
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Monday 15 June 2009

*The Assembly met at 12 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker
[Mr McClarty] in the Chair).*

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MATTERS OF THE DAY

Kilkeel Plane Crash

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Margaret Ritchie has sought leave to make a statement on a matter that fulfils the criteria that are set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Ritchie to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call other Members from South Down, who will also have three minutes to speak.

Ms Ritchie: On Friday last at 9.00 pm, a tragic air traffic accident took place near the Ballyardle Road, Kilkeel, in which Hugh McKnight, Andrew Burden and Stephen Annett lost their lives. My sympathy goes out to the families and friends of the deceased, and there is no doubt that the support and solidarity of the communities of Annalong, Ballymartin and Kilkeel are with them. I am very conscious of the anguish and trauma of the bereaved.

An investigation into the accident is ongoing. That investigation needs to examine the safety of light aircraft and, in particular, the special landscape and topographical features of the part of south Down in which the accident occurred. Not only was the crash a tragedy but it is a sign of a more worrying situation, for it is the second air accident in Kilkeel in three weeks. Moreover, not so long ago, a similar incident occurred in Cookstown, which thankfully and fortunately did not result in any fatalities. I am also mindful of other air traffic accidents, particularly the Air France disaster in which a young doctor from Ballygowan lost her life.

I will write to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, Paul Clark, about the safety of light aircraft. I am doing that because air safety is a reserved matter, and thorough investigation is required. I hope that the current investigation is speedy and effective and makes recommendations that ensure that such incidents are eliminated.

It is important for the House to demonstrate solidarity with and support for the bereaved and to convey sympathy to those who are suffering at this difficult time.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for South Down Ms Ritchie for tabling this matter, because it is important for the House to extend its condolences to the families of Andrew Burden, Stephen Annett and Hugh McKnight, who died as a result of Friday's tragedy. All had a love of sport and were coming back from the TT races on the Isle of Man when the incident occurred. Hugh had been ferrying people back and forth to that event all week, which was a generous gesture that, sadly, ended in tragedy.

It is one of a series of tragedies to have afflicted the South Down constituency in recent months. However, I know that the people of Mourne will rally around and give tremendous support to the bereaved families and that everyone will do whatever they can to help the families in these difficult circumstances.

A fitting tribute to those who died would be, as Ms Ritchie said, for something to be done to improve safety for light aircraft throughout Northern Ireland but particularly in Mourne. There was a serious accident only a few days before the latest event, and it was fortunate that there were no injuries, or worse, on that occasion. It would be welcome if, as a result of Friday night's incident, something is done to help those who fly light aircraft in and out of small airstrips in south Down to do so safely.

This has been an awful event for all concerned, and I know that all Members will join me in passing our sympathies to the families.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, extend my condolences to the families. This is a further tragedy to hit the Mournes following the loss of the four PSNI officers at Warrenpoint and the tragic fishing disaster that affected the Greene family.

I knew Hugh McKnight from his days in the RUC, and, although we did not see eye to eye on many occasions, he was always human and compassionate in how he dealt with members of the public. This is a sad loss to the whole Mourne and south Down area but particularly to the victims' families. It must also be unbearable for everyone whose lives the three men touched.

I concur with what the other Members said about examining light aircraft safety, particularly at landing strips, which seem to be popping up regularly. That issue needs closer examination by the planning authorities and greater scrutiny by the regulators.

I convey Sinn Féin's sympathy to all the families.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Member for South Down Ms Ritchie for tabling this matter. I extend, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, our deepest and

most sincere sympathies to the McKnight, Burden and Annett families.

At times such as these, when such a tragedy occurs, we rise to the challenge as one community and stand shoulder to shoulder with families who have suffered. It is so sad that three men's participation in something that they loved — watching road racing at the TT on the Isle of Man and flying light aircraft, for which Mr McKnight had a passion — should end in tragedy. It reminds us all of how quickly events can turn to tragedy.

I think and hope that every Member and everyone across south Down and Northern Ireland will keep the families in their thoughts and prayers. We should do that at this difficult time and, indeed, in the weeks and months ahead, as the full extent of the loss sinks in for those families.

Mr P J Bradley: Just over six months ago, on 24 November 2008, the six South Down Assembly Members expressed condolences to the families of four young policemen and a young social worker who had died the previous weekend. Sadly, today, we express solidarity with the families of the pilot, Hugh McKnight, Andrew Burden and his young colleague, Stephen Annett.

As Minister Ritchie mentioned, County Down has suffered great tragedy. We heard about the fishing tragedies, and it is appropriate that we also think of the family of Dr Eithne Walls, who died in the Air France tragedy. I offer my sympathy and the sympathy of the people whom I represent to the families. It is difficult to comprehend the grief that they are experiencing at this time.

ASSEMBLY BUSINESS

New Assembly Member: Mr Danny Kinahan

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Danny Kinahan has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the South Antrim constituency to fill the vacancy that resulted from the resignation of Mr David Burnside. Mr Kinahan signed the Roll of Membership and entered his designation in the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General in the Speaker's Office on Tuesday 9 June 2009. Mr Kinahan has now taken his seat.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank my predecessor, David Burnside, for his many years of hard work in South Antrim. I look forward to working to the best of my ability for everyone in South Antrim.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has been advised that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will move all the items of business that stand on today's Order Paper in the name of the Minister of Finance and Personnel on his behalf.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 June 2009.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 June 2009.

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

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Swine Flu

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 take this opportunity to provide Members with a further update on the Northern Ireland response to the swine flu virus. On Thursday 11 June, the World Health Organization announced that it considered the swine flu virus to have reached global pandemic levels. That announcement means that we have moved to phase 6 of our pandemic flu preparations. I reassure Members, as I did following the announcement, that the declaration does not reflect the severity of the virus; it means that the World Health Organization thinks that the virus has spread more widely around the world and now fulfils the definition of a pandemic.

The Scottish Government confirmed yesterday that a patient with underlying health problems had died after testing positive for the H1N1 virus. She is the first person in Europe to die from the virus, and she had other, underlying health problems. Her death does not mean that the virus is becoming more severe. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that the virus is not changing at all.

12.15 pm

There have been confirmed cases of the virus in 74 countries and large increases in the number of confirmed cases being reported in the UK, Australia, Chile and Japan. Globally, there have been 30,128 confirmed cases and 165 deaths. Throughout the UK, there are 1,277 confirmed cases, eight of which are in Northern Ireland. We have also seen more cases of the virus in the Republic of Ireland, with 12 cases now confirmed. Given the increasing number of cases worldwide, we can expect more cases here.

The World Health Organization considers the pandemic to be moderate, with the majority of people affected by the virus recovering well, without the need for hospitalisation or medical care. Our experience in the UK has been that the levels of clinically severe or fatal cases appear to be similar to that of seasonal flu. In the majority of cases, the disease has generally been mild, but it is proving to be severe in a small minority of cases. I am pleased to report that all the people in Northern Ireland who contracted the virus have fully recovered or are recovering well.

It is important that Members be aware that the World Health Organization's move to phase 6 does not change the UK's overall assessment of the virus and does not

trigger any material change in our public health response. The World Health Organization, in determining its pandemic alert phases, needs to consider what is happening globally, and, as I reported, although the number of cases throughout the world continues to rise, there continues to be only a small number of cases in Northern Ireland.

As in the rest of the UK, we have been planning for a potential pandemic for some time, and, since the emergence of swine flu, we have been operating at a heightened state of readiness. Our plans are robust and well rehearsed. We are continuing with our preparations based on prudent planning assumptions, because it is still too early to predict accurately the impact of the pandemic on the UK. The move to phase 6 vindicates our planning for a pandemic and the possibility of large numbers of people catching swine flu. I understand how the further development in Scotland may cause public concern, but the UK is one of the best-prepared countries in the world, so we are well equipped to deal with the pandemic. In line with the World Health Organization's advice, the UK Government will not impose any domestic or international travel restrictions, and they will keep UK borders open.

In Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, we are following a containment strategy, supplying antivirals to people who develop the disease and, as a preventative measure, to their close contacts. The strategy has been effective to date in delaying widespread transmission. However, it will not work indefinitely if there is a rapid rise in cases. Therefore, preparations are in hand to move to a mitigation strategy. Such a strategy will mean that, when the number of cases increases beyond a certain level, we will have to keep under review the extent to which we supply antivirals to contacts. In the first instance, we will supply them only to immediate, close contacts rather than to all contacts. The mitigation strategy may also require the use of clinical diagnosis rather than laboratory testing where there is a high probability that people will test positive for the virus. A reduction in the numbers of follow-up contacts may also be necessary so that we target only people who are most at risk.

The move to phase 6 means that vaccine manufacturers will need to meet the contractual obligations of advance purchase agreements for vaccines that were made with the UK and some other countries. Such agreements were made in the event of a pandemic being declared and enable the UK to purchase up to 132 million doses of pandemic-specific vaccine when it becomes available, which means that we will have access to two doses of pandemic-specific vaccine for everyone in Northern Ireland if needed. Northern Ireland has a stock of antiviral drugs that covers half the population, and I have ensured that steps are in

place to increase that stock so that antiviral drugs will be available to treat up to 80% of the population.

Last Friday, I called a meeting of the chief executives of the various health and social care bodies and the Fire and Rescue Service to assure myself that their organisations are in an advanced state of preparedness and ready to respond to the increased number of cases expected in the near future. The meeting was positive, and I am pleased that extensive plans are in place to ensure that the population will be protected.

I also continue to meet my counterparts throughout the UK. Along with Health Ministers from Wales and Scotland, I take part in regular COBRA meetings that are now chaired by the new Secretary of State for Health, Andy Burnham. My Department continues to work closely with the Department of Health and Children in the Republic of Ireland on North/South preparedness. Last week, on the fringes of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting, I met Mary Harney to discuss swine flu preparations and planning.

As we have been doing to date, my Department and I will ensure that the public are kept fully informed and are given the necessary advice. I remind Members and the public that we cannot do this alone: everyone must continue to play their part in helping to reduce the impact of the pandemic. My key message to everyone is to carry on as normal but to ensure that they follow the public health advice that has been widely publicised in leaflets, on television and radio, and in newspapers. The simple but effective measures that the public can take to protect themselves include covering their noses and mouths when coughing or sneezing, putting tissues in the bin and washing their hands with soap and water or sanitising gel as soon as possible. The message is simple: 'Catch it, Bin it, Kill it.'

The Public Health Agency will continue to carry out rigorous surveillance to identify cases and arrange antiviral treatment for those affected and their close contacts. My Department is monitoring the situation in Northern Ireland and will take the necessary action to respond to the emerging situation. My officials are working closely with those from other Departments, particularly the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), as necessary to ensure that the wider Northern Ireland response is appropriate. I will, of course, report again to the Assembly as the situation evolves.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson): I welcome the Minister's swift and measured response to the pandemic. He said that steps are in place to increase the amount of antiviral drugs to cover 80% of the population. How long will it take to achieve that benchmark of 80% availability? Will there be enough antiviral drugs for the autumn, when a major rise in the

number of people presenting with this type of flu is expected?

I assume that when the Minister mentioned people who are most at risk he was referring to older people, particularly those diagnosed with clostridium difficile and MRSA. Given that their condition is considerably weakened, will they be given priority?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I have dealt with the matter of antiviral drugs in the House on a number of occasions. Stocks are in place to cover 50% of the population; no pandemic has yet affected over 30% of a population. However, I have placed an order that will increase the population coverage to 80%. I have no precise date for the arrival of those antiviral drugs, but they will certainly be ready for us by the autumn. By then, I expect to have enough to cover the population not only during the containment stage but through the mitigation stage.

Older people with clostridium difficile or MRSA will of course be prioritised when the vaccines are eventually available. However, that is some way off because the virus seed must be identified before they go into production. The vaccines will be shared among countries that have placed advance orders, including the UK. Northern Ireland will receive its share, and we will determine at that point who is most at risk.

For Mrs Robinson's benefit, it is clear that the people most at risk are those aged 16 and under, not older people. In fact, the suggestion has been made that people who are aged over 65 have some element of immunity. However, those are clinical decisions, and I will leave it to the clinicians to advise me on them.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I note and welcome the fact that he said that our plans are "robust and well rehearsed."

Some media reports say that in some areas of Scotland diagnoses are not being made by either swab or laboratory testing. Is that the case here? What would the level of infection have to be for that to happen here? I understand that GPs are diagnosing swine flu in some areas of Scotland. Given that, what is our GPs' situation? Can they diagnose? What level of infection must be reached here before that would be required of our GPs?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: To some extent, that depends on the progress of the virus in Northern Ireland. Degrees of infection are being seen in Scotland and in England that differ from those in, for example, Wales, Northern Ireland or, indeed, the Irish Republic.

Widespread community transition is being experienced in parts of Scotland. In some places in Scotland, mitigation, as opposed to containment, is operating. Mrs McGill described one of the characteristics

of a mitigation, as opposed to a containment, strategy. We continue with our containment strategy, which has worked well so far. We will reach the point where we move to mitigation, but none of us can predict when that will be; it very much depends on the behaviour of the virus.

Mr McCallister: I also welcome the Minister's statement. We are reaping the rewards of having robust and well-rehearsed plans.

It has become clear that, in dealing with swine flu, we are in it for the long haul. I see two big challenges in that. First, the population can become complacent about some of the messages. We must keep reiterating and reinforcing those messages as we move forward so that people do not think that the pandemic is over. Secondly, finance is an issue. Will a financial burden be placed on the Health Service as the pandemic continues into the summer and autumn?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The money that we had set aside for a flu pandemic will not begin to deal with the cost burden as the disease works its way through. It is clear that it is not part of my budget and that it is a matter for others; I cannot allow for it in the health budget. At present, the costs that are involved are still estimates. However, it seems to me that we have no choice other than to treat swine flu seriously. As I keep saying, we prepare for the worst and hope for the best. There will be a bill to pay, but, if the situation becomes as serious as it could, that bill will be well worth paying.

Mrs Hanna: I welcome the Minister's update, and I acknowledge that the Scottish patient who sadly died had an underlying health problem. However, we are aware that people in Scotland were hospitalised; indeed, some of them were admitted to intensive care units. Scotland is not in our jurisdiction, but it is a very close neighbour of ours.

Has the possibility been discussed that the strain in Scotland is a more virulent one?

12.30 pm

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The strain that is being dealt with in Scotland is the same one that we all continue to deal with. It has had a severe affect on 10 individuals, who are in hospital, but scientists and medical experts are unable to say why those people have been affected in that way.

Mr McCarthy: I, too, thank the Minister for keeping the House and the Northern Ireland public abreast of what is happening with swine flu. Unfortunately, a patient in Scotland sadly died, and I am sure that the House offers its sympathy to the family of that person. We were told that that person had underlying health problems. Swine flu has affected a number of patients

in Northern Ireland. Do any of those patients have underlying health problems, and, if so, will they be monitored and given every available treatment to ensure that they have a speedy recovery?

Furthermore, does the Minister have any evidence that, during this phase of the swine flu outbreak, the wise instructions that he and his Department issued have been adhered to throughout Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: With respect to the Member's latter point, we provide advice through the Public Health Agency, and Members will have seen that advice, particularly in media adverts. We rely on the public to be sensible and to co-operate. Co-operation is a key part of containment, and the longer that we can contain the outbreak, the more time we can buy until a vaccine is ready and in place.

Everybody who has tested positive for swine flu in Northern Ireland has either recovered or is doing well. The situation in Scotland is different; some patients there have had a mild reaction, but others have had a severe reaction. It is early days with this new and novel virus, and no one is clear about its characteristics. No one can yet say whether one of its characteristics is that it is a mild strain.

Mr Buchanan: I wish to express my sincere sympathy to the family in Scotland, whose loved one had the virus and, over the past weekend, tragically lost her fight for life. Although I appreciate that that person was suffering from an underlying medical problem, is the Minister able to say whether pregnant women are at a greater risk from the virus? How does that death impact on the arrangements for fighting the virus in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said in my statement, although the World Health Organization has declared pandemic level 6, nothing will change; we will carry on with the plans and preparations that we have in place.

Although it is early days, there are some indications that pregnant women are more susceptible to the virus than the rest of the population. With respect to fighting the virus, Tamiflu is not suitable for pregnant women; however, suitable antivirals exist and are available to be administered.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. In addition, I apologise on behalf of my colleagues Sue Ramsey and Michelle O'Neill who are members of the Health Committee but who have another engagement in the Long Gallery.

As other Members said, our thoughts and prayers are with the family of the women who died in Scotland. Although it has been confirmed that she tested positive

for, and died from, the H1N1 virus, the Scottish Government also confirmed that she had underlying health problems. Of the 164 deaths worldwide that were associated with swine flu, how many of those people had underlying health problems?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I do not readily have such a statistical answer, and I imagine that much of the evidence is still being collated.

However, as I informed the House before, there has been an alarming degree of under-reporting in other countries. We are not clear about how many of the people whose deaths were ascribed to swine flu had underlying conditions and how many did not, but it is clear that there have been instances worldwide of perfectly healthy individuals, with no underlying conditions, contracting the virus and dying. There are no lessons that have been learned that I can relate to the House. It is still very early days as far as the scientific investigation is concerned.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister tell us what contact he has had with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland? What level have they reached as regards their treatment, analysis and policy? Will he also tell the House whether the eight people who have contracted swine flu in Northern Ireland have been treated at home or have been admitted to hospital? Will he indicate the earliest date at which he expects to receive vaccines to treat swine flu?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: There are 12 patients in the Republic of Ireland who have tested positive. My discussions with the Republic of Ireland show that it has adequate supplies of antivirals and has orders in place for vaccines.

As far as Northern Ireland is concerned, I am not aware of any of our patients who have tested positive going to hospital. They have been able to fight the virus at home with the support of the Health Service and antiviral treatments. As I keep saying, I am not in a position to say when we will receive vaccines, but we will not get all of our vaccines in one delivery: it will be an extended delivery because of the capacity of factories that produce the vaccines and because of the number of countries that require the vaccines. However, we are top of the queue thanks to the UK response and to our being part of the UK. Northern Ireland will get its full share of the 132 million vaccines that have been ordered.

Once the virus seed has been isolated and vaccine production starts, we should be seeing the vaccines before the end of the year. We will then determine who receives them first. High-impact employees, for example those in the Health Service and vulnerable groups, will be key, but that is very much in the future.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Main Estimates

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours for the debate. The Minister will have a total of one hour to allocate between proposing and winding on the motion, and all other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,566,927,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £8,311,830,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2009-10 that was laid before the Assembly on 29 May 2009.

The motion was tabled in the name of the Minister of Finance and Personnel. This important Supply resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the spending plans of Departments and other public bodies as set out in the Main Estimates for 2009-2010, which were presented on 29 May 2009. I request and recommend the level of Supply set out in the resolution under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 on behalf of the Executive.

As Members will be aware, at present, Departments are spending money and using resources on the basis of the Vote on Account in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2009, which was passed by the Assembly in February. As the Vote on Account provides only initial allocations for 2009-2010 based on 45% of the 2008-09 provision, it is now essential that further resources and cash be approved before the summer recess to enable public services to continue for the remainder of the current financial year.

The departmental spending plans in the 2009-2010 Main Estimates are based on the second year of the Executive's Budget 2008-2011, which was approved by the Assembly in January of last year. However, the estimates reflect some technical adjustments that have been made since then. They are a result of reclassification changes or revised budgeting treatment and, in some instances, of transfers between Departments or from the Northern Ireland Office.

There are two key issues in relation to the adjustments. First, adjustments to budgets as a consequence of reclassification changes or revised budgeting treatment do not provide additional spending power to the Executive. That is based on the accepted policy that service delivery should not be affected by such changes. Therefore, although there is an adjustment to the overall Northern Ireland Executive departmental expenditure limit, the result is to maintain spending power at the same level. Secondly, adjustments that are transfers between Departments do not reflect changes in total spending power, but rather that the Budget provision is merely following the service provided.

In addition, Members will recall that estimates also include almost £6 billion of annually managed expenditure (AME). That expenditure is demand-led and is updated at least twice per annum. Therefore, the estimates also reflect updates to the AME allocations published in the Budget 2008-2011 document in January 2008.

The amounts of cash, over £7.6 billion, and resources, over £8.3 billion, sought in the Supply resolution are substantial in addition to the February Vote on Account. The Main Estimates under debate today bring the total requirements for 2009-2010 to over £13 billion cash and £15 billion resource. Although the Minister of Finance and Personnel approves and presents the estimates, and I am doing that today on his behalf, the underlying detail reflects decisions taken by Ministers under the financial authority delegated to them by the Department of Finance and Personnel. Those are the estimates of each Minister; they detail the services planned for delivery in 2009-2010 by each Minister within their Budget allocation.

Although today's focus is understandably on the amount of funding being made available to Departments with, for example, the Budget allocation for schools set to increase by 6% this year, it is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the primary purpose of Departments is not to spend money but to provide high-quality, accessible public services for all Northern Ireland's people. Therefore, although I am sure that during today's debate many Members will highlight their concerns regarding the funding available for one service or another, I would first like to set out some of the service improvements that will be funded from the estimates that we are discussing today.

For example, the allocations will allow the completion of the work under the farm nutrient management scheme, achieving cleaner water and EU compliance, while, at the same time, providing much-needed work for the construction industry. The 2009-2010 year is the second year of the five-year Northern Ireland rural development programme. At a total value of over £0.5 billion, the further investment this year will improve the competitiveness of the sector, enhance the

environment and improve the quality of life in rural areas. If passed today, the 2009-2010 expenditure plans will enable the continued delivery of high-quality primary, secondary and tertiary education services across Northern Ireland. Evidence of that can be seen in the £45 million contract signed recently to provide four new schools in Portglenone, Carryduff, Knock and Downpatrick. During these difficult economic times, that is good news for our local construction industry.

Furthermore, reflecting the Executive's commitment to lifelong learning, the South Eastern Regional College buildings programme is well under way, construction has begun on the Belfast Metropolitan College development in the Titanic Quarter, and the new skills centre for the South West College at Enniskillen is expected to be completed next month.

