in the future. However, we understand that the budget allocated to car park maintenance is minimal. Although no date for the transfer of that function has been agreed by the Executive, it must be fully funded and fit for purpose when the transfer to local councils is completed under RPA. The Department must not transfer an underfunded service to an already struggling suite of councils.

We note that the Department has not included any reference to resources for the provision of footpath salting. Members will be aware of the ongoing discussions between local government and the Department. Councils were involved, to some extent, in salting footpaths during the recent severe weather, irrespective of whether the formal agreement was in place. However, most councils continue to have concerns about the agreement, including issues about resources,

liabilities and indemnity. I know that further meetings are due to take place on 9 February to discuss that issue.

The sector considers that the current situation does not offer a permanent solution. We are examining a number of options that may provide a more acceptable long-term solution. We will discuss those options when we next meet the Department. Whatever solution is agreed, the local government sector considers that for the service to be carried out effectively, the Department must allocate adequate resources for the purchase of grit and necessary associated equipment. There does not seem to be any provision in the budget for that.

Finally, NILGA is concerned that the reduced subsidy for the Rathlin to Ballycastle ferry will increase the cost for islanders and will have a negative effect on tourism in the region.

Mr Dermot McCloskey (Disability Action):

I am the finance director of Disability Action. Thank you for the opportunity to make a few brief points, largely to reiterate what has been said by Frank Caddy and David McDonald. Specifically, I want to draw attention to the impact of the Transport Programme for People with Disabilities (TPPD) on our organisation. We are concerned about the impact of the removal of one service group on the user group, although we welcome the fact that there will be a transition period until 1 April 2011, which will give us an opportunity to make alternative provision.

Secondly, I want to reaffirm what David said. There is a concern about the core hours of the new door-to-door service that is out for tender. Our experience in the Belfast area is that provision in core hours, which are 9.00 am to 5.00 pm Monday to Friday, rather than seven days a week from 7.30 am to 11.30 am, covers 64% of our users. That means that, effectively, there is a 34% cut. I just want to make the point that, although the document says that that represents a retention, there is an implicit cut in current provision. There is a social cost to that sort of cut.

Thirdly, with my financial hat on, I should say that the document is very detailed when it comes to absolute savings. Perhaps I did not see them, but it would have been useful to have included the percentage savings in order to give some idea of financial proportionality and to determine which areas are getting more or less on average.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association):

Good morning. I am the Community Transport Association's (CTA) director for Northern Ireland. Thank you for allowing us to come along. I represent not only the CTA but the community transport sector across all of Northern Ireland. CTA is the regional infrastructure body that provides support, advice and help to community transport organisations delivering transport solutions for older people and vulnerable adults. The community transport operators are the people who deliver the on-the-ground services, who have volunteers and who spend many hours in the community ensuring that transport solutions are available.

Specifically, the reduction in the rural transport fund and the transport programme for people with disabilities will impact on the community in a substantial term; not next year, but by 2015, we will see a substantial difference to community life in Northern Ireland. It will have increased rural isolation, exclusion and difficulty of access for the most vulnerable. The annual rural transport fund budget that is available to the rural community transport partnership network, which is not for all of community transport but a small portion of it, currently stands at £2.7 million and is earmarked in the Department's budget at that amount; that is the baseline. That has been the same budget for the past four years. The proposal is to reduce that budget by £1.7 million over the four-year period, and that will realise a 16% reduction overall.

Talking about money and figures makes no difference; what does it mean to real people on the ground? It means that between 25% and 30% of older people and people with disabilities in rural areas will not be able to access transport solutions, that they will sit at home alone, that their health and well-being will decrease and that they will be left in the situation of exclusion and isolation that existed before the rural transport fund was established in 1997.

The community transport sector will struggle to stand still over the next number of years. By that, I mean that we will struggle even to exist in the way that we survive at the moment. There is no investment in capital and no opportunity to replace vehicles. The Community Transport Association has just completed a report on the state of the sector, and we found that over 50% of vehicles are three years old or older. That means that the community minibuses will be no use to anyone by the end of this Budget term, with no hope of replacing them, so we are looking at the decimation of the community transport sector.

That all must be considered in light of the reduction to Translink's budget. The impact of its

reduction in rural routes because of that budget will pressure community transport further to deliver the alternative access solution, a solution that is greatly reduced due to the lack of appropriate government support. Therefore, not only are there people who cannot access Translink routes, but those people have no alternative to turn to.

CTA appreciates that the budget that is available for transport is revenue-based and that the diversion of funds from capital projects is not permitted. We know that, and we know that this Budget and the cuts that we are facing are a real problem across all Departments. Although community transport will try to perform within the budget boundaries that are provided today, we encourage the Committee, the Minister and the whole Department to reconsider the level of reduction to public transport and, where possible, ensure that transport receives priority if any moneys become available during the Budget term.

Where there are opportunities, budgets should be directed to invest in public transport to ensure that the Executive's priority can be met. The Executive's priority in this Budget is to stimulate the economy, tackle disadvantage, protect the most vulnerable and protect front line services. Is that being achieved? The progress that has been achieved to date to realise accessible transport provision will be decimated and reduced and, therefore, the impact will be most felt by people with disabilities and, in particular, rural people with limited mobility and those with sensory or learning disabilities.

There is no incentive to use public transport. Therefore little is being introduced to ensure sustainability or to ensure that environmental impact is being managed and controlled in this Budget, as the Chairperson mentioned earlier. However, CTA is part of the solution. We are here to offer help and support to DRD and to the community transport organisations to minimise the impact of the required cuts. What we in the community and voluntary sector do is help to generate efficiencies through the development of further sharing of resources, and that is something that I want to ask the Committee about.

