
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

Tuesday 9 June 2009

*The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr Dallat] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

SPEAKER'S BUSINESS

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been informed by the Speaker that he will be absent from Parliament Buildings on official Assembly business on Monday 15 June 2009.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety that he wishes to make a statement on the outbreak of swine flu.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I wish to provide Members with a further update on swine flu. Members will be aware that my previous ministerial statement followed the confirmation of the first case of swine flu in Northern Ireland. Since that statement, I have announced three further swine flu cases. I am pleased to report that the first person diagnosed as having swine flu has now made a full recovery. Since today's statement was printed, two further cases have been confirmed, both of which involved travellers who were returning from the USA.

The picture across the world is changing quite rapidly, and we continue to monitor the situation very closely. As of 8 June 2009, 73 countries now have confirmed cases, with 25,952 people confirmed as having the virus and a total of 139 deaths. Throughout the UK, 664 cases have now been confirmed. We have also seen more cases in the Republic of Ireland, where 11 cases have now been confirmed. Given the increasing number of cases worldwide, we can expect to see more here.

As I said on previous occasions, the public can be reassured that, for the vast majority of people affected in the UK, the symptoms have been similar to that of season flu. However, I am acutely aware that a number of people in Scotland have been admitted to hospital in the past week and that some of them are in intensive care. Although those developments are of concern, people should not be alarmed unduly. They are a reminder that we must not be complacent and that we must maintain a high state of readiness so that we are fully prepared.

We remain at World Health Organization pandemic alert level 5, which means that a pandemic is thought to be imminent but not necessarily inevitable. Recently, the World Health Organization advised that we are getting closer to phase 6 — that a pandemic is declared. It is not possible to state when that may happen, but we are preparing for a possible announcement in the near future. The move to phase 6 will be a serious development, but the World Health Organization alert levels reflect the global view, and any action taken in the UK will need to be based on the situation here.

In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, we are following a containment strategy that includes supplying antivirals both to those who develop the disease and, as a preventative measure, to their close contacts. To

date, the strategy has been effective in delaying the spread of the disease and buying us valuable time.

The number of people developing the disease is certain to rise over the coming weeks, as we have seen already in parts of Scotland and England. Therefore, we need to be prepared for the next stage, which is when the outbreak can no longer be contained and spreads more widely. At that point, we expect to have to move from a containment strategy to a mitigation strategy. That means that, when the number of cases increases beyond a certain level, we will have to keep the extent to which we supply antivirals to contacts under review, supplying them only to immediate close contacts rather than to all contacts in the first instance.

I understand fully how the emerging situation may cause public concern. However, the public can be reassured that we are well prepared to deal with the situation should a global pandemic be declared or if we need to move beyond mitigation stage. The World Health Organization has said that the UK and, therefore, Northern Ireland, is one of the best-prepared countries in the world. We have been preparing for a potential pandemic for some years. That state of readiness will be vital, especially as we approach our flu season. We know that there is the potential for a further wave of the swine flu virus in the autumn, when it may be even more widespread. In light of that, I have been working closely with ministerial colleagues across the UK to secure production of a pre-pandemic vaccine. This is an opportunity to obtain vaccine supplies for the UK in advance of a pandemic wave. Those arrangements may ensure that we have enough pre-pandemic vaccine to protect at least half of the population from swine flu by December.

In addition, as part of plans to deal with a pandemic, sleeping contracts for pandemic vaccine are in place. That means that, if the World Health Organization were to move to phase 6, we will have access to two doses of pandemic vaccine for everyone in Northern Ireland, if needed. It will be several months before sufficient vaccine supplies become available; therefore, it is essential that we continue to use our stock of antiviral drugs carefully, so that the public will be protected during the winter months.

We already have a stock of antiviral drugs to cover half of the population, and I have ensured that steps are in place to increase that stock, so that there will be antiviral drugs to treat up to 80% of the population. Previous global pandemics have not affected more than one third of the population.

The current advice to people who suspect that they have swine flu is to stay at home and contact their GP if they feel unwell. That is extremely important in helping to reduce the spread of the virus. If we do see a sharp rise in the number of cases, it will be important

that symptomatic patients at home can have access to antivirals without placing unnecessary additional pressure on GP practices and community pharmacies. I have been working with my counterparts in the other UK health Departments to develop the national pandemic flu service. That system will co-ordinate the distribution of antivirals and will have the capacity to cope with any likely surges in demand should the virus become more widespread. The national pandemic flu service will be the first of its kind in the world and will be available from October.

The aim is to enable symptomatic patients across the whole UK to access antiviral drugs by either calling a single 0800 number or by accessing a supporting website application. The service will enable people to have their symptoms assessed against a list of key symptoms and risk factors either over the phone or online.

Cross-government plans are also well established. Although there have been no cases of swine flu in schools in Northern Ireland to date, parents, teachers and pupils can be reassured that our links with the Department of Education continue and that robust plans are in place should a school be affected by a case of swine flu. Schools in Northern Ireland close for the summer break much earlier than in the rest of the UK, and that will be an advantage in helping to contain the possible spread of infection.

Officials in my Department, together with staff in the Public Health Agency and the health and social care sector, have been working continuously to ensure that there is robust surveillance and appropriate testing and treatment of individuals who are at risk. I am pleased to report that, since my previous statement, full confirmatory testing for swine flu can now be carried out in the laboratory at the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in Belfast. Previously, after initial tests were carried out in the RVH, samples were sent to the national laboratory for final-stage testing. That new system is a welcome development, as it greatly speeds up the testing process.

It remains vital that the public continue to receive the information and advice that they need. Every home in Northern Ireland should now have received a leaflet that provides further public advice and information. Again, I ask people to read that leaflet and to keep it safe. A major publicity campaign, which includes television, radio and newspaper advertising, has also been running in the national and local media. That has been effective in communicating the steps that people can take to protect themselves. Our message remains very clear, and everyone has his or her part to play.

We should all be taking simple, effective hygiene measures, such as using a tissue to cover one's mouth and nose when sneezing, disposing of the tissue and then washing one's hands with soap and water or

sanitising gel: 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it.' The Northern Ireland swine flu helpline continues to operate on 0800 0514 142 to provide advice. Information on swine flu is also available from the UK swine flu information line on 0800 1513 513. Posters and information leaflets that give advice to travellers returning from swine flu-affected areas have been provided to all ports and airports across Northern Ireland.

I continue to receive full and detailed briefings daily on the national and international picture. That includes participating, along with the Health Ministers for Wales and Scotland, in regular COBRA meetings, which the new Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham, will now chair. My Department also continues to work closely with the Department of Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland, and I will meet Mary Harney tomorrow to discuss the current situation in Northern Ireland and the Republic.

I assure the public and the Assembly that I am continuing to give the situation the attention that it deserves. The World Health Organization has now given a clear indication that we are moving closer to the pandemic phase, and we will monitor developments very closely. I will report again to the Assembly if significant changes to the current situation occur. In the meantime, Members can remain assured that we have the necessary capability to respond to swine flu. The health and social care service is well prepared, and I thank Health Service staff for the commitment, support and dedication that they have demonstrated in the face of a potential pandemic.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and for keeping the House updated on the swine flu alert. I, too, commend the good work of staff in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in dealing with the outbreak.

Despite new cases of swine flu being confirmed over the weekend, I welcome the fact that the number here remains relatively low. I also welcome the fact that those cases appear to be mild and that the people involved either travelled from the affected areas or have been in contact with someone who has travelled from the affected areas. How confident is the Minister that the confirmed cases here are an accurate reflection of the situation internationally, given that those affected have mild symptoms and that some people will not present for advice or treatment?

10.45 pm

The Minister also referred to the situation in Scotland, and media reports there have indicated that perhaps 43 cases of swine flu have been confirmed in one day. That is obviously very worrying, but perhaps

more worrying is the fact that three people with swine flu are reported to be receiving intensive care, although I am aware that they may have pre-existing illnesses. Is the Minister concerned that our hospitals will not be able to cope? Furthermore, are adequate plans in place for anyone who may require hospital admission and for those who may need to be treated in isolation?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that 11 patients are being treated in hospitals in Scotland as a result of swine flu. Some of those patients are in intensive care, while others are responding and recovering well.

The speed of transmission is one of the features of this particular flu virus: not only is it a novel virus, but it moves very quickly. For example, yesterday at 12.00 noon, the total number of swine flu confirmations in the UK was 621, while this morning that figure had risen to 664. That demonstrates just how quickly swine flu can advance.

The Member also asked if we were receiving an accurate picture on the virus. It is widely accepted that the UK has one of the best surveillance systems in the world; therefore, we can be relatively confident that we are receiving an accurate picture. There is a wide variance in other countries such as the United States, where officials consider that the number of confirmed swine flu cases could be out by as much as 10:1 or 100,000 cases, or 20:1 or 200,000 cases. We have a very good surveillance system in the UK, and that is internationally accepted.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I also commend the Department on its work to date on this particular virus and the staff at our hospitals for the preparations that they have made.

Given the potential for a widespread pandemic that is being dealt with and controlled by antiviral medication, will the Minister give any indication of when the first batch of vaccines will be made available to the people of Northern Ireland? In his statement he said that the vaccine will not be with us for some months, but that is rather open-ended.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: One of the major vaccine-producing factories in Dresden has now been taken out of mothballs by the relevant manufacturer, and capacity for vaccine production has been increased. However, there is obviously a huge demand from Governments around the world who wish to buy vaccines.

The creation of the vaccine involves the isolation of the virus seed, and that provides the means of creating the vaccine. That process is and has been under way, but it will be some months before vaccines begin to come through.

The UK has placed sleeping contracts for vaccines with the manufacturers, which will be activated if the pandemic alert level moves to phase 6. That pandemic alert level is at phase 5, and in the meantime we have ordered pre-pandemic vaccines that are made up of the same material. However, we do not anticipate receiving those vaccines until the end of 2009. That is the quickest time that can be achieved, and there will be a long delivery time as every country in the world will be chasing vaccines if the pandemic level moves to phase 6 and in the way that some experts anticipate.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Minister for his update. Had the people who are in the intensive care unit in Scotland been in Mexico, or did they get the flu second-hand? When will the progress report on the vaccine be available? The Minister said that it would be the end of the year at the earliest before pandemic status was reached. I appreciate that many countries want the vaccine, so would the winter be the earliest time at which the vaccine would be available, regardless of the date of a serious outbreak?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I tried to explain to Tom Buchanan, we must make a guess on that. We are in the hands of the manufacturers. Under the sleeping contract, the UK is at the top of the queue, and Northern Ireland will get its share of the 132 million vaccines in our order through that contract. However, until phase 6 is declared, we are in a pre-pandemic phase. We have ordered vaccines under a pre-pandemic contract, and we are also at the top of the queue for those vaccines. We are in the hands of the manufacturers, who have to isolate the seed to make the vaccine and then get production rolling.

The seasonal flu vaccine is being manufactured, and the orders for that will be filled by the end of June 2009. That will allow the manufacturers to move on to vaccines for swine flu. I estimate that the vaccine will be available at the end of this year or, I hope, before then. As we are aware, there will be major demand for the vaccine, so the question will be about quantities and delivery.

Mr McCarthy: I also welcome the Minister's detailed statement. Communication with everyone in Northern Ireland is paramount, and the Minister is communicating very well on the issue. Have the latest victims travelled to Northern Ireland from faraway places? Aside from such travellers, have there been any other cases?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I confirm that the new cases are as a result of travel, primarily to the United States. Mrs Hanna asked about the people in the intensive care unit in Scotland. In their cases, the primary cause is travel. I do not have the exact details, but community transmission or person-to-person infection is occurring

in Scotland, where the virus has spread among people who have not travelled; that development is worrying. The new cases in Northern Ireland concern one person who had been in New York and one person who had been in Florida. Before that, one case had come from the US, and one had come from Mexico. In all the confirmed cases in Northern Ireland, the patients have either recovered or are doing well.

Mr Easton: I also commend the Department on its hard work. I am impressed by the fact that the Department issues daily updates on swine flu. How many people in Northern Ireland have been treated because they have had contact with the small number of individuals who have fully contracted swine flu? Will the Minister advise whether such people take Tamiflu straight away or wait for symptoms to develop?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not have precise figures on the number of people who have been provided with antiviral medicine as a result of being in contact with people who have been confirmed as having the virus. A reasonably large number of people form part of the containment stage, and it goes beyond family members.

People are advised to take Tamiflu immediately. To date, there have been no cases of transmission in Northern Ireland; people who have contracted swine flu have come into the country with it. It has not moved beyond any of the confirmed individual cases. To an extent, that is because of the way in which we have isolated people with the virus. We have issued advice for them to stay at home, and that is an important message.

Antiviral medicine has been issued for those who have been in immediate contact with people who have contracted the virus. It is important that individuals who have been given antiviral drugs take the entire course. However, as numbers increase, the point will be reached beyond which it is not feasible to give antiviral drugs to everyone who is a contact because of concern that the virus will mutate and become able to defend itself. During the containment stage, we reach a wide circle as far as individual confirmation is concerned.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Like the Members who have spoken previously, I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement and the daily updates that help our work. I commend him and his Department on their work on swine flu.

I have a couple of questions. The Minister said that the alert will continue. Will he outline how often COBRA will meet? He also said that he will be meeting Mary Harney, Minister for Health and Children in the South, tomorrow. It will be useful to receive an update following that meeting so that we can have an all-

island view of the problem. In a previous statement to the House, the Minister said that the incidence of swine flu may increase with the coming of winter, which is something we should keep an eye on. Will the Minister outline the strategies he will put in place to cope with that; and, if it is not possible for him to do that today, will he write to Members on that point, as we are being warned of the possibility that swine flu may increase in the winter months?

The Minister of Health, Social Security and Public Safety: As far as the final point is concerned, the answer is yes; we have been warned about that. It is anticipated that the flu virus may follow the patterns of previous viruses, abating in summer and returning in winter. Damp conditions in the autumn will favour a return of the flu.

We have plans in place, and we refine them constantly. We consider how health and social care services will respond. If the flu becomes a pandemic, one third of the population may be affected, which will include one third of the workforce in hospitals, GP surgeries, community pharmacies and so on. Therefore, I have asked the trusts to plan for that eventuality because the current Health Service may bear no relation to that in six months time as it tries to cope with a swine flu epidemic. We will reduce services to those that are absolutely essential, particularly in secondary care.

I will be meeting Mary Harney tomorrow at a North/South ministerial meeting on food safety, and I have arranged for a round-table meeting afterwards with her and her officials. My officials are in constant contact with those in the Irish Republic, where there are now 11 confirmed cases of swine flu. Primarily, those cases involve people who have travelled from the US and Mexico, but I believe that there is one case that has been transmitted locally.

COBRA is the key driving force in the UK. It is chaired by the Health Secretary in London, and other Health Ministers are invited and take part in it. It determines the national response to all the issues that I have talked to the House about, including antiviral drugs and vaccines.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Housing (Amendment) Bill

First Stage

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I beg to introduce the Housing Amendment Bill [NIA 7/08], which is a Bill to amend the law relating to housing.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Bill will be put on the list of future business until a date for its Second Stage is determined.

Diseases of Animals Bill

Consideration Stage

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Consideration Stage of the Diseases of Animals Bill will not be moved today. I met the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee on 1 June and explained my reasons for not doing so. I will discuss the matter further with the Committee and others over the next few days.

11.00 am

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Comptroller and Auditor General

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with section 65(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, nominates Mr Kieran Donnelly as the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland. — [*The Chairperson of the Audit Committee (Mr Newton).*]

College Courses for Older People

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Ms S Ramsey): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to enter into discussions with the Regional Colleges about the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people; and seeks the Minister's acknowledgement that the availability of these discounted courses provides considerable social, as well as educational, benefits to older people.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I will open the debate. At the outset, I thank the Minister for his presence. Given the interest that has been shown in the issue, I am sure that he will tell us how many questions he has received from Members on the matter over the past number of months. Indeed, the information pack that Members received from Research Services — I thank them for that — shows that many Members have raised questions.

In 2008, prompted by information that it received from groups that represent older people, the Committee lobbied the Minister on the matter. Those groups indicated that their members were unable to engage in college courses because they no longer received discounts and, therefore, could not afford their courses.

To be fair to the Minister, in June 2008 he issued a press release, which is in Members' information packs, that outlined the assistance that is available to allow older people to access discounted fees through means testing. However, when representatives of Age Concern and Help the Aged briefed the Committee on 29 April 2009, they told us that their members were still not able to access reduced fees for college courses. What has gone wrong? Why is the new system not working?

