
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Protestant Students

Tuesday 6 October 2009

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Rates (Amendment) Bill

Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, under Standing Order 37(2), the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill is restricted to debating any further amendments tabled to the Bill. No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Rates (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

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

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Members in whose names the motion is tabled are not present. What is your ruling?

Mr Speaker: Members who table motions have a responsibility to be in the House to move them. I will move on to the next item of business.

Mr Easton, I take it that you have an explanation for the House as to why you were not in your place to move the motion.

Mr Easton: I apologise to the House, but I was in the middle of a radio interview that went on longer than I had anticipated.

Mr Speaker: I hear what the Member says, but I must tell him and the whole House that his first responsibility is to the House. I intend to move on to the next item of business.

I warned the whole House quite a while ago that, if Ministers or Members are not in their place to move the business of the House or private Members' business, that business will fall; and this morning the motion fell. It is no fault of the House that that has happened. However, Members need to know their responsibility to the House and to the business of the House.

The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on investment in social housing. I ask the House to take its ease for a few seconds until we move to the next item of business.

Social Housing

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

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the particular impact on the housing construction industry of the current economic downturn; further notes the recent research by the University of Ulster that investment in social housing would have a multiplier effect on job creation; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make moneys available to invest in a programme of new build social housing across Northern Ireland.

I am very pleased to propose the motion. Members can approach the matter in two ways: we can score points against one another — we have done plenty of that — or we can have a constructive debate. We can recognise that there is a real and large problem here for us all. We need a long-term, joint approach by all parties to social housing and investment in social housing. That is what the public is looking to the Assembly to provide.

A good place to start would be Sir John Semple's 'Review into Affordable Housing', which was issued in spring 2007. He said that a target for social housing completions — he emphasised "completions" — should be set at 2,000 per annum expressed as 10,000 over the next five years. The review said that a firm funding commitment needed to be put in place by government to achieve that.

That was in direct rule days. The review goes on to say:

"Significant economic, social and environmental imperatives exist that cause me to recommend in the strongest possible terms that, should an elected Assembly be restored ... it and its Executive should make amendment to the planning and housing systems a priority".

To be fair to the Executive, it did that, although its target figures fall short of Semple's estimate of need. They also fall short of Housing Executive estimates of need. The Housing Executive, in its 'Northern Ireland Housing Market: Review and Perspectives 2009-2012', which was published this year, says:

"There is an annual requirement for at least 3,000 additional new social dwellings for the period 2009-12".

The need is clear. There are about 40,000 applicants on the waiting list, half of whom are in urgent housing need. In one year, about 9,000 households are deemed homeless. Be clear, therefore: even if the Executive target is met, it is by no means obvious that we will have resolved our problem. I have concern about how the Executive target is expressed. The public service agreement plans to ensure the provision of 10,000

social and affordable houses by 2013. There is no distinct figure for social housing alone. Perhaps that is why DFP claims that achievement of the target is still on track, even though last year's milestone of 1,500 houses was not achieved. It was 364 houses short. In the current financial environment, there is clearly a real difficulty in even meeting the Executive target. I hardly need to repeat the effects of the collapse in sales of Housing Executive houses and other DSD property. The budget is now seriously short.

This year, the Minister has given priority to the newbuild programme, at the cost of other housing elements, particularly improvement grants. The essential problem remains. I hardly need to emphasise the arguments in favour of investment in social housing. In summary, the house-building sector has taken the strongest hit in the current downturn, and there is no faster way to prime the economy than investing in houses. House-building is labour-intensive, and for every 10 jobs that are created directly another seven will be created indirectly. Those are the conclusions of the University of Ulster report, and land, materials and labour all offer good value for money at present.

The Northern Ireland Housing Council recently published a report entitled 'Bridging the Gaps', which was issued after it held a convention on the issue of how to bridge the gap between what funding is needed and what funding is available. It is a serious and valuable report that has not yet received the attention that it deserves. It refers to a funding deficit of £200 million in the next two years, and the shortfall over the 10-year investment strategy to 2018 is £1 billion. We all know that finding money will be even more difficult from 2011 onwards.

The Housing Council says that the waiting list for housing is growing annually and is at its highest level since the 1970s. It believes that the current model, which is based on public subsidy and receipts, is no longer sustainable, and it says that the use of developer contributions, although still a viable policy in the medium term, is not realistic at present. It proposes a number of measures for discussion, including stock transfer; new governance arrangements for the Housing Executive; permitting the Housing Executive to borrow; and examining how the Housing Executive could become self-financing. It suggests ways to enhance the role of the private rented sector.

The Minister for Social Development supports the Housing Council's view that there is a clear need to change the way that social housing is funded. Similarly, the Housing Executive has said that we need to examine additional funding provision and more innovative options to allow private finance to contribute. Among other ideas, the SDLP has proposed

the restructuring of Housing Executive debt and the sale and leaseback of the Housing Executive headquarters.

The problem presents a stark challenge to the Assembly. I call for all parties to adopt a long-term, joint approach. The ideas put forward by the Housing Council and others will need a lot of analysis and research, and we need a frank debate. At a more strategic level, we may need a new housing strategy. First and foremost, we need recognition that this is a shared problem, and I hope that such an acceptance will emerge during today's debate. Our task is to put social housing on a sound long-term footing.

Mr Hamilton: Although it may not sound like it, I might find some accord with the proposer's comments during my contribution. It is a pity that his comments about innovative and futuristic measures and looking at the social housing strategy in Northern Ireland have been bound up in one of the most juvenile types of motion that we can face in the Chamber: the identification of a problem and a call for more resources. The Member knows fine well that, even in the best of times, the resources available to the Executive are limited. That is a particularly acute problem at the moment.

Nobody will deny that there is a serious need for social housing across Northern Ireland that affects many thousands of people. There is a grave need for social housing across Northern Ireland, as those of us who do constituency work every week know. However, the issue is so serious that simply demanding more money will no longer suffice.

10.45 am

Recent history shows that the Executive, in totality, agreed that the development of more social housing was one of their priorities, and they set ambitious newbuild goals and targets. That is to be welcomed, and we encourage the Minister for Social Development to make progress on achieving those targets as swiftly as possible. Clearly, she feels that there are pressures on her budget. That is understandable, but all Ministers are facing pressures on their budgets.

Those pressures and problems have not gone unnoticed or unrecognised by the Minister's Executive colleagues. Over the past two and a half years, the Minister has received reallocations to her budget of approximately £160 million from the monitoring rounds. That is not, in difficult times and with limited amounts of money to play with, an insubstantial amount.

The call for more moneys is, in part, based on the new Bible and the new religion of the Smyth and Bailey report. Although I do not deny the importance to the construction sector of building new social houses — that is self-evident — some of the elements of the Smyth and Bailey report are questionable. The fact that they use five-year-old figures from Scotland

to illustrate their argument about the multiplier effect is dated and, therefore, somewhat questionable.

It is absolutely questionable to talk about the non-economic benefits of social housing, using homelessness as a barometer and juxtaposing social housing with public transport and road development. The report shows that social housing has an effect on homelessness that is greater by a factor of 10 to one than that of public transport. If we remove homelessness from the figures in the report, public transport scores higher in the overall assessment. We cannot build a case for social housing on the basis of the Smyth and Bailey report.

Mr O'Loan mentioned the Northern Ireland Housing Council's report, 'Bridging the Gaps'. That leads me to concur with many of the points that he made. There is now a growing need — if we have a crisis, as we supposedly do in social housing — to do things differently. We must change; we cannot do things as we have always done them and expect the problem to be resolved. In particular, in the current increasingly challenging economic environment, we must find a much more sustainable way of financing social housing than we have at present.

I accept the points that Mr O'Loan made about the current funding model; therefore, we have to look at things differently. The Northern Ireland Housing Council's report contains many ideas that are worth reviewing. Perhaps, at a later stage, the Assembly could consider the suggestion that we need an independent assessment of social housing delivery in Northern Ireland so that it is put on a much firmer foundation.

There are many ideas and models of good practice in the UK and Ireland for delivering social housing, such as stock transfer — there is a pilot stock transfer programme in place in Londonderry. There are opportunities to get the private sector involved. The thorny subject of rent convergence was mentioned in the Northern Ireland Housing Council's report. There is a range of subjects to consider, but time does not permit me to explore them. A fuller debate is needed, outside the Chamber as well as inside, on how we can better deliver social housing in future and finance it in a sustainable way in what are increasingly challenging economic times.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion. Mr O'Loan and Mr Hamilton made worthwhile comments not only about the direction of the debate but about what we do afterwards. That is where the challenge lies. Sinn Féin supports the motion, and we agree that there is a deficit in the social housing budget. However, our support is conditional. Simon Hamilton laid out some of those conditions when he talked about considering other

ways of addressing the massive problem of social and affordable housing.

In July, £20 million of extra funding for social housing was announced. At the time, the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, stated:

“The £20 million for housing is a boost both for tenants and for the local construction sector. As well as ensuring that tenants receive much needed maintenance to their homes, local maintenance contractors will be able to sustain around 800 jobs in the construction sector.”

In these times, the prospect of 800 jobs for the construction industry would be supported by every Member of the House as it would create a lifeline for an industry, which, like many others, has experienced hardship.

Declan O’Loan touched on issues in the Smyth and Bailey report. For every 10 jobs created by expanding the social housing programme, a further seven jobs will be sustained elsewhere in the economy. That is grand, but the questions that I have rattling around concern where those jobs will be created and who will get them.

We have previously discussed the economic impact on our communities, which is something that we see in our constituency offices practically on a daily basis and certainly on a weekly basis. There is also the issue of apprenticeships, particularly for young people. If a programme such as this is a way of improving that situation, it has to be welcomed.

I am not point-scoring, but procurement guidelines need to be discussed, as does the issue of tackling long-term unemployment. Communities, particularly those that have rarely seen the benefits of investment, need to see social outcomes too. I represent one such community. Eight hundred jobs could be created through the proposed social housing development programme, and working-class areas have the right to expect to see these jobs and apprenticeships.

My other concerns are about the tables in the Smyth and Bailey report that are referred to as the “Framework for Impact Assessment Screening” and “Weighting Issues”: that is “w-e-i-g-h-t-i-n-g”. I thought that those tables made for interesting reading, although I must confess that I had to read them three or four times before I got a handle on them. I hope that someone from the SDLP can address my concern: what is the connection between those tables and the proposed removal of ring-fencing by DSD from the social housing guidelines? I am concerned because this is about addressing need; it is about 800 jobs in the construction sector and houses built for people most in need. Ring-fencing is a protective measure, particularly for areas such as north and west Belfast and indeed the north-west. The editorial in the ‘North Belfast News’ on 26 September stated:

“According to the Housing Executive’s own statistics, by the year 2012, 95 per cent of those on the waiting list for housing in North Belfast will be Catholic.”

That is totally unacceptable.

I have a copy of a report by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that I will be happy to place in the Library. The committee, in May, stated that it was concerned about the chronic shortage of housing. It said that it was particularly concerned about the lack of social housing in disadvantaged areas. I will skip through a lot of what is said, but it says that there is massive concern about people with disabilities, particularly in Scotland, and Catholic families in North Belfast, in spite of financial resources provided and other measures taken.

I understand that there is a need for a wider debate, and it probably would be better if it happens outside the Chamber. I support the need to create more jobs in the construction industry.

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will. However, we cannot have examples such as that highlighted in POS magazine, in which over £1 million was spent on six houses. That is not value for money. That does not help the construction industry, and it does not address the social housing debate.

Mr McNarry: The motion does not specify how much money the Minister should make available, nor does it say what funding a programme of newbuild social housing entails. Members will recall that, in August, the Ulster Unionists published an excellent document called ‘Putting Things Right’. We followed up the August document with a detailed part two continuation in September. I commend both publications to the House, and I reiterate our demand for an honest debate to concentrate our minds on our deepening economic difficulties.

We also included a new convention for the Assembly. Any party that proposes additional spending commitments, as the SDLP does in this motion, should identify how and where the money can be found to fund those proposals. Rather than to stand accused of grandstanding — I am not making that accusation — it would be useful for the SDLP to address the cost implications of its proposals.

I want to record the genuine and deep distress about the disproportionate impact that the economic downturn has had on the construction sector in Northern Ireland. In the past year, the lion’s share of the increased redundancies has come in the construction sector. Unemployment has doubled since this time last year, and it is set to rise further before any expected improvement.

In the last quarter, 1,580 jobs have been lost in construction. Indeed, official figures underestimate the impact because they do not take account of self-employment, which is the norm for many trades in the building sector, particularly in my Strangford constituency. Official figures also do not take account of underemployment and short-time working, which is widespread across the construction sector. It should be remembered that short-time working means less pay.

A great deal more could have been done to soften the blow and minimise the damage to the construction sector. I do not hesitate in placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of our past Ministers of Finance and Personnel, whose inactivity has become almost legendary. In failing to address their budgetary black hole, even though I warned them about it more than a year ago, they have created a situation in which unemployment in the construction sector has been maximised.

Time and time again, we have said that the Programme for Government should have been re-prioritised and based on the concept of job creation and job protection in the real-world financial climate rather than on an aspiration that is well past its sell-by date. I wonder just how many Government building programmes — for example, on schools and roads — have been kicked down the line into next year and beyond to cover the black hole that, until recently, Ministers of Finance and Personnel would not admit existed.