CTA supports local communities to ensure that, where there are transport solutions, the community is aware and informed of them so that people have the choice to use public transport. Therefore, CTA urges the Committee to do all that it can to protect and value the community transport sector as it aims to deliver services to vulnerable older people and people with disabilities.

We are also quite disappointed that none of the Departments' budgets have considered cross-departmental discussion. We know already that, in education, special educational needs transport and, in health, non-emergency transport services are being reduced. Where are they turning to? I have had hundreds of phone calls, and social workers have contacted me to ask whether the Community Transport Association delivers those services. We do not; we cannot do it on nothing. The rising fuel costs are killing us. Every efficiency that we have made is being eroded by those costs. We are trying our best, but we are doing so in isolation. We need you to consider looking at the draft Budget to see where costs can be shared and savings made across Departments.

Mrs Ann Collins (Shopmobility Northern Ireland):

I am the chairperson of Shopmobility Northern Ireland. Thank you for giving us, as stakeholders, the opportunity to comment on DRD's saving measures. We have circulated the details to all schemes, and the overall opinion is that the planned reduction in support for the transport programme for people with disabilities, which includes Shopmobility's budget, will be devastating to our members. Those measures will impact heavily on people with disabilities, older people, people with mobility difficulties and their families, and that will result in fewer services for the most vulnerable people in our community.

Shopmobility Northern Ireland is an umbrella organisation that was set up to provide governance, support and training schemes around the region. We have developed a range of standards, policies and procedures to ensure that all members receive first-class service. We have 16 schemes operating through the region, not all of which are supported by DRD. The schemes were formed by people with mobility difficulties in answer to the problems that they faced trying to get around our town and city centres.

Our scheme provides daily support to people in the community by providing motorised scooters and wheelchairs to enable people with mobility difficulties to access our cities, towns and outdoor venues, as well as providing other vital face-to-face services.

We appreciate that time is short, and we have put together a pack for each member of the Committee to draw to your attention the facts, figures and personal accounts from schemes in Northern Ireland and the work that we do. I hope that you will look at it.

Last year, with a fleet of 201 scooters and 253 wheelchairs, the 16 schemes in Northern Ireland enabled 15,589 members with mobility difficulties to make over 30,000 accessible trips. We appreciate that we live in times of economic constraints, and we have felt the cuts to our budget from 75% assistance to 50%. We have also cut our annual events.

Current provision from DRD is 50% of our revenue costs. On average, that is approximately £17,500 a scheme. Schemes have to find the remaining 50% of revenue funding and fund all of their equipment. The schemes are running on shoestring resources. Without the commitment and dedication of our 120 volunteers and 73 volunteer members of the board of trustees we would not be able to function.

There are proposals to pedestrianise towns and city centres over the next few years. That will further decrease the freedom of people with disabilities. Shopmobility, although not the solution, was set up as a means to ease the problems. With that in mind, we will work with DRD and DSD in finding a solution to the problems.

People with mobility difficulties are, generally, the most vulnerable in society. Most of them are on benefits, and many of them have low self-esteem and are dependent on others for help. Our services enable people with mobility difficulties to have the the freedom to carry out their own business. Consider things that you, perhaps, take for granted, such as going to the bank, purchasing a birthday card for a friend, window shopping or going for a cup of tea with a friend. The 30,000 trips that are made by our members put money into our region's economy. They empower people and improve their mental and physical health, general well-being and social inclusion.

The proposed saving of £2.3 million over the next three years from the transport programme for people with disabilities will have a dire domino effect on our Shopmobility community. For some individuals, the proposed savings will mean the loss of two or three vital accessible services. Can you imagine what it is like to look out of the window, to see the world go by and not be able to be part of that world because you cannot get around? David and I can. We cannot walk. To deprive citizens like us of the means that, until now, we have been able to enjoy and use to gain independent access to our towns and cities would be a massive step back. Please do not do it.

Mr Tom Wilson (Freight Transport Association):

Thank you very much for this opportunity. We have heard some very good presentations this morning, all of which are very worthy and commendable. I have to remind everyone that freight is a vital requirement for our everyday needs. We have tea, coffee, apples and oranges and papers at this meeting. Without freight, you would not have those or be enjoying normal daily life.

The Freight Transport Association (FTA) is a multi-modal organisation with 14,000 members in the UK and Ireland who operate on road, air, rail and sea. It is one of the largest trade associations in the UK and Ireland. There is a perception that freight is a nuisance. People think that it is ugly, and they do not like it. You may ask why we do not deliver goods at night. The reality is that we cannot make deliveries at night because shops are closed. In truth, we would love to make deliveries at night. Our members work 24/7. It would be more economical and efficient if we could make deliveries at night.

The public often have a choice between bus, rail and car share, but goods vehicles do not have that choice. Furthermore, we must have a good infrastructure given today's high fuel costs. A good infrastructure is a key requirement for us to meet our goals. Most importantly for Northern Ireland, it is key to encouraging inward investment. Belfast handles 60% of seaborne trade and brings in raw materials and consumer goods. Belfast is a gateway for the island of Ireland, and it is vital that it operates efficiently. We need to prioritise in times of budget cuts. When times are tight and money is short, we need to put our money towards our key need.

Someone talked earlier about being healthy and cycling. I liken clogged roads to someone being diagnosed with blocked arteries. We need an urgent fix. We need to free up the clogged roads that we see every day. We will not build new roads necessarily. However, there are roads that we feel must be dealt with as a priority, the first of which is the York Street junction and the Westlink flyover. It is right beside the harbour and the docks. The benefits of that project are to attract inward investment, improve journey times, reduce congestion and improve air quality. I will refer to that further in a minute.

