
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Increase in Energy Prices

Monday 29 September 2008

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Standing Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, these motions on Standing Committee and Statutory Committee membership will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Fred Cobain replace Mr David McNarry as a member of the Business Committee. — [*Mr Cobain.*]

Statutory Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Billy Armstrong replace Mr Fred Cobain as a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr David McNarry replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; and that Mr David McClarty replace Mr Billy Armstrong as a member of the Committee for the Environment. — [*Mr Cobain.*]

Standing Committee Membership

Resolved:

That Mr Paul Maskey replace Mr John O'Dowd as a member of the Audit Committee. — [*Ms Ni Chuilín.*]

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Three amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Mr McNarry: I beg to move

That this Assembly deplores the 33.3% rise in electricity prices by Northern Ireland Electricity and the 19.2% increase in Phoenix Natural Gas prices; and calls on the Executive to set up an inquiry into (i) electricity and gas prices; (ii) their comparability with the rest of the United Kingdom; (iii) their impact on inflation and manufacturing costs here; (iv) their impact on households, and (v) the availability of oil and gas storage facilities.

I recognise that businesses in the global economy face price rises that will, at times, require an increase in the price of the product that they provide to the consumer. However, it would be a travesty if the Assembly did not reflect the widespread public outcry at the recent price increases announced by Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) and Phoenix Natural Gas. Rises of 33% and 19% are not routine: they will have tremendous social and economic consequences. In the aftermath of a 33% rise in the price of electricity, the Assembly must be close to saying that our energy market is not functioning properly.

It is one thing to bail out banks, but to bail out those who are to blame for causing the markets to buckle is not acceptable. Who will bail out the ordinary people — the families, single parents and pensioners — who face hardship in paying for their gas and electricity? It appears, to the consumer, to be unfair, when, apparently, one can do as much as one likes here, if one has a monopoly. The regulator cannot force Northern Ireland Electricity or Phoenix Natural Gas to be competitive with a phantom supplier or a gas or electricity supplier across the water.

In Northern Ireland, a case must be made for the monopoly operators to pay back some of the profits that they enjoy from being in an exclusive monopoly position, when it is clear that they cannot lose and — what is more — will not suffer, when they inflict increases, at will, on their customers. The Assembly and the Executive, as the public's arbitrators, can be a second umpire — another referee — in the game of price hikes that is played behind closed doors. We are not even spectators at that game, and we receive the results only when the game is over.

Electricity and gas price increases of 33·3% and 19·2% are two of the most pressing issues that the Assembly has had to deal with. High energy costs impact on every business and household in the country. Questions, therefore, must be asked about our energy supply and the impact that supply issues have on underlying cost. The major structural weaknesses in our energy supply system that need to be addressed must be identified, and we must establish how the scale of the recent price rise can be justified. Is it due, in part, to the purchasing policies of NIE and its inability — and the inability of the United Kingdom — to store gas? Why, otherwise, are prices increasing in a falling energy market? How can price rises in excess of those elsewhere in the United Kingdom be explained satisfactorily to the consumer in Northern Ireland?

In the early 1990s, during the great North Sea gas boom, Britain had plenty of gas but failed to take the opportunity to build the necessary infrastructure to stockpile that gas. As a result, Britain has only enough storage capacity to stockpile gas for 13 days. After a 13-day gas-price crisis, we would be in trouble, and our energy prices would soar.

In contrast, France reacted to the earlier OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) crisis of the 1970s by systematically building up its gas storage capacity so that it has 99 days of gas in its storage facilities, and it was not alone: the Netherlands built up a storage capacity of 120 days; Germany has developed a storage capacity for 77 days; the United States maintains a storage capacity of 60 days; and Japan has a storage capacity of 50 days. Those countries can all more easily weather any short-term fluctuations in gas prices or crises in gas supplies, and they can buy when prices are at their lowest and store the gas. The United Kingdom cannot. Quite frankly, that is insane, and that is why the whole of the United Kingdom — not just Northern Ireland — is facing inflation-busting hikes in the price of gas this winter.

Northern Ireland remains almost exclusively dependent on natural-gas supplies from Great Britain and, as a result, is vulnerable in the event of market circumstances leading to a reduction in gas supplies. Gas dependency leaves the whole of the United Kingdom vulnerable, and Northern Ireland is particularly vulnerable because its main power stations are all gas turbine combined-cycle plants.

I commend the motion to the House. I have highlighted some of the key issues underlying the energy price rises in Northern Ireland, which go far beyond those in the rest of the United Kingdom. No doubt, colleagues will contribute to the other issues addressed in the motion and, no doubt, Members moving amendments will introduce their particular issues.

We are under the cosh of punitive price hikes for gas and electricity that are causing hardship. No one is saying that the days of such large price increases are over, and I fear that there are more heavy increases to come. This deserved call for an inquiry is addressed directly to an Executive who are currently failing in their duty. Members of the Executive cannot justify their three-month layoff, and far less can Sinn Féin justify what it has been up to in creating the filibuster behind that layoff.

If the Members diagonally opposite want to participate in a debate such as this, please do so, but catch yourselves on with what you are trying to do with the democracy in the House and your non-appearance at Executive meetings. Please catch yourselves on and realise what is happening out there, where few people really care about what has made Sinn Féin absentee members of the Executive. Get back to work this week and let us see business being done, and let us see issues such as energy addressed promptly this week.

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after the second “prices” and insert

“; acknowledges the independent review of the electricity price rise commissioned by the Utility Regulator; and calls upon the Executive to bring forward a new energy strategy that focuses on ensuring secure and sustainable supplies of electricity and gas within a competitive market that drives down prices for all consumers.”

I welcome our having another debate on energy, although I wish that it was in more acceptable circumstances. I join with the previous Member, and, no doubt, every Member who will contribute to the debate, in expressing my deep regret at the price rises for electricity and natural gas that Northern Ireland consumers face. We all regret those price rises and are deeply concerned about the negative effect that those price rises will have on householders and businesses in Northern Ireland and on Northern Ireland's competitiveness in what are trying and difficult economic times.

As amendment No 3 will remind us, this is the second debate of this kind in the House in the past six months. However, unless we get to grips with our energy infrastructure and framework issues, debates of this nature, in which we express our concern, regret or revulsion at increases in energy costs, will become the norm in the House.

12.15 pm

We must address short- and long-term issues. In the short term, we must continue to encourage homeowners and businesses to make their properties as energy efficient as possible. I welcome the work that has been done by the task force on fuel poverty and the various agencies that have channelled their efforts into it. I echo Mr McNarry's hope that the Executive will meet this week, so that the task force's findings or

recommendations can be acted on for the betterment of everyone in Northern Ireland — homeowners and businesspeople alike.

I welcome the fact that the Utility Regulator has commissioned an independent review, which will be headed by Douglas McIlDoon, a man who has great expertise and experience in the field. People will never welcome energy price rises of the current magnitude. However, they need to see evidence that increases are unavoidable — if, indeed, that is the case. I hope that one of the main outcomes of the independent review will be that it will open up that fairly impenetrable process for everyone to see. The review will have to answer other obvious questions, including why there is such a gap between electricity price rises in Northern Ireland and those in the rest of the United Kingdom. I hope that the review gets to grips with all those issues and makes positive recommendations.

Other longer-term issues must be addressed. The danger with debates of this nature is that we home in on one particular price rise, but the real solution to the problem lies in the Executive taking long-term, robust action, in concert with others. I would like to see several developments take place. First, I want to see competition in our existing market. That will not be easy to achieve. In an energy market as small as ours, it is difficult to encourage competition, particularly as the market is constrained by the fact that operators have monopolies in certain areas.

I acknowledge that an independent review has been called, but I urge caution in calling for ongoing reviews of our energy prices. We simply cannot afford to commission an independent review every time there is an energy price rise, whether it is big or small. An unsettled regulatory system in Northern Ireland will do nothing to encourage competition in the market. In fact, it will have the opposite effect: it will deter people from investing in it. As I said, because of the size of our market, it is already very difficult to encourage competitiveness.

Our current energy infrastructure should be expanded. Even though gas customers are being asked to pay a price increase of nearly 20%, I still believe that far too many parts of Northern Ireland do not have the opportunity to avail themselves of natural gas or to benefit from the competition that would exist with other energy suppliers were it available. I want the network that serves greater Belfast and the 10 towns on the North/South pipeline to expand into the south-east and west of Northern Ireland. I realise that such expansion will raise many infrastructural, economic and cost issues. However, it must be our clear goal, and we must work to achieve it.

Improvements can be made in the current gas network. In Firmus Energy's licence area, the company

has only 4,000 customers — largely business customers — compared to the 120,000 or so customers that Phoenix Natural Gas has. I want to see Firmus Energy's licence area opened up much more. At the moment, its business model seems to be to concentrate on business customers, but many domestic customers in that area are not being given the opportunity to avail of a natural-gas supply. Either the company should be encouraged to target those customers, or consideration should be given to opening up that licence to competition, so that the residents of the 10 towns in the centre and north-west of Northern Ireland can enjoy the advantages of being natural-gas customers.

We must work seriously towards capitalising on Northern Ireland's energy potential. The debate will concentrate mostly on electricity and gas, but we must consider Northern Ireland's other energy potential. We talk a lot about it, but the Government, the political parties and the general public need to grow up, wise up and engage in a mature debate on the whole subject. Although we talk a lot about capitalising on Northern Ireland's enormous energy potential, I do not often hear mature debate. There are difficult issues surrounding some of our energy potential, but we must engage in a positive and informed debate on the issues.

There is huge potential for generating energy from waste and animal waste. There is an obvious necessity to deal with the by-products of human life and to deal with animal waste. There is huge energy potential in those areas. Understandably, when there is talk of energy plants using waste, there is public outcry and concern, which is backed up by public representatives.

Wind farms also have huge potential. There is potential in the west of Northern Ireland to produce more energy than we need, which would allow us to export it. However, some people have strong views about the matter, and others are concerned about the impact that it would have on tourism. Cross-border interconnectors would allow us to capitalise on that renewable energy, but there is opposition to them.

There is also an argument about the impact of biofuels on food prices, even though we have some of the best conditions in the whole world for growing willow.

On the face of it, tidal power appears to be a straightforward proposition, but it has met with opposition over its impact on marine life. Nevertheless, ScottishPower announced today that it is considering building a massive tidal-powered energy farm off the coast of County Antrim.

I will be the first Member in the debate to introduce the issue of nuclear power. We must have a serious and informed discussion about it. Lest I be guillotined by Members, I am not suggesting that Northern Ireland build its own nuclear energy power station, but we must have an informed debate and make a contribution

to a UK-wide discussion about where safe and efficient nuclear energy fits in our overall energy framework. Those are issues that must be addressed in a serious way.

There is an opportunity to deal with many of the issues that are highlighted in the review of the strategic energy framework. We all need to encourage ideas and innovation, and we need to be ambitious, adventurous and innovative in how we come up with ideas and investment in respect of all the issues.

During direct rule, no political direction was given to Northern Ireland's energy industry. However, elected representatives and political parties must now give the Minister and her colleagues in the Executive the political backup to make serious decisions, and let the debates that we have been having over the last six months become a thing of the past, rather than the norm.

Mr Neeson: I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Executive" and insert

"to bring forward an Action Plan to counter the effects of rising electricity and gas prices on (i) private household budgets; (ii) manufacturing costs for businesses; (iii) inflation for consumers; and (iv) availability of oil and gas storage facilities."

I welcome the opportunity to debate this critical issue, which is, currently, being tackled seriously by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I welcome the Utility Regulator's decision to commission an independent review of the process. I also welcome the appointment of Douglas McIlDoon, who is highly respected by many Members. However, many issues about the process still need to be clarified. For a start, I deeply regret the fact that the Consumer Council has not been given its rightful place in this important process.

It is vital that the Consumer Council be given its full statutory and regulatory role in the process. Although I acknowledge the impact of the global market in the current crisis, we must ask whether the interests of consumers are being fully protected. Why are consumers in Northern Ireland paying substantially more for their energy compared to consumers in the UK and the Republic of Ireland?

The recent establishment of the single electricity market has helped to develop closer co-operation between the markets and the generators on both sides of the border. Why, therefore, are consumers here not already benefiting from the single electricity market? The biggest problem for energy consumers here is that there is not enough competition in the market, unlike other areas of the UK and even the Republic of Ireland. Commercial consumers can purchase electricity from Airtricity, which uses renewable energy sources, and that is to be welcomed. In the natural-gas market, Firmus Energy has capped prices, but its market is much smaller than that of Phoenix Natural Gas.

The recent price increases have created a major problem for consumers in Northern Ireland. It is predicted that up to 43% of consumers here will be thrust into fuel poverty, and that is a crisis that the Assembly cannot afford to ignore. The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, and her Department have already drawn up plans to deal with the crisis. Sadly, those plans cannot be enacted without the approval of the Executive. It is unforgivable that Sinn Féin is preventing that from happening. Sinn Féin has always tried to portray itself as a party of bread-and-butter politics; however, it is now portraying itself as a party of brood-and-bitter, not bread-and-butter, politics.

Heating and eating are the issues of the day, not the devolution of policing and justice. Is it any wonder that Ministers feel so frustrated at the present impasse? The Executive must meet this Thursday to deal with this crisis, as well as assisting the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety Michael McGimpsey in dealing with free prescriptions for cancer sufferers in Northern Ireland.

All the amendments to the motion are worthy of merit, but the Alliance Party's amendment, which calls for an urgent action plan to address the crisis, is the one that should be adopted by the Assembly, as it recognises that not only are consumers across the board facing difficulties but that future planning is absolutely essential. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's review of the strategic energy framework must make the interests of consumers its paramount concern.

If devolution is to mean anything to society, it is our responsibility to tackle the issues that I have mentioned. That is an opportunity, not a threat. The Assembly must be fully operational in all its functions.

Dr McDonnell: I beg to move amendment No 3: At end insert

"; and further calls for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls; asks the Regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explore ways of improving consumer access to the single energy market; and recalls the motion of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on Rising Energy Costs unanimously adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 2008."

I am pleased to move this amendment. It is clear to me and to others that there is very little public confidence in the regulatory system or that it is fully working to protect consumers. There is an urgent need to build public confidence in the system and for a clearly defined role for the very capable Consumer Council. That would go some way towards restoring public confidence and faith in the system.

12.30 pm

I thank the Members responsible for bringing the pressing issue of spiralling energy costs to the Floor of

the House. Perhaps no other issue so preoccupies the minds of ordinary people, as they struggle to keep a home warm; or to keep a business running; or as a principal tries to keep a school running; or a clergy man or woman tries to keep a church or youth club functioning.

The Assembly last debated rising energy costs in June, just a few short months ago. At that time, the motion proposed by the SDLP was unanimously adopted by the Assembly, against the background of a worrying 28% increase in the price of gas and a 14% increase in the price of electricity. At that time, we were told to expect a further increase of perhaps up to 15% in the autumn. Today, we debate the issue against a much grimmer backdrop, because the suggested 15% increase has in fact turned out to be a 19.2% increase in the price of Phoenix gas, and a staggering 33.3% rise in the price of electricity. It mystifies me that that price hike is almost double that in the UK. People in Northern Ireland, despite earning lower wages, pay over the odds compared with what people in Southern Ireland, or across the water, pay for their electricity.

At the best of times, putting food on the table and heating the home is a very delicate balance for many people on low incomes, particularly the elderly and families with young children. People are faced with spiralling fuel and food costs as a bitterly cold, dark winter approaches. That means that many people on an already thinly stretched income will be pushed to financial and emotional breaking point. Pensioners in south Belfast have been stopping me in the street over the past month to voice their concerns about how they will manage to stretch a very thin pension to get through the winter. I hope that it is not the case, but, if the winter is cold enough and severe enough, there could be a huge spike in cold- and hypothermia-related deaths and in cold-related hospital admissions, as large numbers of elderly people face the choice between heating and eating. That illustrates how serious the situation is.

Parents with young children have told me that they are panicking about how to pay the heating and lighting bills that are falling through their letter boxes, especially given that food bills and other bills have already increased significantly. Over the summer months, the energy context here has changed dramatically, and for that reason, it is important that we debate fully the new and changing circumstances.

No doubt Members will hear today that there is little that we can do about the crisis; that energy prices are decided in far-away places; and that we do not have the power to regulate the failed market here fully. However, there is nothing to stop us speaking up for people who will be turning off their heating in the depths of winter so that they can afford a few shillings for food. There is nothing to stop us speaking against a

market in which oil is traded 15 times and gas six times before they reach the consumer. There is nothing to stop us working and lobbying harder for the imposition of a windfall tax on the massive energy profits that have been accrued by those who have done the trading. There is nothing to stop us demanding that the Chancellor of the Exchequer impose a windfall VAT on oil and direct it into a hardship fund. The Exchequer has raised considerable funds through VAT, and it would be very appropriate that that be used to fund some kind of hardship fund.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair)

We should not abdicate our responsibility, although no doubt we will, regrettably but predictably, hear that from some. The energy crisis has not arrived out of the blue; we knew that energy price hikes were coming. While other Ministers have been playing hide-and-seek, I commend the Minister for Social Development for the efforts that she has made in the past few months, examining every possible way that she can help to protect those pensioners and others who are vulnerable. Although the energy crisis is only a very small part of her brief, she has worked very hard to draw up a response and ensure that she can do all in her power to help people.

I urge the Executive to do what they can to meet on Thursday. Each member of the Executive must fulfil his or her responsibilities, pull together and make things happen.

The Minister for Social Development is attempting to increase spending by some £36 million. The warm homes scheme and improving heating systems help the vulnerable, which is commendable. If the Executive meet and function, Ministers from various Departments can make a difference. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment may be responsible for energy matters, but the Department of the Environment has a major role to play in increasing energy efficiency, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has a role to play in the promotion of land use for renewable energy, and the Department of Finance and Personnel has wide-ranging involvement. Therefore, tackling the problem is a job for the entire Executive. The purpose of devolved institutions is to take responsibility and make a difference to lives. The energy crisis is a test of whether we have devolution that is working for people.

An immediate cross-departmental strategy is required, not only to encourage energy efficiency in homes, schools and hospitals but to ensure swift action on the proposed rate-relief scheme for households that are energy efficient. That means a quick reinstatement of grant aid for use of renewables and the introduction of legislation to promote environmentally friendly and sustainable buildings in the construction industry. People must be encouraged to make savings in their electricity

and gas bills where possible, which could mean paying bills by direct debit or using prepayment orders.

However, I reiterate my opening remarks — there is little public confidence in regulation. As the only protection that customers have, the regulatory system must fulfil its role. Public confidence in the system must be rebuilt, and the Consumer Council, which is the only body that can work for people on the issue, must have an improved, clearly defined role. Such a role for the Consumer Council in energy consultations would go a long way to restoring public confidence in regulation.

However, that alone would not be enough. In order to protect customers and restore faith, the Executive and the Assembly must think ahead and implement a long-term strategy that aims to secure energy sources at the lowest possible price. Open and competitive domestic electricity and gas markets are required, not only in theory but in practice. The regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment must explore ways to improve consumer access to the single energy market. The Executive must take the necessary decisions to create an energy model that puts the needs of Northern Ireland customers first.