Fortunately, the Committee has a good working relationship with the Minister and the Department. Therefore, it is not for me to stand here and blame either; we want to find a mature way forward to resolve the issue. We must examine the fact that the colleges are now incorporated and, as a result, make their own decisions on who receives concessionary fees.

The current situation on concessionary fees dates back to the introduction in October 2006 of the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006. Those regulations were put in place with the aim of giving older people more rights and protections in the workplace and more access to training that might otherwise have been denied them due to their age. The introduction of the regulations was motivated partly by the fact that older people form an increasingly large percentage of our population, and that is reflected in the workplace.

Therefore, under the regulations, providers of vocational training cannot discriminate against people either receiving or accessing training on grounds of age. Regulation 21 states that clearly. That is the reason why, I assume, colleges believe that they would defy the law if they were to grant older people discounted fees or courses. It is ironic that legislation that was designed to protect older people actually causes them to lose out.

The regulations create a loophole that is known as "objective justification". That means that differences in treatment on the grounds of age can be made if they are justifiable.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way; I will not detain her for very many minutes. Given what Ms Ramsey has just said, does she not think that it would be appropriate for the Executive to hurry up the introduction of a full-time commissioner to look after the interests of older people?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I always give way to older people.

Mr McCarthy: Thanks very much.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: If Kieran settles himself down, I will come to that in the course of my speech.

As I said, the regulations provide a loophole through which differences in treatment of people on the grounds of age can be justified. However, that deliberate loophole applies to employers, not to training providers, which is what causes the problem. Colleges believe that they cannot offer discounted fees to older people because that might disadvantage other groups. It does not seem to matter that those older people have paid into the system all their lives and that it might be good for them to get a little back. Nor do the other benefits of attending such courses seem to matter, such as social benefits to people's lives. The only factor that is

weighed up is whether someone else might feel that they are being discriminated against. We are not unique here; the regulations apply in England, Scotland and Wales. Even in the Twenty-six Counties, where so much has been done for older people, they only get a discount if they are over 70 years old and meet the medical card qualification criteria.

As I said earlier, the Minister, to his credit, admitted in a response to a Committee member's question that, in the context of the effect on discounted fees for older people, the regulations come under the law of unintended consequences. As a result, he attempted to find a way round the legislation by applying means testing. I welcome that approach. However, as Members know, older people have a great deal of dignity and, when faced with questions about their ability to pay for courses, they do not want to feel that they are receiving a handout. In many cases they decide against doing the course; that is something that we have all seen.

A number of groups provided presentations on discounted courses. It is important that courses are available for older people. We are all faced on a daily basis with the terrible problem of isolation for older people. We all know of groups who are often pushed to the edge of society, and we know that exclusion can easily occur when people feel like that. Exclusion among older people is a growing issue faced by society. Given the advances in medical technology and so many other things, more people are living to a much greater age. That often means that they are alone, without a partner. Furthermore, their families are preoccupied with their own lives. Isolation can be a real danger.

That is why groups such as Age Concern and Help the Aged are so keen that discounted courses are available to older people. For a small cost, they can be part of a group and engage in social activity. They can make friends, plug into networks and take courses that allow them to better understand things like the Internet. That enables them to better relate to younger generations and be part of things generally. In many cases, the contact and purpose provided by a course has health benefits, which, as we know, have positive cost implications. The Assembly should find ways to help older people stay active and should not close down the avenues available to them. As a member of the Health Committee, I recognise the huge positive cost implications for the care of older people. However, if we do not facilitate older people in remaining an active part of society, there will be negative consequences.

Objective 2 of PSA 7 in the Programme for Government aims, as Kieran McCarthy said, to introduce co-ordinated strategic action to promote social inclusion for older people. We will not achieve that objective if we continue to push older people, intentionally or otherwise, out of mainstream society. We claim to attach importance to our commitments on lifelong

learning. I am not a great believer in spouting statistics during debates, because it tends to obscure the issues. However, it is clear from the figures that enrolments in courses that are favoured by older people have fallen, and we know that the overall number of older people who access courses has fallen.

As the Minister will clarify, it is not the case that the age limits set in regulations for state-funded schemes are outside the scope of the EU directives that inform those regulations. The Minister will be hoping that the Committee does not expect him to produce more money for something else, but it does. Nevertheless, it is important that a proactive approach is taken, given the health issues at stake, the fact that Mr McGimpsey is the Minister's party colleague, and the Executive. It is up to the Minister to talk to his Executive colleagues to see whether this one small concession for older people can be advanced.

Recently, I received a letter from Dame Joan Harbison, the older people's advocate, in which she said that she supports the motion. It is important that we get a response from politicians, but we must also work with the community and voluntary sector collectively in the interim to make progress on some issues. That will take us to the appointment of an older people's commissioner.

On 29 April, representatives from Help the Aged and Age Concern made passionate presentations to the Committee. They were happy that we facilitated the meeting and that we listened to them. They were delighted to hear that we were going to table a motion for debate in the House. I know that the Minister has been looking at some of the issues raised, but I hope that, from today, we will hear positive, concrete answers on how to advance the matter. I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Easton: The motion goes to the heart of what is meant by lifelong learning, which, if properly realised, will advantage our increasing population of older people, giving them so much more than just education. Of course, we want to plan properly for future demographics. Research informs us that, by 2021, 35% of our education population will be aged over 50, rising to 44% by 2041. It will be advantageous for that population to receive effective instruction, to be better informed and to have its educational aspirations cultivated and nurtured. Our goal should be to have a knowledgeable and learned older population. However, there is more. The motion asks the Minister for Employment and Learning to take cognisance of the social benefits that concessionary courses afford older people. Concessionary courses give older people an opportunity to engage collectively on the common ground that education provides. In many cases, the opportunity to socialise combats social isolation and loneliness by providing an educational community that improves the culture of our society.

There are other reasons for the Minister to prioritise discussions with the regional colleges. Our population of under-35s is decreasing, whereas our population of over-35s is increasing. I ask the Minister to acknowledge fully the economic necessity of ensuring that our older workforce has the education, skills and capacity to address the real economic difficulties that we face. Our economy faces many challenges. We are in a global recession, which means that, if we are to progress, we must ensure that our older workforce, as noted earlier, is educated with the skills and knowledge to meet the economic demands of the twenty-first century. Standing still on the issue is not an option for the Minister. If he does so, he will, in reality, be going backwards. He must think outside the box, although I acknowledge the existence of age discrimination legislation, which is positive, and the fact that opportunities have been provided for people who receive rates relief.

The Minister must act urgently, and it will be good for our regional colleges if ministerial discussions come to a successful conclusion. I continue to be impressed by the comprehensive prospectus offered by the South Eastern Regional College in my constituency of North Down. Real opportunities are available that will add value to many older persons' educational career. The challenge will be to discover how, within the existing legislative constraints, we can provide concessionary schemes that allow our older population to take advantage of education opportunities. Many in that population group have the time, capacity and motivation to take the full educational value of the courses offered by the regional colleges. We want to remove educational barriers that face our older population. We want to make educational opportunities accessible. There is no doubt about it: financial constraints act as a hindrance.

11.15 am

In the past, there have been inconsistencies in approach. I am sure that many Members will accept my analysis that there is major ignorance in sections of our society about the real and tangible benefits of having an age-diverse workforce. Many older people will add value to our economy, because they will be able to bring experience, education and innovation to the table. Is that not exactly what we require? We must listen to employers when they inform us that an age-diverse workforce is economically good for us, and we must listen to the wider community when it celebrates the advantages of an age-diverse workforce.

I wish the Minister well in the discussions with our regional colleges. If we get this right, it can truly be a win-win situation for everyone. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I welcome the debate and thank the Committee Chairperson for securing it. I also thank the Minister for attending. I am a strong supporter

of older people's participation in further education and lifelong learning. Having researched the subject to degree level and having taught in the field for over 20 years, I come to it with background knowledge of the benefits that older people get from further education.

Older people, like everyone else, benefit educationally and socially by learning with others. Participation in education can increase social inclusion and reduce discrimination against older people. We must give older people the opportunity to contribute to society rather than often seeing them as a financial burden. It is proven that significant health and well-being benefits can come through participation in further education.

In a country whose population is getting older, the benefits of further education for older people cannot be underestimated for the Health Service, carers and wider society. In that respect, there is space and reason for interdepartmental consideration of older people and their needs. It is, therefore, deeply regrettable that concessionary fees have been removed.

I recognise that the Minister's hands are tied by the unintended consequences of a European directive that requires all member states to outlaw discrimination in employment and vocational training on the grounds of age. It is proper and correct to outlaw age discrimination, and maybe I should declare an interest at this point. I recognise that, in the past, the Minister has accepted and questioned that anomaly. However, it is of great importance to many individuals and society as a whole that we address that anomaly as soon as possible. It cannot be right that an older person can avail of a bus pass or rates relief but cannot get concessions for education, which, as we have stated, has the potential to bring social, health and economic benefits both to the individual and to society.

The time has come for us to look for a solution to the problem. What options are open to the Minister and his Department? Does he have the power to amend the regulations? What discussions has he had with his counterparts in England? What discussions has he had to date with further education colleges here?

I draw to Members' attention the fact that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is in charge of equality legislation in Northern Ireland, and I ask the Minister what steps that Department has taken to assist the Department for Employment and Learning with this case. I urge the Minister to continue discussions with regional colleges, and I ask him what options he considers to be open to them. I take great pleasure in supporting the motion.

Mr Attwood: I apologise to the House that I will be unable to stay for the rest of the debate and the Minister's response, as I have to attend a Committee meeting that began at 11.00 am.

I concur with virtually every comment in the debate so far. It is self-evident and compelling that the provision of access to discounted courses for older people will ease isolation, improve activity, increase skills, build relationships and contribute in every manner conceivable to the well-being of the individual and the community. I will not rehearse any of those arguments. Instead, I have questions for the Minister to see whether, as Rev Coulter said, a route can be plotted to resolve the matter in a satisfactory way.

I note what Rev Coulter said about the Minister questioning the anomaly. Is the Minister satisfied that, in legal terms, the anomaly has been fully and exhaustively probed to determine whether discounted college fees could be offered? I seek reassurance on that because there is a comparable issue in health: the Minister of Health has determined that people who are approaching the age of 40 cannot be treated more favourably than younger people in the provision of fertility treatment. That has been determined even though it is my view that, legally and under the European regulations, people who are approaching 40 could be treated more favourably than people in lower age categories. Therefore, I ask the Minister whether he has sought exhaustive legal advice that confirms that he cannot advise people that discounted fees can be introduced because of the regulation arising from the European directive.

The Minister may be legally constrained and, as Rev Coulter hinted, it may be that the equality aspect of the matter is not being taken forward with sufficient vigour in another part of government. However, in the absence of a legal resolution to the matter, has the Minister costed the provision of fully or partially discounted fees to people aged 65 and over? If the argument about taking care of our older citizens and cherishing them is so compelling, should not some work be done to assess the cost of assisting those people with discounted fees? The Minister, the Committee and the Assembly may well have to make a strategic assessment that discounted fees for older people are of such merit and worth that they should be found through a subvention from government funds.

I also want to raise a broader political issue, which, although not demonstrated acutely in this case, is relevant nonetheless: there is still an imbalance of power between the Government and the education authorities. Evidence of that can be seen in the way that the regional colleges have chosen to withdraw discounted fees. Given the impact of that issue on equality, the Programme for Government and Government priorities generally, the Government must be given sight of it in advance so that they can form a view on it, rather than regional colleges being allowed to act independently and not have due regard for the authority of the Minister and the Assembly. The same applies to

the University of Ulster in respect of the proposed Yorkgate campus and Queen's University Belfast in respect of its takeover of Stranmillis University College.

Ms Lo: I welcome and support the motion. Given previous exchanges with the Minister, I know that he is frustrated by this unintended consequence of the legislation on age discrimination. Rather than enhancing pensioners' equal opportunities, it has disadvantaged their ability to participate in lifelong learning.

The number of students of pensionable age has been falling steadily over the past few years, from 16,978 in 2004-05 to 14,048 in 2006-07. I am quite sure that the withdrawal of concessionary fees in an economic downturn will reduce those numbers further. A 30-week course used to cost £76 in some colleges. However, without the concession, pensioners now have to pay double that amount.

The majority of pensioner students take non-vocational courses; there are almost three times as many pensioner students taking those courses as there are taking vocational courses. The Department's policy of curtailing funding for non-accredited courses also forced colleges to stop running many of the recreational classes, such as art and craft or gardening, that are very popular with our older people.

Figures over the past three years also show that about 75% of students of pensionable age are female. I ask the Minister to look into that in the context of section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. This issue is having a negative impact when it comes not only to age, but to gender. Can we challenge that practice under our own laws?

We have spoken about advocating for lifelong learning, and people are living longer and retiring much later, sometimes out of necessity. Surely there is a need to value age diversity in our workforce. It is also essential to keep older people active in updating their knowledge and skills. That is beneficial not only to the individual but to the overall economy.

At the launch of an IT project at Ormeau Road library, I met several older people who were learning how to use the Internet and send e-mails. They were telling me that they can now shop online and e-mail their families, including grandchildren, who may have moved to Australia or elsewhere. Surely that is a big benefit to us all.

Like others, I emphasise the health and social benefits of lifelong learning for older people. It is very important that older people have a routine and something to look forward to week after week that will take them out of the house and out of social isolation. There is so much loneliness for older people living alone; their families have perhaps moved far away, and no one calls on them. It is essential that they go out every Monday or

Tuesday, for example, to their classes and to meet other people.

Keeping an active mind is also very important. It gives older people much better mental health and well-being. The physical benefits of getting out of the house and walking down to a centre or a college cannot be underestimated.

Therefore, I call on the Minister to review the situation. We all need to put as much effort as we can into addressing this anomaly by giving older people that bit of life that they want. They really do miss their classes. I have been receiving e-mails and talking to older people, and they say that they really miss their gardening and cookery classes. Those classes are so important to them, and we should not deprive them of those opportunities.

11.30 am

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. Many constituents have contacted our offices about the fact that in 2008-09, it cost more to enrol for courses at the Newtownabbey campus than in Lisburn. That was even the case for non-vocational 15-week courses such as painting for pleasure.

As Anna Lo highlighted, fee discrepancies is just one of the issues that have been brought to Members' attention. I have heard from lecturers who are concerned that they will lose their jobs if the enrolment numbers required to allow courses to go ahead are not met. I have also had contact with students who simply cannot afford to pay the increased fees.

Students planning to attend the Northern Regional College from September 2008 to June 2009 have been told that colleges have amended their policies for providing concessionary fees to people of pensionable age. However, the Southern Regional College in Lisburn was able to offer a discounted rate to pensioners during the same enrolment period.

I understand that the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 forced colleges to amend concessionary fees and to remove unjustified age-based discrimination in employment and vocational training. However, in September 2008, one college in Lisburn was able to offer a 15-week art class to pensioners for £57, while the same course in the Newtownabbey campus cost £113. I am bemused as to why there is a £56 difference in the fees for the same course just because of differing locations.

The same predicament appears to have arisen in the enrolment for courses that will run from September 2009 to June 2010. The Bangor campus is offering the painting for pleasure course to pensioners at a 50% reduced fee of £68, while the same course is being offered for £100 in Newtownabbey, a difference of £32 a year.

There are other discrepancies with the way in which fees are dealt with generally. I wish to hear the Minister's views on why students who are entitled to disability living allowance or incapacity benefit do not qualify for concessionary fees, but those who are entitled to pension credit, working tax credit or child tax credit are entitled to concessionary fees.

That is a debate for another day, but I urge the Minister to reassess the structure of concessionary fees and to ensure that all colleges in Northern Ireland charge the same amount. I understand that colleges set their fees in line with the economic climate and their enrolment trends and statistics, but there must be a level playing field.

We need to help rather than hinder our older generation. It is expected that the number of people over 50 will increase by 35% by 2012. Getting out and doing courses during the day is a lifeline for many people, and it gives them a purpose to socialise. Pensioners simply cannot afford the increased fees.

We need a fair, identical system in each constituency. I urge the Minister to reassess the structure of concessionary fees and to ensure that all colleges in Northern Ireland adopt a consistent approach and charge equal fees for vocational and non-vocational courses. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Employment Equality (Age) Regulations 2006 should be welcomed as positive legislation. However, they should not prevent concessionary fees being offered to older people. In this case, an urgently required piece of equality legislation is being interpreted as discriminating against older people.