At a meeting yesterday, I was told that 65% to 70% of the traffic at the back of the City Hall does not end its journey in Belfast city centre. It is using that as a convenient route. You may know that the new Belfast on the Move project, which involves rapid transit, will mean fewer

lanes. There are four lanes there currently. I understand that that will be reduced to two, which will push a considerable amount of traffic onto the Westlink. At present, 81,000 vehicles use the Westlink every day over a seven-day period. The number is much larger over a five-day period. The topography map of air quality in Belfast shows that, although the maximum permitted number of micrograms in the air is 40, it is 43 µg in the Black's Road area, 44 µg at Stockman's Lane and 49 µg at Devonshire Street off the Grosvenor Road. There are targets to reduce those emissions by 2015 and 2020. Those inner-city measures, as I said, will force traffic onto the Westlink. We believe that priority one, which is the York Street/Westlink flyover, will help traffic to move more freely and will improve air quality.

No one else has mentioned the junction at Dee Street. There is poor air quality in the Short Strand area, and there are big factories such as the Bombardier plant, oil terminals and the IT and commercial presence in the Titanic Quarter. A huge number of people go in and out of there every day, including people who go to events in the Odyssey. That is a very poor, badly-blocked artery. It does not require a new road; it just needs some tweaking of roundabouts to free it up.

Looking to the north, the M22/A6 was mentioned earlier. There are 20,100 vehicles heading to Derry every day. That is heavy traffic. We have heard about the A8 project, which we welcome. That is progressing; it is used by nearly 19,000 vehicles a day and is another key route. The M1/A1 at Sprucefield has not been mentioned; there are 42,000 vehicles a day coming into Belfast. Let us make that a dual carriageway with a free run from Dublin to Belfast. It is badly blocked at Sprucefield and it needs to be sorted.

We applaud the A5 project. It will be a welcome addition, but only when we can justify the expenditure. Only 13,000 vehicles a day use that route. We have little money to spend at the moment. Let us leave that project until we can justify improving those hot spots. Deliveries must be cost efficient. Margins are low today and times are hard, and the peripherality of Northern Ireland means that we need to work smarter. We need to get better use from our existing assets.

I will recap the figures: 81,000 vehicles on the Westlink; 40,000 at Hillsborough and Sprucefield; 20,000 between Toome and Derry; and 13,000 on the A5. Blocked arteries need urgent attention. We must maintain our assets. We must not just fill potholes; we do not want any more claims from cyclists or motorists against the DOE for poor roads infrastructure.

The Chairperson:

I listened to your presentation. However, the Committee is trying to think about taking cars off the road, and the more lanes we build, the more cars we will get. This society is dominated by lorries and cars, and no one thinks outside the box. If we get congestion on the road, the first thing that we do is build another lane, and then another. We should be trying to take cars off the road, but there is nothing in this draft Budget that leads us to believe that there is any incentive to do that. All we do is talk about building bigger roads to deal with more and more traffic. We are in a car-dominated society.

Mr Ciaran Rogan (Translink):

I am here with my colleague David Brown. I suppose that Translink is unlike other organisations here today, in that it is a DRD delivery arm, as much as anything. The Minister and his officials have outlined the difficult and challenging decisions that are posed by the reduced funding in the draft Budget. Therefore, I will not repeat what has been said, except to note that when DRD officials made a presentation to the Committee two weeks ago, they made the point that the impact on public transport was “particularly difficult”. That puts the situation in context.

On top of the funding reductions, Translink is facing some very substantial cost increases. Everyone will be aware of the increase in fuel costs. Fuel duty and pension costs are increasing, and we are losing things like rates relief. It is not just the funding issue that has an impact on Translink but a fairly substantial increase in costs.

We are working hard with DRD. Internally, we have set up a fairly substantial team to look at how to respond to the draft Budget. In seeking to put together a specific response on the likes of services and fares, for instance, we are working to a few basic principles. First, we want to minimise any negative impact on services and jobs. The presentation to the Committee two weeks ago was specific in saying that there would be a reduction in services, increases in fares and potential redundancies. Those are negative impacts, and we are looking to minimise those as far as possible.

We also have regard for protecting the needs and travel requirements of those who are vulnerable — elderly people and people with disabilities — and individuals and communities in the rural areas. We recognise that, as David and Frank said, there is a greater reliance on public transport among the older community and those with disabilities. We are cognisant of the fact

that we have a basic objective with regard to social impact as well as sustainability. It is not simply a question of slashing the services that are used least.

We are also conscious that Northern Ireland, when compared with other areas of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, has a much greater geographical spread and scope of public transport network. We are conscious of that, and we are trying to protect geographical coverage as much as possible.

Connectivity and integration are also important. As we make changes, and even if we are reducing services, we have to ensure that users will have access and connection to the main network. We will have to take a look at where we use bus and rail services to see whether there is duplication or whether anything can be taken out. We will also examine whether any service can be best met by one mode or another, rather than doubling up. In doing so, however, we must ensure that people will always have the opportunity to connect to the main network and arteries as far as possible. We are conscious that we still have an obligation and a basic vision to provide a better and sustainable choice over car travel for as many people as possible.

We are aware that the Budget is still at consultation stage. We are going out of our way to talk to our stakeholders. I am here this morning, and colleagues are meeting trade unions this morning. We are talking to customers, community groups and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland, for instance. We are encouraging everyone to have their say. Until the Budget is finalised, it is difficult for us to be concrete about the impact on services, but we are duty-bound to examine the poorest performing parts of our network. Ultimately, that goes down to such issues as passenger numbers and questions over whether there are unnecessary services or services that could be covered through a combination of several services. We will also look at parts of our network where we can most appropriately improve and enhance services in order to bring in more passengers. I am conscious that we are in the process of bringing in 20 new trains as part of a significant capital investment. That will increase our rail capacity substantially, and we are duty-bound, from a value-for-money point of view, to optimise that as far as possible and to get as many people onto the railways as possible.