Recently published research shows how social housing can have a multiplier effect on job creation. Like many others, I was impressed by the University of Ulster paper that is referred to in the motion. It states that house-building created more jobs than any other form of capital investment and, indeed, that for every 10 jobs created by building social housing seven jobs will be created or sustained elsewhere in the Northern Ireland economy. The one standout sentence with regard to that report is:

“The world has changed in the time since the Executive agreed a budget. Other governments have responded to these changes by channelling additional resources into house building.”

The University of Ulster paper supports the case that my colleagues and I have been making for months. The world has changed in the time since the Executive agreed the Budget, and that sums up how the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel have stood still.

I welcome the ideas that are emerging from today's debate, but we need to have a further debate that is larger, more localised and more embracing. We need to ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel to at least try to act where his predecessors failed to act. We need to think outside the box to unlock Northern Ireland's potential, and we need to have the debate that has been

requested. Perhaps the Minister of Finance and Personnel will come to terms with the situation that he has inherited and move to restore confidence in the social housing sector.

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

Mr McNarry: I am now finished.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party supports the motion. However, I want to comment on it and, indeed, on some of the problems that Members have already identified. At the outset, it is worth placing the matter in its wider context. Investment in social housing has been a key element of the responses of many Governments, around the world and close to home, to the economic downturn that we are all suffering.

If we look to our own UK Government's response to the downturn, we can see that something like £500 million has been invested in social housing in England and Wales. Indeed, our counterparts in Scotland have also gone down that road. However, we in Northern Ireland have not. Instead, we have taken an approach — and it is entirely within the Executive's remit to do so — that is essentially about cutting the costs that businesses and individuals face. That may be a very good way of sparking demand as far as expenditure is concerned; however, it misses two important points.

11.00 am

First, we are missing the opportunity to make the necessary investments in our infrastructure, including in our housing stock. Secondly, we are missing the opportunity to rebalance our economy and to change existing structural weaknesses fundamentally. When we come out of recession, as some day we surely will, our economy will still have those weaknesses because we have not taken advantage of increased spending.

In so far as we recognise what has happened elsewhere in these islands to encourage an uplift in spending, we must also recognise that, by global standards, the fiscal stimulus in the UK has been quite small. A debate is ongoing about how quickly that stimulus should be taken off the table. The Labour Party seems to be more willing to keep some lag in spending, while the Conservative Party, which is having its party conference this week, seems determined to introduce cuts as quickly as possible.

I certainly recognise the argument that the multiplier effect of investment in social housing would get people back into the workforce, but there is another aspect of investment in social housing that has not been touched on. Investment in energy efficiency, both in businesses and homes, is perhaps the most effective — indeed, cost-effective — way to tackle climate change. There is a substantial body of evidence, including the often-quoted Stern review report, to show that, pound

for pound, investment in energy efficiency is the most effective way to deliver change and to reduce our carbon emissions.

Although I recognise the merits of the motion, I am concerned about a number of aspects of it. I share Mr McNarry's concern about the lack of detail on where the money for investment would come from. Having noted that common ground, I must also say that although Mr McNarry may praise his own documents that look at the state of our finances in Northern Ireland, they essentially point to his version of the problem. I have not come across any proposal, in any shape or form, from the Ulster Unionist Party that outlines how to close the black hole that Mr McNarry has indentified. The gap exists, but no proposals have been made on how to close it. The Member may wish to continue to point out the problems that we face, but it would be nice to hear a proposal or two.

Mr McNarry: Does he want me to do the Finance Minister's job?

Mr O'Loan: Does the Member accept that the SDLP has put forward substantial proposals to raise money, which it would then ask to be spent constructively?

Mr Speaker: Dr Farry will have an extra minute of speaking time.

Dr Farry: I intended to mention Mr O'Loan's comments, but let me first respond to the comment that Mr McNarry made from a sedentary position. I dread the day that the Ulster Unionist Party takes over the finance portfolio, particularly in the light of the approach to cuts that its Conservative Party partners seem intent on inflicting on all of us. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr Farry: I certainly acknowledge that the SDLP has put forward proposals to raise revenue. However, the SDLP needs to reflect on the accuracy and sustainability of a number of those proposals. That party must make a choice. It is extremely clear in saying that it has a manifesto commitment to having no water charges in Northern Ireland. Its commitment is absolute; it will not support water charges in any shape or form or under any circumstance. That is fair enough, but the consequence is that there will be a loss of revenue in Northern Ireland. Water services are not funded out of our block grant, so we have to take that money out ourselves. Therefore, choices must be made. The SDLP should, perhaps, reflect on the situation: it is demanding more money for social housing at the same time as resisting the introduction of water charges in any shape or form. Something may have to give. In outlining its approach to social housing, the SDLP quotes economists. I recognise that the economic advice is sound —

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

Dr Farry: However, the SDLP should recognise that the same economists also point out the financial challenges that face the Assembly, including facing up to water charges.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome today's debate, the more so as it presents an opportunity, as Mr Hamilton said, to discuss the bigger picture. Many issues should be debated in a full consideration of housing.

Construction and house-building in the public sector has, undoubtedly, reached something of a crisis point. The building industry creates much direct employment, and associated employment, a point that was highlighted earlier. More than 8,000 jobs in the Northern Ireland construction sector have been lost or are under threat as a result of the credit crunch, not to mention the difficulties with apprenticeships that the Assembly is also looking at.

Investment in building more social housing will stimulate jobs in a way that no other capital investment can. Evidence suggests that the refurbishment of existing housing stock may be at least as labour-intensive as the construction of newbuilds.

An expansion of the activity in social housing would represent better value for money than many other types of intervention. There is also a practical need to support the construction sector, as it will retain skills and employment in Northern Ireland, rather than individuals having to migrate to where work is available. I recognise the plight of those who are self-employed in the industry, as highlighted by Mr McNarry.

It is imperative that the Department for Social Development and the Minister act as soon as possible. Her Department must come up with innovative ways of funding new social housing and improving existing housing. Mr Hamilton raised some of those matters.

Mr F McCann: This morning's debate concentrates on the provision of social housing. However, in looking at social housing, we have to look at the entire housing sector. Many people in other parts of the housing sector, including maintenance and adapted living, have lost their jobs. If this goes on the way that it is going, more jobs may be lost in that sector than in the newbuild sector.

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

Mr Hilditch: I share the Member's sentiments. Those matters have been the subject of previous debates in the House, and I appreciate that they remain on the table

Investment in housing will tackle deprivation and fuel poverty, and it will take the pressure off other

Departments' budgets. It also has the potential to relieve housing stress, child poverty and homelessness.

Earlier this year, Clanmil Housing secured some £15 million from a European investment bank to deliver three new social housing projects across Belfast. It is the only one of 36 registered housing associations successfully to access that type of funding. Together, the three schemes will deliver somewhere in the region of 240 new homes to those in greatest housing need. I urge the Minister to look at ways to encourage the other housing associations to avail themselves of similar funds, grants or schemes. The Department must be proactive and lead from the front on such matters.

It is, perhaps, unfair of the Department to request more money time and time again from the Department of Finance. The Department for Social Development received £20 million in the June monitoring round in extra funding for social housing and maintenance. Other Departments had bids turned down and, therefore, had to adjust their spending. The Department for Social Development must act accordingly. The Department must make much more effort to deliver better housing and think outside the box. I strongly support Mr Hamilton's suggestion of an independent review to ascertain the best way forward, because a number of housing issues in Northern Ireland remain outstanding.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will also vote in favour of the motion, but I have some difficulty in endorsing it wholeheartedly. The last phrase of the motion is indicative of the SDLP's perennial approach of transferring responsibility. There is significant agreement in the House on this issue.

There are many issues in this House on which the parties predictably fall out, but there is quite a remarkable amount of consensus in relation to housing. However, I do not see that consensus being built upon or exploited.

The quarterly monitoring round process demonstrates that Ministers are prepared to stand back in favour of addressing the deficit in social housing and making more resources available. That is in a context of finite financial resources and the ability of the Minister of Finance, particularly in straitened economic circumstances, to find additional resources. In itself, attempting to squeeze out efficiencies is not a sustainable process; one does get to the point at which the direct impact on front line services is inescapable and unavoidable. In those circumstances, even with what I regard as a very genuine commitment to addressing the question of social housing, we will get to the point at which Ministers feel that their programmes and departmental priorities are not just

under significant pressure — because they all are — but in significant jeopardy.

It would be better if the SDLP adopted a less confrontational approach in relation to this issue. Simply demanding more resources begs the question of where we find the resources and whether we do it in an arbitrary fashion. That squanders the understanding, goodwill and commitment that is quite obviously present among the political parties and across the Executive table.

Mr A Maginness: I listened very carefully to the Member's remarks in relation to funding for housing. The Department of Finance and Personnel needs to be creative in relation to how it approaches this issue. One of the most creative ways of putting housing on a sound financial footing would be to provide the Housing Executive with additional borrowing powers. In Britain, local authorities currently have what is called prudential borrowing powers. That is a creative approach, but the Department of Finance and Personnel is particularly lacking in creative thought in relation to financing.

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

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Member for those comments. In a sense, they illustrate the point that I am making. There are creative opportunities. There is also a challenge for us all and for the Finance Minister to address the question of whether the very significant resources in the Department, which are programme budgetary items, can nonetheless be applied in these circumstances. It is very often evident that the Minister for Social Development is looking for money for the housing budget while the Minister of Finance and Personnel has unspent budgetary resource. Rather than having an argument about it —

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sorry for interrupting the Member in his flow, but does he agree that the significant resources in the Minister for Social Development's budget need to be managed better? We saw the whole fiasco around the surrender of millions of pounds. Equally, in relation to the first intervention, the whole issue of tax-varying powers was raised in this House previously. I am not sure whether the SDLP supported that proposal, but the comments that followed during the debate lead me to think otherwise. Does the Member care to comment?

Mr McLaughlin: I do, because I made that proposition. I was disappointed that people did not consider the full implications of it. The fact of the matter is that every member of the Executive has the same view: the overall budget resources that are available to meet the needs of a society that is emerging from conflict, and to address years of underfunding in relation to the social infrastructure,

were not there to begin with. There were very significant negotiations with the Treasury and the British Government to try and inject further funding. However, out of it all, people recognise that every Department faces a budget deficit.

Social housing is an example of an issue that has wider strategic significance in our efforts to make devolution work and to be better than direct rule. Therefore, in order to address it, Ministers should consider the benefits of getting around a table and negotiating with party representatives.

11.15 am

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

Mr McLaughlin: The Minister for Social Development should attempt to establish consensus before Executive meetings, rather than simply demanding more money to build houses. That does not address the problem.

Mr Craig: I have a feeling of déjà vu when we come to this subject; we seem to debate it time and time again. The simple truth is that the Finance Department cannot issue blank cheques. Although I support the motion — I would love to see more social housing built in Northern Ireland — I share Finance Committee members' concerns that it makes no provision for finance and that it has no bottom line. I repeat: blank cheques, quite rightly, cannot be issued. The Executive have a process whereby Departments, rightly or wrongly, get their share of the limited Northern Ireland Budget.

I share some Members' concerns about how the Department for Social Development manages money, and I have raised those in the House and in the Committee for Social Development. The downturn in the economy has caused a huge problem in the private housing sector and an even bigger problem in the public housing sector. Cash flow for building public sector houses is slowly but surely dwindling; it lags behind that for the private sector, and over the next few years, that situation will get worse.

However, such a situation also brings opportunities. For instance, no one in the House believes that the price of land, which was the issue two years ago, is the issue today. It is no longer the issue, and anyone who believes that the Department will be paying the same price for building land that it paid two years ago is living in cloud cuckoo land. The Department is getting land at a fraction of its previous cost. Therefore, the downturn has opened up certain opportunities.

The Government could exploit those opportunities, although not necessarily directly. The Conservative Party has stated openly that tax revenues will dwindle drastically. Considering who may be in

Government within a year, those reduced revenues will lead to problems for the housing sector and for every Department in this country. Therefore, massive opportunities exist for the Department for Social Development.

I listened with care to the opening remarks in the debate, and I agree fundamentally with one issue that was raised. We should review how the housing strategy in Northern Ireland is delivered. Things have changed so fundamentally that a review must take place. Such a review could afford the Department an opportunity to give more freedom to housing associations to self-finance some public housing builds. The Clanmil Housing Association was mentioned, and it has been successful in getting private finance to deliver social housing in Northern Ireland. Do we need to take some of the economic shackles off such associations and allow them to get on with the job without intervening with public finance? Do other opportunities exist that need to be exploited?

Over the past few years, the Minister has put together other action plans for the rating of vacant properties, in an attempt to provide the owners with an incentive to rent them out. At what stage are those plans? Have they progressed? Are they dead in the water? That is why there is merit in reviewing the whole strategy.

I agree that the Programme for Government, with respect to housing, needs to be put on a sounder footing. The Minister should not be pouring an inordinate part of her budget into newbuild at the expense of repairs to existing housing. If that policy continues, it will create a disaster in public housing in the near future.