Further education colleges have applied concessionary fees arbitrarily. I attended a meeting in the Southern Regional College in Newry with other constituency MLAs, and it was clear then that only two local colleges were applying the legislation strictly. Students, particularly older students, were not consulted or given enough warning about the impact that the changes would have on them.

In the regulations, direct discrimination on grounds of age is prohibited unless it can be justified objectively. Objective justification recognises that differing treatment on the grounds of age can sometimes be justified; and that should apply to the provision of concessionary fees for older people.

On a visit to the Southern Regional College in Newry on 26 June 2008, the Minister stated that all six colleges in the North had agreed to add to their means-testing criteria that decide who is entitled to concessionary fees. People receiving rates relief will be entitled to claim concessionary fees.

However, some older people do not access the rates relief scheme, and they do not know that they may be entitled to other benefits, such as pension credit. They often do courses at colleges, but because of the rules, they must pay full whack and do not qualify for concessionary fees. People who do not receive benefits are not necessarily better off, and it is essential to distinguish between justifiable differences in treatment and discrimination, which must be prohibited.

I have spoken to older people whom the legislation has affected. They looked forward to taking courses but having found that their fees had, in some cases, increased by 400% to 500%, they could not afford to participate in them. In Britain, some areas continue to offer concessionary fees and actively encourage older people to participate in courses. It has already been stated that in the Twenty-six Counties, people over the age of 70 can access concessions.

In June 2008, the Minister stated that learning is a lifelong process.

That is true. I have spoken to many older people who regard courses that they attend as being therapeutic and occasions for socialising with their peers. Many of those people are carers, and attending courses can be a welcome form of respite for them. Once again, older people have been put in a position in which they feel marginalised and not appreciated. When will we stop paying lip service to the concept of age inclusion and start doing something to include older people? They have contributed so much to our society, and it is time that we gave them the recognition that they deserve. Lifelong learning should mean just that, and rather than erect obstacles, we should make it easier for people to access courses that can have such a positive impact on them.

I ask the Minister to pursue all available avenues that are open to him to resolve the problem for older people who need to access those courses. It is time that a commissioner for older people was appointed. The situation needs urgent attention. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs M Bradley: In many debates, Members have referred to the plight of older people: how they must choose between heating and eating; the awful experiences that they have had; and how they feel threatened every day by their own communities. Older people are under constant pressures, which are gradually wearing them down, and they are becoming frail, disinterested people, rather than people who should be living a full life, at a relaxed pace and in their own way.

Equality is a buzzword that we all like to throw about. An equality-based decision supposedly led to the withdrawal of educational concessionary fees for our older people, but how are our older people, who still want to learn, supposed to afford the full applicable fees? To what extent did the equality impact assessments

illustrate the effects of that withdrawal on the individual? The multiple effects of loneliness, isolation and the non-maintenance of an active and interested mind are clearly illustrated through the many different health issues, such as chronic depression and dementia, that are prevalent among older people who live in isolation.

In the three years up to the beginning of the 2007-08 financial year, there was a 37% decrease in older people's uptake of courses. Such a decrease in society participation will result only in voids in older people's daily lives. At this point, I feel that it is important to congratulate organisations, such as the Changing Ageing Partnership and U3A, the University of the Third Age, which are constant advocates of the importance of access to education and lifelong learning, regardless of age.

The benefits of social inclusion and the positive effects on health far outweigh the financial implications. If the Executive are to truly promote equality and finally banish ageism, they should reinstate concessionary fees. That would be a strong indicator that they are serious about delivering their aims and objectives. Therefore, I ask the Minister to give due consideration to the content of the motion. I have every faith that he will revisit the situation, and I look forward to the day when he informs the House that all barriers to education for older people have been removed, especially the financial barrier. I support the motion.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis seo le labhairt ar an tairiscint.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I apologise for arriving late; I did not realise that the business was going through so quickly.

Further education colleges present an opportunity for many, particularly older, people to attain qualifications, better themselves, join the workforce or simply improve their quality of life. I accept that the EU directive, as my colleague Michael Brady said, is aimed primarily at preventing discrimination against people in employment and at ensuring that training providers cannot discriminate against people because of their age. That is welcome because, in the past, people have had to take cases of age discrimination to the Equality Commission.

In previous debates, the Minister referred to the unintended consequences of the legislation. One such consequence is that the issue of concessionary fees is forcing many older people to abandon non-vocational and recreational courses in further education colleges and their community out-centres. To be fair to the Minister, he has tried to deal with the problem, and, for example, people who benefit from the rates relief scheme are entitled to concessionary fees.

I agree with many other Members that the issue must be addressed and that the House will unite on it. I am sure that the Minister will comment on that.

As David Hilditch said, further education colleges adopt various approaches to concessionary fees for older people. An attempt has been made to achieve some uniformity, but the situation is patchy, and, therefore, a fees policy is probably required.

Each of the jurisdictions in England, Scotland and Wales operates a different system. Wales is trying to develop a fees policy, and the Assembly should, perhaps, consider that option. As the Minister said, the Equality Commission should re-examine the issue in response to the outcry from MLAs and the constituents who have raised the issue with them.

I accept that the Department for Employment and Learning produced the FE Means Business strategy before the Minister's time. It emphasised the importance of attaining qualifications to create a better workforce, and that was welcome. However, the strategy also mentioned the full recovery of costs for all courses provided by further education colleges. The Assembly has debated the problems faced by people with learning difficulties who want to attend college but not attain a qualification. However, older people are now taking the hit.

The development of a fees policy may be the way in which the issue can be addressed. The Minister will tell the House that further education colleges are autonomous bodies that set their own policies; however, they receive a substantial amount of taxpayers' money. The Minister should, therefore, examine a way in which a policy could deal with older people who want to attend courses.

Anna Lo and other Members said that lifelong learning, social cohesion, improvement in people's lives, health benefits and increased well-being are all important benefits of further education courses. There must be a move away from the emphasis on people not taking non-vocational or recreational courses.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I welcome the debate; it deals with issues in which I have much interest and with which I have considerable sympathy. Progress has been made in several ways; however, it has been a frustration to me that some aspects of the problem remain unsolved.

11.45 am

In reply to the Committee Chairperson's question about how many communications I had received: I have had 25 letters from Members in the two years since this issue first arose; I have responded to 10 questions for written answer; and I am on record as answering one question for oral answer.

To take the second part of the motion first, my Department and I recognise the significant value to older people of participating in further education. As well as being educationally beneficial, such participation is a more general social, health and well-being benefit, which adds to the frustration expressed by Members on all sides of the House. That is why my Department has worked so hard with FE colleges over the past 18 months or so to address some of the issues. However, it must be recognised that a number of substantial problems have yet to be overcome and that the age regulations constitute a considerable, if unfortunate, obstacle.

The first part of the motion asks me to enter into discussions with our FE colleges about:

“the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people”.

I have no difficulty in engaging with the colleges on issues of concessionary fees. We have been working with them over the past 18 months and will continue to do so. However, I will set out the legislative background of that for Members.

The European directive 2000/78/EC required all member states to outlaw age discrimination in jobs and vocational training by the end of 2006. OFMDFM consulted widely on that directive in 2005, and put forward proposals that became the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, which have applied to all providers of vocational training since 1 October 2006. The European directive is implemented here in the Employment Equality (Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, which define the policy issues from a legislative perspective.

The policy intention that underpinned the directive and the age regulations was to prohibit unjustified age discrimination in employment and vocational training. A main provision of the regulations is that providers cannot discriminate on age grounds in relation to training or access to training. Legal advice has confirmed that the regulations apply equally to vocational and non-vocational learning, which is important because older people tend to participate in college courses for recreational rather than vocational reasons. However, and unfortunately, that does not help, because all provision is covered by the regulations.

Another legal complexity is that the age regulations include an objective justification mechanism, which is quite a technical measure that time prevents my going into in great detail. However, the relevant clause allows for age discrimination in the event of a “legitimate aim” being pursued and when action taken to do so is “proportionate”. In other words, it must be demonstrated that the aim is sufficiently important to justify discrimination and that there is no alternative, short of discrimination, by which to achieve that aim. I will return to that point later, because recent interpretation

of that complex mechanism in England may be worthy of further consideration here.

It must be recognised, though, that the objective justification mechanism does not remove discrimination. In effect, it provides an opportunity to justify taking discriminatory action, and we all know the importance of removing discrimination. Therefore, we should not cast aside the clause lightly.

I have frequently been asked why older people can claim free bus passes. The answer is that age regulations apply only to employment and vocational training. At present, no legislation in Great Britain or Northern Ireland prohibits age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services. That may change for the better in the future, which is another matter that I will return to shortly.

That is the legal position and the very complicated landscape within which we are required to operate. However, in a more positive light, I will outline some of the measures that my Department and I have taken to address those issues. In doing so, I repeat my commitment to increasing access to learning and to removing whatever barriers that I can for people of all ages.

A major focus of our work has been on finding ways to minimise the impact of the age regulations on older people while being mindful of the need to comply with them. Early in 2008, my officials began discussions with senior management in further education colleges to achieve a consistent approach to the interpretation and application of the legislation and to examine how any negative impact on learners could be minimised.

As a result of those discussions, since September 2008, colleges have applied age regulations in a reasonably consistent way, although Mr Hilditch raised a number of fee anomalies. Of course, that does not mean that all colleges will charge the same fees, and we know that that is the case. As Mr Butler is aware, setting fees is a matter for each college. I do not want the Department to begin micro-managing such matters, but, equally, I accept that we are putting in large sums of money and, consequently, have some interest in policy matters.

Although colleges have stopped offering concessionary fees on the basis of age alone, they have traditionally offered concessions in a number of other ways. In particular, they offer means-tested concessions to, for example, people who are in receipt of certain benefits, such as income support, jobseeker's allowance and guaranteed pension credit. The age regulations do not stop that practice, so it continues. Again, Mr Hilditch mentioned the list of benefits that are taken into account, which I am happy to look at.

In response to the fees issue, my Department agreed with all colleges that they would extend their means test criteria to include those who are in receipt of rates relief. Rates relief is focused on older ratepayers and,

although, admittedly, it does not include all pensioners, it has the potential to increase the number of older people who may be entitled to fees concessions. It might, therefore, be appropriate for me to discuss with colleges how that concession could be accessed more easily, because some people attach a stigma to claiming rates relief.

The Department and the further education sector are looking further at the whole subject. For example, we are considering the fee structure in light of the current economic climate and part-time enrolment patterns throughout the sector. As a result, colleges have reduced some course fees, including some with respect to recreational provision, and that totally complies with age regulations. Mr Attwood mentioned the cost of addressing the matter. Although the local economic situation is difficult, the issue for us is not about cost; it is about how we comply with the regulations.

Turning to the motion, I shall identify a couple of areas — one in the short-to-medium term and one in the longer term — in which it might be possible to make some progress. In the short-to-medium term, I and my officials have been keeping in close contact with our counterparts in England on this matter. As has been mentioned, last year, I discussed the matter with Bill Rammell MP, the then Minister of State with responsibility for lifelong learning and further and higher education.

In March 2009, the Government in England published a White Paper, in which they restated their commitment to adult learning. They recognised the difficulties created by the age regulations, and they are pretty much the same in England as they are here. Specifically, the Government in England referred to the objective justification mechanism in the regulations and its potential to overcome some of the fees issues. As is the case in Northern Ireland, the White Paper emphasises that it is up to providers to make the case for objective justification, taking account of circumstances in their local area.

Subsequent to the publication of the White Paper, on 27 May 2009, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, which champions adult education in England and Wales, published a briefing note on age discrimination and adult learning fees, in which it suggests that the objective justification mechanism in the age regulations could, perhaps, be applied to socially legitimate aims as well as to legitimate aims of an economic or vocational nature. There are associated risks, because, as I said, doing that is, in effect, an attempt to justify discriminatory action. Moreover, those risks would be carried by individual colleges, which would, if legally challenged, have to justify their actions. However, it is worth exploring that avenue further, and I can confirm that my Department will examine it with colleges as a matter of urgency.

A proposed new EU anti-discrimination directive is under consideration. The draft directive was published on 2 July 2008, and member states have been engaged in negotiations with the European Commission regarding its precise content and scope. The process of agreeing the directive is unanimity by all 27 member states following consultation with the European Parliament. The Government Equalities Office has issued a UK-wide consultation document on the draft directive, and the consultation period runs from 5 May 2009 to 28 July 2009.

I inform Members about all that because the proposed directive will prohibit discrimination on a number of equality grounds, including age, in access to, and supply of, goods and services. One might think that that will only make things worse for older people because bus passes, for example, could then be treated in the same way as college fees. However, removing those types of benefits to older people would be totally unacceptable, so it is likely that the directive will include a raft of exceptions to enable justified age-differentiated services to continue. That could provide an opportunity to take a similar approach to FE provision.

It is worth noting that in advance of the European directive and separately from it, Great Britain is progressing its Equality Bill. It is likely that it will include powers to produce subordinate legislation to allow exceptions to be made to the prohibition on age discrimination. GB will consult on what age-based exceptions there should be, and it is likely that college fees could be among those that are identified. Although GB's Equality Bill will not apply to Northern Ireland, and the European directive is some way in the future, both will, I hope, give strong signals to the policy intent in that area. That will help us to come to a successful resolution later, if not sooner.

Earlier this year, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explore specifically the extent to which the emerging equality legislation in Europe and closer to home could be used to help to solve the problems in that area. I wrote to them on 16 January 2009, and I received a reply 10 minutes before I came into the Chamber this morning. It is, at least, a positive reply, and it will be helpful in dealing with the matter.

Mr McCarthy: I am pretty alarmed by what I hear about EU age-discrimination legislation. We had a European election yesterday. Many issues were debated and discussed but not this matter. Does the Minister agree that it is an important aspect of European policy and that the three MEPs whom we elected yesterday should get back in there and fight our corner?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am conscious that there was a European election yesterday. The Member's point is valid. I read out a list of issues, of which there will be widespread repudiation. However, we are opening up an important discussion.

I received a response from Dame Joan Harbison, who is the advocate for older people. We will co-operate with her because the First Minister and deputy First Minister asked her to consider the issue. That is another positive step.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I am running out of time, but I will give way if the Member is quick.

Mrs M Bradley: Did the Minister receive any explanation from OFMDFM for the length of time that it took to reply?

The Minister for Employment and Learning: I did not, but I am glad that at least I received a reply. I have just received it, but at least we are moving in the right direction.

I share much sympathy with the Committee regarding this matter. In answer to Mr Attwood's earlier question — I know that he had to leave the Chamber — I confirm that I am prepared to revisit the legal advice; at one time, the issue was clear, but there have since been developments. Given that that is the core issue that has held us back, it is appropriate to revisit the legal advice, and I will do so. I will report to Members in due course.

I welcome the debate warmly. I thank Members for their contributions, and I assure them that the Department is taking the issue very seriously.

12.00 noon

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning (Mr Newton): I declare an interest, as Dr Coulter did. Members had better beware that one reaches the "older person" category at the age of 50.

This is an important issue. Taking what has been said across the Chamber, it is an issue that exercises the staff of all MLAs, as people phone or visit their offices. It is not just an issue of education, but one that is about social inclusion and that stretches into matters of health, both physical and mental. It is an issue that we should all be conscious of because it has implications for society as a whole that are much wider than people attending a class on cookery, flower arranging, computing or whatever. It is an important issue for all aspects of society.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I thank the Deputy Chairperson for giving way. I was going to ask the Minister to give way, but I was conscious of his time.

What strikes me in the overview of the debate is that everyone supports the motion and seems to want to take the objective forward. The Minister might not be able to answer my question today, but, as I said earlier, objective 2 of PSA 7 of the Programme for Government

refers to taking forward co-ordinated strategic action to promote social inclusion. Can we have more information on how the Department hopes to do that?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning: I thank the Chairperson for that point.

I agree very much with the thrust of the Chairperson's speech, which outlined the general thinking of all members of the Committee from all parties. My party colleague Iris Robinson has been exercised by the issue and has taken it up on a number of occasions.

I will summarise the debate. Mr Easton, the first Member to follow the Chairperson, made the point in his opening remarks that the issue goes to the very heart of the ambition of society to be engaged in lifelong learning. He highlighted the opportunities that the proposal presents for FE colleges — an issue that the Minister referred to as well. Dr Coulter stressed his experience of involvement in the field of education and the benefits that he has seen personally. Again, he stressed the benefits to the entire community and across the various Departments. Dr Coulter has vast experience in further education.