We are looking at other commercial opportunities to bring in as much non-fare-box revenue as possible. We are looking at our entire estate and commercial opportunities to bring in as much other revenue as possible. There is a fairly substantial reduction in the funding available to us

and a fairly substantial increase in our costs, and we have to make changes. Over the past weeks, we have gone out of our way to set up a team, which is carrying out a complete root-and-branch review of all aspects of our network. Therefore we are not treating this as a salami-slicing exercise, as is often referred to; we are taking a fundamental review of our total network to see how we can better provide for as many people as possible.

Our vision is about integrated travel solutions that are attractive, sustainable and good value. Sustainability is key. As you rightly say, the more people we can get off the roads onto public transport, the further congestion will reduce, and the better it will be for the likes of the Freight Transport Association and for those who, unfortunately, have to use a car to get to where they want to be.

I want to pick up on two points that were raised. There was a question on why we need a train maintenance facility, which we intend to build at Adelaide freight depot. It is a second facility, and it is a reflection of the fact that, as we bring in new trains, we will see a fairly substantial increase in the capacity of the railways. We are duty-bound to optimise that capacity, as and when it comes, and to maintain the trains and get them out every morning. Therefore we need to increase our maintenance capacity.

Secondly, there was a very interesting reference to the joint work that we can possibly do on a cross-departmental basis with, for example, the Education and Health Departments, in order to deliver a better transport solution. My colleague David Brown has been working on that, so he will fill you in.

Mr David Brown (Translink):

I am a relative newcomer to the world of public transport, having arrived less than two years ago, but I was not here for very long when I began to be amazed by the amount of money that the Health and Education Departments spend on moving people around. I know that some of that — for disabled folk and people who are particularly unwell — has to be specialist transport, but quite a lot of it is general transport. I have therefore prepared a paper, which I have recently sent to DRD, highlighting a number of areas where I think Northern Ireland plc could have very obvious collaboration between health, education and public transport.

For example — I will keep this brief — we could consider collaborative purchasing: we all

buy fuel, we all need tyres and we all buy consumables. Are we all getting the best deal? Let us go back to the drawing board on that. Collaborative stabling: we have got lots of depots, and the folks in health and education have depots in the same towns and villages. Could we not try to share? Collaborative servicing: could we not look at some way of saving costs by sharing the servicing costs? Then there is the whole idea of collaborative integration, for example, there are people living in Derry who need to come to Belfast for specialist healthcare. Is there some way in which those people, instead of perhaps paying taxis, could be decanted on to some of our services? We could reserve seats for those people and share the costs between us. It is still early days, but another witness made a valid point. I just want to let you know that Translink, in conjunction with DRD, is looking at the area of collaboration.

Mr Scott Kennerley (Consumer Council for Northern Ireland):

Thank you for the opportunity to speak. We share the Committee's concern that there is nothing in the draft Budget to encourage the modal shift from the car to public transport. The draft Budget also goes against what consumers have told us they want from public transport, which is, essentially, value for money, more frequent services and a wider network. Just last week, we heard young people, in this very room, telling us exactly what they wanted from public transport, and telling us that they would love to use public transport more to access education and recreational services, but it is simply not available to them.

I disagree with the point made earlier that consumers can choose the car, the bus or the train, because in many areas of Northern Ireland there simply is no choice; there is no bus or train, and they can only use a car if they have access to one.

Other organisations have already referred to the fact that the consultation document states:

“The Executive's priority in this Budget is to stimulate the economy, tackle disadvantage, protect the most vulnerable in our society and protect front line services.”

Again, the draft Budget appears to contradict that statement. We have ambitious plans and strategies in place to support public transport, cycling and walking, but when it comes to the delivery of those ambitions, they are often lost.

The regional transportation strategy in 2002 suggested a spending ratio for roads — including walking and cycling — to public transport of 65:35. Our understanding is that that has never been achieved, but we know that the Committee has worked hard over recent years to promote the need for more integrated, sustainable public transport. There is a very strong sustainable

message throughout the regional development strategy that is out for consultation at the moment. The draft Budget sets the tone for what is going to be achieved over the next four years, and demonstrates that it will be very difficult to achieve the sustainability message and the modal shift from the use of the car to the use of public transport.

A point was made about the Belfast on the Move proposals. The Department's budget demonstrates that we are still no closer to the on-the-ground delivery of rapid transit, and, if we do not have investment in the development and delivery of integrated public transport services, people will not be able to get to the hub routes to use the rapid transit services and the Belfast on the Move enabling measures.

Our flagship service, the Enterprise, is also likely to be affected. There will be speed restrictions on the line, so, again, there is more encouragement to move away from public transport and into the car, which goes against what many of our ambitious plans state that we are trying to do.

Finally, the budget states that Translink will be required to:

“look at further ways of reducing costs and ways of generating more income, including from fares.”

It goes on to state:

“it will be necessary to reduce services”

and:

“The service cuts could lead to a number of job losses.”

The Consumer Council believes that the onus should be on Translink to demonstrate how it will operate with a reduced budget and that it should not be for the Department to make suggestions of potential fare increases, service reductions and job losses.

Mr Aodhan O'Donnell (Consumer Council for Northern Ireland):

I will talk about the other end of the budget, water and sewerage services. Notwithstanding what happened over the Christmas period, the research that the Consumer Council has undertaken over the past few years shows that consumer confidence in Northern Ireland's water and sewerage services is already dropping. That confidence was in a bad state even before what happened over the Christmas period.