12.45 pm

In addition, the Skillsafe scheme, which was announced on 26 May, will, initially, assist engineering and manufacturing apprentices who have been placed on short-term working to use their downtime to undertake accredited training that will contribute to their apprenticeships. That represents practical help and protection for apprentices in the current challenging economic environment.

Invest Northern Ireland, for which the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is responsible, continues to work proactively with local companies and entrepreneurs to help to minimise the impact of the economic downturn. The expenditure plans before the House will fund initiatives such as the accelerated support fund, which provides advice and support to companies that are suffering the adverse effects of the downturn. In addition, the short-term aid scheme, which I announced recently, will provide valuable support to structurally sound local firms that have a significant presence in export markets, but which are experiencing short-term difficulties due to the global downturn.

In health and social care, building work is about to commence on the new acute hospital in Enniskillen. As well as providing the latest health services for the people of the south-west, that project will bring timely economic benefits. Over the construction period, 850 jobs will be supported through the project, of which 180 will be new. In addition, the new Downe Hospital is due to open to the public at the end of the month. It will provide state-of-the-art medical facilities and services to south Down. Construction will continue on two health and well-being centres in Belfast, which will provide employment for almost 200 people.

A dental contract will be introduced in 2009-2010, which will provide access to dental services for 57,000 additional patients. That is particularly good news for

areas in Northern Ireland where, recently, access to Health Service dental treatment has been difficult, something that I know a lot about.

Those are examples of the improvements in services that the Executive intend to deliver this year. Overall, the 2009-2010 provision in the Estimates will enable the continued delivery of the vital core services, including hospital services; community and primary care; social services; and mental-health and learning-disability programmes.

Turning to roads, the recent completion of the widening works on the M1, Westlink and the M2 will reduce congestion and benefit the economy. The 2009-2010 Department for Regional Development (DRD) expenditure plans that are before the House will ensure the continued improvement of our road infrastructure. However, there must be an appropriate balance of development between the private and public transport sectors, with further investment in this financial year on new trains to increase frequency and capacity in the greater Belfast area and on the Belfast to Londonderry line.

I could not conclude this brief summary of some of the main services that are planned for 2009-2010 without mentioning the numerous social security benefits, totalling over £3 billion, that the Department for Social Development (DSD) will administer during that period. The passing of the Supply resolution and the approval of the 2009-2010 Main Estimates will enable pension benefits and credit, disability benefits, income support, housing benefits and winter fuel payments, to name but a few, to be paid for the remainder of 2009-2010. Those benefits are crucial to many families at this time of economic downturn, and they underline the importance of the Supply resolution.

The continuation of funding for social and affordable housing, as well as the important support for the community and voluntary sector, is also vital to our communities, and the Department for Social Development has the largest capital allocation of any Northern Ireland Department over the next two years.

The importance of this stage of the public expenditure cycle, including the Assembly's anticipated approval of the Supply resolution and the associated expenditure plans that are laid out in the 2009-2010 Main Estimates, cannot be overestimated. Failure to approve the resolution would result in serious consequences for public services, which I have highlighted. Departments would run out of cash and public services would grind to a halt, something for which the people of Northern Ireland would not forgive the Administration.

The forthcoming June monitoring round, and those for the remainder of 2009-2010, will provide the opportunity for a revision of the plans in light of changing circumstances.

I am sure that, during today's debate, Members will avail themselves of the opportunity to provide their advice and recommendations to the Finance Minister and the Executive on our proposed revisions for 2009-2010. Maybe more in hope than in expectation, I ask Members to put forward their spending proposals in tandem with sensible proposals for reductions in public spending elsewhere in the Budget.

Following this debate and the passing of the Supply resolution, I intend to introduce the related Budget Bill. As this is the fifth time since May 2007 that the Assembly has gone through this process, Members will be familiar by now with the need for the accelerated passage of the Bill, as specifically recognised in Standing Order 42(2) of this Assembly. Once again, I acknowledge the vital role played by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and its pragmatic approach to that matter.

Members will also be familiar by now with the differences between Budgets and Estimates. Estimates reflect the spending plans of Departments, while the Budget reflects the spending plans of the wider public sector, including arm's-length bodies. Those differences are reflected in the resource and capital reconciliation tables, from Estimates to Budgets, in the supporting statements section of each Department's estimate.

I remind Members of the significance of today's business. Approval by this legislature of the 2009-2010 Estimates and today's Supply resolution will provide Departments with the legal authority to spend cash and use resources on the services that they plan to deliver, up to the limit that is set out in the 2009-2010 Estimates, the Supply resolution and the related Budget Bill. That means that this House will subsequently hold Departments accountable for managing and controlling their spending and resources within the limits authorised today. Any breach of the limits set by this Assembly will be reported by the Comptroller and Auditor General to the Public Accounts Committee, following his examination of departmental resource accounts.

When referring to the spending plans for the Budget today, some Members will, I expect, press again the case for the Executive to take forward a formal budget process in light of the changes in economic circumstances or, indeed, for other less benign reasons. However, the Executive already have procedures in place to allow changes to be made to existing expenditure plans throughout the in-year monitoring process. With regard to the economic downturn, that process allowed the Finance Minister to announce a significant financial support package as part of December monitoring, while recent initiatives by the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and my Department were taken forward without the need for a Budget process.

The Executive are not being dogmatic in that respect, as a Budget process would be taken forward were it required. However, to date, no proposals have been put forward that cannot be accommodated through in-year monitoring. I hope that Members agree that Departments and public bodies should focus on delivering public services and supporting industry, rather than indulging in a costly, bureaucratic and distracting Budget exercise.

Dr Farry: The Minister said that monitoring rounds are sufficient to allow flexibility in dealing with different economic circumstances. However, does she accept that monitoring rounds are themselves limited to the amounts that Departments surrender or the Barnett consequential that the Executive receive, and that, unlike a Budget, they cannot delve into existing policies and practices to see whether they are still relevant or whether moneys could be better spent elsewhere?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I am sure that we will have a full and open debate about the Budget process during the next couple of hours and, indeed, tomorrow. Nothing has come before the Executive yet that has not been able to be accommodated by the monitoring rounds; that is what the Finance Minister is saying clearly.

I wish to make a final point about the presentation of the Estimates document, which I hope Members have had an opportunity to look at. The more observant Members will have noticed the new look for the 2009-2010 Estimates. In recent years, the Estimates documents have been printed on high-quality, glossy, coated art paper — I notice that the Member beside me is flicking through a previous one — with coloured pages separating each Department and the supporting documentation. In line with the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) sustainable development policy, this year the Estimates have been printed in black and white on recycled paper containing 75% post-consumer waste. In addition, that has reduced the cost of printing the volume in line with DFP's efficiency savings programme. I am sure that Members will not mind that at all.

In conclusion, as we approve the opening departmental positions for this financial year as set out in the 2009-2010 Estimates, some difficult decisions lie ahead for the in-year monitoring rounds. No doubt, many Members will demand additional funding for many worthwhile projects and services, and they will probably do so during the debate; in fact, I know that they will. However, I ask Members to remember that we have a finite Budget, and any demands that are made today for additional funding should be accompanied by recommendations as to where that additional funding should be found. Our task is to juggle competing priorities within a limited Budget so that we deliver

our public services. I look forward to a healthy and robust debate on those issues.

I ask Members to support the resolution to approve the opening position for the 2009-2010 year and to ensure that provision is made for vital public services to continue beyond the current position in the Vote on Account.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Mr McLaughlin): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for being here to represent the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who cannot be here today. If we were to pay attention to some of the comments in the media, that might be seen as something of a rehearsal. However, I commend the Minister for her detailed and precise presentation of the resolution and the Budget targets.

Senior departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 27 May 2009 on the Main Estimates for 2009-2010 and the associated Budget (No. 2) Bill, which gives legislative approval to the Estimates and which is to be introduced in the Assembly following this debate. Advanced copies of the Main Estimates were made available to Committee members prior to the briefing, and departmental officials also provided the Committee with a paper that reconciled the figures in the Budget to those in the Main Estimates for 2009-2010.

At departmental level, the main difference in DFP's allocations in the Executive Budget and the Main Estimates for 2009-2010 related to an additional £4.1 million transfer from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for the central reform of IT services. Following the briefing, the Committee for Finance and Personnel agreed to support accelerated passage for the Budget (No. 2) Bill for 2009.

As the Minister said, the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 2) Bill are the outworkings of the process to finalise the Executive's Budget for 2008-2011, which the Assembly agreed in January 2008. In December 2007 when the Budget was at draft stage, my Committee published a report that included substantive submissions from all the Assembly's Statutory Committees. The Committee received a formal response to that report, and it is continuing to monitor the implementations of its recommendations, especially those to improve financial management in Departments.

The underlying spending plans for 2009-2010 brought forward in the Main Estimates reflect the position established in the second year of the Executive's three-year Budget. Although the Budget for 2008-2011 has been agreed already, Members should be aware that the Assembly and its Statutory Committees can

have an input to the reprioritisation of resources in 2009-2010 via the in-year quarterly monitoring rounds. Indeed, the Minister referred specifically to that point, which I support

The Department completed a review of the monitoring-round process at the end of March 2009, and my Committee is waiting to be briefed on the outcome of that review. I urge the Minister to ensure that that report is made available as soon as possible, because, due to the ever-increasing pressures on resources and the rising concerns as expressed by all parties in the Assembly, it is extremely important that the monitoring-round process is as effective and transparent as possible.

Another area that may have an impact on the expenditure proposals in the Main Estimates for 2009-2010 is the achievement of existing targets for efficiency savings, especially given the added challenge of the pending additional efficiency cuts that were signalled in the Chancellor's recent Budget announcement. The Committee has been briefed by the Department on progress in delivering the Department's own efficiency plans in 2008-09, and officials have raised concern already at the impact that efficiency targets may have on delivery in this financial year, 2009-2010. I urge the other statutory Committees to continue to scrutinise the efficiency delivery plans of their respective Departments.

1.00 pm

At a more strategic level, officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel's central finance group gave evidence to the Committee in January 2009 and informed members that they had undertaken a qualitative analysis of departmental efficiency delivery plans. Almost five months ago, the Committee requested a copy of that analysis, but, disappointingly, we have yet to receive it. I ask the Department to make that analysis available forthwith, and, in the interim, perhaps the Minister will comment on the potential pressures that efficiency targets may place on this year's Budget.

The Budget for 2008-2011 made provision for capital receipts of £486 million for 2008-09 and £266 million for 2009-2010. That included a planned receipt in 2008-09 of £175 million for the Department of Finance and Personnel from the Workplace 2010 programme, but those funds were not realised as the planned sale of accommodation under that programme was not taken forward. Will the Minister outline how shortfalls in capital receipts for last year and the uncertainties that abound regarding the achievement of the 2009-2010 target have been built into those estimates? If no such provisions exist, will the Minister indicate what options are currently available to the Executive to address in-year budgetary pressures for 2009-2010?

Stopping the Workplace 2010 procurement exercise has had expenditure ramifications for the Department

of Finance and Personnel's own budget beyond the loss of the £175 million capital receipt. Much of the public sector estate, as I believe all Members will be aware, is in urgent need of maintenance, with health and safety implications now having to be addressed by the Department.

Indeed, the Department of Finance and Personnel has already submitted a £6 million bid in the June monitoring round for urgent maintenance to the Civil Service office estate. That Department also has a lead responsibility for a number of Civil Service reform programmes, and, despite previous assurances that those will be funded from the monitoring round process, many of the Department's bids in relation to those programmes were not met last year. A further bid of £15 million was submitted in June, and we wait to see whether that will be met.

Already, it is apparent that the Department's budget for 2009-2010 is under pressure. The Department submitted bids totalling £26 million for the June monitoring round, which is a very early stage in the financial year and is against an opening departmental baseline of £190 million. In the past, DFP officials have stated that more revenue will be generated from an improved performance in the collection of rates by Land and Property Services, and the Committee has taken a very focused and critical interest in that body. It has asked to be briefed as soon as possible on the performance and efficiency delivery unit's review of it.

Going forward, the Committee must agree an efficient and effective process for scrutinising and agreeing future Budgets. My Committee has already made representations in that regard, including a submission on the Budget process, made in October 2008. However, the Committee is still waiting for a response from the Department of Finance and Personnel on the recommendations in that submission and an outline of the Department's views on a future process. That must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

In conclusion, I want to speak on behalf of my party. For Sinn Féin, tackling the economic and fiscal crisis is a key priority for the Assembly and the Executive. At a time of economic crisis, it is even more critical that those who are most disadvantaged and in the greatest need are given additional help and assistance. My party recognises that the Executive have been very alive to that priority.

Given the efficiency savings pressures that exist, including those that are being proposed by the Chancellor and the Treasury, there is a need for an all-party commitment to defending front-line public services. Sinn Féin supports greater efficiency savings, but such savings should be made in obvious areas, such as the bonuses received by senior civil servants and the grossly inflated salaries of some in public bodies.

Front-line services must not be the first resort; indeed, they must be defended. Sinn Féin believes — I think that other parties would expect us to — that, given the financial and economic constraints affecting the Southern economy and our regional economy, there is a need for greater co-operation, particularly on delivering shared services, especially in the border area. It is simply a waste of time and money to deliver such services on a back-to-back basis. It is a particular waste when the economy is under such pressure.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Dr W McCrea): I speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and I will limit my comments to the Estimates that are relevant to that Department.

This has not been an easy year for the agriculture industry, and everyone who knows that industry is aware of the challenges, including the high costs of fuel, feedstuffs and fertilisers that are impacting on farm businesses across the sector. In addition, the severe weather in the summer of 2008 played havoc with, in particular, the potato and cereal sectors. I therefore thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel and his Executive colleagues for agreeing to lessen the burden on small but important parts of the industry through the hardship schemes for the fishing and potato industries. Those small amounts of money have been important in securing family businesses and have certainly not been taken for granted. I also welcome the additional £2.3 million that has been made available for the south Down fishing village programme. That will provide much-needed support to communities that have been negatively impacted as a result of the difficulties faced by the fishing industry on which they are dependent.

Overall, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will see a net increase in its cash requirement of just over £40 million. That is to be welcomed. The highest proportion of that, some £29 million, relates to the farm nutrient management scheme, which will allow Northern Ireland to be compliant with the EU nitrates directives. It should be noted that, as with most schemes of that nature, the grant that is payable represents only 40% of the total cost of carrying out those works, the balance of 60% having been found by the farm businesses. That represents a major investment in Northern Ireland's rural economy by farm business at a time of severe economic downturn.

I am sure that the House will agree that we ought to congratulate farmers on their bravery in investing their hard-earned moneys in their businesses and in the economy. I also call on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to ensure that it processes the outstanding claims with as much speed as possible, because most farmers will have had to borrow money

in order to invest. It would be a total injustice to them and their willingness to support their local and national economies if they had to incur huge bank fees because of the apathy of the Department in processing claims. That is vital because many farmers have not received much help from the banks. In fact, fees have been burdensome at a time when farmers have had so many other economic pressures. It is therefore very important for the Department to pass on the money as quickly as possible, and all steps must be taken to allow that to happen. If positions must be rejigged within the Department to make that happen, that must be done, as many farmers have received a half payment but are still short of the other half and have had to subsidise that for the benefit of everyone and the environment.

Although it is not strictly relevant to the debate, my Committee also notes the willingness of family farm businesses to invest in the modernisation of their enterprises.

I call on the Department to examine critically its budget provisions in the Northern Ireland rural development programme to determine whether shortfalls in parts of the overall programme budget can be transferred to that worthwhile and well-supported scheme. The leverage of approximately 60% of overall costs from the private sector — the farmers themselves — will massively boost the local economy and local businesses beyond those that are involved in farming. For example, it will boost light engineering and processing companies. I ask the Executive to encourage that to be a reality, because it is vital to get the money circulating in Northern Ireland. I take my hat off to the farmers, who, in these times in which they face so many challenges, are up-front in investing their own money in the industry's future and in the Northern Ireland economy.

Although the Committee supports the Department in such matters, it is concerned about some traditional allocations, particularly that for disease control. We note that an element of the £12.5 million increase given to the Department's central policy group is for animal disease compensation. I am not sure whether that figure includes the bid for an additional £6 million that was made in the June monitoring round. Irrespective of that, it is evident that the Department is not controlling the diseases that are most relevant to Northern Ireland agriculture, particularly TB. The Minister of the Environment has given the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development approval for a limited badger cull, yet DARD has been totally inactive on that. The Committee calls on the Department to take the brave decision to eradicate animal diseases, thus saving the Northern Ireland block more than £60 million a year. That is no small amount of money, so the Minister must take every possible action to ensure that the money is well spent. I am sure

that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will consider the situation very carefully, because that is a recurrent amount of money that is being spent in Northern Ireland. The underlying problem of eradication of disease is not being dealt with. Action must come from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The Committee notes that the spring Supplementary Estimates identify a number of significant decreases, for reasons such as the reallocation of administrative budgets. We appreciate that those decreases are subsequently reallocated across Departments and the Northern Ireland block, but we are concerned that they are happening. Therefore, we call on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to assure the Committee and, more importantly, the rural community that the decreases will not result in a decline in the provision of front line services to rural Northern Ireland.

The Committee is pleased at the additional moneys that are coming to the Department. We hope that the Department will continue to work with the industry to promote a stronger, more vibrant industry and rural economy.

Mr McNarry: The outgoing Minister of Finance and Personnel either holds this place in contempt or has a genuine reason for his absence. Therefore, it would be appropriate to hear the reason that Mr Dodds has for not attending. I shall not speculate or fuel rumours about his future or that of other DUP Ministers as they dispose of double-jobbing in a party reshuffle to hide their unbounded embarrassment, but the fact that the outgoing Minister is not here today and, I understand, will not be here tomorrow for the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill tells its own story and adds only to vivid speculation. He should be here. The reason for his not being here needs to be better than "very good".

Perhaps the interim Minister could explain why the Department is not accepting any spending bids for the June monitoring round. Is that not an exceptional situation that deserves explanation? Has a decision been taken that effectively means a scenario of massive overspend, or an unwillingness to admit reliance on underspends, which creates an inability to balance the books not at the end of the year but in the first quarter? In other institutions, a message that instructs Departments not to make a bid would set alarm bells ringing. Is that a message of prudence, or has spending been excessive and the purse emptied? Is such an instruction from a Government not unprecedented? Will the interim Minister take time to allay the genuine fears that are circulating that the Department is overseeing the stretching of the Northern Ireland block grant to levels that cannot be sustained?

The refusal of the Finance Minister to shift on reprioritising the Budget must be one of the foremost examples of political inflexibility and rigidity in the modern legislative arena. As we vote for the Supply resolution, we vote to sustain a system that predates the world financial crisis and the recession that occasioned the rewriting of budgets and the redesign of governmental fiscal structures across the world in every country except Northern Ireland. “No change here” is the slogan.

1.15 pm

Unfortunately, there is change here. When I first raised this matter last October, there were 29,000 people unemployed. Today, that figure has risen to over 47,000. One might suppose that those horrendous figures would present a learning curve steep enough for even the outgoing Finance Minister to recognise that he might possibly have been mistaken in not reordering the priorities of the Programme for Government. However, his refusal to move on that matter earns the cosy coalition the title “the do-nothing Government”, presiding over a situation in which 81% of this Assembly’s time is taken up with private Members’ motions that are not binding on Ministers and only 18% is taken up with Government business. That is a scandalous state of affairs that cannot continue. After the humiliation and reversal of last week’s election result, one hoped that there might be a rewriting of the Programme for Government. However, the DUP are like the Bourbons after the French revolution:

“They have learnt nothing, and forgotten nothing.”

We vote today on a Supply resolution and associated Budget designed for a world before the worst recession and banking crisis since 1929. I ask the Minister once again, even at this late stage, to think again and order a thoroughgoing review of the priorities in the Programme for Government. I ask that in the name of the 47,000 unemployed and those who daily increase that number and of those who live in fear that their jobs will be terminated tomorrow or even today. I ask it on the grounds of common sense.

What about the black hole, which was £1 billion and rising at the last count? When will someone level with us as to how the deficit-financing scheme is performing? How many Departments have underspent so that they can balance their books? When will someone withdraw the bonuses of senior civil servants in Departments that have underspent and failed the public? Will someone tell the House what will happen after 2011, when efficiency savings of £14 billion will be imposed throughout the United Kingdom legislatures? What are the contingency plans for that situation? Members want to hear from someone with ministerial responsibility for finance.

Until now, yesterday’s Finance Minister had been building his latest house of cards around the suggestion

that all of the pain would come after 2011: bully for him. However, it goes without saying that, if the Chancellor proposes a three-year spending review, that will lead, almost inevitably, to a reduction in the block grant before 2011. That is what is likely to hit Northern Ireland; that is the pain that is coming very soon.

Sound Government finance is not theory. It can never be established by creating a Programme for Government before a worldwide economic crisis erupts and then sticking to it rigidly, no matter what happens in the economy or in the real world. Of course, it must be difficult for double-jobbers and treble-jobbers to latch on to that fact. Let us face it: their multiple salaries cushion them from the impact of an economic downturn or recession very nicely.

That fact has resonated with an electorate who are fed up with false promises. It has struck home with people who, last week, struck back and sent the DUP crashing. Those people are indignant and angry at seeing that their trust has been misplaced. What is being talked about today, regarding the Supply resolution, is the highlighting of a financial situation and the fact that the person charged with responsibility happens to be somewhere else. We do not know where. The House deserves better, and I hope that that is what it will get in the not-too-distant future.

