



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Ministerial Briefing on  
Northern Ireland Housing Executive's  
Response to Recent Adverse Weather**

27 January 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Northern Ireland Housing Executive's  
Response to Recent Adverse Weather**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Simon Hamilton (Chairperson)  
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sydney Anderson  
Mrs Mary Bradley  
Mr Mickey Brady  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mr Alex Easton  
Ms Anna Lo  
Mr John McCallister  
Mr Fra McCann

**Witnesses:**

Mr Alex Attwood            )       The Minister for Social Development  
Mr Michael Sands         )       Department for Social Development

**The Chairperson (Mr Hamilton):**

Good morning. Members, we requested a briefing specifically on the issue of the Housing Executive's response to the recent adverse weather. The Minister has agreed to come along to brief us. Minister, you are very welcome. The Minister is joined at the table by Michael Sands, who is the deputy director of the housing division in the Department. We understood that Stewart

Cuddy, the acting chief executive of the Housing Executive, was to come along as well. Is he not with us this morning?

**The Minister for Social Development (Mr Attwood):**

No.

**The Chairperson:**

Why is that?

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I understood that the request was for me to come along. I am a very strong believer in political accountability and responsibility. That is why it is important that, first and foremost, I am here to explain the situation. I am anxious for Housing Executive staff to come to explain the situation as they see it. However, I thought that it was very important, as a fundamental principle of political accountability and responsibility, that I was here first to explain that.

**The Chairperson:**

That is fine. I am more than content with that explanation. However, we requested that the Housing Executive come as well. We understood that Stewart Cuddy would be here today, hence the confusion. We will iron that out afterwards.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I apologise for that.

**The Chairperson:**

As everybody knows, the Housing Executive's poor performance in its initial response to the recent spell of severely cold weather is of great significance to the public and the Committee. I want members to confine their questions and remarks to that aspect. The Committee will return to more general governance and procurement issues at the Housing Executive at a later date. Indeed, we discussed that earlier. Members' packs contain a cover note from the Committee Clerk. The Department has not provided a briefing paper, but the Minister is here to give an oral briefing. Minister, I would be most appreciative if you would begin by making some opening

remarks to address the various issues, after which we will ask some questions.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

Certainly, Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with members and to take any, and all, questions in relation to the matter. I will make a number of preliminary comments.

I have a clear view of what a Minister should be about. Ministers should be in government and in power. There is a difference, and it is one that we and others, in particular, still have to learn. I believe strongly in being in government and being in power. As the democratic institutions embed themselves, and as we move from this mandate into future mandates, the democratic interest has to assert itself more and more. That has to be consistent with good evidence, due process, and proper authority and boundaries between Executive Ministers and other organisations. That is the principle from which I operate.

In this instance, and in any other aspect of my job as a Minister, I judge myself, and I expect to be judged, on how I exercise my authority of being in government and in power. I want to make that very clear. I do not take the view that arm's-length bodies should be left to get on with their business, particularly in critical instances. I do not shirk from the accountability for me, my Department or other organisations that comes as a consequence. That is the proper way to go forward. Those are the proper standards against which to be judged in this instance to ensure the good authority of government on one hand and, more critically, the protection of tenant interests on the other.

I want to make something clear about the situation that arose over the Christmas period. I have made this point very clearly at every opportunity that I was given. Indeed, there were times when I was denied the opportunity to make the point. I remember such occasions when I was on the phone to, or waiting for a phone call from, the biggest show in the country. I would have made clear my view then — I make it clear today — that there were issues in the initial phase of the Housing Executive's response that should not have arisen. However, in each subsequent phase of its overall response, the Housing Executive measured up more and more. That view is based on the evidence and on my helping to manage the situation.

I was down at a Budget consultation in Enniskillen yesterday. Given that this is the most significant Budget for a generation, it is very important that we, as Ministers, ask this generation for its views on the Budget. I am running a series of five or six Budget consultations as well as a concordat consultation. People had comments to make about the Housing Executive. Those from community organisations in Enniskillen and Fermanagh said that their overall sense was that it was an organisation that had stretched itself in difficult circumstances and measured up more and more. That narrative is consistent with mine.

I shall make some brief comments about how the situation was managed. As I said, I believe that Ministers should be in government and in power, and, consequently, before Christmas, I began to try to manage the situation that was developing. I called in the Housing Executive on two occasions in the run down to Christmas, not after Christmas. I had meetings with the Housing Executive on 21, 23, 28, 29 and 31 December, on 2 and 4 January, and so on and so forth. That does not include all the conversations and phone calls. For example, in the evening of 21 December and the morning of 22 December, I had four telephone conversations with the chief executive of the Housing Executive. That was to ensure that the Housing Executive's emergency response measured up as fully as possible. As I will explain shortly, it did begin to gear up, but, in the initial phase, it was not all that it should have been. Because of those interventions, and because of the conversations that the Housing Executive had with itself at board and senior management level, it began to gear up to deal with the response.

In advance of Christmas, I did not look only to the Housing Executive to respond. I believed that there was a corporate responsibility beyond mine and the Department's to be seen to respond to the unprecedented situation. That is why I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 22 December suggesting that we needed an emergency Executive meeting in order to have a corporate response to the situation that was developing, because I could see what was developing, and I thought that there was a need for a higher level of intervention. As people know, on 23 December, that request was declined.

I went further than that. Contrary to what some people might say, I believe that there was a serious situation then, and that there is now, in respect of the financial burden falling on people arising from that situation. That is why I wrote and made concise and, in my view, realisable

proposals to find new moneys to help people in need over that period. I wrote to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). I wrote to Iain Duncan Smith, and I rang Lord Freud, who was out Christmas shopping in some part of London, on 23 December to say that there was a serious situation and that government needed to respond to it centrally. I will come back to that issue. Over and above all of that and other things that I did, I went out and made clear publicly what I thought should be the Housing Executive's response to the situation in various media interventions. The point is that I did not hang back; I tried to intervene in order to try to help manage what was clearly a difficult situation.

Again, I say that the Housing Executive did not respond in the way that it should have done in the initial phase, but how did it respond? It has an emergency manual, which is known as the yellow book, although, on this occasion, it does not have a yellow cover. I have the June 2010 version with me. The manual is regularly reviewed. Therefore, the Housing Executive did have a process and mechanisms to respond. To be fair to the Housing Executive: people in this room know that it had very grave difficulties over the past 40 years. A lot of serious situations arose over public disorder, public conflict and damage to people's property. It had good experience and authority of managing emergency situations because of the years of conflict, so it had good reason to believe that that plan was going to be fit for purpose. However, as became clear from our conversations in the run down to Christmas, it was not, and it had to be upgraded.

