
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 16 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Speaker: I would be grateful for Members' attention before we move to the second item on the Order Paper. At the start of last Monday's sitting, numerous points of order were raised by various Members. Some of those were dealt with at the time, and I will deal with others that were legitimate in due course.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Public Authorities (Reform) Bill

Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform Members that the Public Authorities (Reform) Bill has received Royal Assent. The Public Authorities (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009 became law today, Monday 16 February 2009.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 16 February 2009.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 26 January 2009.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2008-2009 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Vote on Account

Mr Speaker: As the next two motions relate to Supply resolutions, I propose to conduct only one debate. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the first motion. Debate will then take place on both motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. I will then call the Minister to move the second motion, before putting the Question without further debate.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for this debate. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will have up to one hour in which to propose the motions and up to one hour in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in

Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009. — [*The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).*]

Mr Speaker: I wish to make it clear to the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he has one hour in which to speak to the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Assembly's main focus today is on the final spending proposals for the current financial year, and on providing Departments and other public bodies with the legislative authority to finalise expenditure in 2008-09. Therefore, I propose to address two important Supply resolutions, in order to seek the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2008-09 and to provide interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2009-2010, in the form of a Vote on Account.

The levels of Supply set out in the resolutions are requested under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The first resolution seeks the Assembly's approval for the issue of a total cash sum not exceeding £12,485,717,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund, and for the use of total resources not exceeding £15,730,008,000, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09, which were laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

The reconciliation from the total resources to the cash sum required excludes non-cash items, such as depreciation and the cost of capital, and it includes provision for capital expenditure and adjustments for debtors and creditors and the use of provisions.

The amount of cash and resources for 2008-09, covered by the first resolution, supersedes the Vote on Account provision in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which was passed in the Assembly this time last year, and the additional provision for 2008-09 in the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, which was passed in June 2008.

The second resolution seeks the Assembly's approval on the issue of a cash sum of £5,618,965,000 and resources of £7,078,596,000 on account for the 2009-2010 financial year, in advance of the consideration and approval of the 2009-2010 Main Estimates and the Budget Bill by the Assembly in June 2009.

Once approved by the Assembly, the resolutions are the precursor to the Budget Bill, which I plan to introduce to the Assembly later today. Subject to Assembly approval and Royal Assent, it will provide the formal legal authority for Departments to incur expenditure for this financial year and for the first three to four months of the 2009-2010 financial year.

I, therefore, remind Members of the importance of the Supply resolutions for which approval is being sought today. As Members are well aware, Budgets, which set spending plans for future years and on which we rightly spend many hours debating, and the in-year monitoring rounds, which amend those plans, do not, in themselves, convey cash or resources to Departments. Nor do they provide Departments with the legal authority to spend that cash or to use those resources. That will be done today through this legislature's approval of the Supply resolutions and the Estimates, followed by the associated Budget Bill. That means, of course, that after the close of the financial year the Assembly will hold Departments accountable for managing and controlling that spending and use of resources within the limits authorised today.

Members will be aware of the important role that has been played by the Public Accounts Committee in ensuring accountability to the House.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will be gratified to hear that I do not propose to try the patience of the Chamber with the detail of every Department's spending plans, as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates volume that is before the House. Rather, I will leave Members to study the detail — as, I am sure, they have — and at the end of today's debate, I will endeavour to deal with any issues raised. However, Members will appreciate that I will not be able to respond to specific departmental queries, and in such cases, where appropriate, I will ask the relevant Minister to issue a written response.

As this is only the second time that the House has considered spring Supplementary Estimates, I will remind Members of two things. First, the final Estimates reflect the spending plans of Departments — not the total spending plans of the wider public sector, including arm's-length bodies. Secondly, they reflect the annually managed expenditure as well as the departmental expenditure limits. I appreciate that during Budget debates and monitoring rounds, the focus is on the assigned departmental expenditure limit, over which the House has full discretion regarding allocation of spend, but we must remember that the Northern Ireland Budget also includes approximately £8 billion of annually managed expenditure for demand-led services, such as social security benefits and public-sector pension schemes.

In that context, the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect both the departmental expenditure limit changes that were agreed at the June, September and December monitoring rounds, and the annually managed expenditure changes that have been agreed since the presentation, in June 2008, of the Main Estimates.

Following the decisions that have been taken by the Executive since the December monitoring round,

additional headroom has been built into the spring Supplementary Estimates in order to facilitate final decisions in the February monitoring round.

I will provide the House with details of the headroom in order to pre-empt any misunderstanding by Members or any confusion that might arise during the debate. Two items of provision have been included that relate to decisions that have been taken since the December monitoring round and which, therefore, are required to be included in the Estimates and the Budget Bill. Those provisions are the £15 million in the Department for Social Development (DSD) Estimate for the fuel poverty package, and the £3.9 million in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) Estimate along with £2.9 million in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) Estimate for the voluntary cull and disposal scheme and hardship payments in relation to the contaminated feed incident.

The Estimates have also been adjusted to reflect the changes that resulted from the reclassification of Northern Ireland Water (NIW). Members will recall that I negotiated the cover for that with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Prime Minister in respect of the additional non-cash costs associated with a deferral on the introduction of water charges.

At the preparation of the spring Supplementary Estimates in early January, it was thought prudent — since the Estimates and the Budget Bill are the final statutory ceiling on spending plans — to include some headroom amounting to £60 million in order to provide the Executive, in the current economic downturn, with the flexibility in February monitoring to make allocations if resources become available. Such headroom has been included with strict conditions. For instance, resources that have been allocated in February monitoring must be used only for the agreed purpose, and virement approval will not be given later to cover excess spending in any other areas.

Departments have also been advised that inclusion of headroom is not an indication that additional resources will be allocated by the Executive where the latest position is clear that resource constraints are as tight as anticipated by the Executive in December. I am sure that Members will appreciate the wisdom of that course, and if it had not been followed, Members would, rightly, be levelling criticism for shortsightedness and lack of flexibility.

I want to indulge in a backward look at the financial year that is fast drawing to a close and which has resulted in the Estimates that are before the House today. In the three monitoring rounds that have passed so far this year, a total of £134.6 million of reduced requirements were surrendered by Departments. As well as reducing the

opening overcommitment, we were able to meet £84.9 million of bids from Departments for emerging pressures.

The Estimates include an increase of more than £25 million in various demand-led social-security benefits that the Department for Social Development administers.

12.15 pm

In addition to the £134.6 million resource reduced requirements, Departments declared reduced requirements of £135.2 million on the capital side, and bids to the value of £54.6 million were met. In order to boost capital spend in the current economic climate, £9.4 million was brought forward from 2009-2010 into this financial year.

Members will recall some of the main allocations made during the current financial year to date, including an allocation of £20 million capital to DSD to assist with the capital-receipt shortfall that the downturn in the housing market caused. That was provided in order to maintain the provision of social and affordable housing, and £6.5 million was also allocated for the special purchase of evacuated dwellings. Recently, DSD has been provided with the flexibility to move a further £10 million from other areas of its budget into its budget for social housing. Other allocations include £20 million capital for the farm nutrient management scheme, which will have a significant impact for the construction industry at this crucial time; £5 million to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for animal health; £700,000 assistance for the fishing industry; and £500,000 for flooding hardship.

Allocations to the Department of Education include £5 million for the extended schools programme; £4 million for school maintenance; and £2.6 million for part-time youth workers' pay arrears. An allocation of £15 million was made to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) under the first call on available resources, which was agreed as part of the 2008-2011 Budget. The Department of the Environment (DOE) was allocated £1.5 million for flood relief to local councils, £1.9 million capital for the Planning Service computer system, and £2 million for a shortfall in planning-application income.

An allocation of £6.2 million capital was made to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for Warrenpoint harbour. Other allocations include £2.5 million for roads' structural maintenance; £1.8 million for public-transport capital works; and £2.8 million capital and £500,000 resource for the Assembly.

It was agreed that in the 2008-2011 Budget, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety would have flexibility to manage spending pressures in its own budget rather than declare reduced requirements and submit bids. That has allowed the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reduce prescription charges to £3 for each item from

1 January 2009, something that I am sure that all Members welcome.

The past year was difficult, as there was an ever-tightening fiscal situation, which culminated in the economic downturn that has gripped the nation and the world. In December, the Executive responded to the economic difficulties with a £70 million package of measures designed to support local business — including the construction industry — and low-income households, which included the £15 million allocation to tackle fuel poverty. Members must not forget that in addition to that, the Estimates for 2008-09 include provision for approximately £2,500 million of social-security benefits and income support for the people of Northern Ireland.

It is important to listen to the construction industry's concerns. As well as bringing forward £9.4 million of investment into the current financial year, I announced in December that some £115 million of construction projects that were scheduled to go to the market via the frameworks will now proceed to tender by March 2009. Therefore, the delivery of projects is not being held back to cover some alleged hole in the 2008-09 Budget, as was claimed by some but has proven to be spurious. Total capital investment in 2008-09 is now expected to exceed £1.4 billion — that is a record for investment in local infrastructure.

Moreover, industrial rates have been frozen at 30%. Rates relief is being provided to those in the freight and transport sector, which is benefiting many of our important docks and transport companies. I have also announced further support to local business through further changes to the rating system, including a freeze on increases in business rates next year, as well as the introduction from 2010 of a rates-relief scheme for small businesses.

The Assembly and the Executive have presided over the delivery of services in Northern Ireland, expenditure for which totals almost £16,000 million in the current difficult financial year. Although there remains considerable scope for improvement over the current financial year, public services have continued in an effective manner, unforeseen issues have been addressed, and assistance has been given to local businesses — including in the construction industry — and to households that the economic downturn and fuel poverty have affected.

Turning from the current financial year and looking ahead to 2009-2010, the second resolution that is the Assembly seeks approval for the issue of a cash-and-resource Vote on Account to continue existing services in the early months of the next financial year until the Main Estimates and corresponding Budget Bill are approved by the Assembly. I want to make it clear that the Vote on Account is around 45% of the final

2008-09 provision for cash and resources, and is not based on the opening Budget position for 2009-2010 agreed in January last year as part of Budget 2008-2011. In addition, the Vote on Account is based not only on the departmental expenditure limit on which the Budget 2008-2011 focused, but on the £8 million of annually managed expenditure, a substantial proportion of which is spent on social security benefits.

I have to remind the House that failure to pass the Vote on Account resolution would have serious consequences for the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland beyond 31 March, and the electorate of Northern Ireland would not forgive the Assembly for jeopardising that expenditure.

As we look forward to the next financial year, and the predictions surrounding the global economy, we must recognise the difficult challenges that lie ahead for the Assembly and the Executive. We must work together to juggle competing proprieties within a finite Budget to deliver public services. The current economic situation highlights the importance of the Programme for Government, with its focus on the economy, and as we continue with its implementation, underpinned by the Budget and the investment strategy, endorsed by the Assembly, and endorsed unanimously in the Executive, we have the opportunity to steer Northern Ireland through the storm that is already battering our local economy and impacting on households.

Within our remit as a local devolved Administration, we have been able to respond to local needs, and we will continue to do that in future.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr Hamilton): I thank the Minister for his opening remarks and his explanation of the context of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. I wish to make some opening remarks on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and if time permits, to make some personal remarks. I will seek to indicate when that switch is being made, although Members may be able to tell by my more pronounced gesturing and pointing around the House.

At its meeting on 4 February 2009, the Committee took evidence from departmental officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 and Vote on Account for 2009-2010. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the officials for helping us to navigate our way through, what are by necessity, detailed and complicated documents. That evidence session represented the culmination of a process of Committee scrutiny of the quarterly monitoring rounds, both strategically and in relation to the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) own position.

The Budget approved by the Assembly in January 2008 contained three-year plans for 2008-2011. The

spring Supplementary Estimates, Vote on Account and associated Budget Bill, which are considered annually by the Assembly each February, emanate from the agreed Budget. They give Departments the authority to spend, and they set control limits for Departments, through which the Assembly can hold Departments to account. The Committee has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which is to be introduced later today, and the Chairperson has written to the Speaker to confirm that.

In layman's terms, the spring Supplementary Estimates encapsulate the changes in departmental budgets, especially during the quarterly monitoring rounds. The spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 seek the Assembly's approval for any additional resources and/or cash needed over and above what was detailed in the Main Estimates for 2008-09, approved by the Assembly in June 2008.

The spring Supplementary Estimates for this year include what is described as additional headroom in respect of a number of departmental Estimates, which will facilitate allocations in the February monitoring round. The headroom will cover changes since the December monitoring round and areas where Departments intend to bid for resources in February, provided such bids have been initially assessed as reasonable and are in areas to which the Executive may allocate funds, if available. This addresses the timing issue, in that the Budget Bill, containing both the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, needs Royal Assent before the end of March to allow Departments to have the legal authority to continue to spend in the early part of 2009-2010.

Departmental officials cannot, therefore, wait to finalise the Estimates until after the outcome of the February monitoring round has been announced in early March.

The headroom provision means that any funding that becomes available may be allocated in the February monitoring round, and the Estimates will then give Departments the capacity to take on and spend that money. If that headroom had not been built in, some of the Executive's recent decisions, such as the decision on actions to address fuel poverty, could not be implemented and accounted for in February.

When giving evidence to the Committee, DFP officials stated that that decision was not taken lightly, given the need for Estimates to be taut and realistic and written to the latest Budget position, which was agreed in December. However, given the decisions that the Executive have made since the December monitoring round, it was thought prudent to build in headroom for this year. The headroom will be used only if allocations are made in February and, therefore, does not pre-empt Executive decisions. Strict conditions have been laid

out, and the Minister may wish to reassure the Assembly on that matter later, when he gets a chance to do so.

Although total headroom of £342 million resource and £96 million capital has been built in, those amounts may not, in fact, be allocated in February. The headroom provision may ultimately reflect somewhat on the accuracy of the Estimates. However, the Committee welcomed the flexibility and transparency afforded by that approach, and DFP officials assured the Committee that they have asked Departments to inform their respective Committees of the headroom that has been built in to the Estimates.

In relation to budgetary changes that emanate from quarterly monitoring rounds, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has once again fulfilled an active scrutiny role throughout 2008-09. DFP officials have briefed the Committee on the Department's position before each monitoring round and have provided in-depth written responses to the queries raised. Following the Minister's plenary statement on the outcomes of each monitoring round, DFP officials responsible for central finance have briefed the Committee on the strategic and cross-cutting issues that relate to public expenditure.

The Committee worked with DFP officials to develop a standardised format for monitoring-round information to facilitate Committee scrutiny of departmental submissions, and it is conducting an inquiry into the scrutiny of the Executive's Budget and expenditure. Stage three of that inquiry will review the in-year monitoring process, and in that regard, the Committee welcomes the fact that DFP is committed to its own review of the process, which is to be completed by the end of March. The outcome of that review will feed into the Committee's inquiry. DFP officials have assured the Committee that movements of money during monitoring rounds are scrutinised — initially by DFP and subsequently by the Executive — to ensure that the Executive's priorities in the Programme for Government have been put to the fore.

The previous Minister of Finance and Personnel outlined three possible reasons for the return of funds by Departments: greater than planned efficiency; the overstating of resource needs upfront; or a failure to deliver the planned level of public services. I, therefore, repeat the call that was made last year for Statutory Committees to examine the resources returned by their respective Departments and to question why they have been released and whether they have been returned at the earliest possible opportunity. Returning money on a large scale must inevitably affect delivery, and the information base must be improved centrally to measure that effect and to facilitate DFP's strategic challenge function, especially in examining whether Departments are overstating resource needs when bidding for particular programmes.

I will now turn to the motion on the Vote on Account for 2009-2010. It is a practical measure that provides for the sums needed to enable public services to continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates and associated Budget Bill are debated before the summer. I, therefore, support both motions.

I now wish to make some comments in a personal capacity. I reiterate my comment about the seriousness of the debate. We often hear the media and the public say that the House does not debate serious enough issues. However, the budgetary process is the most serious issue that we can debate, and we will discuss it today, in the two motions before the House, and tomorrow, in the debate on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Those are serious issues in serious times. I would suggest that it is no time for silly stunts. Mr Speaker, I would praise you in your wisdom if you were to rule as out of order — if it is appropriate — the frivolous silly stunt that is the attempt to cut a penny from the Estimates. That sort of stunt would be more befitting Fawcett's Circus than this Assembly. Just think of the amount of paper that was printed to inform Members of that attempt. It cost more to print that paper than would have been saved had a penny been taken off the Estimates and the Vote on Account. Indeed, if the Members who put the amendment forward had been strangely convincing enough to persuade the majority of Members to support their silly idea, infinitely more than a penny would have been spent on reproducing the very thick Estimates document, which is published every year and which, of course, would have needed adjusting.

Regardless of future Budgets or Budget processes, Members need to get a grip of themselves. I cannot predict what Members will do, but I have a fairly good idea of how some parties in the House will behave later today, and they need to get a grip of what is before us. We are debating last year's Budget, which, as I said, was agreed by the vast majority of Members. Today, we are trying to formalise our in-year monitoring process and provide what is known in the vernacular as a "cash float" for Departments for the next year so that they can continue with their business.

12.30 pm

Members attempted to table an amendment seeking to reduce departmental budgets by a penny. What they really want to do is to reduce departmental budgets by more than just a penny. Their calls for the re-writing, or wholesale redrafting, of budgets would have to be financed by taking money from other Departments, given that there is no new money, and no desire in any part of the House to raise money in the midst of a recession through increased rates or other measures. It must be pointed out that some of the vital public services that Members cry about needing more money

would be hit significantly by such a reduction, such as the Education Department, which spends huge sums, or the Health Department, which receives around 50% of the total Budget.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way providing that the Member bears in mind the time that I have left to speak.

Mr B McCrea: I take the Member's point about frivolous motions on board. In the area that he has responsibility for, is it likely that Land and Property Services will implement a new strategy for rating reform that incorporates IT replacement? Will savings be made in the areas that have been identified, such as IT staff, software licences and maintenance? Will he be able to make the savings from accommodation and staff restructuring?

Mr Hamilton: I have absolute confidence in the ability of the Minister and his team to deliver on those matters. I thank the Member for promoting me — I am not responsible for anything. That is a question to ask the Minister at a later date.

I am glad that the frivolous amendment was rejected. Did the Members who tried to table that amendment ask their Minister — the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — if he would be happy for £500 million to be taken from his budget to pay for their ideas.

Mr Speaker: Will Members check that their mobile phones are switched off? Someone is operating a mobile phone, or has one switched on, which is affecting the audio equipment.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for arriving late. I am glad, as always, to speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. The Committee has noted the Department for Employment and Learning submissions to DFP, and I will make some observations on the Department's reduced requirements.

As Members are aware, the Committee has previously stated that it has issues with the Department's underspends, which it has discussed in its meetings with the Minister and his departmental officials. The Committee notes that, although underspends for individual projects and programmes appear relatively small in comparison with the Department's allocation in this monitoring round, they are significant as a proportion of the budgets of certain projects and programmes.

From its discussions with officials, the Committee has ascertained that underspends on some skills and work-readiness demand-led programmes are associated with time lags before participation becomes mandatory for clients. For example, in this monitoring round, the

Department is showing a reduced requirement of almost £700,000 for the Steps to Work programme, which has arisen because demand for that programme has not reached expected levels. That is because it is not mandatory for 18- to 24-year-olds to enter the programme until they have been on jobseeker's allowance for six months. In addition, that period is 18 months for those aged 25 and over, which is something that the Committee queries.

As a result of the time lag and our knowledge that the number of unemployed people has risen dramatically in the recession, the Committee expects that funding levels for that and other Department demand-led programmes on unemployment will have to rise. We emphasise that to the Finance Minister and urge him to be forthcoming with funds for those important programmes when increases are required. The Executive are also considering that matter.

At the same time, the Committee highlighted to the Department that investment in upskilling and reskilling the workforce must continue if we are to take the best advantage of the economic upswing when it comes. A highly skilled workforce will attract foreign direct investment and other investment. The Committee would support any funding bids that the Department might make for such programmes. We remind the Minister of Finance of the commitments in the Programme for Government with regard to upskilling and reskilling the workforce.

The Committee notes that a number of the Department's reduced requirements arise from unfilled vacancies, and we are concerned that the Department is unable to fill those vacancies in this time of recession. We urge the Finance Minister to take note of the prevalence of the Departments that are making reduced requirements because of unfilled vacancies. If those vacancies remain because of skills-gap issues, that matter must be addressed. It is appropriate that the Finance Minister should address those issues with his Executive colleagues, including the Minister for Employment and Learning.

We also ask the Finance Minister to be particularly aware of reduced requirements across the Department resulting from slippage on capital projects. The Committee for Employment and Learning has taken the lead on the issue, and we wrote to all the Statutory Committees and their Ministers urging that capital projects not be allowed to slip and, where possible, pushed forward.

The construction industry has been one of the worst-hit industries in the recession, and the Committee is concerned that if the situation is allowed to continue, we will lose many skilled workers to projects abroad, setting back the construction industry by years. As always, the Department can depend on the

fact that the Committee will be supportive of its budget judgements when appropriate, but there should be no mistake that the Committee has sharp teeth and a keen sense of smell, and we will be looking closely at all the financial arrangements that come before us. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McNarry: The Ulster Unionist Party will not be supporting the Minister today. Our unanimous view is that what may have worked when the initial Programme for Government was approved is not working today. Therefore, we cannot endorse what the Minister asks the House to support, as it is not in Northern Ireland's best interests. That has been our consistent view. We recognise that the Minister is also being consistent, albeit consistently wrong. It is a difference of opinion between us.

The chasm is as deep as the hole that the Minister oversees in an out-of-sync Budget, coupled to an unfit-for-purpose Programme for Government. We have consistently asked the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: We have consistently asked the Minister to show us the evidence and the outworkings to which he gives credibility, to demonstrate that what was workable in a recession-free period holds good in today's recession-riddled times and to convince the people who are desperately trying to keep a roof over their heads and a business solvent that what the Assembly votes for today will really impact on, and make a difference to, their lives and to their places of work.

Furthermore, we would like the Minister to explain why the dysfunctional, delusional direction pursued through the financial conduits of the Department keep turning into a blind alley. Last year's routes are blocked, and we do not hear solutions — only the re-cooking of last year's recipe. If the Minister intends to take his party and his Sinn Féin soulmates down the tubes of a rollercoaster of financial folly, be my guest, but he will not be taking the Ulster Unionists with him.

Let us take a good look at the Department's lamentable performance under the Minister's watch. When I have finished, perhaps he will tell me if he were in my position, would he vote for more of the same — targets in disarray, too many key components running into the ground.

The Minister has lost control of spending. There is no strategy attached to the strategic stocktake. Shortfalls of the dimension now exposed will not be met by in-year monitoring, efficiency savings or reliance on underspends. One day the Minister boasted of a letter dispatched to Ministers warning them not to overspend, but in a press statement last Friday, the Minister had crawled back into conceding his dependency on underspending. He even introduced the abandoning of projects. Which is it to be: Departments tilting at

overspends, or Departments handing money back from underspends? I will come back to that issue.

What is all this about cutting projects? Will the Minister reveal which projects he intends to axe? Surely they cannot include road improvement: DRD spends 18% of what is spent on road repairs in England. He cannot axe the £22 million of capital spent on infrastructure projects that has already been kicked into the next financial year. What are the projects that the Minister intends to cut, and how do they relate to this debate?

The Minister inhabits his own monetary world, in which shortfalls are called “pressures” and new money is called “easement”. It is a world of euphemisms.

How is the Minister feeling today? Is he comfortable with how the past year has worked out? Are targets safe and set for delivery on time? Is enough being done to reduce costs? What new ideas does he have for minimising costs and maximising outcomes? I pose those questions because the Minister has cocooned himself in systematic denial.

Who is to blame for the millions of pounds overlooked in the collection of rates? Who was at fault for the £200 million lost in the sale of the Crossnacreevy plant-testing station? Is £100 million — or is it nearer £200 million — that is balanced precariously over civil servants’ pay claim? That will mean a sizeable extension of our loan capacity when the money is borrowed. Is it possible to borrow money from the Treasury for that purpose? Can the Minister guarantee that those claims will be met? How does he intend to pay back that loan to the Treasury, and what will be the repayment timescale?