As Members, we must take control of our energy policy if we are to increase the security of our supply and stabilise prices. We must reduce our almost complete reliance on imported energy and harness locally produced renewables, be they wind, waste, tidal power or biomass. With proper planning, we could reduce our dependence on oil and gas by up to 80%. More initiatives like the tidal-energy farm off the north Antrim coast that was announced today would go a long way to helping us to achieve that.

The best way to protect Northern Ireland customers is through the local generation of as much heat and electricity from local resources as possible. That practice has been common in many European countries for decades. If we do not act urgently to meet the challenges, the picture is bleak, and we will lurch from one crisis to another —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Dr McDonnell: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support amendment No 3 and the motion. I thank the Members who had the initiative to table the motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposers of the motion for giving Members the opportunity to speak on a very important issue. I am disappointed that some Members have used a motion on such a serious issue to indulge in narrow party politics and to attack Sinn Féin.

It is clear that Sinn Féin is working hard to secure an Executive meeting. However, it must take place in

partnership and equality. My party is well aware of the crises that affect people. The constituencies that my party colleagues and I represent, and the areas in which we live, are where those price hikes will be felt worst.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: No.

No one could fail to be shocked and angered by the level of recent rises in electricity and gas prices. As has been mentioned, they will have consequences for households and businesses.

Families in the North of Ireland generally pay more for their household-energy supply than families elsewhere, and their average wage is normally lower. More people here are in receipt of benefits. Couple that with the rise in the cost of other essential commodities and the credit crunch, and it is estimated that half of the population will spiral into fuel poverty during winter 2008.

It is important that the matter is considered in human terms. In 2007, 500 cold-related deaths were reported. That number could increase during the winter weather that is expected in 2008. Businesses, too, will be affected. They already pay higher electricity costs, and many will be unable to remain competitive. That, in turn, will lead to further unemployment and greater hardship for all.

Customers are expected to pay increases from 1 October 2008. The Consumer Council, which protects consumers, still does not feel confident that the issue has been dealt with in a transparent and clear way. It claims that its voice has been ignored. The price increases have exposed the lack of long-term sustainable-energy policy. There is, therefore, a strong case for the Government to reassess their options on offsetting fuel poverty and the development of a longer-term strategy to meet rising energy demands.

During the 1980s — and the 1990s in the North of Ireland's case — the Government disengaged from direct ownership of the production and delivery of major energy networks and providers of electricity, gas and coal. That was done in the belief that a combination of private-sector management, independent regulation of natural monopolies of wires and pipes, and competition in generation and retailing would produce a more efficient energy sector and would deliver low cost to the entire economy. However, that has not been the result. The outcome of the decision to privatise major utilities, such as electricity and gas, is still the subject of major debate, into which the Assembly must enter. There are many lessons to be learned from the decision to allow large monopolies a free run in areas such as energy provision.

The decision to reduce Government intervention and to promote free enterprise and market principles

without robust regulation in areas such as energy can lead large companies to exploit their monopoly in the market. Regulation must be thorough and robust, and take on board views of organisations, such as the Consumer Council, which protect consumers' interests. If views such as those of the Consumer Council are ignored, how will energy companies that have a monopoly in the market be stopped from exploiting customers and introducing price rises such as those that have been announced recently?

Sustainable economic growth is possible only when it is set in the context of an equitable system that provides equality of opportunity for all. Energy must be considered in the context of the creation of an all-island sustainable-energy market. Geographically, there is great potential to open up an all-island gas market and to develop an all-island interconnection. Often, wholesale gas prices determine wholesale electricity prices in the North, where gas accounts for almost two-thirds of generating capacity. Therefore, more storage for gas supplies must be created.

The fuel mix for electricity generation continues to change rapidly. Large-scale electricity generation from renewable electricity resources, such as onshore wind, wave and biomass, is in operation. However, there is still no large-scale generation that uses offshore wind, solar or waste resources. Ireland's substantial tidal resources could be tapped for the production of energy. The island also has huge potential for wind-generated energy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must draw her remarks to a close.

Ms J McCann: All Members have the responsibility to take up the challenge to create conditions that will lead to an effective strategy that will ensure forward-thinking sustainable-energy policy and will include the use of renewables.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time, please.

12.45 pm

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan): The Committee tabled a motion in the Assembly on 30 June, which was referred to by Simon Hamilton and Alasdair McDonnell. That motion enabled the Assembly to debate many of the issues. The price increases that have occurred since then have shocked many people, including Members. Although we talk about the credit crunch, with respect to devolution, we have been visited by a credibility crunch. People want to know whether the devolved Administration is on the case and what tools are available to it to shelter them from such price increases and to provide help and support.

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have a view on the motion or the amendments. Each amendment has been proposed by a member of

the Committee, and all of them make valid points that were made in Committee discussions in recent weeks.

The Committee took evidence from the regulator and from representatives of the Consumer Council on 11 and 25 September. The exchange of correspondence shows that the views and questions of members on 11 September, and their stated intention of returning to the issue on 18 September to establish some sort of review, led the regulator — on the Minister's strong advice — to institute the independent review of which we have been notified. The Committee received the review's terms of reference at its meeting on 18 September, and members questioned the regulator and the independent reviewer about them at our meeting on 25 September.

It is not clear, to me or to the other members of the Committee, what the outcome of the review will be. I question the review's objectives, which appear to be set on a presentational basis. They are to establish whether the process and outcome were robust; identify where improvements could be made; explain the role of regulation in the context of wider energy policy; and ensure that the findings are widely understood by stakeholders.

Specific terms of reference are described as the "scope" of the review. One of them is to determine whether the outcome was justified. However, there is no indication of what might happen should the review determine that the outcome was unjustified. What will flow or follow from such a determination is not discussed. There seems to be a presumption that the review will state that the outcome was justified, and that seems to be the reason why the issues are not being considered. We have to await the work of Douglas McIldoon's review, and he has assured the Committee that he will address the issues raised by the Consumer Council. I hope that that reassures other Members. We will have to wait and see.

Some of the amendments and the motion rightly address the long-term case for an improved approach to strategic energy policy. The Committee noted that the new Minister has already commissioned advance work on the strategic energy framework. The current framework started in 2004 and will run until 2009. No doubt, the Minister will discuss that with the Committee when she meets it later this week. She might also want to comment on that topic in her contribution to this debate.

Our energy platform needs to be improved. We must move away from being locked into dependency on fossil fuels and do much more on renewable energy. A number of Members have referred to the story in today's media about ScottishPower's interest in developing tidal energy off the north Antrim coast. A review of the renewable obligations regime, and renewable obligation certificates, is taking place. The proposal is that Northern Ireland will award a renewables obligation certificate

in respect of tidal energy that will be of lesser value than that which Scotland proposes to award. That could have major implications for the very project that is welcomed today.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin supports the motion and amendment Nos 2 and 3. We do not support the amendment proposed by Simon Hamilton, because it is a transparent attempt to camouflage the failure of the Minister to address the issue.

This autumn's price rises were predicated by an earlier rise in late spring, when it was clearly indicated that more pain was to follow. The question arises — what attention did the Minister pay to the issue and what steps did she take to alleviate the problem, particularly in the context of worsening economic circumstances?

The motion, to which amendment Nos 2 and 3 add value, calls on the Executive to address the present economic crisis by undertaking a number of specified actions. Members must remember that the Minister is already empowered by virtue of the Programme for Government commitments on eradicating poverty, for which a timetable is in place. That implies that, in fact, there should be an action programme before the Assembly. That cannot be constantly put on the long finger.

In light of those commitments, and the power that goes with holding ministerial office, the Minister is in a position to do more than review the process employed by the Utility Regulator, however independent and impressive the reviewer. The Minister performed a very neat trick; with one leap she distracted attention away from her failure to develop an action plan, such as that outlined in the motion.

This is not the first time that the issue of energy costs has been before the Assembly. Douglas McIlDoon was brought in to conduct an independent review, but, in 2000, he said that he did not have the necessary powers to influence tariffs, and that he hoped that Assembly Members would endorse a:

“ministerial boot up the backside for the industry”.

He continued:

“The industry is operated now in the interests of its owners, not in the interest of its customers. That has been the position since privatisation.”

Historically, the regulator has set out the limitations on his ability to affect the determination of the industry to maintain a significant level of profit, and to pass on increased costs directly to the consumer, irrespective of poverty indices.

Although not specified in today's motion, the Minister should consider the issue of payback calculation, which has been mentioned several times regarding renewables. People in the fossil-fuels industry constantly say that alternative or renewable-energy technology is under-

developed and underinvested, and that the payback period makes it unrealistic. That equation changes on a daily basis. Clearly, other Administrations already recognise the need to develop alternatives to fossil fuels, and to breakout of the stranglehold that they have on the abilities of economies to grow and of people to escape the poverty trap.

On several occasions, my colleague Martina Anderson has mentioned an initiative that is based on the availability of Venezuelan oil. That factor should be brought into play and explored by the Minister. Ken Livingstone has demonstrated that that is possible. There have been other experiences. For example, in 2005, officials from Venezuela and Massachusetts signed a deal to provide cheap heating oil to low-income families. The fuel was sold to thousands of homes at approximately 40% below the market price. The deal involved shipping some 45 million litres of heating oil from Venezuela to Massachusetts at a discounted rate.

A similar deal was struck in order to provide 25,000 families in Philadelphia with affordable oil. Other areas such as the Bronx and cities in Maine, Vermont and Rhode Island have used the scheme. We should look at all options, and the Assembly can be pathfinders in that regard.

I support the motion, and amendments No 2 and No 3. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): Rising energy prices continue to be of great concern to us all and, indeed, to this House, and I am thankful to Members for again bringing this issue to the House in order to allow us to have our voices heard on the matter.

Simon Hamilton and others, including Mark Durkan, Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pointed out that a motion on rising energy costs was debated before the summer recess. Since that time, wholesale energy costs have continued to drive up the prices of electricity, natural gas and oil. That has an impact on manufacturing companies, small businesses, rural and urban communities and individual households, with a disproportionate effect on those on lower incomes.

Those significant price rises are not unique to Northern Ireland, and they have been driven primarily by sharply rising global oil prices, regardless of what Mitchel McLaughlin might want to attribute to me for my impact on rising global oil prices. His distraction politics do not work in this House in relation to the need for an Executive meeting this Thursday. I very much hope that that meeting will take place in order that we can discuss these very important issues, including the energy crisis.

Since the start of the year, significant energy price increases have been announced in the rest of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. In Great Britain, most electricity companies have increased prices twice this year, by 29% on average. Gas prices in GB have also risen by an average of 29%, and there is speculation that further increases in Britain and the Irish Republic are likely in the new year.

The increases in wholesale fuel costs are driving up the cost of power generation and, therefore, the retail price of electricity to consumers. Generation costs amount to about 60% of the final cost of electricity, while the wholesale cost of gas equates to about 65% of the final gas price to consumers.

Phoenix Natural Gas and NIE Energy have advanced-purchased gas and power generation respectively for this winter in order to protect consumers. While that was a sensible and responsible strategy in a rising energy market in the early summer, the disadvantage is that consumers will not see the benefit of any fall in wholesale energy prices until well into next year.

Wholesale gas prices generally track movements in oil prices, but there has been much more volatility in gas prices in recent months, compounded by a leak in a pipeline connected to a gas field in Norway. Our natural gas comes to Northern Ireland from Great Britain. However, the UK gas reserves are declining — a fact to which, I believe, David McNarry referred — and the UK is now a gas importer.

My Department has no direct role in setting energy prices, but attempts continue, in co-operation with the Utility Regulator and the energy industry, to create market conditions that can have a downward pressure on prices. To that end, the Department has supported several initiatives in recent years. The first of those was the single electricity market, which was established in November 2007. That provides a single market for wholesale electricity, combining the markets in the North and the South into a much larger market, thus providing for economies of scale and improving security of supply, with potential for lower electricity prices for consumers.

Sean Neeson, I believe, asked why consumers were not seeing the benefits now. It has always been accepted that the single electricity market will deliver benefits in the medium to longer term, because it is a wholesale market as opposed to a purchasing market.

The Department has also been examining the issue of mutualisation of key energy assets, and the mutualisation of key energy infrastructure such as the Scotland-Northern Ireland pipeline (SNIP), the Moyle electricity interconnector with Great Britain, and the recently mutualised Belfast gas transmission pipeline has resulted in those assets being acquired by Northern Ireland Energy Holdings. That is a not-for-dividend

mutualised company, and the low rate of debt financing of those transactions allows for a possible return to energy consumers. Indeed, over recent years, Northern Ireland Energy Holdings has announced returns to customers for gas and electricity.

Work has also been done on the energy efficiency level, but I will not go into that in great detail because it was not mentioned in the debate.

1.00 pm

However, it is important to refer to the fact that the motion and the amendments call for an inquiry into electricity and gas prices. Members will be aware that, in light of public concern about the increase in electricity prices, the regulator has established an independent review of the electricity price-setting process. The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to the comments that were made to the regulator at the Committee meeting on 11 September. I have no doubt that he is correct in that those comments had an impact on the regulator's decision to set up that review, which will report by mid-November.

The review will consider the justification for the price increase, the consultation process on the price review, scrutiny of the hedging processes, and any regulatory policy areas that should be considered to improve effectiveness and fairness of risk management in the Northern Ireland energy industry. I am satisfied that the review will be conducted quickly and independently, and that the agreed terms of reference are sufficient to meet the concerns that have been expressed by the public and the Consumer Council.

It is important to be clear about the role of the Utility Regulator in relation to the setting of energy tariffs, given that there has been much confusion about the issue, not least from Members opposite. It is important to put on record that the regulator carries out his work in line with statutory duties that are set out in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and the Electricity (Single Wholesale Market) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007. He is responsible for regulating the gas, electricity and water industries in Northern Ireland, and it is he, therefore, who has been entrusted by Government with the decision-making powers in such matters. He has knowledge of the facts, he is in possession of the necessary skills, and he has the independence to reach a decision on regulated energy issues, including energy prices.

The Utility Regulator is, therefore, deemed to be an expert body on the detailed consideration of price-review submissions from energy companies. The legislation confers the function of tariff setting on the regulator, taking into account his expertise in such matters.

Mr Neeson said that the Consumer Council had not been given its full place in the regulatory process. I am somewhat surprised by the reaction of the Consumer

Council because, when I asked the regulator to conduct a review in my initial letter, I was conscious of the Consumer Council's public concerns. The terms of reference that I agreed were designed explicitly to address the council's concern that it was not persuaded that an increase of 33·3% was justified.

Dr McDonnell talked about the need for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the energy crisis. The legislation confers a statutory obligation on the Consumer Council to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers, including specific responsibilities for energy. To my knowledge, the Consumer Council has not raised any concerns with my Department about the adequacies of those statutory arrangements.

Gas prices have risen significantly in GB, at an average of 29%. British Gas prices have risen by 35% this year, and Scottish and Southern Energy prices have risen by 29%. EDF Energy has received much attention recently, but I will leave the nuclear debate for another day.

NIE Energy advises that, after the October price rise, electricity prices for domestic consumers are broadly comparable with those in the Republic of Ireland. Phoenix Natural Gas advises that, based on average bills, prices in its licence area of greater Belfast and Larne are lower than those in the Republic of Ireland. Prices are £690 a year compared with an average in the Republic of Ireland of £717 a year. On a unit-rate-of-energy basis, Phoenix's prices are higher.

Ms Purvis: Will the Minister explain why £5 million was given to Invest NI to help businesses over the economic downturn? What help is being given to consumers? It sounds as though the policy is one of socialism for the rich and free enterprise for the poor.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: That is absolutely not the case. The Member must know that businesses are struggling, and it is within my remit, through Invest Northern Ireland, to help those businesses to get through the credit crunch. If she listens further, I will touch on the fuel poverty strategy, which has been mentioned and which, I hope, will come to the Executive table this Thursday to deal with the issues that affect consumers.

The Member referred to the fact that I have given Invest NI £5 million to address energy efficiency and other issues that affect small businesses. That money will be well spent, because in a period of poverty and fuel poverty, economic growth is not an option but a necessity. We must continue to grow our economy; that is outlined in the Programme for Government, and it is an Executive priority.

The effect of rising energy costs and fuel poverty on less well-off individuals — such as pensioners and people on benefits or low incomes — is a concern. The Fuel Poverty Task Force that Margaret Ritchie established

will, I hope, report to the Executive on Thursday 2 October 2008, and I know that she has a clear view of how that process should progress. Dr McDonnell mentioned the windfall tax. The Minister of Finance and Personnel confirmed that he supports the task force's efforts and is content to make appropriate representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on its findings. The Department for Social Development (DSD) warm homes scheme is still the main programme for tackling fuel poverty in Northern Ireland. However, as Dr McDonnell indicated, all Departments have a responsibility. We should bear that in mind when the Executive meet on Thursday — please God.

The three power stations in Northern Ireland with oil- and gas-storage facilities are required to maintain oil stocks that can be used as emergency backup fuel in the event of a coal shortage or a curtailment in the gas supply from Great Britain. The oil industry in Northern Ireland maintains oil stocks for industrial, agricultural and domestic use, with frequent deliveries on a just-in-time basis. The bulk of oil stocks are held in greater Belfast.

Mr McNarry referred to the “structural weaknesses”. He is correct — there are no indigenous natural-gas supplies and no gas storage in Northern Ireland. However, Northern Ireland benefits from recent significant investment in gas storage in Great Britain, and investigative work is under way to consider whether underground gas storage can be developed here. In particular, Portland Gas has announced positive geological findings in Larne Lough and hopes to conduct further investigations to confirm whether gas could be stored in solution-mined cavities in suitable salt strata approximately 1·5 km below the lough's surface. I welcome those moves to tackle storage gaps and hope that they can be accelerated.

Diversification of energy supplies is important in order to provide fuel choice and security of supply. In recent years, power generation in Northern Ireland has been provided by two gas-fired power stations and a coal-fired generator. The single electricity market has enhanced the security of Northern Ireland's electricity power supply, and the extension of the natural-gas network to 10 urban areas outside greater Belfast provides a choice of energy supply for business and domestic consumers.

Significant work is ongoing to establish how renewable energy can contribute further to power generation, improved diversity and security of supply, and shelter Northern Ireland from global oil-price fluctuations. Competition is important. The island of Ireland has a single electricity market, but we must consider larger markets, either on the British Isles or into France. We had some useful discussions on that issue during the British-Irish Council meeting in Edinburgh on Friday 26 September 2008.

Increasing competition in energy-supply markets elsewhere has, generally, resulted in lower prices and improved customer service. Although Members believe that the Northern Ireland energy market is hugely important, it is a small market that comprises approximately 790,000 electricity consumers and only 120,000 natural-gas consumers, who are mainly concentrated in greater Belfast. Although the electricity-supply market in Northern Ireland and gas-supply market in greater Belfast are open to competition, customer switching has been limited. The Department has discussed that matter with the Utility Regulator. Northern Ireland has little scope to be sheltered from the significant global rise in energy costs. Rising energy costs are a concern here, in the rest of the UK, the Republic of Ireland and further afield.