Mr Armstrong: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. There is a serious problem with the Department for Social Development's budget, as there is with the entire Northern Ireland Budget. The problem is that many spending plans have been based on securing capital receipts. However, due to the ongoing recession, those receipts have not materialised.

In addition, there is serious mismanagement and denial of problems by successive DUP Finance Ministers and spokespersons. Problems ought to have been tackled when they emerged; tackling them now makes the achievement of positive outcomes extremely difficult.

I appreciate the arguments put forward by the SDLP. There is clear evidence that increased investment in housing construction will boost the economy, especially through creating employment in the construction sector.

The Minister is struggling to meet her Programme for Government targets of creating social and

affordable housing, and increasing investment there will help many vulnerable people. However we must approach the issue in full recognition of the problems facing the Executive. The Finance Minister has already outlined cuts in the region of £370 million that do not factor in the effects of swine flu or the equal pay claim.

In such circumstances, according priority to social housing will be a difficult and bold decision; but the Executive must debate it. An open and honest debate, based on all the facts and figures, is essential, and it has been lacking to date. For Northern Ireland to emerge from the recession in a strong position, the Executive must outline a coherent vision of public spending that will give confidence to business and protect the most vulnerable in our society.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Members who have spoken already. I agree with some of their points and disagree with others.

We are in difficult and trying economic times. Local businesses are experiencing great difficulties, and unemployment is rising. One of the industries hardest hit is construction, and one of the simplest ways of getting it off its knees, or even getting its face out of the mud, is by applying a stimulus to the housing market. Some Members have said that too much money is going into housing; others have raised other objections. I do not understand some of those objections. Some have also said that there is enough money going into the construction of social housing, if only it were properly managed. That is completely false. During the past couple of years, management of the housing budget has been comparable to the miracle of the loaves and fishes: money has been stretched to achieve far beyond what we thought it had the potential to achieve. Fundamentally, not enough money is being invested in housing development, whether it is in new housing or in the renovation and repair of existing houses.

The Department for Social Development is facing a unique problem in that its mainstream programmes, outlined and planned over a number of years, have been massively undermined by a shortfall in expected capital receipts. No other Department has been undermined in that way. The facts, as distinct from the speculation, are as follows: there was a shortfall of £80 million in 2008-09; there is a shortfall of £100 million this year, and a shortfall of £100 million is expected next year. Those shortfalls represent gaps between what is required to meet the demands, needs and plans and what is available.

Executive support and assistance for the DSD budget have been inadequate and patchy. For the record, some help was given in September 2008. However, three months later, in December 2008, there was a smash-and-grab raid in which the Executive

removed £30 million that had been released for housing from the DSD budget. In February 2009, the DSD was allowed to transfer some other moneys into housing. In June 2009, £20 million was transferred to housing, but that was done under strict conditions and with a focus on special needs and circumstances. As I understand it, the Executive plan to cut the DSD housing budget further.

To my mind, the situation with social housing is a bit like the miracle of the loaves and fishes. The housing budget has been managed well recently because, despite there being a shortfall of £80 million last year — the equivalent of building 800 new homes — the DSD managed to build only 350 fewer than that; it squeezed enough money from its existing budget to build 450 homes that were not budgeted for. That was a fair achievement. This year, in spite of the £100 million shortfall — the equivalent of 1,000 homes — the Housing Executive and the DSD are on course to meet a target of 1,750 newbuild homes, unless, of course, their kitty is robbed in the meantime.

The work that has been done is very cost-effective. To meet the demand across all communities, geographically, socially and in every other way, the budget is being managed cost-effectively. We are getting good value for money. Members referred to land. One of the ways in which that good value for money is being achieved is that, in many cases, the Housing Executive is not buying land on which to build houses but is using up spare land that it has had on its books for some time. Therefore, because land does not have to be bought, all the money can be used to build new houses.

An unprecedented amount of money is being spent on renovations. In addition to that, the Minister has protected —

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

Dr McDonnell: The Minister has protected vulnerable people from cutbacks, when those have to be made.

I support the motion fully. We must unite around it. The detail can be put in place later, but let us first agree on the principle.

Mr F McCann: A chairde agus a Cheann Comhairle, I support the motion, although I have some concerns about the SDLP's assumptions.

Sinn Féin has always supported a proper newbuild programme. At Committee level, our group has supported the Minister and her Department when additional resources have been requested, as have all members of the Committee for Social Development. We realise that housing is a cross-cutting issue. There is an impact on the health, education and quality of life

of those who do not have a home. We argue that all aspects of housing are underfunded. The SDLP motion refers to a recent report by the Ulster University that states that the development of a proper social housing programme has a multiplier effect on employment. That is true, but it can be said of any sector.

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

The fact remains that the major impact on the construction industry was not the collapse of the social housing market but that of the private housing market. In 2006-07, 95% of all houses built were for the private housing market; in 2007-08, that figure was 90%. Of the 6,356 housing starts in 2008-09, 5,493 were started for the private market; there were 863 starts in the social housing sector. I wonder how many of those were paper starts. More than 300 homes in the social housing programme were not built and were carried over into 2009-2010. Therefore, the remainder of them must have been built for the private market originally and bought from private developers.

When Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer, he stated that one way in which to kick-start the economy and to create jobs is to upgrade the present housing stock. However, the Minister for Social Development has gone in the opposite direction; she has suspended most grants, and that will put many people on the dole.

11.30 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member talked about buying off-the-shelf housing from developers, and about that being factored into the housing figures. Does the Member agree that a substantial amount of public money has been spent on buying houses off the shelf that have not been up to standard; that additional public money has had to be spent on bringing them up to the Housing Executive's standard; and that that is not a good way of managing the budget for social housing development?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute in which to speak.

Mr F McCann: I agree with the Member. Some housing associations that I have spoken to say that they may have to spend —

Mr O'Loan: Will the Member give way?

Mr F McCann: I am sorry; I am running out of time.

Several months ago, we heard from a group that represents 900 small builders that they are being put out of business by the Minister's policy. We heard also from the Egan contractors, who were disappointed that commitments given by the Housing Executive were being gone back on. Those contractors informed us that they were about to shed jobs. Roughly 1,000 people are employed in the Egan sector, but that

number does not include those who rely on the custom of the sector for survival.

We agree that additional resources should be given to housing, but we are also concerned at the way in which the present budget is being run and the impact that it is having on existing housing stock in the private and social sectors. The Housing Executive admits that it is unlikely to meet the target of bringing all houses up to a particular standard by 2010. Perhaps the Minister will explain whether the Housing Executive will reach the new target date of 2014, given the suspension of much of the grants programme.

The Housing Executive set itself a target of making 3,200 external maintenance improvements, but it completed 2,105, which is a shortfall of 1,095. It also set itself a target of 4,500 kitchen replacements, but it achieved 2,566, which is a shortfall of 1,934. Furthermore, it set itself a target of 3,150 multi-element heating installations and other works, but it achieved 2,064, which is a shortfall of 1,086. Much of the failure to achieve targets was due to budget restrictions.

A statement that was released recently by the Housing Executive shows that we will not fare much better in the programme for the coming year. The Housing Executive usually issues 7,000 grants to help homeowners, but that will be cut to only 2,000. All group repair schemes have been put on hold, and discretionary grants that are not already in the system will not be approved. The statement goes on to say that £157.25 million has been allocated to newbuild. In normal times, we would commend the Minister for her commitment, but we are not in normal times. The Minister cannot continue to rob other parts of her budget to put into newbuild, no matter how commendable that may seem.

The Minister also needs to explain why many of the 1,500 houses that the Housing Executive has lying empty for use in decanting for major works have been brought into use to house those who are homeless. Furthermore, she needs to explain what happened to the report that she was to bring regarding the almost £1 billion of land owned by her Department and the Housing Executive, some of which is in areas of high demand. It is not always about selling land, but about using it strategically to gain houses.

When will we realise any houses from the developer contribution, which has provided thousands of units in Britain and the South? We lack resources for all aspects of housing, but we also lack a strategy to deal with the problem.

The SDLP should not continue to accuse people of attacking its Minister. We criticise where criticism is warranted. The SDLP should look at its record of attacking other Ministers in the House. When all is

said and done, we will support the motion, and we ask the Minister of Finance to look favourably towards providing additional resources for housing and to ensure that it is spent wisely, not on only one element of the housing sector.

Lord Morrow: The motion is a lot of humbug. There is no sincerity about tackling a real problem and a real issue. I have listened carefully to what some of the Members have said, and, to put it mildly, it is an absolute farce.

I listened to Billy Armstrong trot out comments about how evil the Finance Ministers of the past were and how they had fallen far short of the mark. Dr Farry is the only Member to come to the debate with a degree of honesty and sincerity; he attempted to set out before the House the real issues, and he put the challenge to the Ulster Unionists and to the SDLP, who proposed the motion. However, none of the Members of those parties who have spoken has taken up that challenge.

I listened to Mr McNarry, who told the House that if everyone had listened to him long ago, we not be in the current predicament. He has told the world at large that there is a “black hole” in the Budget and that, had the Executive taken the appropriate action long ago, we would not be facing this predicament. That is another lot of nonsense, which the House has come to expect from that quarter on a regular basis.

Mr A Maginness: The Member referred to Mr McNarry’s claims of there being a “black hole” in the Budget, but surely Mr McNarry is correct to the extent that the denials made by the previous Finance Minister, Mr Dodds — who came to the House on a number of occasions and denied that there was any problem with the Budget or the Executive’s finance — were based on a false premise and that there is a very serious black hole in those finances?

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

Lord Morrow: I do not accept that at all. In fairness to Mr Maginness, he normally brings some light to debates in the House, but he has also missed the mark. It seems that the Member is being influenced by a tendency to gang up, which is unfortunate, given that the issue of social housing should have the full support of all Members of the House. Some of us find the insincerity being spewed out today so contemptible that it is very difficult to listen to. However, despite the fact that the DUP has many reservations about the motion and the sincerity behind it, it will not divide the House on it.

We are in the midst of a severe economic downturn. Previously, the Housing Executive has, quite rightly, relied on house sales to stimulate its budget and its house-build programme, and that factor has not been properly and fully taken into account. Rather than the

Assembly uniting as one body to deal with the serious issue of housing, with over 20,000 people on the housing waiting list, it is divided. Furthermore, the Minister for Social Development seems to be oblivious to the whole issue and does not want to take any advice on board. Rent arrears are spiralling out of control, houses have been purchased under the SPED scheme, and what has the Minister done about those issues? The sad fact is that she has done little or nothing, and we are moving further into a housing crisis on a daily basis.

When the Minister for Social Development was appointed, I believed that she had the heart for the job. As district councillors, we served on different bodies in the past, and I thought that her social intuitions would have steered her to strongly tackle those issues. However, to date we have seen no movement and there has been no effort by her Department to stand up and be counted. Instead, she has taken the facile approach of trying to blame everyone else, rather than admitting where the blame lies, fair and square.

I appeal to the SDLP to stop and think what it is doing when tabling motions such as the one before the House. In proposing such motions, it is making the job more difficult and is depressing those who have been on the housing waiting list for years. However, that party still believes that it is, in some way, attempting to address social issues.

Mr G Robinson: Just last week, I received a response from the Minister for Social Development regarding the renovations of dwellings for pensioners and disabled people in Coleraine, which is in my constituency.

Although I appreciate the Minister’s budgetary difficulties, her response informed me of yet another setback for that long-planned renovation scheme, and there is no starting date for the project. What are the additional moneys awarded to DSD from the spending rounds being spent on? They are not being spent on objective 1 in the PSA 12 delivery document.

There is another example in Limavady in my constituency, where another much-needed renovation scheme has no start date. I am sure that the Minister remembers her visit to that area last year and can recall the deprivation. Therefore, there is an urgent need for that project to begin. Those are just two examples from one constituency, and I am sure that Members can recount similar delays from their constituencies. That fails to meet objective 2 of PSA 12.

There is also the crisis in the availability of suitable housing. I call the situation a crisis because of the numerous enquiries for assistance that my office receives every week, and I am sure that other Members are in a similar situation. There are not enough public-sector homes available for tenants. The Minister has

the unenviable task of addressing that situation, and there are two ways in which that can be done: newbuild or renovation of property, with newbuild being the long-term preferred way forward. The Minister has had significant financial help from successive Finance Ministers through the spending rounds to address the problems on her plate.

The reliance on the sale of public-sector homes has been a major factor that has led to the Minister's current budgetary problem. In previous years, there was a predictable number of sales. However, the current economic downturn has led to a crash in the volume of house sales and, therefore, a depletion in her spending power. That economic downturn is not the fault of the Finance Minister, but the result of poor planning by the Minister and her predecessors, and has impacted heavily on the desired newbuild targets of the Minister.

It is essential that, in future, the same budgetary problems do not beset DSD. It must develop a way forward that will eliminate many of the mistakes that have been made, and that can be done only by an independent review of social housing in Northern Ireland. It must be a truly independent review, with DSD providing information and awaiting the results of the inquiry's findings rather than its having the responsibility of carrying out the review. As a result, the people of Northern Ireland would have confidence in the review and its findings.

Mrs M Bradley: I am disappointed that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will not be in the Chamber to respond to this important debate. This is the second time that the Minister has failed to respond to such a debate, and that is not good enough.