I will give you some examples of what the Housing Executive did. It went out and checked all the voids. That was a critical matter in the run down to Christmas, because, as people will understand, voids can have serious consequences if there are burst pipes. It relocated its telephone response system away from the housing centre in Adelaide Street to the customer support unit in Great Victoria Street and increased by five times the number of people who were managing and answering calls. In the initial phase, that number of people was not enough, and the figures that I will share shortly indicated that. It created a pool of 300 staff over the holiday period to work in eight-hour shifts, with up to 30 people on each shift. There were some who worked 18-hour days — one person worked an 18-hour day on Christmas Day. The issue is that he should not have been working an 18-hour day on 25 December, but he did so in order to demonstrate that the Housing Executive was stretching itself.

Under the yellow book, the chief executive assumed control of the emergency situation, as was required, etc. The figures suggest that, on 25 and 26 December, the telephone response was not all that it should have been, even though it had been upgraded in that way. The figures suggest that, on 24 December, 80% of calls to the emergency number were answered; on 25 December, 72% were answered; on 26 December, nearly 76% were answered; and, on 27 December, nearly 80% were answered. The figures increase thereafter.

To compare those figures with the response rate for NI Water: on some occasions around the same period, the percentage of phone calls to NI Water being answered was down to 1%. Answering 70% and 80% of calls in the course of the day is not good enough — obviously, there were a lot of multiple calls coming in, as NI Water experienced — but it is a starkly different record compared with another organisation of that type. That rate is not good enough, but it does demonstrate that the Housing Executive began to escalate its response, and the figures thereafter suggest that it began to push up to 90%, 91%, 99% and 96% etc over the subsequent days. That demonstrates that it was able to turn it around.

There is another aspect to it. It is not just the answering of phone calls but the placing of contracts and getting that work done. There is learning in respect of the placing of contracts. I have instructed the Housing Executive to do an evaluation of each and every contractor employed during that time, because, in my view, there are issues about the response of one, or more than one, of those contractors in some districts. It does not seem to be common across all districts, but I believe — based on MLAs contacting me and clusters of problems that I see — that some of the contractors probably have more acute questions to answer than others.

I was in the call centre on 28 December. I took calls and wrote up what those calls were on pro formas, which the Housing Executive then gave me back as I was leaving the call centre. Calls that I took at 1.50 pm on Tuesday 28 December were on the system before 2.11 pm. The contractor had been rung on a mobile number in order to have an immediate response. The system used mobile contact numbers, because it was out-of-office hours and there is an issue there, and the jobs were then allocated. There were multiple mobile numbers, and there were out-of-office contacts with the managements of those various organisations. From 27 December, they were asked to open their offices. Again, there should have been a system in place so that, in an

emergency response, offices were open. It may be that mobile phone numbers and direct e-mails to the workers is actually a better mechanism, but, nonetheless, that should have been a safety net. We can talk about that more.

The consequence of it is that — I look to Michael to keep me right — in the 22-day period up to 9 January, the total number of faults that were reported was 43,062 on the Housing Executive side alone. The total number of properties affected was 25,462. As a small number of the reported faults were not faults at all or were related to housing association or private properties, 41,546 orders were placed. On the housing association side, 4,732 faults were reported. To give you an idea of the scale of that: in an average week, there are 5,000 reports to the Housing Executive, believe it or not. That is 250,000 every year. On a pro-rata basis, the consequence of all that is that there was an eight-fold increase in reports during that period.

I was in Omagh, Sixmilecross and Enniskillen yesterday. In Omagh, the figures — I am still assessing the management situation — suggest that there was virtually one call for every Housing Executive house because of the acute weather. Some people in Sixmilecross flagged that up to me yesterday afternoon. A total of 4,900 heaters were put out; I will come back to the heater issues. The consequence of all that is that — we are still interrogating the information and will provide that once it is fully interrogated — by the first weekend in January, 80% to 85% of the required work had been done or alternative mechanisms had been put in place. Once we have the full management information, I will share that.

I have one or two more comments. There are questions now about whether Housing Executive property is fit for those sorts of conditions. I am looking at that and at other issues with Housing Executive property, given the tragedies of the carbon monoxide deaths last summer. I clearly have a responsibility to look at that situation, and I hope to make an announcement in that regard in the very near future. There could be issues about upgrades, but let us be very clear: some properties suffered damage because people cannot afford to heat them. They are heating a room or two. People are, rightly, being told to open their loft. There is no point opening a loft if there is no heat in the house. People are not able to afford fuel because of declining income. For the sixth year in a row, the figures show that people's real income has declined, and we know what is coming with the welfare situation. Therefore, over and above the



thermal efficiency of properties, there is a deeper issue about people's ability to pay for fuel. It all goes back to the fuel poverty strategy that I will probably announce next week.

There is an issue to do with warm homes, making homes more energy-efficient and trying to protect those budget lines. People know that I have made a commitment in that regard, and I will try to enhance that commitment in the near future. There may well be issues with Housing Executive stock because it is older, and the figures on damage to Housing Executive stock are disproportionate compared with those on housing association stock. We need to deal with that. I have instructed the Housing Executive to do technical assessments to see whether there are any interventions. It already does interventions. At the moment, it is planning 50 schemes, one way or the other. Those will affect 3,693 properties and will improve thermal efficiency. Moreover, 25 heating schemes are planned, subject to budget, over the next financial year and will affect 1,562 properties. They will deal with thermal efficiency as well.

I am very concerned about the issue of payment to help people in those circumstances. That is why I wrote to the London Government before Christmas and why I followed up the representations around the social fund. Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness have helped in that regard. I welcome that. It is quite clear that people need further support, and we have two means of providing that: the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 and the emergency schemes such as those available under the flooding legislation. Martin McGuinness says that he supports a financial assistance scheme intervention. I agree with him.

I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on two occasions since all this arose to advise them that I had told the Housing Executive to scope out what it could afford to pay for and to ask that we meet to work up a scheme. I am now in a position where I have indicative figures on what it will cost, first, to redecorate people's property, secondly, given the increased energy costs for a lot of properties, to help people with those costs and, thirdly, to provide an intervention to reinstate the properties.

There are a small number of properties where all the work has not been done. It is no reassurance to some people, but that is going to be inevitable. There is technical advice on how that small number of properties will be fully repaired following severe damage. That advice

includes making sure that they are dried out properly, because an accelerated drying-out process can cause damage to the property. So, work is outstanding for a small number of properties. I have a list of each and every one of those properties. I know where each and every one of them is in respect of the schedule, the timing and the level of repair, so as to ensure that they are addressed.

There is learning here, but I will not scope it all out now. We may talk about that when members ask questions. I have had reason, one way or another, to be more interventionist in an organisation than had been the case heretofore, and I have had to actively manage in a lot of different ways. This week's Assembly debate demonstrated that. I think that that narrative demonstrates that my approach was somewhat different from that adopted by others. It got things turned round. It did not get things turned round fully in the first phase, but, thereafter, the Housing Executive began to measure up.