I am fully aware of the impact that the increases are having on consumers and businesses. The Executive really must meet on Thursday to deal with all the issues that have been mentioned.

The review of the 2004 strategic energy framework that took place earlier this year has been referred to. That is crucial in enabling us to develop a policy context. Simon Hamilton said that a mature and informed debate is needed. When Members contribute to a debate, it is crucial that they are fully informed so that they contribute in a meaningful way.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. People are justifiably very angry about gas and electricity price rises. It is quite proper that some of that anger has been reflected during the debate. People are angry because they are being landed with massive price hikes.

We are told that it is a done deal and that nothing can be done; that there is no point in complaining. We are told that we just have to pull out our wallets and get on with it. We are told that the price hikes are due to the rising price of oil. However, we hear that the price of oil is now falling, but nothing is happening at the retail end.

People are angry because there seems to be a one-way ratchet when it comes to prices. They are afraid because they feel absolutely powerless. That is always extremely frustrating. The price increase will conceivably tell its tale during the winter months when fuel poverty kicks in; when fuel-related illnesses have their impact; when our hospitals clog up; and when the death toll rises as a result of fuel poverty and poor health. That, in itself, is a massive issue.

The wholesale energy market appears to do what it wants. We are told that the price of gas is linked to the price of oil, but we are never told why. That link has absolutely nothing to do with the way in which oil and gas are extracted from the earth, and it has nothing to do with exploration or recovery. The link between the

two is a result of how they are traded. When we fill up our cars, or when a tanker of home-heating oil backs into our driveways, the fuel has already been traded at least 15 times before it came to the retailer. Fifteen people — or, more likely, 15 hedge funds — receive a slice of the action from the price that people pay for fuel.

Even the gas that fuels our cookers has been traded at least six times by people who have never seen a pipeline, never been near a refinery or never visited an oil field in the Persian Gulf. I note that Viridian, the owner of NIE, had a turnover of over £1 billion last year, and increased its dividend by 157% on the previous year. That is an example of what is going on.

During the course of the debate, I listened closely to informed comments from colleagues in the House. Mr Hamilton referred to capitalising on the North's energy potential. A positive, well-informed and impartial debate about available energy sources is needed, because there are various interests that advocate various causes. Mr Neeson referred to the single energy market and to my colleague Minister Margaret Ritchie's plans to alleviate some of the causes of fuel poverty, as did my party colleague Alasdair McDonnell.

As Jennifer McCann mentioned, there is merit in an all-island approach to energy. My colleague the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment referred to the review that will be carried out by Mr Douglas McIlDoon. It is unclear what the outcome of that review will be and what criteria might be used. Major issues exist, and the Minister touched on some of those.

I certainly do not envy the job of the Utility Regulator, which has to listen to the sob stories of the gas and electricity providers. I have no doubt that the providers could produce reams of figures and acres of spreadsheets to prove that they have absolutely no choice but to increase prices. The regulator can check their sums, cut their margins slightly and question the basis of their figures, but there are no competitors.

There is nowhere to get a second opinion. We have a regulator because there is no competition — there is no market. If NIE does a lousy deal, and buys oil futures at far too high a price, or if Phoenix Natural Gas gets things wildly wrong, and pays over the odds for next year's gas, what can the energy regulator do? Costs — so they say — must be passed on to the consumer, and we all know that mistakes can be costly. We need a better system that places the consumer — the person who pays everyone else's wages — at the forefront.

I support amendment No 3. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

1.15 pm

Ms Lo: The Alliance Party supports amendment No 2. Mr Sean Neeson welcomed the independent review

of electricity tariffs, and we heard other Members' support for the Consumer Council being given a stronger role in protecting customers' rights to fair prices.

My party understands that global markets have pushed up fuel prices all over the world, including in the UK. However, compared to other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland consumers continue to pay much more. The Minister mentioned some of the reasons for that, such as the fact that the market here is small; however, as other Members said, better and more competition in the Northern Ireland electricity and gas markets must be sought to ensure that local customers are not exploited and manipulated by monopolies.

Mr Neeson said that ever more people are being pushed towards fuel poverty. In the coming months, as many as 43% of customers will have difficulty meeting fuel bills. Moreover, the Alliance Party is concerned that the Department for Social Development's strategy to tackle fuel poverty is stuck in the Executive, and we call for progress to be made as soon as possible.

The Alliance Party's amendment recognises that we do not require further inquiries and research — we need action. The Executive must sit around the table and agree an action plan to help households, businesses and consumers, who struggle daily to pay their bills. We want short-term measures — similar to those introduced for flood victims — to alleviate hardship, and immediate assistance for businesses. Energy consumers should be given money to help over the next few months.

In common with other parties, the Alliance Party calls for long-term planning and investment in renewable energy sources, such as wave, wind and solar energy, which offer great potential for Northern Ireland. We must build a long-term renewable-energy strategy. The Minister said that no one mentioned sustainable households, so I state that new homes should be built more sustainably, and builders should be required to install better insulation in order to guard against future energy cost hikes.

Mr Newton: I understand fully the motivation of the Member who proposed the motion. Regardless of Members' feelings about how the issue of energy prices is addressed, they share a common sense of concern for the general householder, elderly people and parents with young children.

The motion must be amended because it has been overtaken by the events of the past few days. I praise the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's acknowledgement that a review is needed, even though she concedes that she has no obvious role in implementing any such review.

That is the reason that I take issue with Mr Mitchel McLaughlin. Forgive me if I do not quote him verbatim, but he stated that the DUP amendment was a transparent

attempt to protect the Minister over her failure to address the issue. Nobody can accuse the Minister of being remiss in her responsibilities on energy prices. However, that type of comment stands alongside remarks by another Member — Mr John O'Dowd — who accused the Minister of approving the rise in electricity charges. The world and its granny know that that is not the case and that the Utility Regulator's role is independent from the Minister's.

On the matter of recent events having overtaken the motion — it is difficult to understand comments made on the review by the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mark Durkan. He questioned whether the review's remit was wide enough. Mr Durkan quoted from the review's terms of reference, but he omitted some points:

“The objectives of the review are: to establish where the process and outcome are robust; to identify where improvements could be made; to explain the role of regulation in the context of wider energy policy; and to ensure these findings are understood by a wide stakeholder group.”

Those terms address universal demands for transparency. I take some credit because I raised that issue with the Utility Regulator in at least two meetings of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I am glad that the Utility Regulator has at least responded positively in appointing Mr Douglas McIlldoon to undertake the review. No one questions Mr McIlldoon's credibility to head the inquiry. However, he has also been asked to consider how the short- and long-term interests of customers can be promoted in regard to the price of electricity. That is a wide brief.

I am sorry that Alasdair McDonnell is not in the Chamber. However, Dr McDonnell and Mr McGlone's amendment proposes that the public has no confidence in regulation. In the absence of any supporting evidence, that is a dreadful statement. I question whether Dr McDonnell can justify that as a valid opinion.

Mr Shannon: Does the Member agree that Prime Minister Gordon Brown has a role and responsibility in relation to energy pricing? Much more than better insulation in lofts or cavity walls is required to address senior citizens' concerns. Does Mr Newton agree that Mr Brown must consider help that involves hard cash? Many elderly people already have insulation in their homes. They want hard cash.

Mr Newton: I agree with the Member. I hope that I get my extra minute because I want to say more about Dr McDonnell and Mr McGlone's amendment.

The amendment calls for:

“a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council”.

I believe that the Consumer Council is very clear about its role. Indeed, during meetings of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Consumer

Council paid tribute to the Minister for the support that he was offering to it in clarifying its role.

The amendment goes on to call for:

“a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls”.

I do not know anyone who lacks confidence in the work of the Consumer Council, so I do not understand where this suggestion is coming from. My understanding is that the Consumer Council is simply asking that its role be respected, that it is consulted with, and that it is given access to materials. It is not making any additional demands. I have not been lobbied by the Consumer Council to call for an extension of its powers, so I wonder what inspired that part of the amendment.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to all Members who have contributed to this important debate. There has been remarkable consensus in what has been said about energy prices and the recent hikes in electricity and gas prices by the interest groups from the manufacturing, industry, commerce, and consumer sectors that have been lobbying the Assembly. For instance, the Northern Ireland Manufacturing Focus Group has said:

“These cost increases will put our manufacturing sector under huge pressure to remain competitive against foreign competitors who do business much more cheaply, whose power is less expensive, where wages are a fraction of what they cost here, and who have less distance to travel to market.”

The Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association has told us:

“Independent retailers will have on one hand to try and remain competitive by absorbing this hike of 30% and on the other with consumers facing a 33% increase in electricity and 20% gas increase there is the very real prospect that they will be cutting back further on their grocery list.”

The Consumer Council has told us that 90% of respondents to a recent survey that it conducted are becoming increasingly alarmed about how to make ends meet. Public meetings across the Province have shown that 73% of those who attended are depriving themselves of home heating because of energy price increases, while 52% are depriving themselves of fuel and 46% are depriving themselves of food. Clearly, these are very serious times.

We would do well to remind ourselves that since January 2008, electricity prices have increased in Great Britain by 29% and in the Republic of Ireland by 17.5%. However, electricity prices have increased in Northern Ireland by a staggering 52%. On top of the existing disparity in prices between Northern Ireland and GB, those figures suggest clearly that our economy cannot sustain our energy policy and society cannot carry on as normal.

In his opening speech, my colleague Mr McNarry pinpointed a lack of gas storage facilities as a major underlying cause of the short-term fluctuations in local

gas prices and the potential for instability of supply. He linked those problems to our over-dependence on gas as our main source of electricity, and compared it with the better planning that exists in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and the United States, which has secured far greater reserves of supply for those countries.

I must also emphasise what Mr McNarry said about the urgent need to develop a gas-storage facility in the former salt mines under Larne Lough, and I welcome the Minister's comments about that. However, I am disappointed that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has so far failed to produce an energy policy, something that it had promised to do by the end of 2007.

The think tank Chatham House has said that the failure to prepare for the future has left Britain facing a severe energy shortfall and that there is now no option but to step up imports of expensive natural gas from an increasingly assertive Russia. Only last Friday, the National Grid suggested that the country could be crippled by energy shortages when the colder weather bites this winter, because there is so little spare capacity.

1.30 pm

We have had an interesting debate to which Members from all sides of the House contributed, particularly in the discussions on the three amendments.

Mr Hamilton suggested that we should take an innovative and inventive look at alternative forms of energy production. He even mentioned the “n” word — nuclear energy. However, he then retreated — probably sensibly — to leave that major debate for another day.

Mr Neeson and other Members rightly condemned the actions of Sinn Féin in blocking Executive meetings at which this issue, among others, could be dealt with.

Dr McDonnell reminded the House of the impact that rising energy costs have on the elderly and on single and low-income families. He also warned of the great — and likely — impact that such rises will have on our health services, and he warned that this winter, many people will have to choose between heating and eating. Dr McDonnell also praised his ministerial colleague, Margaret Ritchie. Given that he is her political colleague, I suppose that that was very commendable.

Jennifer McCann tried to uphold the needs of consumers. However, her argument and that of Mitchel McLaughlin have holes in them. That is because of Sinn Féin's failure to allow Executive meetings to take place. Mr McLaughlin criticised the Department for the lack of an action plan and called for a kick “up the backside” — I think that is what he said — for the industry. However, other parties in the House would call for exactly the same remedy to the problem of Sinn

Fein's non-attendance at Executive meetings. Indeed, it is now time that that party had the proverbial kick up the backside to ensure that such meetings occur.

I welcome the Minister's attendance in the Chamber and her contribution to the debate. She said that national and international issues to which we are subject are at play. However, she mentioned a range of issues that the review that is to be conducted by Mr McIlldoon will address. It is hoped that that review will result in the speedy production of an action plan that the House and the Executive can endorse.

The motion outlines the key ingredients of an energy review. Given the impact that such a review will have on overall economic policy, OFMDFM must take a lead role. The key elements that must be addressed are: electricity and gas prices; how prices compare with those in the rest of the United Kingdom; the impact that they have on inflation and manufacturing costs; the impact that they have on households; and the availability of oil and gas storage facilities. Only when those matters have been addressed will we be able to frame an intelligent energy policy that will help to secure our economy and address the very real issues that we face in our living standards.

The debate has therefore been useful. Members and parties have had a good opportunity, which they have all taken, to air various concerns. A consistent theme emerged from all sides of the House. Given that, I appeal to those Members who tabled the three amendments to withdraw them, thus allowing the Question on the motion to be agreed on the understanding that all views are now clearly on the record and have been expressed in the presence of the Minister and her officials. We can then look forward to the Minister and her Department taking action on the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that if the amendment is made, amendment No 2 will not be called. However, amendment No 3 may still be called.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I believe that the Ayes have it.

Mr McGlone: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is clear that there is a division on this matter, and I would like it on the record.

Lord Morrow: Mr Deputy Speaker, are you not supposed to make a decision?

Mr Deputy Speaker: My decision has been challenged, so I will put the Question in three minutes.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 57.

AYES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mrs I Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Hamilton and Mr I McCrea.

NOES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr D Bradley.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Question put, That amendment No 3 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 60; Noes 30.

AYES

Mr Adams, Ms Anderson, Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Burns, Mr Butler, Mr W Clarke, Mr Cobain, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Dr Deeny, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner, Ms Gildernew, Mrs Hanna, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McFarland, Mrs McGill, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McNarry, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Mr Neeson, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr O'Loan, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Purvis, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr K Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Mr Burns.

2.00 pm

NOES

Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan,
Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Dodds,
Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch,
Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Dr W McCrea,
Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton,
Mr Paisley Jnr, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson,
Mrs I Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Shannon, Mr Simpson,
Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Simpson and Mr Weir.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly deplores the 33.3% rise in electricity prices by Northern Ireland Electricity and the 19.2% increase in Phoenix Natural Gas prices; and calls on the Executive to bring forward an Action Plan to counter the effects of rising electricity and gas prices on (i) private household budgets; (ii) manufacturing costs for businesses; (iii) inflation for consumers; and (iv) availability of oil and gas storage facilities; and further calls for a clearly defined role for the Consumer Council in the regulatory process with a view to maximising public confidence in price controls; asks the Regulator and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explore ways of improving consumer access to the single energy market; and recalls the motion of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment on Rising Energy Costs unanimously adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 2008.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Adequate Home-Help Provision

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McCarthy: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it.

I thank my Assembly colleagues, particularly those on the Business Committee, for agreeing to bring this very important social issue to the Chamber. I also thank the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Michael McGimpsey, for being present to hear our very real concerns. I hope that he will take action, where appropriate.

The term "home help" was, and is, very appropriate. The concept is simple; as the name suggests, the purpose of a home help is to provide suitable domestic help in the home to those people who need basic assistance to enjoy a reasonable and comfortable way of life in their homes, and who are unable to do certain chores for themselves. For the most part, but not exclusively, the basic home-help service is required for senior citizens. When we hear of someone in need, and being denied that need, we should be ashamed of ourselves. Were my elderly mother or father, or the only parent or relative of any Member in such need, we certainly would not be happy. Let us all commit ourselves to ensuring that no one in our society goes without that vital help.

The provision of adequate home-help services will, no doubt, involve more work for the new commissioner for older people, when that post is established; there may be two, three, or even four commissioners. The sooner that those commissioners are in place, the better.

The term "home help" is no longer used, but the same work must be done, regardless of what term is used. New names are now used for such services, and there are new levels of domestic work. That is where the problem stems from.

The problem was recently made public when 'The Stephen Nolan Show' discussed the experience of one of my constituents from Newtownards. Mr Stitt is over

80, lives on his own and is recovering from a triple heart bypass operation. Rather than reducing the help that he receives, those in charge of domiciliary care should be helping people in that situation. We were shocked to hear how Mr Stitt was treated — and his story is replicated across Northern Ireland.

On the morning that Mr Stitt's case was made public, I was contacted by relatives of a 93-year-old lady who lives alone in my constituency. That lady was told that the amount of help that she received would be slashed. That is not what I want for our society. If the Assembly is to mean anything, we must all work together to prove that we can make a difference, particularly for our senior citizens.

A further example of the problem with home-help provision is provided by another one of my constituents. The lady in question was informed that she would receive 15 minutes of help, in which her home help was expected to heat a pre-prepared meal, wait while the lady ate the meal and wash the dishes. Is that the level of dignity that anyone, let alone our senior citizens, should be asked to accept? Surely, people are entitled to some space in which to enjoy their meals. Further cutbacks will make the problem worse.

Our elderly and infirm neighbours across Northern Ireland have served the community extremely well through very difficult times — all Members know what I am taking about. The least that we can do is to ensure that those people are comfortable, get sufficient food and are safe and secure when they require help. One day, all of us will seek assistance.

On 31 October 2007, the Northern Ireland Audit Office published its report 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', which made interesting reading on the issues of needs assessment, prevention, quality of service, staff recruitment, and private-and voluntary-sector provision. The report highlighted how home help had reduced by 15.5 % over a seven-year period, which is a trend that will, to our eternal shame, get worse.

Health and social care trusts are reassessing recipients of home-help provision. That has a negative effect on our senior citizens. They begin to worry when they are told of a reassessment visit, and the fear factor kicks in. Senior citizens know that the purpose of such a visit is to establish whether further cuts can be made. In any decent society, the basic tasks that need to be carried out to sustain a reasonable standard of living for the elderly — cleaning the home, preparing food, washing dishes, lighting a fire, making beds and ironing and washing — would be the job of a community care-worker.

I understand that during September, a report was issued to staff instructing them that, from October, all cleaning, laundry and domestic services must stop. That is scandalous — it is horrendous for senior citizens and it is totally unacceptable. It must be the last straw.

Can Members support that type of action? I am glad that the Minister is present in the Chamber. I hope that he can deny that that took place, certainly in my constituency. If it is true, we must all hang our heads in shame. If those cutbacks come to pass, care in the community, as we know it, will have gone — it will be a thing of the past. I appeal to Minister McGimpsey to ensure that that does not happen. Let us provide care for the elderly.

If those disastrous cutbacks take place, what will be the result? Elderly people will suffer more, both physically and mentally. They will probably end up in hospital or in residential and nursing homes — which is the opposite of Government policy. Most people support community care, in whatever form. It is, therefore, essential that the Government and the Assembly allocate the necessary funding to ensure that all elderly people benefit from a decent existence at a time when they cannot fend for themselves.

I ask Members to support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I support the motion. Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has responsibility for the delivery of a plethora of healthcare services, one service in particular — home-help provision — has generated a growing number of letters to my constituency office.

As increasing financial pressure has been brought to bear on Departments and local healthcare trusts, people could be forgiven for thinking that the home-help service is an easy target for cuts in available resources.