Alex Attwood concentrated on legal areas and asked the Minister whether the legal anomalies have been explored fully. The Minister addressed that question in his remarks. Mr Attwood also indicated that perhaps the colleges have too much freedom of action and that the Minister's Department might want to stress that it should be setting the pace. That is a question that the Minister might want to answer in the future.

Anna Lo said that most people of pensionable age who take further education classes are female. She also stressed the benefits of such classes in encouraging social contact and in improving the ability of older people to communicate, and she spoke of the opportunity that such classes give older people to communicate with relatives in Australia, for instance. It is highly desirable that people be given the opportunity to improve their technological communication skills as well as their ability to communicate face to face.

David Hilditch said that his office had received queries from older persons asking why the older student discount had been removed. Perhaps I should say that his office was "inundated" with such queries; the Minister might know from where that word comes. He also asked why there was not a level playing field, and the Minister referred to that. Many people find it difficult to understand why fees for courses at the South Eastern Regional College and the Belfast Metropolitan College, for instance, are different.

Mickey Brady said that he had been approached by older persons who had not been able to afford course fees. All Members are conscious of the affordability of fees. Mr Brady stressed that discounts are being offered in parts of England.

Mary Bradley mentioned the health benefits, and that featured in the remarks of all Members who spoke. She spoke of the importance of including all members of society in college courses, and she said that there had been a reduction in the number of older students who were registering for courses — a point that was made by several Members.

Paul Butler recognised that this is an EU issue and that the intention of the legislation is to stop discrimination against older persons; however, an unintended consequence is that there is no discount for older persons.

The Minister spoke of his frustration with the issue, and he recognised the benefit to society of further education classes. He also stressed the complex legal issues, and he spoke of his Department's willingness to do all that it can to address them. Furthermore, he said that his Department continues to have discussions about the fee structures with further education colleges. The Minister said that it is not an issue of cost to the colleges, which many of us will be pleased to hear, but a legal issue.

The Minister also referred to the work that is being done in England and to the publication of the White Paper. He also spoke about the EU directive that may, in future, provide a way out of the problem. He also informed us that he had raised some matters with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on which he had received a positive reply — belated though it was, for whatever reason.

My party colleague Alex Easton said that we need to create a win-win situation. If, due to new legislation on the matter, for instance, the Minister returns to the House to inform us that discounts will be offered to older persons engaging in courses, we will have created a win-win situation, not only for the older person in the class but for all older people. All parts of society will benefit. Regardless of whether the benefits come from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety or the Department for Social Development, the whole community will benefit, and the health concerns and loneliness that some people face will be addressed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to enter into discussions with the Regional Colleges about the options for, and legalities surrounding, the reinstatement of concessionary course fees for older people; and seeks the Minister's acknowledgement that the availability of these discounted courses provides considerable social, as well as educational, benefits to older people.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Housing Budget

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business in the Order Paper is the motion on the housing budget. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget; notes in particular the lack of finance available for planned maintenance and improvement works, including private sector grants; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give top priority to housing in the forthcoming June monitoring round; calls on the Executive to recognise that investment in social housing can boost the construction sector and the wider economy at this time; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to put long term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

I am pleased to propose the motion. I very much regret the absence of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, whom I had understood was going to be here to respond to the motion. In being absent without any explanation, he is not giving proper courtesy to the Chamber.

The essential argument of the motion is that investment in housing confers great social benefit in dealing with homelessness and, more particularly, it offers the Executive the best route available to addressing the effects of the current recession. In one sense, therefore, I am making an argument that everyone here agrees with.

In the Programme for Government, a high priority was given to the provision of social housing. That was done to address a crisis in housing. As we know, a special report was commissioned from Sir John Semple. He recommended a dramatic increase in the newbuild social housing programme to 2,000 houses a year, up from about 800 a year, which was the rate at that time. The Executive adopted that recommendation and set a target of 10,000 new social homes in five years. The Minister for Social Development made immediate plans to put that into effect, budgeting to build more than 5,000 houses in the first three years. Members will remember that her initial budget was inadequate for that task. Some told her to keep quiet and accept the money; however, she did not, and an increased budget was allocated.

We all know what has happened since then. Much of the housing budget was predicated on house sales and other property sales; those have largely vanished into thin air. Last year, the housing budget was £80

million short. By year end, through the monitoring rounds and diverting Department for Social Development (DSD) funding, that was brought down to about £35 million, but that left many projects unfunded. It also created great uncertainty throughout the year, as building and maintenance firms did not know whether funding was coming. That crisis continued to the year end, as many Members will know from their having been approached by constituents who have such firms and businesses.

Officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) have told the Committee:

"In terms of the actual delivery... the only significant problem area in this financial year has been in respect of social housing".

They were referring to the 2008-09 financial year. That is a remarkable statement. If one considers the many pressures in that year, including the loss of an anticipated £175 million from Workplace 2010 and the need to finance slurry tanks on farms as a result of the nitrates directive, it seems that housing was not given the same relief as other schemes. According to DFP, the single major capital scheme that did not receive its quota of funding was social housing.

This year, the deficit is £100 million. There are 1,750 projected housing starts this year. That is the highest for many years, and the Department for Social Development and its Minister need to be given due credit for that. The heaviest pressure is on maintenance and private sector grants. Major improvement schemes have been deferred, affecting some 850 homes. Single element schemes, such as heating and kitchens, and so on, have been severely reduced.

Many economists have argued that putting more money into housing, particularly the house building sector, is the most effective intervention that can be made by Government to counteract—

Ms J McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will give way, although I feel that I can anticipate the Member's comments.

Ms J McCann: Does the Member agree that it would be beneficial if the Minister were to open up discussions with the credit union movement, the Treasury and the Executive to see whether there is some way that the credit union moneys could be released to help in the social housing budget?

12.15 pm

Mr O'Loan: The Member will know that the SDLP published a substantial paper recently that outlined many measures for generating more funds that could then be used in a number of areas, including the housing sector. The SDLP is interested in discussing all possibilities, including the Member's proposal. I do not know how practical it would be to gain access to

credit union moneys, but we are certainly open to discussing the matter.

I referred to the general support from economists for investing money in house building, and DSD and the University of Ulster published an important paper this week that was written by Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey. That paper argues that there is a greater multiplier for that form of investment through supplies purchased and the spending of incomes than for any other form of investment. That is a very strong and important statement. Specifically, they calculate that for every 10 jobs that are created directly, a further seven will be sustained elsewhere in the economy. They say that that applies both to direct house building and maintenance programmes.

A further factor is that housing programmes give very good value for money. Material costs have dropped by as much as 17%, and we all know that labour costs have dropped dramatically. That means that we can get more for our pound now than we could have in recent years. There is also the desirability of maintaining skills and employment in Northern Ireland, including having a flow of apprentices. The Ulster Bank's quarterly economic review shares the opinion that is outlined in the paper. It states:

"Efforts by the Executive to stimulate this sector will have the largest impact on reducing unemployment."

Of course, there are sound social reasons for investing in housing. Homelessness has increased in recent years, at a time when it was decreasing dramatically in England. With unemployment and repossessions on the increase, homelessness will almost inevitably rise as well. We continue to have serious problems with overcrowding and with poor housing conditions. The House Condition Survey 2006 found 3.4% of houses, that is, one in every 30, to be unfit. One third of those houses are owner-occupied, hence the importance of improvement grants, which have been cut drastically. The connection between poor housing and poor health is known. There is now a major emphasis on public health. If we are serious about public health, we must ensure that the house improvement budget is guaranteed.

I turn to the plight of the contractors who do the one-off maintenance work on heating and kitchens, that is, the so-called Egan contractors. Those firms invested heavily and took on workers after getting firm commitments from the Housing Executive, but they are now reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence and are subject to the vagaries of monitoring rounds. That is no way to plan the maintenance of our housing stock or to get firms to work strategically.

I am at a loss to understand the Minister's position on the matter, because I think that he says contradictory things. In a letter to the DSD Minister in January 2009,

he said that he believed that there is a way through the current financial difficulties. He recognised:

"they risk having a materially disproportionate and undesirable impact on the local construction industry."

I appreciate that stance, yet in a response to a question for written answer that I asked about the risks to the delivery of this year's capital programme, he dumped the problem entirely on individual Departments. There was no sense of collective responsibility or of leadership from the Finance Minister. Again, I regret that the Minister is not here to answer that point. It is very disappointing and unnecessary, and it is not what people expect or want from the Assembly.

I want to relate the issue to yesterday's election results. The two issues might seem to be very different, but I see a close connection between them. The DUP took a substantial hit yesterday. Jim Allister and the TUV did very well, and we know that he is bitterly anti-agreement. The DUP could react to that by becoming more anti-agreement itself and by pulling away from partnership and any attempt to work towards consensus. That would be another colossal strategic failure for unionism.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Has the Member not wandered from the subject of the motion, which he is prone to do in the House? What is the relevance of what he is talking about now?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to stick to the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I am sticking to the point; I said that I would make the connection, and I will now do so. The right response to yesterday's election results is to make the institutions work better for the people and to take the argument to them that the Assembly is delivering for them. The motion is as good a place as any to start on that work. I say to the Minister in his absence: adopt the problem of the housing budget as a collective Executive issue and work out a strategic solution, not just for this year, but, as the motion proposes, for the future.

I wonder whether there is some hope that thinking is changing in the Minister's Department. At the Committee meeting on 27 May, one of his officials said:

"The Executive could agree to a pro rata reduction in departmental allocations and make money available for addressing other pressures."

That was one of a number of comments made by departmental officials recently that indicate that there are thoughts about altering and rewriting the Budget. That is not the right way to go about it: it is not the new Budget that we have sought, nor would it be as effective as the new proposals that the SDLP put forward in its recent substantial paper. However, it may be the beginning of the change that I am asking for in the motion. I ask the Assembly for its support.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David Simpson, Chairperson of the Social Committee.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): Thank you, Mr Deputy Chair; we almost got it right. I apologise for arriving late. I was attending another meeting.

The challenges that face the housing budget are well known and will, undoubtedly, be well articulated today. They have been articulated already, but whether they have been well articulated is a different story. In acknowledging those challenges, the Committee for Social Development has carefully considered the new housing agenda and its ambitious and welcome targets for new social homes. The Committee has also considered other housing-related programmes, which are ambitious and have equally welcome targets, including bringing more houses up to the decent homes standard.

All those programmes and their targets, and the ambitions behind them, are a recognition of the key role that better housing plays in our society. All sides of the House accept that creating more and better social housing has a positive and profound effect on the individual families and communities that benefit directly. We would all concede that the benefits of social housing programmes are keenly felt in the construction and related industries.

The funding of programmes for the building and refurbishment of social homes is based on expected receipts from land and some house sales. As Members know, the Northern Ireland property market has undergone a very bad decline. The majority of Committee members agree that the inevitable consequence of that decline has been a reduction in available resources for social housing. As everyone knows, times are tough, budgets are tight and hard decisions are required.

Mr F McCann: The theme of the debate is maintenance, Egan contracts and replacements. As for urban regeneration, a contract on the Royal Exchange has been delayed, and there is £110 million available in the budget. Does the Member agree that if that £110 million were moved across by the Minister, it would deal with the problems that we face?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: Yes, I take that on board. I got briefed on that only this morning, and I have been told that the new date could be September or October. Yes, £110 million is available, and there is the possibility that it could be used to offset the shortfall in social housing. The Committee will look at that at its meeting on Thursday, when it will reach a conclusion.

Times are difficult, and there is the unrelenting pressure of homelessness and housing stress. Undoubtedly, there are economic benefits in investing in new houses or housing refurbishment and maintenance. On the

other hand, the Executive face the requirement — as does every householder in Northern Ireland — to do the best that they can with a very difficult budget.

In relation to the housing budget, I have a letter written by the Finance Minister that states:

“I have met with the Social Development Minister to consider the options that might be explored in what remains a very difficult economic and public expenditure environment. To help alleviate the pressures on the DSD budget resulting from a very significant shortfall in anticipated receipts I have provided £20 million in additional funding to DSD over recent monitoring rounds and have supported in the February monitoring round a reallocation by DSD of £10.5 million to housing.”

What has happened to that £30-odd million that was allocated to DSD? What priorities did it fund? The handling of the DSD budget is a major issue; therefore, the Minister should look at how that has been handled and the priorities on which it has been spent. That might alleviate difficulties not only in the housing budget but with the Egan contractors as regards the maintenance and renovation of homes —

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: No, I will not give way, because I am almost finished.

Many families have been waiting on contractors to carry out renovations to their homes; however, that work has been suspended.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde. All parties in the Chamber have fully supported calls for additional resources to be given to social housing provision in the past. In fact, in many previous monitoring rounds, tens of millions of pounds have been awarded to the Minister for Social Development to deliver an effective social housing programme. However, the Members who tabled the motion would have us believe that the Executive have given little money to pad out the housing budget over the past two years.

In February 2008, after more than £200 million of additional money had been given to the Minister —

Mr O’Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I am sorry; I have a lot to say.

She stood in the Chamber and said that she now had what she needed to deliver her programme. In the past year, more resources have been given to housing, and we fully supported that to ensure that all aspects of the housing programme were delivered fully. The Assembly even supported the Minister after she raided the social security budget by moving money to the social housing budget.

In December 2008, the Minister gave back £50 million from the social security budget, resulting in the building of two new social security offices being suspended. Those

projects would have provided much-needed work for the construction industry. However, the Department for Social Development lost that money when —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: No thanks.

The Department for Social Development lost that money when it gave it back to the Executive for redistribution among other Departments. In the December monitoring round, the Minister tried to move £4 million from the neighbourhood renewal programme, which was set up to deliver resources to those most in need in society, to the housing budget. However, that money also was lost when it went back into the central pot.

In October 2008, the Housing Executive told all Egan contractors who fit kitchens that they should be ready to start major replacements — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr F McCann: Many of those kitchen replacements were required on the grounds of health and safety. Some weeks later, on 18 December 2008, the Housing Executive informed the contractors that those replacements would not go ahead due to a lack of funding. We still do not know what happened in the intervening weeks, other than that the Minister made her smash-and-grab statement on 15 December. However, we know that DSD, the Housing Executive and the SDLP advised people to complain to the DUP and Sinn Féin about the lack of any resources from the December monitoring round.

In January 2008, the Housing Executive sent an instruction to cease all maintenance and change-of-tenancy repairs. That left hundreds of people who were allocated houses unable to move in, because repairs could not be carried out to their homes, and that upset many people. In February 2008, we were told that no money existed to complete 400 of the housing programmes for that financial year but that those would be completed in this year's programme.

In April 2009, Egan contractors were again informed that £10 million would be allocated for replacements. When contractors took on Egan contracts, they were advised to anticipate a roll out of 4,500 kitchen replacements and 9,500 houses for external maintenance.

I understand that many of those contractors will find themselves without work after June and that they will begin to lay off many workers. That could result in more than 800 workers losing their jobs, not to mention the implications for suppliers of materials and for local shops that will be denied the income that workers would have spent. That is yet another blow to the construction industry. Those workers have been at pains to point out that their sector provides an essential service. Many

people's kitchens have not been replaced for more than 25 years and are deteriorating.

The cyclical maintenance programme must also continue. Not to proceed with that work is short-sighted and will cost more in the long run.

12.30 pm

In his pre-Budget report of November 2008, the British Chancellor declared that the upgrading of public authority housing to meet the decent homes standard should be prioritised to maintain employment in that section of the construction industry. On 26 March 2009, the Minister for Social Development said that she would rather put a roof over people's heads than provide kitchens. However, she forgets that people in social housing pay rent and, as such, are entitled to continued maintenance and replacements, in line with their tenancy agreements.

More recently, another disaster has befallen the construction industry with the suspension of the design and build packages as a result of legal action in Europe. That will impact on many hundreds of construction workers, small builders and developers, all of whom rely on that work. Furthermore, it has been said that little information was provided to those small businesses that believed that the contracts were ongoing, only to discover that they were suspended. The Minister must make a statement to the House and explain what she is doing to assist —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr F McCann: The Minister must explain what she is doing to assist those people, and what legal advice she has received. In its statement, the SDLP said that investment in social housing can boost the construction industry.