Mr O’Loan: I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the Supply resolution. Some time ago, Jonathan Swift made a modest proposal to deal with the enormous poverty and hardship that existed on the island of Ireland at that time. He proposed that the people of Ireland should eat their babies. I want to start with a modest proposal to deal with the current crisis in Government finances: the Assembly should abolish the post of Minister of Finance and Personnel. It is a modest proposal, which would be easier to realise than Swift’s for the simple reason that the Northern Ireland public would not notice any difference.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel says that a three-year Budget has been created and that, no matter how the world changes around him, he will not alter it. The Finance Minister’s function is, essentially, to create the Budget. He says that he has created a Budget and that it still stands. At the start of the debate, Minister Foster made a speech which could have been written 18 months ago. Indeed, quite probably, civil servants wrote it when the Minister of Finance announced his three-year Budget, and it has simply been cut and pasted from that speech. That is consistent with his position. He says that there is no need to make any change to the Budget. Therefore, I offer my modest proposal to the Assembly.

The SDLP expressed serious concerns about the three-year Budget and the Programme for Government at the time of their creation. Many of my party’s fears

have been realised. We remain gravely concerned about the extent to which the Budget was predicated upon efficiency savings and asset sales, asset sales that have not been realised. That has led to major concerns from a range of organisations and sectors about subsequent cuts in front line services. A senior Housing Executive manager said that he is operating in the most difficult funding environment that he has ever operated in, and a senior Health Service manager said that efficiency savings are simply cuts across the Budget that directly impact on front line service.

The global and, consequently, the local economic climates have shifted hugely in the past year to 18 months. The Executive have done remarkably little to take account of that. The deferral of water charges is a significant issue, and we have talked before about the lack of ring-fenced money to deliver much-needed services for children and young people.

During last year's debate on the Supply resolution, the SDLP expressed serious concerns about the ability of the DUP and Sinn Féin to deliver a coherent strategy of government based on a shared society. There have been some high points, and, when good things are done, I recognise them. Politicians on all sides of the House rose to the occasion and showed what a shared society could mean after the recent tragedy of the murders at Massereene barracks. However, there is no question that that approach is not broadly sustained in the day-to-day realities of delivery in the Assembly.

The public have a vague sense that the Assembly is not delivering. However, people would be shocked if they knew how little business is before the Assembly. The reality is that numerous issues and papers are logjammed because of conflict between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. The two parties have managed to deliver, at best, a fraction of what was promised in the Programme for Government, and the Executive seem to lack strategy and leadership. They talk about delivering for the economy, but the SDLP has identified many issues in its significant paper, 'New Priorities in Difficult Times', and our lead has not been followed.

The Minister has stated that he wants to always be:

"flexible and responsive to changing circumstances." —
[Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p152, col 1].

Moreover, a senior Department official referred to the "cessation of low-priority programmes." However, those approaches differ from the Minister's actual decisions on this, which have meant no change to the Budget in light of the colossal change in economic circumstances. Yet again, the SDLP calls on the Minister to prioritise retraining, helping small and medium-sized businesses and putting more money into social housing and the green economy, particularly energy efficiency.

I want the House to recognise that I give credit where it is due. I have heard sound and good feedback about Invest Northern Ireland's credit crunch seminars and its follow-through, which provides diagnostic input to businesses. I welcome the two recent ministerial statements about retraining and apprenticeships. However, not nearly enough has been done. As Stephen Farry said, it is not good enough to say that we can address those issues through monitoring rounds alone. I spoke earlier about abolishing the post of Minister of Finance; perhaps we need a Minister for monitoring rounds.

It is worth commenting on the interesting little example of Workplace 2010, which collapsed. I could say much about the reasons for that collapse and what it indicates about the Department's management of the project. We have been told that that financial hit was taken last year, and it has been suggested that we are through that problem. We are not through that problem. The £175 million that ought to have been available through last year's Budget should have been used to deliver projects. However, those projects have not been delivered.

1.30 pm

There are other Workplace 2010 issues, such as the decentralisation of posts, which was one of the fundamental political challenges that faced the Assembly. On the face of it, each party in the Assembly subscribed to decentralisation, but the degree to which it was written into Workplace 2010 was unclear from the outset. There now seems to be no commitment to the proposals in the Bain Review on policy on the location of public-sector jobs in Northern Ireland.

The collapse of Workplace 2010 means that the Civil Service estate is not fit for purpose, and no revised proposals have been made on how to put that right.

We were told last year that the Civil Service equal pay claim would cost at least £100 million. Is the Minister going to tell us that, in light of the resolution in the House on 1 June 2009, he will resolve that issue and pay those civil servants what they are entitled to within three months?

I welcome the Minister's announcement on senior Civil Service pay and bonuses, but we need more detail about how and when that will happen.

The Minister will know that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has embarked on a major inquiry into public procurement because of serious concerns that the system is not working. Legal challenges have been made, and owners of small and medium-sized businesses say that they cannot get a slice of the action. There has been a failure to use social and environmental clauses to deal with the current economic situation.

There are many other issues that I want to address, but they will have to wait for another occasion.

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

Mr O'Loan: There will be another opportunity tomorrow when we debate the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

Dr Farry: I apologise for missing the first few minutes of the Minister's statement; I was in a Committee meeting.

I welcome Arlene Foster to the Chamber today; she has been a dexterous Minister in the past few days in fulfilling a number of roles, which may be a portent for the future. We do not need to abolish the post of Minister of Finance and Personnel; finance is an integral part of government around the world. However, I concede that we need a change of direction with regard to budgets, and a change of personnel may assist us in that.

There is frustration not only in the Chamber but across the whole of society about the inability of the Assembly to respond more effectively to the effects of the economic downturn on Northern Ireland and to plan for economic recovery when it comes. We should be optimistic in that regard. There is a lack of flexibility in what we do, which stands in stark contrast to what is happening in virtually every other jurisdiction around the world as they wrestle with the economic situation.

We are locked into the figures that were set out in the 2008-2011 Budget, with some minor modifications. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that even the changes that were made in previous monitoring rounds do not affect the underlying baselines. For example, the Minister mentioned what I now call the £150 spring fuel payment, as opposed to the winter fuel payment. That one-off payment was taken out of the £25 million fund that was set up under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009; it remains to be seen whether a similar decision will be taken for next winter. If that is the case, it begs the question of whether it is better to invest in energy efficiency in people's houses rather than giving them payments every year. Surely that would provide a more longer-term benefit for people who are in fuel poverty.

It is important that we nail the wider issue of monitoring rounds. The Executive have made a lot of the fact that monitoring rounds exist to deal with flexibility and to allow Northern Ireland to respond to changing circumstances. That may be true to an extent, but the extent to which it is true is extremely limited. Monitoring rounds are determined by two factors: first, what Departments are prepared to surrender as underspends; and, secondly, what Barnett consequentials come to Northern Ireland. However, I will say more about that shortly.

Monitoring rounds do not have the same effect as a Budget. They do not allow for a review of existing policies and programmes to see whether we are responding to situations as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible. At the same time, they do not allow us to ascertain whether current programmes are redundant or whether money can be better or more efficiently used for other, more productive purposes. That means that we are missing out on that root-and-branch analysis of what we do with the very limited and scarce resources that are available to us.

Claims have been made that through monitoring rounds, large amounts of money have been changed between Budget headings. Again, it is worth stressing that few of those changes relate to the specifics of dealing with a recession in Northern Ireland. A lot of the changes have been made to simply meet demands from Departments, or more usually, to help in situations where funding pressures have been created, whether through Workplace 2010 or the Executive making a decision without having worked out the cost of further deferrals of water charges, for example. Even today, we are faced with a paper from the Minister for Regional Development calling for the further deferral of water charges beyond 2011. That may be the right thing to do if we weigh up all the different and competing demands facing Northern Ireland. However, I find it incredible that we are talking about making a decision on future spending before we even get sight of what the 2011-14 comprehensive spending review will mean for resources for Northern Ireland. If we think about financial management, that is an amazing situation.

We have also heard talk of a £1 billion black hole. I am not going to go down that route, because that is essentially a notional figure somewhere between the maximum amount of future demands from Departments and resources being surrendered. In practice, the sum will be a lot less than that. However, we are uncertain about what Departments will be surrendering, and there is a legitimate question about how the Executive will be able to balance their books over the months and years to come. If we are going to use astronomical terms, we should perhaps talk about a quasar, where a little light comes out at the end of a tunnel, rather than a black hole, which sucks up everything.

In the short term, although we must accept the limitations of monitoring rounds, a lot of the focus will now shift to the June monitoring round to see what the Executive can do. Following the Chancellor's Budget in April, £116 million in Barnett consequentials will flow into Northern Ireland over the next two years. Those consequentials have arisen due to the fact that the Government made the decision, at a UK-wide level, that they still need to invest to deal with the downturn and to prepare for recovery. That should give

a very clear hint as to what we should be doing in Northern Ireland.

At the same time, we are faced with finding £123 million in efficiency savings over the next two years. There will be a very strong temptation for the Executive to set one sum off against the other. Rather than taking the opportunity of spending £116 million to help our economy, we may simply use it to balance the books without trying to change the way that we do things in Northern Ireland. If that were to happen, it would be a tremendous shame and a wasted opportunity. It would show a lack of creativity and imagination on the part of the Executive. Two weeks ago, the Finance Minister indicated that he was minded to do that with those figures. That is disappointing. Although I recognise that under devolution, it is fully up to the Executive to do with those consequential as they see fit — and I defend that right strongly — equally, there is a responsibility to ensure that we spend that money wisely.

Overall, the scale of the stimulus in Northern Ireland has been extremely small; it is barely 1% to 2% of the more than £8 billion departmental expenditure limit. That pales into insignificance when compared with stimulus elsewhere in the UK.

We are in a situation in which there are looming efficiency savings in the longer term. There is no doubt that Mr McNarry and his new party colleagues will be doing their utmost to ensure that Northern Ireland is spared the worst. However, we wait to see whether that will be the case. There is a wider debate taking place at UK level about when to turn off the tap with regard to Keynesian stimulus. Should one keep going, or if there are sufficient indicators of the green shoots of recovery, should one turn off the tap and recognise the looming difficulties of the debt burden that will have to be borne? I do not see any evidence that detailed and strategic economic discussion is taking place in Northern Ireland about whether we should be spending money now or holding back for a rainy day, which is disappointing.

The Minister challenged Members to state where savings can be made. First, we must be careful of going down the populist route: it is very easy to do so and receive easy plaudits. There is a need for responsibility in Government. I would hate to see the situation arise in which populism were pursued until the elections in 2011, with pain following thereafter. That is not the responsible thing to do for the people of Northern Ireland, who are more sophisticated.

The second issue relates to the cost of division. We have tabled proposals to the Executive on that matter, and I may take an opportunity to discuss them in greater detail tomorrow. I note that a Sinn Féin Member was talking about shared services around the border.

Although I respect constitutional appropriateness, my party and I are happy to explore that theme in much greater detail, because that is the constructive approach.

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

Dr Farry: Equally, Sinn Féin should consider our proposals for dealing with division in Northern Ireland and its financial consequences. I look forward to that discussion.

Mr Hamilton: I am pleased to contribute to the debate. This is the third year in which the Assembly has entered into the process. Many have stated their dislike for the process, but at least we are engaged in one. Regardless of one's perspective, we can all acknowledge that it is much more positive to have our own devolved Assembly in which people who are directly elected by the Northern Ireland electorate can contribute and make their points. If people disagree with the direction that the Executive are taking on public finance matters, they can air their views, which will be listened to and, from time to time, adopted. It is positive that we are debating the Supply resolution and that it is not being foisted upon us without any direct local input.

I will respond to some comments and try to make some of my own. I am instinctively drawn to Mr McNarry's comments first. In the same way that he sought an apology from the Finance Minister for not attending today's debate, Mr McNarry should apologise to the House for being here. He ran through a reheated ramble that, sadly, we have had to listen to time and again. However, he did make some new mistakes: he claimed that no new bids were being submitted by Departments in the upcoming monitoring round, which is incorrect. I am a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, and I recall that during meetings of both Committees, departmental officials had submissions for the monitoring round. The Finance Department submitted bids for the monitoring round: what the Executive choose to do with those bids is a matter for them, but it is completely erroneous to say that no bids are being submitted.

We also heard the old chestnut about rewriting the Budget and Programme for Government: it is really time for the rewriting of speeches.

Whenever Mr McNarry calls for the Programme for Government to be rewritten, I am reminded of that now-famous comment from his party leader, the Minister for Employment and Learning, who when asked on the BBC's 'Politics Show' whether it should be rewritten, said "no, not at all". Instead of trying to bring that idea to the House to persuade the rest of us,

Mr McNarry would have a good job trying to persuade the leader of his own party of the merits of that argument.

1.45 pm

Other Members touched on the issue of monitoring rounds. The Budget, or the financial position, is not in any way static: it does change. Sometimes, it can be limited in its quantum and scope. However, if we are looking for a rapid response to an issue, the monitoring round process can deliver. It is completely and utterly wrong to say that nothing has happened since devolution. I believe that about £1 billion worth of resources have been re-allocated as a result of the monitoring round process since these institutions were re-established two years ago. Furthermore, £1 billion is not an insubstantial amount in any respect; it is a sizeable sum, which the monitoring round process has allowed to be moved to areas where it can be spent effectively.

I listened intently to Dr Farry's remarks about the June monitoring round and the impact of the Barnett consequentials. He made an interesting case, and it is worth examining how we deal with that impact. Obviously, none of the Executive is contemplating that, but there is, perhaps, an argument in doing as he suggests, rather than just offsetting the additional money received against that which we lose. Perhaps we could examine how, even within Departments that would be losing that money, it could be reprioritised and retargeted, particularly for use as an economic stimulus. There is merit in that argument.

However, we saw recently that we do not need even the monitoring round process to deliver impact and benefit in the economic downturn. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment announced in the House recently a £15 million short-term aid scheme to help businesses, and the Minister for Employment and Learning announced the Skillsafe initiative, which is aimed particularly at apprentices. Those initiatives emerged without the need for a monitoring round or a formal Budget process. There was a reprioritisation within existing allocations to help those who are in need in this difficult economic climate.

When one hears talk about reprioritising the Budget, particularly from the Ulster Unionist Party, it would be interesting and useful if that party came forward with its own suggestions.

Mr McNarry: At least we are here to do it.

Mr Hamilton: I hear nothing at this stage; I hear only calls about reprioritising, but nothing about from where. There are lots of demands for more money for this and for that, but the flipside of that equation — the downside, the nasty side — namely, from where money would be taken, is something about which the Ulster Unionist Party is silent.

I have to at least acknowledge the SDLP's contribution. I might not agree entirely with some of its suggestions, such as felling an eighth of Northern Ireland's forests, or the idea that some of the money in Invest Northern Ireland or the Harbour Commissioners' resources, capital reserves or current cash reserves may be entirely accessible. At the same time, I do not believe that some of the very good ideas that the SDLP has about selling off some assets might be realisable at the levels that it suggests or at this time. However, the SDLP has at least made a valuable and useful contribution.

Dr Farry made a similar contribution for the Alliance Party. I will not say that I am looking forward to his contribution tomorrow, but I will certainly listen to it intently. However, at least that quarter is also making suggestions about what could be done. We can examine those, and the Executive and Departments could take some meritorious points from them and take them forward. However, the Ulster Unionist Party is curiously silent when it comes to making suggestions as to what can be done. Indeed, in the Executive, Mr McNarry's party colleagues agree, and have agreed, to what is going on. In fact, they initiated some of the very changes about which we spoke earlier.

Again, we had the re-appearance of the mysterious black hole. Dr Farry is correct in his assessment that many of the figures are simply aspirational. There are many things in the so-called black hole that it would be nice to deliver, and there are many ideas, policies and initiatives that it would be nice to implement. However, they were simply not as pressing or as likely to be realised as other matters.

I recall Mr McNarry saying some months ago that the Executive would overspend in the previous financial year. However, the provisional out-turn figures, which are due before the end of the month, will show that claim to have been nonsense.

Similarly, Mr McNarry's assessment that there is a black hole is nonsense. It is apparent that one thing that has fallen into a black hole is Mr McNarry's short-term memory. He said that nothing was being done on the review of senior civil servants' pay and bonuses. However, only last Thursday, the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced his intention to establish an independent review of senior civil servants' pay and bonuses. Therefore, Mr McNarry appears to be asleep at the wheel in that respect.

In discussions about what will happen in the next spending round, we are continually reminded by Mr McNarry and his colleagues that the next Government are likely to be Conservative. Things are bad now, but I am absolutely certain that, under the Conservative Party's power —

Mr McNarry: You can vote Labour then.

Mr Hamilton: I always vote for the DUP in a general election, and I will continue to do that.

Times are difficult, and Labour has shown its true colours by cutting and slashing away at budgets. However, one thing that is absolutely certain is that the Conservatives would be in no way better; in many respects, they would be much worse. There were revelations last week that the Conservatives would make 10% cuts to all Departments except health.

It is incumbent on the Ulster Unionist Party, which extols the virtues of its link with the Conservative Party, to explain how the people of Northern Ireland would benefit from a 10% cut in our public expenditure. The people of Northern Ireland will find it very difficult to see the benefit of that. Northern Ireland is experiencing difficult times, but it will be absolutely savaged by cuts if the Tories win the next Westminster election.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

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

Mr Hamilton: It is incumbent on that party to come forward and tell us —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No; I am clearly running out of time.

That party must tell us exactly what it will do to protect Northern Ireland from the savage cuts that the Tories are going to make across Whitehall and the United Kingdom Government.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a chairde.

An issue that continues to make the headlines is the provision of housing, as does the issue of housing in general. The SDLP may well laugh, but the lack of available resources for housing is a matter of great concern to those of us who sit on the Committee for Social Development, particularly given the collapse of house and land sales.

We constantly hear about rising waiting lists — the latest figure is around 40,000 — and rising homelessness. The Minister of Finance and Personnel needs to take that into account when dealing with the Budget. It is essential that housing is provided to the people who are most in need in our society. That provision is a cross-cutting issue that impacts on people's education, health, employment and development in their community. Therefore, we have an obligation to ensure that resources are made available to deal with the issue.

Mike Smyth's report, which was launched last week, is a welcome addition to the housing debate. That report states that a well-funded social housing programme would impact on the hard-pressed construction industry. However, it must be noted that it

was the collapse of the private-housing market that had the biggest impact on the construction industry. In 2003-04, more than 93% of all housing — some 13,900 housing units — was built for the private sector.

The Committee for Social Development has supported, and will continue to support, the calls for more resources to be made available for housing, whether through the Budget's Main Estimates or through monitoring rounds. There is an argument that all types of housing need to be provided, not only social-newbuild housing. We must ensure that our housing stock's infrastructure is maintained. We must ensure that whatever Budget we are awarded reflects the different aspects of housing.

Unfortunately, that has not happened. Failing to include improvement grants, replacement programmes and cyclical maintenance in the overall housing strategy is short-sighted, and such an approach has a knock-on effect on the building industry. Unless the budget is revisited by the Minister for Social Development or additional resources are found, people who survive on Egan contracts or maintenance contracts, including those for repairs grants, will have to lay off many hundreds of people. That would have a knock-on effect on the entire local economy. Something needs to be done quickly, and I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to take that on board.

I would also like to make a couple of suggestions, one of which is to do with providing resources from the June monitoring round. Can the Minister stipulate that additional money will be reserved for all aspects of maintenance and repairs, including adaptations? Furthermore, will the Minister of Finance and Personnel consider allowing the Minister for Social Development to move the £110 million from the delayed Belfast Royal Exchange development project to cover the reduction in money for Egan contracts and all other aspects of maintenance?

I remind the Minister for Social Development that she is the Minister for Social Development and not just the Minister for housing provision. She needs to deal with all aspects of housing, including urban regeneration, social security and the community sector, which feels that it is being ignored when it comes to the Department's budget allocations. She needs to address all the issues for which she has departmental responsibility as a matter of urgency.

Mr McCausland: I am glad that we have devolution in Northern Ireland and that we as an Assembly have the opportunity to deal with issues concerning the Budget, rather than having decisions about financial matters imposed on us without any input from local politicians. Therefore, I welcome today's debate. However, we must face up to the

reality that, whatever the Budget, only a certain amount of money can be allocated, and if money is to be moved from one Department to another, it is a fact that one Department's gain will be another Department's pain. People who make unending demands for additional resources for their chosen Department and who seem to be almost insatiable in that regard must face up to the fact that if their demands are met, others will face substantial cuts. Therefore, we need to have a sense of realism in facing up to our responsibility.

I want to focus on one aspect of government, which relates to sport and culture. Those are areas of great importance, yet they are undervalued and underestimated in some sectors. In spite of all the financial pressures, one area of future economic growth in Northern Ireland is tourism. It is particularly important at a time when there is a lot of pressure on the economy and there are financial difficulties across the world.

The growing number of tourists coming to Northern Ireland over recent years is a continuing trend. Northern Ireland continues to be an increasingly popular tourist destination. However, if we are to meet the needs of tourists and attract them back again and again, we need to ensure that we provide an adequate product that will draw them here initially. Although that is primarily an issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, the field of culture, arts and leisure has a major contribution to make in that regard.

I welcome the fact that the work on the upgrading of the Ulster Museum is almost completed, and there are developments planned with regard to the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra and the Ulster American Folk Park at Omagh. However, that must be seen as simply the first stage in the development of our museums sector. Some good work was done on the development of a strategy for that sector, and the Department is taking that forward.

Mr Neeson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: I know what the Member is going to say, but I will give way.

Mr Neeson: Does the Member agree that more attention should be given to the development of maritime heritage in Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: There is a certain predictability with some of us, and I agree with that predictability entirely, because I was just about to come to that very point. Northern Ireland has a tremendous shipbuilding heritage and maritime history, and that needs to be developed. *[Interruption.]* I will ignore the comments from my colleague on the right. That sector of the museum world needs to be developed, and I fully support the Member's comments.

In fact, when the Committee was working on the subject of museums, maritime museums were brought up again and again as being of great importance.

2.00 pm

However, museums are only one sector, and the needs of sports must also be considered. The safety of sports grounds presents a major challenge. I hope that not only will the money currently focused on that area continue to be provided, but that a little additional money may be obtained. Over the years, the necessary investment has not been made in sports grounds right across Northern Ireland, with the result that many fall below the standard of safety that is desirable — indeed, essential — for the good of spectators. Therefore, the safety of sports grounds must feature strongly in the Assembly's financial planning, alongside the issue of stadium development.