It is well known that there is a lack of funding for social housing. Simon Hamilton is right: the Minister for Social Development was given £20 million in the last monitoring round. However, that is not enough to fund the huge shortfall. Simon Hamilton also argued that the Minister for Social Development must make changes in her Department in order to fund housing. That has already been undertaken. Unfortunately, due to a dire lack of money, it has led to shortages elsewhere: for example, hampering attempts to continue with the normal Housing Executive repair schemes.

The DSD Minister has tried to bring forward other ways of producing funding. It was Simon Hamilton's party colleague the Finance Minister who stalled some of those initiatives, including the possibility of re-profiling Housing Executive debt.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: No, I will not.

Simon Hamilton should ask his party colleague to recast the Budget and the Programme for Government

— something that all serious economic commentators are aware is necessary — before criticising the DSD Minister. He also criticised the University of Ulster report 'Addressing the Economic Downturn: The Case for Increased Investment in Social Housing' because it makes reference to homelessness. Has he no social conscience?

As the Northern Ireland Housing Council report 'Bridging the Gaps' states:

"Homelessness levels are at a high level and it is taking increasingly longer to provide permanent rehousing."

Social housing is also a big contributor to health and has a strong impact on fuel poverty.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs M Bradley: No, I am not giving way.

The Northern Ireland Housing Council report also states:

"It is widely accepted that housing generally makes a major contribution to Health."

Fra McCann referred to that point, so I hope that he and his party remember that when we ask for their support in getting money to give people decent homes.

11.45 am

The Minister for Social Development is doing a great deal to protect the vulnerable in our society. Her Executive colleagues should assist, not hinder, her. She has protected the budget for the warm homes scheme, thus helping the fuel poor. She has also protected the Supporting People scheme, meaning that instead of people being in institutions, they can live independently in the community. We are all asking for that. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to assist Margaret Ritchie in the good work that she is doing.

Members are telling us to support the motion for the benefit of people who need a home. That is all that those people are asking for — a decent home. We are asking for the appropriate funds to be given to the Minister so that those decent homes can be built. If that happened, the people in question would not face the health problems that Fra McCann spoke about, and if people are really serious, they should ask their Ministers to support the housing budget.

Mr Shannon: The biggest issue that I deal with in my office is housing. Indeed, every Member who has spoken has said the same. Any Member who works hard in their constituency will be aware of the fact that the allocation and provision of social housing is a nightmare. Getting people housed and re-housed is a real quagmire and is very hard to negotiate. As good as Housing Executive and housing association staff are, there are only so many things that can be done at that level. However, something can be done — and, I

believe, must be done — at ministerial level. I am talking about the Minister for Social Development.

I wrote to the Minister recently to express concern about the reduction of grants money that had been allocated to Housing Executive offices in the Province, particularly the Ards office; obviously, I have an issue with that. I urge the Minister to ensure that 1,500 new homes for this year are provided. Strangford, the area that I represent, has almost 3,000 people on the waiting list, which is well above the Northern Ireland average. If those homes are provided, the area will get its fair share of social housing.

Almost 1,700 people are classed as being in priority need in the Ards area, with some 900 on the ordinary list. That shows clearly that social housing need in the Ards area continues to grow. Indeed, such is that growth, it would take over 300 newbuilds in this year alone to address the present housing needs of those who are on the lists. Stephen Graham, the area manager — a real gentleman, hard worker and good manager — has indicated that, in this financial year and the next, around 200 newbuilds are being built with all the different housing associations. We know which associations are involved — BIH, Habinteg, Clanmil, Connswater, and so on. However, that is all subject to funding, which has come to mean that it is unlikely that some of those houses will be built. That is one of our concerns.

There is always a funding shortfall. Given that DSD has been allocated more and more funding in each of the monitoring rounds, I cannot understand that. There must be a turnaround in the way that things are done in the Housing Executive. That change must come from the top and work its way down.

Mr Hamilton: My friend will have noticed that I incurred the wrath of the previous Member who spoke. Does he agree with me that it is wrong to believe that we can meet the real need that exists through the current system, and that, when we are facing a challenging economic and resource environment, new and innovative ways of financing and delivering social housing in Northern Ireland are needed? That is why we need to take a fresh and independent look at how we meet that need in future. We should not continue to do what we have always done; it has not worked.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his comments. I think that all Members will agree that we need new ways to address housing issues. Any time that you go into a housing estate in a town, you will see homes that could be used to house families lying empty. The Minister needs to implement the review to ensure that all homes that should be in use are in use and that homes are not sitting for months on end with no one in them. That is why the Minister must also provide money, not only for building maintenance and

repairs, but for construction. That will give our construction industry, and, as a knock-on effect, the economy, a much-needed boost.

We do not simply want money to be thrown at the situation. It is a matter of thinking it through and getting a strategy that will benefit many sections of the community at once through provision of housing, maintenance and upkeep. There are clear ways in which the Department must tighten up.

First, it has taken the Housing Executive 32 weeks to sell one house in Newtownards — my goodness me. An ordinary private enterprise can do that in 12 to 14 weeks. There is something seriously wrong with the fact that it took the Housing Executive 32 weeks to sell one house.

I asked Margaret Ritchie to provide a breakdown of the number of houses sold by constituency. In the past year, 54 houses in the Province were sold. I know people in Ards who want to buy their house but cannot do so, and I want to know why. Perhaps the Minister can explain that to me. Something is seriously wrong with the system.

In times of economic uncertainty, the sale of homes should be encouraged, and all the revenue from house sales should be redirected to the Department's budget. That could have happened if the process had been speeded up and if the people who enquired about buying their houses had had their enquiries listened to. A little more effort from the land and property section of the Housing Executive could result in more houses being built and sold more quickly. By and large, the Housing Executive is good and it replies, but I have some concerns over the time that it takes.

The Minister must implement greater efficiency in her Department as a matter of urgency so that funding can be freed to go to the right place at the right time. Wisdom must also be shown when allocating funding. Anyone who knows me will know that I completely support the promotion of culture and history and that I believe that we have a duty to preserve and enhance those. However, I also believe that all things should be done in moderation. I accept that help should be given, but I question the granting by DSD of £70,000 for a mural in north Down. Would it not have been better to have used that £70,000 to provide at least one house for a person on the list?

The onus is on the Minister to put her own house in order and to prioritise. As much as she should ask for and receive advice from her ministerial colleagues, she must do her part and accept that the funding that she has been given is adequate if she uses it in the right way. I support the view that social housing is needed, and the Minister knows that, because we have been working very hard to provide housing in Ards. When the Minister implements the review, the money that is

saved will go a great way to providing the funds needed for newbuilds, which will also be beneficial to the construction sector.

I urge Members to think seriously about what they are supporting. We will not stand in the way of the motion. It is right that the issue should be raised, but the way in which it has been brought forward is wrong.

Mr A Maginness: I do not know what has happened in the House this morning, but peace seems to have broken out. It reminds me of the little episode during the First World War when the German and British troops played football on Christmas Day. I do not understand it; there must be something in the water —

Mr McLaughlin: What happened the day after that?

Mr A Maginness: I was going to come to that. When the generals found out that the troops were playing football, they got them back to the trenches.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please return to the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I will, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In any event, it is good to see that people are looking at the motion in a sensible manner. There seems to be a general consensus in the House that the motion is meritorious. Even Mr McCann said nice things about the motion, although he did not say nice things about the Minister; old habits die hard. Nonetheless, even Sinn Féin, including Mr McCann, and the DUP recognise the need for proper financing for housing.

On a serious note, it is accepted that, as stated in the University of Ulster report, investing in social housing in Northern Ireland has beneficial effects, such as its tremendous multiplier effect, which helps to stimulate the economy. It is not only for that reason that social housing is a good thing. People need houses, and the fact that almost 40,000 applicants are in need of housing in Northern Ireland shows that there is tremendous pressure. There is a great need to approach the issue in a creative manner.

I back the Minister's record; she has done very well. As Dr McDonnell said, it is a miracle — comparable to that of the loaves and fishes — that she has produced so many houses and has maintained the services of DSD despite the fact that she has not had sufficient or proper financing.

The Minister has asked for housing to be put on a sound financial basis. There are two ways to do that; either directly through the Budget or by looking at public housing creatively in order to find new means of financing it. The Assembly can do that.

Earlier, I mentioned that in Britain, there is prudential borrowing, which allows —

Mr Savage: Does the Member agree that the contribution that housing associations have made in

Northern Ireland has made a big impact on social housing? Were it not for them, I do not know what situation social housing would be in at present.

Mr A Maginness: I accept that housing associations have made a contribution. Indeed, the Minister, in trying to maximise her budget, has reduced the housing association grant. That means that housing associations must borrow more, indeed, an increased proportion of the cost of newbuild, which makes DSD money go further. That is a creative way to finance housing.

The point that I was making about the Housing Executive's borrowing powers was that the Assembly needs to look at that creatively in order to determine where the Housing Executive can raise additional finance for housing. I see no reason why the Assembly cannot do that. If it does so, I believe that the Treasury —

Mr F McCann: Mr Maginness is aware that the Committee has discussed that issue: indeed, it did so when he was a member. The Committee is awaiting papers on how that proposal would work, which, so far, have not been forthcoming. It seems to everyone that that could be a long way off. The Committee needs those papers urgently so that it can discuss the issue.

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful for Mr McCann's intervention. I support the Committee's consideration of the issue in order to find ways and means to support the Minister in being creative and putting housing on a sound financial basis.

I believe that borrowing powers for the Housing Executive are crucial. As has been pointed out by other Members, house sales and land sales are no longer sufficient to finance housing in Northern Ireland: it is as simple as that. There is not the same volume of sales as there was previously. Therefore, the housing budget is under severe pressure.

The Housing Council's paper entitled 'Bridging the Gaps' is a useful contribution to the debate. The council must be congratulated for its innovative work in that regard.

Mr Burns: I support the motion and repeat the call for more money for social housing. The SDLP has made that point many times previously, during many different debates. I make it again, unashamedly.

Putting money into social housing programmes is one of the best ways that the Assembly can help the local economy. That has been the SDLP's position, and it is the position of people such as Professor Mike Smyth of the University of Ulster. Other Members mentioned the report, in which he makes a number of clear points. Although all those points have been mentioned in the debate, I will run through them again briefly.

In general, house building creates more jobs than any other investment. For every 10 jobs created through building houses, seven other sustainable jobs

are created elsewhere in the economy. That is a clear multiplier: jobs created in the construction industry help the entire economy. The cost of land for construction has fallen sharply, which makes now a good time to invest in construction.

We will get value for money if we build on land that we already own. New houses will help us to deal with the housing waiting list, homelessness and housing stress, and better houses will help us to counter deprivation and to lift people out of fuel poverty.

12.00 noon

The Minister for Social Development received £20 million in the June monitoring round, and we thank the Minister of Finance and Personnel for that extra money. However, the Social Development budget still falls short. Originally, DSD needed an extra £100 million; it now needs £80 million. The SDLP has made that point again and again. The reasons for the budget shortfall are well known, so I will not repeat them. However, I remind Members that the receipts from house and land sales have virtually disappeared, so the budget for social housing has been reduced.

We need to put the social housing budget on a firm financial footing once again by continuing to press the Finance Minister for more money. Living hand to mouth from one monitoring round to the next is no way for the Minister for Social Development to have to run her Department. That is why we have asked for the Budget and the Programme for Government to be revisited.

As Mr McNarry said, much has changed since the Executive agreed the Budget. It is time for a change: we must revise our spending priorities. Based on the evidence and on the report from the University of Ulster, it is clear that investment in social housing should be a bigger priority.

More money has been brought forward for social housing in England and Scotland, and we should do the same. Thousands of new homes are urgently required. In the current economic climate and with housing stress at an all-time high, the demand for social housing will only increase as waiting lists grow longer, repossessions become more frequent, and homelessness rises. We should address those problems by building new houses, as that will also help the economy in the best possible way. That is why we are committed to the newbuild targets; however, we cannot reach those without extra money.

I thank all the Members — I think that there were 18 in total — who participated in the debate. We are, however, disappointed that the Minister of Finance and Personnel is not here to respond to the motion. The Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, has been here on no fewer than 10 occasions to respond to Members' queries and to motions on the issue of social housing.

In proposing the motion, my colleague Declan O'Loan set out the case for investment in social housing very well. Simon Hamilton, the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, said that he understands the problems that the Minister faces. He asked the Minister for the report: the Minister has already asked for it, and it should be coming to the Committee.

Sinn Féin's Carál Ní Chuilín said that she understands the importance of building new houses, because that will increase the number of apprenticeships. Having more apprenticeships will help to reinvigorate the construction industry and make it grow. Apprenticeships are the lifeblood of the construction industry; they should not be cut. I, therefore, agree with Carál that there needs to be more support for apprenticeships.

David McNarry said that the whole world has changed due to the economic downturn, and that we really need to revisit the Programme for Government and the Budget. That is very important. It does not mean only the Social Development budget and the housing problem; that goes right across all the ministries in the Assembly.

Stephen Farry brought us, as Lord Morrow might say, back to reality. But he wanted to shift the emphasis in the Budget to water charges, as if by bringing in water charges everything would be solved. Tell that to the electorate; let him announce that the Alliance Party is all for water charges.