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

Mr McNarry: Spending Government money on the creation of jobs and on the realisation of projects, such as housing, seems a desirable way in which to proceed. However, to do so would require a reprioritising of that sacred cow, the Programme for Government. According to the DUP, amending that programme is impossible because it is perfect. Some of us, however, suspect that the real reasons behind that rigid and inflexible attitude is the control freakery that so characterises the DUP and Sinn Féin leaderships. Those leaderships cannot agree on how to reprioritise the Programme for Government, and that has resulted in political sterility, with 81% of the Assembly's time being taken up with private Members' motions, which, as we know, are not binding on Ministers, and only 18% of our time used to debate Government business.

What did the DUP blame for the demise of its vote and for its failure to reach the quota yesterday? Was it

not something pathetic such as it had been too busy in Government? Where is the evidence that it has been too busy in Government? What may be closer to the truth is that that party has been too busy eating out at the taxpayer's expense, purchasing six or seven tables and looking after two homes, never mind double- and triple-jobbing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. As I have already said, the motion under debate concerns housing.

The Member may now continue

Mr McNarry: I accept what you say, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, we have heard nothing today about housing, and there will be no ministerial response to the debate. Instead, all the House has heard is talk of a hokey-pokey shuffle, without the electorate's being allowed to choose. That shuffle means that MLAs who are also MPs can remain at Westminster but cannot stay here. It is a kind of cull. The issue of housing has been sent to the back of that internal cull to protect the salaries, pensions and perks that have been taken for so many years at Westminster.

If the DUP is not interested in housing — the issue that the House is debating today and of which the Deputy Speaker has reminded me — let it go to the electorate. Let the electorate choose and give that party its verdict on who stays or goes from this or any other place. Let the electorate also give that party its verdict on housing. Let the DUP give the people another opportunity, as it did yesterday, to tell that party that the game is up.

There is a sound case for housing's being afforded a higher priority in the Programme for Government. Most of us can see the win-win nature of providing more social housing and not falling short of targets, as we undoubtedly are. In the process of doing so, we can provide more construction jobs and help offset the alarming rise in unemployment in that sector. Housing is a priority, yet others do not seem to recognise that fact.

We should have had such debates earlier. It must be difficult for treble-jobbers to understand the plight of unemployed people and people whose jobs are threatened. How could anyone with two homes empathise with people who suffer the consequences of a financial shortfall for housing? How could they see the consequences? Therefore, decisive decision-making must improve the turnaround time in implementing decisions in an Executive that does not function properly.

On 29 May 2009, it emerged that the UK Government's much-heralded £285 million mortgage rescue scheme had helped only two homeowners in its first four months of operation, despite having 4,202 applications for help. In a nutshell, that is an indication of what the motion is about. It was taking up to five months to process a claim. That is all the more reason for us to

move towards making those decisions, instead of burying our heads in the sand and pretending that the real issues that face us on housing and on everything else will somehow disappear. They will not disappear; the electorate said so yesterday, and will say so again at the soonest opportunity.

Until we prioritise the Programme for Government, we are going nowhere, and we are letting our people down.

Ms Lo: I support the motion. A serious debate on the issue is urgently required. As the proposer of the motion said, a shortfall of £100 million for this year and next year exists because of the dramatic fall in receipts from land and house sales. DSD's capital receipts have been worse hit than all the Departments. DSD has been dependent on bids in the quarterly monitoring rounds to make up its programme deficits. Depending on short-term firefighting measures without any long-term planning is poor practice, and, surely, is no way to run a Department.

The Committee for Social Development has heard from the Egan contractors, and Mr Fra McCann also mentioned that. The Egan contractors were responsible for maintenance, with the anticipation that the annual spend would be approximately £40 million. Contracts started to roll out in July 2008, but, in December 2008, the contractors were told that there would not be any starts in January 2009. The Minister of Finance and Personnel then agreed to provide additional funding, and the contractors were told in January 2009 that they had to spend the £10 million in less than three months to the end of March. They were paying staff overtime to do the work to spend that £10 million. Surely, that is not the way to run a Department.

Mrs D Kelly: The Member is quite right: the Department for Social Development should be properly funded and resourced. Does the Member share my concerns that it seems that the DUP and Sinn Féin are punishing the Minister for Social Development because she stood up to them on a wide range of issues in the Executive?

Ms Lo: We all need to work together as a joined-up Government; infighting does not help anyone.

The Egan contractors paid staff overtime, and their staff had no work to do in April. That is a wasteful way of working; it is ridiculous. Instead of the Egan contractors' budget being ring-fenced at £40 million, it was reduced to £10 million. It is difficult for the construction industry to work to budgets that swing so much in a short period.

Planned maintenance is important if we are to keep the housing stock in good shape and to prevent houses from falling out of use. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has a responsibility to tenants who pay rent every month to keep up maintenance.

However, 40,000 people are still on the Housing Executive waiting list. Undoubtedly, there is a huge need for more social housing. The Minister of Finance and Personnel's press release of 23 April 2009 stated that the Government are on course to deliver the public service agreement target of 10,000 social and affordable houses by 2013: that is, 2,000 units a year. Last year, the housing budget had a shortfall of £32 million, and only 1,100 new starts were completed. There was a shortfall of 364 units. This year, it is planned that the Housing Executive should commence 1,765 newbuilds and catch up with last year's shortfall. That is a total of 2,000 newbuilds with a £100 million shortfall. One does not need to be a rocket scientist to know that the Housing Executive will be unable to do that. It is unrealistic, and we desperately need a short-term injection of cash from the June monitoring round. More importantly, the Department needs to take long-term measures to secure a sound financial footing for the Housing Executive.

It is important that housing is prioritised. As Members said, construction of newbuilds and maintenance work will help the economy. It will maintain jobs in the construction sector and in allied industries.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. By leave of the Assembly, I propose to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The next Member to speak will be Mr David Hilditch.

The sitting was suspended at 12.42 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion.

The Minister for Social Development and her Department seem to be under the impression that the members of the Executive, particularly the Minister of Finance and Personnel, do not support her proposals for investment in social housing. That is simply untrue. As I look around the Chamber, I can see that, from all Benches, there is support and a desire to help to solve the problem. My party and I are keen to do as much as we possibly can on housing. It is a matter of record that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has already prioritised housing in previous monitoring rounds. At some stage, the penny must drop.

Members are all aware of the current economic climate and of competing priorities. As Members from all parties table their private motions, there must be a realisation of from where resources come. The Minister of Finance and Personnel must have the freedom to choose which priority is most deserving. I remind the Members who tabled the motion that other Departments have received much less in previous monitoring rounds.

Members are all aware that sales of social housing have dropped dramatically. However, it is unfair to say that that crisis appeared simply because of the global economic downturn. Although there is no doubt that it has had a significant impact on the housing market, we cannot simply blame the economic downturn for every financial shortfall.

It is time for the Department for Social Development to look at ways in which to try to alleviate its in-house problems and to review its policies, particularly on financial management and contractual matters. Other Members have mentioned the unacceptable way in which some matters have been handled, with Egan schemes being cited as a main example.

The Minister has committed herself in making housing her number one priority. I ask what exactly her Department has done with its budget to redirect funding to provide extra social housing rather than for her simply to pass the blame on to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Again, Members have given glaring examples, which can be studied in the Hansard report.

Although the Department for Social Development has, I believe, tried to put housing at the top of its agenda, if it is to succeed in the current economic climate, it must make serious adjustments and amendments in order to eradicate the waiting list of those in housing stress, on which there are 20,000 people. Housing stock must be maintained, refurbished and improved, regardless of the economic downturn. The Minister and her Department must find ways in

which to do that rather than blame the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I look forward to the Minister's approval of the social housing programme for 2009-2010, which, it is to be hoped, will put housing on a secure footing and will have a positive impact on the economy, particularly on the construction industry. Given the delays with the plan, which revolve around procurement, it might be best to defer it and to put extra resources into decent homes and Egan schemes, the immediate spin-off of which would be economic activity.

Mr Craig: The debate centres on the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget. It is one of those stories that ask whether there is ever enough money in any budget. Even on a personal level, does anyone ever have enough money to spend on what he or she wants? The answer is always no. The same is true of DSD. There will never, ever be enough money to spend on public housing. There will never be enough money to spend on what the Assembly wants.

Mr O'Loan: I wonder whether the Member will accept that he is not expressing the situation accurately. When he says that there is not enough money in anyone's budget, and that everyone wants more money, he makes a valid point. However, the fact is that a three-year budget was allocated to DSD, of which a substantial section was intended for housing. That money was not realised. That is quite different to every Department's saying that it wants more money in its budget. Does the Member accept that point?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr Craig: Any Member can put his or her own spin on the matter, but there are facts. The reality check for DSD, as there is for every other Department, is that budget allocations are flexible.

Certain people in the Chamber have criticised the whole Executive's inflexible approach to the Budget and their reluctance to change it to adapt to circumstances. Changes have been made to that Budget. The real criticism in the debate is that the Minister of Finance and Personnel has failed to allocate money to housing. The history speaks for itself: £20 million has been reallocated to the housing budget. If £100 million is missing, to where did that £20 million disappear? Moreover, the Minister of Finance and Personnel reallocated another £10.5 million to the housing budget. Where has that money gone? Is the figure now £70 million? Is it still £100 million? Is it £200 million? So many figures have been floated about as regards the housing budget.

The motion also states that the shortfall is causing major harm and concern and is reducing the maintenance budget for housing. That is an interesting issue. It was brought to my attention that there is a serious issue

about a maintenance budget for housing; none of us will deny that. Letters have been sent out throughout the Province to residents who had expected schemes to be conducted for health and safety reasons.

I know of two examples from areas in my constituency, one of which was visited by the Minister for Social Development last week. She saw, at first hand, the ongoing problems in Hillhall. Houses have been built on top of garages where cars are parked, which has increased the risk of fires. A scheme that was intended to redevelop the area has been cancelled for the fourth year in a row.

The Minister was taken into a pensioner's bungalow —

Mr F McCann: One theme of the debate is to create work for the construction industry. However, almost one third of properties, such as the Curzon cinema on the Ormeau Road, that were used in the 2007-08 newbuild project were bought in the open market or from developers.

Mr Craig: I concur with the Member, and I will address those issues in a moment.

The Minister was taken into a pensioner's bungalow, where she was shown a kitchen ceiling that had collapsed several months previously. However, the Housing Executive refuses to repair the ceiling because it does not have sufficient funds. It is waiting for a scheme, which was cut this year, to be implemented.

Furthermore, people have been moved out of the Dales flats in Seymour Hill because of health and safety concerns that arose from mould growth due to the lack of ventilation in the flats. A major £5.5 million scheme was cancelled this year.

If the issue was merely about a shortfall in budgets, I would speak to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, in reality, the Minister for Social Development made decisions that caused the shortfall in the maintenance budget. The Housing Executive gave her options, one of which was to select a budget that balanced maintenance and newbuild matters. She opted for newbuild only and left everyone else to straggle and to struggle with maintenance problems in existing housing. That is the problem. The Minister for Social Development needs to sort that out, not the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

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

Mr Craig: When Ministers make choices, they must realise that there is no wonderful pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. If Departments want another £100 million, from whose budget will it be stripped?

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I apologise to Members for not being present in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate; I was at other meetings.

I support the motion, and all Members agree that there has been a dramatic fall in house sales, with a consequential shortfall in the social housing budget.

That shortfall in capital receipts is down to a virtual cessation in Housing Executive house sales. Its total house sales revenue was only £6 million this year, compared with more than £100 million two years ago, and we must acknowledge that. There has also been a dramatic drop in receipts from land sales.

As a result, the social housing budget is under stress, but it is not simply about money. The impact of the social housing shortage is felt most acutely in communities that are suffering the greatest disadvantage, as families and first-time buyers can no longer afford mortgages. It is important to give those people hope. We have a responsibility to them, but, most important of all, we have a responsibility not to play politics with the issue or with people's hopes. Unfortunately, some parties here are playing politics with the issue today.

In a recent publication, the SDLP talked about how £400 million could be redirected to address pressing issues such as social housing. However, in allocating that £400 million, the SDLP did not allow for the equal pay claims of underpaid civil servants or for the deferral of water charges, which would cost approximately £100 million and £200 million respectively, while saying that it supports both. The SDLP's notion that the Belfast Harbour Commissioners could simply reallocate £30 million to the Titanic signature project was not based on any realistic assessment of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' commitment to that project; the SDLP was simply looking for a cheap headline while pretending that it had something new to say. However, there was nothing new in what was said.

Even this year, when the Minister for Social Development proposed a fuel poverty payment, she was quite happy to exclude all pensioners from the scheme. It was only because other Ministers, particularly the deputy First Minister, to whom I give credit and congratulations, intervened and increased the number of people who were eligible for that payment from 65,000 to 150,000. The SDLP seems to believe that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. We all know, of course, that there is not. The notion of constantly re-spending the same money reflects the SDLP's political opportunism and the way in which it plays politics with people's lives.

In seeking to address the issue realistically, the Executive must support their priority to fund social housing. Monitoring rounds and reallocations are appreciated and gladly accepted by Ministers who struggle with the limitations of their budgets. However, it is also important that in seeking additional resources, Ministers can spend what they have demanded. Unfortunately, in the case of the SDLP Minister for

Social Development, that has not always been so; in the December monitoring round, Margaret Ritchie returned £38.7 million of her budget. This is the Minister who said that if she was given the money, she would build the houses. She was given money for neighbourhood renewal, among other demands, and she gave it back.

The Executive made it clear that social housing continues to be a priority. It is unfortunate that the Minister for Social Development is not here to respond to the debate. Money will have to be found to tackle such a vital issue, and I hope that the Minister finds the competence to deal with her budget effectively.

We must also recognise that the global economic downturn is having a negative effect on Departments and on the services that they provide. As such, it is likely that all Departments will seek additional funding to address pressing issues, which, in many cases, represent front line services. We must be careful that in trying to address one issue we do not have a negative effect on other front line services.

I would like the Minister to make proposals for targeted interventions in areas of greatest need, particularly in north and west Belfast, the north-west and Derry. I ask the Minister to inspire confidence by showing that she can manage her budget better than she has done thus far. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: My colleagues and I are happy to support the SDLP motion. The housing budget appears to be well short of what is required to meet the needs for which the Department for Social Development is responsible. There is little point in criticising a Minister or a Department without giving them the necessary resources, whether through a monitoring round or by reprogramming budgets.

2.15 pm

The motion refers to the housing budget as being important to the general economy, particularly at the moment. It is accepted widely that housing can be a key mover in the local economy. It is incumbent on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider those benefits when making his quarterly monitoring round decisions.

I note, as have others, the recent work of Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey of the University of Ulster, suggesting that housing projects produce a local economic multiplier effect, creating local employment opportunities and maintaining investment in the local and regional economy. A local economic multiplier effect encompasses further economic activity, which is associated with additional local income, local supplier purchases, and long-term development effects. In England, the same effect has been recognised by the fact that £600 million on top of existing budgets has been invested to stimulate housing development.

I question Gordon Brown's reduction in VAT across the board. What benefit is there to the economy if people get a reduction in the price of their flat-screen televisions, which may be manufactured elsewhere? It is important that funding be targeted to areas that would benefit local employees.

The First Minister is very good at telling us that given that the Programme for Government is designed to put the economy first, it should not be rewritten. Indeed, he felt fit to get angry at a member of the press who took him up on that issue.

The actions that both DUP Ministers of Finance have taken in this devolved Assembly show their inability to adapt the Budget to changing circumstances. The motion highlights rightly that more money for the housing budget would mean more money for the contractors who are employed to carry out the work that is involved. That would mean more money for the employment of builders, plumbers, electricians and other tradesmen, many of whom have been laid off because of the decline in house building.

Although I question the actions of the Department of Finance and Personnel, it must be said that the Department for Social Development also has questions to answer. It appears to be handing back a lot of money in monitoring rounds. Are the Department and the Minister doing everything possible to minimise underspends in the Department? What assistance has the Minister and her Department received from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the issue? Should more of the money that has been returned centrally be passed back with the authority to spend it on other budget headings where it is clear that money can be spent? Those questions have to be answered.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office released a report recently stating that the Housing Executive is keeping to its accounting targets of reducing the amount of rent arrears by simply writing off large amounts of debt, which is some £10.6 million. Is that the best use of public money?

However, I do not wish to give the impression that the Minister for Social Development is responsible for the hole in the housing budget; clearly, she is not, and we accept that. The new Labour recession is affecting public finances across the UK. Given that her budget is so reliant on the capital value of lands and capital receipts, it is clear that her Department was always going to suffer the most from the downturn. I understand that last year, her Department was budgeting for some £80 million of receipt income. A press release that the Department issued in January 2009 indicated that some £8 million was being forecast at that time, meaning that there was a huge shortfall.