I want to acknowledge the contractors and people in the Housing Executive and elsewhere who stretched themselves over the period. However, I want to acknowledge the tenants, more than anyone else. I have spoken to a lot of tenants. On 28 December, for example, I toured north and west Belfast and spoke to tenants who were in difficulties. A lot of the difficulties were beyond the control of the tenants or the Housing Executive and were due to frozen pipes and the water situation. You cannot repair unless water is flowing, and that became a serious issue. The fortitude, resilience, patience and understanding of those people need to be mentioned — qualities that continue to be displayed in some cases. It is the interests of those people that we want to protect. Those tenants who suffered seriously deserve extra support in making the houses better and in trying to deal with the financial pain that many are enduring because of the consequences of that period of weather.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much for your comprehensive evidence. Everybody appreciates that we were dealing with fairly unprecedented weather conditions, hence the scale of the problems that were created. Whatever I or other members of the Committee might say about the Housing Executive corporately, I do not think that you will hear criticism from anyone here about the efforts that were put in by individuals who were working in the organisation and the contractors. I put on

record my support and praise for them and for the work that they did over that difficult time.

The purpose of today's session is not to kick lumps out of the Housing Executive; it is to see where lessons can be learned from what happened. Minister, I appreciate your openness and willingness to accept that there was a problem in the initial phase. It begs the following question: notwithstanding the existence of an emergency response document, had interventions not been made at that initial phase when it was identified that problems were starting to develop, just how bad might the situation have become? It is impossible to answer, but there is that question of how much worse it could have been.

It also begs the question of why the Housing Executive was not ready at that initial stage. Regardless of what it did afterwards — no matter how it tooled up and quickly moved into a phase of rapid response — why was it not ready? After all, the inevitable consequence of such a freeze is a thaw. There will always be some pandemonium at the outset of something of that nature, but there is a question to be asked about why the Housing Executive was not ready for it.

My area was fortunate. We did not have the same level of problems that were seen in the west of the Province and in and around Belfast. Any issues that we raised through our offices were dealt with professionally and quickly. However, that is not what is coming back to me from other people. I have talked to party colleagues and Members from other parties, and they have reported various problems. I do not want to get into the specifics of those, but, generally, the issues that keep coming back concern contractors. I have heard about their being uncontactable and how, sometimes, they appeared on site to do a job that they had been called out to do only to leave without doing it. I have heard of contractors informing tenants and, indeed, elected representatives that the job had not been keyed into the system even though it had been. Individuals and elected representatives had been given a job number, so they knew that the Housing Executive had done its job and keyed the job into the system. There were some poor responses, and, this week, we had wider discussions and debates about contractors and maintenance contractors. There were issues with the response, particularly on the heating side.

The big issue for me is the sheer scale of the problem in the Housing Executive. Roughly a quarter of Housing Executive properties were affected one way or another during the freeze and

the thaw; that seems extraordinary compared to other tenure types and to the private sector. I am not saying that private-sector dwellings or owner-occupiers were not affected; they were, but not to the same extent. You said that just short of 5,000 faults were reported in housing association properties compared with 43,000 faults reported for the Housing Executive. That is nearly 10 times more, yet there are about 30,000 housing association properties compared with 90,000 Housing Executive properties; the ratio does not tally.

There seems to be a particular problem with Housing Executive properties, and I am interested to hear your explanation for that and what you have drawn from it. I am interested in the conundrum that we all face about the balance between investing in newbuild and maintaining existing stock, particularly investing in pipes, heating systems, lagging and so forth.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

Thank you for those comments and the acknowledgement of the efforts that were made, without prejudice to your subsequent comments. The evidence suggests that the Housing Executive was not fully ready, although it did have an emergency plan, it checked out the voids, it moved its telephone system to a more central location, and it brought five times as many people as it normally has. In the run-up to Christmas, it escalated its response, and that is the narrative behind it. It was still not fully ready, and, despite my interventions, I did not get it to the point at which it was fully ready.

I am not walking away from that. I, and every other Minister, should judge themselves against one standard: was any tenant or any customer who receives a public service or utility let down at the critical instant? It is the standard for me, Conor Murphy, Peter Robinson, Martin McGuinness and everyone else. Behind the politics and the silence of some people on the issue, there is an understanding at a corporate and individual level that that was the question, and that question was not answered fully or satisfactorily by one or more than one person. I at least asked myself the question to get it to a better place. It got to a better place, but it did not get there quickly enough or fully enough, and the Housing Executive has issues to answer on that.

I am sometimes surprised that the Housing Executive has not shown me the door, because I pushed the limits of my authority and my vires over what it can and cannot do. It is not my job to

micro-manage, but in times of critical instance, you probably do have to provide that level of management. For example, in my phone calls to Brian Rowntree and Stewart Cuddy, the acting chief executive, that Tuesday or Wednesday, their minds were beginning to engage with the situation, and I acknowledge that. Without going into detail, I know the hours that some people in senior management and at board level clocked in, and, individually, they measured up in a situation where there was some corporate weakness.

I agree with what you say about contractors. The management of contractors in this issue was somewhat different from the partnership approach outlined in the gateway review. It was face-to-face, call-to-call engagement in order to get them out. However, when they get out — I want to make this clear, because there have been issues — contractors get only one call-out charge; they do not get a second call-out charge for going back to a property because no one was there the first time. I have instructed the Housing Executive to evaluate all the invoices to make sure that there is no issue there. There is a scale of rates, and if there is anything like that happening it will be rectified. That is the policy — one call-out rate for each contract job, not another one for calling out again. It may be that the contractor is then called out to do a second job, and that becomes a separate contract.

I agree with you, Chairperson, about some heating contractors. I have interrogated the Housing Executive about that issue. In one instance in particular I have identified clusters of problems where I do not think there should have been any. Although there will be variables in how people manage and what scale of problems there might be from one district to another, I identified some patterns that were enough of a concern for me to ask Stewart Cuddy to evaluate all the contractors, including those on the heating side.

You are right about the number of properties that had some difficulties. Some of it is actually the consequence of good practice. There is now a problem with gas-condensing boilers. When doing a heating-replacement scheme, the Housing Executive will try to install gas-condensing boilers where gas is available because it is cheaper, more efficient, and cleaner; however, gas-condensing boilers have a weakness: an outlet pipe freezes and that cuts the system down. It is easy to rectify. However, I do not want to suggest to the Committee how tenants can rectify those problems, because that could end up with my being sued for negligence, and I do not want that.