The stakeholders that are involved, NI Water, the Department and the Consumer Council, went through the first price control process, PC10, which set out the operational and capital

expenditure with which Northern Ireland Water was going to be provided to meet the targets that were set by the Utility Regulator. The draft Budget sets out that there will be a significant reduction to that. There will be only three quarters of the planned projected investment in the final two years of PC10. The Consumer Council and other consumers are concerned about the impact that that will have on the investment that is necessary not only to maintain the infrastructure but to enhance it to ensure that confidence is rebuilt. PC10, which has been through an agreed process, was painstaking and difficult to agree in the final stages and is being undermined by not having the budget available. If the budget that is being prescribed were to go forward, a period of consultation with those stakeholders would be needed to ensure that the infrastructure and the developments that are needed are planned for.

The Chairperson:

We will have a five-minute break, followed by a plenary session in which the Committee will interface with some of the contributors.

The Chairperson:

I will give Committee members a chance to ask for clarification on some issues.

Mr McDevitt:

I thank everyone for coming this morning. It was very useful. I have a couple of questions. Nigel Smyth and Gordon Best made similar points about the need to invest in greater sustainability, and one of them could answer the question. Do you think that, as it stands today, the budget from the Department can deliver a lower carbon footprint in the transport sector in this region?

Mr Best:

It is very important that the debate does not turn into a battle between investment in roads and investment in public transport. I agree with the Chairman; there has to be a balance. To be totally frank, the Chairman mentioned social inclusion but certain aspects of the draft Budget have no balance whatsoever. I take David McDonald's point. When I read the Budget and saw the removal of the door-to-door service, I thought to myself that it did not make sense, because there are bound to be areas where it is working and areas where it is not. It is fully understandable that the Department would remove services that are not being used. However, to remove services that are obviously being used to provide a service to those who are less fortunate than able-bodied people is totally wrong.

With regard to economic sustainability, every report drawn up in Northern Ireland, including the Snaith report, has highlighted the lack of investment, particularly in roads maintenance. Personally, I have issues with the A5 project. Tom Wilson's figures on traffic volumes are very interesting. We highlighted in our paper for the Committee where other money was spent.

There is a big world outside Belfast. Our manufacturing hub of mid-Ulster, for example, around Cookstown, Magherafelt and Dungannon, is gridlocked. We have been calling for bypasses around those towns for years. Obviously, due to our history, a lot more money had to be spent on security. However, the Department has drawn up a strategic roads programme. That programme needs to be completed. At that stage, we then need to increase spending, year on year, on public transport in rural areas.

There is an urgent need for public transport spending in and around Belfast, Derry and our larger towns to get people out of their cars and to free up the Westlink. We always made the point that, when they were designing the Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) agreement for the Westlink/M2 project, the missing part of the project was the Westlink flyover.

With regard to environmental sustainability, on numerous occasions, we made points to Roads Service that we should be looking at lower-carbon products. This is the only region in the UK that does not use warm asphalt, which has a low environmental impact. Fortunately, we are now seeing more usage of stone mastic asphalt, which is a low-noise, low-environmental-impact product. The maximum sustainability benefit will not be achieved because of the budget constraints.

We need to prioritise the economy, because the only way that we will offer better services for those less fortunate than ourselves is by increasing the tax take from the economy and growing the private sector.

Mr Smyth:

Sustainability covers economic, social and environmental factors. The CBI strongly welcomed the draft Budget's proposed major investment in the rapid transit system. That will help the modal shifts. We have to focus public transport on the high-volume routes. Investment in the Metro buses in recent years has been a success, and we need to build connectivity on the back of

that.

You could have a debate on some of the major road investment projects. From a congestion perspective, Tom Wilson was absolutely right: the York Gate junction has the highest level of congestion. On the other hand, the CBI would probably prioritise the M22 to Castledawson. It is a high-volume strategic route, but that would probably come out top overall from the perspective of regional development in the north-west. However, there is a balance in all those things and you have to take all those measures into account.

Clearly, we would like to have more. We have a lot of sympathy. Services are being cut, particularly some community services and services for the disabled. The surprising thing in the Budget is that there are apparently no cuts in the Department's administration. That is in contrast to several other Departments, where there is a much more radical effort — although not as radical as we in the CBI would like — to cut administration costs rather than some frontline services. That is a big disappointment.

Mr McDevitt:

I largely agree with a lot of the Sustrans and IMTAC contributions, so I will not ask a question about that. However, I would like to ask the CTA a question. You spoke about the ageing fleet. What sort of capital investment would you need in this Budget to ensure that the fleet, even as it is today, will still be there at the end of this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period? In other words, just to stand still at the current level of service.

Ms K Armstrong:

The community transport sector has been trying to rectify that. Rather than asking government for a huge capital investment to replace buses, we need the structure in place for the subsidy to allow us to develop our own reserves. For instance, if the group hire budget is being cut in its entirety, we will continue to deliver group hire transport. Group hire transport is for senior citizens' groups, gateway clubs and small groups in communities that have loads of Peace fund moneys pumped into community halls. Community transport allows people to get to those facilities. We generate income from that, and we save that as reserves for bus replacement.

We are simply saying that the reduction in the budget means that, as businesses in the community and voluntary sector, we cannot afford to hold appropriate reserves. We have to

invest our reserves back into front line services. The reduction in our budget means that a group that has a three-year-old vehicle will have a vehicle that is over seven years old by the end of the Budget period, and the vehicle will be of no use to anyone because it will have been driven into the ground. We are simply saying that we are very careful with the funding that we receive. We know that we have to be sustainable in our business practices, but the cuts are cutting us back.