David Hilditch spoke well. He understands the problems that the Social Development Minister is facing. Mitchel McLaughlin feels that the SDLP is always coming back to the Assembly to ask for money. He said that our one and only cry is that we do not have enough money for housing. He said that we are always back here begging for money. Well, we have to come here and ask for money for housing because the housing budget was £100 million short. We got £20 million, but we are still £80 million short.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Burns: No.

Mitchel McLaughlin did not mention all the other priorities that the Social Development Minister has, such as the warm homes scheme, the Supporting People programme, neighbourhood renewal, the economic downturn, and the creation of more jobs in benefit offices. The Department for Social Development is a big-spending Department, and it deals with a lot more than just housing.

Jonathan Craig spoke well. He mentioned that there was better value for money to be got. He said that, in the construction industry, prices now are better value than they would have been two years ago. I thank Billy Armstrong for his contribution, and I think that Alasdair McDonnell spoke very well, too.

Fra McCann understands the problems in social development. He gave us the facts and figures for the entire Department and for social housing. I thank Fra for his contribution.

Lord Morrow nearly stole the thunder from my winding-up speech. He referred to the whole debate as a farce. I totally disagree; the debate has been far from a farce. There has been a complete acknowledgement of the underspend in social housing. Every Member knows and understands that.

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

Mr Burns: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. My party colleague Alban Maginness said that when the war broke out, the soldiers went out and played football, and then went back to the trenches. I do not want us to go back into our trenches. I want us to work together to solve the social housing problem.

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

Mr Burns: The SDLP wants to build more houses.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the particular impact on the housing construction industry of the current economic downturn; further notes the recent research by the University of Ulster that investment in social housing would have a multiplier effect on job creation; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make moneys available to invest in a programme of new build social housing across Northern Ireland.

Mr McNarry: Manchester United went into the trenches.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

As the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 12.30 —

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We had an unprecedented situation this morning, and I fully respect the rulings of the Speaker on that. However, the only remaining business in the Assembly today is Question Time and an Adjournment debate. I think that a lot of us are conscious of the credibility of this institution among the public in Northern Ireland. The number of hours that we will have on the Floor is extremely disappointing. Is there any possible way that the Business Committee can reflect on whether it is possible to bring any business forward this afternoon so that we can have a working Assembly, rather than one which sits for only one and a half days this week?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 12.30 pm. Members can raise with the Business Committee any issues that they have at that time. As the next item of business is Question Time, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 3.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.10 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McClarty] in the Chair) —

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Rating of Empty Homes

1. **Mr Brolly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much revenue will be lost by the postponement of the rating of empty homes.
(AQO 165/10)

Mr Brolly: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ceist a haon. Question 1.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): I am glad that there was an interpretation, but I think that I would have guessed that it was Question 1.

The rating of empty homes is likely to raise between £6 million and £8 million in additional regional and district rates revenue when it is established. However, the experience of the rushed introduction of the rating of vacant non-domestic properties in 2004 suggested that the amount that would have been raised through the rating of empty homes in 2010-11 is likely to be significantly less than that amount.

Land and Property Services (LPS) is experiencing the same problems as the Rate Collection Agency in compiling a list of reliable owners in time for the April 2010 introduction of rating of empty homes. Therefore, it is likely that just over half the revenue that the measure is capable of raising annually would have been raised, and the postponement of one year has the advantage of allowing LPS sufficient time to finalise the list.

Mr Brolly: I thank the Minister. He has probably answered my supplementary question, which was whether the real reason that the rating of empty homes was not implemented was because Land and Property Services has difficulty in delivering it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am very pleased that I anticipated the Member's supplementary question. There is no doubt that one of the reasons was that we did not have a full list of vacant homes. I hope that council building control departments will help Land and Property Services to identify such properties. The additional reason was that there would have been implications in introducing rating on vacant homes,

given the state of the housing market. It was decided, therefore, that we should postpone its introduction.

Lord Browne: Would the Minister agree that it has become increasingly difficult for councils to set a budget for the financial year because of the default in the collection of rates? What percentage of rates has been collected by Land and Property Services in each council area, and what action has been taken to recover unpaid rates?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I tend to have certain facts given to me by the Department before I come to Question Time. However, I do not have the detail for which the Member asked in relation to the percentage of rates that is not collected in each council area. However, the amount of rates that has not been collected has increased, and probably sits at about £130 million, which is quite a high sum. Despite our taking an increasing number of people through the courts to recover rates, the sum has increased. That is partly due to the recession and partly due to the fact that work needs to be done on rates collection.

As for identifying properties on which rates are not collected, building control carried out an exercise in the Belfast City Council area that found that many properties in the city that were thought to be vacant were not, in fact, vacant. That exercise increased the rates base by about £4.2 million. That is the way forward, and I would like to see LPS working with local councils to ascertain which properties are not paying rates and whether they should be.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members from all sides that supplementary questions should not be read.

Mr Durkan: The Minister referred to the introduction of the rating of non-domestic properties, which was never introduced in Scotland. Is the Minister aware that the Chancellor has introduced new reliefs in England in the context of the downturn, and does he recognise that, through no fault of their own, many owners cannot let their commercial properties? Those properties are facing deterioration because money that could be spent on maintaining them has to go towards rates.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Although I accept the Member's point, we are evaluating the rating of vacant non-domestic properties. We have sought the views of a wide range of people, which we are now considering. However, lest I give the impression that we are less generous in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom, the rating of non-domestic properties in Northern Ireland operates at a 50% level, whereas a 100% level operates in the rest of the United Kingdom. Moreover, rates for manufacturing industries are capped at 30%. There are differences in the rating systems, and, therefore, a comparison cannot be made between here and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Public Expenditure

2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of what the public expenditure situation may be after the general election in 2010. (AQO 166/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Although the position will not be confirmed until the conclusion of the next UK-wide spending review, a marked slowdown, if not a reduction, in current expenditure is expected after the next general election. The noises from the Conservative Party conference today and yesterday, and from the Chancellor, indicate that there appears to be almost a competition as to who will cut deeper. The leader of the Conservative Party has made it clear that if his party wins the next election, Northern Ireland will not be exempt from reductions. I am sure that the Members from the Ulster Unionist Party can tell us some more, given the insight that they have through their contacts with the Conservative Party.

In the past number of years, the funding of public services has experienced a significant uplift at an average of about 6.8% a year. That means that we are working from a higher base, and, therefore, there is considerable scope to yield further benefits from the previous investment. The Executive's 10-year investment strategy, which runs until 2018, was based on the continued growth in capital of either 2.3% or 2.7% a year. That contrasts with the Treasury's latest projections that investment in the UK will fall by about 9.3% in real terms between 2010 and 2014. However, significant reductions in construction prices should at least help us to get more for every pound that we spend. Therefore, given the uncertainties about public spending decisions after the next election and some other factors that I mentioned, the total impact is difficult to assess.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. What can the Executive do to offset any reductions in available spend?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are several measures that the Executive can take, and are taking, to address that problem. First, we must reduce the unnecessary bureaucracy that surrounds much of the public sector. Steps must be taken to remove it, and Ministers should consider that matter in their own Departments. Furthermore, the Executive will need to consider scaling back programmes that are no longer needed or are no longer regarded as effective. Governments tend to continue with measures after their usefulness has passed or after the issue that they were designed to address has been sorted out.

That is the second point that I want to make: we should examine the activities that we are involved in and ask whether they are really necessary.

We must also prioritise the efficient delivery of front line services. I will probably raise the Health Minister's ire when I say that productivity in the health sector in Northern Ireland is approximately 16% lower than that in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is probably true of many other front line services; there is room for considering more effective and efficient ways of spending the money that goes into those services. There is also the more fundamental issue of whether we can get greater contributions from local households for the provision of public services. The Assembly will have to have a debate about that issue at some stage.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. We are all aware that we are facing a very difficult future, given the run-up to the election in the current economic circumstances, and the post-election scenario. I am sure that the Treasury is keeping a close eye on the situation. Has the Minister considered exploring with Treasury officials the implications for the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period and the new policies that our friends will introduce after the next election?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: It is not just a case of considering whether to explore those issues; there is the question of whether the Treasury is prepared to divulge any information. As the Member will be aware, we should have already been talking with the Treasury about the outcome of the next CSR period. That has been postponed until after the election; it would appear that the Chancellor is not even discussing with his own Ministers the possible effect on their departmental budgets. At present, it is difficult for us to get a picture of what is likely to happen in the coming year. An election is coming, and even if we had an indication from the current Chancellor about what is going to happen, there is no guarantee that he will be in place after the election, or that the existing programme will continue.

Mr McNarry: The Minister has recently made much of the forward-planning and preparation strategy that he has put in place to shore up his Budget. Rather than looking to us to tell him, has he made contact with the Conservatives, who are likely to form the next national Government?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Given the fact that the Conservative Party has not shared its plans for the future with its political mates who are sitting at the end of the Chamber, I suspect that I am not going to get too much joy either. Indeed, having listened to what has been divulged by the Conservative Party so far, it has not been prepared to be specific about the measures that it is prepared to consider. It has said only that any such measures will be draconian and that they will apply to Northern Ireland. I look forward to any enlightenment that can be given to the Assembly by

the Ulster Unionist Party, which now has a close relationship with the Conservative Party.

I hope that, when the Ulster Unionist Party hears whatever story it is told by its new political allies, it will report it a bit more accurately than it did some of the figures that it has put into the public domain so far. I am glad, at least, that the Member did not refer to the black hole today. I was surprised that he did not do so; he seems to be obsessed with financial black holes, and wants to compete with another party in identifying the blackest of the black holes. Even when the figures are not accurate, he will make them up. I hope that he can get some information when he speaks to the shadow Chancellor.

3.15 pm

Mr McNarry: Answer the question.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I thought that I had answered the question. The answer is that, at present, since the Conservative Party is not even sharing the total picture with its members, it is unlikely that it will share anything with me.

Dr Farry: I share the Minister's view on the Conservative Party and its Ulster Unionist colleagues. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. This is Question Time. Allow the Member to ask his question.

Dr Farry: The Minister mentioned efficiency savings being made through institutional reform. Will he comment on the potential for savings to be found from tackling the divided society that potentially costs £1 billion a year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Alliance Party's figures for the cost of a divided society have been contested. I am on record as having made this clear: savings can be made, and the duplication of services in certain areas adds to the costs of the position in Northern Ireland.

Take the Alliance Party's education policy as an example of the costs of a divided society. It is quite happy not only to fund the state sector and the maintained sector but to promote a third sector — the integrated sector — even where such schools are planted in areas where there is a surplus of places in the state and maintained sectors.

In talking about the costs of a divided society, the Alliance Party ought to look at its own policies because sometimes those policies add to the costs of a divided society.

Civil Service Equal Pay Claim

3. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the Civil Service equal pay claim. (AQO 167/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The matter was debated in the House last week. I thank the unions and staff for the fieldwork on the review of the technical grades, which was completed on time. My officials are considering the results of that review as well as a copy of the draft report, which has been passed to the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA). I expect internal procedures to be completed shortly, at which point the report will be finalised. My officials are also engaged in intensive negotiations with NIPSA.

In response to a question from the Member for North Belfast Mr Maginness last week about what I would be doing, I said that I would be meeting officials from NIPSA. I did so yesterday, and it was a useful meeting. I conveyed to the officials from the trade unions that I wish to see the matter resolved as quickly as possible.

However, I repeat to the Member that this is not only within the remit of the Department of Finance and Personnel; there are two sides to the negotiations. NIPSA has its own procedures. It must talk through any proposals, and even if an offer were on the table, NIPSA would have to ballot its members on it.

My officials must also meet the individuals involved to discuss their circumstances. We are still some way from a resolution, even if we can reach the point where an acceptable offer to both sides is reached.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. Will the Minister clarify whether the completed review of technical grades 1 and 2 is now the accepted benchmark for negotiations on the way forward?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Department's review of technical grades 1 and 2 has been with NIPSA since the beginning of September. NIPSA has not indicated that it does not accept the review's conclusions, but it has not yet formally accepted that review.

Mr Craig: I will ask the million dollar question to which all civil servants want an answer. If a settlement were reached, how quickly would civil servants receive a payout?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I made it clear during last week's debate on the Civil Service equal pay claim, and again today, that any final settlement that is reached between the Department and the trade unions has to go to NIPSA to be voted on by its members. I do not know how long that is likely to take. Even if NIPSA accepts a settlement, there has to

be a meeting with individuals who will have to accept the available offer. Individuals who do not accept the offer will have the right to go to a tribunal. I do not know how long that process would take, but it could take years. It is impossible to give a date for civil servants' receiving a payout. However, once there is a final settlement that can be accepted by both sides, I will take a report to my Executive colleagues to ensure that we put the necessary finances in place.

Mr K Robinson: The Minister has just touched on the point that I was going to raise. Does the Minister envisage any difficulties in acquiring the moneys or loans from HM Treasury that may be required to pay the final settlement in full?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There will be a combination of legacy payments and ongoing costs. Once a settlement is agreed, there will be some uplift in the pay of those who have been affected. That will be an ongoing cost rather than a legacy issue and will, therefore, be met by the Northern Ireland Budget and not by HM Treasury. We already have a facility on which we can draw for part of the legacy payments. I indicated that I am prepared to return to the Treasury to seek additional finance for the legacy costs if necessary. We will have to ascertain how any costs to the Northern Ireland Budget will be financed.