Mr McCarthy: Before leaving the subject of museums, does the Member agree that Northern Ireland is entitled to a sports museum? Throughout the ages, Northern Ireland has produced a great many sportsmen and sportswomen, and a sports museum would be highly attractive to tourists.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that Northern Ireland's rich sporting heritage should feature in the museum sector. How that will be done is a matter for consideration in the context of the strategy for museums, but sports should not be ignored. Northern Ireland has a number of sportspeople of world renown.

The reports that have been produced on the state of sports grounds give genuine cause for concern. Therefore, investment in that area should be encouraged. Sport does not merely have the general benefit of improving and enhancing the quality of life; it can contribute substantially to young people's good health. I am holding my stomach in as I say that this country has an obesity problem. It is, therefore, good to encourage young people, and those of us who are slightly older, to become involved in sport. Such increased involvement would, undoubtedly, improve the standard of health right across society and result in savings in the health budget. We should not simply regard culture and sports as separate entities to be examined in isolation. They benefit all society, through the economic development of tourism, improving health, and enhancing physical and mental well-being.

It was noted earlier that, although a certain amount of money will be allocated to Northern Ireland, ultimately, we are dependent on the Westminster Exchequer. My colleague Simon Hamilton pointed out what will happen whatever is the outcome of a future Westminster election. All the evidence shows that under a Conservative Government, which is a distinct possibility at present, the financial situation in

Northern Ireland will become even more stringent. We must keep that to the forefront of our minds as we move towards that election.

Mr Beggs: Once again, the Assembly finds itself debating Northern Ireland's Budget. Although today's and tomorrow's motions on the Budget are largely technical in content, they provide another opportunity to take stock of our collective position in the middle of an economic crisis.

I join other Members in seeking an explanation of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's absence and his failure to deliver the Budget on behalf of his Department. That is one of the annual duties for which he earns some £54,000 a year, or over £1,000 a week, in a part-time role. He may have a valid and genuine reason for not being here, but surely Members should be made aware of what that is.

It is without any joy that I acknowledge that we seem, unfortunately, to be largely in the same position as we were after the February 2009 and December 2008 monitoring rounds. We are still balancing the books, as opposed to taking any decisive action to ease Northern Ireland out of the recession and place it in a strong position to compete in the future. It ought to be acknowledged that very little flexibility is available through in-year monitoring.

There has been much debate over the past year as to the existence of a hole in the Northern Ireland Budget. Perhaps we have been looking at that issue from the wrong angle. Northern Ireland is unlikely to go bust, as almost happened to some of our banks. Despite the unprecedented level of debt in which Gordon Brown has placed Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, we will, hopefully, remain solvent.

However, our immediate aspirations and much of our Programme for Government are going or have gone bust. The public's belief in these institutions, in the lead parties that direct them and, most worryingly, in politicians in general, has been lost. Retaining the status quo of a Budget that was agreed two years ago does not give the public great confidence.

I will explain further. We are all aware that there has been a reduction of £133 million in the block grant for 2010-11. How will that be accounted for in the future? We must start to think about that now.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Mr Hamilton did not give way to me earlier. Therefore, I will not give way.

How is the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) pay claim, which some estimates put at more than £100 million — perhaps £200 million or £300 million — dealt with in this Budget? There is also the Workplace 2010 debacle. As has been said, much of the Civil Service has substandard accommodation.

There has been the miscalculation of the value of the Crossnacreevy site by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and by DFP, which had to accept that valuation. There is the loss of rates income by Land and Property Services, another DFP agency that is generating costs and reducing income through its gross failure to run an efficient rates collection system. A further £236 million of costs will accrue to the Executive as a result of the further deferment of water charges until after 2011, as suggested by Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, and the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Nigel Dodds.

In light of those realities, and amid repeated calls from these Benches to take action —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: No, I will not give way, for reasons that I explained earlier. The Member will have his opportunity to speak.

Amid repeated calls from these Benches to reprioritise the Budget in order to make what we have work better for Northern Ireland, the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the two main parties in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister have refused to do anything. Is that because they cannot agree on what action to take?

Earlier in the debate, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, on behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, advocated the use of monitoring rounds for reallocation. I recall that last June there was no reallocation whatsoever. Will the Minister indicate now what moneys she expects to be reallocated in this year's June monitoring round? On the other hand, is the Minister being disingenuous by pointing Members towards a monitoring system that may not materialise?

It is continually claimed that the core of the Programme for Government was written for economic growth. However, unless one has been living on Mars for the past year, it is perfectly clear that, rather than economic growth, Northern Ireland has been experiencing growing unemployment. When the circumstances in which a plan is made change, surely the plan must adapt to that change.

Recent reports of "green shoots" are welcome, but do not hide the fact that job losses are still increasing and that job security is diminishing in many areas across Northern Ireland. I noticed during the past few days that the Institute of Directors forecasts that it may be next January or early in 2010 before the real "green shoots" appear. Only last week, like other Committee witnesses, Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey from the University of Ulster indicated in their aptly entitled paper, 'The Case for Increased Investment in Social

Housing: June 2009', the economic and job-creating benefits of investing in building social housing.

However, largely due to a reduction in capital receipts received by her Department, the Minister for Social Development is facing a hole of £100 million in her housing budget. Setting aside the issue of social housing, the Assembly and Executive have been slow to react to areas of potential economic growth, such as green technologies and the wider economic potential that exists in tackling climate change. The Minister of the Environment, of course, does not believe that anything can be done about climate change, because man has nothing to do with it. How ridiculous.

The Programme for Government is focused on attracting foreign direct investment while our small businesses are struggling to get funding from the banks. Suggested programmes in that area must be welcomed.

Although financial and budgetary decisions take a while to filter down to the public, they undoubtedly have an impact, and the fact that we are, yet again, having a no-change Budget will further diminish the public's belief in the ability of politics to change things. Instead, the public appear to be focused on the observations and revelations about MPs' expenses. As people struggle with their own finances, they become increasingly aware of double-jobbing MPs, who receive MLAs', ministerial, Committee Chairpersons' and Deputy Chairpersons' salaries. That creates public dissatisfaction and a disconnection from politics. Public confidence is necessary if we are to change policies and budgets to meet people's needs.

MPs cannot be in Westminster and Stormont at the same time. Double-jobbing costs the public purse and, more importantly, there are bound to be other impacts. Obviously, double-jobbing means that we do not have full-time Ministers, and not being present in Departments for the required length of time undoubtedly has an impact on the decisions that are made. Following pressure from David Cameron, the DUP was forced to end its practice of double-jobbing, and the people of Northern Ireland showed their disgust in the European elections.

Recently, the Finance Minister announced that he is to commission an independent review of pay and bonuses for senior civil servants in Northern Ireland. I have no problem with that.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: That is to be welcomed, but perhaps that Minister should begin by adding up the total salary and expenses that he earns from his North Belfast constituency —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. On a number of occasions, Members have requested that Mr Beggs

give way. He has made it quite clear that he is not going to give way.

Mr Beggs: I draw the Deputy Speaker's attention to the clock, which continues to run, so I hope that he will be lenient when it comes to the end of my time.

Those are issues that ought to be addressed. Rather than pointing the finger at others, let us set an example.

The huge debt that Gordon Brown has handed to the United Kingdom has been highlighted. Therefore, regardless of whether there is a Conservative or Labour Government, that debt will have to be paid. The failure of DUP Members to acknowledge that fact is quite surprising. Indeed, when talking about the Assembly Budget, Nelson McCausland said that Members will have to face up to a new reality. That is not the message that was being delivered when the DUP was talking about the prospects of future funding for the Assembly from Westminster. We will all have to face up to difficulties in the future, irrespective of who occupies Number 10.

It is accepted by all parties that, to date, the devolved institutions —

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

Mr Beggs: The outcome of the European elections has demonstrated the public's dissatisfaction with how things have been run in Northern Ireland, how the DUP and Sinn Féin have dealt with economic problems, and their lack of ability to instigate change in the Assembly.

Mrs Hanna: I rise primarily to contribute on health matters. The National Health Service has delivered major improvements, particularly in recent years. Investment has trebled, and the positive impact of that can be seen in the welcome reduction in waiting lists, and in the increasing number of healthcare staff. In Northern Ireland, approximately 100,000 people are employed in the National Health Service, and that includes a significant increase in the number of doctors. Furthermore, some good initiatives have been embedded in practice.

However, there are still many concerns. The media picked up on the Northern Ireland Audit Office's report into the health and social care sector, which highlighted the £16 million that has already been spent on compensating senior staff for the loss of their jobs as a consequence of reducing the number of trusts from 18 to five. In addition, a further £90 million has been set aside to meet the total early retirement and redundancy costs that will arise under the review of public administration.

That commitment of £106 million is front-loaded in anticipation of future substantial savings to the public purse as a result of the amalgamation of the trusts.

Those savings must be delivered, and they must be quantified as having been delivered.

2.15 pm

Some senior staff who have been let go are in final salary schemes and on salaries that are very generous by Northern Ireland standards. We must ensure that the interests of lower-paid staff in the trusts are as well protected as those of top management. People should not retire on generous packages and then pop up almost immediately in quangos or posts that should be available for people who are appropriately qualified and need the job. The Minister of Finance and Personnel should take another look at his — or, indeed, her — proposals because we are in a much changed financial environment.

There are also many concerns that the investment in the National Health Service does not always afford adequate front line services where they are most needed and that resources are being spent on expensive managers and agency staff rather than on permanent posts. We in the SDLP propose protecting front line services. In our ‘New Priorities in Difficult Times’ paper, we outline the need to ensure that we retain the 700-plus nursing jobs that the Minister has proposed to cut. I understand that the Minister has reassured the Royal College of Nursing that that will not be the case, and I hope that that is so. I will certainly watch that space.

There needs to be far more transparency and openness regarding performance and outcomes. Now that the trusts have been reduced and structures have been reformed, there will, hopefully, be no more changes for some time. We have to make the new system work better than the previous one. People are far more concerned about outcomes and quality, which is where the focus needs to be.

We are very concerned about the pressures on midwifery services across the North. We want the best possible start for babies and the best circumstances for mothers. I regularly meet former colleagues — doctors, nurses and midwives — who are deeply concerned about issues in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital, primarily around staff shortages and overcrowding. Morale is sometimes low among staff because they feel that they cannot do the best possible job for their patients. They are worried about patient safety being compromised. I would be very interested to hear what consideration the Executive have given to our proposals, which would certainly ensure that early intervention is put into practice. They would also bring valuable jobs to an area that has been hit hard by job losses in the construction industry. Last month, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors highlighted that the plunge in activity in the construction industry shows no signs of changing.

Despite many assurances that the recommendations of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability will be implemented, the low level of available resources for mental-health services, especially for the next few years, has seen many improvements put on the long finger. The delay in the implementation of key changes to services to support people with mental-health issues and/or learning disabilities is very concerning. There are old buildings that need to be replaced, but we cannot afford to close them until we have new buildings. People who leave care should also be provided with more appropriate supported housing.

There must be real partnership between Departments in all areas. There needs to be far more transparency and openness regarding expenditure, performance and outcomes. There must be a tightening of belts all round. As I have said, there should be far more focus on positive outcomes and a far more action-orientated approach.

We know from the Royal College of Nursing that there is a continuing reduction in the number of specialist nursing posts and a tendency to place inappropriate and unpaid leadership responsibilities on band 5 and band 6 registered nurses, which is unsafe practice. The number of trained mental-health nurses needs to be further increased to meet the needs in hospitals and the community. Although we welcome the increased number of midwives being trained this year, that increase needs to be repeated for several years to achieve an adequate number of trained midwives and to allow for wastage and increased birth rates in some areas.

In its ‘New Priorities in Difficult Times’ discussion paper, the SDLP identified ways in which money can be found to protect front line services. Saving money cannot simply be about taking a slash and burn approach to public spending in an effort to balance the books. The Department of Finance and Personnel can and should do more to support Departments in making efficiency savings. A Department with a huge number of staff, it could take more time to study the absolute financial detail. It is also the Department that has responsibility for personnel —

Mr McGlone: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Hanna: Yes; I will.

Mr McGlone: Does the Member agree that, for those of us who sit on and who chair Committees, it would be very useful, in the interests of transparency and efficiency, to obtain the details of the monitoring rounds on time? One of the problems last week was that the Committee for the Environment did not have access to that detail to discuss it at what was a fairly late stage.

Mrs Hanna: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is absolutely essential that we get the details of the

monitoring rounds on time. It is important that we get far more financial detail to all Departments to help them make efficiency savings so that a slash and burn approach is not adopted, resulting in the loss of important front line services.

People who work in Departments are also affected. It is not Whitehall but a very small, local area. We must make a difference, because that is what devolution is supposed to be about.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, so I suggest that the House take its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

The debate stood suspended.

(*Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair*)
2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Programme for Government

1. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister when it will report to the Assembly on progress against targets set in the Programme for Government. (AQO 2951/09)

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I would have asked permission to answer questions 1 and 6 together, had the Member who was to ask question 6 arrived in the Chamber on time.

As Members know, the Programme for Government sets out a clear statement of the Executive's priorities, and we have already delivered significant successes across a range of areas, from investment in infrastructure to the appointment of commissioners and advocates for victims, children and older people, and from reforms in public services to delivering support to local people and businesses in the face of the economic downturn. It is clear that the delivery of the Programme for Government generates real, tangible benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

On 5 March 2009, the Executive finalised the formal delivery framework for the Programme for Government. Structures and processes have been established across Departments to monitor and report on performance. A key element of the framework is the preparation of delivery reports, which set out progress made against the programme's key goals, commitments and targets.

On 7 May 2009, the Executive commissioned the preparation of a formal delivery report to show progress as at 31 March 2009. That report is scheduled for consideration at the Executive meeting on 25 June. We hope that it will be made available to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for consideration before the summer recess. That will mark the first step in a wider consultation on the Programme for Government.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the First Minister for his answer. However, equally importantly, will he tell the House what structures exist in Departments to monitor their performance?

The First Minister: As a first step, a lead Minister and a senior official have been assigned to each target and commitment in the Programme for Government. Therefore, a person has been identified as being responsible for answering for each of the key goals. In addition, a small number of those key indicators will be identified to assess whether the delivery of the key goals and commitments is bringing about the real change that the Programme for Government envisaged. That assessment will carry on.

Each Department assesses where it stands on meeting those key goals through a traffic-light system whereby progress is identified as red, amber — an amber/green category has crept in — or green. Therefore, we know whether people are meeting their targets in each Department. Those results will be gathered in a delivery report, which will come to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and will be monitored by my officials. The Executive, in their periodic meetings, will also look at those reports and I imagine that, at that stage, Committees will wish to examine how their Departments are meeting their targets.

I hope that the requirement for progress to be monitored at every level in each Department, the Executive's oversight and the pressure exerted by departmental Committees will combine to encourage Departments to meet those targets. At the very least, that scrutiny will allow us to see where we are falling behind and, therefore, where more energy, or even resources, may be required to meet those targets.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is useful to get an update on progress that has been made to date on the Programme for Government. Will the Minister tell the House what progress has been made to date on meeting the targets to reduce child poverty?

The First Minister: I am not sure whether I should use the template that we have, because, as my ministerial colleagues know, it was an indicative report that was produced for the Executive, from which we took each of the responsibilities in the Programme for Government and worked them up. However, when the findings were brought to the Executive, some Ministers felt that they had performed slightly better than the targets that appeared in the report. Nevertheless, at least it set us on our way, in that we could begin to determine targets properly.

The deputy First Minister and I have had several meetings with officials and ministerial colleagues on the whole issue of poverty, and we have identified four different methods to measure poverty. In my view, the one that is the most accurate is the absolute measurement, and, on that basis, we are meeting our targets.

Relative indicators require us to consider how we compare with other parts of Europe, so we will be able to provide the Committee with a full range of measurements, using different measuring techniques. However, measurements indicate that Northern Ireland is making progress beyond that which it did in the past. Nevertheless, we still lag behind other parts of Europe, and we all know, especially in these difficult times of an economic recession, that the greatest pressures fall on those who are less well off. Therefore, it is more difficult to meet the targets, and a greater onus is placed on us to ensure that we put in place the necessary steps to enable us to meet them.

Mrs Long: In recent weeks, a number of Ministers have indicated that some of the issues that they bring to the Executive in line with the Programme for Government are being held up there. Indeed, there is some frustration that some issues are not being brought to the Executive table from the First Minister's office. In broad-brush terms, and using his own red/amber/green scales, how does the First Minister rate the performance of the Executive and his office?

The First Minister: I use red, white and blue ones.

We all need to be honest about the general issues at stake. When the Member for East Belfast and her colleague the Committee Chairperson came to see the deputy First Minister and me last week, I said that if the deputy First Minister were left on his own in OFMDFM, decisions would be taken much quicker, and if I were left on my own, decisions would be taken much quicker. However, our system of government requires us to go through a process of getting agreement so that we have the highest level of agreement possible on a range of issues. We must face up to the fact that the system is slow, and that is why some of us want to see the system modified and improved.

Bearing in mind the difficult terrain in which we must work, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is performing very well and getting things done — much better certainly than its predecessor, where a series of collapses and huffs took place. At least we are doing the business, slow though it may be at times. The more that we deal with issues that present a win-win situation for all sections of our community, the faster those issues will make progress.

Climate Change: Sustainable Development Strategy

2. **Mr Cobain** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what its position is on climate change in relation to its sustainable development strategy. (AQO 2952/09)

The First Minister: Our position on climate change is consistent with that set out in the Programme for

Government, which acknowledges that climate change is a most serious problem.

As Members of the Executive, we remain determined to play our part in addressing the challenges that climate change presents, whether they be environmental, social or economic.

Day and daily, Departments across Northern Ireland are progressing plans and strategies that will ultimately contribute to a reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions and combat the worst effects of climate change. For example, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has identified sustainability as a key factor in developing its new rural White Paper; the Department for Regional Development is working on initiatives that support sustainable transport; and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is leading in the area of renewable energy. Those actions will have telling and lasting effects.

As Ministers of the Department with responsibility for sustainable development policy, the deputy First Minister and I face the challenge of mobilising all those plans and strategies to achieve the maximum effect, and our new sustainable development strategy and, importantly, the associated implementation plan, will have a leading role to play. We intend to produce a high-level strategy to enable and support those Departments whose work supports the fight against climate change. The implementation plan will express, clearly and accountably, the way in which that will be done, after we have listened to the views of stakeholders.

Mr Cobain: The First Minister, through his reply, has answered most of my supplementary question. The purpose of the current development strategy is to mainstream the policies into each Department. Will the First Minister reassure the House that that is actually the case?

The First Minister: I assure the Member of that. Although the deputy First Minister and I play a co-ordinating role, much of the action on the ground will be taken by Ministers and their Departments. It is hard to think of any Department that will not make some contribution, and although I have mentioned three, I could easily have mentioned others. Each Minister recognises his or her responsibility in relation to climate change. It is a key issue and target in our Programme for Government. Therefore, it is our responsibility to take it forward.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Does the Minister believe that the Environment Minister's position on climate change is sustainable?

The First Minister: Everyone knows that the Environment Minister does not deny that climate change exists; indeed, he argues that it has been happening for centuries. The Environment Minister

feels that climate change is not solely due to the man-made contribution, and it is hard to argue with that viewpoint.

When one examines where the greatest burden lies, the statistics and the expert views indicate that man has made a very significant contribution to climate change. However, the causes of climate change and what might be contributing to it are academic. If it exists, we must deal with it, and we require policies to do so.

Mr Gallagher: Does the First Minister agree that the climate change strategy, like any strategy, must be underpinned by clear targets? Furthermore, given our tremendous renewable energy resources, does he agree that we should adopt the EU target of sourcing 15% of our energy from renewable sources by 2020?

The First Minister: In joint ministerial council meetings, the deputy First Minister and I have had discussions with the other devolved Ministers and the UK Government about targets. We have made it clear that Northern Ireland will contribute to the overall UK targets.

A position often adopted by people here is that Northern Ireland is such a small area of land in comparison to countries such as China, India or the USA, and that we cannot make a great difference. However, climate change is one area in which every part of the world must make a contribution; Northern Ireland no less so than any others.

One of the areas that we can examine in relation to sustainability is energy. In my previous post as Minister of Finance, I very keenly examined all of the renewable energy possibilities, and we can make a very real contribution in that area.

However, I am reluctant to get down to what part of the UK target should be met by Northern Ireland. We have committed to making our contribution, and we will make the fullest possible contribution, whether that is below or beyond the target set by the EU.

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Racial Equality Strategy

3. **Ms Lo** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in the absence of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, if it would consider

reviving the racial equality strategy to require Departments to produce annual action plans to tackle racism and racial discrimination. (AQO 2953/09)

The First Minister: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister remains committed to the implementation of the current racial equality strategy endorsed by the Assembly on 3 July 2007. We certainly consider that the six shared aims of that strategy remain comprehensive and robust, especially given the increasing diversity of the population in recent years. Practical work to improve racial equality and good relations continues to be done as part of the racial equality strategy. For example, the migrant workers thematic subgroup continues to operate, and its work has been widely welcomed, including the migrant workers strategy and action plan.

While work to fulfil the commitments in the first action plan to implement the racial equality strategy continues, our resources are now focused on developing proposals for the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. Those proposals will include actions to tackle racism and sectarianism. While work to finalise the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration progresses, the work of challenging sectarianism, racism and all forms of intolerance continues with the active support of OFMDFM Ministers. That support has been clearly demonstrated since the restoration of devolution in May 2007.

2.45 pm

As the Member will be aware, the very first event that the former First Minister and the deputy First Minister hosted was a reception here in Parliament Buildings for new and existing minority ethnic communities, migrant workers, and those who work closely with them. We recognise that real change takes place on the ground through local people providing local solutions to local issues. We acknowledge the valuable and vital role played by groups working with ethnic communities on the ground. In recognition of that, we have recently announced a further tranche of funding to support work with minority ethnic people and communities in the financial year 2009-2010.