To improve heating systems, the Housing Executive has put in a heating system that we all use. I have a gas-condensing boiler and it is very efficient, but it has an outlet pipe, and over the holiday period three-foot icicles were hanging from it. The Housing Executive has done good things that have given rise to some weakness. That can be corrected, but it will cost about £50 to put in a mechanism that will take around an hour to correct the gas-condensing issue. Some of the problems in Housing Executive houses are a consequence of good work that has been found wanting in a critical situation.

Given the profile of Housing Executive tenants and their income levels, I do not underestimate the fact that there were issues that were more acute in those properties than in others. Most of the properties in the housing association stock, as we all know, were built in the past 15 years. The quality, design and thermal efficiency of some of those schemes are much higher. That is one of the reasons why people like housing associations and are prepared — if they are not on housing benefit — to pay more.

However, I do not walk away from it. We need to investigate all the reasons for the disparity between Housing Executive stock and the private market and then identify whether we now need to improve thermal efficiency and upgrade lagging over and above what happens in planned maintenance works.

**The Chairperson:**

Raising the issue of people being able to afford to heat only one room and the negative consequences that that had on their properties highlights the problem. We have concrete examples of that. A report from the Housing Executive highlighting that would be a useful piece of work in the war against fuel poverty and would greatly assist us all in focusing on the issue. I know that time is always pressing, so I will now call members to ask questions. I may call members in twos at a later stage to try to get through the issues more quickly.

**Mr Craig:**

Minister, I listened with interest to the figures that you gave on the telephone responses, and I noted very carefully that you first met the Housing Executive on 21 December. That is

commendable, because that is when we should have been looking at the emergency response. It is unfortunate that — and many Members will share this view — on 26, 27 and 28 December, the emergency line, although I can only speak from my own experience, was uncontactable. I could not get through.

I will outline my experience on 26 December, as it needs to be put in context. It took me seven hours of non-stop redials to get through to Northern Ireland Water. Unfortunately, however, I failed totally to get through to the Housing Executive at that stage. That was completely down to overload on the system; I will not deny that. On 27 December, after contacting people at senior level, I reverted to sending e-mails to acting directors in the Housing Executive to get issues dealt with. That was my experience in Lisburn. I dread to think about the experiences of the tenants. I could not repeat the language that was used. Therefore, why, after your intervention, which I commend, did they not up the ante even further with regard to the emergency response number?

Secondly, there is a problem with how contractors are handled. On several occasions, contractors came out to deal with heating. The initial problem might have been a burst pipe in the water supply to the heating, but, because of the demarcation between them, the heating contractor would not deal with it and another contractor had to be sent out. The irony is that they were all plumbers and all could have dealt with it. The trouble for the tenants was they had no heating and no water supply and, quite frankly, the tenant could not have cared less who fixed the problem as long as it was fixed. It is regrettable that, in some cases, multiple contractors came out to fix very minor problems. The Housing Executive needs to look at its contracts and contractors.

Thirdly, I have raised the issue of maintenance and insulation in Housing Executive properties before. In a row of four pensioners' bungalows, the first had 26 bursts, the second 36 bursts and the third, because the tenant was away on holiday and the heating was not on, had 106 bursts. I think that the fourth had 37 bursts. Perhaps that indicates a lack of insulation, because the heating was on 24/7 in those houses. The pipes were of such poor quality that one piece of pipe had seven repairs within three feet. It took my intervention and that of the area manager for maintenance to drill home the fact that we needed to stop wasting public money and replace the entire piping. However, it should not have taken my intervention or anybody else's.

There seems to be an issue around how those are handled. It should have been highlighted much earlier when someone looked at the number of repairs to that section of pipe. Someone should have bitten the bullet and replaced the entire piping system. Unfortunately, common sense did not kick in.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I will deal with the latter point first. In the many conversations that I had with Housing Executive staff, the issue of multiple repairs to a small section of piping was raised. I agree: if multiple repairs are needed in one area of pipe at one time or arise over a period, that pipe should be replaced. If you give me the details of the property, questions will be asked about why the pipe was not replaced in one job rather than repairs being made in multiple visits, given the potential cost consequences. We will investigate that and determine whether all proper processes were complied with. I am not pre-judging; however, that situation has arisen before. I was told by the Housing Executive that multiple leaks in a section of pipe should give rise to the replacement of the pipe and not to a number of multiple contracts, with the cost consequences that can arise thereafter.

As a consequence of the events and the gateway review on contracts, I have stopped the current tender process for several Egan contracts in order to rehabilitate the contract to make it fit for purpose. We must ask the question: is the contractual process so structured now that you defeat your own intentions, because contractors do not do all that they are qualified to do in a property and, instead, a number of contractors make multiple visits? Sometimes there will be multiple visits and several contractors. For instance, specialist work is required for the removal of asbestos in one or two damaged properties.

There are contractual issues in respect of the management of properties to ensure that all the work is done rather than a requirement for multiple visits. That is why I told my permanent secretary that in taking forward the gateway review, the rehabilitation of Egan contracts and the general contractual situation, we need to have experts in contract procurement working hand in hand with the Housing Executive. That will help to bear down on those issues and ensure that they are addressed when tenders are placed for the Egan contracts in the autumn or late summer.



I am not giving elected representatives a higher position in the hierarchy than anyone else who was involved in the situation, but it was not good enough that MLAs, MPs and councillors did not have better access. On the morning of Tuesday 28 December, I met the Housing Executive emergency response team. I instructed that a representative of NI Water attend that meeting, because, like others, I was picking up on the fact that water damage to some houses could not be addressed because of the situation in NI Water. Someone who has not been very public on the NI Water side attended that meeting. I told her in no uncertain terms that NI Water needed to have an emergency line for MLAs, unlike much else around NI Water. At 12.30 pm that day, all MLAs got a text or an e-mail from NI Water giving the emergency hotline for MLAs. It was not my job to manage NI Water, but, at that moment, I felt that it was.

I told the Housing Executive to do the same; however, it did not do so until the following day, which is not good enough. Nevertheless, the Housing Executive has learned from this. By the following weekend, it had in place a new system of escalated response to emergencies. On the Friday morning, I instructed the Housing Executive that I wanted more customer units open than just the Belfast unit, which had been its intention. After a polite conversation we agreed that it would escalate its response and open three other customer support units.

The point is that the Housing Executive had learnt the lesson from the previous couple of days that MLAs, elected representatives and, primarily, tenants needed access. Consequently, over that weekend, when another dip was expected, the Housing Executive was taking calls through four operating centres. It has learnt from the experience and now has in place a three-phase response to emergencies. The first-tier response is the Belfast customer support unit, where up to 25 people are available to take calls. If the situation escalates, the second-tier response is to open four emergency units with a total of between 60 and 75 people available. The third-tier emergency response is to open the district office and have up to 200 people managing incoming calls and information from tenants. That is the system now. However, as I said, the figures confirm that the Housing Executive escalated its emergency telephone response over the first number of days.