Furthermore, there is the remarkable debacle of Workplace 2010, whereby an estimated £175 million of revenue was lost due to what is best described as incomprehensible incompetence of the worst kind. Was £10 million, £12 million or £14 million spent on consultants and some kind of golden project under finders-minders fees? Will the Minister tell us who the lucky recipients were? Having apparently wasted those millions and lost out on the £175 million in revenue, will he tell us who took the decision to mothball the Workplace 2010 project? Will he confirm that, long before the decision to pull the plug was taken, his Department was aware that the two final competitive bidders were already engaged in talks about a merger?

Is that not a disgrace? Not only has some £14 million that was spent on dubious fees been wasted, but more than £175 million of revenue has been kissed goodbye, and another project has been abandoned — for refurbishment, so I hear. I wonder where the money will come from to tackle worn-out buildings and office supplies.

Those are not pressures; the roof is caving in. At least Obama had the grace to admit that he “screwed

up”. The Minister is in retreat. He is totally reliant on underspend and hopes that the historic inadequacies of the Departments will be repeated. That is a solution over which the Minister should not stand, because such posturing is an indictment of the ineffectiveness of the financial machine for which he is solely responsible.

Yet the Minister does not come to the House short of advice, some of which is bound to have made to him many of the points that I have been banging on about for the past five months; he need only read the newspapers and the economists’ forecasts. Perhaps he does not do that. There is no chance of reducing child poverty by 2011, and little chance of a 50% growth in creative agencies, realising £120 million of private-sector investment or creating 6,500 new jobs. We must not forget that, just around the corner, are water charges, and now, we are told, the financing of policing and justice — another deal.

The republican/DUP show goes on. They can vote in or out whatever they can agree on, and the record shows that they agree on a great deal. However, despite their power, their control of the purse strings and of most of the Departments, they, like the figures, fall short on solutions.

There has been talk that in some of the advice offered to the Minister there is a proposal that could bring £50 million into his kitty — by way of the DUP and Sinn Féin agreeing to a 1% freeze on public-sector salary increases and ending bonus payments to senior civil servants. Does the Minister intend to put such a recommendation into action today?

12.45 pm

We are dealing with a document of substantial reading, complete with the potential for serious consequences for the Finance Minister and those who control the Executive. It is a worthy piece of work, and its author is no secret. Somewhat mysteriously, however, it is stamped: “embargoed until further notice”. Can the Minister tell us who commissioned that work, who placed that strange embargo on it, and when will it be lifted? Has that restriction got anything to do with today’s debate? What does the Minister intend to do with it?

The Minister has made an about-turn on underspending. In the interest of public confidence, will the Minister outline where he stands on underspending? Will he detail any urgent measures that he is considering but, so far, has not disclosed? That is another good reason why we will not be supporting the Minister.

Mr O’Loan: The Assembly is — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr O'Loan: I nearly had the floor, hopefully, I have now. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Loan: The Assembly is certainly well aware of the concerns — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. All Members who want to speak in this debate will have an opportunity to do so.

Mr O'Loan: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am sure that the clock will be brought back to zero.

The Assembly is well aware of the concerns that the SDLP has about the budgetary process. It was our desire for a full Budget process in order to respond in a significant way to the economic downturn. However, we recognise the importance of the Vote on Account in providing the money for Departments for the next year, and therefore we will not be seeking to divide the Assembly on that matter. I hope that that will provide the opportunity for a reasoned and reasonable debate on the issues. It is in that spirit — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr O'Loan: I am sure that the timekeepers will note that my time is being severely limited.

Within the strategic stocktake, £1 billion of pressures were not provided for; in response, we were told that half of those pressures are likely to disappear like chaff in the wind. In a previous debate, I pointed out that a number of those issues did not look to me like chaff in the wind. In response, the Minister gave the Mr Micawber answer that something will turn up. Although we hope that something will turn up, we feel that more is needed.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I involuntarily gave way a number of times and I need the time that is available. If there is time at the end I will give way, but I doubt that that will be the case.

There are question marks around the deliverability of the current Budget, and the capital asset realisation is a major concern. The investment strategy is very dependent on that, and that problem has not been quantified. I would be grateful if the Minister would address that concern. A further major issue — little discussed — is PFIs, on which the investment strategy is very dependent. There is a banking crisis and, surely, those PFIs must be dependent on funds coming forward from the banks. Again, no information has been forthcoming on the consequences of that for the investment strategy.

I say directly to the Minister; if he is aware of issues of concern around the delivery of the Budget, I believe that he is under a duty to tell us now, even if those issues have not been fully quantified.

It concerns me greatly — and the Assembly should have been even more concerned than it was — that the equal pay issue was known to the Minister concerned six months before he presented the Budget statement but the Assembly was never given any indication of it. That type of situation should not happen again.

The strategic stocktake document quantifies the deferment of water charges as £2 million being lost from the Budget over the two-year period. It has been estimated that the equal pay issue will cost at least £100 million in back pay. Perhaps that has been provided for, but I want to ask more about that. If there is anything in excess of that £100 million, it has not been allowed or provided for. That is a recurrent theme.

I want to talk about the £900 million that has been talked about and presented as new funds from the Treasury. It is not new money; £800 million of it is simply extra money that would have been charged in relation to the accountancy rules because of the deferment of water charges. The Treasury has simply said that it will absorb that; it is not new money for the Northern Ireland block. We believe that the £100 million is for equal pay, and I would be glad if the Minister could confirm that. Does that money have to be repaid in due course? If it has to be repaid, no money at all is being made available to the block.

In the downturn, it is possible that the rate receipts will not make the values that had been predicted. I know all about the increased sums that are coming from what were previously thought to be vacant properties. In the pre-Budget report, the Chancellor talked about a further £5 billion being taken out of Budgets as a result of further efficiencies. Barnett consequentials could follow from that.

Previously, I quoted a departmental official who referred to programmes having run their course and needing adjustment in the light of the present economic downturn. That amplifies the SDLP's real concerns about whether the economic downturn is being responded to adequately. I noticed that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was asked about that during Question Time last week, and she did not give a lot of an answer. She referred to information seminars, and I give credit to the initiatives that Invest Northern Ireland (INI) is carrying out. I noticed the elaboration of that initiative from INI's recent publication, and that it is doing significant work to give support to companies through current difficulties.

However, I do not think that enough is being done. Other countries have substantial measures on reskilling and on the upgrading of skills in response to unemployment. That must be replicated, but new measures are not being introduced in line with those. I worry that strategic focus is being lost, that not much is being

done about the current situation and that we are losing sight of the bigger picture.

On 4 February 2009, in a letter to the Committee for Finance and Personnel about what the Department is doing about Varney II, DFP stated:

“On the specific request for a paper on progress, this has been overtaken by external events, particularly the fact that the economic climate is now materially different from when Sir David Varney produced his Review in April 2008. The Executive is now focussed on putting in place measures to address the economic downturn.”

I do not see a lot of measures in relation to the economic downturn, and I am worried by the shift in focus and the fact that we seem to be losing sight of what needs to be done about the bigger picture and the longer term.

Invest Northern Ireland says that Northern Ireland is now placed 113 out of 203 regions in the EU25 for innovation. That is the lowest place of any UK region. It says that Northern Ireland lags behind the UK average for entrepreneurial activity. Those are fundamental challenges, which can be summed up in one word: “competitiveness”. The global economy has been greatly shaken in recent times, but it remains a global economy, and the only future for Northern Ireland is to compete in that global economy. We need to know that the Minister has his focus on that, but that does not necessarily seem to be the case.

The First Minister, when he was Minister of Finance, said that there was no escalator and that we must use the stairs — the trouble is that nobody is pointing to the staircase any more. At present, the fundamental direction must come, in particular, from the Minister of Finance. We are living through a contemporary crisis that must be ridden out, but we must keep our eye on what will happen to our companies, businesses and society after the crisis.

Mr Speaker, you and Members might have noticed that, thus far, I have not mentioned the word “housing”. I rest my remarks on that innovative note.

Dr Farry: The motions provide, as Mr Hamilton said, a very important opportunity for the Assembly to debate the nature and level of public expenditure in Northern Ireland. At the outset, I declare my intention to criticise the Minister and the Executive. However, my party is a constructive opposition party and it does not intend to divide the House on the motions.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: I wonder what Ulster Unionist Members are playing at, because the simple fact is that if the motions are not approved, Departments — including the two that are headed by Ministers from the Ulster Unionist Party — will have no money to spend from 1 April 2009. I wonder whether the Ulster Unionist tactic has been approved by those Ministers, who must have signed up to the motions when they were discussed

in the Executive. The Alliance Party does not have such complications.

It is important to acknowledge that the debate is even more important in the context of the economic downturn. Even the Alliance Party concedes that the global economic crisis is certainly not the Executive’s fault, but there are important issues to which the Executive must attend.

There are two broad questions — first, are the Executive doing everything within their power to mitigate the effect of the economic downturn on Northern Ireland? Indeed, the Executive may have particular responsibilities in that respect. Secondly, are the Executive doing enough to rebalance and modernise our economy in order to ensure that Northern Ireland is best placed to take advantage of recovery, once it comes? My party has had major concerns from the outset about whether the Budget and the Programme for Government are fit for purpose. Those questions are even more acute today.

I, like Mr O’Loan, believe that contradictory messages are being sent. The Executive have said that there is no need to reform or revise the Programme for Government (PFG) or the Budget because both already prioritise the economy. However, the Varney II Report was dismissed by the Executive on the grounds that they were already committed to the recommendations in that report. As Mr O’Loan said, the Executive are saying that they can no longer implement the recommendations in the Varney II Report because events have overtaken them. That surely begs the question — of the Minister and of the Executive — have events not also overtaken the Programme for Government and the Budget?

We have been unhappy with a number of the spending changes made in the course of the year, because we do not believe that they adequately address the issues that face us. *[Interruption]*

If Basil McCrea wants me to give way, he is more than welcome to ask. He is saving himself for later, OK.

We must take account of how other national and regional governments around the world are responding to the economic downturn. Last week, the US Congress passed an \$800 billion stimulus for the US economy. In December last year, the UK Government passed a stimulus worth around £20 billion. Our Scottish counterparts — a regional Government with similar powers to our own — have provided their own stimulus in the context of their powers and responsibilities. The Scottish Parliament’s forthcoming Budget Bill makes provision for £227 million of capital expenditure, including £120 million for affordable housing.

Unfortunately, I have not included much on housing in my speech, because I assumed that Declan O’Loan would cover that gap, but there we go.

1.00 pm

It is interesting that in the Scottish Government's response to the Council of Economic Advisers' first annual report, Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, said:

"As Scotland's government our responsibility is to prioritise action that, in the short term, mitigates the impact of the downturn while shaping policy that, in the longer term, ensures Scotland not only recovers, but emerges stronger".

Certainly, I do not often agree with Alex Salmond. However, his remark hits the nail on the head as regards what a regional Government should do. I am disappointed not to have heard such rhetoric from Northern Ireland's Ministers.

Similarly, the Irish Government, Germany and Canada have engaged in stimulus activities that tend to share four key elements: to bring forward investment; to increase social housing; to develop the green economy; and to introduce tax incentives, which are usually targeted. There has not been much meaningful action on those issues in Northern Ireland.

As regards investment, I note that the Finance Minister has promised capital spend of £1.4 billion during the current financial year and has pointed out that that is a record figure. It is a net figure from the Budget. However, examination of the investment strategy and gross figures leads one to anticipate that, in budgetary terms, around £5.4 billion of Northern Ireland's money, with a potential additional £450 million, will be spent during the current three-year period. That amounts to at least £1.8 billion each year. Therefore, investment is already £400 million less than what the investment strategy suggested should be spent on capital during the current financial year.

Mr Hamilton: I understand the Member's point. I am glad that he has, at least, finessed some of the arguments that he has made previously in the media with regard to investment of £1.4 billion versus £1.8 billion. Will he accept that net investment of £1.4 billion is still a record level of investment in infrastructure, is far in excess of the £1.1 billion that was invested in 2007, and is, therefore, positive for Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: Certainly, I will concede that the Executive are moving forward in the right direction: £1.4 billion is much more than has been spent previously. However, it is not as much as the Executive's own documentation sets out. The issue is whether capital is actually being spent. Obviously, a spend on capital can have a major impact; it can not only improve Northern Ireland's infrastructure, but provide people with jobs in the short term. Members must be mindful of that. The Assembly has slipped back on social housing opportunities. Indeed, that debate is probably for another place.

There has certainly not been any rhetoric, let alone action, from the Executive on exploiting opportunities

to develop the green economy through energy efficiency and renewable energies. Energy costs are, perhaps, the single biggest issue for households and businesses alike. Certainly, although I recognise and support the £150 winter fuel payments — which, I hope, will be paid during winter, rather than spring — it is worth recognising that moneys invested in energy efficiency in housing could save money in the long term for vulnerable people, such as pensioners and others who are fuel poor. Therefore, rather than focusing on a one-year initiative, a longer-term view must be taken. Obviously, to make energy efficiency improvements to homes will provide people with jobs, which is important.

Around 10% of the US stimulus is linked to the green economy. The UK stimulus also has a heavy emphasis on the green economy, but has been criticised widely by several groups for being insufficient. Both of those policies, however, are ahead of those of Northern Ireland.

I am critical of the Executive's approach towards tax incentives, not only as regards opportunity costs for public expenditure that arise from some of them, but also the danger that there is too much focus on the spending power of individual households to stimulate the economy. In a recession, the risk is that people will save money, rather than go out and spend it. I am not sure that the right balance has been struck between short-term consumer spending and the broader question of longer-term investment for the good of the economy. The Alliance Party disagrees strongly with the Executive on that issue. My party shares many people's concerns about overall public expenditure and whether the Budget is capable of delivering.

We have not had fiscal stimulus on the scale of many of our neighbours', and that is a pity. We have a very tight public expenditure situation, which the Executive did not inherit. The cost of division and of managing a divided society has constrained our ability to redirect public funds. However, the Executive's actions and decisions have lessened spending flexibility even further. They have taken a populist rather than a prudent approach.

I note with regret the decision to defer water charges for two years. That may, in itself, be the right thing to do, but, before that decision was taken, no consideration was given to where the money that will allow water charges to be deferred is to come from. Much criticism has been levelled at parties that have made suggestions without outlining from where the money will come, yet the Executive have done exactly that. They have taken a decision that is not covered by the Programme for Government without saying from where the money will come. There must be a single standard in the Chamber.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for bringing the Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly, and thus

providing the opportunity for this debate. We look forward to another financial year with many opportunities, and we realise that some difficult choices will have to be made. However, we must congratulate the Executive on their accomplishments so far this year.

We are well aware that the Supplementary Estimates do not depend on figures alone. They depend on delivery, together with a strong, sound stewardship of the public's money. Those are our responsibilities as custodians of the public purse. With the allocation of resources to the various Departments, particularly the Department of Finance and Personnel, the prioritisation of reforms and the modernisation of public services should ensure that front line services are efficient and deliver the best level of service for all communities in Northern Ireland.

I place on record my thanks to the Minister for securing an extra £100 million from the Treasury to deal with public servants' equal pay dispute, which I hope can be brought to a successful conclusion in the near future. We must improve transportation networks, but we also have a responsibility to take great care to protect our natural environment and to develop sustainable energy. That responsibility led to the recent establishment of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the introduction of Planning Policy Statement 21, which will help rural dwellers and rural businesspeople.

The investment to support the economy, and the development and maintenance of transportation networks throughout Northern Ireland, should improve economic productivity and prosperity when the economy recovers. Members of our older generation can now avail themselves of the improved transportation networks for free, but they need further encouragement to do so. We also managed to reduce the number of road deaths in Northern Ireland in 2008 to 106.

Reflecting on last year's Supplementary Estimates, I hope that the capital investment issued to the Department for Social Development during the past financial year will lead to more social housing's being made available to the various communities that now live in Northern Ireland. I am pleased that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has provided one of the biggest health budgets that Northern Ireland has ever had. Indeed, that has allowed the Minister of Health to reduce prescription charges, and I hope that prescription charges can be eliminated in the near future.

The implementation of the Programme for Government, the Budget and the investment strategy can ensure that we have a strong local economy, improved infrastructure and improved public services in future. Let us vote unanimously on the spending priorities and work for all communities in Northern Ireland, now and in future. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh dhíospóireacht an lae inniu. I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure heard from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 on 5 February 2009. During the evidence session with departmental officials, the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments that affected spending profiles as the year progressed.

The Committee took an active scrutiny role throughout the 2008-09 budgetary year. The Department briefed the Committee on its position before each monitoring round and provided detailed written responses to queries that Committee members raised. On all occasions, the Committee robustly challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources.

The Committee notes that the DCAL spring Supplementary Estimates detail the plan to decrease provision of the £10 million that was originally allocated to a multi-sports stadium. Of course, the Committee has a particular interest in that issue. We have written to Minister Campbell to ask that he appear before the Committee to explain his plans for disbursing that money and his decision on the multi-sports stadium.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure will continue to prioritise its scrutiny of the Department's budget management. In fact, the Committee recently commissioned the Department to arrange a finance seminar in order to explain all aspects of the Budget process, including the spring Supplementary Estimates. That proved to be a useful exercise, and I encourage other Statutory Committees that have not already done so to explore that possibility.

As Cathaoirleach of the Committee, I want to declare that the Committee still believes that the overall allocation to DCAL is inadequate. The Department is still suffering from the legacy of the past, in which the Government have consistently undervalued the contribution that sport and the arts make to health, the economy, tourism, and so on.

In a personal capacity, I welcome the Minister of Finance and Personnel's comments on the farm nutrient management scheme, which has inherent environmental and agricultural value. People in the agriculture sector have told me that it is an important initiative that will generate work for the construction industry. I want to repeat my stance on the multi-sports stadium: the decision represents a missed opportunity, has wasted huge potential for the construction industry and suggests that the Minister lacks vision and a long-term strategy for sport.

I invite other parties to support Sinn Féin's call for greater fiscal powers, including tax-varying powers, for the Assembly. In the past, that has not always happened, and it is a matter of regret.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I will be absolutely clear: Northern Ireland's economy comes first. That simple remark trips off the tongue. However, a few years ago, the economy was not the Government's priority, and most people on the opposite side of the House claimed that Northern Ireland's economy was a basket case that could not be repaired.

I welcome the fact that all but one party in the Chamber appear to recognise that Northern Ireland's economy is the priority and is — and must remain — top of the agenda in the Programme for Government, not because of an ideological need but because the people of Northern Ireland want the economy to come first. I am delighted that the Government, through the Budget and the Supplementary Estimates, are focused on channelling resources, energy and priorities towards putting the economy and the needs of the people first. That should be the Government's key priority.

I am concerned at the isolationist view that was espoused by the Member for Strangford Mr McNarry. I am disappointed at the suggestion that we should isolate the issue and, rather than put the economy first, that we should have different priorities. The Ulster Unionist Party wanted to table an amendment that encouraged Members to vote against the Minister's proposals. Although all Members accept the ping-pong nature of politics in the House, it would be utter folly not to proceed with the Government's key priority — which was agreed by all Executive Ministers who represent the four key parties — to put Northern Ireland's economy first. We must drive forward and deliver on the priorities that have already been agreed. We must put our hands to the plough, push forward, not look back and plough a straight and solid furrow for the people of Northern Ireland.

In the past, a bright idea was mooted to sell Stormont and lease it back. I am delighted that that bright idea has been switched off.

A big claim was made this morning that the Minister has lost control of the Budget. That is utter nonsense. The spending supplement indicates control of the Budget, directed towards the key priority of making Northern Ireland work.

1.15 pm

Let us look at the facts. They speak for themselves, but they should be spelt out loudly and clearly: over the next three years, £612 million is allocated to road infrastructure and road building. That will create employment, generate spend in the economy, and take the economy forward. Some £647 million is allocated to developing water infrastructure. That will create

jobs, drive the economy forward, and address some of the employment issues that our country, like other parts of the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the world, are facing today.

Some £565 million is allocated to primary healthcare and hospital modernisation, and £855 million is allocated to schools and colleges. That spells out a very impressive Budget; indeed, it is a plan for investment of £1.4 billion to £1.5 billion for this year, and will rise to £1.7 billion over the next year, and £2 billion over the following year. That is an impressive spending agenda over the next three years, aimed at putting the economy first, driving employment forward, creating growth in the economy and making sure that Northern Ireland is a success.

It is disappointing that some people want to pour cold water on those efforts, and want to turn their eyes against them. It is disappointing when people want to turn their eyes against spending that sort of money, and allocating it to projects in our own constituencies, which will affect us all. In the spending estimate, £265 million in health and social services will go towards building and improving health facilities at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, Downe Hospital, Altnagelvin Hospital and Craigavon. That does not affect just parts of the Province; it covers every bit of it, ensuring that we are seeing that money spent all over the Province.

Some £127 million has been invested in the Belfast sewers project; £89 million in waste-water treatment projects; £83 million in four major projects delivered by the Department for Employment and Learning; and £200 million in 14 projects being constructed by the education and library boards.

Therefore, I appeal to the Ulster Unionist Party to return to the position that its own leader espoused less than two weeks ago on 'The Politics Show' — and I hope we are on air now — when Jim Fitzpatrick made the point that the Programme for Government is barely a year old, and it is clear now that it is dead in the water. Sir Reg Empey rightly replied that he would not accept that. He said he believed that a lot of the priorities had been set, such as putting the economy top of the list, which was the first time that that had been done in a Programme for Government. That that was the right place for it to be, that he did not accept Mr Fitzpatrick's position at all, and that he was wrong.

Well, I hope that that becomes the position of the Ulster Unionist Party today, and that it holds firmly to that, because otherwise it would send out all the wrong signals to ordinary Ulster men and Ulster women who want to see political unity when it comes to creating employment and driving the economy forward. I hope that the Ulster Unionist Party reflects on the position that has been espoused this morning by the Member

from Strangford Mr McNarry and that it follows this particular leader of the party at this particular time.

Finally, it has been spelt out very clearly that the Departments have indicated 60 new projects during the current financial year. That is an aggregated value in excess of £400 million. Those projects will be advertised by the end of this financial year, and some will have commenced. They include the South Eastern Regional College in Bangor, at a value of £10 million; 10 schools, ranging in value from just under £2 million to the Magherafelt High School project with a value of £11 million. In addition to that £400 million, Roads Service is scheduled to commence the procurement of a new A5 western corridor from Aughnacloy to Londonderry, which will represent an investment of some £600 million. That is an impressive work programme. In fact, there is very little else that could be done.

I note that, even today, the SDLP got away from its mantra of “just build houses”. I accept that housing projects are one key element of moving things forward, but they are not the be-all and end-all answer. Judging by its silence today, the SDLP has recognised the fact that it is those other infrastructure projects — not the one-trick pony of building social houses — that will make the lion’s share of a difference to Northern Ireland.

I welcome the Minister’s statement and look forward to the rest of the debate. I hope that it will be recognised that if what is proposed in the motions is to go forward, all the parties that endorsed, voted for and approved the Budget last year, and added to the value of this supplementary spending programme, should walk through the Lobbies and support what the Minister of Finance and Personnel is doing. They should get behind him and ensure that our economy is delivered and that Ulster comes first.

Mr B McCrea: It is indeed a privilege and an honour to follow the great Ian Paisley Junior — former junior Minister, former Executive member and former lots of things. I have previously recognised his expertise on land and property and all sorts of things.

I am not sure that we are dealing with the real issues today. I fear that the wheels are about to come off the cart. I say that because I was at a meeting last week with the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA), which is an illustrious organisation that is full of good people, all of whom are worried about money and whether there is enough to keep its member organisations going. I hear concern from the private sector, many parts of which are experiencing wage cuts and three-day weeks. There is a real problem.

In an attempt to put things into perspective — and Mr Farry encouraged us to look at the international example — I am told that if President Obama’s fiscal stimulus package were to be imagined as a stack of \$1,000 bills, it would be eight miles high. I was told by

some illustrious people at that meeting with NICVA that the Obama package is not nearly enough; it is only 10% of what is required.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel talked about people working together; I am interested in that proposal, but if we are to do so, it is important that we understand all the facts and figures. I am concerned that when we look at the background of deteriorating public finances, those facts and figures cannot help but have an impact. In his pre-Budget report in 2008, Alastair Darling said:

“having carefully considered the extent and the limits of efficiency savings, today I can announce the Government will now find an additional £5 billion of efficiencies in 2010/11.”

If we have to take our share of that, I am sorry to say that there will be difficult decisions to make.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Will you propose that?