This year, we have increased the amount of money available in the fund by 10%, to over £1 million, to meet the increasing demand. That is on top of a substantial increase last year following devolution. The aims of the funds align with our Programme for Government commitments by supporting work that contributes to the promotion of good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds, the building of community cohesion, and the facilitation of integration.

Ms Lo: I thank the First Minister for his comprehensive answer. Although ethnic minority communities are very appreciative of the increased funding for their work, they are anxious that work

needs to be carried out in Departments, something that has not happened in the past two years. Will the First Minister outline what work has been done by OFMDFM and other Departments on promoting racial equality and addressing racial discrimination?

The First Minister: The role that the deputy First Minister and I have in that area requires us to meet a number of organisations that work with migrant workers and minority ethnic communities. We encourage that work in our speeches and statements, to indicate that they have our support and that they continue to do so. We encourage it through the funding that we give to those organisations that are best placed, on the ground, to make the change that is necessary.

There are a number of schemes in place, some of which, for instance, take people from our indigenous population to other parts of the world, such as the site of the Holocaust, so that they can have a better understanding of the migrant workers who come into Northern Ireland. All of that helps, but the overall programme for cohesion, sharing and integration will identify the actions that need to be taken. Considerable work is going into that, not just on sectarianism, which is our own, home-grown problem, but on racism and the difficulties with the integration of minority communities.

Mr Shannon: I thank the First Minister for his detailed, factual and helpful response. Obviously, to try to tackle racism and racial discrimination, it is important that there be a possibility, and that we are hopeful, of meeting the targets. Can the First Minister confirm that the targets are still in place, and that achievements on cohesion, sharing and integration can be made?

The First Minister: I shall tie that question with the question about the measurement of targets. In such an area, on-the-ground contacts and communications are critical. Although it is important to measure the work that is done, to use a rural expression, you do not fatten a pig by weighing it. The system can have all sorts of measurements, but it is the real groundwork that can make the difference. Of course there are targets, and the amount of reported difficulties has reduced.

The exception was the considerable blip that took place as a result of the Northern Ireland v Poland football game. Some Polish football supporters, who have a worldwide reputation for their behaviour, left behind a trail that led to innocent Polish people having various hate crimes committed against them. The Executive want to be identified as being opposed to all those who might be involved in that kind of activity, especially when it targets a section of our community that has made a great contribution to the Northern Ireland economy and to the community as a whole.

Apart from that blip, the number of hate crimes had been reducing considerably. None of us should be

complacent and write off the fact that one incident can cause considerable difficulties. We, as Assembly Members, are required to be actively working on the ground in our constituencies to give support to those who have been facing any such difficulties.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In light of the recent, quite horrific, attacks in Coleraine, what steps are being taken by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to tackle sectarianism in Coleraine?

The First Minister: First, I condemn those attacks. We should not consider that Coleraine is somehow different from the rest of the Province and that Coleraine is the problem point. There is underlying sectarianism across our community, and it emanates from all sides of the community. Therefore, it must be tackled in a comprehensive and robust way.

Immediately after the attack in Coleraine, the deputy First Minister and I met the police to discuss the investigation. Often, the best way of tackling such issues is to ensure that prosecutions take place and to ensure that the courts, using due process, can deal with the incidents concerned. We also sent a message to the community relations unit, which was fairly quick off the mark without any prodding — for want of a better word — from OFMDFM. The lasting contribution that OFMDFM can make on such matters is to get our cohesion, sharing and integration strategy through the Assembly and to have it in place so that the action plan can be used to work to eliminate sectarianism.

Presbyterian Mutual Society

4. **Mr Kennedy** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any discussions it has had with the Prime Minister and HM Treasury on the Presbyterian Mutual Society.
(AQO 2954/09)

The First Minister: Every Member will be acutely aware of the difficulties that members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) face. When the deputy First Minister and I met the Prime Minister on 25 February 2009, we took the opportunity to register our concerns about the PMS situation. After the Prime Minister received the report on the PMS, he agreed to a further meeting with us to specifically discuss the matter. That meeting will take place on 17 June. We have also been in contact with the Secretary of State on the matter. Furthermore, on 29 April 2009, my colleagues Nigel Dodds and Arlene Foster met the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Yvette Cooper, to discuss the PMS issue.

That constructive meeting entailed an exchange of views, as well as information about the particulars of the PMS situation. Members of the society have been living with uncertainty as to the state of their savings

for some considerable time. The administrator who is appointed to wind up the society's affairs has indicated that it would be helpful to know whether the Government are prepared to offer assistance.

For those reasons, we are keen that when we meet the Prime Minister later this week, we can leave with some firm decisions as to his Government's intentions. The ambiguity of the current situation is harmful and hurtful, not only to members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society but to the wider community.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the First Minister for his reply. I declare an interest; I have a modest sum of money in the Presbyterian Mutual Society. I welcome the fact that First Minister has indicated the cross-party and cross-community nature of this issue. All Assembly Members are aware of the acute and severe financial hardship that a great many find themselves in through no fault of their own.

Does the First Minister agree that when Gordon Brown tells the House of Commons that no UK saver will lose out as a result of the current banking crisis, that guarantee should extend not only to members and savers of the Dunfermline Building Society but to those of the Presbyterian Mutual Society?

The First Minister: As a general principle, we can all support that. He will be aware that the Government make a distinction between savers and investors. The Prime Minister has been quick to point out, as was the Secretary of State, that Presbyterian Mutual Society depositors were investors, rather than savers. I do not accept that distinction. It was not in the mind of anyone who deposited funds in the Presbyterian Mutual Society that they were speculating, hoping to make a quick pound. They were, in every sense, savers. If the Secretary of State can tell the House of Commons, as he did on 3 June, that bureaucracy should not stand in the way of doing the right thing, we would all judge him severely were he to make semantics an obstacle to progress.

I trust that the Prime Minister will recognise the genuine determination on the part of those who deposited funds in the PMS that they are on a level playing field with savers in the Equitable Life Assurance Society, the Dunfermline Building Society and the third mutual society that was reported to be in difficulty at the weekend. For those reasons, the Government need to assist the PMS. We will make that case.

We recognise that it would be altogether better, from the point of view of the depositors, were a bank to take an interest in the PMS and, therefore, cover it by the guarantees that are available to banks. That is outside our control, although the Government, who have a stake in several banks, might like to encourage people to look at that option.

Mr Durkan: I assure the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that they go into that meeting with the encouragement and endorsement of all Members.

The First Minister rightly picks up on the false distinction that the Government make between investors and savers. As he says, those who saved in the Presbyterian Mutual Society thought of themselves as savers. The Government cannot have it both ways. They cannot, on the one hand, cite Financial Services Authority concerns that money was being taken in the form of deposits, because that is essentially the business of banking, and, on the other hand, indict the savers as though they were investors.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You must ask a question.

Mr Durkan: Will the First Minister make it clear that several charities are among those who have invested over the shareholder limit? The Government's suggestion that they are speculative investors is downright insulting.

The First Minister: We are happy to do that. I appreciate the Member's comment that there is overall support around the House for the case that we will take to the Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, those who invested more than £20,000 with the Presbyterian Mutual Society are regarded as having provided it with a loan and, therefore, have first call on any funds that become available. That means that people who made investments of less than £20,000 will be hurt most. I do not know the category into which the Member for Newry and Armagh falls. It means that many people who had put away a nest egg will be unlikely to get more than 30 pence in the pound for their savings. That is regrettable. That is the area into which the Prime Minister must look most closely.

3.00 pm

AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Rural White Paper

1. **Mr Neeson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the rural White Paper will be completed. (AQO 2971/09)

17. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the rural White Paper. (AQO 2987/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): With your permission,

a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer question No 1 and question No 17 together.

I am pleased to report that progress continues on developing the rural White Paper. During coming weeks, I will submit proposals for a thematic approach to the Executive. The rural White Paper stakeholder advisory group has commenced work in subgroup format on the five themes that have been identified in proposals for a thematic approach to the rural White Paper's development. That work includes looking at issues and challenges that rural communities face and identifying new approaches to address those challenges.

It is anticipated that that work will be completed by late autumn 2009, following which the five subgroups will report to the Department on the outcome of their work. The Department has discussed its proposals for the rural White Paper with the interdepartmental committee on rural policy and seeks nominations from other Departments of appropriate officials to participate in the rural White Paper's development.

It is proposed that other Departments will begin to engage with stakeholders during the subgroup stage. The Department has also considered options for the establishment of an effective rural evidence base as part of the rural champion concept and is commissioning papers to help to inform the rural White Paper. It is proposed that the main work to develop the rural White Paper will take place during 2009 and into 2010, with public consultation on the draft document in 2010. That time frame will tie in with the development of the new comprehensive spending review.

Mr Neeson: I thank the Minister for her reply. She was probably not in the Chamber when the First Minister referred to the role that agriculture can play in mitigating climate change through renewable energy initiatives. Will the Minister include firm proposals to expand green energy in the rural White Paper? Can she assure the House that she will make that a priority?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: If the Member will allow me some latitude, I am happy to return to that matter when I answer environmental questions later. Climate change mitigation does not necessarily fit into the main role of the rural White Paper. The paper aims at ensuring that rural dwellers' entitlement to goods and services is equal to that of urban dwellers and not merely a tick-box exercise at the end of the policymaking process.

I agree with the First Minister that agriculture has a role to play in mitigating climate change. I am happy to respond to the Member in writing on that issue.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. *[Interruption.]* Can the Minister tell the House what priorities for rural infrastructure she will include in the rural White Paper? That is, if she heard my question over the interruption by certain Members

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The rural White Paper represents a wide range of rural interests and sets out five themes, which are being considered in subgroup format. I will come back to the Executive with further detail on the work on the five themes. I am happy to provide the Member with more details in writing if that is OK.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Ná habair é.

Mr T Clarke: To date, how much has been spent on producing the rural White Paper? Does the Minister believe that it represents value for money?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I certainly do believe that the rural White Paper represents value for money; I would not have brought it forward otherwise. The fact that the North was without a rural White Paper when the rest of Ireland had one, as did England, Scotland and Wales, shows that there is merit in having one.

We must ensure that rural dwellers are not left out during policy formulation. As I said, the development of the proposals on the rural White Paper will take place throughout 2009, and we will produce a more detailed paper in 2010. That fits in with the comprehensive spending review. It is worth spending the money to ensure that rural dwellers are not left behind, and it fits in with the departmental budget. Members will be glad when the rural White Paper is developed, and I am happy to receive input from Members.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Maith thú, a Chiaráin. Caithfidh mé é sin a rá. The SDLP is a long-term proponent of the rural White Paper. The Minister mentioned that she will engage with stakeholders during 2009-2010 and hold further widespread public consultation thereafter. Does the Minister have any indication of when the public consultation will be complete and, more importantly, when we might be at the point of having a rural White Paper? Does she have a deadline or specific date in mind?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Much work has already been done with stakeholders, and I am pleased that some rural organisations have held conferences to discuss the rural White Paper. For empowerment purposes, the rural community needs to say what it wants to see in there. The rural White Paper stakeholder advisory group represents a broad range of issues, such as agriculture interests, which are represented by the Ulster Farmers' Union, the Young Farmers Clubs and NIAPA. It also represents environmental groups and broader rural organisations such as the Rural Development Council and the Rural Community Network.

The Department is formulating a big piece of policy work, the bones of which I will take to the Executive in the next few weeks. Much work has already been done. As I have said in the House, a job that is worth doing is worth doing right. I want to get it right, and I expect firm proposals to come through this year and be published in 2010. You will see a rural White Paper in the next 12 months or thereabouts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Danny Kennedy.

[Interruption.]

Mr Kennedy: Perseverance and a bad back pay-off, apparently. Anyway, will the Minister inform the House whether the rural White Paper will attempt to improve co-operation between the farming community and the wider rural community?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That is not necessarily the job of the rural White Paper. It aims to improve co-operation between the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and other Departments. We need to ensure that, when other Departments formulate policy, they consider the 40% of the population who live in rural areas. It is about governmental acceptance of the needs of the rural community. Every Department plays a part; whether it is health, education or roads, every Department has an obligation to meet the needs of rural dwellers. The rural White Paper will ensure that we are not left behind during the formulation of those policies.

Rural Childcare

2. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the rural childcare strategy and what impact it will have. (AQO 2972/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Shortly after I took office, I initiated the rural childcare stakeholder group and was pleased to present its report 'Rural Childcare: Investing in the Future' to the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people in March 2008. The report contains several cross-cutting recommendations and recommends that DARD develop a rural childcare programme. My officials are working with other Departments on the cross-cutting recommendations for rural childcare as part of the development of the rural champion concept and the rural White Paper.

I am delighted that the rural childcare programme has recently opened for applications and will be funded by the Department's rural anti-poverty and social inclusion framework budget. I formally launched the programme on Tuesday 9 June during a visit to the childcare centre in Eskragh, County Tyrone, which is an excellent example of a rural community working together for the good of the entire community.

The programme is worth £1.5 million, and its overall objective is to improve childcare provision in rural areas by providing solutions that address the distinct challenges faced by rural communities in relation to the delivery of and access to childcare services. Through that programme, we will provide funding to support the development and evaluation of a series of pilot or demonstration projects. The evidence that is collected will form a basis for the development of future policy and priorities for rural childcare provision. By improving information about rural childcare provision, the programme has the potential to help bring about great improvements in the lives of women and children who live in rural areas, to support families and to contribute to the economic and social development of rural areas in the North.

I am, therefore, confident that that new and innovative programme will make a significant contribution to a better future for rural communities. It will lead to increased opportunities and choices for rural parents in taking up employment or training and will assist rural development. The rural childcare programme and the rural childcare stakeholder report complement other Executive initiatives such as the lifetime opportunities strategy and the work being carried out by the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. It will also inform the development of the early years strategy for nought-to-six-year-olds.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. *[Interruption.]* If the children in the corner settle down, they will get to hear my supplementary question. Basil is the leader of those children.

It is important to recognise, as I did during questions to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's response and approach to the issue of rural childcare. That is one of the benefits of devolution. Will the Minister outline the timetable for the rolling-out of the rural childcare programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The rural childcare programme is now open to applications. The closing date for receipt of applications is 30 June. Following eligibility checks, appraisals and project site visits, it is anticipated that assessment panels will sit in September and that letters of offer will be issued in October and November. All successful projects must be completed by 31 March 2011. I am pleased to say that we have had more than 130 applications to date. There is a lot of interest in the programme and a lot of need. I do not know whether it will cover the weans in the corner, but you never know.

Mr Beggs: I am aware that, in the past, some rural playgroups were almost forced to close because numbers temporarily dropped, but within two years they were

operating at capacity again. Will the Minister ensure that the funding mechanism will not be a case of "all or nothing" and that it will be responsive? Furthermore, will she tell the House what sort of money will be available to individual groups that apply to the rural childcare programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The programme is an ongoing venture. Mr Beggs is asking about something that comes under the remit of another Department. However, the money that is available now is for pilot and demonstration projects. The commitment to those projects is not necessarily ongoing, but it will help them to get off the ground. The rural childcare programme's overall budget is £1.5 million, and there may be flexibility in it. I do not have detailed information on any cap on those projects, but I will be happy to provide that to the Member in writing. It is important that we help those groups to get off the ground. Families from rural communities will benefit from the programme.

The West Tyrone MLAs who are here will know that the Eskragh childcare centre is a fantastic example of such programmes. I was invited there by Barry McElduff. There is not even a housing estate in Eskragh, yet 120 children attend the childcare centre every day of the week. That is an enormous achievement for a rural community. The parents in that community have far greater choice than is available to parents in many other areas that do not have similar programmes.

Mrs M Bradley: I warmly welcome the new rural childcare programme. However, what assurances can the Minister give that no child will be denied such a service because of a lack of affordability?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Unfortunately, I cannot give the Member that assurance. I am doing my bit to help strengthen choices for parents who live in rural areas. I am one of the Ministers who sit on the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, and I always make the case for rural communities. The responsibility for childcare is shared by a number of Departments, such as the Department for Social Development; therefore, the responsibility is not mine alone.

3.15 pm

Food Exports

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she had with her ministerial colleagues before she called for the removal of UK status on food exported from Northern Ireland. (AQO 2973/09)

Mr B McCrea: La question numéro trois, Monsieur le Président.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am very impressed at the bilingualism in the Chamber today; it is brilliant.

I have discussed the issue with ministerial colleagues in my party. However, there is no obligation on me to discuss it with other Ministers in order that I may express my view. Farmers have raised the issue with me regularly at a range of meetings and forums.

So far, we have made excellent progress in keeping out of Ireland serious diseases that have occurred in Britain, for example, foot-and-mouth disease and bluetongue. Through our fortress Ireland policy, I intend to do my utmost to ensure that that remains the case. In that context, our animals having a UK identity can be a disadvantage to our farmers whenever they are transporting animals abroad, and a clearer local identity can assist in ensuring that our animals are identified clearly with the better disease status of the island of their birth. We need to maximise the potential of selling our produce on the world stage by having a clear clean, green label that associates our produce with a positive and disease-free status.

In accordance with the country codes laid down by the International Organization for Standardization, under Council Regulations (EC) 1760/2000 and 21/2004, the identification code on cattle and sheep ear tags must begin with the letters that identify the member state of origin. However, the concept of regionalisation is well established and is accepted by the EU Commission. I intend to press a case for regionalisation on this issue. Obviously, Members on the opposite Benches are likely to have an ideological objection to that. However, I ask them to think carefully about the issue and not to have a knee-jerk reaction to it. I also ask them to consider the potential benefits and the reality that our industry could capitalise on our recent record of better disease levels.

Mr B McCrea: In a global market, food, or its consumption, is one of the few commodities whose locale concerns the consumer. In the agriculture business — the agribusiness — what percentage of our food goes to the United Kingdom, and how much goes to other areas? Is it not the case that the United Kingdom is our biggest single market and, therefore, our most important market? Have there not been cases, such as that of dioxins in pork, when it was an advantage to be part of the United Kingdom and not of another country?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The market across the water is our biggest market; 80% of our produce is exported to Britain. That is no coincidence. For years, a beef ban did not allow us to market our produce to other countries. We are still dealing with the residue of that

beef ban, which came out of the BSE crisis. Again, the UK is linked strongly to that.

We must also deal with the new markets that are emerging. People are moving out of rural areas in China and India, which are countries with vast populations, into urban settings. They are becoming more Westernised, and they are eating more beef. There is no reason why we could not look to those markets for a premium price. Ultimately, this is about adding value and getting a better outcome for our farmers. They work very hard to produce quality products, and I want to work equally hard to get them the best price that I can for those quality products. We will market ourselves better if we can, and we will do everything that is in our power to ensure that farmers get a better price for their labour.

Mr Irwin: Does the Minister accept that the key stakeholders of the agrifood industry believe that the UK food status is to the benefit of Northern Ireland, given that, as the honourable Member for Lagan Valley said, much of our food is exported to the UK mainland? That being the case, I believe that the Minister is foolish. How can she justify a removal of UK status, given that 80% of our food is exported to the mainland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, we are a net exporter. We have a substantial amount of trade with British multiples and their own-label brands, and, in that environment, it is not easy for us to promote our own identity.

It is in the best interests of the North's beef industry for it to determine how best to position its products in the markets that it serves. I will continue to support industry in that respect so that it can achieve the greatest returns possible. Research into the image of the North's food and drink in international markets was recently overseen by an international image group consisting of experienced representatives from export businesses in the North. That group felt that, in order to gain the optimum advantage from its unique position, the North's agrifood industry should utilise all options at its disposal and, depending on the market and the customer, should market itself as NI, island of Ireland or UK. That is the view of the experts.

We are fortunate that our products are sold in a wide range of markets and, that being the case, branding is tailored for specific markets in a manner that optimises the benefit of the North's multiple identities. In the current economic climate, it is particularly important that our local businesses have the capacity to market their products in such a way that ensures that they have access to premium markets.

When I represented the North in Washington two years ago, I met representatives of companies such as Tayto crisps and Johnsons Coffee, who said that they

had developed markets in America by doing just that. No company should be foolish enough to close itself down to the possibility of other markets due to the way that it markets itself. There is much to be gained from such marketing; I am told that by industry, and I am also told that I need to do all that I can to maximise that gain.

Mr O'Loan: My party has been concerned about the UK identification tag on our cattle for a long time. We have seen that as a barrier to marketing, particularly in instances of crises, such as the export ban on beef and the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease. Evidently, the Minister sees the advantage to the dairy and beef industries of having Irish or local identity. What is she doing to bring that about?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I have been working on regionalisation since I came into office, and my track record speaks for itself. The UK prefix did work against us, especially during the years of the beef ban. That ban was in force when the SDLP held the post of Agriculture Minister, and nothing was done about that issue.

I ensure that we do everything that we can to move our products and get a better price for them. Across the water, they have diseased status due to bluetongue. However, in case anyone would think that I am picking on it, that is not only the case across the water; bluetongue is endemic across Europe. This is the only country in Europe that does not have a problem with bluetongue. If we cannot capitalise on that now, when will we be able to?

Rural Development Programme: Axis 3

4. **Mr Cobain** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the delay involving her Department and the axis 3 council clusters in agreeing a scoring mechanism. (AQO 2974/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am not sure whether Fred asked question 4 or a supplementary question. I did not hear it in Irish, so I do not know which he was asking. *[Laughter.]*

The axis 3 council clusters have no involvement in developing the project assessments scoring mark frame; that responsibility falls to my Department, as the managing authority. It was agreed by the programme monitoring committee that the mark frame developed by my officials should be reviewed by the monitoring committee equality subgroup to ensure that a fair and equitable scoring mechanism is developed to assess all applications to the programme, be they from farmers, private promoters or the social economy and community sectors.