As Ann Collins mentioned earlier, organisations are working to a bare minimum, and appropriate business operating standards are not even being put forward for us. We are trying to be as self-sufficient as possible to replace those vehicles. For instance, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC) specification is for low-floor vehicles, and a minibus-sized vehicle of that specification costs in excess of £70,000. A 16-seater accessible minibus could cost anywhere in the region of £45,000. My difficulty is that, not having the support to realise the subsidy and generate reserves to cover depreciation on vehicles raises the question of whether people will still invest in accessible vehicles. If a business can choose to do that or to turn out a 10-seater small vehicle that is not accessible for less than £30,000, what will it do? Where we have difficulties is in ensuring that the progression on accessible transport, which David McDonald mentioned, is maintained. It can be maintained only when the opportunity is there for support.

Mr McDevitt:

My last question is to Ciaran Rogan from Translink. Are you satisfied that you will have enough resource in your budget to be able to run the new trains at an optimum level?

Mr Rogan:

The new trains will start to arrive in around eight weeks, and we will start to run them in the service towards the end of the year. I cannot give that confirmation at the moment, because we are working through what exactly the budgets are and exactly what the service patterns will be when we get the trains into service. It is certainly one of our priorities. If we are increasing train capacity by 25% to 30%, it is in everyone's interests that we optimise the new trains and carry as many people as possible. We refer to public transport, while in the United States, they refer to mass transit. That is probably a better phrase, and the ideal for trains is mass transit. The more people that we can get travelling from major urban centres on the trains the better that will be for our business, and the better it will be for reducing congestion and increasing sustainability. However, we are still at the stage of consultation and draft Budgets, so we do not know what the

final patterns will be, but it is a priority that we optimise those.

Mr I McCrea:

My question is for Shop Mobility. At last week's Committee, I raised with departmental officials the fact that the spending proposals state that schemes that are "underperforming", as the proposals put it, will have their budgets cut or removed. In your presentation, you said that, of the 16 schemes, not all receive DRD funding. Obviously, DRD cannot cut funding if it is not providing funding in the first place. A reduction or removal of funding on the schemes that are underperforming will have a detrimental impact, but, apart from fund-raising, how do you get the other part of the funding? Do you work with local councils? Has there been any discussion with those local councils? Are they considering reducing their funding due to similar circumstances? Is a wider range of funding, as well as that of DRD, being reduced? Obviously, that could also impact on the scheme as a whole.

Mrs Collins:

At the minute, the Belfast scheme gets support from Belfast City Council. An awful lot of the schemes do not get funding from their local council. Do not forget that the economic situation applies right across the board. I also receive funding from the Health Department, and I have been asked to make cuts to that. Those cuts may be to front line services. We are operating on a shoestring.

You asked where I get the other funding from. To use the very old term, I go as the cripple, cap in hand. I request funding from funding trusts, for example. The amounts are very small. For example, we hope to get £1,000 from the Black Santa. We try literally every aspect of fundraising. We go out onto the street with collecting tins, and we ask our users to do bag-packing at Christmas. Our organisation tries absolutely everything to bring in funding. After all, we have to bring in 50% of the funding. We have to find the funding for all our equipment. We are not supported with capital funding. It can be a case of going to funders or asking people to collect for us. Sometimes scooters that were owned by people who have passed over are donated to the scheme.

Ms Lo:

I thank David McDonald for his description of the door-to-door scheme. At the Budget briefing, the officials said that it was prudent to cut that because of its lack of evening and weekend use.

However, your figures indicate that it is used. You made a good point that the Department needs to look at the different areas where evening usage is high, rather than cutting the whole scheme down in one swoop. That is very useful, David. Ann mentioned that Shopmobility, too, will be cut because of a lack of use. What is your argument against that?

Mrs Collins:

The argument is that the under-used schemes are the newer schemes. The Department has not given those schemes time to be used. People with disabilities are a queer lot. It takes us a long time to get used to things. We have to be persuaded that we need a scooter or even a wheelchair. I run the Belfast scheme. I find that an awful lot of disabled people will not shop in their own locality; they will go somewhere where they are not known. There is perhaps a little bit of a stigma that we have to break down, and that takes a wee bit of time. However, once you get a person on a scooter, by gum, it is an effort to get them back off it. When people use a scooter for the very first time, they say that they will only be 10 minutes. Three hours later, we are out looking for them because they have forgotten the time. If someone who has spent their whole life travelling at a snail's pace is given the equipment to travel at what feels like an even slightly fast pace, they will not give that up.

Ms Lo:

And you went to the ladies' much faster than I did. *[Laughter.]*

I have one more question for Translink. A few people mentioned the issue of departmental joint working with education and health. Do not forget that the Department for Employment and Learning is also concerned with young people. Has there been any discussion about different Departments networking and putting money together for young people or people who need to travel to hospital together?

Mr D Brown:

It is still very early days. People were waiting to see the impact of the budgets and trying to interpret what that would be. Now is the time, when people realise the budget deficit that people are facing, to say that there must be more joined-up thinking and communication. It is still very early days, but there now appears to be at least an economic will. What we now need is the political will behind that to make it happen.

Miss McIlveen:

I thank everyone for coming; it has been a really useful exercise. It is interesting, David, that you say that it is early days, because this is not new to us or to our ears. We received good presentations in advance from the Community Transport Association about the difficulties that it has observed. It is a bit worrying that we are at the stage when it has become critical, and that you now have to look at that issue though it should have been on the radar much earlier. I want to ask Ms Armstrong what deliberations or discussions has CTA had over the past 18 months, and how were they received?

Ms K Armstrong:

Eighteen months? It has been going on for four or five years. We spoke to the Department of Education. They told us that CTA is DRD's baby and they will not talk to us because transport falls to DRD. We spoke to the Health Department. Health does not have a statutory requirement to provide transport to anybody other than through the emergency transport services, so we were told to go back to DRD.