It is up to the Department of Finance and Personnel to show how best to serve the people of Northern Ireland by adjusting for such changes in the Budget.

The two main parties who control the Executive both claim that one stops the other from having an issue added to the agenda, but it is up to them to change anything that they wish, if there is a will to do so. There is little point in their criticising others when it is in their gift to make those changes. The electorate showed their disgust of the current situation through the low turnout for the European elections.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: We must now start to address meaningfully the housing problem facing Northern Ireland, rather than merely bury our heads in the sand. I support the motion.

Mr Attwood: The motion makes two essential political and practical points. The first is to give top priority to housing in the June monitoring rounds, and the second is to put long-term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

The first question — how to give top priority to housing in June monitoring — has been explored in a false and erroneous way by the people from Sinn Féin. Why do I say that? The Member for West Belfast Fra McCann, who is known around this Building as “I will ask others to give way but I will not give way myself”, was asked to give way three times by SDLP Members who wanted to make the point that the Minister for Social Development has not returned a penny farthing of her housing budget in monitoring returns.

Instead, as Mr Beggs said, in the December monitoring returns, the Minister asked that non-housing moneys of £38 million should be approved for housing by the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, backed by the Sinn Féin Ministers, refused to do that. Therefore, £38 million of non-housing moneys that could have been used for housing in December was blocked by Sinn Féin. Those are the hard facts.

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member is not reflecting in an accurate way. Was there not also £50 million moved from the social security capital budget across into —

Mr Speaker: Order. That is not an appropriate point of order.

Mr Attwood: I thank Mr McCann for once again proving that, although he asks others to give way, he does not give way himself; he refused to give way three times during his contribution.

The irony and inconsistency of all that, welcome though it is, is that an hour ago in the Chamber, Sinn Féin changed its mind about what should happen with DSD moneys. Sinn Féin announced that if there were £110 million of unspent moneys in the DSD budget due to the Royal Exchange project not going ahead, it would back a reallocation of that money for housing

by the Finance Minister. Will Sinn Féin explain why it blocked the very same proposal from the Minister in December?

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a minute.

Six months later, when the Minister has won the public and political argument about housing need in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin changes its mind.

I welcome the fact that the Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, who was apparently speaking in his capacity as Chairperson but sounded very like a DUP MLA, also indicated broad support for that principle. I hope that the Finance Minister is listening to Sinn Féin, the DUP Chairperson of the Social Development Committee and the SDLP motion. We are all telling him that in the monitoring rounds he should reallocate unspent non-housing moneys for housing need.

Jonathan Craig simply does not get the second point that the motion makes. Housing is essential to the construction industry in the North for a short-term bounce in a recession and a longer-term uplift in the quality of people's lives. Therefore, money for housing should be ring-fenced so that there is never a doubt in the next Assembly —

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way, because, unlike other Members, I do give way.

Does the Member not agree that it is inappropriate to cut the entire maintenance budget in order to create new housing? It puts 750 jobs in the construction industry at risk. That is an unacceptable way to manage a budget. We cannot keep building new roofs over our heads and allow existing housing to fall into complete disrepair and then also have to be replaced.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr Attwood: If the DUP's Minister had agreed to the SDLP Minister's request in December to reallocate the £38 million, the Member would not have had the nerve to say:

“the Minister for Social Development made decisions that caused the shortfall in the maintenance budget.”

She did not: the recession did.

Martina Anderson spoke about the lack of receipts. When that issue came home to roost, the Minister asked for a way out, and the Department of Finance and Personnel and Sinn Féin blocked it. This month, we must not repeat the error of December. This month, the Finance Minister needs to live up to his commitment in a letter to the Minister for Social Development on January 9 that, in the current financial difficulties, he accepts that the loss of expected receipts from the sale of land and houses risks having a materially

disproportionate and undesirable effect on the local construction industry.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Attwood: We need to put housing on a secure and stable footing for this year, for the next two years, and for the four years after that.

Mr Shannon: I do not think that there is a Member in the Chamber who does not have an issue concerning the Housing Executive. Every day, we get complaints; every day, we hear concerns; every day, we are asked to help in allocating a house. That is how it is in my constituency office, as it is in everyone else's.

Nor is it just about the allocation of houses, it is about repairs, contracts and renovations. The work is done, but not, perhaps, always to the appropriate standard. Just yesterday, a lady came to my office about work to her house that had almost caused her an injury. There are too many horror stories; a change is needed. There is a major problem with housing provision and upkeep, and that must be addressed and action taken.

Aa' shoart whiel ago, Aa' scrivven a letter tae tha Mannyistar tae pit fort mi' worries aboot tha reducing o' grants mony that haud bin sut asied fer tha Hoosin Executiv in tha Proavince, an in pertikular tae tha Airdes hoosin. Tha manager fer tha Airdes area noo is Owen Brady, an he daes a reel guid joab wi' tha mony that bin putt aside fer him, but whut is mare than cleer is that ther isnae enouch mony fer tae dae aw tha woark that is needit

Tha Mannyistar is weel awor o' tha social hoosin needs in tha Airdes. She kens that better than maist fowk an it is sae impoartan that fowk shud stae in ther haems an kerri oot repaers tae manage wi' ther needs insteed o' movin bakk oan tae tha hoosin list, whiel repaers er kerrit oot, an endin up wi'oot ocht fer a unshair amount o' tiem.

Recently, I wrote to the Minister expressing concern about the reduction of grants money that had been allocated to Housing Executive district offices, particularly the Ards district. Owen Brady, district manager for the Ards area, does a fantastic job with the money that has been allocated. However, it is abundantly clear that there is not enough to do the work that is needed.

The Minister knows better than most the social housing needs in the Ards. It is imperative for people to stay in their homes and to renovate to cope with their needs rather than move back onto the housing list and flounder for who knows how long. I urged the Minister to ensure that the 1,500 new homes that are needed are provided. Strangford, which I represent, has its allocation of those. Indeed, I would be happy to see all 1,500 homes built in Strangford, and I know

that my colleague Iris Robinson feels the same. However, that would hardly be fair to everyone else in the Province.

There are almost 2,000 people on the priority housing list in the Ards district and about 1,000 on the ordinary waiting list; that shows that social housing need in the Ards continues to grow. The growth is such that it would take 300 newbuilds this year alone to address its housing needs, and that does not take into account those who come onto the list in the meantime.

Stephen Graham, Housing Executive manager for the Ards area, told me in response to a question that 200 houses are to be built this year with various housing associations, including Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd and Helm Housing, for the years 2009-2010 and 2010-11. However, I told him that the need is there now. He replied that the Housing Executive was agreeing to 70 off-the-shelf purchases that could be built this year to address the core of housing need immediately.

While all that is happening, we have a change — and I talked to the Minister about this — in the way in which houses are built, whether design-and-build or other options, and we now find that there are legal issues. I spoke to the Minister, and I know that she, too, is unhappy that houses cannot be built as they once were. Even in the area that I represent there is great housing need, but schemes have not been given the go-ahead.

2.30 pm

Concentrated newbuild programmes need to be undertaken every year. That is the only measure that will reduce the social housing list, and the Minister can bring it about. We need to boost the construction industry because that would boost the economy, create jobs and put money back into people's pockets.

The Housing Executive manager in my area does the best that he can with his available budget, but, unfortunately, he is not given enough funds to meet the needs of the community. The Minister should allocate more funding to the newbuild process. Creating a strategy will immediately benefit many sections of the community by providing housing, maintenance and upkeep.

It is a big job, and there are no easy answers, but the Minister for Social Development has the necessary willpower to make a difference. I ask her to address the escalating problem with wisdom and to work cross-departmentally to find a solution.

Mr Burns: I support the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue once again. I am slightly discouraged by the fact that we continually have to debate the topic because little action has been taken to address the massive shortfall in the social housing budget. Every Member knows about the £100 million black hole in the housing budget, which is a direct result of the fall in the value of the Department

for Social Development's assets and the sale of those assets. It is obvious that the Department for Social Development, a spending Department, does not have enough money.

The Minister has done her best to make savings, but there is no way that she will be able to make up for such a shortfall in the existing financial package. That is why the SDLP feels that the housing budget should be given top priority in the next monitoring round. Any handouts in June will represent only a short-term measure: they will not be enough.

The SDLP has long called for a complete review of the Budget and the Programme for Government. The world is a very different place from what it was when the Budget was originally set, and the global economic crisis has hit every country hard. Every Government in the world has examined their Budget and made the necessary changes, and there is no reason that we should not do the same.

We have limited powers as a regional Assembly, but granting a massive cash injection to the social housing programme is undoubtedly one of the best things that we can do to help. By building new houses and carrying out repairs, we can cut waiting lists, help people who are in housing stress and give hope to the homeless.

The SDLP has shown where the money for newbuild and maintenance programmes can be found. We put forward the relevant proposals in 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. We have put our plans on the table while others have done very little. Other parties in the House must see the merit in those plans. Many academics, such as Mike Smyth from the University of Ulster, support our ideas. However, one does not have to be a professor to know that building houses creates jobs.

If we undertake the programme in the right manner and build on land that the Housing Executive already owns, we will put money straight into the wage packets of construction workers and the accounts of local building firms. Rathenraw in Antrim, for example, is a perfect site for social housing. It has vast amounts of green open space, where many old houses have been demolished. All the land is owned by the Department for Social Development, and it makes sense to build social housing there.

Social housing will quickly deliver the required economic boost. Projects are ready to go at any given time if the money is available. They can be started with little delay because the plans are already in place, and planning permission has already been secured. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the entire Executive to find the money to start the projects. We must do all that we can to help the economy and the people. Therefore, let us get the social housing programme back on track and give the whole economy a big shot in the arm.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the support from the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and Sinn Féin. I am not sure whether the DUP intends to support the motion.

Mr Shannon: Yes, we do.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you. Jim Shannon is always a good supporter of housing.

It is fair to say that the Sinn Féin Members who spoke attacked the SDLP Minister. In fact, political commentators have noted the sustained attacks over many years against the SDLP and its Minister. For example, Newton Emerson said that Sinn Féin's commitment to attacking Ms Ritchie remains beyond question. Perhaps today that party was at it a bit more than in other days because it may be a bit sore about socialist politicians, given that they may not be good for Sinn Féin, as the people of Dublin pointed out over the past few days.

I want to pick up on a number of points. Jonathan Craig and other Members made the point that the debate should not be about newbuild versus maintenance. The issue is crystal clear: there is simply not enough money in the housing budget. The Executive need to revisit the Budget so that more resources can be given to housing. Mr Burns made that plea in his contribution, and he highlighted very eloquently a scheme in Antrim in which work could commence tomorrow if money were available.

Several Members quoted from Michael Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey's recent publication in which they said that a number of successes could be made to address the economic downturn not only in creating construction jobs but in the ancillary services associated with construction. Many jobs depend on the construction industry, such as small plumbing supplies shops, tile and carpet shops, electricians and other tradespeople with whom Members are familiar. The Minister made it clear and Members acknowledged the fact that disabled facilities grants will not be touched in the home improvements.

Some Members talked about home improvements and pointed out that some constituents have very poor kitchens. We can all be sympathetic to that. Mr McNarry pointed out that some people who own two or three homes will not show much empathy with people who do not own any homes. Mr McCann must acknowledge that people should at least have a roof over their heads. That is the priority. It was a difficult decision, but our Minister makes difficult decisions: she does not shy away from them.

Later, we will hear about homelessness in Foyle from some Sinn Féin Members who want to see money being spent on newbuilds. The choice for our Minister was between new homes or new kitchens, and it is a very simple argument. What the motion asks for in the June monitoring round is that the Minister of Finance and Personnel should give whatever money is available

to the Minister for Social Development for housing and allow that money to be ring-fenced. It is regrettable that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is not here this afternoon to respond.

Other Members accused the Minister for Social Development of giving money back in the December monitoring round. That was misleading and was not the case. Margaret Ritchie wanted to reallocate money in her Department, and, as Sinn Féin knows, she must get the Finance Minister's permission to move money around the different elements of her Department's programmes. Sinn Féin wanted that money to go to slurry tanks and slurry housing because of the failure of the Crossnacreevy site in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's budget. Therefore, if the cap fits, some of those Members should start wearing it. Our Minister has tried very hard to meet the needs of people and to put people first.

I agree with Martina Anderson's comment that the shortfall in the Housing Executive's budget particularly hits people who live in some of the most deprived and disadvantaged communities. Other Members also linked poor health outcomes and health inequalities to poor housing.

Members from across the Chamber rightly said that monitoring rounds are not a good way to run a Department. No Minister would seek to run his or her Department on a hand-to-mouth existence. In the short term, however, it is incumbent on the Minister of Finance and Personnel at least to give some hope to those on waiting lists for a new home that the money will be transferred and ring-fenced for DSD housing in the June monitoring rounds.

Next week, the Assembly will have the opportunity to debate some of the Budget allocations. However, some Members, including Mr Roy Beggs, pointed out that the two main parties that revise the Budget — the DUP and Sinn Féin — have an inflexible attitude to doing so. The Budget was set at a time of economic boom, but those parties have not allowed it to be revisited during the current global recession.

Mr Burns commented on the SDLP's paper, 'New Priorities in Difficult Times'. He rightly pointed out that, although the SDLP has tabled its paper, no other party has yet tabled any proposals. I hear only silence from the Sinn Féin Benches on that matter. Perhaps Sinn Féin Members are embarrassed by their Minister's performance on a wide range of issues. They seem to have no retort on that point.

Mr O'Loan highlighted the many benefits that investment in housing would bring. He related how the Programme for Government budget was predicated on land and housing sales, as did several other Members. Mr O'Loan ably and factually — unlike some — and as a matter of public record pointed out where the difficulties arose.

Mr Kennedy: Which cap was that?

Mrs D Kelly: Which cap indeed?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Simpson, agreed with Mr O'Loan that poor housing has a profound impact on people and creates health inequalities. He also talked about the decline in resources for social housing. However, he proceeded to go off-script slightly by talking as a member of the DUP as opposed to the Chairperson of the Committee. Unfortunately, he is not present to respond to me on that point.

Some £110 million of the money allocated to the urban regeneration of the Royal Exchange may not be spent. My colleague Alex Attwood welcomed the support of the DUP and Sinn Féin for its reallocation within DSD for housing projects should that be the case.

Mr Shannon rightly paid tribute to staff in his constituency who work extremely hard in difficult times with people whose need for home improvement grants causes them distress. He acknowledged the impact that home improvements could have on the creation of jobs in the construction industry, as well as on people who have been waiting for such a long time. Indeed, unless the shortfall in money for housing is appropriately addressed, it looks as though they will wait a good deal longer.

I see that my time is running out; Members will be most upset about that. I ask for support from across the House. I request that the Minister of Finance and Personnel take note of the views of all parties present in the Chamber. I ask him to ring-fence any moneys given up in the June monitoring round for allocation to the Minister for Social Development so that they may be spent on housing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the £100 million shortfall in the housing budget; notes in particular the lack of finance available for planned maintenance and improvement works, including private sector grants; calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to give top priority to housing in the forthcoming June monitoring round; calls on the Executive to recognise that investment in social housing can boost the construction sector and the wider economy at this time; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Executive to put long term measures in place to secure the financial future for housing.

2.45 pm

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As is evident, there was no Minister to reply to the preceding debate. Subject to correction, I understand that the relevant authorities in the House believe that the appropriate Minister to reply was the Minister of Finance and Personnel. Irrespective of whether that is the case — you may be in a position to confirm that — it seems to me that it reflects upon the authority of the House if a Minister declines to respond.

I therefore ask the Speaker to make a ruling, after consideration, on whether it is appropriate for a Minister to decline to attend the House without offering an explanation. Should there be recourse to a remedy if a Minister identified as the appropriate person to attend a debate declines to do so? The situation that has arisen today has occurred previously, and it is not sustainable for an appropriate Minister to refuse to come to the House to respond to a debate.

Mr Speaker: I gave the Member some time on what is not a point of order but a matter for the Executive. The decision on whether to send any Minister to the House for a debate rests with the Executive and the Executive alone.

Mr Attwood: Further to my point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that rule —

Mr Speaker: Order. It is not a point of order. I have already given the Member some time in which to explain himself, but it is certainly not a point of order. I have made it absolutely clear that the Executive alone decide which Ministers, if any, are sent to the House, particularly to respond to private Members' motions.