I wish to use the predicament in which one of my constituents has found herself to illustrate the problems that are now prevalent. Recently, I was contacted by Mrs Eileen Clerici, who lives outside Saintfield. She was in a state of considerable distress, having been told that her home-help service was being reorganised. Although there is no question that the service will be withdrawn, for a 93-year-old lady who suffers from serious heart and blood-pressure problems, and who has poor sight and hearing, such a change is a big deal.

Mrs Clerici has been in receipt of home-help assistance for the past eight years. For the first six or seven of those years, her help was provided by a single carer. That provided a safe and constant environment in which Mrs Clerici built a positive relationship with her home help, who was able to become familiar with Mrs Clerici's needs and, most importantly, gain her trust.

A few years ago, the system was reviewed and the single home help was replaced by three different people who attended to Mrs Clerici's needs at different times of the day. That proved a considerable upheaval for her. However, it was mitigated by the fact that one of the three home helps was her regular and original carer.

We fast-forward to 2008, when Mrs Clerici was informed that, once again, the trust intends to alter the manner in which home-help services are delivered around the Saintfield area and that her three current home helps are to be removed to carry out duties in Saintfield town. Mrs Clerici will now be tended to by agency staff. The thought of the carers with whom she is familiar and has built up considerable trust during the past eight years being replaced by strangers has caused her considerable anxiety. At her stage in life, familiar faces are important.

Someone of Mrs Clerici's age and health should not have to endure the trauma of letting people who are, effectively, strangers into her home — nor the challenge of having to establish new relationships and trust.

2.15 pm

I contacted the chief executive of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, and was informed that although the trust sympathised with the problems facing Mrs Clerici, it did not have sufficient funds to maintain the service, and it was forced to change her care package.

I thought that the delivery of health care was to take place within the community. Although we sell that package, we do not deliver it because the funding is not available. We make a mockery of the promises that we make to the most vulnerable in society.

It has no relevance to the debate, but we have just heard that a trust is removing a small pay packet of approximately 50p or £1.50 from adults and young people with special needs and learning difficulties. That little pay packet makes those people feel that they have earned something from their week's work, and they feel important going home with it. When we think of the size of the budget given to health, to take that from the most vulnerable — as well as depriving our elderly — is a scandal.

That is merely one example of how the rationalisation and reduction of home-help services affects those involved. In each case, we have a situation whereby the nature of the beast, the health and well-being of the service user, is declining. Whereas an observer might assume that service provision is increasing, it is really decreasing to a point where those availing themselves of it begin to feel abandoned by the system. Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety guidelines state:

“The aim of the Home Help Service is to provide practical assistance and care in their own homes for the elderly, the sick, the handicapped and families where parents are absent or incapacitated”.

They qualify that commitment by stating:

“As the resources available are limited it is important that the service is provided to those in the greatest need.”

There is no greater need than that of the elderly and those with special needs and learning difficulties.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin supports the motion and commends the Members who have brought it before the House.

The work of care assistants and home helps is invaluable. Without the service, many would be unable to live independently in their homes and would be forced into nursing care.

Home-help provision varies widely across, and within, trusts. In my constituency of Mid Ulster, there seems to be a particular difficulty in getting adequate home-help provision in rural areas. On numerous occasions, I have been contacted by constituents in rural areas who are concerned about inadequate home-help provision. It is not the fault of home helps, or of social services; there is difficulty in recruiting home helps.

The issue of travel time has been brought to my attention. In a rural area, a home help might have to travel for up to an hour to his or her destination and back in order to work for 15 minutes. Surely, that system is not viable; it has serious resource implications.

There is a wide gap between the care plan recommended by social services and the care subsequently provided. That poses a risk to the health and well-being of those most vulnerable in our communities — the elderly and disabled. I am aware of several cases in which an elderly person, unable to get out of a chair unassisted, has been left for a couple of days without a visit from a home help. It seems to happen during holiday periods, when it is difficult to provide cover. I do not mean to detract from the good work that is provided by care workers in people's homes; they do a wonderful job, considering the conditions in which they have to work.

Home-help provision must be properly resourced, and home helps must have proper contracts that guarantee hours and conditions of work. The system is severely under-resourced, and, as a result, good home helps are leaving for the private sector. Their need for guaranteed hours means that they cannot continue to work for social services. Many home helps work longer hours than those stipulated by their contracts because it is impractical to care for someone in the time allocated. They receive no pay for that extra time, yet they work out of commitment to the people for whom they care. Given that home helps usually earn lower wages, it is ridiculous that they are put in that position.

We are all aware that we have an ageing population and of the issues that that raises. However, that is no excuse for treating the elderly as a burden. They have worked hard and paid their taxes. The elderly should, at least, be able to expect that they will be treated with humanity and dignity, and that they will be given the proper level of care required, so that they can have

some quality of life, and not just exist with the minimum level of care that can be provided.

Of course, I accept that efficiency savings are necessary, but we must not allow them to be targeted towards the most vulnerable in society.

I support the motion.

Mr Gardiner: I congratulate the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his announcement on prescription charges. I warmly welcome the decision, which will be beneficial to all the people of Northern Ireland who must rely on continuous prescriptions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Gardiner: If there was an endless supply of money, we could do everything that we wanted on an endless wish list. However, as Members of the Assembly, we must stop making wish lists and start behaving responsibly and acting like adults who have finite resources at their disposal, and who are accountable for how those resources are spent.

“Resources” is a fashionable word. Let us call it what it is — it is public money that comes from every taxpayer in the Province. Let us get real.

Of the 25,000 to 30,000 home helps across Northern Ireland, it is my understanding that very few of them will provide the minimum level of services. Home helps are to be allocated 15 minutes to undertake a number of tasks; very few undertake just one task.

We have an ageing population, which means that there will have to be major shifts in spending within the National Health Service.

In my constituency, I met a woman whose home-help provision was reduced to 15 minutes. The Department said that her provision was reduced because her home help was expected to peel potatoes and to prepare evening meals for other family members. In that case, the Department was right to reduce the provision. Home help is not provided for that purpose, it is provided to give care and support to an individual.

I appreciate the work that home helps in the Health Service do for people who deserve and need care. Patients appreciate that help. However, we must ensure that we do not overstretch that provision, and that we do not spoil it for other people. From the figures that I quoted, it is clear that we do not have enough carers to undertake additional duties. I support the Health Service and the carers' system, but we must be careful about how money is spent.

I have gone on record many times calling for a far greater emphasis in public life on the needs of older people. Only recently, I asked the First Minister to take steps to introduce an age-proofing stage to all new legislation that comes before the Assembly. Therefore, I strongly support the rights of older people. I know

that my colleague Mr McGimpsey, the Minister of Health Social Services and Public Safety, is also a strong advocate of the rights and needs of our older citizens.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, because the time in which I have to speak is almost up. However, I appreciate the Member's request.

Making major shifts in expenditure in as large and as complex an organisation as the National Health Service is not something that can be done overnight or, for that matter, on the whim of Mr McCarthy's motion. It is a major undertaking, because with every pound more that we spend in one area of the Health Service, we have to spend a pound less in another part.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you; my time is almost up.

Therefore, although I broadly support the sentiments of the motion, specific matters could have been resolved locally and administratively. The public expects the Assembly to be about hard work, not hot air. If cases are followed through individually, they could be resolved locally.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I propose that Members take their ease until that time. This debate will resume after Question Time, when the first Member called to speak will be Mrs Carmel Hanna.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Child Poverty Strategy

1. **Mr Shannon** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm that full consideration is being given to the “credit crunch” in relation to the implementation of the child poverty strategy; and that targets set in this strategy will be met. (AQO 282/09)

The deputy First Minister (Mr M McGuinness): The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) remains committed to reducing child poverty, and it is, of course, particularly concerned about the impact that recent cost increases will have. In light of the credit crunch that we all face, the First Minister and I are engaging in a series of meetings with key stakeholders in the sectors that are most particularly affected. Our commitment to tackling child poverty is outlined in the Programme for Government, which commits the Executive to work towards the elimination of child poverty here by 2020, to reduce it by 50% by 2010, and to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012.

To advance that work, the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people, which is chaired by the junior Ministers, has established a cross-departmental group to ensure that there is a comprehensive and cohesive focus on child poverty. That subgroup’s work will include consideration of the social and economic policies that are needed to reduce child poverty, taking account of the current economic climate.

The subgroup will also give careful consideration to the recommendations that emerged from the inquiry into child poverty that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister carried out. Officials will report the conclusions of the subgroup to the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people. That work will be part of a wider strategy, which will be agreed by the Executive, to tackle poverty and social exclusion and patterns of deprivation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister are concerned about

the level of deprivation and child poverty in their constituencies and across the Province in areas that are perceived to be affluent but that are far from it.

In the process of the Committee’s inquiry, over 40 recommendations were made, and we want to be assured that they will be implemented as soon as possible. Co-operation between Departments must also be initiated quickly so that child poverty issues can be addressed today. Will the Minister ensure that the inquiry’s recommendations are implemented as soon as possible and that child poverty will be addressed in order to help people who are now under more pressure than ever?

The deputy First Minister: As junior Minister Kelly said when responding to the debate on the Committee’s report on 17 June 2008, OFMDFM welcomes the publication of the report. The work in which the Committee engaged provided a tremendous service. Along with our ministerial colleagues, we have considered the report’s contents and its 47 associated recommendations. We are currently finalising a formal response to the report, and we hope to have that with the Committee imminently.

We are conscious of the Member’s initial point that child poverty relates not only to a few specific parts of the North, but is an issue that can affect the whole community. Therefore, it is important to take the time to get it right. That is why the Committee’s input into the debate is of particular value. We hope to act on the issue imminently, and we also hope to make rapid progress.

Mr Beggs: As I am an MLA who represents a constituency in which many children suffer from child poverty, can the Minister state whether the credit crunch will have an adverse impact, in that more children are likely to suffer as a result of child poverty? What effect does he believe that the failure of the Executive to meet over the summer will have on the issue? Does he accept that more children will suffer because of his party’s refusal to allow the Executive to meet and deal with those pressing issues, which could be raised either by the junior Ministers or by other Ministers, in a practical way?

The deputy First Minister: We acknowledge the real difficulties that the credit crunch will bring to the most vulnerable in society.

We must help those individuals to manage during the peaks and outgoings. Financial inclusion will remain an important element of the wider strategy to tackle poverty and social inclusion, and an emphasis will be placed on affordable credit, financial education and debt advice services. Much of that work has been conducted by the NI financial capability partnership, which comprises the Consumer Council and other key partner organisations such as Government Departments.

I am committed to Executive meetings, and I want those meetings to take place. It is the responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to agree an

agenda for those meetings. We are currently striving to agree that agenda.

Mr Durkan: Does the deputy First Minister concur with the First Minister's comments in the Assembly two weeks ago that it is logically impossible to meet the Programme for Government's child poverty targets? In order to advance the child poverty strategy, will he and his colleagues consider reinstating the children's fund as a means of providing cross-departmental support to the community and voluntary sector? Does he agree with Gordon Brown that child poverty targets should be written into statutory legislation? Will he recommend such a measure in this House or through a legislative consent motion in Westminster?

The deputy First Minister: We must consider deeply all proposals and suggestions. As I indicated in my initial response, the Executive agreed the Programme for Government and, in particular, the commitment to tackle child poverty. That commitment includes an agreement to work towards the elimination of child poverty here by 2020, a 50% reduction in child poverty by 2010 and the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012. Any changes to those targets must be agreed by all parties in the Executive. It is important to recognise that child poverty is a clear Executive priority.

However, we are conscious of how the worsening international fiscal situation is impacting on world Governments and, in particular, those in western Europe. We must face those challenges and ensure that our targets are achievable. Some people think that the targets are unachievable, and some individuals believe that it is impossible to rid society of child poverty completely. The Executive have a duty and responsibility to explore all the possibilities in order — as far as possible — to achieve our targets. To date, no party in the Executive has proposed changes to the targets, and, therefore, we will continue with those aims. However, in the future, the worsening worldwide fiscal situation could force us to review that matter.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. (AQO 353/09)

The deputy First Minister: The development of detailed proposals for a programme of cohesion, sharing and integration for a shared and better future is at an advanced stage. That programme will tackle sectarianism and racism, which were, previously, separate but associated policies. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive, through the Programme for Government, are committed to building an integrated and cohesive society that is at

ease with itself and where everyone is regarded and treated equally.

The programme's emphasis will be to support local people to deal with local issues through local solutions. The refreshed policy will not compromise ongoing work but will support, facilitate and resource that good practice more efficiently. The draft strategy will be submitted to the Committee before the Halloween recess and will be subject to a full consultation and equality impact assessment.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. There was a long gap between the shelving of the two previous policies and the publication of the new cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Furthermore, there were no departmental actions to promote community and race relations for almost two years. Given that, how serious is OFMDFM about tackling divisions in our society?

The deputy First Minister: OFMDFM — and, indeed, the entire Executive — is very focused on the need to end divisions in society. The new programme will tackle the very complex and long-standing issue of sectarianism and the more recent issue of racism, which affects established communities as well as new arrivals.

It is important that the proposals are given the fullest consideration. They will build on the excellent work that district councils and community organisations in particular have done already to address the challenges that local communities face. Actions to tackle sectarianism, racism and intolerance will be at the core of those proposals, given that the policy is pivotal to achieving a peaceful, fair and prosperous society with respect for the rule of law. We will ensure that the programme proposals will contribute to that aim.

In early April 2008, OFMDFM officials briefed the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the development of the proposed programme. The consultation document will be issued to that Committee before the Halloween recess. After that, I hope that much more rapid progress will be made.

Mr Kennedy: In April 2008, the deputy First Minister told the House that the Northern Ireland Executive allocated £29 million to the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. In the light of the Executive meetings over the past three months being blocked by Sinn Féin, will any of that money be spent on a re-education programme for Sinn Féin that will apprise its members of their responsibilities to act in the public interest and to deliver a cohesive, joined-up Government through the Executive?

The deputy First Minister: It is very hard to take that question seriously, except to say that the work of ensuring that Executive meetings take place should continue. Nobody is blocking Executive meetings; the

duty and responsibility of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is to agree an agenda that reflects the widest possible representation of people in society. We are working to try and make that happen as we speak, and I hope that we will succeed.

Mr McCausland: I welcome the update on the strategy; we need to develop a shared and better future and better community relations in Northern Ireland.

In that context, does the deputy First Minister accept that the recent television programme about the 1983 IRA Maze Prison breakout — and the contribution of his colleague Gerry Kelly in particular — has damaged community relations in Northern Ireland and has set them back by several years? I refer to Gerry Kelly's description of the way in which he shot one of the prison officers during the escape and the fact that he treated that in such an offhand manner — almost as a matter of amusement — with no sense of remorse at all.

The deputy First Minister: I hope that people will view the programme in its historical context: the event that it described happened 25 years ago, and the BBC decided that it would produce a programme on it. Various views were proffered as to the value of that programme — some thought that it was very interesting historically — but others, as the Member said, took umbrage at its content.

All of us must recognise that our past was very troubled. The past should not be forgotten, but this Assembly should try to build peace and new relationships by charting a course towards the type of new society that we all want. It is a matter of historical fact that people who were part of conflicts have also been very much part of trying to find solutions to them.

As we proceed, I hope that we will all be very careful in how we address one another and how we deal with issues such as the past. That is a big subject for debate at the moment, and there is a great deal of hurt on all sides. There is a responsibility on us all to recognise that and to contribute in a way that heals, rather than exacerbates, the divisions of the past.

Mr Speaker: Mrs Dolores Kelly is not in her place for Question 3. Question 4 has been withdrawn.

2.45 pm

Proceeds of Former Military Sites

5. **Mr Cobain** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for its assessment of the impact of the refusal by the United Kingdom Government to transfer the proceeds of former military sites to the Executive. (AQO 278/09)

The deputy First Minister: First, I must stress that the British Government have not refused to transfer military sites. As Members know, at every opportunity,

the First Minister and I have pressed the Prime Minister to have the sites gifted. To date, we have not received an official response; however, we remain hopeful of a positive outcome.

The failure to gift further former security installations for the benefit of the community would constitute the British Government's renegeing on previous agreements. The first step in the process, therefore, is to obtain a decision on gifting from the British Government. At this stage, to conduct an assessment of the impact of any refusal would be premature.

Mr Cobain: It would be interesting to know when those agreements were made and with whom.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): David Trimble.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Cobain: The First Minister has enough time to speak; he should allow Members to ask their questions.

Mr S Wilson: The First Minister gave you an answer.

Mr Cobain: Pardon?

The First Minister: I was answering.

Mr Cobain: Can the deputy First Minister not answer for himself?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Cobain: Can the deputy First Minister give Members some idea about when the British Government are likely to make a decision?

The deputy First Minister: I realise that someone other than me made a contribution; however, I shall deal with the first part of the Member's question. That contribution was accurate; the negotiations that dealt with that matter took place during your former party leader David Trimble's time. Obviously, there is —

Mr Cobain: With your leader.

Mr Speaker: Order. The deputy First Minister has the Floor.

The deputy First Minister: Many party leaders were involved in those negotiations, including mine. However, that does not undermine the argument that those sites are valuable and could be put to good use for the entire community.

My party colleague the MP for West Tyrone Pat Doherty — supported by Barry McElduff and by other Members elected to this Chamber — has been championing the cause of a former military site in Omagh to provide an educational establishment that would facilitate six schools in the area. That idea has caught the imagination of many here, of the Irish Government in Dublin, and, because they have responsibility for the site, of the British Government in London. I hope that that work can be expedited.

Some people might argue that that matter will not be resolved until the transfer of policing and justice powers has been resolved. It remains to be seen whether the British Government are holding back on gifting former military sites in order to see a resolution to that matter; however, it is important for the Assembly and the Executive to recognise the value of those sites and the fact that their proper use and development could bring enormous benefits to our people, at a time when there is a serious economic situation worldwide.

Mr O'Loan: How can the deputy First Minister credibly argue for the benefits from former military sites when his Department, for deeply opposing ideological reasons, is spurning a huge sporting, social and economic opportunity at the Maze?

The deputy First Minister: Undoubtedly, the failure to make progress with the development at the Maze/Long Kesh site has weakened our hand. I concede that. All Departments must work together to expedite the matter and to release the maximum economic potential that is locked up at that site. However, having had conversations with the British Prime Minister, I do not feel that that matter has been used against us. Our argument — with which we won comprehensively during previous negotiations — stands the test of time. Rather than renegeing on the commitments made by — and the word of — a previous Prime Minister, the British Government must live up to them.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Trevor Lunn for a supplementary.

Mr Lunn: Mr O'Loan has effectively asked my question.

Rising Cost of Living

6. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what steps it is taking to redress the rising cost of living. (AQO 362/09)

The deputy First Minister: The economic turmoil that is driving up the local cost of living is a global phenomenon. We have a small, open economy and cannot remain immune from global economic events. Short-term business and consumer confidence are undermined by a combination of restricted access to credit, falling property prices, increasing inflation and rising food and energy prices. Those factors seriously impact on the well-being of local people.