We spoke to the DSD on Tuesday. They said that, as a regional infrastructure body, CTA may have funding to deliver services specifically for the groups funded by DRD. However, because it is a single-issue organisation on transport and access, it is not in their remit. Over the years, we have faced closed doors from every Department, other than DRD, because of the transport issue. It becomes very difficult when we try to link things together because, obviously, DRD pays for public transport, access and trying to reduce rural isolation and social exclusion. However, DRD is perceived as covering all transport, and it has been very difficult to break down the barriers with other Departments.

Now that we see special educational needs and non-emergency patient transport services from the Health Department being reduced, they are coming to community transport and saying: "Will you? Can you?" However, we have to say to them: "Actually, we cannot because your commissioning structures exclude that type of work." We work on a non-profit basis. We are not commercial, and all contracts and tenders coming through are based on a commercial element. That excludes us because of the way we are licensed.

A review is happening with the Department of the Environment (DOE) on that issue, but, if we go down the commercial route, we will lose over 3,000 volunteers and that community

commitment. So, we have beating on doors non-stop for the past number of years to try to break down those barriers, to say: “Do you see that bus that is going up the road and the one that is following it and the one that is following that? Well, one bus could do all those trips.” When the yellow school bus goes to the school and leaves off little Jonny and his 12 classmates, what happens to that bus when it comes back? Could it bring Mrs Jones to the local GP or health centre? I support Translink’s comments on that joined-up thinking, but it really does need the political will.

Economically, we cannot afford to sit in silos any more. I am heartened that, at long last, the lone voice in the wilderness may be being heard. We are finding it very difficult, especially in the community and voluntary sector, to take the pressure that is being put on us to deliver with no support or funding.

Miss McIlveen:

Going back to Translink, I welcome your comments on this matter. They are very much what the Committee is looking for to drive that forward. Have you had discussions with the Department of Health and Department of Education? I know that you are in discussion with the Department of Education about the contract, but what more can be done about the issues that you mentioned earlier?

Mr D Brown:

I took a bit of a flier about nine months ago and went to see the permanent secretaries in the Department of Health and the Department of Education. I was greeted reasonably well and told that we were heading towards more austere economic times and needed to look at that issue. I then cut in at director/operational level at a couple of health trusts and found a general willingness. However, I feel that I am only touching the surface. For joint working to happen in the way that it ought to, it should be done in a co-ordinated manner. We met on at least one occasion recently with the DRD. I was asked to prepare a paper, which went in only last week.

It is a bit like eating an elephant: you have to do it in bite-sized chunks. So, I have suggested some early, easy wins that would be relatively painless for each organisation. Let us not be foolish about this, each organisation will want to maintain its own integrity and will be loath to let anyone get into the heartbeat of that. At the same time, however, things can be done at the peripheries that ought to be win-win situations. That is what I am trying to create. I made some

practical suggestions and the matter is moving forward.

Miss McIlveen:

Just to play devil's advocate, did you speak to the CTA about those proposals?

Mr D Brown:

We had a chat just five minutes ago, and we are going to have a meeting.

Miss McIlveen:

Brilliant. Thank you very much.

Mr B Armstrong:

Thank you all for your presentations. I think more in terms of the economy and how it can be improved here in Northern Ireland. We have to think of transport, Translink and moving vehicles about. Somebody said earlier that not many vehicles will use the new A5. Maybe that road should be postponed, and we should go ahead with the dualling of the A6 and Cookstown bypass.

The Chairperson:

Is this a party political broadcast? *[Laughter.]*

Mr B Armstrong:

It is all about the economy, and we are here to improve the economy. If the A6 and the bypasses at the key towns of Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon go ahead, they will lift the economy of our country and alleviate the transport situation for our freight and Translink. Representatives of Translink, the Confederation of British Industry, the Quarry Products Association or the Federation of Small Businesses may wish to comment on that. So, I propose that we postpone the A5 and go ahead with other roads.

Mr Tom Wilson:

The A5 works would be commendable in times when we could afford a luxury. This is a serious business decision. We have a limited amount of money and must look at the routes that are heavily used.

We must also be realistic. There is virtually no warehousing in Northern Ireland. Everything

that we get into our stores arrives just in time. Much of it is loaded in Manchester, Birmingham or at a hub in the UK. It is then taken across the sea and is on the shelves between 11am and 3pm the following day. We have to have free movement along routes for that to work successfully.

The numbers stack up: the figure of 80,000 vehicles on the Westlink is mind blowing. Compare that with the traffic on the A5. It would be nice to be able to drive from Dublin to Donegal in a short time. However, of the 13,000 vehicles a day on that road, the volume of freight is very small at about 4% or 5%. We can compare that with the volume on the A6 from Randalstown to Castledawson, which serves Londonderry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, with goods and products.

To my association, those are the priority routes that need to be fixed. I have in my mind the figure of £700 million to complete the dualling of the A5 from Aughnacloy to Londonderry. There are some good schemes on that route for a small amount to be spent creating what is known as a 2-plus-1 road to make the route safer, because there have been a lot of fatalities on that road. We could certainly afford to spend a smaller amount of money and spend some of that £700 million, bearing in mind that £400 million has possibly been pledged by the Republic of Ireland. I am sure that, collectively, congested areas are contributing to our carbon footprint. As Conall McDevitt said there is a need for the country to reduce its carbon footprint by 2020. We have to make those decisions now because 2020 will come round very quickly.

Mr F McCann:

Like everyone else, I welcome this morning's presentations. I have a couple of comments, the first of which is about the A5 and the A8. Nobody has mentioned the £400 million that will come from the South to assist with the road building. If we move it elsewhere, we will lose that money. The Chairperson made a comment earlier about getting lorries and cars off the road. I agree with that sentiment. It is sometimes difficult to match our social conscience when trying to do that and grow the economy across the North. I happen to live alongside the Westlink, near to one of the worst black spots or red spots, just beside Devonshire. The community that I live in is continuously polluted by the 80,000 cars that go along the Westlink.