Mr Attwood: On a further point of order, Mr Speaker. I acknowledge your ruling, and I am not in any way querying it. I ask that you revisit the matter of whether the non-attendance of a Minister reflects badly on the authority of the House in the context of no explanation being offered by the Minister who declines to attend. I believe that the fundamental principles of the integrity and the competence of the House are put at stake if a pattern develops of Ministers declining to attend, even when they know that they are the right person to do so. I ask you to reflect upon that at another time. I think that that is a reasonable approach to take.

Mr Speaker: I further say to the Member and I assure him and the House that I certainly give every encouragement that I can to Ministers to attend the House. At the end of the day, no matter how much encouragement Ministers are given, the decision on

whether they attend the House comes down to the individual Minister and to the Executive.

As Question Time for the Social Development Minister starts at 3.00 pm, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until then.

Sitting suspended at 2.48 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Cavity Wall Insulation

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Development for her assessment of the costs of cavity wall insulation. (AQO 2931/09)

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I think that the Member is inviting me to comment not just on the costs, but on the benefits of cavity wall insulation. Cavity wall insulation is an effective way to save energy and money at home. A well-insulated house keeps warmth indoors, exactly where it should be. The Energy Saving Trust advises that one third of all heat lost in an uninsulated home is lost through the walls. Insulating cavity walls reduces heat loss, and the Energy Saving Trust also advises that yearly savings of approximately £220 can be made on fuel bills in a three-bedroom semi-detached house.

That is why my Department's warm homes scheme offers cavity wall insulation as one of the measures to improve the energy efficiency of privately-owned and privately-rented homes. Since 2001, the warm homes scheme has delivered cavity wall insulation to almost 25,000 homes. The cost of installing cavity wall insulation has risen from an average of £300 per house in 2001 to £440 in 2009. A house that received cavity wall insulation in 2001 will have made energy savings of approximately £1,450. I believe that that represents good value for money. In social housing, nearly all Housing Executive properties built with traditional cavity walls have now been insulated.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. She is quite right that I did want to elicit from her the benefits of the warm homes scheme, which, as she said, has been running since 2001 and has benefited many people. However, I am concerned that there may be a waiting list —

Mr Speaker: The Member should ask his question.

Mr McCarthy: Is there a waiting list for cavity wall insulation and for other forms of energy saving in homes in Northern Ireland?

The Minister for Social Development: As Members are only too well aware, the warm homes scheme has been extremely successful — a victim of

its own success — over the past years. It clearly protects the vulnerable. Taking that central viewpoint, I protected the budgetary position of the warm homes scheme in the recent Budget announcement. In fact, the scheme received an increase in budget. In our pursuit of targeting the most vulnerable in society, we changed the warm homes scheme to ensure that it was better focused on those who need help. The new contractors will be in place in the coming days, and they will work their way through all current applications and will communicate the outcome to applicants. I hope that under the new scheme, we will insulate even more houses for those who need it most.

Further to the question that the Member asked me, I hope that we will be able to deal with the particular issues of the waiting list. If the Member has any specific constituency issues that he feels have not been addressed properly, he can bring those to the Housing Executive or, failing that, to me.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I hope that the Minister's colleagues do not construe the following to be part of a sustained attack on her; it is simply a question. Will the Minister give us some indication of when the warm homes scheme will be operational again?

The Minister for Social Development: Contrary to what Mr Brady said, I hope that the new contractors will be in place in the coming days, and that they will then work through the backlog of applications to ensure that every application is dealt with as quickly as possible.

It is important to emphasise that the warm homes scheme protects the vulnerable. During the Budget debate and despite the budgetary problems, I was anxious to protect the vulnerable, those who are in housing need and the homeless. I did that by protecting the newbuild programme and those who are in fuel poverty by increasing the budgetary allocation to the warm homes scheme. I was also anxious to protect those who require supported housing, as it is better to provide them with supported housing than to have them suffer the indignity of institutionalisation.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her response; it contains plenty of detail, as do all her responses. Nonetheless, I am sure that the Minister is aware of verbal and written commitments that people have been given on the installation of insulation and heating to their homes. I have some concerns, as have other Members, about when those commitments will be honoured. When will those who have been on the Eaga scheme be in the new scheme? I have received many letters on that issue.

The Minister for Social Development: I know that Members are interested in that issue, notwithstanding the good weather. Applicants for the warm homes scheme contract have been interviewed by the Housing

Executive, and notification letters to successful and unsuccessful installers who applied were issued on Thursday 28 May. The unsuccessful applicants have 15 days in which to appeal the decision. However, subject to no judicial interruption, I intend to make a public announcement in the next few days. It is critical that we ensure that help is focused on where it is most required and that the new contractors can deal with the outstanding applications as quickly as possible.

As I said to Mr McCarthy, Mr Shannon should, in the first instance, refer issues concerning his constituents to the Housing Executive. Subsequently, he can pass on to me for immediate investigation any issues that he feels have not been properly addressed.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed responses. What plans are there to convert the heating systems of more Housing Executive homes to natural gas?

The Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive's programme for the financial year 2008-09 makes provision for heating upgrades to 1,200 dwellings to the preferred heating system of gas. Full details will be published in the Housing Executive's district housing plans, which will be brought to local councils this summer. Those plans depend on the availability of funding, and, by now, Members are aware that the housing budget is under significant pressure. As a result, difficult decisions that will directly affect what can be delivered have had to be made on the allocation of limited resources. However, it makes little sense to have the new gas service extended to towns in Northern Ireland and not to connect it to houses.

Let me be clear: there is not enough money in the housing budget. I refer Members to the motion that was debated in the House earlier today. All of us must win the argument to have it increased and placed on a more sustained annual level. I want to put housing on a long-term and secure financial footing. Living hand to mouth in hopeful anticipation of being granted extra money from quarterly rounds is not acceptable; it is no way to run a multi-million pound programme. Be assured that I will continue to lobby my Executive colleagues for their support for increases in funding for social housing, including the conversion of the heating systems in more Housing Executive dwellings to natural gas over the next year.

Therefore, I welcome the motion from my party colleagues that was debated earlier, and I welcome Members' support for the general content of that motion, notwithstanding some of the barbed comments that were made.

Nevertheless, the point is crystal clear: we need to put housing on a sound financial footing, once and for all. That is why I commissioned Mr Mike Smyth from the University of Ulster to undertake significant

research. That was published yesterday, and a copy of it has been placed in Members' pigeonholes.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn. Mr P J Bradley is not in his place to ask question 3.

Social Housing

4. **Mr Gallagher** asked the Minister for Social Development what opportunities exist to build a greater proportion of social housing in land already in public ownership. (AQO 2934/09)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Gallagher for his question; he is quite right to identify the opportunity that exists to develop social housing on land that is already in public ownership. That way, we get more houses for our money, and, during the last two years, I have sought to increase the number of homes built on land owned by the Housing Executive. During that time, we built 670 such homes, but, even at that, I thought that we could do better. That is why, in the current year, we plan to deliver 573 new homes on what we call transfer schemes. Those are schemes that are built on Housing Executive land and then transferred to a housing association.

I have also circulated details of the Housing Executive's surplus land schedule to all housing associations to ascertain what potential they can see in developing that land. That is particularly important if they can identify an emerging housing need that may not previously have existed. At a time when resources are so scarce, it makes sense to make best use of the assets that we have.

That point was made in a report that I commissioned during my first few months in office, and I am happy to assure Members that I will continue to explore each and every opportunity that exists to help me to increase the supply of housing here, despite the very real difficulties that I face due to the shortfall of some £100 million this year and £100 million next year that my budget will suffer. With a budgetary shortfall of that magnitude, we have to stretch every pound as far as possible until we put housing on a firm financial footing.

Mr Gallagher: I thank the Minister for that answer. What is her view on the overall state of our public housing stock in relation to unfitness and maintenance, and what does she feel can be done in that regard, bearing in mind the need for best value for money?

The Minister for Social Development: Members may not be aware that the bulk of our public housing stock is in very good condition. Levels of unfitness have fallen steadily year on year, and I give credit to the Housing Executive and our housing associations, which have invested heavily to make that happen. However, we are now in more difficult and challenging

economic times. The money to maintain and modernise our stock is not available right now, and who knows what lies ahead for us in the next spending review?

That is why I commissioned a major piece of work to look into the condition of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing stock. That will give us a powerful insight into the appropriateness of our current maintenance policies. I recently received that report from the international surveying firm Savills, and I am currently considering its findings. I expect that work to provide a fully costed maintenance strategy that will help us to identify exactly what resources we will need in the coming years to maintain our stock.

Mr G Robinson: Has the Minister identified any potential sites on publicly owned land in areas of housing stress?

The Minister for Social Development: Naturally, in my answer to Mr Gallagher's initial question, I emphasised the need to use transfer schemes. In fact, when the original social housing development programme came to me, about 17% of the sites included in it were in transfer schemes.

I sent the programme back to the Housing Executive because I was not satisfied that we were getting best value for money or stretching every pound in this difficult budgetary situation. I was therefore pleased that it came back to me with a significant number of transfer schemes. I believe that that is the direction in which we must go. As regards the issue that Mr Robinson raised, I hope to publish the programme for this year shortly. That will show clearly that we are using a significant number of transfer schemes throughout Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

Mr McNarry: The Minister's answer to a previous question was very interesting. Can she tell us what current and potential access she has to land that is owned by the Executive, but not necessarily by her own Department, for the development of social and mixed-use housing? What discussions has she had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel about getting access to that land?

The Minister for Social Development: Mr McNarry's point is very pertinent, and I presume that he is referring to the capital assets realisation team (CART). I have raised those particular issues directly with the Minister of Finance and Personnel as recently as our last meeting on budgetary issues in January. In fact, I raised the issue of land and property owned by the Housing Executive, including the sale and leaseback of the headquarters of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Be assured that I am raising those issues; I want to secure the best value for the money that we have so that we can address the very acute housing

need that all Members have identified throughout Northern Ireland.

Ms Lo: Will the land transfers be at market value, or would it be better to hold on to the land for a little longer? I know the importance of making use of the land, but can the Minister consider that point?

The Minister for Social Development: The pertinent issue is to ensure that we get the best value for every pound that we have and to ensure that we have a greater ability and capacity to address housing need. Over the past two years, I have sought to increase the number of homes that are built on land that the Housing Executive owns. There are significant parcels of land throughout Northern Ireland, and, given that, I circulated details of the Housing Executive's surplus land schedule to all housing associations. I informed them of that last November at the annual general meeting in Enniskillen of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations.

Benefit Fraud

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Social Development what assessment she has made of the impact of the recession on levels of benefit fraud.
(AQO 2935/09)

The Minister for Social Development: It is still too early to determine the impact that the recession is having on increased benefit demand, but it is clear that a risk of an increase in fraud remains. The latest figures for 2008 show no noticeable impact on fraud levels to date. The current downturn has an impact primarily on jobseeker's allowance, and although the number of claimants has increased significantly, expenditure on jobseeker's allowance in 2008 was still relatively low, at just over 2% of total benefit expenditure. That means that increases in jobseeker's allowance are unlikely to have a noticeable impact on the overall levels of fraud.

The Social Security Agency has a robust security strategy to drive down levels of fraud. In 2001-02, 1.9% of expenditure was lost through fraud. However, the latest figures, which are still subject to Audit Office scrutiny, indicate that the estimated level of fraud in 2008 was down to 0.3% of annual benefit expenditure. Despite the success, I am not complacent, and I can assure Members that tackling fraud remains one of the agency's top priorities. I will continue to monitor the situation closely to ensure that only those properly entitled to benefit receive the help that they need.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister clarify whether she is saying that the figure for fraud was previously 1.9% and that it is now down to 0.3%? I might not have picked her up correctly.

On a general point, does the Minister agree that benefit fraud is a blight on our society? We must do everything to ensure that those who legitimately need benefits receive them, while those who steal from other people are — I was going to use bad language, but I will refrain. It is not the appropriate way to go forward. Perhaps the Minister will tell us how strongly she feels about the issue.

The Minister for Social Development: I will repeat what I said. We have a very robust strategy to drive down levels of fraud. In 2001-02, 1.9% of expenditure was lost through fraud. However, the latest figures, which are still subject to scrutiny by the Audit Office, indicate that the estimated level of fraud in 2008 was down to 0.3% of annual benefit expenditure. I see that as a good news story.

With regard to the second part of Mr McCrea's question, I am not happy that people are involved in benefit fraud. I want those people who are entitled to benefit to be able to have access to all the benefit systems to ensure that they receive the benefit to which they are entitled. I will be announcing my benefit uptake campaign for this financial year shortly, and I want to encourage everybody in the House, MLAs who have constituents — *[Interruption.]*

Less of the frivolity. I am sure that you agree, Mr Speaker.

It is important for MLAs to encourage those constituents who are entitled to claim benefits, and who might be slightly dilatory in doing so, to apply for them. If they are entitled to benefits, they will get them, and it will make a substantial improvement to their lives, their health and their well-being.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Will the Minister give some indication of how her Department is dealing with clerical error in the Social Security Agency, and how much it has cost the Department? The cost of clerical error is probably equivalent to that of wrongdoing, which is what benefit fraud is.

The Minister for Social Development: As with the figure for fraud, the figure for error has also come down dramatically. There is no doubt that that is due to the sheer hard work of officials in the Social Security Agency, which often goes unnoticed. The percentage of expenditure overpaid due to official error is 0.5%, and the figure for customer error is 0.4%. Any banker, banking institution, insurance company or financial institution would be deeply envious of those figures, which I am sure cannot be matched.

Mrs Hanna: Will the Minister outline the general trend of the level of benefit fraud here?

The Minister for Social Development: Mrs Hanna has raised a pertinent issue. The estimated levels of

benefit fraud have fallen steadily from almost 2% of expenditure to 0.3% of expenditure in 2008. Members will agree that that is a tremendous achievement by the management and staff of the Social Security Agency, and I pay tribute to the staff. Due to their efforts, the level of fraud has been reduced year on year and compares favourably with what is achieved in similar, larger organisations dispensing billions of pounds.

DSD Budget

6. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister for Social Development to provide an overview of her Department's current budgetary position. (AQO 2936/09)

The Minister for Social Development: The Department's expenditure limit for 2009-2010 is £754.4 million, which is divided among the three broad spending areas of social security, housing and urban regeneration. Although my Department faces many funding pressures, the main one relates to the housing budget. That has arisen as a result of the shortfall in capital house and land sales receipts due to the economic downturn. The budget settlement had anticipated several hundred million pounds in house and land sales receipts in the comprehensive spending review, but, unfortunately, they will not be realised. That is no one's fault; rather, it simply points to the need, once and for all, to put housing on a proper and sound financial footing.

I have, therefore, tabled bids for more than £100 million in the June monitoring round, and I am relying on being afforded a degree of flexibility to redirect and re-prioritise resources across all business areas, as was the case in 2008-09. I have consistently impressed on my Executive colleagues the indisputable benefits of injecting funding into housing. The Members who were present in the Chamber during the debate that took place before Question Time are aware of the recent work that academics at the University of Ulster carried out that supports the case. Funding will provide much-needed social housing for the homeless and prevent further job losses in the construction industry, thereby protecting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Other pressures also exist in my Department; however, as the year progresses, my officials will carefully monitor and manage the budgetary position.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. However, she did not deal with the issue of replacement and renovation grants for houses in rural areas. Given that money is still being injected into social housing in urban areas, people in rural areas are concerned that they are being discriminated against. A recent house condition survey indicates that, of the 19,800 unfit dwellings, 53% are in rural communities.

What is the Minister doing to bring forward funding for replacement and renovation grants for houses in rural areas?

The Minister for Social Development: I fully sympathise with the Member and with all the people in rural communities who have had difficulties with their applications for all types of improvement grants.

First, the central issue is funding. Once and for all, housing must be placed on a sound financial footing. I think that I now have the support of all Members in ensuring that housing is put on a sound financial footing, because it must no longer be subject to the crumbs from quarterly monitoring rounds.

Secondly, I have ensured that, where formal approval has been issued, grant applications will continue to be funded and that the disabled facilities grant scheme and the mandatory repair grants will also continue to operate normally. I have great sympathy for many of my constituents who are waiting for a grant. As recently as yesterday, I asked the Housing Executive to keep all valid applications live, even though money is not currently available. I understand the position in which the Housing Executive finds itself.

I hope that, in the June monitoring round, the Minister of Finance and Personnel will see fit to honour the commitments that he gave in a letter dated 9 January 2009 and in a statement that he issued after he met the Northern Ireland Housing Council. He said:

“Social housing continues to be a priority for the Executive and for me personally.”