The Housing Executive should have acted more quickly for elected representatives. I had that

conversation with the Housing Executive in the early part of Tuesday 28 December. However, it got there and demonstrated again the following weekend that it could escalate its telephone response. However, there was a failure as elected representatives and tenants did not have access. The figures are very good compared to those of other organisations; nevertheless, some people did not have access.

I will make one final point: between 17 December and 4 January, there were more than 21,000 unique callers. However, in the same period there were 200,000 calls, because, as Jonathan outlined, people made multiple calls. That clogged up the system. As the figures confirm, it began to manage that more and more. The clogging up of the system was caused by more than 200,000 calls over a 20-day period. I acknowledge that other organisations had many more calls; however, their response rate was much lower than that of the Housing Executive.

Another lesson for government and for my Department is that the Housing Executive moved 231 staff to the Northern Ireland Water helpline to help to manage incoming calls. When NI Water was stumbling, I instructed our Social Security Agency, in particular — that is where the bulk of staff are based — to seek volunteers. Two hundred and thirty-one staff, who were used to dealing with customers and handling information on the phone, moved across. I would like to acknowledge those people as well.

**Mr Craig:**

My comments were negative, but, to be fair, my experience had improved greatly by 28 December. I can cite an example that proves that your intervention was effective. A disabled guy phoned me in severe distress at 10.30 pm on 28 December; his ceilings had collapsed, he had no heating, and he was in great difficulty. I contacted the area manager via e-mail, but I was worried because I thought that I would not receive a reply until the following day. Within 10 minutes of sending that e-mail, the manager was on the phone and ensured that that individual was rehoused that night. I commend the staff on that. We must recognise that they went well beyond their normal duties in trying to help people.

**Mr Easton:**

I will be very brief. Although North Down had problems with the water supply in Holywood, by

and large the Housing Executive end was not too bad. My one complaint concerns the phone line. I was told that people were phoning the normal Housing Executive telephone number on 24, 25 and 26 December and were given an emergency telephone number. When they called that number, there was no answering service if no one answered, and a recorded message gave the Housing Executive office number, so things went round in a circle and no one was getting anywhere. I did not receive a huge number of complaints about the Housing Executive, but there was certainly a contradictory message from its Bangor phone line. Many people perhaps did not know the overall emergency number. That is my only complaint.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

All the usual phone numbers that people may have called were redirected to the emergency call centre, along with calls to the emergency line. There was a problem on Christmas Day because the messaging system was upgraded on 24 December, causing problems on 25 December. Those problems were rectified by 26 December, and the messaging system worked well thereafter.

The number of multiple calls began to decline because people were getting the message that issues were being handled. In any case, the number of people going through to the messaging system began to decline over those days because they were getting direct access. We will share those figures; we are still collecting them. However, there were some very impressive figures: at certain times, calls were answered within 10 seconds. There were also less good, although still useful, figures for calls answered within two minutes. As I understand it, after two minutes the answering system kicked in, and people were able to leave a message. I will take note of Mr Easton's point.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

I apologise to the Minister and to the Committee for having to leave; I have to deal with issues concerning the past couple of days in my constituency. Thank you for being here, Minister. I understand that you have to leave early, too.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I do not want to leave early if people in Ballymacoss are prepared to wait.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

I appreciate your being here. You came before the Assembly on Monday on governance issues; I do not understand why you have not addressed this issue in the Chamber. I am sure that other Members would be reassured if they received the information that the Committee has received. You are missing an opportunity, because this is not about giving anyone a kidney punch or kicking lumps out of anyone. I have loads of questions, as, I am sure, have other members. I want to address several issues. First, what will the social protection fund look like? Not only can people on low incomes not afford to heat their homes, they cannot afford to pay for insurance. It is a matter of eating or heating, and I sure that insurance is at the bottom of those people's list of priorities. How will we make sure that people who are already poor are not further disadvantaged?

Secondly, have you suggested an assistance scheme through the Financial Assistance Act 2009? It would be worthwhile to get that information out. It would also be useful to bring forward your proposals on fuel poverty.

Alex is right: like many other elected representatives, I tried in vain to get through on the emergency numbers. I had great contact with the district manager in north Belfast, who did an excellent job. I was on the phone with him regularly until late on Christmas Eve and again on St Stephen's Day. I do not know whether he was typical of staff across the board. However, the fall down came with the contractors, and that problem is still there. People may have had their heating fixed eventually, but the problem will reoccur unless we deal with it corporately.

Minister, the question is: will you confront the Assembly? I am sure that you are aware that your party colleagues have raised it at the Business Committee, and it was raised on the Floor with you on Monday. People need to get that information.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

Thank you for those questions and observations, particularly the observation that you are a bit reassured; that is welcome. I do not mind people taking lumps out of me. I probably give as good as I get, as you might remember from the Assembly.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

That is what we are here for.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I do not avoid lumps being taken out of me, as long as I win the argument; that is all I am interested in.

**The Chairperson:**

Who judges that, though?

**The Minister for Social Development:**

The electorate.

There was a very serious situation at a block of flats in Newry, where NI Water could not find the external stopcock for a couple of days. Even though the internal stopcocks were turned off, the external stopcock managed the water that went into either the flats or the communal areas. There was catastrophic damage, and people had to move into the Canal Court Hotel and various other forms of accommodation. I think that 178 or 168 people were homeless during that entire period.

Again, that demonstrates the resilience of people and the support network within family and community — they take care of people in times of crisis. It is one of the great features of our society. It is learned. It is part of the tradition of our society, but it has also deepened because of the experience of the past 40 years, when people looked out for each other in a way that may not be the case in other places.

In respect of the scheme, as I said, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 30 December. I have with me a copy of that document, in which I scoped out the need to upgrade the social fund, if we could do that. They made representations to the Secretary of State in that regard, and I welcome that, which I have acknowledged in writing to Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness. I began to scope out what other mechanisms there were under the Financial Assistance Act and the emergency assistance scheme, à la the flooding model, which is statute

based.

On 10 January, I wrote to them to ask if they had any further views on the principle of assistance to relevant persons under the Financial Assistance Act or other mechanisms and on how our Departments might work together on any proposal. Independent of what may or may not emerge from that, I am working on a proposal that relates to what we can do on redecoration, what we can do on extra electricity costs due to blow heaters and so on, and whether there is anything further that we can do on replacement of items that have been lost.

I do not believe that I have received a reply from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the letter of 10 January. However, independent of that, I have now scoped out what those proposals are, and I will be advising the First Minister and deputy First Minister about where I now think we have to go. The principle of support has been endorsed by me and by the deputy First Minister. I know that Fra has said that he will make representations to his colleagues in the Executive in order to get a scheme over the line. I think that it is now time to get a scheme over the line.