Mr B McCrea: Yes, but if it happens, it is a difficulty, is it not?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: For you.

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely. The issue, since the Minister brings it up — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I will talk about public-sector spending, as the Minister has brought it to our attention. The Government are now projecting much slower growth in public spending over their next spending review than in any previous years; slower even than that experienced during the 18 years of Conservative Governments from 1979 to 1997. In real terms, the increase in growth of 1.1% a year would represent a cut in public-sector spending. The squeeze on Whitehall Departments may be even more severe, given plausible scenarios for security and tax-credit costs.

For those Members who have not yet talked about housing, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its Green Budget 2009, said:

“Capital-intensive departments, such as transport and housing, are likely to suffer more than most due to the planned cash freeze on investment spending.”

There are some other issues for Westminster.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will give way when I have finished this point.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Just on that point about the Estimates.

Mr B McCrea: That was not a yes, but as it is Mr Paisley Jnr.

Mr Paisley Jnr: I appreciate the Member giving way. It is clear that some of the issues that the Member mentioned are not even covered by the Spring

Supplementary Estimates, because they are Northern Ireland Budget matters. Northern Ireland Estimates do not cover the provision of the Northern Ireland Office on the three matters that the Member mentioned. There should be some recognition of what we are debating today.

Mr B McCrea: When a Member gives way it is, normally, for a helpful intervention, and I suppose that that is stretching things a wee bit. The point of the matter is that I fear — however it is dressed up — that we do not have sufficient money to meet our obligations. I have asked —

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr B McCrea: Please just let me finish.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, Mr Speaker.

Dr Farry: He is in bad humour today.

Mr B McCrea: The Speaker?

Dr Farry: No; you.

Mr B McCrea: The issue is about whether we have sufficient money to meet our obligations. I look at the planned efficiency savings for the Department for Social Development, for the Department of Education, and for the Department of Finance and Personnel itself and I fear that they are not going to be met.

All that I ask is that the Minister provides some sort of steer about whether or not we have a problem. If we have a problem, it is incumbent on all Members to identify the issues and to work together to try to resolve that problem, because if tough decisions have to be taken, that can be done only through consensus. Only if we all agree that there is a problem, and only if we all agree that cuts have to be made, can cuts be made. However, if we do not have to make cuts, that is great and let us say so.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his honesty. He, at least, is a shining light on his Benches in that he freely admits to the fact that the outworkings of what he and his colleagues are suggesting are cuts to existing Budget lines.

Has the Member spoken to his party colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and worked with him to help to identify lines for cutting? Furthermore, if the Member is talking now about difficulties that are being faced with budgets, how difficult will it be for Departments by the summer, if he and his colleagues persuade a majority of Members to stop funding for Departments, which will be the consequence of their voting against the motion today?

Mr B McCrea: The issue, as the Member well knows — and I can quote Gershwin; sorry, that is a piano player. I mean the other guy. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Does the Member mean Gershon?

Mr B McCrea: I thank the House for its help on that. However, Sir Peter Gershon warned, in 2004, that there was a point at which front line public services would be affected by efficiencies. However, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer vowed that he would not go beyond the savings identified.

Therefore, let us be honest about this issue. If 80% of our budgets are largely, so to speak, people-orientated, there comes a point when, if efficiencies are driven home against a backdrop of rising costs and a failure to take in those efficiencies, a situation will be created whereby the ends of the rope do not meet. I do not want to get to that situation. I want to understand the challenges that we face so that we can find a way to deal with them.

As part of my remit with regard to education, I note that one of the Department's efficiencies is to reallocate or reduce staffing numbers to reflect the demographic downturn. I also note that the strategic stocktake places pressure on the Department to find money to do that. In other words, we do not have the money to get rid of staff and we do not have the money to keep them. That is a ridiculous situation and is grossly unfair on the people involved.

No Member has yet mentioned the Department for Social Development. However, it is clear from the figures that the Assembly will not be able to put in place the type of capital expenditure plans that it had hoped. We must be honest about this issue. Perhaps it is time to work together as a collective team — the Assembly and the Executive — and work out which elements we can afford and which we cannot afford. It is just not sufficient simply to put our heads in the sand and say that we think that everything will be OK.

In the past, Mr Hamilton and others argued about the difficulties of the process, and that perhaps each Department must be left to try to find its own efficiencies, and that, collectively, we might be OK.

1.30 pm

When one considers the numbers, however, I am not sure that that could be done, given the challenges that face us and the likelihood that the situation will get worse. More to the point, I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to clearly and concisely explain — in language that everybody understands — whether we have a problem. Are there issues on which we could work together to try to resolve the pressures? Are there decisions that although not being terribly palatable, must be made by somebody? I believe that that is what the people of Northern Ireland seek from us. They want genuine leadership; they do not want to hear fudge, fuddle and a belief that everything will be all

right on the night. We should work together to defend the core services on which people very much depend.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mr Durkan):

When Basil McCrea expressed a particular interest in what Gershwin said, it led me to wonder whether we were witnessing a ‘Rhapsody in Tory Blue’ today as part of the new UUP position. *[Laughter.]*

Obviously, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have a view on the question of the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Supply resolution. However, the Committee considered budgetary matters on a number of occasions, including monitoring rounds, and several issues that arose should be reflected in today’s debate.

In the context of the global downturn — which was not predicted or anticipated when the Budget was set — perhaps there should be some re-factoring of expenditure in relation to economic support. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Our Committee recognises that that does not just mean re-factoring some of the priorities in the budget of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, but in the Budget more widely. The Committee recognises that matters of economic development extend to other Departments, such as the Department for Regional Development, which deals with key infrastructure; the Department for Social Development, which deals with housing issues; and — very importantly — the Department for Employment and Learning, which deals with the skills agenda and the challenges that we face as a region.

When making a number of my points, I will not pretend to confine them purely to DETI. I hope to reflect the spirit of comments that were made by members of the Committee. In relation to the current economic situation, there seems to be less of a demand on the budgets of DETI and Invest Northern Ireland in relation to foreign direct investment. That has given rise to questions about whether that money could be better used in other ways, either in the Department or more widely — by making economic interventions.

A number of issues that were identified by Committee members involved last year’s decision to withdraw the — albeit small — grants for business start-up. In the current circumstances, people will question whether that is a tenable decision and whether we should review it. In many ways, we should revamp the whole notion of financial support for people who start up businesses. Perhaps we should revisit whether a new menu of grants and support should be available to businesses that are trying to sustain themselves

through the current difficulties and that have the potential to grow beyond them.

In particular, we should consider whether support should be available to companies that have demonstrated that they can grow in current circumstances. In some cases, those companies are suffering from tax being demanded on the one hand, and credit being denied on the other. There is no means of supporting those companies when the grants are gone. In the current circumstances, we must consider whether we could make available a menu of grants to allocate money that will not be used for other economic-development purposes during the downturn.

Similarly, issues have been raised regarding Invest Northern Ireland and its performance. Many people have asked fundamental questions about whether the project that was to be achieved through the merger of LEDU, the IDB and the Industrial Research and Technology Unit (IRTU) has lived up to its promise. We were told that it would operate at arm’s length, outside the Civil Service culture, and that it would be much more market facing and market orientated. However, few people seem to have that perception or experience of Invest Northern Ireland as it currently operates. In the current circumstances, those questions are being asked more sharply.

Of course, the Minister has established a review. Initially, its terms of reference appeared to be centred on Invest Northern Ireland and some related matters. However, those terms of reference have sensibly been widened to consider not just the performance and structure of Invest NI’s engagement with DETI, but how well it meshes with other key Departments and agencies in order to support economic development. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment looks forward to the developing work of that review, and it has already had some engagement with Professor Barnett and other members of the review team. That engagement will continue, and the Committee will support the Minister in encouraging the review to be radical, far-reaching and timely in delivering by the summer.

The Committee hopes that the review can offer longer-term recommendations for the shape of economic-development policy, including a strong, active and responsive support system for enterprise and business, as well as ensuring that the Assembly’s actions do not get in the way of business. It is important that devolution provides the business community with the sense that public policy and the Government are at their backs, rather than on their backs, and that is why we must review the regulatory framework, which can create burdens.

In addition, the Committee hopes that the review will produce some short-term recommendations,

particularly in response to some of the suggestions offered by its members.

With respect to some of the wider issues that have been mentioned, Ian Paisley Jnr pointed out the importance of investment in infrastructure generally, and he emphasised the high level of investment to which the current investment strategy is committed. Of course, I and the SDLP welcome that commitment. As someone who attempted to put in place a platform for an investment strategy, and having emphasised the need for significant investment in capital programmes and the need for a central driver with which to do so, I welcome the commitment, and the conversion of other parties, to that concept. Initially, those parties railed against it.

Nevertheless, our capital-expenditure programme still suffers from delivery sclerosis. Some Departments have delayed investment plans, and when investment plans have been produced, their target audiences have been unclear, they have been incompatible and they have lacked a coherent approach.

Furthermore, there is a question about whether the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) has the capacity to drive and marshal capital-expenditure performance throughout Departments. In addition, there is an issue with underperformance and under capacity in Departments, so, rather than pumping up Departments to do that, we must consider ways in which the Strategic Investment Board can be restyled and reshaped in order to carry out the necessary tasks for the Departments — not behind their backs or in opposition to them, but in order to deliver the investment strategy that has been set out. If the Executive and the Assembly have been happy to endorse the broad priorities and the key projects of the investment strategy, they should have no problem with delegating the strategic management of that programme to the relevant public body, rather than attempting to carve up bits of it for Departments that are underperforming and failing to deliver.

In the current economic circumstances, we make no apologies for stressing the fact that capital investment in social housing is a key economic primer. We are not saying that that should be at the expense of other capital investments, but we are saying that it would provide a ready multiplier; getting the work on social housing going will get wages flowing throughout the region. Moreover, social-housing projects can be delivered much quicker than other projects. If it is there as an early win or as an easy, ready fruit for us to pick during this difficult season, we should avail ourselves of it.

Some Members have asked how the Budget will be changed if it is re-prioritised or revised. I remind those Members — particularly those in the DUP — that, recently, they have tabled a number of motions that

call for changes in the Budget. Last week, Iris Robinson, in her capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, tabled a motion that stated that some parts of the Health Service should be ring-fenced from the efficiency savings. That motion called for a change in the Budget, because it imposed efficiency savings across the Department.

The DUP has also tabled a motion on home closures, which will be debated soon. It follows the same theme; it is asking for a change in the Budget. Previously, Sammy Wilson called for the Minister of Education to change the Budget when she did not have the power to do so. Sinn Féin is also calling for changes to be made to the Budget in relation to ambulances.

Therefore, Members should not ask questions of the SDLP that they are not prepared to answer themselves.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Recently, the re-prioritisation of the Budget, the Budget allocations and the Programme for Government have been a source of debate inside and outside the Chamber. There are many outstanding concerns about whether the priorities have changed. Some of those concerns are genuine, but it must be understood that there will be no programmes or services delivered unless Members support the two motions that are before the House. Members must keep that in mind when they are making their contributions.

The fact that we have to work within the inadequate block grant that we receive from London is one of the main barriers to bringing forward anything, particularly in the current economic climate. Furthermore, our lack of fiscal and tax-varying powers means that we are working within certain parameters that confine us and prevent us from developing the innovative measures that are required to offset some of the issues relating to the financial difficulties that we are in.

The economic downturn presents the Executive with a number of difficulties — in particular, the need to offset any further job losses, to secure the jobs that exist and to create new jobs, as other Members and I have mentioned already. Most people will agree that unemployment and poverty — and the fear of poverty because of unemployment — are the real concerns facing people and their families.

It is important that we maintain our skilled workforce, and we must look beyond the current economic downturn. We need to work together to consider how we can maintain those employment levels. Mention has been made of the way in which Invest NI looks at foreign direct investment. However, we must build our local businesses and ensure that they are kept open and that people's jobs are secure.

At a time of economic downturn, it is important that a Budget considers the people who need support. On 26 and 27 January 2009, the Assembly debated the

Financial Assistance Bill. There were delays, but it must be remembered that many people need the £150 to which they were entitled to pay for their fuel. It is important to remember such situations when issues are being debated, because we must be seen to provide leadership; that is what people want us to do.

There is an issue about the availability of finance and credit, and the access to working capital, particularly for businesses here. As many Members have said, it is imperative that banks and other lending institutions are challenged about their current lending. That challenge must come from the British Government and from local Ministers. Businesses and consumers have not yet felt the benefit of the injection of public money that was intended to steady the banks.

A lot of banks are now under public ownership, and many others are being supported with millions of pounds of public money; therefore, they have a responsibility to ensure that the money that they are receiving is going directly into the local economy. We all know from people who have contacted us that, currently, the biggest problem for businesses is securing working capital and cash flow.

1.45 pm

We need to work within our parameters. The fact is that there is no new money; therefore, it is important that we find innovative ways of spending the money that we have. The answer is good housekeeping and finding initiatives that will help us to spend the money that we have in the best way possible.

Recent initiatives that reduce the risk for banks — such as the enterprise finance guarantee scheme and the small firms finance scheme — need to be taken-up and rolled-out by the banks here. A lot of those schemes are not having an effect on the ground, and we must ensure that they come into place and are running smoothly.

As has been mentioned, Departments have a responsibility to ensure that underspend is kept to a minimum and that their capital and revenue projects are taken forward. Departments can, sometimes, be slow in doing that. I know that planning is a big issue for some of the large capital projects, particularly those funded by private investment. We must consider how planning is holding-up that process.

Improving the delivery of public procurement by providing good services and works can help the economy and local businesses and can also secure jobs for people, which is an important issue. By ensuring that social clauses are embedded into all public procurement contracts, we can help to tackle poverty and need by sustaining current employment and by creating new employment opportunities for people who may be wondering whether they are going to have the money to meet the requirements of everyday living.

Therefore, public procurement is very important, particularly in relation to small- and medium-sized businesses and social-economy enterprises. As recently as last Friday, we heard a report about the increase in house repossessions. Nothing has a greater impact on a family than having a house repossessed. Therefore, we must bring forward initiatives such as adequate mortgage-rescue plans. Earlier, it was suggested that Members may be a wee bit concerned about mentioning social housing, but I am going to mention it because it is very clear that a need for social housing still exists. There is also a need for people who want to buy their own homes to be able to secure the finance for a new mortgage.

It is important that we think outside the box and roll out initiatives that can operate within the existing constraints. Unless we do so, it will simply be a case of same old, same old. Increasing the funding in areas such as co-ownership schemes can encourage first-time buyers to take the risk of buying. At the moment, people are afraid of taking risks and they cannot be blamed for that. We need to drive forward the social housing programme and deliver the investment strategy, and the way that we can do that is by ensuring that Departments are bringing forward their planned capital projects.

The construction industry would be helped by such projects being undertaken; we must remember that approximately three quarters of the people who are becoming unemployed are from that industry. Therefore, that would provide an overall level of help. We must regard the current economic climate as a challenge to achieve the best possible outcomes in the here and now.

We must also look beyond the current economic downturn. The Programme for Government is good, but we must ensure that it is delivered in the way that people are expecting. That is, it must provide for the delivery of high-quality public services, the development of the economy, the building of prosperity and the redressing of the inequalities and disadvantage that still afflict substantial portions of our society.

It is important to remember that people were in poverty even before the economic downturn. We must ensure the best use and allocation of resources in the short term and the long term towards that end.

It is good to have a debate, and it is good that we are able to come to a place such as this and have our say. In the current climate, the best way forward is a united response from all the political parties in the Assembly and the Executive. We must get away from narrow politicking and debates and focus on real issues, which may be a matter of life and death for some people. We are where we are; we may not like it, but we must push forward together in a united way, and send people a clear message of leadership.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): I wish to comment on behalf of the Committee in respect of the Supply resolution for the 2008-09 spring Supplementary Estimates. The Committee scrutinised carefully the Department for Social Development's submissions for each of the monitoring rounds. Reviewing the Department's plans in these challenging economic conditions has been illuminating, and something of an education for Committee members. The Committee has asked many questions and where the Department has answered satisfactorily, I thank it for that. However, there are a few issues on which the Department has yet to provide complete answers. Budget scrutiny, in these difficult times, tends to be a work in progress.

In the monitoring round submissions, the Department has identified serious challenges to its budgetary planning, not least in respect of the social housing development programme. That programme has to deliver 1,500 new social housing starts in 2008-09, and it appears likely that that may not be achieved. It also appears that Housing Executive home improvements and maintenance programmes may miss their annual targets.

Behind those problems, and overshadowing the financing of social and affordable housing for years to come, is the collapse in house and land values. I do not know whether the Department could have anticipated the extent of the collapse in land and property receipts. However, I know that it warned consistently of the pressures on its budget throughout the financial year, and the Finance Minister is aware of that.

The Committee has considered at length the mitigating actions that the Department has adopted. It makes little difference whether they are called surrenders or reallocations — the upshot is the same. The budget for the Social Security Agency is around £80 million less in 2008-09. That reduction is mostly in capital areas, but includes some resource. Around £50 million was reallocated from the social security jobs and benefits offices capital programme to rescue the housing programmes, and £30 million went back to the centre.

It is a measure of the depth of the housing crisis that that reallocation — or whatever one wants to call it — appears to have been insufficient on its own to keep the social development housing programme on track for this year. Indeed, the Department has already asked for additional headroom of £30 million in order to bring the new housing starts programme in on target. The Department has also asked that £10.5 million be reallocated from urban regeneration programmes to support the Housing Executive housing maintenance and improvement programmes.

Finally, the Department has asked for approximately £8 million extra for anti-fuel-poverty payments. The Committee supports the proposed reallocation, the

request for headroom and the bid for the anti-fuel-poverty payment. However, the Committee has several concerns. First, that the social housing development programme be supported and achieve its targets for this year. The Committee believes that if that programme is sidetracked, or even temporarily derailed now, it will be very hard to restart and reach its final destination of 10,000 new social and affordable homes by 2013.

The Committee's second concern relates to the programmes from which money has been transferred. In particular, I refer to the jobs and benefits office capital works and other social-security resource requirements. Jobs and benefits offices have never been busier than they have in recent times. The decision to use the capital and resources from social security to support housing may have appeared to have been a good decision earlier this year. However, the economic situation has thrown up more challenges than expected. Some Committee members are concerned that there may be adverse implications for the provision of essential social-security services just when the need is greatest. As the Deputy Chairperson of my Committee said during the debate on the strategic stocktake on 27 January 2009, the problems facing the housing budget are significant, and not only for this year.

It could also be argued that the Department appears to have stored up more trouble for itself for next year, in the shape of the significant deficit in the social-security capital-project fund, which I mentioned earlier. That issue has arisen at a time when there will surely be an awful lot of demand for social-security services over the coming months, if not years. That is a difficult budgetary situation. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Department for Social Development's spending plans. As I said, it is a work in progress. Committee members will continue to challenge the Department's decisions. We will look for method in its reasoning and prudence in its choices.

I thank the Department for its improving responses to the Committee's queries, and I also ask that the Minister of Finance and Personnel note the Committee's concerns, as set out today.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It was interesting to listen to Stephen Farry talk about fiscal stimulation. I am not sure how that is possible when one does not have fiscal control. However, that may be a matter for another day.

The Executive and the Assembly are confronted by many political and financial realities, and all Executive policies must have at their core fairness, inclusion and equality. We are faced with the economic and political realities that prevail, and we must recognise that. Unfortunately, because of the inadequate block grant from the British Government, we must continue to try to deal with limited resources while having increasing

needs. As my colleague Jennifer McCann said earlier, there must be a united response from all the political parties to the economic realities that we face.

It is incumbent on us to deliver for the most disadvantaged in our society. The Executive and the Assembly must ensure that regional inequalities are eradicated. The decentralisation of public-sector jobs is essential if disparities and imbalances are to be redressed and if balanced regional development is to be supported. The Bain Report on the relocation of public-sector jobs supports that decentralisation, yet the Social Security Agency's strategic business review, which is under way, appears to ignore that report. That issue must be confronted and addressed urgently.

Neighbourhood renewal, if properly resourced, is an effective way in which to target social need and help the most disadvantaged communities. The Department for Social Development is intent on transferring neighbourhood renewal to local government. If that happens, proper infrastructures must be put in place so that the transition can be seamless.

An interdepartmental approach to implementing a sustainable and effective anti-poverty strategy must be taken, and there must be a continuation of the pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020. It must be recognised that the current economic downturn will have a much more serious impact on those who are already in dire need, and the alleviation of their problems must be a priority so that when recovery comes, they can enjoy the benefits that come with it. There must be a continuing commitment to support a social economy and sustainable community development. The provision of social housing must continue to be a priority. Action can and should be taken, even within current financial constraints, to provide social housing.

The Minister for Social Development needs to stop blaming the Executive and get on with the job with which she has been tasked. All Departments want more money, but if it is not forthcoming, they have to get on with it and make the most of their resources.

2.00 pm

The regulation of private landlords must be a priority and will go some way in alleviating financial hardship for those people who rely on that sector for their housing needs.

Equality for people with disabilities must be delivered and their rights must be protected. Those people have the right to education, employment, housing, healthcare and adequate transport. The role of carers needs to be recognised, and they should be properly recompensed for their vital role.

Proper financial support for the community and voluntary sector must be implemented, and their skills and expertise should be fully recognised. In the long

term, that will provide some money for Departments that are involved in the delivery of similar services. Social justice needs to be the key phrase, and its provision to everyone in our society will show that the Assembly can be effective and make a difference to people's lives. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. As the Minister of Finance and Personnel explained, although there are two motions before the House on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, there is a single debate.

The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect the cumulative changes from earlier monitoring rounds, in which Departments either bid for additional resources because of new pressures or release any excess funds when it was clear that they will not be used. However, the Health Department is in a unique position, because it was given first call on available in-year moneys of up to £20 million under the comprehensive spending review. Therefore, it has not taken part in the monitoring rounds to date. The Department has received £15 million and expects the remaining £5 million from this exercise. The full £20 million has been factored into the Department's spending plans for the year.

As other Departments have been through the various monitoring rounds in the year, their respective Committees have, perhaps, had more of an opportunity to examine their financial pressures and easements. The slowdown in the growth of public-sector funding in recent years, which led into the last Budget negotiations, has meant that all Departments have to manage with less funding and are all feeling the pressure. The current financial crisis has added to that pressure. As Members are only too well aware, all Departments are required to achieve significant efficiency savings to make ends meet.

Spending on health accounts for by far the largest portion of public funding — around half of the total public expenditure or £4 billion from the £8 billion total. However, it is worth remembering that although all Departments are required to make the same percentage level of efficiency savings — 3% per year — that is a significant sum for the Health Department and has the potential to make a considerable impact on the level of health and social care services provided through the community.

Over the past number of months, the Committee has taken a keen interest in examining and challenging the efficiency delivery plans throughout the Health Service. The Committee heard first from the Minister and then from the main trade unions. Over the past few weeks, the Committee has been hearing from individual trusts about their detailed proposals, which is an

exercise that will be completed in a couple of weeks. The Committee also tabled a motion that was debated in the House last week, which called on the Minister to ensure that implementation of efficiency savings will not result in cuts to vital front line services. The motion, which also highlighted the need to protect the most vulnerable in our community — children, people with mental-health problems and older people — was, thankfully, carried.

Members will agree that making efficiency savings is a demanding and challenging exercise for all involved and it takes place in a particularly difficult financial climate. Any reductions or cutbacks in services are likely to add to the difficulties that our communities already face. The Health Committee will continue to monitor that issue over the coming months.

I will now change my hat from that of the Chairperson of the Health Committee to that of the DUP's spokesperson on health. For the record, I regret the attitude of my Ulster Unionist colleagues. If they do not support the motion, they will prevent moneys from going to Departments after 31 March. It is a pathetic and childish attempt to undermine the work of the Executive, bearing in mind that the Ulster Unionists are represented on that Executive. It is one thing to disagree, but all concerns and issues are raised and dealt with in the Executive. This is a mandatory coalition. It is perhaps not the most perfect set-up, but, until we have a voluntary coalition, all four parties are tied to the decisions that are made and signed off.