I am pleased to confirm that the scoring mechanism has been agreed with the equality subgroup and has been issued to all joint committees and local action groups. Last week, the local action group GROW, which covers Antrim, Carrickfergus and Newtownabbey, used a scoring framework for the first assessment panel for projects. It successfully scored nine projects and approved five, worth just over £200,000, to go forward to their full local action group board. I commend that group on its progress. At least two further areas will hold assessment panels over the next couple of weeks.

Members will agree that it is vital that the scoring mechanism reflects all the relevant equality issues and still enables strong and sustainable projects to benefit from the programme funds. It is only by ensuring that that we will reap the benefits of a good, strong and sustainable rural community. The review of the projects scoring mark framework has continued unabated in the areas that have opened for calls. Project staff are carrying out eligibility checks and site visits on the applications, in preparation for their assessment by the local action groups.

Mr Cobain: I am glad that the Minister answered both the question and my supplementary.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the fact that the Minister has reached the stage where the information is being passed to the local action groups. Does she accept that it has taken too long to get that information agreed and passed to the groups; that rural areas for which axis 3 is designed have suffered because a decision was not made until today; and that there will be no more delays?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I can assure the Member that a new delivery model for axis 3 affords councils a greater and more central role in delivering rural development measures. Their involvement in delivering that will provide good training in preparation for the greater responsibility of councils for rural development delivery under the new RPA. However, the spend is now getting on the ground, letters are going out, and I can assure the Member that there will be no further delays.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What assistance is available under axis 3 for renewable energy projects?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: A number of areas are helping us to support renewable energy. In addition, my Department is reviewing its renewable energy strategy, the outcome of which will inform the axis 3 position on stand-alone energy projects. In the interim, the Department is working to promote the use of renewable energy and energy efficiency through our renewable energy action plan. Key actions include support for profitable energy production; supply chain development; forestry products and by-products; use of agriwaste for energy; deployment

of renewable energy technologies in the wider economy; and energy efficiency. CAFRE is also delivering technology transfer programmes on renewable energy. I have a very long supplementary, and I am conscious of time, so I am giving you just the bare bones.

Rural Champion

5. **Mrs McGill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her proposals for developing a 'rural champion' concept and improving the rural proofing process. (AQO 2975/09)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am delighted to have the opportunity to update you on the rural champion concept and improving the rural-proofing process. I have finalised the programme in just the past two weeks and intend to present them to Executive colleagues as soon as I can.

In summary, the key proposals include a phased process for the invigoration of rural proofing; support for activities that assist the better co-ordination or facilitation of rural stakeholders; development of a framework for dialogue between all government Departments and rural stakeholders; and creation of a rural evidence base and rural research programme that can support policy and programme development.

Those proposals aim to deliver a collaborative, integrated approach to the development of policy across government, ensuring the full involvement of stakeholders and the robust application of rural proofing. The outcomes that we seek include equitable access to services by rural communities, an enhanced rural-proofing process and access to a supportive rural evidence base.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My question was about rural proofing, and the Minister referred to that. However, the Minister referred earlier to all the Departments. Given the difficulties of rural planning, is the Minister content, in her deliberations with the Minister of the Environment, that those who want to live in rural areas will be able to do so?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I am a member of the interdepartmental subgroup on planning policy. In that capacity, I have made a strong case not just for farmers but for rural dwellers to be able to live in their own communities. I have also formed an interdepartmental committee on rural policy, which I chair, which will incorporate senior policymakers from each Department, including the Department of the Environment. That is another mechanism for getting that message across loud and clear.

Mr Savage: Will there be any legislative base for rural proofing?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The rural White Paper will help to firm that up. In the past, we have seen almost a voluntary option for rural proofing. That has not worked. I am trying to ensure that rural communities can be sure that consideration of rural matters has moved on from a tick-box exercise. Therefore, if legislative proposals are needed, I will be happy to take them through.

Mr P J Bradley: Does the Minister agree that the introduction of an improved transportation service to and from rural schools would be an important inclusion in the rural White Paper?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: Rural transport, particularly for children, is one of the issues that I raised at the meeting of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people. Everyone wants our roads to be safe, especially given the tragedy that happened in Fermanagh in the latter part of 2008.

Children who have to walk considerable distances on narrow roads that have a lot of traffic but no footpaths or street lighting must be safe. A rural transport policy would help to bring that about. These things do not come cheap, but it is worth spending money on them.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Supply Resolution for the 2009-2010 Main Estimates

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,566,927,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £8,311,830,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (b) and 3 (a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2009-10 that was laid before the Assembly on 29 May 2009. — [*The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.*]

The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs I Robinson):

The Supply resolution debate is an opportunity to highlight some of the budgetary challenges that face each Department in the current financial year. I should like to mention some of the financial issues that face the Health Department.

The Department's major challenge is undoubtedly the achievement of the 3% efficiency savings. The Department receives around half of the total block grant and, therefore, has to achieve half of the total efficiency savings. The Minister has given an assurance that he will meet those targets, but the challenge is to do that without affecting front line services. The Minister stated that he achieved the £118 million efficiency savings target in 2008-09. However, given that a total of £700 million of efficiencies must be achieved over the three-year period, there is clearly some way still to go.

There have been major public concerns about home closures and cuts in nursing numbers. A reduction of some 722 nurses is proposed over the three-year period. There was a debate on that issue in the Chamber in February. We called on the Minister to ensure that front line services are not affected.

At that stage, I pointed out that the proposals would result in an estimated total reduction of approximately 2,475 Health Service jobs over the three-year period. That takes account both of efficiencies and any additional investments. In light of the worrying estimate that there will be a reduction of 722 nurses and midwives, I made the point that one cannot remove that many nursing and midwifery posts

without directly and detrimentally affecting front line services.

The Committee has played its part by highlighting the challenges, listening to the arguments and pressing the Minister to protect vital services. The Committee heard from the Minister and from each of the trusts about specific plans and proposals. It heard from the unions that represent employees who are directly affected by cuts. Indeed, in recent days, the unions have asked to meet the Committee again about the efficiency plans.

Trust proposals to achieve 3% savings have been the subject of public consultation. The Committee also heard from district councils and local groups that are concerned about specific services in their areas. The new health and social care structures that came into place in April have led to a rationalisation of bodies and a slimmer and more accountable service through a reduction in the number of public bodies and in bureaucracy and administrative costs. That is welcome, and it will make a significant contribution to achieving the efficiency savings target. However, it still leaves a major gap, and we must continue to ensure that the measures that are implemented do not cut patient services.

The outbreak of swine flu will place an additional burden on finances. Earlier today, the Minister highlighted the need for additional funding to deal with the pandemic. Detailed plans have been developed in recent years to deal with such an event, and those are now being put into practice. It is difficult to predict the impact of swine flu at this stage, but considerable expenditure has already been predicted on antiviral drugs, vaccines and so on. If large numbers of cases are experienced, there will be additional costs for trusts and additional pressures on hospital and community services.

Capital funding is another big issue for the Health Department, despite an investment of almost £700 million over the three-year period. The construction industry group told the Health Committee that more projects should be funded to provide improved health facilities and, indeed, to bring some facilities that are in dire need of repair up to minimum standards while providing much-needed employment.

There have been many calls for capital funding to bring forward the proposed new women and children's hospital in Belfast. That scheme is long delayed, and replacement is needed urgently. Unfortunately, the scheme has not yet been scheduled for funding. The Health Committee visited the existing hospitals and saw the poor state of the buildings and the crowded conditions at first hand. The Committee pressed the Minister to bring the project forward as soon as possible.

Although we accept that the financial climate is dire, in my capacity as the DUP's health spokesperson, I must ask the question: given all the money that is being pumped into the Health Department, why are Members still hearing the same old stories in their constituencies about the lack of front line services with respect to staff, trained nurses, special-needs nurses to deal with autism and other difficulties, and speech therapists? We have to ask whether our Minister is doing the right thing with the money in hand. It really concerns the public that the money does not seem to be improving the Health Service per se and that there seems to be a black hole.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak about the Supply resolution, which is the mechanism for ensuring that funding is released to continue the priorities set out in the Programme for Government. Members have an opportunity to debate the issues, but it is important to remember that if the motion is not passed, there will be no money for the associated programmes.

There is no doubt that the economic recession has presented the Executive with a number of difficulties, in particular the need to offset the rising number of job losses. It is also a major challenge to help families and businesses who are in economic difficulties. Sinn Féin Members have consistently pointed out in many debates in the Chamber and beyond that the block grant from the British Government is totally inadequate. In the context of that financial shortfall, and with no control over fiscal policy, we will continue to carry the burden of trying to match our limited resources with people's increasing needs. Today, I noticed that the Scottish Parliament is pushing ahead with tax-varying powers, and I hope that the Assembly and the Executive will come back to that debate.

The only way to sustain economic and social progress in the long term is on an all-island basis. It makes sense to end the duplication and inefficiencies that are being perpetuated by having two health services, two education services and two separate institutions governing separate parts of the island. Given the small population on the island, the Assembly and the Executive need to be debating that issue.

However, for today's debate, I turn to how families, communities and businesses have been affected by the economic recession, and whether we can examine the way in which the Executive deliver the investment strategy and Programme for Government to make a difference to the quality of their lives. Many low-income households, the elderly and the sick were finding it difficult to make ends meet prior to the recession, but many have now spiralled into even deeper poverty, particularly those living in deprived areas.

I want to touch on a number of initiatives that are sitting in Departments. The credit union legislation was debated in the Assembly and received cross-party support. Introducing that legislation would give credit unions the extra powers that they need. That would benefit not only the people who borrow from credit unions, but those who would be helped by the way in which the money would be invested. For instance, credit unions are keen on investing a large amount of money to meet the needs of social housing. The Assembly must, therefore, push forward on that.

The enhancement of debt-advisory services is another issue that must be progressed. There appears to be some blockage; although the motion was passed by the Assembly, nothing has happened. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is present today, and I hope that she will push forward with that so that specialist debt advisers can be placed in the community to help people who face difficulties.

The legislation on dormant bank accounts has not yet been implemented. Such accounts contain millions of pounds that could be used for voluntary and community projects that face cuts. The money would facilitate the continued delivery of services, and the skills of those who deliver front line services could be retained in communities.

Several Government-funded initiatives have tried to help businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), that face financial difficulties, and the Assembly has often debated the subject. A recent survey by the Institute of Directors highlights the widespread lack of awareness and minimal uptake of some of the Government-backed schemes. There is an onus on the Government, the Assembly and the Executive to ensure that businesses are aware of the schemes.

There are still problems with the banks, particularly for people who want to take out a new loan or an overdraft. It seems that certain problems persist despite Members continually discussing them in the Chamber. If the Assembly could push forward on tackling such issues, it would help some of the affected businesses.

I want to focus on the process of public procurement, which offers the Executive the opportunity to develop a policy that includes social and environmental clauses that would help people. The Governments, North and South, have an opportunity to maximise the social and employment opportunities of everyone through their public procurement processes. That forms an essential part of the investment strategy. It is more important than ever to grasp that opportunity because existing jobs must be secured and new ones created. Unemployment is rising, and the two main problems facing people at present are the fear of losing their jobs and of descending into debt and poverty. The Assembly must

do all that it can to secure existing jobs and to create new employment opportunities.

The Executive earmarked almost £20 billion for public procurement. The Assembly has debated the issue before, but I want to emphasise that, in an all-island context, most of the €16 billion spent on public procurement each year goes to companies overseas; local businesses are often smaller and cannot even get on to the procurement ladder. Ninety-nine per cent of businesses in the North are SMEs. Those in the social-economy sector that deliver front line services to communities also create employment opportunities for local people, including the long-term unemployed, and they provide the quality apprenticeships that are needed.

Some SMEs cannot even apply for public-procurement contracts. They fail at the tendering stage, which they feel is stacked against them and weighted firmly in favour of large companies, most of which are based overseas. That does not generate money in the economy; it is taken out of the island of Ireland. The money must be generated internally to create jobs for people here. Through public procurement and working closely with organisations such as InterTradeIreland, Invest NI, IDA Ireland and the enterprise councils, North and South, there is an excellent opportunity to encourage and develop SMEs on this island so that they can secure contracts.

Businesses in the North should have equal access to public procurement contracts in the South and vice versa. As it stands, there is no equality of access in the North or the South because the process is strongly weighted in favour of large companies.

3.45 pm

I reiterate that incorporating those social clauses into all public procurement contracts at the tendering stage enables delivery on the important issues of fairness, inclusion and equality of opportunity by actively and effectively challenging existing patterns of social and economic disadvantage. We must use increased prosperity in future to tackle ongoing poverty.

In conclusion, my party will continue to press for the full range of fiscal powers to be made available to the Executive and the Assembly. I hope that other parties will get behind that stance, because the powers are required to facilitate the delivery of high-quality public services, to develop the economy and to build prosperity. To that end, we will seek to ensure the best use and allocation of resources in the short term.

Sinn Féin shares everybody's concern about the overall resources that are available and the various stated priorities. However, we are tasked with meeting the challenge of achieving the best possible outcomes in the current economic climate. I return to what I said at the outset: some of us have different points of view that can be debated here, but it is essential that the

mechanism to release the money be approved. If it is not, organisations and groups will be unable to deliver essential services. Go raibh maith agat.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Simpson): I apologise for not being in the Chamber for the start of the debate, but I had to attend a Committee meeting.

As part of its review, the Committee for Social Development considered the Department's Main Estimates and compared them with figures and targets included in the 2008-2011 Budget.

A number of debates on social housing and the Department's budget deficit have been held in the House recently. I believe that all Members now accept that the social housing budget depended on substantial land and house sales. I also believe that most Members agree that when the property market declined, budgetary difficulties became inevitable.

On a number of occasions, the House has debated the Department's monitoring rounds, surrenders and reallocations, newbuild v off-the-shelf purchases, and related issues. I am sure that the House will again debate housing and the importance of balancing the housing budget with the delivery of PSA and other targets. Today, however, I am not focusing on those issues but am simply requesting further budgetary flexibility for social housing.

Members want the PSA target for new social homes to be achieved and to see progress made in bringing existing houses up to the decent homes standard. All of that will benefit the economy but will cost a great deal of money. Most Committee members accept that the Department's budget position is very difficult. Nonetheless, multiple benefits are associated with investment in construction and related industries. Therefore, the Committee is keen to put down a marker for social housing in the event that there is flexibility in future monitoring rounds.

The Committee also reviewed efficiency in the Department for Social Development and was pleased to hear the Department assert that the efficiency target of 3% a year for 2008-2011 will be met. It must be agreed that, when in a difficult budgetary position, efficiencies are essential. Notwithstanding that, the majority of Committee members was concerned about what was described as the driving of efficiency in the Supporting People programme.

Under that programme, services providers, such as the Simon Community, the Triangle Housing Association and Women's Aid, can already demonstrate that they are efficient and good value. Therefore, the Committee believes that additional funding for providers of the Supporting People programme in the voluntary and community sector to meet, for example, contractually agreed salary

increases should be made available in the current budget. I assure the House that, although that is a low-cost request, it will make a big difference to those organisations.

Let me assure the House that the Committee for Social Development will continue to review and scrutinise closely the Department's expenditure.

Mr Burns: I welcome the opportunity to have my say on the spending Estimates, and I am glad that the Assembly is debating the proper business of government. We are living in a difficult economic climate, so if ever there was a time for the Assembly and the Executive to get serious, this is it.

I shall say a few words about the Department for Social Development's budget for social housing. We could spend hours debating that subject, but my time is limited, so my remarks will be brief. I fear that I may repeat myself, because only last week, I spoke on this matter in the Chamber. Although the Minister of Finance and Personnel was not present to respond to that debate, I am sure that he carefully studied the Official Report and took all the key points on board.

Everyone knows that DSD's budget has a big hole in the middle, which is a direct result of the capital-receipt shortfall that the downturn in the housing and property market caused. The gap is so big that there is no way that the Minister for Social Development will be able to fill it by making a few savings here and there. Therefore, more funds must be given to DSD.

Every Department — whether it deals with transport, health or education — wants more money, but a limited amount of money is available. Many Departments and their supporters have put forward strong arguments for more funding, and even within each Department, but particularly within DSD, there will be many different priorities.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way, and in the absence of the SDLP's Minister, Margaret Ritchie, I am glad that he is here to defend her. What does the Minister do with the Housing Executive receipts that she has tried to hide in the past weeks and months? The honourable Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan will bear witness to the fact that there is a problem with Egan contracts in our constituency. Although the Minister has it, she has failed to produce the money to deliver those contracts. Why blame others?

Mr Burns: That question should be directed to the Minister. There is simply not enough money in the DSD budget. Money is required for Egan contracts and for the warm homes scheme, which has been hugely successful but oversubscribed. Therefore, the SDLP wants more money to be given to it.

As well as more money for the warm homes scheme, the mortgage rescue scheme, and so on,

money must be directed at social housing and the newbuild programme. Small handouts during the June monitoring round will simply not be enough.

The SDLP identified in its policy document 'New Priorities in Difficult Times' from where money can be found. A massive cash injection into the social housing programme is undoubtedly one of the best things that we can do. The reasons for that are straightforward. By building new houses and carrying out repairs, we would cut waiting lists, help people in housing stress and give hope to homeless people.

We will also help the construction industry because building social housing creates more employment than any other form of capital investment. If we use land that DSD and the Housing Executive already own, we could build even more houses.

Mr Simpson: I know that the Member sits on the Committee for Social Development. Does he agree that the Department and his Minister should consider innovative ideas on how to push forward the programme of social and affordable housing, for example, by working more closely with the housing associations that sit with millions of pounds in their accounts and do not use it?

Mr Burns: I agree. The Minister is looking at ways to bring forward schemes to create more houses that people can afford. There must be a way for us to tap into the housing associations' money and land banks and get the housing programme started. If we were to do that, we would be able to put more money straight into the wage packets of construction workers and into the accounts of local building firms. Construction costs have also fallen sharply, so it is a good time to push forward with those projects so that we get the best possible value for money.

As I said earlier, I fear that I am repeating myself. I know that the housing projects are only one part of the solution and that there is no magic wand. However, I also know that the Minister is well aware of the economics of building social housing. I hope that the Finance Minister will work with the Social Development Minister to push forward the new building programme as quickly as possible and give her the money that she so badly needs.

Mr Weir: This is one of a number of debates that have been held about the Budget over the past few years. For those of us who are regular contributors to those debates, there is a great sense of *déjà vu* that always permeates them.

The Member mentioned that social housing was not a magic wand. Listening to the SDLP, however, one would think that it is the cure for all our ills. That party tells us that the economy's problems will be solved by providing more housing, although nobody could convincingly argue that that is the case. I am awaiting

the SDLP's putting forward social housing as the cure for swine flu. Perhaps it will put social housing forward as a suggestion to Alex Ferguson as to how he should fill the gap that will be left by the sale of Cristiano Ronaldo. Perhaps Manchester United's problems would be solved if he embraced the spirit of greater degrees of social housing.

Again, the answer from the SDLP is to produce another Budget. I commend the party for at least producing its proposals, although I have been — and I continue to be — somewhat critical of their contents. However, even taking its Budget proposals at face value, I think that they impact only about 1% of the budgetary process when it comes to resources. We are told that there needs to be an all-singing, all-dancing new Budget, but 99% of it remains unaltered under the SDLP proposals.

Without going into the detail, with which I have dealt on a previous occasion, a wide range of the SDLP's proposals regarding where the money will come from are highly questionable when they are scrutinised. For example, the reprofiling of Housing Executive debt would require the support of the Treasury. I think that that is fairly unlikely. The funding for the multi-sports stadium is earmarked for elsewhere. The Invest NI surplus funds are somewhat illusory in nature. There are a range of other matters that, quite frankly, do not add up.

However, I give that party credit for at least putting forward proposals. At least it has done the decent thing and stayed for the second part of the debate. By contrast, there is a deafening silence from the Ulster Unionist Party Benches, which is not surprising as none of them have even bothered to be here for this part of the debate. Silence is also what pervades the Ulster Unionist proposals in respect of alternatives to the Budget.

4.00 pm

It seems to me that the Ulster Unionists suffered from political and economic amnesia at various stages today. Their biggest lapse was that they are in some way separate from the Executive; whereas, in fact, two members of their party sit on the Executive and have endorsed the proposal at that level. As another Member pointed out, the Ulster Unionists were keen to criticise the Programme for Government today, yet, when asked about it on 'The Politics Show', their leader and one of their Ministers said that there was no need to recast the Programme for Government as it was fundamentally sound. I know that not just from watching the programme but from sitting about six feet from the said gentlemen during the debate.

There is also amnesia among the party's Members. We heard from the modern-day Galileo of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr McNarry, on his quest for the black

hole. I will bow to the superior knowledge of the honourable Member Dr Farry, who described it as a quasar. I thought that a quasar was one of those laser battles that took place in an arena near the Ormeau Road. In the illusory search for the black hole, one is reminded of a mythical search for the Holy Grail. Mr McNarry keeps searching for that black hole, yet, curiously, does not find it. On the one hand, the first Member to speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionists, Mr McNarry, accused us of creating a massive black hole in the Budget; yet the criticism from the second Ulster Unionist Member to speak, Mr Beggs, was that we were "balancing the books". Balancing the books is a fairly tame criticism; some Administrations would be delighted if that was the only criticism made of them. It shows the contradiction at the heart of Ulster Unionist thinking on the issue.

There is an all-pervasive silence from the Ulster Unionists on alternatives, although, to be fair to them, they produced at least one: Mr McNarry's idea of some sort of equity release scheme involving selling off all our assets and then mortgaging them back. Any independent expert would advise that that idea is not a runner with the Treasury. Perhaps that explains why, having put the issue into the ether, there suddenly seems to be silence on it. It has all gone very quiet. The Ulster Unionist Party has suggested no alternative.