As for your other point —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

It was about the Assembly.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I am not coy about speaking to people.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

I know that you are not coy, but do you not think it is strange that you have not spoken to the Assembly?

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I do not think it is strange. I came to the Committee two weeks ago and was fully prepared to talk about it then. I know that the Committee had time pressures, but I did not, and I was prepared to

stay and talk about it then. I think that this is a much more healthy interrogation — to use those words — than many. As I will outline at the end, Mr Speaker —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

Not yet.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

No; that is going to Sinn Féin next time around, so it cannot be you. Maybe that will be another deal that will suddenly unpick.

Chairperson, there are a lot of things that I want to come back to the Committee on in respect of all of this, in order to bear down on the comments made by your colleagues. I will think further about that proposal, but I think that I am very much putting myself up for any and all questions and am drilling down in a way such that this public body becomes an exemplar of how a public body can turn things around to make things better and then stretch itself to put in place the best mechanism.

Therefore, it is not a social protection fund proposal that I am coming up with. That is a matter for the Budget. This proposal could be done via the Financial Assistance Act. You will recall that, in 2009, Peter, Martin and Margaret Ritchie came up with a scheme to pay £150 to people in need. A grant scheme of up to £1,000 was put in law. That has seen significant moneys paid, including £1.6 million in 2008-09 for flooding relief. Therefore, we were able to pay £1,000 for flooding relief, and we put our collective brains together and came up with a £150 scheme to help people in emergency need. I have the figures and, indicatively, we are not talking at this stage —

**Ms Ní Chuilín:**

We are not talking about massive amounts of money.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

We are talking about millions of pounds to do all that I think that we need to do. If we can find that money within existing budgets, monitoring rounds or from a special scheme, we need to

move onto that ground very quickly. I have done a lot of the preparatory work. I have not been sitting on my hands. We have figures, and we know that, for example, if someone runs a blow heater in a house for x hours a day for 14 days, the extra payment that people might need comes to around £134. Some 4,900 people got blow heaters, and others may have used their own. It is not beyond our wit and competence to produce a scheme to address that and to address the redecoration of properties.

Without prejudice, the Housing Executive may have a legal duty to intervene when it comes to redecoration. I am not saying that it has to intervene, but the information that is coming to me suggests that it may well have to. It may have to redecorate where there is damage. We have figures on how much it would cost, for instance, to take 5,000 houses and to do two houses in each scheme. However, it is very complicated because every case is different. The four households that Jonathan Craig named will all have different needs.

Some work is outstanding, and — as I said — I have a list of each and every one of the properties in Northern Ireland that still require work. I asked the technical staff in the Housing Executive for advice on the right process for dealing with properties that have severe water damage. I am no technical expert, and I am not going to second-guess what should be done to rehabilitate properties. I have been given that technical advice. I also checked the regulations, which state that, under the flood relief scheme, you can get money for the extra cost of having a dehumidifier, but only for up to four weeks. Therefore, a lot of people think that it could take four weeks, if not longer, to dry out a house responsibly before it is rehabilitated. That is one of the problems with properties that people vacated. You have to make sure that such properties dry out properly, especially when there has been catastrophic damage. Some of those houses need new bathrooms, new kitchens and new electrics.

In many ways, a multi-element scheme is required for some properties. We do not do those schemes very much now. They take a lot of time. That is no comfort to those people who are still out of their homes. It is a very small number, but it conveys the scale of what people have to deal with.



**Mr F McCann:**

I thank the Minister for his extensive presentation. I have been as scathing of NI Water and the way that it handled people as I have been of the Housing Executive and its handling of the crisis.

I was in touch with Phoenix Natural Gas by, I think, 22 December because a number of its appliances had frozen. The chief executive explained that the condensing pipe was freezing. I advised Phoenix to go on the radio and explain to people, as you said, the best way to deal with the problem. An engineer explained the best way for people to do that, and Phoenix phoned back and said that it had received a number of calls from people to say that they had followed the instructions and their heating was back on. Over that period, most of the statutory bodies that were involved lost the opportunity of going on to the radio or television to explain the best way to deal with frozen pipes, whether that was to do with oil boilers or gas boilers.

I think that the first phone call that the Housing Executive received, which may have been around 19 December, was from Jennifer McCann to say that there were serious problems in part of her constituency. I phoned about a number of complaints in my part of the constituency to explain some of the serious problems that people faced. By, I think, 23 December, I said to the Housing Executive that it needed to have in place a full-time emergency response to deal with the situation. That would have helped. There has been praise this morning for the likes of the district managers and some of the local staff for the way that they handled the problem. At that stage, I thought that the district offices should have been brought back on a full-time basis because they have experience of dealing with people on the ground. They would have ensured that things were done more quickly.

I found it difficult to get through on some of the emergency numbers, even at 11.00 pm or afterwards on Christmas Eve. I think that it might have been 28 or 29 December when people moved from Adelaide Street round to the bigger premises to deal with the problem. That is to be welcomed, and I commend the staff who worked over Christmas to deal with it. Most of us in those constituencies were on the ground for hours with people who suffered as a consequence of what happened.

The big problem came from contractors that did not respond to the calls or responded late to

the calls and then left because they said that there was nothing that they could do. People were left with only a blow heater. In one instance — I know that you are aware of the case — on 22 December, an 89-year-old man made a complaint to the Housing Executive. It told me that it put the order out at 4.45 pm. The next morning, neighbours came to my house because nobody had been out. The pipes had burst in the roof space, and the man sat for 18 hours with a candle in freezing weather with the electric off because the water had penetrated, and nobody came out to the house. A neighbour two doors away had a burst boiler. After I had phoned a number of times — I think that it might have been the day before Christmas Eve — he had a new boiler fitted, but he was told that it would not be connected until after Christmas.

There is a litany of stories such as those. I dealt with people 10 days after Christmas. People had not gone near an 86-year-old pensioner. I dealt with a person in the Clonard area eight days after the problem occurred and nobody had gone near them. The contractors argued over who was responsible. People added to the confusion that existed. When the Housing Executive started to get its act together in respect of communication, the big fall down was the ability of contractors to do the job that they were asked to do. You are right: some places have still not been repaired.