The First Minister and I are keen to get the direct views of local stakeholders on the impacts of the economic slowdown. We plan to meet local interest groups in order to discuss the scale and types of problems that are faced, as well as what steps might be taken to mitigate the economic impact.

To date, we have met representatives from the banking and construction sectors, the Institute of Directors, the Utility Regulator and the energy companies. We also plan to meet representatives of the voluntary and community sector, the trade unions, and champions for the consumer and for business. Those meetings have helped us to identify core problems and potentially mitigating actions.

Recent expert analyses have suggested that the local economy is well placed to weather the economic storm, which is good news, although the First Minister and I are acutely conscious that in many local households with severely stretched budgets it is difficult to recognise that. Cost of living pressures threaten people's well-being, and there must be an appropriate social welfare response. I have set out in correspondence with the First Minister a series of measures that might be considered. There will also be detailed discussion on the option of deferring water charges.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. When he met the British Prime Minister on his recent visit, did the deputy First Minister raise the issue of fuel poverty?

The deputy First Minister: At that meeting, I suggested several initiatives that would offset the hardship faced by many in our communities. Those proposals included the indefinite deferral of domestic contributions towards water and sewerage services and the establishment of an emergency fund to address fuel poverty, paid for by increased VAT returns as a result of fuel-cost increases. That initiative would involve giving every fuel-poor household a one-off payment of at least £200 at a minimum cost of £45 million.

Ways of paying for such an emergency fund might include redirecting the British Treasury windfall of £15 million on home heating oil and £25 million on petrol and diesel revenues from here over the past 12 months. Contributions might also be negotiated from the energy industry's non-regulated finances, which include the electricity generators and supply companies. I also raised again with the Prime Minister the issue of gifting of former military sites.

Mr Poots: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that the matter under discussion is cross-cutting and requires the agreement of various Ministers? Therefore, an Executive meeting must be held in order to move the issue forward. Will he confirm that an Executive meeting will take place on Thursday at which the cost of living issue will be dealt with?

The deputy First Minister: I am working in order to ensure that a meeting of the Executive takes place on Thursday. It is also important to note that the Executive have the power, through urgent written procedures, to make decisions that may alleviate the difficulties that people are facing.

Because there has been a bit of verbal sniping, I remind the Ulster Unionist Party that a previous Executive failed to meet for 15 months — from June 1998 until the winter of 1999.

Mr K Robinson: Will the deputy First Minister outline which Northern Ireland Executive programmes are likely to be axed or curtailed in order to provide funds to reduce the impact of the credit crunch? Is there a prioritised list of Executive programmes, and, if there is, what programmes are at the bottom of it?

The deputy First Minister: As we advance, we will give serious consideration to the economic situation that we face and will be cautious about progressing in a way that could place further burdens on people, particularly those on low incomes. The Executive as a whole must decide their strategy for combating the worsening global economic situation.

Civic Forum

7. **Mr A Maskey** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on its comprehensive review of the Civic Forum. (AQO 370/09)

The deputy First Minister: The review of the Civic Forum has sought to canvass as wide a spectrum of opinion as possible on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the structure, operation, composition and membership of the Civic Forum. It has also sought to determine the most appropriate mechanism and arrangements for engaging with and obtaining the views of civic society on social, economic and cultural matters.

The consultation phase of the review was launched on 29 May and more than 50 written submissions had been received by 29 August, the closing date for responses. During the period of May to August, meetings were held with a wide range of stakeholders, including the former chair and members of the forum, as well as civic society organisations and academics. During that period, members of the review team conducted visits to examine mechanisms for engagement with civic society in other jurisdictions, and details of existing arrangements for engagement with civic society by Departments have been collated. The review team is analysing the information that was assembled, including consultation responses, with a view to presenting recommendations and options to the Assembly in the very near future.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. In his view, what are the achievements of the Civic Forum during its — albeit very short — period of operation?

The deputy First Minister: Between October 2000 and October 2002, the Civic Forum met in plenary

session 12 times. In addition to those sessions, the forum established several standing committees and working groups to proceed with distinct aspects of its work programme.

Although operational for only a short time, the Civic Forum contributed to draft programmes for Government, engaged in several research projects into long-term issues affecting society and, by the time of suspension, had published reports on educational disadvantage and a regional strategy for social inclusion. The Civic Forum made submissions to Departments on investing for health, the review of post-primary education, priorities for social inclusion and the role of the Commissioner for Children and Young People. It also commented on an OFMDFM review of community relations policy.

Mr Moutray: Will the deputy First Minister confirm that, when the Civic Forum was in action, it had very few, if any, achievements and was a total waste of taxpayers' money?

The deputy First Minister: No; I do not agree with that at all.

Mr Gallagher: The deputy First Minister has acknowledged some of the good work that was done by the Civic Forum, which, as we all know, was a vehicle for building social partnership and promoting trust and reconciliation. That body is part of the Good Friday Agreement, as is the wider all-Ireland consultative forum, which, once established, could have an important role in dealing with issues such as double taxation for cross-border workers or the concerns of the Protestant community in border areas, as reported on last week. Will the Minister state whether work is being done on the establishment of that body, which is also part of the Good Friday Agreement?

The deputy First Minister: Consideration of the North/South consultative forum is linked to the completion of the review of the Civic Forum in the North. At its plenary meeting in February 2008, the North/South Ministerial Council noted the position on the review and the Irish Government's consultation with its social partners on the North/South consultative forum.

3.00 pm

ENVIRONMENT

Flood Risk Assessment Provisions

1. **Mr K Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's flood risk assessment provisions. (AQO 254/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): Policy FLD 1 of Planning Policy Statement 15: Planning and Flood Risk, sets out the circumstances in which a flood-risk assessment will be required to accompany a planning application. Annex D of PPS 15 sets out in detail the information that should be provided in such an assessment.

Mr K Robinson: I thank the Minister for his rather brief answer. I am sure that he will acknowledge that although global climate change plays a significant part in the ever-increasing instances of flooding in Northern Ireland, there are matters for which his Department has responsibility. Perhaps the Minister recalls that his colleague the First Minister — in response to my question on 15 September 2008 on the availability of a flood map for Northern Ireland — acknowledged that Ministers knew their individual responsibilities and were in a position to ensure that their Departments carry out the necessary work.

There is an ever-expanding number of apartments in my constituency — many built in what I believe are inappropriate locations, close to urban streams or crammed onto sites where, formerly, one dwelling stood. Given that, will the Minister take urgent steps to ensure that the practice of building in areas where the flood risk is very high, or will be exacerbated by such development, will cease forthwith?

The Minister of the Environment: If my answer was brief, the Member's supplementary question was quite long. I will try to make my answer as brief as possible, as I want to answer as many questions as possible.

During the debate last week on draft PPS 7, I gave an undertaking that my Department would review draft PPS 7 and seek to bring some addendum to it. That addendum will include some of the issues that the Member has raised today, and will examine how the Planning Service ensures that developments have permeable surfaces. Furthermore, it will ensure that there is as much on-site catchment of water as possible, and that that water is released in a way that does not exacerbate flooding tendencies in times of heavy rain.

Some good practices are taking place in developments across Northern Ireland, and I have witnessed some of those during visits to sites. However, those good practices must be encapsulated and put into policy, and I hope that that will be done in the very near future.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell the House to what extent his Department attributes to climate change the increased intense levels of rain, and the ensuing floods, in Northern Ireland during this and previous summers?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member seems to have a kind of paranoia in relation to climate change. I have received several questions from him on the issue, and I will seek to answer them. The rains that

we have experienced over the past years are localised. If the Member understood the definition of climate change, he would know that it refers to changes that are widespread across the globe.

However, the Department has accepted that as a consequence of climate change, there will be periods of heavy rain. Had the Member been listening to my previous answer to Mr Robinson, he would be aware that PPS 15 includes a precautionary approach that where there is a risk of flooding, there will be a presumption against development. Furthermore, the Department will ensure that where a flood-risk assessment has been undertaken, that development will be allowed to proceed only if mitigating measures are taken. Moreover, the Department asks for changes in development designs to reduce the threat of localised flooding. The Department recognises that there is a change in rainfall patterns and has adopted policies to deal with those.

Mr Ford: I thank the Minister for his comments. I noticed, in particular, that he referred to good practice in some areas. However, given the serious flooding of the Six Mile Water in the month of August and its effects in Antrim town and Muckamore, will he accept that his Department's Planning Service has continued to allow totally inappropriate developments under existing planning policies and guidance? Furthermore, what can be done to redress that problem so that the once-in-500-year event does not continue to recur approximately every 20 years?

The Minister of the Environment: Given the Member's knowledge of the situation in Antrim, I would have thought that he would have known that most of the houses that were badly affected in that flooding were built some 50 years ago. Therefore, their location could hardly be attributed to the planning policies under which my Department currently operates.

Flood-risk assessments are carried out, and I have made clear what those assessments require. Anyone who applies for planning permission to build at a location that carries a flood risk will have to include, in the plans, the site's physical features, identify the sources of potential flooding, the consequences of the flooding and mitigation for any increase in anticipated flood risks. Such measures are required under the current policy.

David Ford's example of the incident in his South Antrim constituency illustrates how, in the past, permission was granted for building on flood plains. However, one must recognise that many of our towns and cities are built on flood plains, and the anticipated flood-mapping exercise will illustrate that. There will, therefore, always be a risk of flooding.

Northern Ireland Water: Prosecutions

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of the Environment how many prosecutions the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has instigated against Northern Ireland Water since 1 April 2007. (AQO 390/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since Northern Ireland Water was established on 1 April 2007, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency has instigated prosecution proceedings on seven occasions. To date, four have resulted in successful prosecutions, and three are being considered by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS).

Those prosecutions will lay the lie to the claim made by Friends of the Earth on the BBC recently that the Department did not have any officials on its staff who were capable of seeing prosecutions through. On four out of four occasions on which the Department has brought Northern Ireland Water to court, there have been successful prosecutions. Friends of the Earth should check its facts before making any further outlandish claims.

Mr Moutray: Will Northern Ireland Water be prosecuted for the continuing pollution of lands by spillages from a combined sewer overflow at Ballynacor waste water treatment works at Craigavon?

The Minister of the Environment: All sewerage systems that receive surface drainage, in addition to fowl sewage, require overflows, which operate at times of heavy rainfall. The discharges at Ballynacor are consented under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, but they occur only in extreme circumstances, and that will continue to be the case. Northern Ireland Water is required to clean up the area around the plant when such overflows occur.

I have informed the Department that I want Northern Ireland Water to raise its game in a range of places. It is hoped that, by the end of this year, when the new works are finished at that site, those discharges will become rare events rather than the current frequent occurrences.

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister accept that in other parts of the United Kingdom, pollution in an area of special scientific interest would usually result in prosecution? I am interested in the Minister's previous comments. Will he explain why his Department has granted consent to discharge virtually untreated sewage into the Ballystrudder area of Larne Lough, which is an area of special scientific interest? Does the Minister believe that an independent environmental protection agency would have granted such consent? When will the proper sewage secondary treatment be provided to remove that pollution from the sensitive Larne Lough area?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member knows about Northern Ireland Water's considerable investment in the Larne area, because he heard about it at an event that he attended last week — an event at which I was also present. At that event, he said, in fact, that the standard that Northern Ireland Water had adopted in that sensitive area around Larne Lough was the highest that one could possibly expect. The treatment of the water and the water that leaves the plant has been designed to ensure that the shellfish beds in Larne Lough are not disturbed by the discharges.

However, Northern Ireland Water accepts that there is considerable investment still to be undertaken, and my Department will ensure that prosecutions will be made in instances where the implementation of that investment is slow.

The Department has prosecuted on a number of occasions. Every high-risk, high-pollution incident from Northern Ireland Water has resulted in prosecution or in a case being sent to the PPS.

Mr O'Loan: There have been a considerable number of fish kills in our rivers recently. Does that fact not raise doubts about the ability of the non-independent Northern Ireland Environment Agency to control pollution? Does the low level of prosecutions of Northern Ireland Water and private firms, combined with low penalties, not create a lack of confidence in the ability of the Department and the Minister to deal with the situation?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member had carried out his research a little better, he would realise that although we have a non-independent environment agency in Northern Ireland, we prosecute 16 times more than the Environment Agency in England, which is independent, and 20 times more than the independent environment agencies in Scotland and Wales. Having an independent agency is no guarantee that there will be no pollution — given the opportunities available to pollute. Indeed, there have been many infraction proceedings against the Irish Republic, England and Scotland by the EU as a result of the discharges into rivers and on to beaches, etc.

It is not the case that the independent environment agency that the Member keeps prattling on about is a panacea. The Department must ensure that it prosecutes when it can do so. I have said time and again that the Department can prosecute only if it has evidence. Those who complain about pollution should give the relevant information to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to ensure that a prosecution can take place. Some of those who complain about the agency and its practices are the very people who do not give the information needed — and the River Quoile incident was a case in point.

I have just checked with my officials. Members of the Green Party took photographs of pollution and dead fish, but did not pass on one piece of information to my Department. Maybe some people would rather have environmental catastrophe than see effective action.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of the Environment to comment on any discussions he has had with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

(AQO 325/09)

The Minister of the Environment: I have not had any discussions with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. I suspect that, given the way in which that organisation filters out views that it does not agree with, it would not wish to have any discussions with me either.

Dr Farry: I suspected as much. International governmental consensus, involving all Governments in these islands, the Government of the United States and George Bush — and even Sarah Palin — accepts that humans are contributing to climate change. Will the Minister clarify whether the recent article in the 'News Letter' is his personal view or the official view of his Department, and did he take advice from his senior officials before he made those statements?

The Minister of the Environment: I challenge the Member's assertion that there is consensus on the subject. Indeed, 44% of climate scientists disagree with the statement that climate change is mostly the result of man-made causes. There are many surveys in which scientists agree or disagree on this issue. For instance, some of the scientists who had signed one of the most recent surveys included gynaecologists, people who had been trained in Chinese alternative medicine and psychologists — those were the scientists who had informed that great consensus. The Member should check his facts before he starts making wide-sweeping statements about degrees of consensus.

3.15 pm

Mr McClarty: Did the Minister get an opportunity to watch the very convincing BBC2 programme, 'The Climate Wars', which sought to show that those who do not believe that man is largely responsible for climate change are members of the Flat Earth Society? If he has not seen it, can he give an undertaking that he will watch it — in between watching 'Coronation Street' — and convince himself of the arguments that it presents, so that he does not leave himself open to ridicule from the rest of the UK and, indeed, the world?

The Minister of the Environment: I am surprised that the Member, being a busy MLA, has time to watch television. I am afraid that I do not have time to watch whatever that programme was that he mentioned or 'Coronation Street'. Indeed, even if I had time to watch television, I do not think that I would watch such a programme.

I remind the Member that Al Gore once made a film about the horrors of climate change. Of course, within a number of months, all the arguments that he made were dispelled. One of the problems with much of the hysteria that has been stirred up is that the entire matter has been sensationalised. Without that sensationalism, I doubt that many people would be prepared to accept the tax increases, the impingements on personal freedom or the ways in which Government dictate how people live their lives. It is only because the effects of climate change have been sensationalised that people are scared into accepting some measures when, normally, they would tell politicians to get lost.

Mrs Hanna: Does the Minister intend to share his views on climate change with Minister Hilary Benn before he reports back, on behalf of all the UK, to a major international conference on climate change in Poland in December 2008?

The Minister of the Environment: I have had several pieces of correspondence with Hilary Benn, most of which have been to discuss what might be done to reduce CO2 emissions. If some of the measures discussed had been implemented — and Mr Benn has admitted this to me in two letters — it would have led to electricity prices going up by 20% and 25.9%. I have made it quite clear to him that I do not believe that that kind of burden should be imposed on people, especially since many of them are already suffering from fuel poverty.

Many of those who jump up and down about climate change are less than willing to share with their constituents the impact that some of their proposals would have on people's personal living standards and on their pockets.

Toll Bridges/Roads

5. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what information is provided by the Driver and Vehicle Agency to private companies operating toll bridges/roads in the Republic of Ireland in the event of an infraction there by drivers from Northern Ireland. (AQO 242/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Vehicle licensing is an excepted matter, and the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) acts on behalf of the Secretary of State for Transport, who has policy responsibility for the matter. However, I can inform the Member that

no information is being provided by the Driver and Vehicle Agency to private companies that operate toll bridges or toll roads in the Republic of Ireland, although UK legislation does allow for the release of such information to anyone who is able to show reasonable cause for needing it.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his response. What information does the Irish Republic's Government devolve to his Department or any other Department on the subject? Is there not the potential for severe abuse to occur? What steps does his Department intend to take to ensure that such abuse is eradicated or at least minimised?

The Minister of the Environment: Disappointingly, the Irish Republic does not share data with Northern Ireland; it uses some constitutional argument to explain why that cannot be done. However, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, supported by the Driver and Vehicle Agency, has led preliminary discussions at official level with the appropriate officials in the Republic.

It is my desire to have reciprocation from the Republic. It is wrong for people who live in Northern Ireland and commit offences in the Republic to escape their responsibilities; equally, it is wrong for people who live in the Republic to escape sanctions for infractions incurred here.

Departmental Advisory Body: Irish Government Representation

6. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister of the Environment if a replacement has been appointed for the individual from the Republic of Ireland who has been excluded from the Department's advisory body.
(AQO 396/09)

7. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of the Environment what potential negative impact the failure to reinstate the representatives of the Irish Government onto the advisory committees of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside will have on the pollution of the streams and rivers that flow in both jurisdictions.
(AQO 380/09)

The Minister of the Environment: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 6 and 7 together.

The present membership of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC) completes its term of office on 17 February 2009. It includes a representative who was nominated by the Republic of Ireland's Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

When the council is reconstituted on 18 February 2009, it will comprise new members, as well as members who have already served a three-year term of office.

All members of CNCC must compete in a publicly advertised, rigorous selection process, in line with guidance issued by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland in order to demonstrate their suitability for the role.

CNCC is an advisory body, not an operational one, and my decision will have no impact, negative or positive, on the pollution of streams and rivers that flow in both jurisdictions.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister accept that environmental pollution does not recognise the border? Water pollution, air pollution, recycling and waste management are among a host of issues that must be tackled on an all-Ireland basis. Does the Minister accept that there is a growing number of people who care about the environment and who want the Minister to provide leadership? They do not want a Minister who engages in small-minded party-political tactics or stunts. Does the Minister accept that it is time that we had a Minister who put the environment first?

The Minister of the Environment: I made clear my commitment in previous answers on river pollution and flooding, but perhaps the Member did not hear me. CNCC is an advisory body, not an operational one. When it comes to flooding between Northern Ireland and the Republic, the real work will be carried out by departmental officials.

The Member is anxious because I did not automatically appoint someone from the Irish Republic. The Member and his party are in favour of discrimination — they believe that there should be discrimination in the appointment of officers to the Police Service, but is he now saying that there should also be special treatment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Please allow the Minister to respond.