Departments: Reduction in Number

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an estimate of how much would be saved annually by reducing the number of Departments from 11 to six. (AQO 168/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: In the context of the constrained public expenditure position facing the Executive, it is clear that Northern Ireland has too many Departments. Although steps have been taken to share services, there remains an unnecessary and costly duplication of functions. I invite Members to read the 'Independent Review of Economic Policy', which was published last week. The panel, which was chaired by Professor Richard Barnett, discussed whether we need a Department for Employment and Learning and a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It suggested that a single "Department of the Economy" would be more effective.

There is wide recognition of the need to rationalise Departments, and it is estimated that reducing the number of Departments from 11 to six would save tens of millions of pounds per annum on an ongoing basis. Such a move would also be a significant demonstration to the broader public sector and wider society that the Executive are serious about efficiency. However, it is not just about saving money. The amalgamation of Departments would also enable us to do better

business. I was previously in the Department of the Environment and witnessed the difficulties that are often caused by three Departments' involvement in the planning process.

Therefore, as well as savings in administration, significant savings would be made because we would have a better way of doing business. That would have a huge impact on the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Hamilton: Given the increasingly challenging economic environment, does the Minister agree that public patience with the bloated political bureaucracy in Northern Ireland will not last long, particularly when the tens of million of pounds of savings that he has talked about could be made? Does he further agree that our focus should now be on service delivery and not on sustaining an artificially large administration?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The view that I expressed is not just my view or my party's; there is a wider recognition among those who work with Departments and those who are reviewing how the system works that significant savings could be made.

The Assembly must consider the number of Departments for several reasons, and not just because of our constrained financial circumstances — although that should be an impetus. First, if we want to deliver services, do we need to deliver them in the way in which we are delivering them at present? Secondly, considering the issue would be an important message that we are taking efficiency savings seriously. Thirdly, it would create Departments that worked better and which could do the business of government much more effectively.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am fascinated by the idea of cost-effective government, which I welcome, as does my party. However, does the Minister not agree that concentrating on the number of Departments is a bit of a phoney issue, given the overstaffing in Departments? Figures that I have to hand suggest that the number of staff in the Department of Finance and Personnel has increased by more than 14% in the past 18 months. Surely reducing staffing levels would be a better way of saving money than reducing the number of Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will deal with the issue of the number of staff in the Department of Finance and Personnel in a minute or two, but let me first say that the Member has not been listening to my answers. I do not think that I have particularly concentrated on reducing the number of Departments. At this moment, I am answering a question about reducing the number of Departments, but had the Member listened to my earlier answers, he would have heard me talk about the productivity gains that could be made in some Departments. Even if the number of Departments remains the same, there are

ways of ensuring that output is much more effective and efficient. Of course, Ministers should be working to achieve such output at present. Indeed, the idea behind the efficiency review panel was to consider such issues.

We must be very careful when considering the number of staff at the Department of Finance and Personnel. I have looked carefully at my Department, and it is up to every Minister to do likewise for his or her Department. The Member is right: there has been an increase in the number of people employed in the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, the figures do not take account of the fact that the delivery of shared services has meant that new personnel have joined the Department of Finance and Personnel — staff who would previously have been scattered around other Departments, dealing with accounts, IT or human resources. That influx of people has increased staff numbers.

I make the following point to the Member about those shared services: Access Northern Ireland, for example, is now achieving the same output for 25% less cost.

3.30 pm

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Assembly Roadshow: East Belfast

1. **Ms Purvis** asked the Assembly Commission whether there are plans to reschedule the Assembly roadshow for east Belfast which was poorly attended by MLAs due to the extended sitting of the Assembly on 22 September 2009; and whether members of the public who attended will have their travel costs refunded. (AQO 179/10)

Mr Moutray: The east Belfast roadshow will be rescheduled as soon as possible. As the Member knows, the roadshow on 22 September was the first in an autumn series that was promised by the Assembly Commission in response to the public's positive feedback about the first round of roadshows that took place in spring 2009.

Unfortunately, the unexpectedly late sitting of the Assembly on 22 September meant that several MLAs who had committed to being part of the panel were unable to leave Parliament Buildings. Ms Purvis was the only Member to attend and was able to answer questions from the audience on several issues. The members of the Assembly Commission shared the public's disappointment that the event did not proceed as advertised. Therefore, the Speaker travelled to the Park Avenue Hotel to convey his apologies.

The Speaker and his officials judged it preferable, though not ideal, to reschedule the event at the Park Avenue Hotel for a date on which MLAs from all parties would be able to participate. The audience was most understanding about the difficult position and appreciated the commitment to arranging another event in the constituency. Every effort will be made to advertise the events widely, including through local community networks, as the purpose of the roadshows is to maximise public accessibility to MLAs.

On the night of the event, transport was provided for one member of the public who had expressed concern about travel arrangements. The Assembly Commission cannot identify every member of the public who attended and is, therefore, unable to provide refunds for travel costs incurred on the night. However, the Commission hopes that all those who attended on 22 September will be able to return for the rescheduled event.

Ms Purvis: I thank Mr Moutray for his comprehensive answer. I welcome the rescheduling of the roadshow in the near future and the fact that it will be advertised as widely as possible. Mr Moutray mentioned one member of the audience who spent a considerable amount of money — exactly £25 — on a taxi to travel to the roadshow. However, other members of the public were also out of pocket through paying to travel to the event. Should those people find it difficult to meet the expense of returning to a roadshow in east Belfast, will they be able to get in touch with the Assembly Commission or its officials?

Mr Moutray: I am prepared to reconsider the issue and write to the Member.

Mr A Maginness: Given the success of the roadshows throughout Northern Ireland, in addition to holding another meeting in east Belfast, will the Commission extend the programme to enable more people to participate?

Mr Moutray: The Assembly Commission received an evaluation of the previous series of roadshows that outlined the costs, the issues raised by the public, the public attendance at each venue and the feedback received. Given the success of that first round of roadshows, members of the Commission, most of whom participated on panels throughout that series, are deeply committed to extending the series. After the current round of roadshows, they will make an assessment, and a decision will be made subsequently.

Parliament Buildings: Security Arrangements

2. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Assembly Commission to provide details of the security arrangements at Parliament Buildings regarding the deployment of the PSNI during (i) plenary sessions; (ii) Committee

meetings; and (iii) any other circumstances where the PSNI is deployed. (AQO 180/10)

Mr Neeson: During plenary sessions, seven police officers will be on duty from 8.00 am to 7.00 pm or until 30 minutes after the House rises, whichever is later. That number of officers allows duties to be rotated and facilitates periods of rest and refreshment.

During Committee meetings and as the week progresses, the number of officers will gradually reduce to three, and they will normally be on duty from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm.

In other instances, such as during VIP visits, the PSNI, in consultation with Assembly security services, will determine the number of police officers according to what is deemed operationally appropriate.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank Mr Neeson for his answer. Will he give us some idea of the cost of the PSNI operation in Parliament Buildings? When is the service level agreement up for renewal? When that happens, will there be negotiations about the number of officers who will be based in Parliament Buildings?

Mr Neeson: The pre-agreed costs are in keeping with national guidelines and are reflected in the service level agreement. That agreement will be reviewed and the security situation, as it exists, will impact upon that. The operation represents an annual cost of approximately £413,000, or £8,000 each week. That figure is calculated using nationally agreed rates and is kept under constant review.

Mr Spratt: Does the Member agree that the Police Service of Northern Ireland provides an excellent security service to Members? Given that there was a serious incident in the Building, does the Member also agree that it is necessary to have security to reassure Members and the public who attend the House?

Mr Neeson: I agree entirely with Mr Spratt. The Michael Stone incident very much impacted on the number of police personnel who have been taken on board to secure the Building and look after the safety of Members and the public.

Mr Cree: Will the Member advise whether there has been any appraisal of the security arrangements by the Commission since the events of 2007? Has consideration been given to the balance between public access and security?

Mr Neeson: The situation is kept under continuous review. The Commission aims to develop value for money while ensuring the safekeeping and well-being of Members of the Assembly and the public.

Lord and Lady Craigavon's Tomb

3. **Mr Elliott** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on the promotion of Lord and Lady Craigavon's tomb to visitors to Parliament Buildings. (AQO 181/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Member for his question. Members may know that the tomb of Lord and Lady Craigavon has been an integral feature of the official tour script since 1999. It is established practice for the Events Office and Education Service staff who deliver official tours to routinely inform our guests of the tomb's location. The Member will particularly wish to know that, following his recent question on the matter, staff have been asked to emphasise the feature during their deliveries to ensure that all guests are fully aware of their option to visit the tomb if they wish.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his answer. Will he give a commitment that the Commission will make a visit to the tomb part of the itinerary of the official tour and not just have a reference to the tomb?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I have no problem with giving an assurance that that will be brought back to the Commission for consideration. However, I point out that, in inclement weather, it would be difficult to take parties out to see the tomb. From that point of view, we will have to consider how best to put the tomb on the itinerary and ensure that our visitors know all about it.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for his reply. Lord and Lady Craigavon's tomb is a very important part of the tour. We all know that Lord Craigavon was buried with his two .303 rifles. I do not know who he thought he would see in the next world.

Would it be possible to have signage for the tomb? On a tour today, it was indicated to people where the tomb was, but people were not quite sure of its location. I thought that having signage outside might make the tomb more accessible to the people on the tour.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I hope that the Member is not suggesting that Lord Craigavon was trying to start an underground movement. I think that signage should be better and that it would be of great help to visitors. I agree that the tomb is an important part of this Building's heritage and history, and I will certainly bring the matter to the Commission's attention. I am sure that there will be no opposition to putting up a sign for the tomb.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Mayor — *[Laughter.]* You were once; in fact, you were also mayor. Sometimes one gets confused about which place one is in.

People from my tradition did not frequent this place, certainly not to the extent to which they qualified for a

tomb. However, from time to time, some great people from the nationalist community, such as the late Joe Devlin, did descend on this place. Has the Commission given any thought to displaying relics that tell that story, which, although largely one of isolation, is nevertheless an important part of the Stormont story?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: There has not been much discussion on that subject. However, if the Member is suggesting that we exhume some of the people he mentioned, I am sure that we could work in dead earnest to ensure that they are properly located here. Bringing that subject to the Commission's attention will raise a subject that is dear to the Member's heart.

Assembly Website

4. **Mr McCallister** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on the development of the new Assembly website. (AQO 182/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The business case for the project and the procurement strategy for the design and hosting phase of the project have been drafted, and they will be agreed at the next project board meeting in mid-October. The project team continues to evaluate content management systems and will put together demonstration sessions for the project board and clerking and reporting staff.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Rev Coulter for his answer. He will be aware that the Assembly website is one of the main portals through which the public can see what goes on in this Building. If the old website is anything to go by, the new one should be excellent. Will the Commission consider making archive video of Assembly proceedings more accessible?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Communications Office continually works to update and design the structure of the present website, introducing enhanced services and making use of social media channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. At my age, I am not sure whether there are any more, although at times in this House we certainly twitter a bit.

Recently, a new service was introduced: the video archive. Website users can watch again or catch up on any Question Time session from the Chamber. Participation in social media technologies is expanding rapidly, and the Assembly's use of such channels encourages communication between the Assembly and its stakeholders. In addition, it increases opportunities for interaction. For example, a new web presence, yourassembly.com, has been established to deliver content relating to the Assembly roadshows. The website contains video taken at the roadshows and it is linked to the Assembly's Twitter, Flickr, Facebook and YouTube feeds, which invite comments from visitors on a number of discussion topics.

3.45 pm

Annunciators: Electricity Costs

5. **Mr Ford** asked the Assembly Commission to detail the estimated cost of electricity incurred in the operation of annunciators throughout Parliament Buildings during the summer recess; and the associated amount of CO2 produced. (AQO 183/10)

Mr Neeson: The estimated cost of the electricity consumed by the annunciator system during the summer recess was approximately £113. The associated amount of CO2 produced was less than 700 kg. Members will appreciate that the method used for calculating such costs is not an exact science. The calculations are based on the following figures: the average operational power use of a TV set in the annunciator system is 85 watts, and 41 of the 57 TV sets in the system were switched on during the recess period. That was confirmed by Information Systems Office. The system was operational from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday, during the summer recess. The average price of electricity supplied to Parliament Buildings during the period was 9p per kilowatt hour.

Mr Ford: It is unusual to ask a question of a Member seated behind me. That is perhaps symbolic of the unusual way in which the Commission operates.

Does the Commission accept that, although the figures are relatively small in this case, it is an example that shows a need for better management of energy consumption in the Building. An annunciator that runs for several weeks, announcing that “The Assembly is in recess” does nothing to convey the impression of a working Assembly or the practicalities involved. The Building has a very good overall energy consumption rating score, but there are management issues that the Commission must continue to address.

Mr Neeson: The annunciator system is left on during recess to provide an information service to visitors. Furthermore, during the summer recess, a series of tests was completed on the system. The environmental review has identified that as an area where electricity consumption may potentially be reduced. It may be possible to switch off the annunciator during the recess periods or turn off the TV sets in areas of the Building that visitors are less likely to visit, such as the first or fourth floors. Of the 57 TV sets in the system, 41 are located on those floors.