I was thinking about the fact that 60% of freight goes through the Port of Belfast, yet Belfast must be the only city in Europe that does not send freight by train. If freight trains were to deliver most of that 60% from the Port of Belfast, it would take a huge amount of traffic off the

roads. I do not know whether that is practical given the financial situation, but we need to head towards that. It would have a big impact on traffic movement.

Michelle McIlveen has raised the issue of community transport a number of times in Committee. Although some organisations that are funded by DRD or other Departments may be able to take the hit of some of the cuts and redirect it, for other organisations, such as the Community Transport Association, £10,000 could have a devastating effect on their ability to deliver a proper transport service.

A few weeks ago, we held an event here on young people's impressions of transport delivery. It was frightening to hear that, in Fermanagh, either the education and library board or local health board has a bigger fleet than Translink, yet it is closed up at night and not used until the next morning. We need to look into that. We need to look at the movement of freight and a reduction in cars. Being an inner city person, it takes me two minutes to walk into the centre of Belfast. However, I am lucky because I can walk. People with disabilities cannot walk and have to rely on different forms of transport to do that.

Mr G Robinson:

I thank all the representatives; it has been very enlightening to hear other points of view today. I have a question for Nigel Smyth, who mentioned water charges at the beginning. I know that that is a very contentious issue in Northern Ireland, and I know that it would raise somewhere in the region of £200 million a year. That money would be very useful, particularly at the present time. The other side of the coin is that we are in a deep recession at present, and people and households are struggling. Nigel, do you not think that it is the wrong time to introduce water charges? The Executive have recognised that.

The Chairperson:

He is away. He must have known that you were going to ask that question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McDevitt:

I just want to return to comments made by the Consumer Council. It said that it does not believe that the draft Budget, as it stands, indicates that we are any closer to delivery of rapid transport. Perhaps it could expand on that for me.

Mr Kennerley:

The draft Budget appears to show that funding is available to continue the planning of the rapid transit proposal, but it gives no clear indication of delivery dates or when the service will be running. Potentially, it may be an additional four years before we see delivery of a rapid transit service in Belfast.

Mr I McCrea:

My question is addressed to Kellie Armstrong. In respect of the reduction in the number of community transport partnerships, how do you feel that that will have an impact on the delivery of services, given the fact that some of the services are provided by volunteers using their own vehicles and so on? What are the practicalities of that? You commented on the need to incentivise people to use public transport. Have you any ideas about how we can do that? It would certainly be a big help.

Ms K Armstrong:

The Budget plan states that the rural community transport partnerships will reduce from 15 to seven. To be fair to the rural transport fund team, a number of years ago it published a task report which looked at Northern Ireland and community transport functions. The team really grasped the issue and looked at where efficiencies could be made.

The Community Transport Association and the community transport sector do not oppose that. In future, the grant will be provided to seven geographical areas. That means that the organisations that deliver the services will continue to do so, but, instead of each being funded to deliver in its own small area, they will clump together to deliver in seven areas. Front line delivery of services will not be affected. We are likely to see the loss of a huge skill set, because the numbers of managers and people who take bookings and have the local knowledge will reduce. However, in the community and voluntary sector, we suck it up and get on with it. It is a real Budget issue that we have to face.

As for getting people out of their cars and incentivising them to use public transport, I did some research on the effect on a rural family wherein mum and dad both have to travel to work. It could be better explained to people how much they could save by using public transport. For a rural dweller, an average journey of 25 miles to work and 25 home would not be unusual. Even if one parent were to use public transport instead of the car, and if childcare arrangements could fit

in with that, they could save £1,700 per family. That is a substantial help, given the current economic situation for families.

I am a rural dweller. I have not a hope in heck of using public transport because I have to walk for 20 minutes to reach a main road, and I would be lucky if I were able to catch a bus once a day to head towards Newtownards or Belfast. Incentives to use of public transport come from providing information on where the routes are and what times people can get transport and, perhaps, from a review of the routes. We can work with Translink and tell it that it can increase passenger numbers by 20% or 30% just by letting people know those things. Recently, Translink has been very good about telling people that they can buy a pass that can be used over a month. People need to know about all these things.

Petrol and the use of my car are costing me a fortune at present. People cannot keep up with those charges and the charges for car parking when they go to work, and that is an incentive to use public transport. The other incentive would be to have a public transport system that people could actually use, and which would fit in with their lives. We have to have a care for that. For example, if I were to use public transport to go to work, I would have to leave the house at 6.00 am each morning, which would mean that bringing my children to school would be out the window. I would also have to leave work at 4.00 pm every day to catch a 5.00 pm bus home, and that does not fit in with working life. There are ways of making it easier for people and of showing them how much more cost effective their use of public transport would be. However, that will involve spending money on marketing.

Mr G Robinson:

I want to commend Ann Collins and David McDonald for a powerful presentation on behalf of the more disadvantaged in our society. It was enlightening for the Committee to hear that presentation, and I thank them for it.

The Chairperson:

On behalf of the Committee I thank you all for coming today. The event was called at short notice, and the Committee appreciates your expertise.

As for the next steps, I said earlier that the event is being recorded, and a Hansard report of it will be created. You will all receive a draft copy of that report, and, as soon as it is finalised, it

will be published on the Assembly's website. That report will also form the basis of our response to the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the plans that have been developed on the draft Budget. It was important for us to hear your views today and the information that you have provided will be also used by Members in other discussions in the Assembly. I ask anyone who has referred to facts and figures to send those to the Committee office. That would be helpful for the Committee.

I thank the Official Report for transcribing the event, the Assembly broadcasting team for providing their services and the catering staff and support services for all their help. Thank you all for coming and have a safe journey home.