The Minister of the Environment: Is the Member now saying that there should also be special treatment for candidates from the Irish Republic who apply to become members of the advisory body? Everyone from Northern Ireland who applies for the post must go through a public competition, but the Member is suggesting that someone from the Republic should have an automatic right to a post on the advisory body, without going through a public competition. They got there in the first place as a result of direct rule Ministers showing favouritism, but I am not prepared to engage in that kind of discrimination.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Contrary to what the Minister says, there are concerns in my area that CNCC is a powerful environmental group, and not merely an advisory group. Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: CNCC is an advisory group; that is what its constitution states. It advises the Department on a range of issues, and its advice will continue to be received. The contentious issue appears to be whether it should be an automatic right for someone from the Irish Republic to sit on the advisory body, without going through public competition.

My answer is no. The Member should have checked with the members of her party who sit on the Public Accounts Committee; and the SDLP Member should have checked with his colleague. I do not know whether the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment saw the job through. However, when the Public Accounts Committee reported on those bodies, it said:

“A significant number of...appointments...are held by people domiciled outside the province.”

The Public Accounts Committee went on to say that it would like to see more people from diverse backgrounds within Northern Ireland applying.

So, I was taking my lead from members of the SDLP and members of the Public Accounts Committee who wished to see people from Northern Ireland being appointed. These are Northern Ireland advisory bodies; why should people from Northern Ireland not serve on them? No one will stand up in the House and say that I should treat people from the Irish Republic who apply for such posts differently than I would treat people from Northern Ireland. People from anywhere can apply, but everybody will be judged on the same basis and not on the preferential basis that was in operation before I made this decision.

Mr Weir: What is the position for anyone applying from the Irish Republic or anywhere else outside Northern Ireland for positions in the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside or any other advisory body that is sponsored by the Department of the Environment?

The Minister of the Environment: Since I am a champion of equality, those people will be judged on the same basis as anyone from Northern Ireland. People from England, Scotland, Wales and the Irish Republic will be entitled to apply, but no special places will be reserved for them as happened under the direct rule Administration. People will be invited to take part in the public appointment competition. They will be judged on their performance, and, if on that basis they qualify for membership, they will be members.

Mr Elliott: I am glad that there is a champion for equality in the House today. Does the Minister accept that representatives of such bodies would be more in tune with the bodies' roles and responsibilities if they came from this jurisdiction?

The Minister of the Environment: They will be capable of carrying out the job if they have the qualifications to do the job. Obviously, if they are

advising on Northern Ireland, local knowledge will be important. However, if they have particular abilities and demonstrate those abilities in the public competition, they should, of course, be considered for the posts that are available.

Review of Public Administration

8. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on his Department's proposals for the Review of Public Administration, with special regard to councillors who have expressed their plans not to contest seats in any new council format being created or "shadowed" before implementation. (AQO 341/09)

The Minister of the Environment: My officials are preparing options for a possible severance scheme, using the recommendations of the councillors' remuneration working group as a starting point. I intend to start a public consultation on those proposals before the end of the year. The necessary legislative power to establish a severance scheme will be included in the forthcoming local government Bill, which I hope to introduce in the Assembly in early 2009.

Mr Boylan: I am glad that the Minister did not have to shout his answer to me. Following on from his answer, will the Minister assure the Assembly that his Department will secure sufficient funding to ensure a smooth transition, in all aspects, from the present council arrangements to the proposed future council structures?

The Minister of the Environment: The issue of funding the transition work has been raised at meetings of the strategic leadership board. An undertaking has been given to examine whether money might be available to the Department. There is nothing in the budget for this year, but we will make a bid for that money: I know that my colleague the Minister of Finance and Personnel is listening intently to me at the moment.

There are considerable advantages for councils in the review of public administration process, and, in the long run, councils will benefit from it. It is important that the councils recognise that there are resources that they can put in, especially as they will feel the benefits in the long term.

3.30 pm

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Relocation of Public-Sector Jobs

1. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what progress has been made in investigating the relocation of public-sector jobs. (AQO 315/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): An independent team was established at the end of December 2007 to review the policy on the location of public-sector jobs. The review team has now completed its work, and the chairman, Professor George Bain, will publish his report tomorrow. I understand that all Executive Ministers and MLAs will receive copies of the report tomorrow.

The review was independent, and the recommendations of the review team will have to be considered carefully before decisions can be made on the way forward. I plan to refer the report to an early meeting of the Executive, to gather the initial views of ministerial colleagues.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. In light of the financial pressures facing the Executive, is the Minister satisfied that the relocation of public-sector jobs would represent value for money?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obviously, we look forward to the publication of the report tomorrow. It would be wrong of me to pre-empt its conclusions, but I know that the terms of reference for the professor's work included the requirement to consider costs and benefits. I expect a rigorous assessment of those in the report. Of course, affordability and value for money will be key considerations for the Executive and for the Assembly in moving forward. It would be simply nonsensical if that were not an issue for the Executive and Ministers to take on board, in the context of all the other issues, particularly at this time. I look forward to the publication of the report; I believe that the work has been very detailed and thorough, and I think that it will offer a valuable guide to the way forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that civil servants who work in Omagh or Strabane, for example, and who apply for promotion to a post that transpires to be located in Belfast, are very often forced to refuse such an offer, and are put to the back of the queue for future promotion opportunities? I hope that, in his assessment of George Bain's report, he will consider the possibility of creating promotion opportunities in towns such as Omagh and Strabane.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issue that the Member has highlighted is no doubt one on which the report will comment. It is a fair point to make; people are being forced to consider their place of employment in order to apply for promotion, and sometimes the necessity of a move can be a barrier to their accepting that promotion. However, I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the report. The Member mentions Omagh and other places, and obviously all those issues will have been addressed in the report, but, at this stage, it is not possible for me to give a commitment. We must first receive the report, and it

will then be for the Executive as a whole to take a view on the best way forward.

I am sure that the Member looks forward to an early Executive meeting at which those issues will be discussed, since they are so important to all our constituents.

Mr Beggs: The last Member has advocated the transfer of jobs to the west. Will the Minister acknowledge that areas such as Carrickfergus, Larne and Newtownards have the lowest proportion of Civil Service jobs of any of the district councils in Northern Ireland? Will he ensure that there will be an equitable distribution of any relocation of Civil Service jobs?

Finally, the Scottish Executive's experience of the relocation of jobs varied greatly, from relocations that cost considerable amounts of money, to others that actually saved the public money. How will the Minister ensure that any changes will actually result in savings, so that the budget is available to be spent on improving services?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raises a couple of very salient points. First, with regard to equality and distribution, I think that the report, when it is published, will undoubtedly address the issue of sustainable development and economic benefits for the entire Province, and it is right that it should do that. I note in passing that Omagh, for instance, probably has the highest proportion per head of public-sector jobs of all towns in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, there may still be an argument based on wider economic benefits that may accrue — we await the report. As for the wider issues raised in Mr Beggs's question, and others, it is right to study the report. MLAs will get sight of it tomorrow, and then we will have a discussion.

However, I emphasise the independence of the review. The Executive will receive the review report and examine the way forward. Undoubtedly, the varying cost of relocating jobs, which depends on the areas concerned, will be taken into account. For example, the location of new bodies may be cost neutral, but there will be a cost attached to moving jobs. All those issues must be considered, particularly in the current economic climate when resources of the Executive are stretched.

2011 Census

2. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel if there will be questions on the 2011 census on the use of British and Irish sign language. (AQO 311/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Consideration has been given to the inclusion of a question on the main language of respondents, which would allow them to indicate, as appropriate, that sign language is their main language. Final proposals for the 2011 census will be produced later this year and will

be followed by a census Order and census regulations during the 2009-10 session, which will provide the opportunity for full legislative scrutiny in the House.

Ms Lo: I missed part of the Minister's answer. Will that question be included in the 2011 census?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Yes, it will.

Ms Lo: I welcome that, because I thought that sign language might be excluded.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for tabling her question, because it addresses an important issue for those affected. I will present proposals on the content of the questions for the 2011 census but, bearing in mind that there was previously a question about language, the census will provide an opportunity for people to indicate that sign language is their preferred method of communication.

Mr Poots: Does the Minister agree that the pre-devolution situation wherein sign language received nothing from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's languages strategy was ludicrous?

Will he consider how the Irish language is identified in the census because, before the last census, a certain newspaper stated that if people could read and understand the phrase "tíocfaidh ár lá", they could read and understand the Irish language. That test does not provide empirical evidence that people can understand, read or speak the Irish language.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Obviously, funding during direct rule falls outside my ministerial remit. However, I accept what the Member said. There will be full consultation on the proposals for the contents of questions in the 2011 census. By the time of the census, the content of questions will have been subject to detailed analysis.

The Member highlights the fact that if the census is to be meaningful and robust, everyone who holds a position of responsibility must exercise responsibility in how they advise people to fill in the form. However, the nonsensical approach that was advocated by a certain newspaper is accounted for when the results are analysed. I thank the Member for drawing attention to that point.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his previous answers. Does he agree that one question of relevance to deaf people is not adequate to address issues of concern to that community, which have been neglected? Does he agree further that we do not have to wait until 2011 to establish how to address the many forms of discrimination that deaf people experience?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The treatment of deaf people is not primarily an issue for the census. There are many measures that can be taken to help that community — we do not have to wait for the outcome of the census. The availability of so much

digital data means that much information is already available, which was not the case in previous years. Nevertheless, there is still value in proceeding with the 2011 census.

However, the issues that Mr Dallat raises do not require a wait until the 2011 census is carried out; nor do they depend on one questionnaire. He asked whether people would be allowed to indicate that sign language is their main language. The answer to that is a positive yes.

Peace III Funds

3. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide an update on the allocation and delivery of Peace III funds to organisations from the community and voluntary sector. (AQO 324/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Community- and voluntary-sector organisations are expected to be the main beneficiaries of the Peace III programme. Letters of offer will begin to issue to successful projects soon. Approved applications include all the local-authority action plans that local authorities developed in partnership with local stakeholders, including the community and voluntary sector, and will be implemented on the same basis. Additionally, the majority of regional applications that have been approved and victims' projects that have applied come from community and voluntary organisations.

Mr Molloy: Is it envisaged that gap funding will be available for voluntary groups that are in difficulty, in order to ensure that they do not collapse before they acquire Peace III funding?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The issue of gap funding has been raised on several occasions. It should be clear by now that there is no gap between Peace II's closing and Peace III's opening. Peace III first opened for project applications in November 2007. All four Peace III themes have been open since March 2008. It is well known that no Peace II project can expect an automatic share of Peace III funding. Peace III was never intended to be an extension of Peace II. It is a distinct programme with its own objectives and selection criteria. Of course, Peace II projects can apply for a share of Peace III funding. However, they must compete with other applications and satisfy the relevant selection criteria.

The Peace II programme concludes this year. Most of the remaining projects are scheduled to close by 30 September. EU peace funding has always been special, time-limited support. Peace II projects were aware of that at the time of application. As a precondition of assistance, all projects had to specify an end date and, if appropriate, a strategy for sustaining themselves post-Peace II. Therefore, no Peace II project should be

uncertain of its post-Peace II future. None should expect an automatic share of mainstream or further EU funds.

Mr Elliott: My question follows on from the previous supplementary question and concerns victims' groups. I am aware that some victims' groups hope to obtain Peace III funding. Is the Minister aware of any redundancies being made in victims' groups because of the delay in Peace III funding?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is absolutely essential that Peace III make an important contribution to tackling victims' and survivors' needs. In that respect, Peace III will build on the work that has already been undertaken through Peace I and Peace II. Victims are a named beneficiary group of the Peace III programme. Therefore, they can apply to any of the programme's themes. Specific provision is made under theme 2 of priority 1, which is on acknowledging and dealing with the past. That theme is worth around €50 million. The first allocations from that theme are expected to be made in October 2008. Peace III takes full account of the Executive's strategy for victims and the work of the Commission for Victims and Survivors. I hope that that answer goes a long way towards reassuring the honourable Member of Peace III's prioritisation of funding for victims.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his responses to previous questions. He has already answered the question that I had in mind.

Tax-Varying Powers

4. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration he has given to seeking tax-varying powers for the Executive in light of the current economic crisis and the burdens facing households. (AQO 332/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The current economic environment is of deep concern to me, as it is to all Members. However, as we are aware, rising commodity and fuel prices, as well as the credit crunch, are driven by events in global markets. As we have seen, the Executive or, indeed, any Government, have limited influence over global economic market forces. Tax-varying powers for a small region such as Northern Ireland would, therefore, do little to influence those globally driven economic trends.

The Executive must not, and will not, let current difficulties obscure our strategic long-term vision. The current economic climate makes it more important than ever before that we focus attention on delivery of the Programme for Government's main objective, which is to create a dynamic and innovative local economy.

3.45pm

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I agree with his opening comments about

global economic conditions. Does he agree with me that, notwithstanding those international difficulties, the Assembly and Executive could benefit from greater fiscal autonomy in addressing targets for economic growth and anti-poverty measures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Under current funding arrangements, there is no direct link between public expenditure and revenue receipts in Northern Ireland. However, if the Executive obtained tax-varying powers that would undoubtedly change; that needs to be borne in mind when we talk of the potential benefits of obtaining tax-varying powers.

Over the past year and more, the Executive have taken action within their remit and the scope available to them. Today, I heard that at the Tory party conference, the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that if the Tories took power, they would freeze council tax for two years. I have news for him: Northern Ireland is far ahead of him; our Administration has already taken steps to freeze the regional rates for three years. When people ask what Northern Ireland is getting, that is part of the response. The Executive have taken action in other areas; we have deferred the introduction of water charges. Those measures mean that local households will be £1,000 better off than under direct rule; those bills would otherwise have had to be paid during the period 2007-08 to 2010-2011. That takes no account of other measures, such as the 20% discount in rates for pensioners; the possibility of a further delay in water charges; rate rebates for green measures; and the emphasis on fuel poverty, insulation, and so on.

Recently, I met the Minister for Social Development and other Executive Ministers. I met her again, together with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on 25 September when we discussed the development of an action plan to tackle issues associated with the rising cost of energy. We hope to advance that plan in the context of the next monitoring round.

Mr Hamilton: I acknowledge what the Minister has said about the limited scope available to the Executive in tackling problems associated with current economic conditions. Will he elaborate on his discussions with ministerial colleagues, giving a full rundown of who he has spoken to and what might be forthcoming from the discussions?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his question.

I deeply regret that the Executive have not been able to discuss this important issue. Although the issue of rising energy prices was debated in the House this morning, it is only right and proper that the Executive should sit round a table to discuss it. That should have happened before now, and I hope that it will happen on Thursday.

Even in the absence of that meeting, several Ministers met on Thursday 18 September to discuss the issue. As I said, on 25 September, the Minister for Social Develop-

ment, the Health Minister and I met to agree and develop an action plan for consideration in the context of a future monitoring round.

There is important work to be done in tackling fuel poverty — we must approach energy companies on relevant matters, and there is work for all Departments to do. The Executive need to consider short- and medium-term measures. However, the critical issue is that the Executive meet to discuss those matters, and I hope that people will realise the seriousness of the issue and get down to business soon and stop blocking the Executive meetings at which those issues may be tackled.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that in the current economic crisis — with rising food and energy costs and other burdens placed upon households — the introduction of water charges will result in more children growing up in poverty?

The Minister might have already touched on that matter.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of my anticipation of his question.

As I said, the Executive have agreed to defer the introduction of water charges until 2009-10, with an offset against the regional rates bill. However, as the Member said, since the Budget was agreed in the Assembly last January, the position for households has become more serious and difficult.

That is why the First Minister and others have indicated that the Executive will consider whether further steps should be taken on that matter.

Again, if we are to address the issue, the Executive must meet to discuss it. It is important that we, as individual Ministers, do what we can to progress issues. However, there comes a point when Executive action is required. Therefore, the Member will agree, with some, if not every other Member here, that it is absolutely essential that we get down to business, and that the Executive address this and other issues of concern to people in the real world.

Rate Arrears

5. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action his Department is taking to recover rate arrears. (AQO 280/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Land and Property Services (LPS) robustly pursues all ratepayers who have not discharged their rate liability, with some 80 staff now working on a full-time basis on the recovery process.

Recovery is made through a number of steps, the first of which is to issue final payment notices, followed by, if necessary, court proceedings. If the debt remains

unpaid following the award of a decree in a Magistrate's Court, further legal action is taken. That may mean referral to the Enforcement of Judgments Office to secure payment through, for example, an attachment of earnings order or an order charging land, or it may mean consideration of bankruptcy or liquidation proceedings.

So far, during this financial year, Land and Property Services has issued 85,473 final payment notices and started 21,122 court proceedings, and the Magistrates' Courts have awarded 1,657 decrees for rating debt.

Work will continue to reduce the level of debt.

Lord Browne: I am pleased that the Minister is taking positive and robust steps to deal with rate arrears, which are totally unacceptable. However, does the Minister accept that in today's economic climate, with high energy prices and job losses, vulnerable people in Northern Ireland face genuine difficulties in making payments? Will the Minister outline whether he will take any steps to assist them in these difficult times?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that individuals, households and businesses may face difficulties in paying bills. Given the escalating costs that householders face, one can understand that.

Nevertheless, rates must be paid. Ratepayers in difficulties are actively encouraged to contact Land and Property Services, with a view to making an extended arrangement, and to check their entitlement to housing benefit or any other form of rating relief.

Such arrangements will help individuals to spread payments over the full financial year. LPS will work with individuals to do that. The worst thing that people can do is to bury their heads in the sand and hope that the problem will go away. I am sure that all of us have seen examples of that in our constituency advice centres.

If people who are in genuine difficulty contact LPS, it will work with them to spread the burden and to extend the repayment period, even into the next financial year, and — in exceptional circumstances, where warranted — into the next two financial years.

Of course, one should also bear in mind that the Executive have taken action to reduce rating liability under a number of schemes, including rate relief, the lone pensioner allowance, and the disabled person's allowance.

This is a particularly serious issue, given the present context. I encourage people to speak to LPS if they are in difficulties.

Mr McFarland: Can the Minister account for the significant increase in rate arrears since his predecessor took up the post in May 2007? Will the Minister confirm that with the increase in aged debt, additional resources will be required to recover it? Does he have a plan to deal with increased bad debt and loss to the public purse?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: If the Member has been following the issue at all, he will know that some problems have been encountered with the new IT system. Some post-implementation difficulties have occurred with a function on the delivery of rating reform, and, as a result, recovery functionality was put on hold. However, I am pleased to report — as we did at the Committee for Finance and Personnel where the Member's colleague raised the matter — that a recovery plan has been instituted. We have not been waiting to do that.

In 2008-09, recovery started in June, four months earlier than in the previous year, and by 30 August, 100,000 final payment notices had been issued. Land and Property Services had a target to issue 11,000 court proceedings by 31 August 2008. The actual performance was 17,000. Land and Property Services is on target to issue 40,000 court proceedings by 31 March 2009.