Even taking the SDLP changes at face value, and, as I said, I have serious doubts about whether they are realisable, the amount of money that is proposed is less than half that realised by the various monitoring rounds over the past two years. More than £1 billion has been reallocated. Although it is believed that the Budget process has been fundamentally sound, there has been an opportunity to readjust. Indeed, the Executive, of which, in case the SDLP has forgotten, it is also a member, have undertaken various measures to tackle the crisis. We have seen the announcement of the relief for small businesses and the freezing of regional rates for the non-domestic sector. We have also seen proposals from the Economic Development Forum, which was set up by the Executive to deal with construction, the financing of SMEs, businesses in difficulties, and skills. Measures have been introduced and there is more to come. Proactive action is being taken.

The reason why there is a need for adjustments rather than a fundamental review is that, in both the Budget and the Programme for Government, the Executive put economic development at the top of their priorities. Calls for re-prioritisation prompt the question: how exactly is something to come above number one on the list? Should another issue be placed ahead of economic development? The economy is at the centre of the proposals and at the heart of Government. The Executive have acted. However,

there will be a limit to what can be done, because contrasting what we do with other Governments' measures is not comparing like with like. Ultimately, we are a regional Government dealing with a block grant.

There may well be more difficult times ahead; I bow to the superior knowledge of the Ulster Unionists on that, because we see the slash-and-burn of the Conservative Party's proposals and the potential that they hold for large cutbacks.

One assumes that the Ulster Unionist Party would have sought some sort of guarantee that future block grants for Northern Ireland would be protected before any degree of reciprocation or electoral arrangements were made with the Conservative Party. However, that does not seem to have figured in any way in the Ulster Unionists' calculations. I am happy to give way to any Ulster Unionist Member who is willing to confirm that the Conservative Party will add the Northern Ireland block grant to the list of items that it says it will protect in the next Parliament. The silence is deafening.

Mr Beggs: As I said earlier, the Labour Government have accrued huge debts, and they will have to be repaid. Regardless of whether a Labour Government or a Conservative Government are in power, the British Exchequer will have to make significant repayments in the next number of years. That will affect finances throughout the United Kingdom, irrespective of who occupies Number 10. Does the Member accept that?

Mr Weir: Yet again, the honourable Member misses the point. Due to the difficulties that Northern Ireland has faced, one assumes that any party would, at least, have sought to protect the region from which it comes before making any electoral arrangement with another party. The DUP is not linked with the Labour Party or the Conservative Party; we are here to defend Northern Ireland, first and foremost. The Conservatives have announced a number of areas in which they will offer protection in public spending, whereas there will be large cuts elsewhere.

I am happy to give way to any Ulster Unionist Member who can assure the House that the protection of the Northern Ireland block grant was part of that party's negotiations with the Conservative Party, but, again, the silence is deafening.

The process that we have put forward is one —

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I have only about five seconds left, but I will give way.

Mrs M Bradley: We should not be proud of ourselves, because, one year after the announcement of the Budget, we have not got a children's strategy in place.

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

Mrs M Bradley: Considering that we are in a recession and that children are suffering, that is disgusting.

Mr Attwood: I want to respond to one matter that Mr Weir raised. He failed utterly to grasp the inconsistency that was evident in his last point to Mr Beggs. He berated Mr Beggs for not securing protection for the Northern Ireland economy, given the Ulster Unionists' relationship with the Conservative Party. However, the DUP boasted about the protections for the Northern Ireland budget that it had secured from Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, and those protections went out the window in Gordon Brown's recently announced efficiency cuts strategy. Perhaps, the next time that he wants to challenge —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will not give way until later. Mr Weir was not himself able to secure the very thing that he asks of another party. If he cannot see the inconsistency and contradiction, shame on him.

If this debate is to mean anything, the Minister has to respond today, on the eve of recess, to four or five representative issues that have been in and around the Chamber over the past two months. First, can the Minister come to the Chamber today and confirm for Members, and for everyone else, who will chair the Senior Salaries Review Body, and what its time frame is in bringing forward its proposals? Does the Minister agree that if a review is to have any value, it should go further than the Senior Civil Service salaries? There is now a need to look at the salaries of other people in senior posts in publicly-funded organisations.

According to media reports, the vice chancellor of Queen's University had a 13.3% salary increase in the past financial year, and it has been mooted that he will have an increase of 5.5% in the current financial year. His salary has increased by one third in four years.

In a year such as this, when other staff have been offered an increase of 0.5%, and given that this Government provide Queen's University and other higher education institutions with £2 of every £5 that goes to their coffers, is it not time for this Government and Assembly to cast their net further than the Northern Ireland Civil Service and look at Northern Ireland chief executives who receive substantial pay from the public purse.

In my view it is unsustainable to — rightly — ask our civil servants to have a review of their pay and conditions when we do not apply the same principle to institutions such as Queen's University, which receives more than £90 million of its £250 million annual income from central Government.

My second question to the Minister involves a report that appeared in 'The Irish News' on Saturday and concerns Queen's University; I use that institution

only as a general example of a publicly funded body. The article contained leaked information from the university's unpublished corporate plan. It said that:

"informed forecasts suggest that the university should be planning for a 10 per cent reduction in government income by 2012-13."

What does Queen's University know that the rest of us, who are meant to be in and around Government in the North, do not? What information can Queen's University put into a document that may be published and that quotes informed sources saying that there will be:

"a 10 per cent reduction in government income by 2012-13."

Why have we not heard about that, if that is what will happen?

Does the Minister or DFP know about any plans for major cutbacks or efficiency savings to the tune of 10% that might affect higher or further education institutions, or other publicly funded bodies in the North? In my view, such predictions raise a lot of questions and anxieties that we have an obligation to calm or, at least, discuss.

Mr Weir's comments were verging on cheap and shameful when he compared the issue of social housing and Margaret Ritchie's requirements in respect of that and the SDLP —

Mr Weir: I ask the Member to withdraw the accusation that I am "verging" on cheap and shameful.

Mr Attwood: That comment says a lot about the person who has just made that intervention.

My point is that if Mr Weir does not believe that the SDLP proposals on social housing are a panacea, he should ignore them. However, the current Finance Minister and, perhaps, a future Finance Minister, cannot ignore the evidence in the Smyth/Bailey report. That report says that the construction sector was the most exposed of all employers in the North. It says that for every 10 construction jobs there will be seven other jobs. It says that, although hundreds of millions of pounds have been released by Governments in London and Scotland for construction projects in the recession, there has been no response of a similar scale in the North.

The argument that Smyth and Bailey put forward is that it is possible — in my view, it is probable — that the single biggest intervention that one can make in a time of recession is to build houses, not only for all the reasons that I have outlined, or because costs in the North are down by 17% compared with what they were a short time ago, but for all the other social and wider community reasons that uplift a society that has secure housing. The Minister can ignore the SDLP proposals if she chooses, but she cannot ignore serious academic evidence that outlines a strategy that is based on social and affordable housing and that can make an

immediate and serious intervention in our economic situation.

Moreover, I ask the Minister to confirm whether she or the DUP agree with what Fra McCann of Sinn Féin said in last week's housing debate. He said that if there were £110 million of unspent DSD money for the Royal Exchange projects, Sinn Féin would support the SDLP's argument and:

"agree if that £110 million were moved across by the Minister, it would deal with the problems that we face" — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 41, p284, col 1*].

The problems being in respect of the housing shortfalls.

4.15 pm

Will the DUP confirm, through the Minister, that it agrees with the SDLP and Sinn Féin that in the event that that £110 million becomes available in the next monitoring round or in future monitoring rounds before the end of the financial year it will be authorised to be put back into DSD's construction and housing budget? On 7 January, the DFP Minister told the DSD Minister that he accepted the argument that a lack of housing money had a disproportionate material impact on the construction industry in the North.

Two of the Minister's ministerial colleagues came to the House recently; Martin McGuinness on 5 May and Gerry Kelly on 20 April. They spoke about the fact that a childcare strategy was being developed. Indeed, on 5 May 2009, the deputy First Minister said:

"I understand that a meeting of the relevant Ministers has been arranged for 28 May 2009 to discuss it." — [*Official Report, Bound Volume 40, p215, col 2*].

I know that that subject is dear to the Minister's heart because a year and a half ago when we talked about child-minding in the North we shared a photograph in the 'Belfast Telegraph'.

Will the Minister confirm whether that report has been received and will she confirm that money has been allocated to fund that report? Will we have a situation at the end of August where, once again, childcare organisations such as PlayBoard will come to the end of their funding stream? Those are simple questions: has the report been received and is the money available?

Equally, given the DUP's surrender, on 1 June, on the equal pay issue where, variously, Simon Hamilton accused other parties of playing politics, etc, only for the DUP to withdraw its amendment; is the money in the coffers to pay for the equal pay consequences in the event that agreement is reached quickly about who should get what amount of money?

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

Mr Attwood: Those are five questions. I hope that I receive five answers today or some time after today.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education

(Mr Storey): I wish to highlight some aspects of the Committee's scrutiny of the Department of Education's budget, which are reflected in the Main Estimates. For those who have trawled through that small document, the details can be found on pages 57 to 86 of the 'Northern Ireland Estimates 2009-2010'.

One of the Committee's key areas of budget scrutiny continues to be the £200 million earmarked primarily for schools and youth services; approximately 10% of the overall education budget for 2008-09. The Minister of Education recognises that earmarking budgets erodes flexibility in the use of resources, and the Department has been assessing the scope for mainstreaming budgets directly to education users, mainly schools.

The Committee's objective is to increase the overall percentage of the education budget that goes directly to schools, and no one in the House would argue that that is not of paramount importance. How many of us have visited schools and spoken to boards of governors, principals and staff and found that the recurring issue that they want to see resolved is about money going directly to schools? The overall percentage of the education budget that goes directly to schools here is 62%, which is much lower than in other parts of the United Kingdom and some of our neighbouring European countries. The Committee for Education's particular focus in that area is to encourage the Minister to increase delegated funding through the common funding formula to primary schools and reduce the current differential in average funding levels between primary and post-primary schools.

In a letter that the Committee received from the Minister in July 2008, she stated that:

"baseline funds for distribution to schools in 2009/10 provide for a further increase in primary AWPU funding (from current level of 1.04 to 1.05), from next year – with a view to increasing progressively the relative funding levels distributed to primary schools under the LMS funding arrangements across the budget period."

Although that increase is welcome, it is not enough; we must go further.

Members of the Committee and Members of the House will have attended various presentations and seminars or have been lobbied by organisations such as Early Years. All those organisations stress the importance of early intervention in ensuring the delivery of good educational outcomes in the future, but those outcomes cannot be delivered if the adequate financial resources are not in place. Therefore, although the uplift to the AWPU (age weighted pupil limit) is welcome, as any additional funding is, the Committee feels that it is not enough to close the gap and deal with the differential between primary and post-primary schools.

The Committee welcomes the fact that there will be an increase of almost £27 million in the delegated budget for primary schools in the 2009-2010 education Estimates. A small element of that is additional funding, but that change demonstrates to the House that limited budgets can be used to better effect. The use of delegated funding allows primary schools to determine how they wish to use such funds to best meet their own needs and priorities, which is particularly important as needs and priorities can differ from area to area.

The Estimates touch on another aspect of the education budget that continues to be a matter of concern for Committee members and, no doubt, members of the House: school maintenance. There is a huge schools' estate in Northern Ireland, and it may come as a shock to Members to learn that the backlog for carrying out maintenance to that estate across the five education and library boards has risen to somewhere in the region of £200 million. Although it is imperative to have a speedy and effective procurement system in place, we must raise the major issues around the way in which procurement is being delivered. We are not seeing a lot of newbuilds being built and those that are being built are not being built quickly enough. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School, which has been waiting since January 2009 for the Department to finalise the financial arrangements that would allow it to cut the first sod and begin construction of the school that it was promised three years ago.

Several Members made references to the construction industry during today's debate, and the call for that industry to be given the green light to move forward must be extended to the education sector. We must be more aware and focused rather than allow ourselves to be held up by bureaucracy and red tape.

Let us adopt a can-do attitude. I have grave concerns about the way in which we govern ourselves. There is no point in my trying to blame other Ministers. If we are to have an Assembly, we need to take collective responsibility. Often, we do not adopt a can-do attitude when trying to move forward on these matters.

The issue of the maintenance budget must be urgently addressed to ensure that there is no further decline in the educational estate and that more problems do not arise in years to come as a result of delay and the system being unable to respond adequately and quickly enough.

The Committee noted the additional £5 million in the final monitoring round for 2008-09 and the Department of Education's bid for £14.8 million in the current monitoring round. However, during a recent budget briefing by senior departmental officials, the Committee heard that the current education and library

boards now have no set school-maintenance budgets. That is a matter of grave concern.

I have examined the Estimates that relate to the Department of Education. It is worrying, to say the least, that no established school-maintenance budget is included in the tables on pages 59 and 61. That is particularly worrying when one considers the £200 million backlog to which I referred earlier. I can assure the House that the Committee for Education will scrutinise that matter in some detail, and will ask the Minister of Education to put the proper budget arrangements in place for schools maintenance.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak on behalf of the SDLP, not the Education Committee. Mr Storey has done that eloquently, and although I may echo some points that he made, I do so to underline their importance.

I begin with the issue of the procurement of capital projects in education; newbuilds, as they are better known. The Department of Education is notoriously slow in providing new schools, with delays running into years, and, in some cases, into a second decade. That is totally unacceptable at a time when we need an injection of capital into the building industry in this part of the country. In that procurement process, every second year of delay requires a fresh economic appraisal, which creates further delay. It is a vicious circle. For projects costing more than £5 million, DFP requires what is known as a BREEAM assessment, which may mean a fundamental redesign and restructuring of a project, creating further and longer delays.

That type of bureaucracy is a mire that causes delays that are impacting on the delivery of the education service at the chalk face. It would be of great assistance to those awaiting newbuilds if, for example, DFP could streamline its procedures and those of the Department of Education in such a way as to fast-track schemes to ensure that there are no delays, or that any delays are kept to a bare minimum. Such a development would provide a major stimulus to the building industry at a time when it is on its knees, and when the queue of unemployed construction workers is lengthening by the day. We need to bring new school builds on stream much quicker than is the case at the moment. We literally cannot afford those delays.

Mr Storey referred to the difficulties of school maintenance. In response to a question that I asked the Minister of Education on that issue, she gave an answer that ran to more than 60 pages. As Mr Storey said, the backlog in school maintenance is more than £200 million. Newbuilds would go some way to reducing that, but the bid of £14.6 million in the June monitoring round is not enough if children are to have access to the best possible educational facilities.

Greater investment in schools' maintenance is needed, as the estate is crumbling due to lack of investment. The maintenance budgets of education and library boards must be ring-fenced; they have been continually raided for other purposes throughout the years. That must be put right: money for educational maintenance must be spent on educational maintenance. Such investment would also benefit the building industry.

4.30 pm

During a debate on 19 May 2009 on special educational needs, the issue was raised of releasing £25 million to implement the findings of the special educational needs review. Unfortunately, the matter is not resolved. Apparently, that resource is still locked in dispute at Executive level. Many parents who have children with special educational needs wonder why a local devolved Executive is failing to release a valuable resource that would go some way to providing better educational services to their children. The issue must be resolved immediately: further delay will reflect extremely poorly on government here.

Other important reviews need resources to be allocated to them, including the nought-to-six strategy and the review of Irish-medium education.

The unregulated system of transfer that has emerged under the Minister has meant that area-based planning has not progressed at the rate at which it should have. Nevertheless, school closures and reorganisation are proceeding, with the axe hanging over many small rural schools. It seems sensible that school closures and school reorganisation should be stalled until properly agreed area-based plans are developed. The Executive should commit to providing financial support for small viable rural schools at risk of closure until proper area-based plans are developed.

Mr Gallagher: I agree with the Member. The Executive, and not just the Department of Education, must use logic in the treatment of schools. I take the Member's point that small schools must be supported in the interim period until area-based plans are worked out. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development spoke effusively about the publication shortly of a rural White Paper. Does the Member agree that it makes sense to keep supporting small schools until the outcome of the rural White Paper is known, as well as the area-based plans? When that information is available, decisions can be taken about the future of education provision.

Mr D Bradley: I agree wholeheartedly with the Member. In fact, this evening, I shall visit a small rural school that faces closure. That school has enough pupils to make it viable; in fact, it benefited recently from £250,000 of investment from the Department of Education. One fails to see the logic when an investment of that size is made in a small rural school,

but, within five years, that school is designated for closure. That simply does not make sense.

As to transfer 2010, I ask the Minister of Finance whether any consideration has been given to the possible costs that are associated with the current unregulated system, which may see the Department of Education joined in legal challenges that parents take. We may be faced with that scenario, and it is one for which the Minister should be prepared.

Mr Storey: I assume from the thrust of the Member's question that he is concerned about whether transfer 2010 will cost us more. Does he join with me in saying that in our segregated system, the maintained sector has cost three or four times the size of the budget? Alliance Party Members will know that I am good at quoting the document on the cost of division. Will the Member be consistent and say that the best way to reduce the cost of education is to not have the segregated systems that we have?

Mr D Bradley: I cannot agree with the Member on that point. He will remember that, on a number of occasions at the Education Committee, I traced the history of the segregated system in Northern Ireland. He will also remember what I said about Lord Londonderry's attempts to establish a non-segregated system and about who opposed him and introduced the segregated system. I am sure that I do not have to give the Member a further history lesson.

The SDLP is very much in favour of parental choice, be that for maintained, controlled, integrated or Irish-medium education. If parents want choice, we have to pay for it.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and Members' comments about it.

Times are indeed hard for most people in the Province. In the United Kingdom as a whole, the economy is expected to decline by 3.5% in 2009, with a slight recovery possibly this time next year. We are all asking what that means for the Province, and I will address that point.

I am informed by the Department of Finance and Personnel that the Chancellor has confirmed that an additional £5 billion in efficiency savings will apply to the devolved Administrations. That means that our block grant will be reduced by some £122.8 million this year. However, the potential impact of that is offset by the allocation of Barnett consequentials of £116 million over this year and the next. That is a serious situation, and I am not taking away from it, but it is not all doom and gloom.

What does all that mean in layman's terms to you, me and our constituents? It means that not much money is available; we all know that. We must tighten our belts considerably; we all know that as well. We

cannot expect that we will get money to meet all our wants in each Department; indeed, nor will we.

Above all, it means that we must show wisdom in the manner in which we spend money in each Department to ensure that each pound that is spent is put to the best use. The current financial position means that the only way that more resources can be allocated to a particular service is to scale back other public services. That is robbing one service to pay for another. For that reason, each Department must plan and allocate funding carefully according to priorities and needs.

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The Minister has worked carefully to ensure the best use of money in the distribution to each Department, and he has tried to ensure as high a level of efficiency as possible.

In addition, the position on the Executive's expenditure plans, which are grounded in the Programme for Government, is dynamic and fluid. Other Members mentioned that the programme's number one priority is economic growth. They indicated that they support that and wish it to continue.

In particular, although Whitehall Departments' three-year expenditure plans have remained largely unchanged since October 2007, spending plans for Northern Ireland Departments in 2008-09 have, as part of the in-year monitoring process, been reviewed on four occasions in light of the most up-to-date, available information. Clearly, work has been done. That approach will continue during 2009-2010 as part of the forthcoming June monitoring round. We are keeping up to date and on top of monitoring to ensure value for money and to make change as and when it is needed. Certainly, the Minister and his Department work hard to ensure that the Province receives as much money as possible.

At the same time, I must point out that the Finance Minister can only direct money towards Departments; he does not earmark money for individual projects. That is the responsibility of individual Ministers. The onus is on them to ensure the proper distribution of funds on the ground. There is a need to ensure that funding is not wasted on processing schemes through the system and that the process is sufficiently efficient to ensure that as much money as possible goes to schemes and, subsequently, to the people who need it. That is no easy task.

Wearing my other hat as a member of my local council, I am aware of the background work that goes into every decision, every paper that must be researched, and every in-depth inquiry that must be

carried out. Departments must ensure that that work is carried out as efficiently as possible so that more funding for projects is secured.

I have considered the SDLP's proposed Budget, some of which would certainly be beneficial if it were taken on board. However, I also see that it is not a solution in itself. It contains a number of factual inaccuracies, and some of its goals cannot be realised within our current timescale. I have every confidence that the Minister will take on board and incorporate the parts that are of benefit and use to the entire Province.

Although the situation is not a crisis, it must be monitored. I have faith that my colleague Nigel Dodds and his spokesperson in the debate, Arlene Foster, will ensure that we survive the economic downturn and see the beginnings of the shoots of prosperity. Although there are major problems, it is important that we understand that the dawn is coming. In the meantime, we must ensure that each and every Department takes on board the concepts of efficiency and priorities so that they can pull us through.

Through his Department, Minister Dodds has done a good job in difficult circumstances. I know that he will continue to monitor the situation and ensure that Departments get all the funding that is available. People on the ground need to see Departments choose what to spend the money on wisely. I challenge every Minister, Committee Chairperson and Committee to get that money on the ground and to let people see a difference. I support the motion.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): The debate has been good. It raised many issues, which was to be expected. I have noted those issues, and I will try my best to deal with them. Clearly, if there is anything that I do not deal with, or that I am unable to deal with, I will, undoubtedly, be reminded during tomorrow's debate. I hope that I will be able to deal with any such issue during that debate, if not during these closing remarks.

At the outset, I acknowledge confirmation by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel that there has been appropriate consultation with his Committee on the public-expenditure proposals that are reflected in the 2009-2010 Main Estimates, the Supply resolution and the related Budget (No. 2) Bill. As a result of that confirmation, the Budget (No. 2) Bill that I will introduce shortly will proceed under accelerated passage, which will exclude Committee Stage. On Mr Dodds's behalf, I appreciate the Committee for Finance and Personnel's assistance and action on the matter, which will help to ensure the seamless continuation of public-service delivery throughout the coming year.

As I said, I will try as far as possible to address the issues that various Members raised, and if I miss any, I am sure that I will be reminded of that.

The first issue that I want to address is the limitation of monitoring rounds, which many Members raised, not least Dr Farry and Mr O'Loan. I must say that Members are too dismissive of the monitoring process, which is an important tool for the Executive in the strategic management of the public-expenditure position.