I do not know whether it is possible to do so, but it would be interesting to find out how many calls were not answered. There must be some connection there. I have been scathing about NI Water. I made 66 calls in a row and could not get through to NI Water. However, at times, I could not get through to the Housing Executive line at all. There was a difficulty probably eight days before Christmas. People knew that the bad weather was coming, and the Met Office said that we were to face some of the worst weather conditions in decades. That should have been taken into consideration. While it is not easy for people to predict the consequences, certain actions should have been taken that may have eased the situation.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

Thank you for all those questions. People are right to be scathing on an individual case-by-case basis. I will not share some of the conversations that I have had on a case-by-case basis with people in the Housing Executive, and I am sure that Stewart Cuddy and others will not want to share those either when they come here. I can understand why people are scathing about

individual cases. I do not agree that, on broad consideration, one can be equally scathing of what happened on the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and NI Water side when compared with the DSD and Housing Executive side. There may be cases where people were let down and the response was not all that it should have been. However, the scale and character of what transpired in NI Water and in the Housing Executive are not comparable. The responses were different, and that is why I welcome Fra's comments about how the Housing Executive began to address the situation. We should not compare one body to the other.

Fra made the point about gas-condensing boilers. I concur with him, and that is why the Housing Executive and DSD will send out guidance to everybody. That will not be a letter that outlines 10 or 20 measures that can mitigate the risk, but guidance to retain on the back of a door or inside a cloakroom so that, when a situation becomes acute, people can refer to a checklist. We need to be legally rigorous because, although the man on the radio gave advice on one or two suggestions to deal with gas-condensing pipes that might have frozen, we need to be very careful about how we address that.

I know that members, including Fra, have said that they cautiously welcome how the Housing Executive has got things into a better place and that they will monitor it closely. To monitor it closely is a good principle, and, at the end, I will outline how that can be done. I will certainly be monitoring it closely. The telephone centre move from Adelaide Street to Great Victoria Street happened before Christmas. It happened not on 27 or 28 December but in advance, because the Housing Executive recognised that it needed greater capacity and that it had to get that capacity by moving premises. That centre was up and running by Christmas Day or Christmas Eve.

I have made my views about contractors very clear. There is a contract that says that some contractors work from 9.00 am to 9.00 pm. However, they did not. A lot of them worked beyond that until 3.00 am or 4.00 am. We have good examples of where contractors demonstrated that they realised that the situation was acute and they could not walk away from people. Sometimes, they might not have explained themselves very well, but they had to leave because there was nothing that they could do. Once they had made sure that the electrics were OK and that the water was turned off, if there was no water flowing into the systems and none coming down the street, there was not very much that they could do. How could they find out where the leaks

were? If there are multiple leaks, it can be difficult to identify them all.

So, there were occasions on which leaving a heater and making the situation safe was the height of what their initial intervention could amount to. Our assessment is that by the first weekend in January, 80% to 85% of the works — it may have been more in the east than in the west — had been attended to or alternative heating systems had been provided. It may not be that every little bit of secondary work that was required to be done, such as painting, had been done by that stage, but a substantial number of homes fulfilled the three standards of being safe, dry and warm.

I will share the evaluation of the contractors, subject to legal advice and matters that might be thrown back at me because of commercial confidentiality, although I do not think that that will happen. More critically, the work that will be done by the Housing Executive between now and September will create a regime around contracts in which any contractor that has not put all the systems in place, either from this learning or any other learning, will be dealt with.

The call answering response information — the days, the numbers, the times and all the management information — is not complete yet. I will share that information, and there is good learning to be had. The Housing Executive and many of the contractors involved demonstrated what could be done in a critical situation, unlike elsewhere. However, we have to demonstrate that the response system is the most fit-for-purpose system available. It will be useful to share that information with the Committee.

**Mr F McCann:**

Things really started to move in the Housing Executive when the district offices came back to work. There may have been 300 people working hard on the phones, but nothing really moved until the people with experience in dealing with those types of incidents came back into their offices.

Compensation is an urgent matter. In some cases, people lost not just their heating system but everything in the house. Some people have applied for community care grants because they are in dire need, but they have been refused. Some people have been offered crisis loans that have to

be paid back at exorbitant rates out of their benefit money.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I did not answer Carál's point about insurance. Only 25% of our tenants have insurance. For reasons that we all know about — less money, less work and less welfare — that number could decline. There is a corporate insurance scheme that tenants can dip into, but very few do. I have instructed officials to try to increase the take-up of that scheme and to reduce the cost of it. It is not that cheap; it is cheaper, but it is not necessarily all that it should be.

I agree about the district offices. That is why the third tier of the new emergency response schedule requires that the district offices are open. That will increase the number of staff who are answering phones and managing information by 100 or 125 people in an overall team of up to 200 people. The principle that has been agreed is the right one. That is why, in the run down to the first weekend in January 2011, I instructed that the three customer support units be opened as a second-phase response.

I take on board what has been said about the Social Security Agency (SSA), the social fund, community care grants and crisis loans. I keep in contact with Tommy O'Reilly, the chief executive of the SSA, in order to map those issues. It is curious that, yesterday in Enniskillen, that very point about community care grants was raised with me. Community care grants are normally made in order to avoid placing people in sheltered housing. I will look again at whether there is any further scope in trying to see where the three elements of the social fund could be better deployed to help.

**The Chairperson:**

You said that you are going to meet people at Ballymacash. I know the development that you are going to. It is very nice. I do not want them all coming down here en masse to sort us out. They can be whipped into a frenzy.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

Jonathan can entertain them.

**The Chairperson:**

He can tell them a few gags.

What I will do, because this is a subject that everybody has some interest in —

**Mrs M Bradley:**

If it helps, I will talk to the Minister later. I will leave it at that.

**The Chairperson:**

Mickey has indicated that he wants to contribute. Please will you be very brief. We will then hear from Sydney. After you have answered them both together, Minister, you can go to Lisburn.

**Mr Brady:**

I have just a few points. It is very noble of you, Minister, to sort out emergency numbers for the water service, but I think that you might have been better served sorting out your own emergency numbers, because I certainly could not get them. In fairness, I commend my local Housing Executive office and the manager, in particular. I had his number, and he was the one who did any sorting out.

I have very clear evidence that people were let down. One case, in particular, is that of a woman who is suffering from and being treated for a very serious illness and who was out of her house for over 10 days because contractors could not come to a consensus over who was responsible for heating and plumbing. I was at the house when they came out for the fourth time, and the plumber decided that perhaps he had better do something because we happened to be there. I wonder about the call-out charges. We were told that the heating engineer who had been out the previous day had to submit a report but that the heating contractors were not open until 7 January. However, it is interesting that we managed to get an e-mail back from a company that was apparently closed, four days before it was due to re-open.

I think that around 70% of the problem was caused by internal pipes. The number of properties involved, particularly the number belonging to the Housing Executive, indicates that there were internal problems, and I would argue very strongly that routine maintenance has not

been carried out the way it should be. That needs to be addressed urgently. It seems to me that standards may well have slipped since the Savills report on the standard of housing was produced, certainly given the evidence that you have presented about the numbers. You said that 25,462 properties were affected, yet only 4,742 faults were reported to housing associations. That is hugely disproportionate, and something needs to be done about that.