A considerable amount of work is, therefore, going on. LPS has increased the size of its recovery team, and 80 staff are involved full time in the recovery of rating debt. I am determined that we should bear down on that debt, because that revenue must come in to the Assembly and Executive, especially given the current state of finances. The Member will not, I hope, have to wait much longer before the Department announces further action to build on the success that is being made this year in bearing down on the level of rating debt.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister agree that there is a crisis in Land and Property Services? The latest examples of that are incorrect calculation of the rate revenue due to district councils, which has caused councils serious distress, and very poor processing of the lone pensioner allowance. Does he agree with my sincerely held belief that every problem that arises is symptomatic of a deeper problem in Land and Property Services, and will he set up an independent review of that agency?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I read the Member's call for that review earlier, before he announced it here. There is an exceptional demand for the lone pensioner allowance, which was introduced this year. It is an example of an initiative that has struck a chord with many senior citizens. Some 11,000 applications have been processed, and applications are outstanding. I have asked officials to ensure that those are resolved as quickly as possible, and I am confident that the matter will be addressed.

The Member also referred to the difference between estimated penny product and actual penny product. His claim that that was entirely attributable to inaccuracies in LPS does not square with the facts. I leave him to reflect on that point, given that those estimates are made some 18 months in advance of the rate collection. Just as there are times when councils collect less in rates than was estimated, there are many times when they collect more. Of course, there is never any complaint when more money is raised than was estimated. Complaints arise

only when less is raised. Nevertheless, that is an issue for some councils, and I am considering it, particularly with regard to those councils that have suffered.

I am determined to drive forward rate recovery and the delivery of the benefits that have been introduced. A lot of change has taken place in rates; many new reliefs and benefits have been introduced. It is right that those should work through as quickly as possible, but there have been many changes, and the delivery and the benefits of those changes will be seen strongly in the communities that we all represent.

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Executive-Owned Sites

8. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cumulative value of sites owned by the Executive in Belfast which are presently unused or unoccupied. (AQO 321/09)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The cumulative value is approximately £145 million across numerous properties. There is no recent valuation available for a few Department of Education and Department for Regional Development sites. The total value figure given, therefore, excludes those sites.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair)

The bulk of the sites are held by the Department for Social Development, accounting for approximately £105 million spread across a wide range of land holdings, which are, generally, held by the Housing Executive for social-housing development schemes, or are awaiting comprehensive redevelopment or sale under specific development-brief conditions in order to promote regeneration in deprived areas of the city.

4.00 pm

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Police Searches: Parliament Buildings

2. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the procedures of the Northern Ireland Assembly in regard to police officers carrying out searches on elected Members, their property and offices; and to outline how this compares with procedures applied in the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and at Westminster. (AQO 308/09)

Mr Neeson: Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and their offices are not subject to search by

police officers on a routine basis while in the confines of Parliament Buildings or Annex C. Therefore, no procedures are required in that regard.

The advice of the PSNI is followed in relation to VVIP (very, very important person) visits to the Northern Ireland Assembly. A comparison exercise has been undertaken with the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and Westminster in relation to searches on elected Members and their offices. That comparison exercise shows that Members of the above legislatures are treated exactly the same as Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly on a routine basis in that they, or their offices, are not searched by police officers.

However, the exercise did identify one slight difference with Westminster in that all vehicles, including vehicles belonging to Members of Parliament and ministerial cars, are searched when they enter the grounds of Westminster each day. The other legislatures follow the advice of the local police on VVIP visits.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his answer. Will the Member agree that the searching by police of elected Members' offices and cars on a regular basis is totally unacceptable? Furthermore, will he agree that such events undermine the foundations of democracy itself?

Mr Neeson: The Member is asking whether the measures that were taken were over the top. Before it was known that a VVIP visit was to take place, arrangements had already been made to conduct a police search of the Assembly Chamber, above it, below it and its surrounding area, following an extensive refurbishment of the Chamber during the summer months. Shortly after that had been agreed, it was announced that a VVIP visit was to take place.

A further threat assessment was conducted by the PSNI, which seemingly concluded that a full building search was required. Unfortunately, that additional search was not completed on the night of Sunday 14 September 2008, which resulted in police officers returning the following morning to complete the full building search shortly before the beginning of proceedings and before the visit of the VVIP. On the Sunday night, Assembly officials were not informed by the police that the search had not been completed.

In response to the Member's suggestion that such events undermine the foundations of democracy, the Assembly looks after the interests and those who work in the Building. On all occasions, we follow police advice, which is reviewed on a constant basis.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Adequate Home-Help Provision

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it. — *[Mr McCarthy.]*

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the motion, and I thank the proposers for bringing it to the Floor of the House. I pay tribute to the many home helps who work hard, perform their tasks professionally and go the extra mile for their clients.

Health policy is to support people, especially older people, to stay in their own homes for as long as possible and to allow them to remain part of the community with family, neighbours and friends around them. Most older people are independent for as long as possible, but they recognise that a time may come when they need to rely on some help and assistance, whether from family, friends or home help. That is often only a small amount of help, for instance to light a fire in the morning, to bring in a bucket of coal to keep the fire going or to collect their pension and a few items of shopping. It may include help to heat a main meal to ensure adequate levels of nutrition, and many older people now get meals-on-wheels provision, which can be helpful.

It would be useful to consider more creative ways of involving older citizens proactively. Fires are being removed from many houses in order to make heating easier and to eliminate the bother of maintaining a coal fire. The Assembly could do more on that level.

A person with a more serious level of immobility may require personal support such as help getting into bed and help with toileting. It is preferable that people remain at home, and, as the Minister knows, it is more cost-effective. Of course, relatives who live within a reasonable distance should be expected to help, especially with practical chores; however, society is changing, and there are no longer so many close-knit communities. Even though sons, daughters, nieces and nephews must juggle their own family lives, many relatives offer that support and go the extra mile. They are carers in every sense of the word, and they fulfil those duties with a heart and a half. Before I went into politics full time, I worked for social services and assessed domiciliary care for older people; through that work, I met several home helps and relatives.

We must eradicate abuse of the system to ensure that money goes where it is most needed. Home helps build a rapport with their clients and are often the client's main contact with the outside world. Furthermore, the

connectivity between the home help and the client's relatives is important because it increases the home help's sense of job satisfaction, makes them feel trusted and gives them a sense that they are making a difference to people's lives. Health Service personnel must monitor home-help activity because, although most people are honest, industrious and well-meaning, older people are vulnerable.

Life expectancy has risen, and the percentage of older people in the population is increasing. Many of those people are out and about using their free bus passes and their grey power. However, there will come a time when older people need help, and the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety are aware of the growth in demand for such services. Resources must be used efficiently, but older people must be able to live in dignity, warmth and security. If Members are serious about helping senior citizens, that provision must be available. Cutbacks have been mentioned — that would be short-sighted.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. Over the years, home-help provision in Northern Ireland has proven to be extremely valuable to the elderly, sick and handicapped and to families who want their loved ones to remain as independent as possible and continue living in their own homes. Without the provision of the home-help service, many elderly and disabled people would, undoubtedly, have no alternative but to go to hospital or into a residential nursing home. For many elderly people — especially in rural areas — the home help provides a sense of security and normality and, in some instances, is their only communication with the outside world.

Research in Great Britain has shown that domiciliary care packages that are provided to keep people in their own homes amount to between one quarter and one third of the cost of putting those people into residential home placements. Therefore, is it not common sense and good practice to provide such domiciliary care packages for our ageing population? It is a downright shame to cut back that service from one of the most vulnerable sections of society. Furthermore, it shows blatant disregard for our elderly and ageing population, who, for years, have worked hard and paid taxes. It is insulting to the dependant and the care worker to allocate 15 minutes a day to complete the necessary care provision, especially as the care worker has, perhaps, driven 20 minutes to arrive at the home.

Such a system is grossly unfair and financially unviable for the carer, who has but time to say "hello" in one breath and "goodbye" in the next.

In my own constituency of West Tyrone, which is in a large rural area, it is impossible to describe the value of the work and commitment of home-help carers, who provide a much-needed service to the elderly and disabled

population. The Minister's soundings about severe cutbacks and job losses that have resulted from privatised agency work have caused much anxiety and concern among that vulnerable group in our society.

Although the Minister may attribute such cutbacks to savings in the health budget, I remind Members that the previous comprehensive spending review revealed that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety underspent grossly by some £53 million. In light of that, perhaps the Minister will do the honourable thing and resource that invaluable service for elderly and disabled constituents properly — they are the people who need it so much.

I support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I also welcome the opportunity to speak to this important motion, and I thank Kieran and Anna for proposing it. I know that the debate was suspended for Question Time, but it is a pity that the Minister is not here to hear other Members' contributions. Had he been, I would have welcomed him to the debate and commended him for his earlier announcement. I know that a speaker from his party already said this, but his earlier announcement about introducing proposals to abolish prescription charges shows that —

Mr McCarthy: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: I will, but be quick.

Mr McCarthy: Sometimes the workings of this Assembly are criticised. However, does the Member recall that last year the Alliance Party — supported by the Assembly — called for prescription charges to be abolished? Here we have proof that this Assembly is working and can work when a Minister listens.

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. I hope that the Member does not claim credit for abolishing prescription charges, because that proposal was in the manifesto of every party in the Assembly. However, I agree that if we work collectively, we can deal with some of the issues that affect our communities.

The point that I was making is that I hope that the Minister brings additional good news. As a member of the Health Committee, I am not prone to criticising the Minister unless it is required. I am also quite happy to commend him when I see positive work coming from the Department. Today's announcement on prescription charges is a step in the right direction.

I was shocked to hear an earlier contribution from a member of the Ulster Unionist Party. We must ask ourselves the purpose of the home-help service. It is there to provide practical assistance and care for the elderly, the sick, the disabled and families in their own homes where parents are absent and there is no one else who can help. That removes the argument that home help is only for elderly people. That is not the

case, but the focus of the debate earlier suggested that it was. We all support the announcement of a commissioner and of legislation that will help the elderly. However, the home-help service is not just for that group.

One of the principles of the Programme for Government is the delivery of fair outcomes and social improvements. Today's announcement about prescription charges shows that we are heading in the right direction.

The Department of Health's mission statements says that the Department's aim:

"is to improve the health and social well-being of the people".

It endeavours to do so by ensuring the provision of appropriate health and social-care services in clinical settings such as hospitals and GPs' surgeries and in the community through nursing, social work and other professional services. That can be balanced out, both in community and hospital settings. However, does that mission statement make any difference?

I do not know whether anybody in this Chamber has ever helped to care for a loved one or has benefited from home-help services. Many of our mothers and fathers, husbands, wives, partners and children would probably have to go into a residential home or a hospital without the added support of care in the community, of which home help is a fundamental part.

It would be useful if the Minister would inform us of exactly how many people would be put into a residential or hospital-care setting if home care were not provided and tell us how much that would cost.

There are many statistics out there; however, if the Minister were to give us the appropriate statistics, we could begin to compare.

4.15 pm

As I said, we must consider the human cost of caring for a loved one and how much society currently saves due to families' input. Families require support. No matter who is being cared for, every carer deserves, and needs, a break, and home help provides that time out.

Mr Deputy Speaker, will I be given additional time to account for the intervention?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes.

Ms S Ramsey: In October 2007, the Audit Office produced its report, 'Older People and Domiciliary Care', in which it stated that there is a high dependence on institutional forms of care. In 2005-06, 60% of the £394 million spent by trusts on personal services for older people went to residential and nursing home care; however, the amount spent on people receiving less complex help, such as home help, decreased. I want the Minister to state whether there has been any change since the report was published in 2007.

In 2005, the Appleby Report stated that the number of delayed discharges from acute hospitals had remained at approximately 350 to 400 patients in any one month. There seems to be a knock-on effect throughout the Health Service, and community services are downgraded, downplayed and do not receive funding.

I am glad that the Minister is now in the Chamber, because, although he would probably have read about it in the Official Report tomorrow, I wish to commend him on his announcement about prescription charges. Moreover, I commend the people who work in the home-help service for their dedication and commitment to patients. We all know that they give up free time because of their loyalty to, and the relationships they have built up with, patients. Vulnerable people require help, and home helps are the only link that some of those people have with the outside world — the only human contact that they have — and Members would not be fulfilling their duty if such help were to be taken away. I support the motion.

Mr Easton: I too wish to thank the Minister for his announcement on prescription charges. It is greatly welcomed.

As we debate and discuss this resolution, it is important to put our appreciation for those who provide such a superb home-help service for the elderly and infirm in Northern Ireland on the record.

Meals on wheels, day centres and the home-help system should all be vital components of any strategy that seeks to enable people to stay in their homes for as long as possible. People really do want to be cared for at home. Such care is not just a valid lifestyle choice for the elderly; it is an important right that we must protect. Receiving care at home is less traumatic for patients and, indeed, much less expensive for the community than admission to hospital or residential care.

Over the years, the number of people over 75 has increased dramatically, and the size of our dependent, elderly population will continue to increase. Those increases must be central to considerations when planning and apportioning scarce health and personal safety resources.

We are talking about people who have contributed their time, talents and taxes to the community over many years. Such people have worked hard for decades, and when we plan for their sunset years we have a responsibility to be generous in the provision of public services. We should want for every elderly person the kind of treatment and provision that we would wish for our own parents and grandparents.

In the community, home helps are on the front line in ensuring the health and well-being of elderly people, and we must ensure that the burdens that we place on them do not cause them to become disillusioned or demoralised.

I have had frequent opportunities to talk to home helps, and they all make the same points about the way in which the service has been affected by reduced time with patients. They can recall when visits might have lasted two hours, during which the helper had time to make beds, do washing, set fires, prepare meals and do shopping. They repeatedly point out that longer visits led to developing close relationships between those serving and those being served. Helpers regard the offering of companionship as a vital component of caring, and their visits gave the elderly person something special to look forward to every day.

Their message is also unanimous — a home help is someone who can help in the home. What can anyone do to help someone else in 15 minutes? In cases involving a bedridden elderly person, that is scarcely enough time to get them out of bed and dressed. It becomes a race against time to get a client washed and down the stairs, and to make them comfortable. It is a challenge to ensure that they are warm and fed. Shopping or making a cup of tea may be out of the question. The relationship is changed dramatically. The time available in which to offer companionship and support is whittled away.

I support the home-help system and strongly oppose any reduction in the length of time allowed for home visits. I urge the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that there is adequate home-care provision for every person who needs it in Northern Ireland.

Mr Elliott: I support the motion and thank the Members who proposed it.

The home-help service is invaluable in Northern Ireland society. Home helps provide priceless, practical assistance to the elderly and other people who live alone; to people with mobility problems; to single-parent families; and to people who suffer from prolonged illnesses. As well as practical assistance, home helps provide a degree of independence, dignity and companionship.

The service means that thousands of elderly and other people do not have to enter nursing homes, and that children from struggling families are spared being taken into care. Home helps, therefore, save the Health Service an invaluable amount of money and provide independence and dignity to thousands of people. As a society, we ought to highly value home helps and their work.

I note that Sue Ramsey said that, in the context of home helps, the Ulster Unionist Party referred only to the elderly. I assure Members that it is not just about the elderly. It is about a much larger sphere in society. I can speak from personal experience, as someone who — perhaps like other Members — has had relatives who relied on home-help care. My father suffered for years from advanced Parkinson's disease before he died. My mother-in-law, who passed away in the

summer, had Alzheimer's disease for many years. If not for the home-help system, the families would not have coped. They could not have kept their loved ones out of the care system. I do not denigrate the care system. However, it does not offer the benefits of home care.

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad that the Member clarified that point. A Member of the Ulster Unionist Party who spoke earlier in this debate seemed to state that home helps worked exclusively for the elderly. Mr Elliott can check the Official Report, but that was what was said — if people are old they get a home help. The argument was put forward that the commissioner for older people, therefore, would deal with this issue.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that intervention. However, that is not the Ulster Unionist Party's concept of the home-help or -care system. I like to call it the home-care system, because that is what it is. It is caring for people at home.

One major problem, and one that I find in my constituency, is the lack of people who can work as a home help. It is not a job that everyone can do. Bluntly, a lot of the work is farmed out to agencies, some of which fail to pay an appropriate rate. That is where a difficulty sometimes arises. Potential recruits can find an easier way to earn a living. Instead of working for an hour each at six different houses, they can do six hours of something else with as much pay.

Home helps have a huge specialist expertise and a dedication to their role. I must say, again from personal experience, that I do not know how home helps can cope with going into homes other than their own in order to care for people. The level of dedication and the personal help that they render to their clients is second to none.

Although I recognise that there serious concerns about the reduction of home help-provision in individual cases, I understand that all clients are assessed and reassessed according to need, and that care is provided according to the level of that assessed need. Guidelines are in place to determine the length of time per required service.

In some instances, a changed assessment of need can alter the amount of time for which a person receives home help. A reduction in help can be traumatic for families and for the people who receive the help; that is why a consistent and robust evaluation process and system must be put in place. That is particularly important given the indications that a group-care system may be introduced in some areas, meaning that some of the people who need care will not be getting help from the same individual every day. That should only be done in extreme cases in which it is not possible for the same individual to help every day.

Some 24,000 people avail themselves of the home-help provision in Northern Ireland, and the vast majority is

provided with an outstanding service with which they are happy. Unfortunately, in a small amount of cases, it appears that provision has been reduced. However, when examining such cases individually and objectively, the Assembly must be cautious and not tarnish the overall wonderful service that we have.

I will conclude by saying that I am aware that, in a press release last week, Mr McCarthy admitted that the cuts in the health budget are a result of cuts in the overall Budget.

Mrs M Bradley: I congratulate the Minister on the announcement that he made today. It is a super announcement — one that will be of great benefit to the people and that the community will welcome.

Members have heard many stories today about cases of people who use the home-help system. I will not bore Members with many more such stories — I have a list of them that is a mile long, but I will give just two examples.

One case involves an older lady suffering from cancer who had major surgery, was discharged from hospital and was given home help for between two and three hours a day. That meant that the lady's home help visited in the morning and in the evening, which ensured that the lady got, at least, two warm meals each day. However, after six weeks, that help was taken away from her, even though the lady's health had not improved. That is one of the most unfair stories that I have heard in a long time.

The other case involved a man who had five children and whose wife was ill. Again, his home help's hours were cut greatly, and he got no benefit from the service after that. Those are only two cases, but if the Minister wants further information on them, I will give that to him.

We are discussing the fact that the home-help service is being restricted to 15-minute visits. Often, many of the people who receive the service are seriously ill and may not see another face for the duration of the day or the week, depending on the status of their health. What will happen to the hundreds of older people who are discharged early from hospital owing to bed shortages who still need care, are unable to make themselves a meal and have no one to help them? A 15-minute visit will be no good to any home help. However, that is not the fault of the home helps, who do a super job.

What can anyone do in 15 minutes? Not much, I dare to say — it would take 15 minutes to make tea and toast and bring it to someone, never mind clean the person's home. It is important that people who are ill have a clean home, because the lack of a clean home environment will not help to improve someone's health.