I hope that that statement will be honoured through a significant allocation to DSD, ensuring that I will be able to give the Housing Executive the funds it needs to deal with all the outstanding applications for grant aid. I would love to be able to do all the work that is required, but I need the money. That is why — here I return to the central core of the argument and the debate — housing needs to be put on a sound financial footing. I believe that I have the support of the entire House in that respect.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That brings to an end questions to the Minister for Social Development.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — *[Mr Deputy Speaker.]*

ADJOURNMENT

Social Housing in Foyle

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

Mr Durkan: It is timely that we have this Adjournment debate on the back of the debate that took place earlier today on financing the housing programme. However, this debate relates specifically to the situation in Foyle and the acute need for social housing there.

Derry has a very high social housing demand and very real social need. The figures for the end of 2008 show that there was a waiting list of 2,400 people across the city: of those, 1,400 were deemed to be in housing stress. Therefore, the problem is very real there. Indeed, when Members in the previous debate and the Minister during Question Time spoke of the problems and pressures in the housing budget, it is people in housing need in places such as Derry who worry and wonder whether the Executive's priorities will deliver for them.

The Minister for Social Development reflected very strong commitment to deliver the Programme for Government targets for newbuild houses. Therefore, faced with a £100 million shortfall in her budget this year and next, she has kept a firm focus on delivering those newbuilds, which is the correct approach. However, I know that all Members also support the Minister in her attempt to receive as much topping-up from the various monitoring rounds as possible. Those funds will ensure that commitments can also be met in the areas of replacement grants and housing maintenance and repair, areas that are not just an issue in the Foyle constituency but in many others.

Several issues and concerns have arisen in Derry regarding the delivery of new social housing, and the questions arising from the Budget have already been well aired in the previous debate and during today's Question Time. However, additional complications arose as a result of the interpretation of EU public procurement law, which fundamentally affected the planned approach to design and build between developers and housing associations. In particular, a significant site at Skeoge in Derry, which was ripe for 280 new homes to be built, was stymied because of the impact of EU public procurement law. The housing

association was committed and the developer was ready, and the houses would be in good demand and would be produced to a very high specification to meet all the modern environmental standards. People who were involved with the project were at a loss to understand where the difficulties had arisen. There seemed to be some sense that the rules were not causing the same problems with design and build in other jurisdictions.

I have made verbal and written representations to the Minister, and she has been kind enough to reply to set out the nature of the problem. However, I am concerned about the impact that that will have not only on the site in Derry but on other projects that housing associations and developers were planning in other parts of the North through the design-and-build approach, which the Department and the Housing Executive have built up and encouraged in the past number of years.

The developer was, obviously, notified that the legal issues meant that the project could not proceed on the terms that were originally envisaged. That created some uncertainty about the terms on which such a project could proceed. In Derry, the Housing Executive, councillors and other public representatives relied on the houses being built. There has been some concern about the delay with the project and the uncertainty that that has created.

The project would not only have delivered much-needed houses but much-needed jobs. I have received representations from many firms, not only from the primary developer but from all the other subcontractors and downstream suppliers, who, clearly, are affected by the situation. They retained people on their payroll in anticipation of the work that would have come from the contract, but the uncertainty has created difficulties.

I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us where the scheme stands and where we stand on the overall issue of design and build. An urgent review is needed to ensure that problems are not created all over the place because of the interpretations. The Minister said in her letters to me that other procurement routes are being explored and identified. Can she clarify how well they are being identified, and, in the case of Derry, are a number of sites being considered? Over how many years is that being done? We do not want the problem to be solved for one possible project only to have to go through it again for other projects. Can clarification be provided to give confidence that a clear pathway is in place for the way forward with a coherent procurement framework that will be workable for housing associations in the private sector and for the Housing Executive?

I mentioned the Skeoge site, and I also ask for the Minister's assistance with the Old School Lane site. At

that site, a housing association has identified lands that were held by different interests and Departments. DSD's local development office, the North West Development Office, was very helpful in assembling that site. One outstanding impediment is awaiting approval by Roads Service, which has a slice of land at the site. I ask the Minister to do anything that she can to expedite the conclusion of that long-awaited scheme on Old School Lane on the Racecourse Road in the Shantallow area. It is not affected by the design-and-build issue; it has been about land assembly and transition and getting agreements signed off.

The Minister also visited another prospective site for social housing on the Springtown Road on a field above Hawthorn Grove. The field is directly attached to the new, positive and attractive housing development by Habinteg Housing Association. According to the area plan, the site is above the building altitude line, yet the natural reference point for a cut-off for the building altitude line should have been the next road, which is the road on the other side of that field. That is a site for which developer, landowner and housing association are ready. All that is needed is an adjustment. Will the Minister make representations to the Minister of the Environment so that there can be a sensible relaxation of the rules at that location, on account of the pressing need for housing? It will not interfere with anything else.

We are told that the location is above the building altitude line. However, if one stands in that field and looks across the Springtown Road, one can see other houses built well above that line. Building there will not breach any rules; it is simply where the line was drawn. It should have been drawn at the road, rather than at a hedge that divides two fields. It would help if the Minister could assist in that regard.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about the other procurement sites that have been identified. I understand that, this year, upwards of 100 houses are to be delivered in Derry. I ask the Minister whether they will be completed on target and how that fits in with the supply to come through the new procurement routes that we discussed for the other sites. Can she give us any assurance that the volume of houses that we looked forward to in the Skeoge proposals will be delivered, whatever rejigging of the procurement routes is involved? If so, it will give a great deal of comfort not only to those awaiting houses but to those depending on the work that can come from those opportunities.

We could discuss the turnover that could come through re-lets and so on. However, other issues that I was going to raise have been well rehearsed and well aired in the earlier debate by other Members, including other Members who represent Foyle, so I will not

touch on those now. I leave the opportunity to raise them to other Members.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Social housing is an extremely pressing issue in Derry. I thank Mark Durkan for tabling the Adjournment topic. My colleague in Foyle, Raymond McCartney, would also like to have spoken, but he is away on Committee business. He sends his apologies.

Some 2,700 people are now on the housing waiting list in the Derry City Council area, and 1,350 of them are deemed to be homeless. More than 100 people are in temporary accommodation in the city and do not know when they will be housed. Those figures are shocking, and, unfortunately, the plans to tackle them are equally disturbing.

Perhaps the Minister will correct me if I am wrong — it will be good news if she can — but planned social housing development in Derry over the next 12 months is as follows: some 72 homes are to be built by North and West Housing Ltd, of which 63 are to be at Dove Gardens and nine in Steelstown. Those nine homes in Steelstown will be the only new social housing to be built in the past two years in greater Shantallow, which has a population of more than 35,000. Habinteg Housing Association Ltd plans to build 13 homes at Lourdes Hall. Oaklee Housing Association has no plans whatsoever to build, nor does the Fold Housing Association, after plans for 280 homes at Skeoge were put on hold, as Mark Durkan said. That makes a total of 85 homes, to address a waiting list that is rapidly approaching 3,000 people.

I fully understand that some newbuilds, including the Skeoge development, have been delayed by the recent European directive on design-and-build schemes. In the past, the majority of social housing was built through design-and-build schemes, which is a kind of all-in-one arrangement in which the landholder was also the developer. However, the EU now rules that a landowner cannot be given the contract for development without there first being a competitive procurement process. All of us recognise the need to get the best possible value for public money. We are told that the European Union's ruling is designed to do that, and we hope that it will.

What must happen now is that the Department must manage the issue, work with the developers, identify alternative arrangements where necessary, and, ultimately, ensure that social housing schemes go ahead as planned and on schedule.

3.45 pm

Last month, DSD stated categorically that a series of other potential projects had been earmarked to ensure that its target of 1,750 new homes in 2009 would be met. A DSD spokesperson said that the

ruling on design and build does not threaten that target. Those words are welcome. However, I want to hear the details behind the statement, particularly with regard to the Foyle constituency. What potential projects have been identified in Derry? How many of those 1,750 homes will be built in Derry? When will they be completed? Has funding been ring-fenced? How many schemes in Derry have been affected or delayed by the ruling? Is the Department working with developers to ensure that schemes go ahead on time?

Mr McCartney and I are also being asked whether social requirements will be built into EU procurement contracts, so that public money is used to achieve a number of objectives. As well as building social houses, we can take people out of long-term unemployment, and much-needed apprenticeships can be provided in Derry. We want information on that.

Furthermore, there is a view that the Minister has abandoned all improvement and maintenance schemes for social housing because she is concentrating all of her resources on newbuilds, which, in Derry, amounts to only 85 new homes. There is grave concern. That means that people must go without necessary repairs and improvements to their homes because the Minister is unable to balance her budget. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is not what anyone expects from an Executive Minister. I could almost accept it if plenty of social houses were being built. Given that only 85 to 100 homes are being built and in view of waiting lists of nearly 3,000 people, that is unacceptable.

As I have explained, as far as Derry is concerned, the Housing Minister neither builds houses nor repairs those that already exist. What exactly is being done with the housing budget? More specifically, what is being done with the budget to target clear objective need in Derry, the area that we hail from and about which we all have grave concerns?

As I have said, I fully endorse the Minister's stated commitment to build new social houses. However, the people of Derry need more than words. They need delivery, and they need it now.

Mrs M Bradley: Mark Durkan has covered much of what I intended to say. Therefore, I will focus my comments on the area about which I know most: Shantallow. The problem in that area is that, at present, there are more than 700 families on the housing waiting list. Every week, four or five families present themselves as homeless at the local Housing Executive office. Those families are then placed in private housing. That is problematic because they find that they cannot sustain living in those houses because of the higher rents that need to be paid to private landlords, sometimes as much as £30 or £40 more. They go back to the Housing Executive to say that they cannot stay

in those houses and that they need homes that cost less rent.

The only way to deal with that is for the Finance Minister to give the Minister for Social Development the money that she requires to build houses. There is no other answer. The Minister does not waste money. She has made good use of all of the money that she has received.

I thought that the election was over and that, therefore, point scoring would have finished. I am sick listening to point-scoring between local politicians in Derry, which includes those from Sinn Féin. It goes on constantly. One would think that there were only one Minister to attack. I am disappointed that Mr Dodds is not present. The Finance Minister should have been in the Chamber to hear exactly what is going on in Derry and what people there need. Surely, he should have paid Members the courtesy of listening to those problems.

If you talk to people and families in Derry about housing, they tell you that the current situation is just as their mothers described the 1950s and 1960s, when houses were occupied by 10 or 12 people or, possibly, by two families. We are returning to that situation. It is obvious therefore that responsibility lies with the Finance Minister. He must give the Social Development Minister the money that she needs to build houses. Margaret Ritchie has said, over and over again, "Give me money, and I will build houses". She is not getting money; she is getting blame.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): After that lively contribution, I thank my colleague Mark Durkan MLA for Foyle for securing the topic for debate. It is a timely debate, particularly as it follows the earlier motion on the housing budget and the questions for oral answer, which, by and large, concentrated on housing.

The increased supply of social and affordable housing is my first priority. We have had two debates on the issue today, and I am glad that Members share my objectives. I thank Mark for his supportive and well-informed opening remarks, which have facilitated a better debate than might otherwise have been the case. I will try to address all Members' questions and will, naturally, study the Hansard report and write directly to Members whose questions are not covered by my response.

At the end of 2008, almost 2,400 applicants were on the waiting list for housing in the West Bank and Waterside areas of Derry, and 1,400 experienced housing stress. We can tackle that structural challenge only by increasing newbuilds and by ensuring a steady flow of re-lets. Although waiting lists have increased steadily for several years, in 2008 we managed to restrict the growth and secure more allocations to social housing than in previous years. During 2008, we

allocated 618 homes to those in greatest housing need in Derry. However, as I said, that measure did not reduce waiting lists overall; it merely restricted their growth. When the private housing market is in the doldrums, as it is now, people remain in social housing and re-lets are relatively low.

I have made social housing newbuild my priority because that is where the structural problem lies. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive estimates that, in order to make inroads into waiting lists, 3,000 new homes are required across the North every year. Although I have increased social newbuilds significantly from direct rule levels, the 1,750 that are planned for 2009 and the 2,000 that are planned for 2010 are not enough. Derry will, of course, receive its fair share of the social newbuild programme. However, we need increased resources to do more to help people in housing need, not only in Foyle but across the North.

As we heard during the previous debate, the budget available to me this year is likely to be £100 million less than was previously anticipated, and a similar position is expected next year. For a long time, I have argued that the housing budget must be placed on a firm financial footing. The hand-to-mouth existence and reliance on in-year monitoring does not work if one is tasked with delivering housing programmes that require a long lead-in period of planning and advance approvals.

In arguing for more resources, I assure Members that I will not simply transfer responsibility for housing delivery to the Executive. I am conscious that I must make the scarce resources at my disposal stretch further, and I have introduced initiatives to do so. So far, I have introduced a new procurement strategy that will ensure that the newbuild programme is delivered more efficiently than before, and savings will be reinvested to deliver more houses. Since autumn 2007, I have increased private investment in new social housing and reduced public subsidy per unit from 77% to 63%, which, in real terms, equates to a saving of £33,000 a house that can be spent on more houses. I have also increased the number of houses that we plan to build on land that we already own. In the last two years, we have built, on average, 300 homes on land that is already in departmental or Housing Executive ownership. This year, we plan to build up to 573 new homes on our own land. By building on land that we already own, we can reduce our grant rates by up to 30%, in effect getting us more bang for our buck. When I ask my Executive colleagues to deliver a more sustainable budget for housing, they can do so safe in the knowledge that every penny will be wisely and soundly invested.

I will return to the specifics of social housing in Foyle. In this year alone, we will deliver a minimum of 116 new homes across three sites in the city. Sometimes we hear complaints that Derry is not getting its fair

share of social housing — nothing could be further from the truth.

Mark Durkan mentioned Skeoge specifically, and, at his request, I met the developers of that site several months ago. Members will be aware by now that that scheme, like so many others, unfortunately had to be withdrawn from our programme because legal advice clearly indicated that the plans for that scheme were no longer compliant with EU public procurement law. As Mr Durkan rightly said, he raised the issue of legal advice in other jurisdictions with me. I had the matter fully investigated, and the legal advice that the Housing Executive, the housing associations and I received concurred with that which was given in England, Scotland and Wales. I assure Members of that.

That is not to say, however, that we cannot explore other options for development in Derry and elsewhere if such alternatives can comply with current procurement law. Indeed, those discussions have already started, and I can give Members some detail about that. On my instruction, the Housing Executive replaced negotiated design-and-build packages with alternative newbuild schemes using traditional competitive procurement arrangements. That immediate action should ensure that the target to provide 1,750 new social housing homes this year will be achieved.

As a result of the public notice that appeared in national newspapers two or three weeks ago, former design-and-build contractors are free to compete for construction work that is commissioned under the social housing development plan. I was fully aware of the concerns that Mark Durkan in particular raised about that issue. Those contractors can also opt to sell their development land to housing associations at any time. I want everyone to be assured about that.

I guarantee Members that Derry will continue to get its fair share of the cake. However, the real challenge is to make the cake bigger.

I will now address the issues that were raised by Mark Durkan and other Members. Mr Durkan mentioned Springtown Road, Hawthorn Grove and Habinteg Housing Association. In late August or September 2008, on the day that I held a housing conference and seminar, I visited that site. I am fully aware of the planning issues surrounding the site and the need for an adjustment to the building altitude line. I will make renewed representations to the Minister of the Environment to ensure that we can achieve a sensible relaxation.

Mr Durkan mentioned other sites. In that regard, I hope that he will be pleased with the contents of this year's social housing development programme, which I will publish soon. I am not yet entirely satisfied with the programme, which is why I am a little hesitant, but I want to assure Members that it is my wish to get as much as I can for Derry while realising the housing need.

Martina Anderson left me in some doubt, given her confused contribution to the debate. I suppose that she indicated the need for housing to be put on a sound financial footing, but she then queried the issue of ring-fencing. Naturally, because I wanted to protect the vulnerable throughout Northern Ireland, I ring-fenced the budget for the social housing development programme in order to ensure the delivery of 1,750 houses.

4.00 pm

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

The Minister for Social Development: I am fully conscious that I have not explored all the issues that Members raised. I will review the Hansard report and come back to Members with more detailed answers. I thank Members for their contributions, and I assure them that I will look after Derry to ensure that the situation reflects housing need.

Adjourned at 4.00 pm.