The Commission is trying to improve performance in that respect, and this is an issue that will be taken into consideration during the next recess.

Accommodation Strategy

6. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Assembly Commission to provide an update on the work carried out in relation

to the accommodation strategy; and how much this work has cost to date. (AQO 184/10)

Mr Neeson: Following completion of the space utilisation study, the accommodation review project team presented options and associated costs to the Assembly Commission on 18 June. The Commission requested that further consideration be given to the provision of fully functional Committee rooms, with a view to carrying out a pilot scheme during the summer recess. As a result, the Members’ Reading Room, room 30, was converted into a new Committee room. If the Member has not yet seen that room, I invite him to take a look at it.

A new bespoke meeting table has been installed to accommodate 18 people. Full broadcast and archiving facilities will be included in the room. Services have been installed to allow for the future provision of LCD or plasma screens to meet the needs of Committees, and replacement lighting has been installed to cater for broadcast requirements.

In addition to that work, the gents’ toilet near the Senate Chamber was redesigned during the recess, allowing for the creation of a new education suite for the education officers. To facilitate that, a new door was created to that room, which is now accessed from the main corridor near room 12. The approximate cost of the work is expected to be in the region of £85,000 to £95,000.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Neeson for his response on the work that was carried out. I was in room 30 today for the meeting of the Agriculture Committee. It is a great facility and “Fair play” to the Commission in regard to that work. Is a second phase of work planned? What timescales are planned, and what costs are involved?

Mr Neeson: Consideration is being given to improving the Committee rooms and enhancing the facilities in them. The Member may be aware that the issue of accommodation for the public was one of the big issues raised at many of the Assembly roadshows across Northern Ireland. In addition, work is progressing on cleaning the library store in the basement so that that space can be better utilised. It is also hoped that there will be a range of internal moves to improve staff accommodation in Annexe C and Parliament Buildings. As proposals are being drawn up, there is not yet a set timescale for that work. However, it is an issue that is being kept constantly under review.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 7 has been withdrawn.

Parliament Buildings: Bilingual Signage

8. **Ms J McCann** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to provide bilingual signage both inside and outside Parliament Buildings. (AQO 186/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, in carrying out all its functions, powers and duties, to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity among the nine categories of people identified under the legislation. Paragraph 6.2 of the commission's equality scheme provides that, within a year of the approval of the scheme, the NIAC will review its arrangements for providing information in minority ethnic language formats. The Assembly Commission will be reviewing the issue of signage in the development of a language policy. That policy, which will be developed by March 2010, will be screened in compliance with section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 for differential impact, and all issues regarding signage will be considered in that context.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for his answer. Does the Commission accept that this institution is used by two main traditions and that it should reflect the cultural identity of both?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Assembly Commission's equality scheme was approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on 27 February 2008.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Assembly Commission have any concerns about how additional signage would interact with the listed status of Parliament Buildings?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: That aspect will be considered by the Assembly Commission, which has to be conscious of the listed status of the Building. Any additional signage may be subject to the approval of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's built heritage branch.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are no more questions. That concludes Question Time.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Unauthorised Monument in Newtownbutler

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic has 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately eight minutes.

Mr Elliott: It is unfortunate that I have to bring this issue to the Assembly for debate, but I do so following the events of the weekend of 12 September 2009, when a monument was erected in Newtownbutler village. That caused great concern to the local community there, particularly the small, isolated, local, Protestant, unionist community. The Newtownbutler area has undergone a huge amount of ethnic cleansing in the past 40 years, whereby large numbers of Protestants and unionists, particularly security force members, have been shot, blown up and brutally murdered.

The monument is a commemoration of terrorists, of whom, I understand, not all are local. It was put up with total disregard and contempt for the authorities in the land. I understand that the organisation behind the erection of the monument is Sinn Féin; an organisation that is seeking the devolution of policing and justice to the Assembly. It is ironic that it disobeyed the laws of the land. It did not apply for planning permission; it put up the monument without the authority of the agency that owns the land, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive; and it did not consult the Housing Executive or ask its permission before erecting the monument. In fact, Sinn Féin had the cheek to say that it intended to consult the Housing Executive following the erection of the monument. What contempt for the authorities of the Province.

When I think back on the past 40 years, I recognise that such behaviour is nothing new in the Newtownbutler area. The village is continually swamped with Irish tricolours flying, and there has been a continual campaign of intimidation against the local Protestant and unionist communities in that area. Many of the people from those communities have had to move out of the village and surrounding area and go to live in other areas, mainly in County Fermanagh, that are classified as being safer.

A number of people have been murdered in the area, and I think of a local shopkeeper, Richard Latimer, who was murdered a small number of yards from where the monument is erected. To me, it is not the issue of monuments being erected; rather, it is where they are placed. The monument in Newtownbutler has

been erected in an in-your-face position where many people who are entering and leaving the village can see it. Those who put up the monument have disregard and a lack of respect for the community in that area.

It is interesting to note that the Benches opposite are empty of the party that was behind the erection of the monument: Sinn Féin. It is a disgrace that its members cannot come here and answer for themselves on this issue and tell us why they put up the monument. All that they were able to tell us, through the local press, was that they intended, at some stage, to ask the authorities whether it was OK to do it, after they had carried out their cowardly act.

It seems that there is no shame in them. They do not care that people are hurting because of their act, and it shows the contempt that they have not only for the authorities but for the people whom they often classify as their neighbours, who are fellow citizens of the Province. They shamefully disregard the thoughts and emotions of those people, many of whom had loved ones murdered throughout the past 40 years. Although Sinn Féin members try to tell us that they have changed and moved on, they continue to show blatant disregard for the feelings of the local people.

I reported the matter to the Planning Service as soon as I could, and I am pleased to say that the local planning office opened an enforcement file on the situation immediately. It is following up the matter to see what action, if any, it can proceed with. I am also pleased that the Housing Executive has started a process of assessing the views of the local population and local elected representatives to see what it can do about the monument, since it is on its property.

I am also aware of a similar monument that was erected in Dromore in County Tyrone. The Equality Commission had to refer that matter to the Secretary of State, because Omagh District Council, the owner of the land, refused to take any action on it. Thankfully, the Equality Commission had the initiative to refer that to the Secretary of State, who had to make a recommendation to Omagh District Council. I hope that matters do not have to go that far in this instance and that the authorities will move on it and take action.

My thoughts at this time are with the people who have been deeply hurt over the past 40 years — the real victims in the Province — and I am concerned for the people who live in the area who are intimidated and who have had their lives destroyed by this.

4.00 pm

Over the past number of years, the population of unionists and Protestants in the Newtownbutler area has diminished to a very small base compared with what it was 45 years ago. I am seeking the support of the authorities so that those people can be supported

and their concerns given credence. Hopefully, that will bring the situation to a reasonable conclusion.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member agree that republicans' continuing to erect such monuments, which cause great offence to the Protestant relatives, neighbours and friends of those who were murdered by the republican movement over the years, raises very serious issues about what is called a shared future? Does he also agree that the absence of republican Members in the Chamber for today's debate, including the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, is nothing less than shameful?

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his comments, which I support. The difficulty with such monuments is that many of them are of an in-your-face nature. They are very divisive in the local community, and they cause a great deal of heartbreak to those who lost loved ones during the Troubles. That makes their erection a very difficult issue for those people to deal with.

Mrs Foster: I support the Member, and I commend him for securing the debate today.

By their nature, memorials or monuments generate and deserve community respect and understanding. The so-called monument in Newtownbutler is as vile as it is provocative, and Mr Elliott has given the reasons why it is so provocative. The monument has been set in an area that fronts on to a public road that a large number of people in that area use. Therefore, the impact that the memorial would have on the small and already alienated and isolated, unionist and Protestant community in the Newtownbutler area was well known.

The memorial itself was erected in the dark of night, which is quite ironic given that the intimidation and murders that took place in that area were also carried out in the dark of night. Those acts were carried out by faceless cowards who went about their business murdering police officers and many Protestants simply because they were Protestants.

Of course, the monument received no planning permission, and I welcome the fact that the Minister of the Environment is in the Chamber to listen to and respond to the debate. Furthermore, those who erected the monument had no permission from the Housing Executive to do so. Like Mr Elliott, I welcome the fact that the local Housing Executive has spoken to local political representatives and local people to assess their feelings on the memorial.

The memorial causes gross offence to the local unionist community and to the wider community in the south-east Fermanagh area. Indeed, it has caused offence simply by its presence; it is quite imposing, given that it is 6 ft high and 4 ft wide.

A bizarre situation exists elsewhere in County Fermanagh. The Fire Brigade removed from its

premises a memorial to those who were murdered in the IRA atrocity in Enniskillen after receiving one complaint from a member of staff. The removal of that memorial caused a great deal of hurt to the wider community in County Fermanagh. Given that, I ask the Equality Commission to examine the situation regarding the monument in Newtownbutler closely, because many people will complain about it. Therefore, there is an urgent need to remove the monument or memorial — call it what you will — in Newtownbutler. If the memorial in Enniskillen was offensive, and I do not accept that it was, how much more offensive is the memorial in Newtownbutler?

I commend the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for the stand that he has taken against the glorification of terrorism in GAA clubs in Northern Ireland, and I urge him to continue with that approach. I ask other Ministers to take a similar stand on their shared future.

We heard that the issue arose because the monument was erected on Northern Ireland Housing Executive land. I took the opportunity to mention that to my colleague Margaret Ritchie, the Minister for Social Development, some time ago, and I received a letter from her today in which she referred to:

“the unlawful erection of a monument at Galloon Gardens in Newtownbutler... erected... without the agreement, involvement or knowledge of the Housing Executive”.

Her letter goes on to outline what she believes is the way forward, and the Member for Newry and Armagh has already referred to the shared future agenda. It is a disgrace to see what has happened.

The Member for North Down is in the Chamber, and no doubt he will talk about what has happened in North Down during the past week or more. It is disgraceful to see public money being spent in that way; likewise, it is disgraceful to see public land being abused in that way by those seeking to mark out their territory, and that is exactly what the monument is about. That fact has been acknowledged by the Minister for Social Development in her letter, where she said that during her recent meetings:

“One of the issues most commonly raised ... has been around the marking of territory by paramilitaries”.

That is exactly what is going on in Newtownbutler, and it is akin to an animal marking out its territory. We know that many of Sinn Féin’s former colleagues are causing difficulties for the party in the Newtownbutler and Fermanagh area. What does Sinn Féin decide to do? It erects a monument to mark out its territory. It is carrying out a desperate and pathetic act in Newtownbutler.

Mr Kennedy: Does the Member agree that, rather than erect republican memorials and wallow in republican ideology, mainstream republicans, as they are called, would be better to give up names and

information about their erstwhile colleagues who now mask themselves as republican dissidents. It would enable the authorities to identify and apprehend those people much sooner.

Mrs Foster: That is precisely the point that I was going to make, and I thank the Member for making it for me. Instead of marking out their territory with monuments, they should be giving the names of dissident republicans to the forces of law and order so that we can rid ourselves of the scourge that is hanging around the necks of constituencies such as the Member’s constituency of Newry and Armagh and my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

It is absolutely disgraceful that Sinn Féin cannot even come to the Chamber to defend the erection of the monument. The Member referred to the fact that there was a very scant reply about the monument from the local councillor in the local papers, who said that they had thought about going along to ask the Housing Executive. What a disgraceful thing to say. The forces of law and order — the Department of the Environment, the Housing Executive and the Police Service — are there, and they are there to be obeyed.

It is disgraceful that the Member of Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone has absented herself from the House. She knew that the debate was coming up, but she has not had the grace to come and argue her side, and that speaks volumes.

Mr Gallagher: We have all lived through 30 years of conflict, and we know all about the violent conflict that resulted in deaths on both sides of the community. In that regard, Newtownbutler is no different from other areas of Northern Ireland. Members from both sides of the community have lost their lives, and some of the darkest incidents during our troubled history occurred in and around the Newtownbutler area.

The SDLP has always emphasised the need to recognise the pain of all those who have been bereaved in the conflict and the rights of loved ones on all sides to commemorate those who have lost their lives. It is a matter of regret for the SDLP that, at this point in the life of the Assembly, we still do not have a shared future strategy and that progress on victims’ issues is very slow.

With the commemorating of victims of the conflict comes a responsibility to respect the pain and hurt of other families with the utmost sincerity. It is self-evident that no healing can take place if the suffering of others is disregarded or if commemorations are hijacked for political purposes. We saw what happened in the Kilcooley estate in recent days, where a memorial has been used for purposes other than those agreed. At least in that case I understand that an investigation is under way.

In the 11 years since the Good Friday Agreement political progress has been slow, but what has been clear over that time is the strong desire of both sides of the community to build a shared future and a harmonious society. People want that to happen not just in the Assembly but in our housing estates, neighbourhoods and schools. It is widely agreed that division and mistrust must be overcome in this society and that healing and reconciliation are the objectives that people want us all to work towards.