I have found that, generally, the measure of how successful the Housing Executive will be is predicated on how well the contractors perform. I heard from one woman yesterday whose ceiling had collapsed, been repaired and re-plastered, and the plaster is now falling off it. That is the kind of standard that needs to be addressed. There is not much point in spending all that money doing repairs if they are not going to be successful.

The other issue that we need to look at is boiler scrappage. Under the old social security system, people got central heating costs when they had such heating. Condensing boilers may have an initial expense through the outlay, but that money will be got back within a relatively short time. I have personal experience of that, having had to replace a boiler. There is a raft of issues there. The social fund needs to be addressed, because budgeting and crisis loans have been offered, and people simply cannot afford them.

I will finish by flagging up that the residents of the flats in Newry who were put up in the Canal Court Hotel were single parents who were offered bed-and-breakfast accommodation in Portadown before being offered anything in Newry.

**Mr S Anderson:**

Thank you, Minister. I do not intend to retrace a lot of what has been said this morning. I know that your time is limited.

I take the broader view that, as a result of what happened, lessons have been learnt and that procedures have been put in place so that such a situation does not happen again. I am sure that the Minister will take that on board. We can all highlight individual cases. The Minister referred to the fact that 75% to 80% of calls were responded to; however, it was the 25% that were not responded to that caused the problems, and I hope that that will be looked at. Compensation was

referred to, and something must be done as quickly as possible to ensure that those who lost a great deal are looked after financially. I do not know how well that can be sorted out, but I know that the Minister will take it on board.

I want to refer to the housing stock, which Mickey mentioned. Perhaps some of the bigger problems lie in the state of that stock. My colleague Jonathan referred earlier to the state of the pipes and one case of six repairs in a three-foot pipe. Who inspected those repairs, is there any procedure for contractors to be followed up and inspected on their work, or do they just fix something, get paid and move on? A lack of inspection procedure will cause problems further down the line. There are problems with insulation. I will close with the old saying that prevention is better than cure. Perhaps, as has been said already, there is work to be done to upgrade many of our properties.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I do not mind trying to sort out NI Water, because it seems to me that nobody else has tried to do so. If I was able to help a wee bit, and I think that I probably did with regard to the access of elected representatives to NI Water, I am pleased. As I said earlier, we could have done much more corporately, and I regret that we did not have an emergency Executive meeting. That is water under the bridge, but there were issues around the corporate response. I have demonstrated what I did both before and after Christmas, and I might send the Committee the number of phone calls that I made to various people in the Housing Executive during that time, never mind the number of meetings that took place in order to put them in a better place. It took the Housing Executive too long to get a hotline for elected representatives; it got there but not quickly enough.

People from all parties have forwarded me details about cases, and dealt with them; I did not hand them over. In any and every case that was forwarded to me, I demanded a particular and detailed response. Some cases were not handled as well as they could have been, but tens of thousands of cases were. That is not the same as saying that no lessons were learnt; clearly there were. However, the Department demonstrated to the Housing Executive that it was learning as it went along. We did not wait until everybody else knew what was happening before we intervened.



I know about the cases that Mickey and others referred to — not necessarily individually, but I know them because I have seen them coming through from various elected representatives. However, that has to be measured against thousands and thousands of people. To go back to what Sydney said about inspection, the Housing Executive now has a call-back policy. People will say that it was difficult, etc, but the broad narrative from tenants who received a call back was that they knew that it was difficult but, in the round, the Housing Executive responded.

The gateway review and the audit that were discussed last Monday in the Assembly said that the inspection regime needs to be enhanced. For example, for work that costs less than £100 the sampling exercise is not effective at all. I assure members that inspection, sign-off and whether the work was done properly are part and parcel of ongoing investigations in the Housing Executive.

Savills said that 0.2% of Housing Executive stock was not fit but recommended that we spend a particular amount on maintenance. However, we spend more on maintenance than even Savills recommended, and his report came out last year. Therefore, although I do not deny that there may be issues about how to enhance thermal efficiency and the securing of pipes, the Savills report, which seems to be the benchmark, is that the standard is the best that it has seen and that we spend more on maintenance than we should, a conclusion with which I do not necessarily agree. However, I agree with Mickey that the issue of thermal efficiency and the protection of pipes is one that may need —

**Mr Brady:**

It is not necessarily about the amount spent; it is about the quality of the work. That needs to be addressed.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I agree, and I assure you that in investigations, and in taking forward the new revisions to Egan contracts, we will have to deal with that. I was not prepared to allow ongoing tenders to run to conclusion, because the process may not have been informed by the point that you made, which means that the contract could be significantly flawed in ensuring that the work is up to standard.

A great deal of good work is done by Housing Executive contractors and Direct Labour. In respect of boiler scrappage, I suggest that members watch this space. I said that I was minded to issue a fuel poverty strategy soon. I assure you that it will contain measures to deal with fuel poverty and thermal efficiency never before done in Northern Ireland. Not only that, it will deal with the issues of income and the price of fuel. We cannot deal with fuel poverty without attacking those two issues, which are probably the biggest contributory factors to fuel poverty in Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge what Mickey said: there are many good district managers, but everybody said that the district manager in Newry was exceptional. Had he been in the middle of the fight between the contractors, I am sure that he would have sorted it out pretty quickly. I also agree with Sydney that there are always lessons to be learnt. We in politics learn them every day. I almost got myself into trouble on Tuesday night when I left the Chamber because I thought that the Caravans Bill business was over. I went upstairs, looked at the screen and intuitively knew that I was in the wrong place. A sixth sense told me that this is not where I should have been; I should have been somewhere else and I raced back down. I learned a nearly painful lesson on Tuesday. The point is that —

**The Chairperson:**

We were all too tired to do anything at that stage; we were happy to take a break to wait for you.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

DSD and the Housing Executive geared up better than others and got into higher gears pretty quickly. That is not to take away from tenants who had difficulties, which I acknowledge; it is not to take from the fact that some contractors could have performed better; and it is not to take away from the fact that the emergency response tiers that we have now should have been in place earlier.

Danny Kinahan was the first to flag up to me that more needed to be done. He did so quietly, but when Danny Kinahan whispers in your ear, you know that there is something that you need to get more on top of. The point is that, quantitatively, given the scale of what they had to do, the qualitative input of the Department and the Housing Executive stands apart from the conduct and

performance of other organisations over that period.

**The Chairperson:**

The message of lessons learnt or to be learnt is where we should leave this business. I thank the Minister for his time. I am sure that there are other issues on which we will want to follow up in correspondence.

**The Minister for Social Development:**

I will come back to you on those.

**The Chairperson:**

Sorry, Minister, for keeping you a little longer than intended.