It is deplorable that it is deemed necessary to cut back on a service that is a lifeline for many people, many of whom are ill. Those people's need for the service is

constantly under review, and they can, as the result of a very small change in their circumstances, lose their meagre time slot.

I ask the Minister how such a decision can be made in all good conscience, because it will leave the people in our communities without their much-needed assistance. It is a disgrace that home-help assistants are being asked — in some cases instructed — to call into a home and see how the person is, leaving them no time to perform any household duties. I find the entire situation to be degrading to both the person who needs help and to those who give help.

I have met the Minister in both formal and informal settings and have found him to be an extremely fair man who wants the best for the people of Northern Ireland. That is made obvious by the fact that, at the weekend, he accompanied paramedics in order to see at first hand what they encounter in their job and witness the problems that drinking causes for our young people — fair play to him for doing that.

4.30 pm

I accept that there are many demands on the Minister's time and resources. However, in the current economic climate, when many households dread the winter months and are terrified of the implications of constant increases in energy prices, I hope that the Minister can give this issue due consideration. I also hope that he will approach the task with renewed vigour and make sensitive and sensible decisions.

Vital services such as home-help provision must be constructed and moulded around the person and their needs. The diminishing of that service is a huge worry, particularly to our older people, as their lifelines to dignity and to society in general erode before their eyes.

Although I represent Foyle, I know that this problem is widespread in all constituencies. Indeed, I speak for all my party colleagues who have grave concerns regarding the reduction of those services in their respective constituencies. I support the motion and thank Mr McCarthy and Ms Lo for tabling it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The provision of an adequate home-help service for many older and disabled people is an absolute necessity as many are almost totally dependent on it. Any reduction in that service is of particular concern to many of our frail and disabled older people who do not have immediate or extended family help and who cannot self-care.

In their statutory capacity, social services have a duty of care to those people. Indeed, their home help may be the only contact that many older people have with the outside world. They depend on their home help to get their shopping, their pensions and to do the things that they cannot do themselves.

A survey conducted in 2007 found that some older people left their homes for only 24 hours in a year. In many cases, that is due to a lack of support to enable them to lead as normal a life as possible. Those elderly people have contributed greatly to our society through their work and, in many cases, by their contribution to the voluntary sector.

As is stated in the motion, home-help provision for some people is being reduced to 15 minutes a week. That is totally inadequate and unacceptable and must be urgently addressed by the Minister. Those who are deemed to be in need of such provision should be an absolute priority and should not be party to a system that only provides lip-service to what is an essential service.

In its criteria for home-help provision the Southern Health and Social Care Trust issued guidelines that contain a definition of the needs of older people, ranging from low through moderate to critical. Low means that in many cases people simply do not qualify for home-help provision and must do without that service. Moderate means that if people do not have an adequate service they will inevitably end up in hospital, thereby adding further pressure to the Health Service budget. Critical means that if those people do not have proper adequate home-help provision, they will die. That is the reality.

Our old and disabled people deserve better, and we should be ashamed that we have allowed such a situation to develop. Some people who require home help receive care monitoring up to four times daily and at night; however, to qualify for such services, the criteria are stringently applied.

Some years ago, a document called 'People First' was published by the Department of Health in relation to the provision of adequate care for the elderly. It was full of platitudes, and it soon became abundantly clear on reading it that it was mainly concerned with money and how it could be saved. That trend unfortunately has continued; the mantra being best care, best value.

The Southern Trust has been tasked with making efficiency savings of £8 million over the next three years and has lost £3 million of its budget this year. In the light of such cutbacks, providing an adequate home-help service has become impossible.

In the vast majority of cases, families do their best to cope with elderly relatives who require care. Indeed, 43% of the population are looked after in their own homes and in their own communities.

Care for the elderly and disabled should be one of our main priorities and should not come down to the amount of money available. Our older population needs to be appreciated and treated with the dignity that it has earned and deserved. As my colleague, Sue Ramsey, said, a home help for those who need one is for life not just for Christmas. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Bresland: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion and congratulate the Members who brought it before the Assembly.

Many elderly people in my constituency depend on their home help, and the home-help service ensures that senior citizens can remain in their own community.

It is regrettable that some health trusts are in the process of penny-pinching, and the home-help service is a soft target for the administrators.

In my constituency of West Tyrone, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has cut home-help services to a number of constituents — some of whom suffer from cancer and one of whom has, for 15 years, been registered as blind. In most cases, those who provide the home-help service work beyond the times set by the trusts, but some of the prescribed times are being cut to a ridiculous 15 minutes. We have an army of social workers and administrators; however, those who provide front-line support to those in our communities who are worst in need face stringent cuts. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. I am contacted repeatedly by my constituents to express concern over the reduction of home-help provision. Therefore I am pleased that the motion is being debated, and I congratulate Anna Lo and my constituency colleague Kieran McCarthy for tabling it.

As Members know, the population of Northern Ireland is living longer. That is good news for those of us who are advancing in years, but it places a greater demand on the care service. Domiciliary care packages are needed more today than ever. The 2007 report on older people and domiciliary care found that there were 266,000 older people living in Northern Ireland, of whom 6,500 people in Northern Ireland received a domiciliary care package that was tailored to their needs, and of whom 24,000 received what are called "simple elements of support" to help them live independently. More care provision is required for those people who fall into that bracket.

I have spoken to carers on many occasions, and they are aggrieved and annoyed that there is not enough time to do all the work that has to be done. My wife assures me that 15 minutes is not enough time to do the dishes and wipe the kitchen surfaces, never mind vacuum, polish and do other jobs, and she is right.

If those jobs are not carried out by home helps, elderly gentlemen will be living in dirty rooms and some lady will trip over herself and break a hip while trying to vacuum. As a result, she will lose what is most important to her — her independence and her health. It is worse for those who were granted help with washing, dressing and shopping, for instance. All of that is being taken away from them.

In my office, I hear regularly from carers who are frustrated because they cannot provide as much help as is required. Mary Bradley provided an example of a home-help situation; I will do so too. I know of one lady who gets paid for performing home-help duties for three hours each morning; she starts work at 8:00 am, but does return home until 2:00 pm. She works for five hours — two hours more than she should. She does that because she refuses to leave men and women in dirty homes. That same home help returns to one of the homes at night to put a lady to bed, because although the lady cannot cope alone, she does not want to go into a nursing home.

That home help should be congratulated for those unpaid hours; but it must be acknowledged that it is simply unfair. Not everyone can put in those unpaid hours; however, they should not have to do so.

Recently, I met Andy Mayhew and Heather Finlay from my local trust area, and I informed them of those issues, amongst others. I received the good news that an extra £800,000 was to be given to domiciliary care, which will mean that an additional 75 to 80 people on the list will be looked after.

In conclusion, the figures show that there is a 38% growth in the 65- to 75-year age bracket in my trust area, and I am sure that it is the same in other areas. There is the even higher figure of 48% growth in the 75-plus age bracket. Therefore the need for domiciliary care will grow, and that demand must be met by a budget that can keep on top of the situation.

As demands on the trusts' domiciliary care provision grows, and, as the number of people to be cared for rises by 75 to 80 each year, something must change for the better — not for the worse.

I urge the Minister to consider the issues raised in the Chamber today. It is important that people are not put into nursing or residential homes if they do not want to go there. It will be a hard winter, financially, for many people. I ask the Minister, respectfully, to ensure that a support network is in place for proper care and practice, and not just a time schedule on paper.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I thank Mr McCarthy for proposing the motion on what is an important issue. One of my key priorities is to ensure that, wherever possible, people are helped to maintain their independence at home, and that is important. Everyone should have a choice about how their care needs will be met. The message that my Department has received loud and clear is that people want to continue to live independent lives in their own homes for as long as possible and for as long as it is safe to do so.

Our population of people who are over 65 years of age is set to more than double over the next 50 years. My Department is firmly committed to continue to

transform the way in which services are delivered in our communities to ensure access to high-quality services that will enable older people to live in their own homes with safety and dignity.

A key element of that has been the expansion of flexible and responsive domiciliary care services, which include a range of services such as food and diet; simple treatments, including assistance with medication and dressings; personal assistance, including assistance with dressing and getting in and out of bed; personal hygiene and so on. In working closely with the independent and voluntary sectors, we are now helping more people than ever — almost 10,000 — to stay at home and avoid admission to hospital or residential care. I have set challenging targets for health and social care services to ensure that we continue to build on the good work being carried out already.

My Department is working to achieve the new public service agreement target, which is that 45% of people with assessed community-care needs are supported at home by 2010. The latest statistics show that by working with our partners in the independent sector we are already well on our way to achieving that goal. I pay tribute to the tireless work of the many thousands of unpaid carers who help support loved ones in their own homes. I do not take such support for granted, nor should it go unrecognised.

Although the primary responsibility must be to those at greatest risk, I recognise that preventative low-level support can avoid deterioration in an individual's situation. Therefore, I expect the health and social care service to develop methods of risk assessment to help it identify those people whose risk to independence appears relatively low, but who are likely to become more serious over time.

More than 23,000 people in Northern Ireland receive a home-help service, which includes more than 4,000 in the Northern Trust area, 7,000 in the Belfast Trust area, 4,000 in the South Eastern Trust area, and more than 4,000 in the Southern and Western Trusts. Home-help services include a range of basic domestic tasks such as routine household cleaning, preparing and cooking food, washing-up, lighting fires, making beds, laundry, ironing and shopping. As with all services, frequency of home-help support depends on a comprehensive assessment of need and can range from daily to weekly intervention. I have no doubt that the service is a vital element in promoting and maintaining independence for vulnerable people in our communities.

Home help is one of a range of services that play a vital role in maintaining independent living. Others include intermediate care, which is designed to bridge the gap between hospital care and health and social care in the community, and it provides time-bound intensive support to prevent inappropriate admission to

institutional care and ensures patients recover from illnesses more quickly. A study in 2005 showed that the cumulative impact of intermediate care services in 2004-05 avoided 3,000 accident-and-emergency admissions, saved 150,000 hospital-bed days, avoided 811 planned intensive community-care packages and reduced 223 existing community-care packages.

I am keenly aware that we must strike a balance between the necessity to respond to urgent and intensive needs and, at the same time, ensuring that people with lesser needs do not slide into dependency unnecessarily for want of early intervention.

4.45 pm

Everyone is aware of my considerable efforts — which were well supported by a number of Members and those further afield — throughout the CSR period to achieve a better Budget settlement for my Department. The Department's expenditure on support for elderly people was £628 million in 2006-07, which represents the Department's second-largest area of expenditure after acute services. Furthermore, as part of the CSR, I will invest an additional £60 million so that more of our elderly population can be supported in the community.

Although my budget was increased, it fell some way short of the Department's bid, and, as a consequence, the Department is not in a position to provide all the services that it might like to provide and that people deserve. It is in that context that I am working hard with staff in the field of health and social care to realise the best possible outcome for all the people of Northern Ireland. That clearly means that some tough decisions must be made to ensure that we can meet the needs of those in our community who are most at risk of inappropriate admission to a hospital or care home.

Some of those decisions have featured prominently in the media, and I understand that they may, at times, appear to lack sense. However, I assure Members that such decisions are not taken lightly, and that, in each case, proper consideration is given to individuals' needs and circumstances, after a comprehensive assessment or review of need. Those assessments and reviews cover strengths, preferences, risks, carer contribution, carer need and other areas of disagreement. It is also crucial to take into account the perceptions and wishes of individuals and their carers about how they wish to live their lives.

I also assure Members that there has not been a wholesale reduction in home-help services. It is normal practice for the trusts to review periodically the individual needs of a service user. Those reviews are designed to ensure that the service provided to an individual is still appropriate to their level of need. They are not, as has been suggested today, designed solely to achieve efficiencies. A review can lead to an increase or a reduction in services, the key factor being any changes

in the individual's assessed need. Regular reviews will not only ensure that each person receives the appropriate level of service but that trusts target resources on those clients who are most in need of support.

In 2006-07, the Department spent over £157 million on domiciliary care, and I want to make clear that budgets for domiciliary care, which include the home-help service, have increased by £10.2 million this year. In addition, trusts have indicated that, although some packages have ceased or have been reduced, a greater number have either been introduced or increased. For example, this year, in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which covers the area that Kieran McCarthy represents, 644 people are receiving a new or increased service. In the Western Health and Social Care Trust, that number is 836, and, in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, 1,397 people are receiving a new or increased service. That level of provision far outweighs any reductions that have occurred as a result of reassessment of need, an assessment of lesser need or the service being withdrawn.

Mr McCarthy: I acknowledge what the Minister has said about new packages, but I want him to answer the simple question that I asked him earlier: will he confirm that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has issued instructions that, come October — that is, in a few days' time — all domestic services, including shopping, cleaning and laundry, are to be discontinued? That information was brought to my attention at the weekend, and it would spell disaster for the individuals concerned. I ask the Minister to confirm or deny that that is the situation.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I am not aware of any such proposal. I am interested to know who gave him that information. One of the problems that the Department faces is negative gossip, which does us no good at all. I am not aware of any such plan, which would represent a radical departure from the policy that the Department has laid down for home helps and services and domiciliary care.

In fact, 4,000 clients in the South Eastern Trust area receive home-help services. I am not aware of any reduction in the services that those clients receive.

Changes to care packages can cause considerable distress, but there are channels for people who are affected by a reduction in services to appeal such decisions. There is also a complaints process if the appeal fails to address people's concerns, and, in April 2009, my Department will introduce a revised complaints process.

I have listened carefully to what Members said, and I also listened carefully to the press coverage, which, quite frankly, is nearly all inaccurate, to put it mildly. However, there is concern about the issue in the House and further afield, so I will review the issue of people

who are affected by reductions in services. I will also review the appeals process and the complaints process, which sound good on paper, but may not be straightforward for people in their 80s or 90s.

As I said, services for elderly people make up the second-largest part of the Budget after acute services. That is due to the clear need, which will increase, as the number of elderly people aged over 65 is going to double over the next 50 years. Therefore, we must get it right. One way of addressing the need is to help people who are on the edge of being institutionalised or hospitalised if they do not get the necessary support. They will be given support in their homes, so that they can live independent lives. That will make them happier, their quality of life will improve, and they will live longer, which is what we all want. Therefore, I will review the issue.

I am not entirely clear about the steps that I will take, but I will come back to the House and inform Members of them. If people are unhappy with the care that they receive, they should not run straight to the media. They can go straight to their MLAs or councillors, but a process must be put in place to allow people to complain and appeal. People must have confidence in it, it must be easy to use, and it must be easily accessible for people in their 80s or 90s.

I will examine that issue, as we must provide the appropriate support and also maximise the resources available. The number of people being supported by these services is growing every year, and I want to ensure that that is addressed appropriately, so that people get the support that they need.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for being here and also thank all the Members who supported the motion. Most Members expressed concerns about the reported reduction in the time offered for home help. Mary Bradley cited examples, and she questioned how 15 minutes can really help elderly folks. Most Members paid tribute to the contribution that elderly people make to society, yet they are not receiving the home-help services that they need as they approach their later years. Almost all colleagues paid tribute to home helps who go the extra mile. As Carmel Hanna and Jim Shannon said, some home helps willingly return to homes in the evenings to help out, without being paid to do so.

Several Members cited figures produced by the Northern Ireland Audit Office in its October 2007 report, which showed a high dependence on institutional care. Although health and social care trusts spent 60% of their budgets on the care of elderly people in 2005-06, most of that money was spent on residential and nursing homes; not enough money is allocated to community-care provision.

Several Members mentioned community-care policy. Mickey Brady said that notwithstanding the

People First policy, we must shift the balance from residential care to community care, with the delivery of care packages at home. Many policies seem to be about reducing costs rather than providing practical help for elderly people.

Tom Buchanan and Michelle O'Neill mentioned the rural provision of community care and the difficulties that people in rural communities face in obtaining home help. They also pointed out the difficulty in recruiting home help, and asked whether it was realistic to ask people to travel long distances to help people in their homes for only 15 minutes a day.

Many themes reoccurred; everyone said more or less the same thing. Iris Robinson supported the motion and said that home help was an easy target for cuts. Although she understood that there were underlying financial constraints, Mrs Robinson said that it was unfair to make cuts in services to vulnerable people and that we were making a mockery of the community-care policy.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware of the guidelines that are given to home helps about the time that they should spend on each activity? Those guidelines advise that home helps should spend 30 minutes on cleaning; 60 minutes on cooking; 20 minutes to light a fire; 20 minutes to carry water; five minutes making a bed; 20 minutes on washing and ironing; 10 minutes on shopping; 30 minutes on dressing; 15 minutes on undressing; 30 minutes on help with washing; and 15 minutes on social support. Yet they are supposed to do all that in no more than 15 minutes. If ever we needed an example of where things have gone wrong, that is it.

Ms Lo: I absolutely agree. I do my own washing and ironing and wash my own dishes, and I know that I cannot do that in 15 minutes.

Michelle O'Neill mentioned the difficulties in rural areas and the gap between social services packages and community-care services, and she praised the good work of care workers. Other Members reinforced the point that home-help provision must be adequately resourced. Michelle O'Neill told us that she knew of many home helps who did more work than they were expected to or were paid for.

Several Members spoke about the need to make efficiency savings, but that we should not target the most vulnerable in society. Sam Gardiner said that we should stop making wish lists and that we should be accountable for how taxpayers' money is spent.

He said that care must be given to those who need it, and that home helps should not, for example, peel potatoes for the rest of the family. Although he supports the motion, he said that we must be careful about how money is spent, and that, if there is change in the system, such a change to the NHS cannot take place overnight.

He said that he broadly supports the sentiment of the motion, but cautioned against spending money unwisely.

5.00 pm

Carmel Hanna paid tribute to home helps for the work that they do, and said that they often go the extra mile. She also said that a small amount of help can make a difference, but that perhaps we need to think of more creative ways to help elderly people to stay active in their homes and in society. Most people prefer to be at home, and it is much more cost-effective to use the home-help service than to send people to residential or nursing homes. She acknowledged that there is a need to cut out abuses from the system, but said that it is important that elderly people can avail of the home-help service, as often it constitutes their main contact with the outside world. She acknowledged that the home help also gets a lot of satisfaction from doing their very difficult job and making a difference in people's lives. However, monitoring and the provision of sufficient resources are important.

Tom Buchanan spoke about rural areas, and said that the home-help service costs around one third to one quarter of the cost of residential care, and also that we cannot show disregard for contributions from the elderly population. He also said that it is impossible to carry out the tasks of a home help in 15 minutes, and that it is impossible to place a value on the work of home helps. The changes to the services are causing anxiety and concern to elderly folk, and he called again for proper provision of resources.

Sue Ramsey commended the Minister — even though he was not here at the time — for the proposed introduction of free prescriptions, but cautioned that the home-help service is not just for the elderly, but also for other sections of the community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his contribution, and I welcome his promise to look at the appeal system, and to promote access for people who are unhappy about the assessment to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the good work carried out by the home help service; further notes that some people's provision is being reduced to 15 minutes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to make sure that there is adequate home help provision for every person who needs it.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.