Mr McGimpsey boasted that he could gain additional funding after the draft Budget was signed off by all four parties, and it was open for Departments to put in bids for additional moneys. Indeed, he has been heard all over the airwaves boasting about how he could draw down and extract more money from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Just over a week ago, Sir Reg Empey said on the radio that we did not even need a debate today because the issue has been agreed, and it has all been tied up. Therefore, I am wondering where the Member for Strangford David McNarry is coming from and what support he has from his party. The leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey, is saying one thing, yet one of the less prominent Members of the party is speaking out. I wonder whether it is sour grapes or whether the whole party will put its hands up and oppose the motion.

The country is in a dreadful situation — as is the rest of the United Kingdom and the rest of the world — with the current economic downturn, yet for the sake of a headline, the Ulster Unionist Party is prepared to say that it does not support the Executive, even though it is part of that Executive. It will leave the electorate scratching their heads and wondering

what sort of representatives they have in the Ulster Unionist Party.

If the Budget does not go through, we will face meltdown because of the impact on Departments after 31 March. Departments will have no money. What are they going to tell the electorate? I cannot wait to hear the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Sir Reg Empey — *[Interruption.]*

I am speaking, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

A Member: Calm down.

Mrs I Robinson: They should calm down and perhaps take a pill.

Sir Reg Empey has one view, and I cannot wait to hear how he is going to explain to the voters and taxpayers of Northern Ireland — who are facing the credit crunch with great difficulty — that the Government have no money. I support the motion.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Cobain): The Speaker will be glad to hear that I am not going to try to explain that.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09 and the Vote on Account for 2009-2010.

The Minister for Regional Development wrote to the Committee last week setting out the main changes arising from the June, September and December monitoring rounds, and they are reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2008-09.

The Minister also identified a number of areas where additional headroom was included in the Department for Regional Development's spring Supplementary Estimates. Those areas include £2.5 million for a possible allocation to Roads Service for structural maintenance in the February monitoring round; £900,000 to allow a possible transfer from DSD to Roads Service in respect of the neighbourhood renewal strategy in the February monitoring round; £38.5 million for Northern Ireland Water's accelerated programme facilities; £55 million for Northern Ireland Water's revolving credit facility; and £400 million for adjustments that may arise following the in-year reclassification by Her Majesty's Treasury of Northern Ireland Water.

The Committee for Regional Development scrutinised the quarterly monitoring rounds in 2008-09 and responded to the Department on the specific bids and easements contained in each monitoring round return. Arising from that work, the Committee identified several issues of strategic concern, which, in my capacity as Chairperson, I want to raise.

It is the responsibility of the Executive to resolve pressures on the DRD budget arising from the ongoing

deferral of charging for the provision of water and sewerage services. Although the Committee awaits a more detailed briefing from the Department on the consequences of Her Majesty's Treasury's in-year decision to reclassify Northern Ireland Water, I am pleased to see that headroom provision has been made to address that.

During monitoring rounds, and also on the Floor of the House during debates on the Budget and on the Programme for Government, the Committee raised the need to provide adequate and timely funding for structural maintenance. Funding for structural maintenance must be adequate, in that it approaches the funding levels that are set out in the independently audited structural maintenance fund plan. This year, funding reached less than 60% of the recommended level, and a slight improvement is due next year. In the in-year monitoring rounds of previous years, DRD was successful in attracting additional funding for structural maintenance and bringing spending on it closer to the levels that are recommended in the structural maintenance funding plan. However, that is not the case this year. I reiterate the Committee's view that light of current budgetary pressures, it is no longer acceptable or prudent for the Department to rely on in-year monitoring to fund structural maintenance programmes.

Spending on structural maintenance must also be timely. At the earliest possible point in the financial year, DRD has to ensure that the structural maintenance industry has the capacity to deliver. The Committee's arguments — based on road safety and the value-for-money benefits arising from a proper level of structural maintenance — are well rehearsed. In addition — and in the current economic climate — adequate and timely spending of structural maintenance will go some way to assisting the hard-pressed construction sector.

I wish to make some further points as an MLA. The majority of people who rely on front line services are socially and economically challenged. In these increasingly difficult times, they continue to rely on those services to provide for many of their basic needs. Pensioners, the working poor and near-benefit-level families will be hit hardest if we continue with the status quo.

I provide the following examples. All the authorities on housing agree that we need between 2,000 and 2,500 new social homes to be built each year in Northern Ireland to meet increasing demand. With the economic downturn and the job losses that will result, that figure will increase. It was disappointing that in the Programme for Government, we were promised only 1,500 new social and affordable homes each year; it is unacceptable that there will be a 40% cut in that figure, which will result in the building of only 800 to 900 social and affordable homes, which will increase homelessness. More families will have to turn to the

private sector where, in order to get a house, they will have to subsidise their housing benefit. That will result in more families living below the poverty line.

Continuation of the fiscal status quo will ensure that there are other negative impacts on housing. The Housing Executive does not have the available moneys to repair and maintain buildings. People are living in deteriorating accommodation: kitchen replacements have stopped; units for people with complex needs and those who require care in the community have been shelved; and external cyclical maintenance schemes have been suspended, which will have an unacceptable impact on older people and those with special needs and physical disabilities.

No one in the House can defend that position. We are failing some of the most vulnerable people in society. The Minister for Social Development has been hamstrung by the DFP decision, and people will continue to suffer because of it. We are told that, each year, 1,000 people die of cold-related illnesses, and vulnerable people are now marginalised simply because the Executive —

2.15 pm

Mr F McCann: I do not disagree with what the Member has said — most Members would argue that there needs to be an effective social house-building programme. Does the Member agree that over the past two years, the majority of the social housing programme has been made up of houses bought on the open market, or apartments bought off the shelf? That does nothing for family housing.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Mr McCann makes a fair point. I am not really concerned whether houses are bought or built; I am concerned that there are sufficient homes provided by the state for people who need them.

The Programme for Government made a commitment to reduce child poverty by half by 2012, and to eradicate it by 2030. I think that everyone would agree that those figures are laughable. The number of children living in severe poverty is increasing and under the current circumstances, will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. OFMDFM's reaction to that has been deplorable, and the priorities of the Minister of Finance and Personnel do very little to relieve the plight of those people.

The recent Financial Assistance Bill promised £150 for pensioners who receive pension credit to help with heating through the winter, and that was pushed through the House using the accelerated passage procedure. We were told that that had to be done so that the money could be paid out in time for Christmas. Committees were not allowed to hold the Department to account.

Monday 16 February 2009

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Go ahead, Milton.

Mr Hamilton: I note the reference to Milton Friedman; at this point in the day, I would take any lunch, never mind a free lunch.

Can the Member tell me how the Financial Assistance Bill — which provided for a payment of £150 to people on pension credit or income support — could be rushed through before Christmas, when the legislation came before the House after Christmas? His friend the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister can clarify that for him.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: The Member should talk to his colleague junior Minister Donaldson.

If we do not hurry up and pay out, pensioners will be using the money for their summer holidays instead of their winter fuel bills. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Water payments are now inevitable due to the Government's placing of Northern Ireland Water back under DRD's control. That will result in capital asset payments in 2011. Make no mistake, if water charges are introduced, everyone will have to make a contribution in the form of a payment for water, even those people who have never before had to do so. People living on benefits did not have to pay for water or for rates; however, if water charges are introduced this year, that link will be broken — every individual will have to pay a charge for water. If water charges are introduced, pensioners who receive pension credit, which the Government say is a safety net, will have to pay water charges. The Executive are saying that they know better.

Mr Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: There was an intervention, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: There is no extra time.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I speak as the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I speak for a community of which I am very proud. As always, the Committee has been relentless in its robust scrutiny of departmental accounts, and we endeavour to ensure that budgets are met in a prudent manner in accordance with the departmental aims and objectives within the strategic plan.

This year has been difficult for the agriculture sector, and the farming community has found itself

under mounting pressure to ensure that it is compliant with the European nitrates directives. Previously, I have presented to the House the Committee's thoughts on the severe accounting failure of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in respect of that matter, and the severe impact that that has had on the Northern Ireland economy. I will not repeat those comments today.

However, the Committee has been supportive of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Finance and Personnel in their attempts to ensure that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's original underestimate of the cost of the scheme has been rectified. The Committee notes the previous increases of the budget and the additional £29 million that is noted in the Estimates. I thank the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for that additional finance, which is a fulfilment of the promise that was made by the previous Minister, who assured the Committee that that finance would be provided.

The Committee welcomes that additional money and calls on the Department to ensure that it takes all necessary action to get the money out to farmers as quickly as possible. A past failure has been that although the money has been made available, the Department was slow in getting it into the pockets of the farmers who faced the expenditure.

The Committee recently received a presentation from the Department on the February monitoring round and was surprised that the Department had not identified any reduced requirement in respect of its budget. The figures that the Department presented showed that it still had some £90 million of its budget to spend from December 2008 to March 2009. The Committee is concerned at that, given the Department's track record in surrendering moneys too late in the day for other areas of the economy to make use of those moneys. That is evident in the last provisional out-turn, when a total of £31 million was returned by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Committee will continue to monitor that closely and ensure that the Department does not break the assurances that it has provided to us and to the industry. The industry cannot afford for moneys that are desperately needed for investment being returned because of the inefficiency of departmental accountancy processes. The Committee genuinely hopes that the Department achieves its budgetary targets and that its historical habit of returning significant sums of public money out of the industry and the Northern Ireland economy has ceased.

The Committee notes the additional sum of £12.5 million for the cull-and-disposal scheme, the hardship payments and animal disease compensation. However, the Committee believes that the Department has lost

the opportunity to address the difficulties in each of those areas appropriately.

The Department's counterpart in the Irish Republic acted immediately to the dioxin scare by going to Europe to seek a substantial hardship compensation package amounting to £180 million. Although the additional £12.5 million is welcome, it does not address the full cost of the scare to the industry, and we must continue to pursue fervently whatever avenue is open to us. That includes that of the Irish Republic, where the problem originated and which has a duty to pay for the disaster that came out of the dioxin scare and that which followed from it.

The Committee calls for a compensation package for those who were severely impacted by the severe flooding of August 2008. The Department's response was to put a business case to DFP that stated that there was no economic case for compensating farmers who are now struggling to support their families and their businesses. That was a despicable statement; instead of providing appropriate compensation, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development suggested in its business case that it would be preferable to allow those farms to go out of business since larger, stronger businesses would take over the land.

The Department then plucked a figure of £500,000 and presented that to the Executive as being sufficient to cover costs that it considered to be in excess of £1 million. That has resulted in farmers with losses approaching £50,000 receiving less than £7,000 as a hardship payment. I am sad to say that it was not the Executive that were to blame for that, but the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The £7,000 is undoubtedly welcome, but it falls far short of what is needed to support the sector.

In respect of animal disease compensation, at every monitoring round, the Committee is presented with the spectacle of the Department taking its begging bowl to DFP in search of more money. Disease compensation for bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis costs the Northern Ireland economy more than £60 million a year, but what does that achieve? Departmental figures indicate that the brucellosis level remains static and that the incidence of TB is increasing. That is happening despite the Department's defined disease-reduction target in the Programme for Government.

The Committee recently considered the Diseases of Animals Bill, and it will recommend to the House that the Committee undertakes an inquiry into how to compel the Department to implement a TB-eradication programme. In years to come, such a programme will allow for the positive release of moneys back into the Northern Ireland economy, instead of pouring them down the drain in compensation for diseases that should, and could, be eradicated.

We cannot continue to allow public finances to be wasted. We must take action beyond spending money foolishly on studies into subjects about which we already know the answer, such as the £6 million that the Department will spend on studying — rather than tackling — the prevalence of TB in badgers. The farming community is not only alarmed, it is disgusted by the inaction. The Department must use money proactively to protect the industry and the public, and to enhance the Northern Ireland agriculture sector and the wider economy.

I stated that the Department does not have a good record in managing its budget. However, at this stage, the Committee gives it the benefit of the doubt. The Committee notes and welcomes additional bids made in respect of matters that are key to the industry, and calls on the Department to keep its side of the deal by ensuring that those moneys are fully spent on supporting the vital agriculture industry.

I will speak personally for the final minute of my speech. We are living in challenging times. Issues relating to pensioners, people with special needs or learning disabilities, and children who live in poverty must be tackled. As a public representative, I find it appalling that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is recommending the closure of acute services at hospitals in Whiteabbey and in Mid Ulster; the closure of old people's homes; and the closure of special homes, such as the one at Cherry Lodge in Randalstown, with the loss of vital services for the most deprived children.

We must be very careful. I want those in the House who object to the Budget to answer a simple question. As members of the Conservative Party, and in the midst of the difficulties that we face, where would they make cuts? The cuts in services across the water that the Conservative Party is recommending would have a major effect on the Northern Ireland Budget and on the spending that is available to keep our residential homes and hospitals open, and to maintain our services to the community.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr Patsy McGlone.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

Autism Northern Ireland

1. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education what meetings she has had with Autism Northern Ireland in the last year. (AQO 2046/09)

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Cuirim béim láidir ar ghné na riachtanas speisialta oideachais go ginearálta, an t-uathachas san áireamh. Tá tábhacht ar leith leis an athbhreithniú atá á dhéanamh faoi láthair ar riachtanais speisialta oideachais agus cuimsiú agus muid ag iarraidh feabhsuithe a chur ar chreat reatha riachtanas speisialta oideachais.

Special educational needs, including autism, are a particular priority for me. The ongoing review of special educational needs and inclusion is of great importance as my Department strives to improve the current special educational needs and inclusion framework.

As Members will be aware, my Department organised a North/South conference on autism, which was held in Croke Park. It brought together specialists, experts, professionals and parents from throughout the island of Ireland. A follow-up conference will take place.

On 16 May 2008, I met members of the south Down branch of Autism NI in Newry for a wide-ranging discussion on matters that relate to provision for autistic children and services that are provided by the Middletown Centre for Autism. We had a very productive meeting, and I was able to direct parents who were in attendance to the relevant education and library boards.

On 5 February 2009, I had a useful meeting with Eileen Bell and Arlene Cassidy of Autism NI, who were able to provide me with an update of their work with families and autism professionals and their plans for an international autism conference.

In addition to those two meetings, Autism NI met Department of Education officials on 3 December 2008, when it provided a comprehensive outline of service developments in the organisation.

I am also glad to report that Autism NI has been working actively in several ways with the Middletown

Centre for Autism. The centre provided Autism NI with places on its 2007-08 training programme and provided staff to assist Autism NI in the delivery of training. The Middletown Centre is currently in discussion with Autism NI in order to conclude a service-level agreement to facilitate the transfer of the five-day Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children training model to Middletown.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell the House whether she has any plans to introduce a joined-up strategy on autism with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

The Minister of Education: My Department works closely with the Department of Health because it is important that they work together at every level. We will continue to do so. I thank the Member for his question. If a real difference is to be made in the area of special educational needs and inclusion, it is essential that the Department of Health and the Department of Education work together.

Mr McCallister: Further to Mr McQuillan's question, does the Minister agree that she must broaden the entire system and process of her response to autism? As a Health Committee member, I have visited Wales to examine its response, which is much broader and involves health, education, and employment and learning. Does she agree that her approach must be much broader and get as many people on board as possible in order to achieve the best response, which autistic people need and deserve?

The Minister of Education: I thank the Member for his comment. I welcome people's recognition of the importance of cross-cutting relationships. The broadest possible approach must be taken towards autism and special educational needs. As Members will be aware, I have presented a review of special educational needs and inclusion to the Executive. I look forward to their discussion on the matter.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an cheist a fhreagairt. Does the Minister believe that autism services are best delivered on a cross-departmental basis with maximum co-ordination between Departments and, indeed, that autism legislation is the best way to achieve and ensure that level of co-operation?

The Minister of Education: Thug mé freagra ar an chéad pháirt den cheist. I believe that Departments must work together, which is why my Department works closely with the Department of Health. I look forward to the continuation of that work.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is a wonderful centre of excellence. In addition to our cross-party work in the North, we are working with our counterparts in the South of Ireland. I note that the autism centre there is funded by the Department of Education and

Science and the Department of Health and Children. To date, the autism centre in the North has been funded only by the Department of Education. It is very important that all the Departments work together. We can build an international centre for excellence here.

The number of children with autistic spectrum disorder has increased in recent years, and there are many other children with special educational needs who daily face significant life challenges. A comprehensive legislative framework on special education provision already exists. The review of special educational needs and inclusion aims to improve provision and access to services for all children who have special educational needs. The introduction of new legislation is a lengthy process. Many proposals for improving services, specifically for children with autism, could be progressed more quickly through the existing legislative framework.

English as an Alternative Language

2. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Education what are the reporting requirements for resources allocated to schools under the English as an Alternative Language scheme; and how the benefits of this scheme to each pupil are assessed. (AQO 2047/09)

The Minister of Education: Léiríodh ar dhaoineamh Dheireadh Fómhair 2007 go raibh 5,665 dalta ó thíortha eile ina gcónaí i dTuaisceart na hÉireann a raibh Béarla mar theanga bhreise acu.

The October 2007 census indicated that there were 5,665 newcomer pupils who have English as an additional language (EAL) in the North of Ireland. My Department provides funding directly to schools to allow them to support their newcomer pupils. In addition, funding is provided to education and library boards for the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS).

The common funding formula is used to allocate funding directly to schools. Schools receive an additional 50% of the basic age-weighted pupil-unit cash value — £983.08 in 2008-09 — for each full-time newcomer pupil that is designated in the school census as having English as an additional language. During 2008-09, a total of £5.5million was allocated to schools via the common funding formula. Members will be aware that there are some children for whom we do not have exact numbers and that I recently decided to include the Roma children in this programme.

Under local management of schools arrangements, it is for the principal and board of governors of each school to determine how to spend their budgets and plan their use of resources to maximum effect. However, the support provided by the Inclusion and Diversity Service is also relevant. That regional service was established on 1 April 2007, and it is operated by the five education and library boards. It uses the

Department's funding to support schools with newcomer pupils who have English as an additional language.

The service received £1,015,000 in 2008-09. That allowed the IDS to establish a number of EAL support services, including diversity coordinators, a multi-lingual website, interpreting and translation services and a toolkit for primary-school teachers in Ireland, which I jointly launched with the relevant Minister in the South of Ireland. There is a lot of work being done, and the issue will be included in our review of special needs and inclusion services.

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for her response. She said that more than £5.5 million has been allocated for 5,665 pupils under the EAL scheme. Given that that money is allocated under the common funding formula, how can we be sure that those pupils are benefiting directly from the additional resources? How is their performance and achievement measured? What assurance will the Minister give that she will review and amend the common funding formula and introduce reporting requirements for the scheme?

The Minister of Education: I welcome those very important questions. We must target our resources on the basis of objective need. To do that, we need the most up-to-date assessment, investigation and data for newcomer children, and that is why we have brought forward the review of special educational needs and inclusion. I look forward to an Executive discussion on that. I have it ready for tabling, but I have not yet been given a date on which it will be discussed by the Executive. It is very important that that discussion takes place, because it concerns £25 million of extra money that we fought for and achieved in the Budget. There is a possibility of losing that £25 million if the proposal does not progress at the earliest opportunity. It is important to target on the basis of need.

The Department is conducting a comprehensive review of the common funding formula in order to ensure that money is targeted on the basis of need and is allocated to the most disadvantaged children. The Member will have noted the Department's decision on the Roma children. That was changed because school principals brought the matter to the Department's attention.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline how resources that are allocated per pupil to teaching English as an alternative language compare to those allocated for teaching English to local students?

The Minister of Education: We must target on the basis of need and identify barriers to learning, which we must address at an early age rather than as children progress through school. Early intervention will increase all children's chances of achievement. It should not be a competition between children from ethnic minorities

and children from the North of Ireland. The review of special needs and inclusion will meet the needs of all children.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the newcomer policy propose support for early-years provision? Will funds be set aside for that?

The Minister of Education: As the Member knows, the Department is going to bring forward its important newcomer policy, and all our policies are, of course, interlinked. Special needs and the newcomer policy are interlinked, as is our review of the common funding formula. Therefore, the newcomer and early-years policies will go hand in hand. As I said earlier, the Department's various policies are like a jigsaw and are all interconnected.

Early-Years Strategy

3. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Education when she will publish the early-years strategy.
(AQO 2048/09)

The Minister of Education: The question, appropriately, refers to the early-years strategy that Carmel Hanna mentioned in her question.

Tá an Roinn ag súil le dréacht-straitéis a thabhairt os comhair an Choiste Oideachais go luath sa bhliain 2009, agus beidh comhairliúchán leathan cuimsitheach poiblí ina dhiaidh sin san earrach — beidh comhairliúchán leis na hearnálacha sláinte agus oideachais níos leithne agus le páistí agus tusimitheoirí — sula mbeidh an straitéis críochnaithe agus foilsithe.

The Department plans to bring the draft strategy to the Education Committee early in 2009. A broad and inclusive public consultation — including consultation with the health and education sectors, and children and parents — will follow in spring before the strategy is finalised and published.

Mrs O'Neill: I look forward to receiving that document in the Education Committee. Does the Minister recognise the importance of investing in early-years provision? Does she recognise that early intervention is critical to investing in a child's future and development?

The Minister of Education: The early years of a child's life are critical. During the early months and years, a high percentage of learning takes place. Children form attitudes, make first relationships, develop concepts and form the foundations for later skills and learning. As I said earlier, the strategy will recognise that early intervention encompasses a wide range of issues, and that means identifying and addressing specific needs in a timely manner. Those needs contribute to the individual's ability to grow and learn and to develop and fulfil his or her potential.

A hungry child will be unable to learn, and a child who has suffered violence at home will have additional barriers to overcome. Without early intervention, a child that does not speak English will experience much greater difficulty. Without appropriate early-years support, a child who is autistic, dyslexic or suffers from dyspraxia will struggle to be comfortable and stimulated in school. Therefore, it is essential to ensure proper early-years intervention for young people.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Storey: In case there is confusion, I ask the question as a Member, not as Chairperson of the Committee. Sometimes, when the Education Minister brings forward proposals and policies, it seems as though the children will have left school by the time they are implemented, because we are still waiting on so many of them. Will the Minister comment on speculation that the strategy for children under six years of age will include comment on the ending of reception classes — given that the Minister tells us that early intervention is paramount to her?

The Minister of Education: I look forward to having discussions at the Executive on my review of special education needs and inclusion. I am very disappointed that, to date —

Mr Storey: Answer the question.

The Minister of Education: This is in relation to the first part of the Member's comment. I am very disappointed that, to date, my proposals have not been tabled, despite the fact that I sent them in July and gave responses in November. Despite that, the issue is still not on the Executive agenda. I hope that it will be placed on the Executive agenda very soon, because people who care about children with special needs do not block proposals from being placed on the agenda.

In relation to early-years education, I will not comment on the contents of a review that is under way, but I will say that I hope that, when the review of early-years provision is ready, it will be placed on the Executive's agenda very quickly.

Mr B McCrea: Given the almost universal acceptance in the House of the importance of early-years provision, perhaps the Minister can explain where it is placed on her list of priorities. How much time has she spent on that issue in comparison with the transfer issue, for example? Which factor does she think has the greater influence on a child's educational attainment?

The Minister of Education: The question shows a lack of understanding of the interconnectedness of all the policies — the review of early-years provision; the review of special needs and inclusion; the review of Irish-medium education; transfer 2010; and the

entitlement framework. None of those policies is more important than any other — all are equally important. Anyone who has listened to me in the House will know that I have always spoken about interconnectedness. If intervention is not made at an early stage, or if the education of our children is destroyed by ensuring that they spend their time cramming for tests that they should not be doing at that age, it will distort their early years, distort their literacy and numeracy, and distort the education system.

Post-Primary Transfer: Executive Committee Discussions

4. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister of Education how many times she has discussed the issue of post-primary transfer with the Executive Committee. (AQO 2049/09)

The Minister of Education: Chuir mé páipéir ar aistriú iarbhunscoile faoi bhráid an Choiste Feidhmiúcháin ar dhá ócáid ar leith ag iarraidh plé a dhéanamh ar an ábhar le teacht ar chomhaontú ar mo mholtaí chun creatlach reachtach d'aistriú 2010 a éascú.

I have brought papers on post-primary transfer to the Executive on two separate occasions, seeking a discussion with a view to obtaining agreement on my proposals to facilitate a legislative framework for transfer 2010. In May 2008, I brought proposals to a meeting of the Executive; the DUP and UUP refused to discuss them. I offered to hold a single-issue Executive meeting on the matter. Again, that was rejected by the DUP. I also wrote to every Executive Minister, offering them the opportunity to discuss my proposals on a one-to-one basis. No DUP Minister availed of that opportunity.