The Newtownbutler monument commemorates the dead hunger strikers, and the rights of the families of those who died on hunger strike have to be respected. The area suffered numerous deaths as a result of violence right across the community —

Mr Elliott: Does the Member accept that those who died on hunger strike did so of their own free will, whereas the people — many in the Newtownbutler area, such as Ritchie Latimer, who lived just a few yards from the monument — who were brutally murdered, shot and bombed at the hands of terrorists, did not have a choice? They were cut down by thugs and cowards.

Mr Gallagher: I accept what the Member said about some of the local people who lost their lives; I mentioned that earlier. It is the view of the SDLP that, with all lives lost as a result of the Troubles, the grieving of families and their right of commemoration must be respected.

Apart from a political connection that Bobby Sands had with the constituency, none of the hunger strikers was from Newtownbutler or, indeed, from Fermanagh. In the eyes of some local people, the monument was erected without any wide community consultation, any consultation with the victims' commissioners and without any statutory authorities being approached. It is therefore entirely inappropriate. Others in the area regard it as having more to do with the exercise of power and community control than with commemorating lost lives.

Because those responsible for erecting the monument have ignored the sensitivities of others and have caused controversy, they may end up by dishonouring those whom they claim to commemorate. Their actions fly in the face of all who are working to build respect and reconciliation between the two traditions on the island. If we are to build a better future for all and to begin the work of uniting our people, we must remember all the victims of a very dark period in our history in a respectful way. Those who plan commemorations should consult widely in the area; they should take account of the views of all those who share their neighbourhood. They should consult the victims' commissioners. There is now a victims' forum, which should also be consulted.

Above all, as I said, they should avoid giving offence to any other people who have lost family members, particularly by not putting memorials anywhere close to locations where other people lost their lives during the Troubles. The Newtownbutler case has been handled very badly, and there is no doubt that great damage has been done. Any repetition of that anywhere else should be avoided at all costs.

4.15 pm

Lord Morrow: I also congratulate Mr Elliott for securing this appropriate and timely debate. As a result of the debate, some of the shenanigans that are going on within republicanism have been exposed and seen in clear daylight.

There is little doubt that republicanism and Sinn Féin are split right, left and centre, particularly in Fermanagh. Sinn Féin's non-attendance for the debate demonstrates clearly the depth of that chasm. The fact that Sinn Féin is not prepared to come here today to defend the actions of its foot soldiers also demonstrates that. As my colleague Arlene Foster said, it is particularly significant that the Minister of Agriculture has decided that she does not wish to participate in the debate. That should not be underestimated.

The erection of the monument was, no doubt, purposely designed to cause the maximum amount of hurt. Perhaps that was one of the reasons why its location was selected. The monument is there to glorify terrorism in all its rawest, worst and most sectarian forms. The border areas of County Fermanagh, County Tyrone and County Armagh have suffered perhaps more of the sectarian warfare that has been carried on by the Provisional IRA for the past 35 years than any other part of Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the erection of the monument seems to be an insulting and offensive move to those of us who come from a different part of the community. We are told that those people were something other than what we understood them to be and anyone with half a head on their shoulders knows them to have been.

I was interested to read a quote from a local councillor, Councillor O'Reilly, who served in the House for a period. He said:

"This monument marks a show of respect for all those who died in the hunger strikes of 1981 and commemorates ... Bobby Sands who many people in South Fermanagh worked extremely hard to get elected. We all have to share communities and tolerate each other's cultures and traditions".

He said that the memorial was not erected to be insulting to anyone. If ever there was hypocrisy, that is it.

Mrs Foster: Given that Councillor O'Reilly said that, will the Member agree that it is incredibly hypocritical of him to be a part of the cheerleading gang that objects to band parades and Orange services being able to progress along the main street in

Newtownbutler to church? He is always there at those protests. How does that show respect for each other's culture and tradition?

Lord Morrow: The point that my colleague Arlene Foster makes is a good one, and I certainly concur with what she says. That individual says in the papers that we must tolerate each other and share communities. It is amazing that, when it comes to a church parade or another parade, he is the main cheerleader trying to ensure that the parade does not go through.

We have come to the stage in this country when we have to make up our minds. Some people have great difficulty with that: either they are moving on or they are not. We are told continually that it is time that everyone moved on past the 35 dreadful years. Of course, those 35 dreadful years should never have happened.

Some of us make the effort to take society forward and to create a better future for the next generation. It behoves Sinn Féin to start to address difficult issues. Some times, in order to do that, one must stand up. It is patently clear, however, from the empty Benches that Sinn Féin members will not stand up when it comes to taking difficult decisions in their own communities, particularly in County Fermanagh.

Sinn Féin went ahead and erected that monument in the dead of night. If someone does something in the dead of night, instead of in the open, there must be something wrong with it. Let me make it clear: I do not condone the erection of monuments to people who have carried out acts of terrorism, regardless of the section of the community from which they come. I have no difficulty or embarrassment in saying that. During the 35 years that I have been in public life, I have been totally consistent in condemning such memorials and atrocities. To try to perpetuate the names of those people into the future is highly offensive and insulting.

I look forward to the day when the authorities will take the first step, which will send out a clear signal to everybody that that sort of behaviour will not be tolerated. Nothing less than the removal of that offensive landmark will satisfy the unionist community.

Let it be said that it is not only unionists who find those memorials highly offensive. Many people in the nationalist community — some of whom have spoken to me one-to-one — do not want to be part of that. I can understand that, sometimes, it is extremely difficult for them to speak out and to say that openly. Undoubtedly, there is growing resentment of that type of behaviour in the entire community and society. It must stop. For Sinn Féin members to play the good guy, bad guy when it suits them will not wash for ever.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it would be more fitting for Sinn Féin to make every effort to find the graves of

the disappeared and to let that information be given to the public and police on both sides of the border, rather than to erect a monument that causes hurt and despair among many people?

Lord Morrow: I thank Rev Dr Coulter for that superb point. Having worked quite closely with one particular family of the disappeared, I know how that family still hurts to this very day. Both parents, sadly, passed away without ever knowing what happened to their 21-year-old son. His brothers continue to fight for that information to the best of their ability. Rev Coulter makes a superb point.

Sinn Féin makes much play of the claim that it does its best. Often, its best is just not good enough. It strikes me that Sinn Féin just does not get it. It does not seem to understand that the offensive things in which it is engaged — the type of activity that has been brought before the Assembly today — shatters the confidence of the unionist community and, indeed, many people in the nationalist community. I look forward to the day when all of that is left behind. I look forward to the removal of that memorial in Newtownbutler.

Dr Farry: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Adjournment debate. I congratulate Mr Elliott for securing it. It is telling that there is a greater turnout from the Alliance Party than from Sinn Féin, given the constituency. The issue affects all of Northern Ireland.

I have deep family roots in County Fermanagh, and can certainly appreciate how that memorial will have been received in the community.

I welcome the direction in which the debate is moving: Members are acknowledging that this issue is not just a matter for Protestants, but a matter for people from a Catholic background and other backgrounds, too.

We should not assume that people from the Catholic tradition will support a memorial that is offensive to Protestants just because the IRA is perceived to come from that tradition. There are challenging issues to address, such as how the rule of law is observed and how we should deal with the past so that we can move on.

The loyalist memorial in my constituency of North Down was mentioned. Recent press coverage of that memorial and our discussion of another memorial in Newtownbutler show that the problem affects everyone in Northern Ireland. Government must respond seriously to those problems. It is important that we condemn loyalist and republican paramilitary memorials equally, because they are exactly the same.

I was disappointed that Mr Elliott spoke in generalities and talked about issues regarding republicans but not loyalists. We must tackle the issue with consistency and balance. A whole host of issues has been thrown up.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Dr Farry said that I did not talk about loyalists. I am not aware of any loyalist memorials that have been erected in County Fermanagh generally or in Newtownbutler in particular. If the Member can tell me where one is located, I would be happy to hear of it.

Dr Farry: Mr Elliott and Mr Kennedy spoke about Northern Ireland-wide issues that were couched solely in regard to what republicans are doing but not loyalists. The record will —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Adjournment topic is unauthorised monuments in Newtownbutler. As far as I am aware, Mr Elliot and the other Members stuck to that subject, and I ask that you do the same.

Dr Farry: I respect your ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, the Hansard report will reflect a more general discussion, including references to Mr McCausland and GAA grounds.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It appears that, in spite of your advice, Dr Farry is persisting with a line that seems to challenge your authority.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I note what you say, and I thank you for the point of order. Dr Farry, I insist that you stick to the subject matter that appears in the Order Paper, and I ask that you refrain from straying into other areas.

Dr Farry: Thank you for your advice, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will return to the issue and follow the example set by the other Members who spoke in the debate.

The episode throws up challenges for the public sector to how it responds to the matter. First, there is planning policy and how it is enforced. Memorials require planning permission; people cannot erect them without authorisation. Secondly, there is the issue of the abuse of public land and the use of public funds.

There is the wider issue of how we deal with the past. I recognise that people from all backgrounds and traditions may wish to acknowledge loss and suffering. However, we must distinguish between that kind of recognition and the kind of recognition that grants organisations any legitimacy whatsoever for their actions. The erection of the monument in Newtownbutler crosses that boundary.

4.30 pm

There is also the issue of how we promote a shared future. It is important that we look to shared space. The situation in Newtownbutler compromises the notion of shared space. Shared space does not have to be neutral space; however, a permanent memorial such as this fundamentally compromises the notion of a shared future.

There is also the issue of how public agencies interact with the legacy of paramilitarism in our

society. There is still an infrastructure that exercises community control, with respect to loyalists and republicans, at a grass-roots level. Although the overt violence may have disappeared, there are insidious moves to create tensions within communities, whether through flags, bonfires or memorials. In some respects, due to fear, people have difficulty expressing their opposition to such moves. The public sector has difficulty enforcing its statutory duties around shared space because of the perceived fear of its workers. We should acknowledge that that fear is there and that it needs to be addressed.

As other Members have mentioned, there are issues relating to flags in which we need to very clearly ensure that there is a co-ordinated and effective response to attempts by loyalists and republicans to compromise shared space.

What happened in Newtownbutler throws out a large challenge and is an example of similar episodes across Northern Ireland. Although I appreciate that the Minister of the Environment is in the Chamber — he may be able to talk about the situation from a planning perspective — there are responsibilities for other Ministers. For example, the Minister for Social Development, with respect to Housing Executive land; the Minister for Regional Development, with respect to the use and abuse of public highways; and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, with respect to the creation of a strategy for a shared future. I look forward to the Minister of the Environment's comments, and those of his colleagues in the Executive, as to how we tackle this cancer within our society.

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I thank the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mr Elliott for securing the Adjournment debate. It is clearly an issue on which many Members — and, for that matter, members of the public — hold strong views. I too have strong views on the illegal erection of this monument. Given the highly charged emotions that it generates, that period, during which terrorist criminals committed suicide, is not one that should be remembered in this manner. As we build a shared future, monuments of that nature are inappropriate and cause division within our society. We cannot allow the bully boys who lurk in the shadows to dictate what can or cannot be erected in our cities, towns or villages.

Therefore, I welcome the opportunity to provide some background to the case in Newtownbutler and to explain the current situation. The case involves an unauthorised hunger striker monument that has been erected at the entrance to Galloon Gardens, in Newtownbutler, County Fermanagh. The monument was first brought to the attention of the Planning Service on 15 and 16 September, when a number of complaints were received in the Omagh divisional planning office. Following receipt of the complaints,

an enforcement case was opened on 17 September, and, on 22 September, a site visit undertaken.

The monument is located in the centre of a small area of open ground adjacent to Galloon Gardens and the main street in Newtownbutler. The monument measures 2 m wide by 1.2 m high by 0.3 m deep, and is constructed of coarse stonework and marble. No evidence has been obtained as to who carried out the unauthorised works. A subsequent Land Registry search has confirmed the land to be in the ownership of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

On 12 October, the case will be reviewed at the monthly meeting of the enforcement group in the Omagh divisional planning office. As with all enforcement cases, the evidence gathered to date will be assessed, and a number of outcomes are possible. First, if it is found that the monument does not constitute development, or that it is immune from enforcement action because of the length of time that it has been in place, the case could be closed. However, the Planning Service is of the view that the monument does constitute development, and initial evidence indicates that the monument was only constructed in September. Thus, it is not immune from any future enforcement proceedings and, therefore, planning permission is required.

Secondly, the Planning Service could invite an application for the retention of the memorial. That would allow all local issues, including impacts on amenity and townscape, to be assessed fully. Alternatively, the Planning Service could proceed with enforcement action to have the monument removed. That would initially involve working with the landowner, which is the Housing Executive. Should that not prove successful, the Planning Service could proceed to formal action by serving an enforcement notice, which would require the removal of the monument.

With the last two options, the onus is likely to be on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to address the matter, because it is the acknowledged landowner. Initial discussions have taken place between the Planning Service and Housing Executive officials from the Fermanagh district office, who are aware of the monument. Those officials have sought some time to see whether there is potential to resolve the matter locally to the satisfaction of all parties.

The Planning Service accepts that the best way to deal with the matter is to seek local agreement. Over the coming weeks, further discussion will take place with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to establish progress. If progress cannot be made, I will instruct the Planning Service to initiate enforcement proceedings; I will not be dictated to by bully boys who tried and failed to dictate to the people of Northern Ireland through murder and mayhem.

Adjourned at 4.36 pm.