Mr Hamilton pointed out that the monitoring process has facilitated more than £1 billion of changes in departmental allocations in the past two years. Mr Beggs questioned the purpose of monitoring rounds without reallocations. I want to put him straight: there have been £1 billion of reallocations since the restoration of the Assembly.

4.45 pm

Mr Beggs: Does the Minister acknowledge that it is better to plan funding so that money is not spent hastily near the end of a financial year? Does she agree that such an approach would achieve better value for money?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Absolutely. However, the flexibility of the monitoring round allows us to reallocate if necessary, and Ministers have used in-year monitoring to reallocate money to Departments. Where original programmes or projects have encountered difficulties, or where costs have decreased rather than lay idle, the money can be redirected into the economy. That approach has facilitated substantial redirecting of money, not least £22.5 million for the fuel poverty scheme, £26.5 million for housing programmes, £20 million for the farm-nutrient management scheme and almost £10 million for minor capital projects. Members should not dismiss those significant developments.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel mentioned the review of in-year monitoring. In March 2008, the Executive agreed that there should be a review of how the Executive and the Assembly conduct the Budget processes. We listened to the concerns of Members and the Committee for Finance and Personnel on those processes. The Committee provided valuable and substantive input into that review and incorporated comments from other Committees. Similarly, a review of the in-year monitoring process has been undertaken, and as the Chairperson said, the evidence-gathering stage of both reviews has largely been completed. I understand that officials will soon bring the emerging position to the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his consideration, after which the various Committees, not least the Committee for Finance and Personnel, will consider the matter.

The Member also raised some issues about capital delivery. I will offer two points in response. First, as he

highlighted, we face a difficulty owing to the lower level of capital receipts. Although that was an issue last year, its impact was largely managed through the in-year monitoring process. The best illustration of that success is that the Department for Social Development, with Executive support, delivered 1,365 new housing units last year against a milestone of 1,500. That performance leaves the Department well on track to meet its Programme for Government target of 10,000 units over five years. The current economic climate, as bad as it is, will not last for ever, and assets that we cannot sell today will be retained for future disposal. Secondly, the current state of the construction market provides an opportunity to procure capital projects at lower costs. Mike Smyth and Mark Bailey's much-quoted report, which I had the opportunity to read at the weekend, picked up on that point.

Rev William McCrea, the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, spoke about farming issues. I am grateful for his recognition of the funds that have been provided to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for the farm-nutrient management scheme and to support the fishing industry. The farm-nutrient management scheme is a long-term investment in farm infrastructure that is essential for EU compliance and to create an environmentally sustainable future. However, we need to support and assist our farmers, and he made the point, very forcibly, that farmers are investing a great deal of their own money in the industry. That point must be acknowledged.

Mr McNarry made several points about the Budget process and said that the Department of Finance and Personnel does not accept bids during the June monitoring round. He has either been misinformed about or has misunderstood — Members can take their pick — the scope of the June monitoring round.

Departments have been asked to submit spending bids in this monitoring round as they would in any other year. As always, the Executive will determine the way forward only when all the evidence on the bids has been collected and analysed. I understand that some considerable bids have still to be dealt with.

The level of funding for the Budget plans for 2011-12 and beyond, which will be available to the Executive in the form of the block grant, will be confirmed only as part of the next UK-wide spending review, which is not expected until some time next year. Some very rash assertions were made about funding cuts, the best examples of which were made during the debates on the previous Budget, when similar fears were largely overblown. Once again, that highlights the folly of rushed and ill-informed judgements on Budget proposals, which Mr McNarry continues to make. Some people never learn, and he is clearly not in a position to listen to what is happening.

Just as he has still not grasped the concept of Budget proposals, he has not grasped the concept of a four-party mandatory coalition. The Executive are comprised not of two parties but four.

Mr Kennedy: And Jim Allister.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Jim Allister is not in the Executive, funnily enough. The do-nothing Executive to which Mr McNarry referred have two Ulster Unionist Ministers. What an indictment that is of those two Ministers, if that is what Mr McNarry thinks that they are at. As for deceit, Mr Deputy Speaker, hypocrisy knows no bounds from Mr McNarry. I am sorry that he is not here to hear my remarks, but no doubt he will read them in the Hansard report and respond tomorrow. For the record, however, I will not take any lectures from a man who was a special adviser to David "No guns, no Government" Trimble.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Kennedy: You supported him in his leadership bid.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I was on my honeymoon during one David Trimble's leadership bid. I enjoyed my time in Cyprus greatly, Mr Deputy Speaker. I had nothing whatsoever to do with that particular gentleman's election.

Moving on, which I am glad to do, I want to deal with some of Mr O'Loan's comments about the difficult financial situation that we are in. There is no denying that the financial environment has become more difficult, and, unfortunately, it will become even more challenging. However, Mr O'Loan is simply wrong to suggest that efficiency savings are the cause of our difficulties. It is only by making savings in existing services that Departments will be able to meet spending pressures. I heard Mr O'Loan say that civil servants gave me a cut-and-paste speech that was written 18 months ago. If that is the case, I do not know how I could have given details of up-to-date expenditure such as that for the new hospital for the south-west in Enniskillen. He should not judge others by his tactics of cutting and pasting speeches to make in the Assembly. Not every Member does what he does.

Those of us who were out and about during the European election campaign know that the Civil Service equal-pay claim is an important issue. Mr O'Loan, and Mr Attwood in particular, said that the desire to deal with the equal-pay claim is clear to us all. I was disappointed by Alex Attwood's attack on Simon Hamilton for withdrawing an amendment to the motion on the equal-pay issue on 1 June. He attacked Peter Weir, which he is entitled to do, but he should have thought better of following that up with a snide attack on Simon Hamilton, whose intention in withdrawing his amendment was to avoid dividing the House.

The Civil Service equal-pay claim involves very complex issues, and a great deal of work remains to be done before the matter can be resolved. The Minister of Finance and Personnel met NIPSA representatives on 7 May to hear at first hand the union's issues of concern and to assure them of his commitment to resolving the matter, if possible through a negotiated settlement, without the need for litigation. As we all know, the only people who benefit from litigation are the lawyers.

It is necessary to reach a negotiated settlement, and that is still the desire of the Executive. A review of technical support grades is being undertaken to ensure that posts are correctly graded, and to provide a firm foundation for resolving the matter. Discussions are continuing; therefore, it would be inappropriate for me to go into any more detail at this stage.

Mr O'Loan and Mrs Hanna mentioned the SDLP Budget proposals, as did others. They are a welcome contribution to the debate on the handling of public expenditure. The proposals have been examined by the Department of Finance and Personnel, and by Ministers of other Departments. However, it is important to recognise that there are flaws in that analysis, as have been mentioned, and that the proposals require significant development before they could be considered for further implementation. Furthermore, some of the proposals to generate funds for reallocation may not be deliverable in the next two years; for example, additional asset sales. It should also be recognised that there are deeper flaws in respect of the amounts that are identified as being available from Invest NI and the Port of Belfast.

Many Members mentioned the impact of the loss of Workplace 2010 receipts. The potential of £175 million from Workplace 2010 receipts was factored into the plans for 2008-09. However, the loss of those receipts was managed through the in-year monitoring process. Lower construction costs also provided an opportunity for Northern Ireland Departments to procure capital projects at lower cost.

Mr O'Loan: I made the point that £175 million was not delivered last year, and that was a real loss. That meant that capital schemes that should have been funded from that money did not go ahead. Does the Minister accept that?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I accept that we were able to manage that through the in-year monitoring process — the same process that is being attacked by Members across the Floor who say that it is not adequate to deal with issues that come up during the year. We used that process to deal with the loss of that contract. As the Member is aware, the reasons why the project was not completed were external, and did not represent a failure by the

Executive to proceed with it. It was simply the case that both contractors who were involved in the competitive tendering process joined together, and as a result, there was no competitive tendering. That was the issue, and we could not proceed.

On the one hand, Stephen Farry complains that nothing has been done about the economic downturn; he then raises concern that the measures that have been adopted have not been baselined. That is a disparity. He also said that we compare unfavourably with the rest of the United Kingdom. That is simply not the message that Nigel Dodds gets when he speaks to colleagues in Wales and Scotland. We are the first devolved region to deliver such a programme as a short-term aid scheme to help people in business. Sometimes, the Members opposite indulge in a bit of glass-half-empty rather than glass-half-full thinking. We are effectively dealing with the issues that are before us, particularly those that the business community wants us to deal with.

The Member also raised the concern that funds have been allocated to pressures other than the economic downturn — I think he used the term “populist” — but we should ensure that sufficient resources are made available for all public services. I am sure that the Member would accept that, in tough economic times, support for the vulnerable is just as important as hard-nosed economic initiatives.

Dr Farry also suggested that we should not offset the reduction in funding for 2010-11 as a result of the additional efficiency savings through the use of Barnett consequentials. However, he provided no indication as to how he would bridge the resulting funding gap that would remain, other than to make non-specific reference to the costs of division again. There are undoubtedly some additional costs associated with a somewhat segregated society. I do not think that anyone would deny that.

The Member for North Antrim Mr Storey talked about the costs of our segregated education system. However, as has been made clear previously, the suggested savings are sometimes overblown, and would also involve job cuts. That would not be achievable in the short term.

He also mentioned the tension between policies that look at stimuli and having to deal with a debt burden, which was a fair comment. When do we move from trying to create stimuli to dealing with the debt that we have as a result of those stimuli? That was a question that I had to ask when I looked at the short-term aid scheme. I asked whether it was worth doing it at the time and decided that we had to do something to help businesses in need. The scheme is time-limited and will end in 2010. We hope that the upturn will have

arrived by that stage and that we will be able to make use of the skills that we were able to save in companies.

5.00 pm

Fra McCann, Roy Beggs and Alex Attwood mentioned social housing, as did other Members. Over the past five years, the number of social houses completed per capita has been almost a third higher in Northern Ireland than in the UK as a whole. Similarly, total housing completions per capita were 160% greater in Northern Ireland.

Members also referred to the report by Mike Smyth and Dr Mark Bailey. Although that report attempts to provide an assessment of the monetary and non-monetary benefits of investment in social housing, its content and conclusions clearly reflect that it was commissioned by DSD. That is something that Members should consider very carefully when reading the report's analysis. Any Department can commission its own consultants to prove the case for additional funding; I am sure that Departments have done so in the past and will do so in the future.

Unfortunately, the underlying analysis in the report is rather sparse. Evidence for the construction sector as a whole is based on data for Scotland that are five years old. In addition, the evidence in support of investment in social housing relies on a single study from 2003, which, again, was based on the position in Scotland. Therefore, although the report adds to the debate, it is not particularly applicable to Northern Ireland or informative in the current economic climate.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister share my sense of irony that the SDLP Minister with responsibility for housing has commissioned a report by consultants to try to prove her point when her party's proposals for the public finances in Northern Ireland refer to doing away with consultants to a large degree?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am sure that that point will be put to that Minister in due course.

I want to talk about the £110 million easement that Mr McCann mentioned.

Mr O'Loan: There is considerable experience and knowledge in our university system, which is available to the public sector at considerably less cost than traditional methods of consultancy. If Departments were to avail themselves of that knowledge and experience, it would be very beneficial and considerably more cost-effective than taking our present routes.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: That is something that I intend to look at this week; I plan to meet economists from our local universities and take the very route that the Member mentioned.

Mr McCann and Mr Attwood referred to the £110 million easement in respect of the Royal Exchange project. The Social Development Minister has not yet formally identified that money for reallocation by the Executive. The Royal Exchange project will also provide additional business and work for the construction industry. The decision is one for the Social Development Minister, but, as Mr McCann said, social regeneration is also an issue. Therefore, the question is whether the Minister wants to transfer funding for the project to housing or whether she wants to continue with the regeneration. That is her decision, and we can have a discussion around the Executive table about the reallocation of that money.

Mr Attwood: There has been a bit of mischief-making about the DSD report that was acquired by Margaret Ritchie. However, there can be no mischief-making about what Mrs Foster's colleague Mr Dodds said. He said that building less social housing in a recession had — to use not mine or Margaret Ritchie's but Nigel Dodds's words — a materially disproportionate effect on the construction industry. Given that the evidence, not from Scotland, Wales or England but from Northern Ireland, is that the construction industry has suffered more than any other sector of our employee base — the Minister knows that because of her DETI background — how can she not join up the dots and draw the conclusion that investment in housing materially benefits the construction industry, as well as all the broader uplifts that would come to society?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: It is not that I am not joining up the dots. We all recognise the value of social housing, and those points were made in the report by Mr Smyth and Mr Bailey about homelessness, social exclusion and other issues. However, the report skews the evidence to argue for social housing over, for example, public transport and roads infrastructure. Homelessness will not have as high a rating for public transport and roads infrastructure as it does for housing. There are other areas of construction that I urge Members to consider. We need a full and open debate, not just a consultants' report that was commissioned by the Department for Social Development to argue its case for social housing.

Nelson McCausland raised the issue of safety at sports grounds and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's opening capital budget for 2009-2010 of £29 million for stadia development. The Culture Minister has reallocated £22 million of that to accelerate projects in sport and in other sectors. It is my understanding that those accelerated projects, including those relating to safety at sports grounds, will be taken forward.

I also welcome the Member's emphasis on the need for support for sport and tourism, areas that are close

to my own heart. Tourism is a growth area, and the Executive are always aware of the need to keep it high on the agenda. It is gratifying that the relative peace in our community facilitates further concentration on it. As the Minister with responsibility for tourism, I assure Mr McCausland that I will not be found wanting in pushing ahead with tourism infrastructure.

Roy Beggs highlighted the need for more public spending and spoke about balancing the books, directly contradicting his colleague Mr McNarry, who talked about a black hole. It is hard to see the meeting of those positions. However, there is no denying that the financial environment has become more difficult and will, unfortunately, be more challenging, particularly if we face cuts from a Tory Government should David Cameron become the next Prime Minister. However, the Member is wrong to suggest that efficiency savings are the cause of those difficulties. It is only by making savings in services that Departments will meet spending pressures. Surely the Member recognises that the Executive can best support the economy during the downturn by delivering on the commitments in the Programme for Government.

Last year, we had the highest levels of funding for public services, as well as record capital investment, providing support to the construction sector. Furthermore, Mr Beggs's pessimistic view of the economy contradicts reports in the 'Financial Times' that most City economists think that the UK economy has begun its recovery. Although the Member is right that public finances will be more constrained, regardless of which party is in control after the next general election, the challenges will be much worse under a Conservative Government than under the current Labour Administration.

The Member spoke about Budget pressures. The main Budget pressure facing the Executive this year is that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has said that the capital receipt from the disposal of the Crossnacreevy site will not now be delivered. However, that and other shortfalls in capital receipts should be compensated for by slippage on other projects.

Another potential pressure is the impact on Northern Ireland of the additional efficiency savings that are expected to be made in UK Departments. However, the outcome of the 2009 Budget was not as bad as some had predicted. Additional allocations largely offset the reductions made through the Barnett consequentials. Therefore, most of the known pressures that the Executive face should be absorbed as part of the in-year monitoring process. However, the House must note that major uncertainties remain in respect of domestic water and sewerage and the NICS equal pay scheme.

I appreciate that there are also concerns about the performance of Land and Property Services. Many of those concerns resulted from the change to the rating system that occurred at the same time as services were shifted to that agency. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has asked the performance and efficiency delivery unit to conduct a review in collaboration with Land and Property Services. The aim of that review is to provide assurance that the agency is structured and managed in a way that focuses on the delivery of its important objectives. The team is framing its final conclusions and is due to report back shortly.

I am sorry that Mr Beggs is not here. I listened carefully as he spent considerable time talking about double-jobbing and how people cannot be in two places at once. I look forward to his resignation either from this place or from his council position, because the logic of his argument dictates that he cannot hold both those positions. Indeed, one would have thought that Mr Beggs, of all people, would be careful about making such statements. His father was MP for East Antrim, a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly between 1982 and 1986, a councillor and an active farmer — all at the same time. Despite that, Mr Beggs comes into the Chamber and speaks about double-jobbing and how people cannot be in two places at the one time.

Mrs Hanna wanted to speak about redundancy payments in light of the Audit Office's report on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I appreciate the Member's concerns about the cost of redundancy payments made to senior staff following the reorganisation of the Health Service. However, we must respect the rights of the senior and lower-paid staff who are being made redundant as part of efficiency-driven reorganisation. The Member must also bear in mind that the redundancy payments will bear fruit in the longer term, by producing much-needed efficiencies that can be reinvested into front line health services. That is something that I would consider to be a longer-term aim for the House.

I fully agree with Mrs Hanna that the focus should be on outcomes and quality of service and that there must not be a slash-and-burn attitude to efficiency savings. It must be taken on board that Committees have a clear role in ensuring that savings are made through doing things better rather than through making crude cuts.

Jennifer McCann, perhaps unsurprisingly, said that the Executive should be given the full range of fiscal powers. Northern Ireland does very well as a consequence of being a full part of the United Kingdom. Full fiscal autonomy from the UK is not a risk-free option, and that needs to be addressed by the people who propose it. Indeed, the latest figures indicate that there is a £6.7 billion gap between the tax

revenue that is generated here and public expenditure. The Member might want to consider how she would manage such a Budget deficit were we to have full fiscal autonomy.

The Member also mentioned public procurement, which arises again and again as a matter of concern. In December 2008, the Minister of Finance and Personnel established the construction industry forum procurement task group to agree the principles to be applied to future construction procurement. The group's report was finalised on 30 April and was tabled at the procurement board on 7 May. The Finance Minister has instructed Central Procurement Directorate to work with all government construction clients to implement the seven key principles agreed by the task group, one of which is to provide recurrent tender opportunities for enterprises of all sizes.

5.15 pm

Centres of procurement expertise are required to advertise all construction procurement opportunities that are in excess of designated thresholds on their websites or in the local press. The procurement board approved the use of the eSourcing NI web portal as a single sourcing tool for all centres of procurement expertise. The portal offers all registered construction firms 24/7 access to view all procurement opportunities and facilitates the submission of electronic tenders.

Recently, a hospital in my own area of the south-west held a successful open day for local contractors, which was facilitated by Invest Northern Ireland. It was a hugely successful event and indicates what can be achieved locally if we put our minds to the issue of procurement.

Mr O'Loan and Dr Farry mentioned the green economy, which is one of the key growth areas for us. It is one of the reasons why I set up the interdepartmental working group on sustainable energy. The working group has met on a number of occasions, and a subgroup has been set up to examine green jobs. I am hopeful that we will see a lot of progress in that area.

Alex Attwood asked me a number of questions, and I hope that I have answered one or two of them already. He asked me about the review of senior Civil Service pay and bonuses, which was announced by Nigel Dodds only last Thursday. I have no doubt that he will want to say more on the whole procedure and on the leadership of the review. My colleagues are discussing the issue, and the terms of reference may well be extended, as they are not set in stone. However, Executive Ministers will discuss the issue.

In relation to Queen's University, Belfast, and its 10% cut in funding as reported in 'The Irish News', the allocation to the Executive in relation to public bodies, such as Queen's University, is in line with the UK's public expenditure system. However, despite

some forecasts that the wider economic position in 2012-13 will be known, we have public expenditure plans only up to March 2011.

Mr Attwood: First, I want to acknowledge that the Minister indicated that the Senior Salaries Review Body's terms of reference may extend beyond the Civil Service. If that were to happen, it would be timely, and it would be a good development. However, the Minister indicated that what happens after 2011 is yet to be determined, even though a public body in Northern Ireland appears — I stress the word "appears" — to be making proposals, including making up to 300 staff redundant, because of what informed sources tell them may be the position from 2012-13. It is a concern when a publicly funded body in Northern Ireland appears to be making decisions based on figures that it believes to be the case, even though those figures are not in the public domain and are not even known to our Ministers. Surely there needs to be a conversation with that public body about what it is doing.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I am sure that the Member will take the issue up with the Minister for Employment and Learning. However, on the basis of what we know, I can offer no clarification of the item that appeared in Saturday's edition of 'The Irish News'. If you wish to take the matter up with the relevant Minister, I am sure that he will endeavour to find out the answer for you.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education, Mr Storey, raised the issue of schools funding in the latter part of the debate, and Mr Bradley took the matter on. I recognise the Member's call for additional funding for schools. However, we need to recognise that, overall, schools funding is set to increase by 5.9% this year, which is significantly greater than the average for other public services. The Member will also be aware that, as part of the December monitoring round, an additional allocation of £4 million was made for school maintenance to the Department of Education. However, as the Member will know, that is primarily a matter for the Minister of Education, who has a considerably large budget. In fact, that Department receives the second-highest level of funding.

I am aware that there is at least one question of Mr Attwood's that I have not answered. I am not in a position to answer his question on childcare today, but, if he will be in the House tomorrow, I will endeavour to find the answer for him by then. Members have a considerable interest in childcare, as do I, as Mr Attwood mentioned.

I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. I acknowledge their genuine concern and their desire to fund many needy projects and programmes. However, as has been said many times, my colleague

the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not have a bottomless pit of money from which to draw. The extent to which specific pressures in one area will be addressed is contingent on the level of reduced requirements declared by other Departments.

I commend the Supply resolution to the House. I remind Members of the importance of today's vote. It is vital that public services continue seamlessly in 2009 and 2010, and I ask all Members to support the motion.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,566,927,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 and that resources, not exceeding £8,311,830,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the year ending 31st March 2010 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(b) and 3(a) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2009-10 that was laid before the Assembly on 29 May 2009.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Budget (No. 2) Bill

First Stage

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I thought that you were going to call me by name but you have obviously forgotten to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 2) Bill [NIA 8/08], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 2010; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2010; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Minister Foster said, the Speaker has received written notification from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel confirming that the Committee is satisfied that, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2):

“there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill”.

The Bill may, therefore, proceed through accelerated passage, and the Second Stage of the Bill will be brought before the House tomorrow, Tuesday 16 June 2009.

Adjourned at 5.23 pm.