In January 2009, I produced a policy memorandum paper that provided further detail in relation to my proposals and signalled my intention to publish guidance if the Executive again failed in their duty to engage with me. The Executive again refused to discuss the proposals, and that resulted in the publication of guidance, including recommendations for admissions criteria, on which consultation is under way until 27 April 2009.

People on the Shankill Road can ask the DUP and UUP very valid questions, as can people in Kilcooley and in different parts of the North of Ireland, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas. I will give three statistics on which everyone should ruminat.

Last year, 10 children from the Shankill Road gained access to a grammar school. No children from Kilcooley gained access to a grammar school. Sixteen children from the New Lodge gained access to a grammar school. There is no comparison between those figures and the statistics from some of the more

affluent suburbs. The DUP must, therefore, ask itself what it is doing to support children in working-class areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister clarify whether she intended to answer questions 4 and 7 together?

The Minister of Education: Yes, I did. I am sorry; I should have said that.

Mr Cobain: Perhaps the Minister will tell the House whether she tried to resolve the issue informally before bringing it to the Executive? If she did, will she tell us if she had any meetings with the DUP and, if so, what the outcomes of those meetings were?

The Minister of Education: As people will know, I have had many discussions with every single party and with the Committee for Education. I attempted to have discussions with the Executive, but some parties on the Executive refused me. I have met educationalists, all stakeholders, the Churches, the trade unions and the children's rights groups. I have left no stone unturned. I had many discussions at different levels with all the political parties.

Mr McFarland: Does the Minister not understand that the way in which she has handled this issue — by saying that she is engaging with all those concerned, but not really engaging in any serious way — has done more damage than if she had dealt with the matter in a sensible way and had engaged with people in order to have a proper debate?

The Minister of Education: I respectfully suggest that the Member considers how his party has engaged on the issue of post-primary transfer. His party has failed to engage; it has failed to take into account how the existing system discriminates against working-class children. I read out the statistics, which are an indictment of our society. We need a system that is fit for purpose in the twenty-first century. We need a system that does not test children at the tender age of 10 or 11 and on which future pathways are determined.

I am moving forward because parents and teachers want clarity, and I am providing clarity. I have issued guidance because both parties on the opposite Benches refuse to engage on the issue of post-primary transfer. We cannot allow the current levels of underachievement to continue. We cannot allow the system that is failing 12,000 people every single year to continue. I am not prepared to allow that to continue. We have educational apartheid, and it has to stop now. The best way to deal with that is for all schools to adhere to the guidance so that we have a smooth transition in transfer 2010.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer.

Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire a n-aontódh sí liom nach dul chun cinn ar bith é an córas neamhrialta

atá cruthaithe aici ar an seachóras a bhíodh ann. Go deimhin, chruthaigh sí córas roghnaitheach a thabharfaidh ar dhaltai dó nó b'fhéidir trí de theistíní a dhéanamh.

Will the Minister agree that the unregulated system that she has created is no improvement on the former system of transfer, and that, in fact, she has ensured the continuation of a selective system in which children will have to sit not one test, but possibly two or three? Will she further agree that children who are from a socially disadvantaged background will be further disadvantaged by such an unregulated system?

The Minister of Education: I thought that the SDLP was opposed to academic selection. The question that the Member asks obviously shows that they are not. That is very disappointing.

If all post-primary schools adhere to the guidance, no child will be required to enter any test. If schools depart from that guidance and offer breakaway entrance tests, no parent will be forced to enter their child for those. I have advised schools on the legal perils of doing that. We have an opportunity to build a new system that, for the first time, is based on equality and on giving every child an equal chance. That is what I will do. I hope that the parties that claim to oppose inequality and academic selection will join me in bringing about that change.

Mr Poots: Given that the Minister has failed in her efforts to introduce a bog-standard comprehensive system, will she, at least, allow the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to set the examination paper, or does she want to go down the route of privatising education services?

The Minister of Education: I find some of the words that the Member used derogatory. I hope that the Member can explain his comments to the many schools in the community that he claims to represent. Those schools, such as Ashfield Girls' High School and Cookstown High School, ensure that all children are welcome. The Member's use of offensive terminology — such as “bog-standard comprehensive” — really shows where he is coming from in this debate.

Non-Selective Education Systems

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Education for her assessment of the effectiveness of the performance of non-selective education systems in other countries.
(AQO 2050/09)

The Minister of Education: D'amharc mo Roinn ar na torthaí oideachais a baineadh amach i dtíortha san Eagraíocht um Chomhar agus Fhorbairt Eacnamaíochta, agus bhreithnigh sí freisin feidhmíocht choibhneasta na dtíortha sin nach geuirtear taifid acadúla daltaí san

áireamh go ginearálta maidir le hiontráil ar iarbhunscoileanna.

My Department has examined the educational outcomes achieved across countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, and has also considered the relative performance of countries where students' academic records are not taken into account in admission to post-primary schools. The data shows that many countries where academic selection is not a factor are capable of outperforming the system here to a significant degree.

The outcomes from the 2006 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in, for example, reading, show that we have a score of 495, which represents average performance at Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) level.

Compare that with, for example, Sweden, where the OECD reports that only 2% of pupils attend schools where their academic record is a prerequisite or high priority for admittance, and yet its PISA reading score from 2006 stood at 507 — a performance significantly better than the OECD average score. Consider Finland, which has a score of 547 in reading and 548 in mathematics.

Other countries where the vast majority of young people are admitted to schools without recourse to academic selection include Scotland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Denmark. Those countries all significantly outperform us in mathematics, and Canada, Australia and New Zealand also significantly outperform us in reading.

In Belgium, three quarters of young people transfer to post-primary education, untroubled by academic selection, and that country's performance also outshines our own — it is significantly above the OECD average in reading, mathematics and science.

In the rest of Ireland, academic selection is not a feature of the education system, and yet, in the South, the performance in reading — a score of 517 compared to our 495 — is significantly better than ours and the OECD average. Let us learn — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: We must deal with our level of underachievement, not run away from it.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer, which clearly demonstrates how out of touch the education system in the North is. It also demonstrates how out of touch some of the Members on the Benches opposite are. *[Interruption.]*

A bit of peace, please. The Minister touched on the issue of PISA. Can she outline how that is relevant to international best practice and to our situation?

The Minister of Education: As Members may know, PISA is an assessment of the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in various countries across the world. It runs every three years and uses a series of tests based on real-life challenges that involve reading, maths and science.

3.00 pm

The tests have undergone rigorous scrutiny to ensure that they are robust. That allows us to have confidence when we compare the results of participating countries or regions. The first round of PISAs took place in 2000, and each round has seen the number of participating countries grow. That growth included an increase from 32 in 2000 to 57 in 2006, when 30 OECD member countries took part. We have taken part in each study since the PISA was established.

ENVIRONMENT

Planning Applications

1. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that planning applications currently within the planning system, that offer employment opportunities, are dealt with expediently given the economic downturn.

(AQO 2066/09)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): The Programme for Government refers to a six-month target being applied to large-scale planning proposals in which pre-application discussions have taken place. Those proposals are considered to have significant economic or social implications for the whole — or a substantial part — of Northern Ireland.

Two strategic project teams have been created to specifically handle that type of application, including facilitating the pre-application discussions. Applications that do not fall into that category will still be given priority in the planning system in relation to their processing, and measures are in place to that effect.

Guidance on the prioritisation was issued to all divisional planning offices in July 2006. That clarified that priority should be given to applications on which grant aid may depend, or to certain commercial, industrial, social or infrastructure proposals that have clear strategic, employment, community or public-interest dimensions.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra.

I thank the Minister for his answer. The Department of the Environment recently recruited 34 people for professional and technical reasons. Will those casual

workers receive full-time positions, or does the Minister envisage any redundancies?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member is quite right: we have gone through a process, and we are considering whether casual employees should become full-time employees. The Member will also be aware that there are certain resource implications for the Department in light of the economic downturn. Planning applications have decreased by about 40%. Currently, there is quite a deficit in the Planning Service as a result of reduced fee income. In light of that deficit, officials and I are studying the current method of delivering the Planning Service in Northern Ireland. It is obvious that the number of planning officers must be included in that consideration.

I assure the Member that my priority is to keep the service at a high standard while dealing with the backlog and making sure that we have the resources to quickly process planning applications. However, that means that we must consider the resource implications and how we could obtain additional resources to keep the current complement of planning officers in light of the straightened financial circumstances.

Mr Burns: Will the Minister tell us whether there has been a reduction in business-related planning applications since the start of the economic downturn?

The Minister of the Environment: If the Member had listened to the answer that I just provided, he would have heard me saying that there has been a reduction in planning applications of some 40%. Given the current economic position, that is understandable. I seek to make the best of that opportunity by ensuring that applications that are in the system are dealt with quickly.

Although we received 15,000 applications in the past year, I point out to the Member that we dealt with 18,000 applications. We have tried to use the current situation to ensure that we get rid of some of the backlog of applications in the planning system, although we still have to deal with some of those applications. There is a big backlog in relation to Planning Policy Statement 21 (PPS 21), and I have guaranteed that we will have dealt with that by June of this year.

There has been a reduction in the number of applications. That reduction has had implications for the Department and for the resources that are available to the Planning Service.

Mr Neeson: Does the Minister agree that the recent decision to decline planning permission for the Aurora building was a lost opportunity for job creation? Moreover, does he agree that that decision flies in the face of the planning permission that has already been granted for the Obel skyscraper, which is located beside one of Belfast's most historic buildings, namely, the Custom House?

The Minister of the Environment: I do not often find myself in agreement with my colleague from East Antrim; however, on this occasion, I do agree, and as one would expect, I have already made my feelings about the Aurora project public.

The Aurora project has massive potential to regenerate an area of Belfast that is in need of regeneration. I accept that it was to be built beside a listed building. However, as the Member pointed out, planning permission has been granted to build other large buildings beside significant listed buildings, such as the Custom House at the docks. The management board is examining that planning application, and those matters will be considered.

Belfast City Council: Town Planning Committee

2. **Rev Dr R Coulter** asked the Minister of the Environment what approaches he has received from the Town Planning Committee of Belfast City Council since taking up office. (AQO 2067/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Since taking up office, I have received no formal approaches from the town planning committee of Belfast City Council. I believe that it is isolating and ignoring me, and I feel lonesome.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he reflected on his previous commitment to resign from Belfast City Council, and does he not accept that being simultaneously the Minister in charge of planning and a member of a council planning committee is a conflict of interest, which is hugely damaging to his credibility and, more importantly, to the credibility and structures of Government?

The Minister of the Environment: The majority of Members are also members of district councils, and many of the matters that they deal with in the Assembly relate to the affairs of those councils. Furthermore, many matters that Members deal with in detail in Committees have implications for district councils.

Of course, Members from Dr Coulter's party who hold ministerial office are also members of Belfast City Council, and they do not feel that there is a conflict of interest. Consequently, his party leader might not be too pleased that he asked that question. If he is criticising his party leader and his party's Minister of Health because of the contradiction in their positions and their potential conflicts of interest, he should take that matter up with them. Nevertheless, I do not believe that the office that I hold and my role in Belfast City Council have led to any conflicts of interest.

Lord Browne: Has the Minister met with Belfast City Council — in his role as Minister of the Environment

— to discuss tall buildings in Belfast? As an elected member of Belfast City Council like me, he will know that the council supported the construction of the Aurora building. When will the draft policy and guidelines for tall buildings in Belfast be completed?

The Minister of the Environment: In May 2008, a cross-party delegation from Belfast City Council asked to meet my predecessor to discuss the matter of tall buildings in Belfast. A date was agreed before I became Minister, and I attended that meeting on 28 July 2008.

Given the number of applications for tall buildings in Belfast and the economic potential that they hold, I have made it clear that it would be appropriate to have a policy. Consequently, I have asked the Planning Service to prepare such a policy. I do not have a date on which it will be finalised, although I understand that consultants have been employed to begin work on guidance.

It is hoped that it will be brought to fruition fairly quickly, because the issue of tall buildings will not go away. Furthermore, applications of that nature can bring great economic benefit to a city, and Belfast would benefit from the impact that tall buildings, in the appropriate places, would have on its well-being.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. Does he agree that his failure to resign from Belfast City Council leads to a conflict of interest in his present position? His defence to Rev Coulter was that other Ministers in the House are members of Belfast City Council and other councils. That is no defence; it merely confirms the view that there is a potential conflict of interest. When Arlene Foster was the Minister of the Environment — the position that Sammy Wilson holds now — she resigned from her local council in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

The Minister of the Environment: As the Member knows, I will do my own thing on these issues; I will not be guided by the actions of others. I make up my mind as to how I believe I should discharge my duties. It is ironic that the accusation comes from a Member who is also a member of Belfast City Council. On many occasions, he has to debate issues in the Assembly that affect not only Belfast City Council, but other areas. If he can remain objective, I believe that I am more capable of the required degree of objectivity than the Member for North Belfast.

PPS 21

3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of the Environment when the independent working group on PPS 21 will publish a final report. (AQO 2068/09)

The Minister of the Environment: The independent working group is required to report to my Department by 26 June 2009.

Mr McGlone: How many deferrals have been determined under draft PPS 21 at the Planning Service's Omagh office? How many of those have been approved?

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's memory must be short, because a letter that he wrote to one of the local newspapers was published in today's edition. He has quoted the figures in that letter, so I do not know why on earth he needs me to remind him of them. Perhaps Alzheimer's disease has set in. I will remind him of what is contained in the letter that he wrote to the newspaper. Some 280 applications have been deferred in the regional planning office that covers the Omagh, Strabane, Fermanagh, Dungannon and Cookstown council areas, and 41 of those applications have been approved. If Mr McGlone's maths are right — and I hope that they are better than his memory — that represents 14.64%. Therefore, that is 14.64% more applications than would have been granted under PPS 14. There will be 41 people in those areas who will be happy that I have introduced such a policy.

Across Northern Ireland, so far, there has been an approval rate of about 37%.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. May I be the first Member to welcome the Minister's return following his being sent to the DUP sin bin by his party colleagues last week. What guarantees are there that the recommendations from the independent working group, which will report in June, will be implemented?

The Minister of the Environment: I know that the Member would love to get rid of me from this position, but I assure him that I am here today, and I will be in this position at the next Question Time and for the foreseeable future. To paraphrase the Member's party leader, I am not going away, you know.

3.15 pm

The independent working group's recommendations will come first to me and then to the ministerial subgroup, in which we will consider them and, at that stage, determine what happens with them.

Mr Cree: Before PPS 14, the Planning Service advised that the number of new houses in the countryside exceeded the combined total of those in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister advise the Assembly on what he thinks is a sustainable annual figure for new houses in future?

The Minister of the Environment: It would not be right for me to say what I believe to be a sustainable annual figure. In fact, I would not like to think that the suitability of planning applications would be determined on the basis of a quota. That will be determined on the basis of whether those applications comply with the policy that has been introduced. Applications that comply

with PPS 21 should be granted, but if they do not comply, they should not be granted. I have no idea, and the Member could not reasonably expect me to have an idea, of how many successful applications there should be.

I must emphasise that that planning policy is designed to achieve two aims. The first is to ensure that those people who need to live in the countryside have the opportunity to do so, and that rural communities are sustained and are sustainable. The second aim is to preserve what I believe to be a very important part of our natural heritage — the landscape of our rural communities and our rural areas. The planning policy is designed to achieve those two aims, and every application will be judged against them.

Planning Service: Overhaul

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of the Environment for a progress report on the Programme for Government commitment to overhaul the Planning Service.

(AQO 2069/09)

The Minister of the Environment: A comprehensive programme of reform of the planning system is well under way. Improvement is being made in the short term through various process improvements, such as a streamlined council consultation scheme. Parallel to that, officials have been working to develop detailed policy proposals for reform in the medium to longer term. Those proposals take account of the transfer of planning functions to the proposed 11 new councils in May 2011, under the review of public administration (RPA).

Subject to receiving Executive approval, I hope to publish the proposals shortly for a period of public consultation. That is a critical next step on the path to meeting the Programme for Government commitment and the PSA 22 commitment to ensure that a fit-for-purpose legislative framework for the planning system is put in place by March 2011.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister account for the spiralling costs of ePIC — the electronic planning information for citizens project — which increased from £5.5 million to £12.8 million? Was that project re-tendered? Would the Minister not be better spending his time controlling costs in his Department rather than publicly criticising civil servants and espousing ridiculous views on energy efficiency, renewable energy and climate change?

The Minister of the Environment: When it comes to lectures on protecting the environment, the last person to whom I will turn is a member of the Beggs family, whose expertise when it comes to protecting the environment revolves around landfill and illegal dumping. The Member might bear that in mind before

he starts to lecture me about my role as Minister of the Environment.

As far as the spiralling costs of ePIC are concerned, I am not trying to wash my hands of the matter, but most of those costs were incurred during the very early part of the process. I inherited the current system, and I have asked tough questions about the costs of the ePIC project. The project was not re-tendered, because to start all over again would have led to increased costs and could have left the Department open to court action by the firm that held the contract.

I must also point out that some additional things were put onto the system, making it a bit more complex than was originally intended. However, I assure the House that I will keep an eye on the costs. I hope that we now have a tender document that is much tighter than it was in the past, and that we will deliver ePIC, which is an important part of planning reform, in so far as it will give the public and developers greater accessibility to their planning applications, and it should also cut down on much of the administrative costs in the system.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister back. No doubt, Stephen Nolan will be looking for him shortly. Perhaps he can also make provision for the poor old polar bears now that they are an endangered species in his constituency.

What provision or new measures will the Minister provide to ensure that councillors will be trained adequately to ensure that the new planning procedures will be put in place when functions transfer to the super councils? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of the Environment: I want to correct the Member. Polar bears and polar bear colonies are thriving; they are not in decline. I give him that piece of information for nothing.

The Member asked about an important issue. For those who wish to see local government functioning properly after May 2011, it is important that councillors who take on planning responsibilities are properly trained and have the capacity to deal properly with planning decisions. For that reason, the planning reform proposals include actions that will help to have councillors trained in that area.

Sinn Féin members on the strategic leadership board have been helpful in preparing for RPA. However, the planning reform proposals are being held up in the Office of the deputy First Minister — and I know that the Chief Whip of the Member's party might not be too happy with him for raising the issue. Nevertheless, we are reaching a deadline, and if we do not get the proposals out for public consultation and start moving towards the legislative requirements, we will find ourselves in a difficult position when it comes to

delivering that reform before May 2011. I will be more than grateful for any help that the Member can give me in getting those proposals to the Executive so that they can go out for public consultation.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister referred to the streamlining process, and we all agree that that is a good thing. However, will the Minister comment on the fact that if developers — particularly apartment developers — do not get approval for 40 apartments, they withdraw and defer and come back with proposals for 30 apartments, and if they do not get 30, they withdraw and defer, and the process goes on and on. Does the Minister agree that that exercise defeats the purpose of what we are trying to do, which is to push the planning process forward?

The Minister of the Environment: Part of the Member's question is correct. The streamlining process has had a dramatic effect where it has worked. Where it has been introduced so far, for example in the Londonderry area, the average time for applications that go through the streamlined process has been reduced from 89 days to 28 days, and 20% of applications are being not only processed but decisions issued within 20 days. That is a remarkable turnaround, and it has a big impact locally.

Nevertheless, the Member is right. I have told planning officers that we should no longer be in a position where we work with developers and negotiate down by increments. Apart from the fact that it messes up the planning system, it also means that an officer's time is tied up in those negotiations and looking at changed plans — sometimes with minor alterations only.

Of course, the other issue is that objectors are kept on tenterhooks, because they must constantly return to the matter to consider amendments. One reason why we have introduced the front-loaded pre-application arrangement is to try to get developers to understand, at the very outset, what is likely to be acceptable and what is outside the ballpark. Then, if they lodge an application, they have only themselves to blame if it is turned down after one go. That is the way forward. The Member is right, we must free up resources to deal with applications quickly.

Mr Gallagher: The report 'Foundations for the Future' commented on the third-party right of appeal. It made it quite clear that it should be considered only in well-qualified circumstances, because, obviously, if there was a free-for-all, it would make the planning process impossible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question.

Mr Gallagher: Do the planning reforms under consideration in the Department contain some facility for a third-party right of appeal?

The Minister of the Environment: The emerging findings paper will have already indicated that I am not in favour of third-party appeals. Of course, the point of holding consultations on planning reform is to give people the opportunity to make an argument for third-party appeals. Despite the arguments that have been made in support of third-party appeals, they are not a panacea. The way to get community buy-in for planning applications is to have the community consultation front-loaded, not end-loaded. Rather than giving people the right to fight a decision once it has been made, they should instead be given an opportunity to have input before an application has even been submitted.

I want to mention one issue that is contained in the emerging findings paper and that will be dealt with in the planning reform paper — indeed, it is an issue that will form part of the consultation. When making an application, developers will be required to show not only that they have consulted people, but how they have consulted them and how they have tried to deal with the objections raised by the people who will be affected by the development. To my mind, that is a much better approach: before anybody's mind is made up, the public gets an opportunity to have their say, and, hopefully, planning applications can be tailored to meet the needs of local people and to take account of their views.

Aurora Building

5. **Mr McFarland** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the planning application by McAllister Holdings for the Aurora Building, Great Victoria Street, Belfast. (AQO 2070/09)

The Minister of the Environment: Belfast City Council has referred the application to the Planning Service management board for consideration and reassessment, and I have decided that it is best that the application is dealt with by that process.

Mr McFarland: I thank the “Minister for Entertainment” for his answer. He is in good form today as usual.

Does the Minister not find that there is a degree of incongruity between, on the one hand, his duties as the Environment Minister, and, on the other, his lobbying for planning applications and his criticism of his own planning staff?

The Minister of the Environment: That question has been asked time and again. The argument seems to be that when someone becomes a Minister, somehow or other they cease to have constituency responsibilities. I am in this Chamber because constituents have elected me to it. I happen to have been given a post — in the meantime anyhow — *[Laughter.]* — as the Minister of a Department. However, that does not mean that I no

longer have an obligation to represent my constituents. When I talk to planning officers about a planning application, I am simply carrying out my constituency duty. The one occasion on which it is not right for me either to listen to applicants or objectors or to make representations is when I have to make the final decision on a planning application that is subject to article 31 of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

The record will show that, when dealing with such applications, I have adhered to the requirement to remain separate from the planning process until the officers submit a report to me with a recommendation on which I must make a judgement.

3.30 pm

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Irish in the Workplace

1. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if his Department actively encourages the use of Irish in the workplace. (AQO 2086/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): No.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer, even though it was somewhat sarcastic. Does he accept that there is a greater onus on him — *[Interruption.]*

May I finish my question?

— to recognise the Irish language now that it has secured level-3 status under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I assure the Member that I was not being sarcastic. The Member mentioned the use of Irish and its status — she is correct about the status that it has attained. The requirements of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages are being fully met by the Department. I would hope that, in the workplace, we could concentrate on trying to deliver better services for the entire community, rather than being sidetracked on language issues such as that which the Member has raised.

Mr Shannon: A report on the matter is published. Will the Minister confirm when the third periodic report will be published?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member is correct to say that periodic reports are published. The third report is awaiting Executive consideration. The deputy First Minister made substantive comments on the report, which, along with the comments of others, were incorporated, as appropriate. The deputy First Minister has been considering the report,

including those comments, since 11 November 2008. I will bring the report to the Executive as soon as I can.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire — agus tá súil agam go dtabharfaidh sé freagra níos fuide uirthi ná a thug sé ar an chéad cheist: cad é atá déanta ag an Aire leis an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn ó rinneadh Aire de? I hope that the Minister's answer to my question will be longer than the one that he gave to the initial question. What work has he done to promote the Irish language since he became Minister?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is remarkable that Ministers and politicians are criticised when they give fulsome and protracted responses, yet I am criticised when I do the complete opposite and give a concise and specific answer.

The honourable Member has taken a consistent line in his approach to the issue. However, he has found that I have taken an equally consistent line. There will not be an Irish-language Act; however, those who choose to use Irish or Ulster Scots should be facilitated to do so. That was the position, and it will remain the position for the foreseeable future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr McGlone is not in his place to ask question 2.

London Olympics

3. **Mr O'Loan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given the timing of his decision not to proceed with the multi-sports stadium at the Maze site, if it is still possible for his Department to have an alternative stadium ready in time for the London Olympics, as had been envisioned for the sports stadium at the Maze site. (AQO 2088/09)

Sports Stadium

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if it is his Department's preference to proceed with one multi-sports stadium or for three separate stadium projects for the Gaelic Athletic Association, Irish Football Association and Ulster Rugby. (AQO 2092/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 3 and 7 together.

In line with the commitment that I gave to the Assembly on 12 January 2009, I forwarded my conclusions on the proposed multi-sports stadium at the Maze to the Executive on 27 January. In my paper to the Executive, I advised that I had reviewed all the evidence available to me, including meeting with the governing bodies involved, and I had come to the view

that the Maze proposal should not proceed. I also advised that I intended to have a further series of discussions with the governing bodies of the sports involved in order to explore alternatives. I have already had initial meetings with the relevant governing bodies, and I have asked them to review their options on stadia provision and to report back to me. Accordingly, there is no preferred option at the moment.

With regard to stadium provision for use during the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games in 2012, Northern Ireland's capability to actively participate could only be fully determined once a decision is taken on the preferred stadium option or options. However, I am considering the possibility of supporting a limited remedial programme of work at Windsor Park, so that international football can continue to be played there until a longer-term solution is found. Any support will be subject to an approved business case and to satisfactory assurances from the Irish Football Association and Linfield Football Club on future arrangements for maintaining the venue. That interim work may allow for some Olympics-related events to take place.

Mr O'Loan: How much money does the Minister have in his budget for stadium development? How much have the Minister and his Department spent and, therefore, inevitably, wasted on the Maze project?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member posed a classic leading question when he asked how much has been spent and, therefore, wasted. He knows the facts as well as I do, and, I suspect, as well everyone else in the Chamber does, and they are that the issue of the multi-sports stadium was exceptionally complex. It was in the ether for many months and years preceding my arrival at the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Therefore, it was always going to be a difficult choice. However, I have never shied away from taking difficult decisions. Having taken that decision, removed the uncertainty and brought clarity to the situation, we must now move forward.

I am delighted that we are now in the position whereby governing bodies can examine a very limited number of options. We are not going back to square one. There are a limited number of options available, so progress can be made quickly and practically in an attempt to bring clarity and to ensure that football, rugby and gaelic are catered for in the stadia provision. The 2007 budget gave capital provision of £70 million to the multi-sports stadium project over the period 2008-09 to 2010-11.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will know that, since 29 January, officials from the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure have been in regular contact with his departmental officials to try to secure a meeting between the Minister

and the Committee on the subject of the multi-sports stadium. As Chairperson of the Committee, I subsequently followed up that request in writing. Will the Minister pin down with our Committee staff a suitable date to discuss the matter? After all, it is a Government scrutiny Committee, and one could be forgiven for thinking that the Minister is trying to avoid the Committee.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Four weeks ago, I said that I would undertake a series of discussions with the governing bodies.

I did that within two weeks of taking the decision. Unfortunately, a leak was made to the media about the document at that time. If anyone has any information as to who was responsible for that leak, I would be delighted to receive that information and to take the appropriate action.

The Member seems to think that I am avoiding a meeting with the Committee. Since I took office in June last year, I have appeared before the Committee on every occasion on which I was asked to do so. We will reach a consensus on the best date — which I hope will be in the immediate future — and I will be glad to answer any questions that the Committee may wish to put to me in respect of this matter. I am sure that we will have a healthy and robust debate, and I will stand over everything that I will say to the Committee — I hope that the members can do likewise.

Mr McNarry: In view of the mounting failure to find private sponsorship for the London Olympic venues, are there any opportunities for Northern Ireland? Can the Minister say at what speed he will be able to move on the alternatives to the Maze site, to facilitate access to such opportunities?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for raising the question in that way. I recall that other Members, both in the House and outside, indicated that, had the opposite decision had been taken — had I decided to proceed with the Maze stadium — it would, in some way, bring relief to the hard-pressed construction industry which faces the economic downturn.

However, even had a decision to proceed been taken, not a brick would have been laid before 18 months had passed. Everyone ought to know that. However, despite that, Members chose to make political capital. Their comments were nonsensical. Building work could not have started immediately; it could not have started within an 18-month to two-year period.

The Member asks how quickly we can proceed, and I want to proceed very quickly. I have met the three governing bodies and have indicated that I wish to receive their options within a matter of weeks. In the next few weeks, I hope to have a tiny, finite number of options that represent the governing bodies' preferences,

and I will get to work immediately. We can make progress quickly now that the uncertainty has been removed.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister said that everyone knew that £3.8 million — nearly £4 million — has been spent, squandered or wasted on the Maze site. I hope that that is so. Is it possible that some value can be salvaged in the preparation of an alternative site from the lost consultancy fees and documents?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. I did not mean that everyone knew that the expenditure had been of that order. My mention of widespread knowledge was with reference to a different point.

I hope, and have told local representatives in Lagan Valley and elsewhere, that, now that the uncertainty has been removed, other developments — that can, should and must occur at the site — are able to proceed on a more efficacious basis. That must happen now as a matter of the utmost priority. I hope that some of the preparatory work for the multi-sports stadium can be utilised in the development of that much-needed site. In the short-to-medium term, we could then see progress in developing genuinely world-class facilities at that site.

Creative Industries Fund

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details of the take-up of the £5m Creative Industries Fund that was announced last autumn. (AQO 2089/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Following its launch last October, there has been a high degree of interest in the creative industries innovation fund. It is administered by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, and an initial call for applications was made, to sectoral bodies only, in October 2008.

3.45 pm

The Arts Council undertook a competitive assessment process and I will announce in the near future the outcome of the first call. A second call for applications from creative enterprises opened on 5 January and closed on 5 February. The Arts Council has advised that more than 350 applications were received, considerably higher than the level that was expected. I believe that that is due, in no small part, to the successful marketing campaign undertaken by the Arts Council, which included presentations across Northern Ireland and close liaison with all 32 local enterprise agencies.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. The strategic action plan indicates that there are more than 2,500 creative enterprises in Northern Ireland employing almost 35,000 people, and that there is a specific goal to grow that sector by 15%

by 2011. In light of that growth and planned development, will the Minister tell the House what the Arts Council is doing to promote creative industries innovations to ensure that all parts of Northern Ireland benefit from that funding?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. His rationale is one that is often utilised in the Chamber when Members ask about the geographic spread. I am delighted to inform him that, in so far as it has been possible, there has been a widespread number of information seminars, at centres including the Ards Art Centre in Newtownards; the Strule Arts Centre in Omagh; the North West Regional College, Limavady; the Southern Regional College, Newry; Space Craft in Belfast; the Presidents' Club, Belfast; the Noribic Centre, Londonderry; the Craft Centre, Ballycastle; Work West, Belfast; and Oxford Island, Craigavon.

In addition, the 32 local enterprise agencies were provided with copies of the presentation. I am sure that the Member will be aware that Belfast City Council also promotes the fund by providing links on its website to the appropriate pages on the Arts Council website. I hope that Members will agree that there has been a comprehensive attempt to publicise the fund as widely as possible. The take-up — as measured by the response so far — would appear to indicate that that was money well spent.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I know that political manners and leadership are not qualities of which the Minister displays a lot. However, through the Deputy Speaker I will ask: what is the next step for those applicants who made bids for funding, particularly in relation to the 5 February 2008 deadline?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I made clear the closing deadline for applications. The Arts Council will now look at all the applications. As I said in response to a previous question, given the geographical spread of the information, I am hopeful that there will be a broad spread of resources across Northern Ireland. I cannot prejudge the outcome because there are criteria to be met. However, I am hopeful that people right across Northern Ireland will benefit from the fund.

Mr K Robinson: I note that in the Minister's response to the initial question, and in his geographical response, he omitted south and east Antrim, so I will make a bid for those areas now. Has the Minister assessed the job-creating potential of the creative industries fund spending, from the primary investments and the knock-on opportunities?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member raises a pertinent point. The total amount of the fund is £5 million, which is a considerable sum. I

would have liked there to have been more money available, but we have to work within the current Budget. However, I am hopeful that there will be considerable job-creation capacity within the limitations of the fund.

If that fund were to prove as successful as I hope, given the initial interest in it, it would strengthen my case for going back to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to say that a subsequent fund of a similar type should be set up. I hope that such a fund would be as successful as the current one, and, if more money were invested, a greater return might be made.

Theatre Funding

5. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure if there will be additional funding made available for (i) the Waterside Theatre; (ii) the Playhouse; and (iii) An Gaeláras in Derry/Londonderry, to allow them to maximise the use of their facilities when refurbishment is complete. (AQO 2090/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Waterside Theatre, the Playhouse and An Gaeláras have all received funding from the north-west challenge fund towards their capital arts projects. All three projects have subsequently received additional funding beyond their original allocations from the fund.

Funding for the arts is dispersed through the Arts Council. The Arts Council has advised that it is fully aware of the needs of the arts venues in Londonderry, which have been undergoing capital development. It is currently assessing applications under the annual support for organisations programme, including applications for increased funding from those venues. The Arts Council will make its decisions in February 2009, and it will notify the applicants of the outcome during March 2009. Any further requests for additional capital funding will require the completion of a business case and will be dependent on the availability of funds.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Waterside Theatre project has found itself in difficulties through no fault of its own. Does the Minister agree that, in order to optimise the capital investment, there will be a requirement for ongoing revenue support?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for raising the issue of the Waterside Theatre. On a local level and on a ministerial level, I am aware of those issues, which were well outside the theatre's control. People representing the Waterside Theatre have been in touch with the Department, and we are discussing what assistance we can offer to the theatre in the light of the circumstances in which it finds itself.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister assessed how many jobs have been created by his Department through its overall investment of public money? What is the geographical distribution of those jobs?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am a bit unclear whether the Member was referring to the original question. If he was, I have not received any information about the number of jobs that have been created, but the three projects that were listed in the original question have total project costs in excess of £8 million. Although I do not have the figures, I am fairly certain that there has been significant job creation. I will endeavour to establish a precise number — if a precise number can be established — and I will write to the Member with the details.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I noticed that when the Minister said “An Gaeláras”, it did not burn his lips. Perhaps speaking Irish is not always the end of the world. When groups find out whether they are to receive funding, are the reasons for not receiving it made clear? Sometimes, there is a feeling that some groups get funding and others do not. The process of allowing more funding to be made is not very clear.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member referred to my use of Irish. I am happy to use any one of a number of languages from any one of a number of countries. I am quite content to do that, and we should all open up our minds to other cultures and countries, where possible.

The Member referred to applications that, for whatever reason, do not clear the system and are rejected. It is important that, where it is possible and practicable, the applicants establish for themselves understanding of why they did not receive funding so that they can see that the criteria are fair, reasonable and applied across the board. On future applications, therefore, they can ensure that, where possible, they might meet the criteria, rather than falling short of it.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister say what criteria were applied to applications for additional funding?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: That follows on neatly from the previous question. The applications for additional funding were individually assessed by a steering group, with consideration given to the overall funding package for the project as a whole, any potential shortfalls that might jeopardise delivery of the project and the possibility of losing other funding sources. The steering group supported the bids, and final amounts were determined and approved at ministerial level, as was appropriate.

Foras na Gaeilge

6. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any delays in filling Foras na Gaeilge posts which were approved in 2001.

(AQO 2091/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The total staffing complement for Foras na Gaeilge was outlined in the agency’s 10-year strategic plan from 2001, which was agreed by both North/South Ministerial Council Ministers. A number of issues have contributed to Foras na Gaeilge’s failure to attain its agreed complement of staff. Those issues include the Irish Government’s decentralisation policy, which has resulted in protracted negotiations with unions about which posts should move to Gweedore in the Irish Republic. I understand that Foras na Gaeilge has also had difficulties with the recruitment and retention of staff.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his answer. However, is he able to specify why Foras na Gaeilge has failed to fill those posts?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: In the same way as I was content to be specific and precise in my answer to previous questions, I will endeavour to be so in answer to this one.

Market forces have contributed to Foras na Gaeilge’s well-recognised staff-retention problems. I understand that the recruitment of specialist staff, such as professional accountants and editors, with sufficient Irish-language skills has been problematic. As I have stated, the posts in Gweedore cannot be filled until Foras na Gaeilge and the trade unions resolve their positions.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister know whether the issue of pay disparity between Foras na Gaeilge in the North and in the South has been sorted out?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I am unsure to which disparity the Member refers — whether he means a disparity in wage structures or something else. I will try to provide a written reply after I read the Hansard report.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Has the Minister considered job-sharing possibilities involving Scottish Gaelic language providers and local minority-language providers that make use of EU funding mechanisms and that may, consequently, save public money?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: On the face of it, the Member’s question makes some sense. I must establish whether it is as straightforward as his question makes it sound. However, I will certainly draw his suggestion to the attention of the Ulster-Scots Agency, Foras na Gaeilge and associated bodies in order to establish whether job-sharing is possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question No 7 has been answered.

Irish-Language Groups

8. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many meetings he has held with Irish-language groups since taking up his office.
(AQO 2093/09)

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I have received four invitations to meet representatives and Irish-language groups to discuss the Irish-language position, all of which I accepted. Those meetings were with Foras na Gaeilge on 8 July 2008, Pobal on 30 September 2008 and a delegation of the Irish Guild of the Church of Ireland on 19 January 2009.

On 20 October 2008, I also met a Sinn Féin Member for West Belfast and other representatives of that party for an in-depth, comprehensive and robust discussion on Irish-language issues. I look forward to any further such meeting.

4.00 pm

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

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2008-2009 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Vote on Account

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009. — *[The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds).]*

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr D Bradley): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Mar is gnách, tá an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo, agus beidh mé ag labhairt inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach Choiste Oideachais an Tionóil.

I am pleased to participate in the debate as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. In that role, I want to draw Members' attention to certain

aspects of the Department of Education's 2008-09 budget and some of the pressures that it has registered to date for its 2009-2010 budget.

The spring Supplementary Estimates reflect changes that have arisen during in-year monitoring rounds. I will focus at first on some of the Committee's concerns about the Department's 2008-09 budget. The Committee questioned senior officials on the impact of the removal of efficiency savings from the schools budget with regard to reductions in the number of teachers and front line school staff. Efficiency savings in the schools budget for 2008-09 totalled £39.5 million; £72 million for 2009-2010; and around £103 million for 2010-11.

The Committee was concerned that the Department did not have figures to hand on the number of teacher reductions as a result of those substantial baseline cuts to the schools budget at classroom level, and it pressed for a larger percentage of the education budget to be devolved directly to schools.

The Committee for Education takes particular interest in the Department's underspend and reduced requirements from in-year monitoring rounds. It was concerned by two recent examples that did not involve substantial money: the surrender of money for science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) in schools; and the integrated development fund for disadvantaged children under the west Belfast/greater Shankill initiative. The Committee viewed that as poor monitoring and lack of control over scarce and limited resources in those important areas.

The Committee for Education, in conjunction with two other Statutory Committees, has organised an event to promote STEM subjects, which will take place in the Long Gallery at lunchtime on Wednesday 18 February 2009. Members are most welcome to attend that event.

Turning to the Department of Education's 2009-2010 budget, the Committee awaits the Minister of Education's proposed actions to deal with a gap in resources of around £60 million, much of which appears as inescapable pressures, such as costs that arise from pay reviews, job evaluations, pensions and redundancy costs. Clearly, re-prioritisation of elements of the education budget must be considered soon. The Committee will examine closely the Minister's proposals in that regard.

As I mentioned earlier, the Committee for Education has taken particular interest in the Department's efficiency delivery plan. One important element is the efficiency savings that will arise from the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA). Some £21 million of savings are projected in 2009-2010 and 2010-11. The Committee recently heard from senior departmental officials and ESA's chief executive designate on the authority's outline business

plan. That basically suggests that £50 million of the education budget should be invested to save £20 million per annum with further potential savings.

The proposals given to the Committee state that the £20 million of annual savings would be put into front line services, namely school classrooms, to improve education standards. However, I regret to report to the House that the Committee has distinct fears that any savings generated from the establishment of ESA may very well be swallowed up in efficiency savings and never make their way to the classroom to benefit pupils. I say "any savings" because the evidence session on the outline business case, which was reported by Hansard, identified many gaps and questions on where savings will be made.

The Committee is awaiting the full business case and will revisit its concerns and inform the House during its Committee Stage report on the Education Bill, or earlier, if possible.

The Committee scrutinises the education budget on a regular basis and takes that role very seriously. We have at least one session with senior departmental officials per month. Some weighty decisions on budget priorities will have to be taken over the coming year. I assure Members that the Committee will continue to examine those decisions closely and report to the House as appropriate.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's debate on behalf of the Committee for Education.

Mr Elliott: All Departments — and the Minister of Finance, in particular — have had to deal with the rolling lack of finance. It has been difficult to match some of the resources required, especially with the necessary efficiency savings being demanded.

I want to refer specifically to a couple of issues concerning the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. I know that the Department placed huge emphasis on completing the farm nutrient management scheme by 31 December 2008. There was a major impasse along the way when there appeared to have been agreement between the DFP and DARD over the sale of Crossnacreevy. Indeed, I understand that the DFP guaranteed the DARD finance to complete the scheme.

That scheme has been a success for the Department, and many of us are hugely appreciative of that. However, it has not been without difficulty, and, even though it has been completed, there is still a shortfall in its finances. Bids have been made in both the December and February monitoring rounds to try to complete the scheme's jigsaw of finance. I am concerned that the money required may not all be available and that some farmers who completed the scheme late on may have to wait some time to get their full moneys.

I am hopeful that that matter will be resolved; however, I am concerned that it will not be.

I want to mention some immediate issues that arose throughout the year and that had difficulty securing finance. In August 2008, severe flooding affected many farmers, especially cereal and potato farmers. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development reacted slowly in providing finance, even though not a huge amount was required to alleviate the hardship. At that time, homeowners whose houses flooded received compensation within a short timescale. However, although only small numbers of farmers were affected, some lost their livelihoods for the entire year. They could not access the support and financial assistance that they urgently needed. A quicker reaction from the Department would have been more appropriate.

The dioxin scare in December 2008 resulted in similar problems. I am concerned that it has taken representatives of the Executive nine weeks to make a case in Europe, given that our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland had their case sewn up early — almost before Northern Ireland knew about the situation. I am hugely concerned about the slow reaction to a serious situation. Removing some cattle and animals from farms more quickly could have helped to alleviate the difficult situation internationally and to clear our products without undue difficulty.

When the Programme for Government and Budget were being drawn up last year, I commented on the roads budget. I had huge concerns about the amount of finance that was allocated, particularly for structural maintenance. In the past couple of days, I have researched that matter and have discovered that, in the 2006-07 financial year, one region received well over £2 million for structural maintenance, whereas this year it received only £1.5 million, which is 77% of its allocation from two years ago. Furthermore, that figure does not take into account the increased cost of the products, which have, in some cases, risen by 50%.

People talk about introducing traffic-calming measures in towns and villages. However, most roads in Northern Ireland have inbuilt traffic-calming measures, because drivers must zigzag to avoid potholes and poor surfaces. The rural communities, particularly those west of the Bann, are concerned because they do not have public-transport systems similar to those in the east of the Province. We do not have a train service or the same level of bus service, and we are desperately dependent on those roads and on the car. Therefore, more money should be allocated to roads in the structural maintenance budget. It is important to the Province's economy. The west of the Province will miss out badly on economic success if it does not have the funds to carry out structural maintenance.

Mr Shannon: Tom Elliott mentioned roads in the west of Province. When he is available, I will take him to Strangford and Ards, where he will experience poor roads.

At this time, there are no easy jobs in the Executive. All Departments are under a certain amount of pressure to meet the needs that are presented to them, especially during the economic crisis. However, some Departments are undoubtedly under more stress, especially the Department of Finance and Personnel. People who are struggling expect that Department to implement changes and, at this time, more people look to the Minister, Nigel Dodds, to help improve their lives.

Many middle-class families are struggling, losing their businesses and face losing their homes. They are hoping for some kind of intervention.

Thus far, the Minister has provided an extra £400 million to defer water charges and a further £100 million to tackle a range of issues, including the backdating of Civil Service pay.

4.15 pm

The Titanic signature project wi' £43.5 million es pairt o' hit's ain economic package hes been becked bae the Executive an' the Finance Meenster hes allooed at eh bes mindit at the devolved Meenesters dae ivrything at thair fit tae dae tae heft femmelies, consairns an' the economy. Eh hes allooed at we ir waarkin wi' the constraints o' a block grant o' catter. Oan account o' thon we havnae the freedom o' manouvre laike a national Government wud hae bit thon dusnae stap iz fae taakin positive steps tae heft the fowk o' the Province.

The Titanic signature project, with a £43.5 million investment as part of its own economic package, has been backed by the Executive, and the Finance Minister has expressed his determination that the devolved Ministers do whatever they can to help families, companies and the economy. He has acknowledged that we are operating within the constraints of a block allocation of money and that we therefore do not have the freedom of manoeuvre that a national Government would have. However, that does not stop us from taking positive steps to help the people of the Province.

We are all aware of the record to date and the major decisions that have been made, such as freezing the regional rate from 2008-2011; capping industrial rates at 30%, and freezing business rates in real terms. Free prescriptions and free public transport for the over-60s have also been introduced, and we know the pressure that that has relieved in homes with illnesses around the Province. There is no doubt that the Finance Department and its Minister have taken steps to make this hard time a little easier and will continue to do so.

That is why I find it difficult to fully comprehend some of the statements that have been made, one of

which was made by a Member for Strangford. I heard little or no positive ideas about what he would do differently and what he would bring to the table. I heard only negative comments and remarks, which will certainly not put heat into homes across the Province. That is in contrast to his own leader, Sir Reg Empey, who acknowledged in positive terms, on ‘The Politics Show’, that the Programme for Government was working well. I find it difficult to understand what a rewrite of the Budget would do, if such a rewrite were possible; there is no new money. Where should the money be taken from? Should it be siphoned from different Departments? Who do we rob, and who do we pay first — the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety?

I ask the Ulster Unionist Party — and perhaps the next Member to speak can respond — what its Members think of the Conservative Party’s plans to drastically cut public spending, even more so than the Labour Party. Are they happy with their party — the “Conservative Unionists” — to be associated with Tory financial policy? When people do not spend, businesses cannot survive, and in time the Province will be in a worse state. I am more than confident in the steps that our Finance Minister is taking. He has the best interests of the Province at heart; that is his goal and his focus.

The steps that have been taken are not the end of our route to prosperity. Despite the pressures, the DUP Finance Minister is continuing to deliver. Action has been taken to reduce rates burdens on small businesses. We will deliver over £1.4 billion on construction projects this financial year, compared with £676 million five years ago. Again, that is a very clear step forward. That is helping schools, roads, hospitals, and many other areas.

Over the next 10 years, the Department will deliver £20 billion of capital projects through the investment strategy, working closely with the small and medium-sized enterprises. There have been unprecedented levels of investment in key Departments, such as the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, which enjoys its highest ever budget — £4.3 billion. That is an area that most people agree is in real need of investment no matter what else is happening.

What is important now is for Departments to declare likely underspend and not wait until it is too late to make a difference. Money that is not allocated for some reason will not help anybody anywhere, whereas the opposite is true — money can be allocated for projects with a short turnaround, such as buildings, which will create construction jobs that would be permanent fixtures. That will not be possible if Departments hold on to their underspend until the twelfth hour, by which time it will be too late.

In conclusion, the Department of Finance and Personnel has done a sterling job thus far in a hard time. I lend my wholehearted support to the continuance of the work that has been started by the Minister, Nigel Dodds, and his Department, and I ask Members to do the same thing, and support the motion.

Mr Neeson: The Executive’s priority in the Programme for Government was to grow the economy. Unfortunately, the Programme for Government was drawn up before the current economic downturn began. The real question is whether the necessary resources are in the Budget to deal with the current situation. In particular, what are the Executive’s plans for financing public-sector projects in areas such as social housing, road and rail infrastructure, and the upgrading of schools and hospitals, all of which can assist the construction industry in these very difficult times?

Last week, representatives from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) appeared before the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Among other issues, they emphasised the importance of expanding the tourism industry in Northern Ireland, bearing in mind the current value of sterling against the euro. Will the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and the Executive, give me assurances today about the existing proposals for the signature projects, particularly those at the Titanic Quarter and the Giant’s Causeway?

In the current situation, my party is not convinced that the Executive are focused enough on developing the green economy. As I said in the House last week, President Obama has already shown leadership on that issue. There is clear evidence that global warming is happening at an accelerated pace, and we in Northern Ireland should consider that to be an opportunity rather than a threat. By the same token, the relevant agencies should be encouraging the development of renewable-energy projects, including wind power, tidal power and generation of electricity from waste.

I must question the commitment to improving public transport in Northern Ireland. In particular, I want a complete commitment from the Executive to purchase new trains, which are urgently needed on the Larne line. Furthermore, at a local level, I seek assurances that the upgrading of the A2 Carrickfergus to Belfast road and the A8 Larne to Belfast road will proceed on schedule.

I appreciate that times are difficult, but it is vital that the Executive and the Assembly get their priorities right. That is what the community expects of us, and that is what devolution is all about. The challenge is there in the Budget. We must show flexibility, and priorities must be developed as the economic climate changes.

Mr Poots: The debate has been interesting thus far, having identified the range of opinions that exists in the Broad Church that is the Ulster Unionist Party. We

had Mr McNarry — “Dave the brave”, “hatchet man” McNarry — who wants to cut all around him; Basil McCrea, who wants us all to work together; Sir Reg Empey, who supports the emphasis on the economy; and Mr McGimpsey, who thinks that the only thing that matters is the health budget. The Broad Church of the Ulster Unionist Party has produced a broad range of opinions — it is certainly not a very cohesive group. Perhaps when it joins with the Conservatives, it will have a different range of opinions, and it will support the Executive’s implementation of even more cuts than Mr McNarry wants to see.

Some people have suggested today that we should re-prioritise the Budget. However, let us go back to what was contained in the Budget at the outset. The Budget’s key priority was the economy. Is anyone suggesting that, in a global recession, when people all over the world are losing their jobs and banks are going bankrupt, that we should shift the focus away from the economy to other matters? We will only resolve the difficulties in social housing, health, education and many other areas if we have a strong and vibrant economy. Therefore, it is right that we focus on the economy and not on other areas. Re-prioritisation would be madness.

I agree with leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, because he did not accept the assertion of his spokesman on financial affairs, Mr McNarry, that the Programme for Government, which is barely a year old, is dead in the water. Rather, Sir Reg welcomed the fact that the economy is at the top of the list of priorities — which is where it should be.

Sir Reg did not accept that the structures were wrong; therefore, I am not sure where “hatchet man” McNarry is taking his leadership from on this issue, whether it is from David Cameron or Sir Reg Empey; but I am glad that Sir Reg Empey is playing his role and is being part of the Executive team. I trust that his influence will come to bear whenever the vote on this motion takes place this evening.

I also trust that my Lagan Valley colleague Basil McCrea — with whom I do not always agree, but who on this occasion is absolutely right about the need to work together — will use his influence to ensure that Mr McNarry does not go traipsing through the ‘No’ Lobby and divide the House as part of some petty political point-scoring exercise. If Mr McNarry were successful, there would be no money in April for any Department to spend. That is the logic that Mr McNarry has applied in this instance.

During these times, we are much better off being linked to the economy of the United Kingdom. Over the past 10 years, people have looked enviously southwards and have said how much better Northern Ireland would be doing if it were part of the great Celtic

tiger. I remember an advertisement for the ESSO oil company that used the slogan “put a tiger in your tank”.

Mr Wells: The Member is showing his age.

Mr Poots: I can barely remember the advert; I was in short trousers at that time. The slogan was “put a tiger in your tank”; however, the tank appears to have run empty for that particular tiger and could do with refuelling.

In January alone, there were as many people added to the unemployment list in the Republic of Ireland as there are on the unemployment list in Northern Ireland. That identifies the nature of the problems that exist in the Republic of Ireland. I do not wish that country ill, in any respect, because I know that Northern Ireland benefited significantly when the economy in the Republic was strong. However, I am glad that Northern Ireland is not closely attached to the Republic’s current economic problems — being trapped in the euro zone and losing serious numbers of jobs, which its Government’s finances are unable to withstand. We, in Northern Ireland, do well from our attachment to the United Kingdom’s economy, which, despite all its problems, is still the fifth largest in the world.

A Member spoke earlier about the difficulties in implementing the infrastructure programme and about how the Government had failed because they were supposed to spend £1·8 billion but only spent £1·4 billion. Of course, some people tend to overlook the realities of life and do not observe them particularly well. This year, £1·3 billion to £1·4 billion was supposed to be spent on infrastructure projects, which is an increase of £600 million from previous years. In reality, the figure of £1·8 billion was based on additional money being gained from the sale of assets.

Is any Member recommending that this Government sell off their assets now when the market is down? Any sensible, rational individual who has an asset and wishes, but is not being forced, to dispose of it will wait until the market levels out and there is a better opportunity to maximise the income that he will receive from the sale. Therefore, the headlong rush to sell that asset —

4.30 pm

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his logic, and I agree that it would not be prudent to sell assets at this time. However, does he agree that the miscalculation in relation to the Crossnacreevy site was beyond belief and had nothing to do with the fall in the market? All of a sudden, land that had been valued at £200 million was worth only a maximum of £6 million. Does the Member believe that that situation should and could have been avoided, and does he agree that it was an embarrassment to this Government?

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Mr Poots: I certainly think that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development got that badly wrong. One can put development value on a particular piece of land only when it has received approval for development. Therefore, valuing agricultural land by placing a development value on it is a fraud. The Agriculture Department has many questions to answer about that particular issue. I know that Mr Elliott will work with the other members of the Agriculture Committee to seek those answers, and I thank him for bringing that issue to the Floor today.

We need to maximise the value of our assets. At present, the sale of those assets would not be of any benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

There are many considerable projects that are of huge benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. I suggest to Mr McNarry that his colleagues would not be particularly happy with him if, for example, we were not to proceed with the redevelopment of the Ulster Hospital. I am sure that the good people of Strangford would reject Mr McNarry's idea to make those particular cuts. I am sure that his colleague Mr Gardiner would be less than happy if we did not proceed with developments at Craigavon Area Hospital.

I am sure that Mr McNarry's colleagues in Belfast would be less than happy if we did not proceed with the Belfast sewers project. I am sure that my Lagan Valley colleague Mr Basil McCrea would not want the £20 million project for the development of the South Eastern Regional College to be scrapped. Some of us worked very hard to secure that development.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for giving way. While he is on that theme, could he respond to the loss of the 6,000 potential jobs that would have been created by the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site? How does he feel about the loss of those construction jobs in his constituency?

Mr Poots: I will tell the Member exactly how I feel. Six thousand jobs are not enough. I have much higher expectations for the Maze development than a mere 6,000 jobs. I suggest that the deputy First Minister's office should tidy things up very quickly. If that was done, real developers could be brought in to develop that site very quickly. We will create substantially more than 6,000 jobs, and our economy will develop significantly, if we receive co-operation from that particular office.

Mr McNarry: How many jobs would the shrine have created?

Mr Poots: I hear the hatchet man talking again. He does not seem to like the fact that mention was made of his proposals to cut the development of the Ulster Hospital.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Poots: We will reject his proposals to cut the development of the Ulster Hospital.

Mr Wells: It is very hard to follow the barnstorming contribution from Mr Poots. I will be brief. A couple of issues have emerged that we, as an Assembly, should consider in the long term. I speak not as a representative of the Committee for Regional Development, but as someone who has sat on that Committee in this Assembly and in the first Assembly in 1999.

A theme that keeps coming back to bite the Committee — which the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott raised — is the vexed issue of the structural maintenance of roads. Unfortunately, a system has developed over the years in which structural maintenance has depended upon allocations in the monitoring rounds, and why that happened is obvious.

The very natures of the quarrying and road industries mean that contractors connect very quickly when money becomes available, and they fix roads at short notice. Therefore, it has become accepted that if the issue of structural maintenance is left to the monitoring rounds, the contractors will be ready, the tar will be hot, the engines will be revving, and they will go straight to a country road to fix it. The problem is that the wheels have come off the monitoring-round gravy train.

In the past four quarters, a consistent pattern has emerged, whereby the amount of available money has been reduced even further.

If ever the old grandmothers' phrase, "a stitch in time saves nine", was true, it is true about the structural maintenance of roads. We are reaching the stage at which some C-class roads in Northern Ireland undergo major repairs only once every 83 years. That means that many people in the Chamber will not be alive to see the one planned maintenance of some C-class roads in their areas. Those of us who do not drink or smoke, and who are vegetarians, have a greater chance of seeing it, but it may not happen for the rest. *[Laughter.]* Although I was making a humorous point, by using the present method for the structural maintenance of roads, we are storing up huge problems for our society.

I think that everyone in the Chamber will unite in congratulating the Minister for succeeding in bidding for large capital projects, and when they filter through the system, Northern Ireland's infrastructure will be radically changed. Already, dualling work has taken place on the main Dungannon to Ballygawley road; plans are well advanced for upgrading the Aughnacloy to Londonderry route, and that must be welcomed; and work on the Westlink is almost complete. All those projects will bring huge economic benefits to Northern Ireland.

However, there is little sense in having wonderful A-class trunk roads and motorways, if one encounters the reality of what has been happening when one drives into rural areas. I am not criticising any particular Department, because this state of affairs is a legacy of our history, but it is time that we had a fundamental review of our approach to the problem. The monitoring-round route will no longer suffice, and if we do not do something soon, some of our roads will simply collapse because of the lack of planned structural maintenance — or even a coating of stones.

We should have learned lessons from water. For years under direct rule, the water infrastructure was deprived of essential investment, and when the books were opened following devolution, they told an extremely sorry tale. We found that sewage treatment works throughout the country simply did not meet modern standards and, therefore, we have had to spend vast amounts of money to upgrade major sewage treatment works in places such as north Down, Portrush and east Antrim. Had we spent money at the time, as part of a sensible planned maintenance budget, we may well have avoided many of the huge problems that we have faced since devolution.

In the next couple of years, we must sit down and think strategically about what we intend to do about the problem. If we do not, as I said, we will cause enormous difficulties for future generations. It is no good passing on a totally decrepit road system, simply because we are not prepared to face up to the reality that we are not spending enough money. The last monitoring round was particularly disappointing, and if we continue spending at the present rate, there will not be enough money left in the kitty to carry out that work.

When the unemployment statistics were published recently, the headline figure was dramatic and worrying. However, it is interesting to note, and significant, that almost half the entire increase in unemployment in Northern Ireland was as a result of layoffs in the construction industry, and reviving that aspect of our economy, particularly road maintenance, is one way that we could quickly get people in Northern Ireland back to work. We could have men back on the roads within weeks. Other job-creation methods are much slower and longer term; however, in Northern Ireland, many thousands of capable road workers — mostly men — would be ready to start such work at the drop of a hat. Perhaps, we could kill two birds with one stone by bringing our roads up to an acceptable level and by —

Mr Shannon: Is that the first time that the Member has killed two birds?

Mr Wells: As someone who boasted about going to Argentina to kill 8,000 pigeons, that statement is a bit rum.

Mr Shannon: I did not boast about killing 8,000 pigeons; it was rumoured that I killed 8,000 birds.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member has not informed the House whether he killed more than 8,000 pigeons or fewer, but, if I was an Argentinian pigeon, I would be extremely worried if I saw him coming through Buenos Aires again.

We need to grapple with this problem. It is set in stone in the incoming Budget, but we need to get together as an Assembly and work out how to solve the problem in the long term. Should we regard planned maintenance as infrastructure, and access SIB funds? Is there some radical way that we can get this sorted out? If not, I predict that rural areas will face big problems in the future. In 10 or 15 years' time, we will look back and ask why we did not tackle the problem before it was too late.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee for the Environment has considered the Department's submission for the February monitoring round, and it has a major concern that it has identified to the Minister. The Department of the Environment has identified road safety as an area in which it can seek reductions in its budget. The Committee has asked for more information on the detail. Proposals include a reduction in spend for road safety education officers, and members have been led to believe that that is due to a deliberate delay in recruitment to save money.

Members are concerned about the implications of that, especially since it concerns the safety of children. Should we be making any cuts or postponing spending in that area? Can we be confident that there will not be an increase in the numbers of children and young people dying on our roads or sustaining injuries, as a consequence of that money-saving exercise and decision?

When bidding for funds, the correlation between education officers and child safety is made by the Department. The converse, therefore, naturally suggests that reductions in that area will have a detrimental effect. The Committee was so concerned about the issue that it felt unable to endorse the submission to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The concerns did not stop there.

The Committee was also concerned about the ongoing problem to which it was alerted regarding the reduction in fees from planning applications and a further bid by the Department to fill the resultant gap. A similar proposal was presented to the Committee at the last monitoring round, and members are asking how long the public purse can be called upon to make up the difference in the shortfall.

Members also wanted to be informed of what the longer-term implications would be for personnel in the Planning Service if — or when — adjustments in budget forecasts have to be made to allow for that reduced demand.

The Committee for the Environment noted with consternation the discrepancy between what appears to be an overstuffed planning unit and a shortage of road safety education officers. The Committee sees that as something of a no-brainer.

Concerns about the February monitoring submission did not stop there. It seems that the Department is in a position to return over £500,000 as a result of a reduction in environmental protection spend and farming-conservation practices. Considering that agriculture schemes are so readily oversubscribed when administered by other Departments, members wanted to know why there seemed to be an inability to spend the money that was budgeted by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Were farmers unaware that the money was available to them? How were such schemes advertised? How were farmers advised of them? How were they delivered? Those are some key questions to which the Committee is seeking answers.

The Committee learned also that there had been slippage in the electronic planning information for citizens (e-PIC) project that had been so eagerly awaited. In previous monitoring submissions, that had been attributed to difficulties in recruitment. However, in this February monitoring round, the Committee was told that in its efforts to save money, the Department had sought deliberately to delay planned expenditure on filling vacancies where there had been no contractual obligations to pay in this financial year. We will have to wait for a while before the e-PIC project becomes fully and completely alive.

I reiterate the Committee's overriding concern that in a bid to save money in the short term, the Department is — and will be — putting children's lives at risk in the longer term.

As we come to the end of this budgetary period and make preparations for the next one, I urge the Department to ensure that any monetary sacrifices that are made now do not result in lives being sacrificed tomorrow.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, sin a bhfuil le rá agam.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; that is all that I have to say on behalf of the Committee.

4.45 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I am pleased to speak in the debate. The Chairperson of the Committee spoke earlier and outlined a number of the issues that the Committee raised, but perhaps I can place a slightly different emphasis on some points.

Committee members noted the proposal that the Department for Employment and Learning made to DFP, and I have composed some brief remarks about the Department for Employment and Learning's reduced requirements. In this monitoring round, Committee

members noted that underspend for particular projects and programmes was not large. In fact, underspend appeared to be comparatively small-scale when one considered the total amount that was allocated to the Department. However, the percentage that the underspend represents in specific budgets for projects or programmes can be vital.

Committee members have already established that shortfalls in spending on demand-led programmes — skills and preparation-for-work programmes — are a result of problems associated with time lags, ahead of when involvement in those programmes became obligatory for eligible clients. The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned that point in her contribution.

As a case in point, in this monitoring round, the Department for Employment and Learning is confirming a reduced requirement of circa £700,000. That is because take-up of the New Deal/Steps to Work programme has not reached the levels that were forecast. The programme is not mandatory for those aged 18 to 24, and it is not possible for people in that age bracket to enter the programme before they have been registered for jobseeker's allowance for a minimum of six months. For those aged over 25, that period is 18 months. Committee members have previously queried the requirement for an 18-month qualifying period.

Given that the Committee has queried that time lag, and bearing in mind that the numbers of people who are out of work has shot up, it might be time for the Minister to give that matter consideration. There is every expectation that funding levels for that scheme and other demand-led skills-training programmes, which are directly related to the increasing levels of unemployment, will need to be increased. Committee members wish to draw that to Minister Dodds's attention, and we implore him to be accommodating with funding for those essential schemes when demand for them increases.

Committee members have emphasised to departmental officials the need for a highly skilled workforce and for investment in the upskilling and reskilling of all our young people, and, indeed, all those who need retraining. Failure to do that will mean that we are not ready for better economic times, when we shall need a well-qualified, motivated and highly skilled workforce, which will be attractive not only to foreign investors but to the most progressive of local firms, as they exploit business opportunities for growth.

Those skills gaps cannot be allowed to continue — they must be addressed. I believe that I am right in saying that Committee members will support bids that the Department submits for funds for such training programmes. We ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bear that in mind when it comes to the

future upskilling and reskilling of the Northern Ireland labour force.

I will now take off my Deputy Chairperson's hat and speak as a member of the Committee. It is probably the case that the worst-hit sector of industry is the construction sector. Hundreds of apprentices have now been paid off and, as such, are unable to complete their apprenticeships. Unfortunately, the company fostering scheme that Minister Empey developed has not been taken up by the sector. We will lose those young people from our skilled workforce if they are not given the opportunity to gain their full apprenticeship qualifications. Members have expressed concerns on that matter, which the Minister must address. Funding will be required to deal with that.

Again, I implore the Finance Minister to consider funding for the increased quality of apprenticeship schemes overall. I have no doubt that when the Committee completes its work on the review of apprenticeship training, it will recommend a higher quality of apprenticeship training through every sector of industry.

The Committee for Employment and Learning has always taken a responsible position in its relationship with the Department, and it will, I believe, be supportive of the Department in its work over the coming months.

Mr Weir: I am, possibly, the last Member, other than the Minister, to speak in the debate. At this late stage in the afternoon, it is difficult to provide anything that is new, inspiring or interesting, so I shall try my best to stick to that promise and bring nothing that is new, inspiring or interesting to the debate. Indeed, a heckler on my right has said that that has never stopped me in the past.

Not only towards the end of a debate is it difficult to introduce anything new, to those who have been involved in Budget debates — and, along with several colleagues in the Chamber, I have been involved in some of the Budget or finance debates since about 1999 — there is a tremendous sense of déjà vu about the subject. Mr Wells, one of the previous Members to speak, was probably debating the subject when there were pounds, shillings and pence.

However, for those of us who have been involved in Budget processes over the past 10 years or so, there is often a great similarity in these debates. Despite our current financial position, I suspect that if one plucked this debate, or one of the other debates, at random at any stage over the past 10 years and said that it was today's debate, plenty of the same issues would be coming up again and again.

Not unsurprisingly, and with a fair level of merit, we heard representatives of the various Committees read the key demands of their Department, and it is perfectly

reasonable for Committee Chairpersons to defend their bailiwicks. One of the problems of any Finance Minister is that there is rarely a choice between good spend and bad spend, or between things that are completely unworthy and things that have a full degree of merit. Quite often, it is a choice between expenditure on various good projects. Therefore, the position of the various Committee Chairpersons is understandable.

However, we have seen a few novel actions today. As regards competing for priorities, we have seen the need to have everything focused on a business or a right-wing agenda, a need to have health as a top priority, and a need to have child poverty and tackling the poverty of the lowest in our society as a priority. Those competing priorities can be found in the speeches of simply the Ulster Unionist Party, who are still not quite sure on the one hand whether they are with the "Cameroons", who are willing to slash and burn everything, or whether they are in the Fred Cobain mode, trying to defend an old Labour-type agenda.

Unfortunately, we have also seen a high level of misunderstanding in the debate, particularly from the Ulster Unionist Benches. The debate is not about the future long-term direction of the Budget. There will be an opportunity tomorrow to debate the wider bits of the Budget and for the longer-term position to be examined. Today's debate, however, is about ensuring that money goes to front line services. When the tap gets turned off on public money, those Members who will oppose today's debate must tell us how they will explain that to all those front line services that have not been given enough money to survive physically, and I look forward to that.

Of course, we do not always have the calm, erudite presentation of an alternative way forward in the Budget debate, as was done by Mr McNarry, and today was no exception.

Instead, we got some "stuntery", whereby, at one stage, an attempt was made to table an amendment to leave 1p in the Consolidated Fund. Some of us with long memories will remember the great cry of the now Liberal Democrats in the 1980s for a 1p increase on income tax. Suddenly, there was a massive range of things that they could do with that 1p increase — it must have been spent several times over. That 1p increase was spent on education, health, and so on, yet even the now Liberal Democrats did not have the inventiveness to spend a single penny over and over again, à la Mr McNarry. We must acknowledge his inventiveness when it comes to fiscal responsibility.

I heard mention of the black hole. Not only do some Members seem obsessed with the world of finance but others have become amateur astronomers in their spare time, and they appear to be spotting black holes all over the place. Let us be honest: on inspection, the

argument does not hold up. Yes, there is an examination of wish lists of £1 billion in future expenditure. Again, I must point out that that matter is not directly relevant to today's business. To deal with the issue, a number of those wish lists relate to energy costs, job evaluation and departmental prioritisations, but that is not expenditure to which we have committed. Consequently, they are potential future pressures.

I am sure that if given enough money, all of us involved in drawing up the Budget could spend it on worthy causes two or three times over. However, that does not constitute a wish list. As everybody knows, we are living in tough financial circumstances. Those who seek a radical redistribution of the Budget are very quick to tell us where they think things are wrong and where they believe vast additional amounts of money should be spent, yet there is silence when they are asked to identify which programmes and departmental budgets are to be cut to finance those additional investments. For example, should £500 million be taken out of the health budget to fund those programmes? Again, when that question is asked, we are met with silence.

I will now speak about capital investment. Some £1.4 billion in net capital is projected to be spent. The difference between that projection and earlier projections is that it is net of capital receipts. Those who decry the £1.4 billion of capital investment should remember that that figure represents a record spend. It was only as recently as 2003 that the amount spent on capital receipts was £676 million, which is less than half the projected spend now. Indeed, last year, the figure was £1.1 billion. Again, what we are witnessing represents not simply an increase or a record level of expenditure but very much a step change and a sea change.

It is abundantly clear that all Departments must examine their budgets to ensure that their capital expenditure is right and that projects are not being unnecessarily delayed. In particular, those Departments with large capital projects must ensure that projects are being progressed as quickly as they should be. A distinction must be made between capital projects that have been put on the long finger and those that will be progressed in the next financial year — the delay of a month or two or into the next financial year is not a major problem.

It is important that the spring Supplementary Estimates fulfil the Executive's priorities of putting the economy and business first and of ensuring that front line services are delivered. I urge Members to think about what they are voting for in this debate. Moreover, I ask those who oppose the motion to consider whether they want to stop front line services being delivered to all our constituents. I support the motion.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The debate has been wide-ranging. I was going to say that

it was a pleasure to sit through it all, but that might be gilding the lily a little. Many issues have been raised, although, as Peter Weir said, some were not always relevant to the Supply resolutions under discussion.

Some Members touched on the wider economic and Budget considerations that they felt were important to reflect upon and discuss. In the course of my closing remarks, I hope to try to address some of those issues. However, to understand that, a certain level of financial, or at least numerical, literacy will be required. Although that will rule out one or two Members, most of those who spoke will be able to follow the gist of the Budget procedure. I gave up long ago on certain Members having a rational approach to financial matters.

5.00 pm

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton, confirmed that there has been appropriate consultation with the Committee on the spending plans outlined in the motions. The Supply resolutions and the Budget Bill provide legal authority for the expenditure of moneys for this year and for the first couple of months of 2010. Therefore, when we list the projects that would be stopped if they had their way, those Members who announced that they will vote against the motions will have to explain to everyone in their constituencies how such action will help with the restoration of economic confidence in Northern Ireland.

I will address one or two of the other crackpot schemes that were announced by Mr McNarry, who I think is the official finance spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. He mentioned freezing the pay of public-sector workers. That was slipped into his speech, and I will examine that in more detail shortly.

The House should be familiar with — although I know that some Members are not — the logistical need for the Budget Bill to have accelerated passage and to receive Royal Assent by 31 March 2009. I appreciate the assistance of the Committee in that matter. I assure Members that strict conditions have been applied to the headroom built into the Supplementary Estimates. Any resources allocated at this stage will be used only for the agreed purpose, and virement approval will not be given later to cover excess spending in any other areas.

Mr Hamilton raised the issue of the review of in-year monitoring. Although the most significant spending allocations to Northern Ireland Departments are made as part of the Budget process, it is equally important that there is sufficient flexibility to make changes subsequently as part of the in-year monitoring process. Although the current process has generally worked well, it is essential that we seek to continually improve all of our programmes and processes, which is why my Department is reviewing the in-year monitoring process. That review will examine in particular the

bureaucratic burden on Departments as well as how engagement with Committees can be improved. The review will be completed by the end of the financial year, and I look forward to the outcome of the Committee's deliberations on that matter.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, Sue Ramsey, mentioned more funding for demand-led skills programmes. I agree with her and the deputy Chairperson of that Committee, Robin Newton, about the need to continue supporting the local economy and workers, particularly with regard to skills. As was mentioned, we need to be ready for the time when the upturn in the economy arrives. It is very difficult to predict the level of funding required for demand-led programmes, which is why the quarterly monitoring process is so important in providing the Executive with the flexibility to respond to those issues. Some people decry that process, but at the same time make pleas for extra resources to be freed up from money not spent elsewhere in the in-year monitoring process. The Department for Employment and Learning will want to monitor funding requirements for programmes as we move into the next financial year.

Sue Ramsey and Stephen Farry both mentioned capital projects. Given the nature of such schemes, there will always be some slippage in capital projects, which is another reason why we urge all Departments to identify slippage early in the year and surrender it as reduced requirements, thus enabling the resources to be reallocated. Any acceleration of capital projects is dependent on the level of resources available in that year. Again, that is basic financial common sense, which will be lost on one or two Members. However, I make that point for the benefit of most Members.

As part of the recent December monitoring round, the Executive agreed to avail of the opportunity provided by the Treasury in London to accelerate £9.4 million of capital investment from 2010-11 into the 2008-09 financial year. Representatives of the construction industry in particular welcomed that. If the Executive so decides, there is also an opportunity to accelerate £76 million into 2009-2010 from 2010-11. However, it must be borne in mind that we need to take all factors into account when making that decision and that acceleration of funding has implications in terms of the year in which it is being accelerated from. However, we will keep that matter under review.

Some Members raised the issues of Crossnacreevy and Workplace 2010. In the light of changed circumstances, the position in both cases is being reviewed before recommendations are made on how to proceed. Edwin Poots made the point about Crossnacreevy. It is important that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development takes that issue on board as a matter of priority. It is a matter essentially for that Department.

I will now turn to a number of other matters that were raised regarding the Executive's capital investment plans. As Peter Weir, Simon Hamilton and other Members pointed out, the Executive's plans regarding capital investment will be higher this year than they were last year. In fact, they will be double what they were under direct rule. Therefore, when we talk about ensuring that jobs are protected, particularly those in the construction industry, it is important to remember the level of investment this year and the level that is planned not only next year and the year after, but over the 10-year period of the investment strategy.

If we did not have that strategy in place, everyone would ask what we are doing to put more money into capital expenditure. References were made to what Scotland and Wales are doing, but, in proportion, Northern Ireland is doing what Scotland and Wales are doing. In fact, when I met the Finance Ministers for Scotland and Wales, we agreed on the commonality of our approach to investment in capital projects. In fact, we were going further with issues such as rates relief to help hard-pressed families. There was a large degree of commonality, for instance, on the issue of ensuring that Government receipts and invoices were paid as quickly as possible, in order to ensure that there was cash flow to industry and to businesses.

Given that Mr McNarry raised the issue of a review of budget allocations, it surprised me that he then opposed moves by the Executive to reprioritise funding to projects that will have the largest immediate impact on the economy. Another matter of concern, which I raised at the outset, was his suggestion about public-sector pay freezes. I am sure that the 200,000 public-sector workers in Northern Ireland, as well as shopkeepers and local firms who rely on those salaries for business, would have been shocked when they heard the suggestion from the official spokesman —

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: No, you have had your say. I am taking my opportunity now to reply.

Mr McNarry: Are you going to tell fibs?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: They will be shocked at his call for a public-sector wage freeze. *[Interruption.]*

You had plenty of time to speak, Mr McNarry. You will now be able to listen to my response.

Mr McNarry: But you are not telling it right.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Calm down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Does the Member not realise — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to withdraw his remark.

Mr McNarry: Whatever the remark was that gave offence to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, I withdraw it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It has to be said that during a time of downturn in the private sector, public-sector wages provide essential support, and that a pay freeze would have serious consequences for the economy. I do not know whether the rest of the Member's party agree that hard-working public-sector workers and their families who have experienced rising costs over the past year should be faced or threatened with a further penalty at this time — *[Interruption.]*

The Member is getting all excited now, because we are dealing with some of the points that he made. We remember Mr McNasty — sorry, Mr McNarry — dubbed “the hatchet man” by my colleague, or “Slasher” McNarry, was at odds with Mr McCrea on this issue, and he was clearly at odds with Mr Cobain and Sir Reg Empey on this issue.

When Reg Empey was asked on ‘The Politics Show’ a week-and-a-half ago, he made it clear that there should be no fundamental reprioritisation of the Programme for Government — he defended it.

Mr McNarry was sacked by Reg Empey as Chief Whip. We know his views — he talked about policing and justice. He once said that it had to be recognised that there would be a Sinn Féin Minister for policing and justice. He went on to say that he did not understand the use of the word “easement”, as though it was a new invention that we rely on. Then Mr Cobain spoke, and he talked freely about easements, so he knew all about easements and reduced requirements. However, to Mr McNarry, it appeared to be a new concept. He really does need to get a bit of financial literacy into his head. The black hole that is in his imagination needs to be filled with a bit of financial accounting understanding.

Just before Christmas, Mr McNarry came out with a brilliant suggestion. He has never since repeated it in this House, or anywhere else. He came out with the idea that we should have what he called an “equity release scheme”. In this brilliant crackpot scheme, he said that we should tot up all that the Executive and Government hold in valuations of assets in Northern Ireland. We should then seek from the UK Government an immediate interest-free advance. Later, if the valuations rose, we would repay the loan and pocket the rest. It was laughed to scorn in Treasury, and I have not heard it mentioned since. What has happened to that idea? Has it disappeared into the black hole? We have never heard him mention it since, yet it was put forward as a means of trying to rescue our economy. That is the level of financial literacy that was on display.

Then Mr McNarry was going to table an amendment to knock a penny off the Budget. That was his solution.

His amendment was not even accepted. It beggars belief that, at a time of serious economic consequences, Mr McNarry should make such a ludicrous, pathetic, laughable suggestion, instead of making serious suggestions.

Mr McNarry said that we rely on the hope that there will be inefficiencies in the system, in order to meet pressures and so on. He should have a word with his colleague Reg Empey, Minister for Employment and Learning. If Mr McNarry believes that reduced requirements are inefficiencies, then Reg is one of the most inefficient Ministers. The fact is, however, that reduced requirements come about because of the exact opposite of inefficiency. Very often, there are reduced requirements from Departments because they have been more efficient than they would have been otherwise. Sometimes, that is because Departments have overbid for funds in the first place. Sometimes, it is because of changed circumstances and money cannot be spent as originally intended and must be returned. That happens in all Departments. However, to Mr McNarry, this is mind-boggling stuff, unknown to him — though it is known to all the other Chairpersons and representatives of his party.

Mr McNarry's view runs totally contrary to what his colleague Mr Beggs said when a statement was made about the December monitoring round. Mr Beggs said that in extending the level of overcommitment and then dealing with it through the in-year monitoring process, the Minister:

“will be implementing one of the ideas that was suggested by the Ulster Unionist Party in its submission on the draft Budget”. — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 36, p115, col 2].*

So, Mr McNarry is at odds with his party colleague Mr Beggs on that very issue.

The other issue that has to be dealt with is the proposal to reprioritise the Budget. It has been acknowledged by several Members — and I have acknowledged it as well — that during the in-year monitoring process, changes are made to the Budget. Additional funds are put in various areas in response to bids. For example, the fuel-credit payment is a change to the Budget. Mr Durkan acknowledged that we make changes as we go along; of course we do. However, what is suggested by those who put forward the idea of reprioritisation is that we have a fundamental look at what is in the baseline allocation of each Department.

5.15 pm

That can only mean taking money out of one Department and putting it into another. That is a fundamental attack on budgets such as that of the Health Department and the Education Department. There is no other way to find the money to fundamentally reprioritise than through reallocation among Departments. Do Mr McNarry and others who put forward that

suggestion live in a parallel universe? They need to get it into their heads that the Budget has been fully allocated along departmental baselines.

Almost half of the Budget goes to the Health Department. Has Mr McNarry asked his colleague the Health Minister whether he is prepared to give up any of that money? Mr McGimpsey has made it clear, in the Executive and elsewhere, that he wants more money. I have listened to representatives of the various Committees say that they want more money. Once again, Mr McNarry is clearly at odds with his party colleagues and with other Assembly Members.

Apart from his crackpot idea of mortgaging Government assets — including, no doubt, this Building — to try to secure an interest-free loan from the Treasury, Mr McNarry is silent. Importantly, Basil McCrea made the point that the threat emanates from Whitehall. In his pre-Budget report, the Chancellor of the Exchequer signalled that there could be £5 million of so-called efficiencies; the difference is that he does not intend to plough those back into spending. I have spoken to my Welsh and Scottish counterparts and we intend to resist that; we have made it clear that we will raise that matter with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. When I challenged Mr McCrea, he agreed that we should oppose that. However, when I challenged him to oppose what his own party — the Conservatives — will be doing, with cuts that go further than Labour's and that will begin in April 2010, there was silence.

Mr McNarry talked about a black hole in the Budget. That black hole will be created by Whitehall changing the allocations under the block grant. Mr McNarry's new leader, David Cameron, is proposing even greater cuts to the Northern Ireland block grant than Labour, and both proposals are unacceptable. Will Mr McNarry and his party oppose those cuts? It is very clear that they are in bed with those who are going to lead an even greater attack on services than anything that he could even imagine. Mr McNarry has nothing to say because, unless he decides to renege, he is part and parcel of that attack. He is at odds with his party.

Mr McNarry has spoken up and railed against those who urge a full-scale line-up with the Tories' views on the Orange Order, etc, and that has caused him some difficulty. However, as financial spokesman, Mr McNarry will have to answer a question: does he agree with the Conservative Party attack on funding in the block grant — an attack that will go even further than the Labour Party proposals? Both proposals are unacceptable and will be opposed by my party and, I hope, by all parties in the Executive.

As far as financial literacy is concerned, I do not hold out any hope whatsoever that Mr McNarry will learn anything as a result of the debate; however, I hope that

other Members in his party, particularly his party leader, will be aware of the inconsistencies in his approach.

I wish to deal very quickly with a number of matters that Declan O'Loan raised. Mr O'Loan talked about funding for PFI projects coming from the banking sector and from PPPs; however, as Mr O'Loan knows, PFI deals account for less than 25% of the total investment strategy for Northern Ireland. If there are specific problems in PPP delivery, we will look at alternative methods of ensuring that contracts are fulfilled. That could include working with alternative banking consortia or delivery through conventional procurement vehicles.

Mr O'Loan was concerned that the £900 million was not new money; however, at no point have I said that it was.

However, in minimising the impact of the additional cost pressures that face the Executive, the package of support that is provided by the Treasury is of equal value to the funds that are available for local public services. That included £800 million to cover the deferment of water charges and £100 million for wider pressures, including equal pay. If that support had not been forthcoming, the Executive would have been faced with the option of addressing those pressures from a reduction in existing departmental budgets. That money was secured to ensure that that would not have to happen.

Stephen Farry and Iris Robinson raised issues on the approach that some Members have taken to the Budget Bill. The suggestion that some Members would go through the Lobbies to vote against the Supplementary Estimates and the Budget Bill is incredible. I will be clear on what a vote against those would do. The Members who talk about a black hole in the Budget would immediately create an unimaginable abyss, because no funding would be available for any front line services anywhere in Northern Ireland from 1 April 2009. Those Members have put that forward as responsible economic policy at a time of economic recession and hardship. That is the level of responsibility from certain quarters.

I note the criticisms that the Alliance Party and the SDLP made and the issues that they took, but at least they have the responsibility to realise that such a crazy approach would be totally detrimental to the interests of the people of Northern Ireland. I leave it to the Ulster Unionist Party to decide whether it is prepared to be led by Mr McNarry in that way or whether it intends to assert some degree of financial responsibility after all.

Mr Farry mentioned the shortfall in capital expenditure. It is, of course, the primary responsibility of Ministers and Departments, working with the Strategic Investment Board, to implement the Executive's capital investment programme, rather than that of the Department of

Finance and Personnel. However, it must be recognised that, as house prices have fallen, external factors have meant that delivery against the £1.8 billion in gross capital expenditure plans is no longer a meaningful indicator of performance by Departments.

As Simon Hamilton, Peter Weir and others have pointed out, the net capital expenditure plans of £1.3 billion, which Northern Ireland Departments will not only meet but will exceed comfortably according to the latest forecast, is a better measure. That compares with last year, when Departments underspent by some £300 million against net capital investment plans.

It is important to put on record the level of expenditure and the sorts of projects that are being funded as a result of the investment strategy and the capital investment that is being made this year. Seven major projects are being funded in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, totalling some £265 million. That includes developments at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the Ulster Hospital, the Downe Hospital, Portadown Community Treatment and Care Centre, Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the regional adolescent child psychiatric unit. That is only a number of the projects that are taking place in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Roads Service has spent some £125 million on the Westlink and the widening of the M2. The A4 from Dungannon to Ballygawley has received £115 million of investment. At Newry, the A1 has received £180 million. Northern Ireland Water has received £127 million to spend on the Belfast sewer project, and Northern Ireland Water has 10 waste-water treatment projects under construction with an aggregated value of approximately £89 million. I could go on to list the projects that are being carried out by the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department for Social Development, and so on.

All that points to the fact that a considerable amount of investment is being made in capital expenditure this year. That is expected to grow next year and extend into the following year, 2010-11. It is essential that those projects proceed and are not derailed in any way. Therefore, in December 2008, I announced that any projects that were using the frameworks that were being held up by legal challenges will move forward by conventional procurement. I said that that would allow £115 million worth of projects to go to the market. Between December and 1 April, capital projects worth £400 million will go to market.

When we talk about what is happening elsewhere, about fiscal stimuli and all the rest, it must be recognised that £18 billion worth of investment — over the period of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland — represents a significant boost to our construction industry,

and lays the groundwork and foundation for a modern infrastructure for the people of Northern Ireland in the years ahead. Capital expenditure is projected to be some 26.4% higher than last year, providing a significant benefit to the construction industry and the delivery of better public services as part of the Programme for Government.

Stephen Farry raised a point about the current economic downturn. As was pointed out by other Members — including Ian Paisley Jnr — the economy was, and continues to be, the first priority of the Programme for Government. Sir Reg Empey was right to say that no fundamental reprioritisation or review is required, because the Programme for Government has it right.

I know that Sir Reg is away, but he might be surprised to hear what was said by some Members from his own Benches. In an economic downturn, growing the economy must be put first, which is what the Programme for Government does. As I have said, that is consistent with the approach of devolved Administrations elsewhere. I will continue to work with colleagues in the coming months to explore every possible opportunity, and to provide as much support as possible to struggling families and hard-pressed businesses, as the precise impact of the economic downturn continues to unravel.

I believe that the Budget puts in place a strong foundation of support for families and businesses in Northern Ireland over the next three years. That support includes the decision to freeze domestic regional rates over the Budget period, which marks a clear break from direct rule when rates bills increased by an annual average of around 10%.

Over the past six months, further measures were put in place to support local families. In December, I announced a package of measures in response to the economic downturn, including the £150 fuel credit payment; and £20 million for the farm nutrient management scheme, which — as Tom Elliott and other Members pointed out — has proved extremely useful by benefiting the agricultural sector and providing valuable work for construction firms. Help has also been given to schools, roads maintenance and public transport works.

Measures that we announced about the small business rates relief scheme, on which further details will be forthcoming shortly and which will come into play from 2010, have been widely welcomed by businesses, particularly small- and medium-sized enterprises. The decision to freeze interest rates for businesses will also help them at this difficult time. It is essential that we do everything in our power, within our limited remit, to protect as many jobs as possible, and to help businesses. We brought forward measures to help councils in relation to rates relief, and introduced planning reforms. I am delighted that planning changes to PPS 21 announced

by the Minister, and other planning reforms, will speed up the planning process.

The issues of increased efficiency savings and the risk of Departments not achieving targets were raised. I believe that Mr Basil McCrea spoke about the £5 billion in 2010-11 that was mentioned in the Chancellor's pre-Budget report. I already referred to that in challenging other Members in Mr McCrea's party to recognise that the threat comes not so much from within the Assembly Budget than from outside with regard to what the Treasury plans to do to the block grant if it proceeds with the £5 billion in efficiency savings for Whitehall Departments for 2010-11 — and what the Conservative Opposition plans to do to make that situation even worse. We intend to challenge that, and I hope that we will have the support of all parties.

A number of other matters were raised. Mr Durkan questioned the delay in investment-delivery plans. We must focus on what is important, which is that Departments deliver their planned capital investment programmes. The latest forecast outturn figures from Departments for this year indicate almost full spend on net capital investment, which demonstrates that Departments are delivering on their capital programmes.

5.30 pm

Mr McElduff raised the issue of the multi-sports stadium. I must remind him and other Members that the accounting officers in both OFMDFM and DCAL concluded, as he well knows, that a value-for-money case had not been demonstrated for the scale of public expenditure that was involved in those proposals.

Transfer of fiscal powers was also raised in the debate. In order to consider the case for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly to have greater fiscal power, people who espouse such a view must first set out clearly what they want to do with that power. Would they raise taxes and thus place further burdens on local families and businesses? Would they reduce taxation and thus starve public services of funding? The simple fact is that Northern Ireland benefits significantly by billions of pounds each year from being part of a fiscal union with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is the case now more than ever, as the experience of smaller nations throughout Europe has shown.

I accept the point that has been made by several Members about the challenging times to come in the years ahead. One of the strategic stocktake's aims was to highlight all of the pressures that are faced by the Executive. I have been clear and open about our financial position. The debate has emphasised external factors — and one of its benefits has been the acceptance of them by several Members — particularly the threat that is posed to the Executive as a result of the announcement in the pre-Budget report of Whitehall

efficiencies. We must take close recognition of that matter and challenge it at every opportunity. I look forward to working with parties and Members on those issues in a reasonable and mature way.

Mr Durkan raised the matter of reshaping economic policy. The fact is that, throughout the world, there is no clear agreement on the correct approach to economic interventions. He mentioned the ongoing review by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, chaired by Professor Richard Barnett of the University of Ulster, which will be important in setting the longer-term economic development strategy. I agree that the Government's role is to support local businesses and not to try to control the economy. That must be considered with regard to the Executive's role at this time.

The detrimental impact of rising unemployment on individuals and their families and the threat of job losses have been stressed during the debate. There was some suggestion that Invest Northern Ireland's approach to foreign direct investment (FDI) should be reconsidered. It must be ensured that local, indigenous firms have long-term growth. As Members are aware, the immediate need for job creation must often be focused on FDI from larger firms.

The Bain Review was also mentioned — it was debated on 21 October 2008 — and I am currently considering its consequences. The matter will be brought to the Executive for discussion in the near future.

The Chairperson of the Health Committee, Iris Robinson, mentioned the first call on savings by that Department. It was provided with the dispensation as part of the 2007 Budget process: it would receive the first £20 million in allocations as part of the in-year monitoring process. To date, £15 million has already been allocated to the Department during the current year. I am sure that the Health Minister would be extremely interested to hear members of his own party talk about reprioritisation of the Budget when the clear implications of that for departmental baselines is that that money would have to come largely out of the health budget.

As regards structural maintenance, several Members raised the issue of continued maintenance of the roads network. That is important, not only to sustain the quality of that important element of the public infrastructure, but also for the support that it offers the local construction industry. It is for that reason that the Executive agreed an additional allocation for structural maintenance as part of the 2008-09 in-year monitoring process. Going further, the structural-maintenance budget will increase by 28.6% in 2009-2010, while the overall roads capital-investment programme will be 77.5% greater than in 2007-08.

Of course, that will only be the case if Members decide not to reprioritise and take money out of that Department to put it into another Department. However, none of the Members who talked about the issue suggested where the money should be taken from.

Mr Simpson, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, raised the issue of the shortfall in capital receipts from house and land sales and the impact on the housing programme. We are fully aware of the pressures facing the housing budget due to the shortfall in house and land sale receipts. The additional allocation of £20 million during the 2008-09 in-year monitoring process is evidence that we recognise those pressures.

It must be recognised that a number of Departments face pressure. The Chairpersons of the various Committees — for Employment and Learning, Education and so on — all said that the needs of their Departments must be recognised in the allocation of any available in-year funds. Bearing in mind all the competing bids, it is important that all those matters are considered by the Executive as a whole. However, ensuring that jobs are maintained and created in the construction industry in Northern Ireland remains a priority.

I am pleased that the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association was allocated £15 million grant funding this year. Added to external finance, that sum will be sufficient to ensure that the target of 500 applicants can be met. I am sorry that I do not have time to deal with all the issues that were raised during this wide-ranging debate.

Tom Elliott spoke about the farm nutrient management scheme. I re-emphasise that there is no link between the sale of the Crossnacreevy site and the availability of funding for the farm nutrient management scheme. Any shortfall in funds that results from the sale of land at Crossnacreevy will impact on the Department's budget for 2010-11, but the farm nutrient management scheme is an issue for 2008-09. The importance that we place on the farm nutrient management scheme was indicated by the £20 million allocation that was made in December. Our ability to respond to any request for additional funding is entirely reliant on the level of resources at our disposal.

Dominic Bradley talked about the pressures in education. The pressures that have been identified in the Department of Education, and the other Departments, all need to be assessed carefully. For example, one bid related to £18 million in energy costs. However, that must be questioned in the light of the dramatic fall in the price of crude oil. I welcome Mr Bradley's view that the Department must look first to its own £2 billion budget and the 6% increase in funding that will be available next year.

Mr Neeson raised the issue of the green economy. It is important that local firms are encouraged to take advantage of all possible growth opportunities — including those relating to sustainability — but that must be based on business potential. Local firms know their own businesses better than civil servants do, and we should not tell them where or how to invest.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, Mr McGlone, talked about the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland. The funding mechanism of road safety committees has been amended following a recent review, but that funding is not being cut. Instead, funding will be directed away from central administration and into front line road-safety activities that will be carried out by local committees.

Robin Newton raised the issue of the economic downturn's impact on apprenticeships. I welcome the actions that are being taken by the Department of Employment and Learning to allow apprentices to complete their training. However, I share Mr Newton's disappointment about the number of apprentices, who were training under the apprenticeship programme, who have been made redundant in 2008.

This has been an important debate. I thank Members for their contributions; some of them have been enlightening, and others have not been so enlightening. I also thank Members for the contribution that they make through the Committees, correspondence and questions posed in the Assembly and on other occasions. It is important that we debate such matters and that we deal robustly with views that clearly fall short of the challenges of the times.

In that respect, some Members' suggestions are out of kilter with financial reality. Most Members appreciate the basic concepts of budgeting and balancing the books. Other Members do not. I question the level of financial responsibility of Members who request additional spending without any clear steer as to the source of that funding.

The Executive and the Assembly carry a heavy responsibility to manage public expenditure in Northern Ireland prudently on the behalf of taxpayers. We must face future challenges with finite resources, and, therefore, it is essential that the Assembly passes the resolutions. Members who vote against the resolutions will, in effect, vote to remove Departments' authority and ability to spend money. That is unthinkable in the current difficult economic times. Indeed, it is, in any circumstances, unthinkable to prevent hospitals, schools, housing and other areas from receiving the public money that they require in order to provide front line services for families and businesses. I question the financial responsibility and political maturity of any

Member who votes against such a proposition. I commend the resolutions to the House.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Questions are put, I remind Members that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £12,485,717,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 and that total resources, not exceeding £15,730,008,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2009 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 2(c) and 3(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2008-09 that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £5,618,965,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £7,078,596,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31 March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2009-10 document that was laid before the Assembly on 9 February 2009.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr Dodds): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA 5/08], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2009 and 2010; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2009 and 2010; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2009.

5.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That constitutes the Bill's First Stage, and it shall now be printed.

I inform Members that the Speaker has received written notification from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel to confirm that the Committee is satisfied that, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), appropriate consultation has taken place with the Committee on the public-expenditure proposals contained in the Bill, and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated-passage procedure. The Second Stage of the Bill will be brought before the House tomorrow, Tuesday 17 February 2009.

Adjourned at 5.46 pm.

