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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 September 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Personal Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the business on the Order Paper, I advise the House that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will make a personal statement immediately after the ministerial statement on the September monitoring rounds. I caution the House that I will not take any points of order on this matter. We will now move on to today's business.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not prepared to take any points of order on what I said. I am informing the House that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be in the House to make a personal statement after the Minister of Finance and Personnel has spoken on the September monitoring rounds. I will take a point of order that is outside that particular issue.

Lord Morrow: My point of order is about future statements to the House. This could refer to any Member, although I suspect that it would apply only to a Minister. Whenever a Minister is going to make a statement in the House, do they give you a time when they will make that statement? If not, perhaps you could look at that again with the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures so that the House can be helped in its business and, more importantly, so that you can be helped and so that we can have some indication about when those statements are coming, particularly personal statements from a given Minister.

Mr Speaker: I hear very much what Lord Morrow said. Personal statements must be cleared by the Speaker. I have received the personal statement. I take a great deal of time with personal statements to make sure that they

say what they need to say. Of course, we then need time to inform Whips of the issue. That is why I have decided that the statement should be heard at 12.00 noon today, or in and around that time, after the statement from the Finance Minister. Lord Morrow raised an interesting point yesterday about the Committee on Procedures, and it is an issue that the Committee on Procedures should look at.

I will take no further points of order on the issue. I took a point of order from Lord Morrow, and that is the only one that I will take. I am moving on.

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am taking no further points of order on the issue. The issue was well aired yesterday, and I allowed quite a number of Members in on it. I have allowed Lord Morrow in on it this morning, and it should rest there. I have made it clear to the House when the Minister will be here.

I remind Members that part of the convention on personal statements is that they must be heard in silence. Yesterday, I gave some latitude to Members, but this morning is when it stops. I am moving on to the business on the Order Paper for this morning.

Mr Weir: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I am seeking clarification on the way that things will be handled. I am not in any way challenging your authority.

Mr Speaker: I am happy to see the Member or any other Member outside the House to discuss how the issue has been handled.

Mr Weir: My question is potentially for the benefit of the House. After this statement or any personal statement is made, does anyone have the right to respond? If so, who? Is there an

opportunity to question a Minister on his or her personal statement?

Mr Speaker: No. A personal statement is a personal statement. It should be heard in silence, and there should be no points of order or debate on it.

Unfortunately, Mrs Foster, who asked the original question, will not be in the House, so no other Member — [Interruption.] Order. The convention is clear: no other Member can question the Minister on the statement. Mrs Foster has informed me that, unfortunately, she will not be in the House for the statement. The convention is that no other Member of her party is allowed to rise in her place.

Lord Morrow: Could Mrs Foster delegate the Chief Whip of her party to ask a question?

Mr Speaker: No. I am going to move on. There is a clear convention in the House. We should now move on.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the recent meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format.

The meeting was held at the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Thursday 9 September 2010. The Executive were represented by Robin Newton and myself; the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Eamon Ryan TD. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Newton, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council welcomed a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency, which was presented by its chairperson, Tarlach O Crosain, and chief executive, Derick Anderson. Ministers welcomed the developing partnerships on marine tourism between the Loughs Agency, NITB and Louth County Council.

We noted the effectiveness of the agency's response to pollution incidents on the Foyle system through the use of aeration and pollution prevention equipment. We also noted the positive impact of the regulation of the Lough Foyle oyster fishery, including improved catches in the 2009-2010 season. Ministers also noted that the agency's new monitoring vessel, the MMV Ostrea, is operational and has facilitated the surveying of the seed mussel areas in Carlingford Lough and the native oyster fishery in Lough Foyle.

The Loughs Agency also reported that there has been an increase in illegal salmon poaching, and Ministers were concerned to hear that there have been violent confrontations between poachers and Loughs Agency staff. A number of prosecutions are pending for both illegal fishing and assaults on Loughs Agency staff.

The Council welcomed a presentation by the Loughs Agency on the 2010 series of catchment status reports, which are produced in-house by Loughs Agency staff. Ministers were impressed by the user-friendly format of the reports, the range of information presented and how that information is made widely available to the agency's stakeholders and other interested parties through the agency's website. We also noted the practical use of this information and how it is applied by the Loughs Agency to ensure continued and effective conservation and protection of the freshwater fisheries and aquatic resources of the Foyle and Carlingford systems, whether on the basis of a localised plan or complementary to the implementation of the water framework directive throughout Ireland.

The Council approved a set of regulations which reduce the fee charged for an oyster fishing licence in Lough Foyle from £300 or €400 to £150 or €166. Ministers were pleased that the agency's stakeholders will benefit financially through the introduction of those regulations, particularly in the current economic climate.

Ministers considered the agency's legislation implementation plan, welcomed progress in its delivery and noted that further regulations will require NSMC approval during 2010 and 2011.

Ministers noted the Loughs Agency's annual report and draft financial statements for 2009, which will be laid before the Assembly and the Oireachtas once the financial statements have been certified by the respective Comptrollers and Auditors General.

Finally, we agreed that the next meeting in the aquaculture and marine sectoral format will take place in December 2010.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development (Mr Moutray): I thank the Minister for bringing this statement to the House.

I condemn the assaults on Loughs Agency staff carrying out their legitimate duties. I am delighted that the agency is pursuing those and the illegal poaching of fish through the courts.

I note that the Minister mentioned the developing partnerships between the Loughs Agency, NI Tourist Board and Louth County Council on marine tourism. Will the Minister also advise the House whether the degeneration of partnerships between the agency, the Department and the

local fishermen was discussed at the meeting? Will she also advise of the final cost of the MMV Ostrea, how long the vessel was non-operational and the cause of its being non-operational?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I welcome the Chairperson's comments on the assaults on staff. It is important that we send a message that the House is united behind the Loughs Agency staff and the work they are doing. We were concerned to hear that staff had been subjected to violent confrontations. The chief executive reported at the meeting that, where appropriate, the PSNI and guards had been called and that prosecutions are pending. As the accompanying Minister said at the meeting, this is not a victimless crime, and we expressed concern for the welfare of staff. We heard that among the items seized was an air rifle. Some of the charges brought have resulted in custodial sentences. It may also be of interest to the Committee that agency staff had been involved in removing bodies from the river and that the agency is sourcing counselling services for its staff, in the event that they are needed.

As to the Chairperson's second question, on partnerships, a lot of work has been carried out in partnership with NITB, the Loughs Agency and Louth County Council. For example, projects at Mill Bay and Narrow Water are now under way. We are content that those partnerships are in place and that stakeholders generally work very well with the Loughs Agency. The fishermen recognise that the regulations developed under the auspices of the NSMC over a period of years have resulted in more sustainable angling on the Foyle, and many Members of the House and many members of the community have remarked on the benefits to tourism in an area that has been hard hit by the economic climate. We are all aware of the loss of the Seagate factory at Limavady and other big job losses. Tourism is becoming increasingly important, and it is hugely important that the agency works with partners.

As to the MMV Ostrea, I can confirm that the cost of the vessel has been in the region of £830,000. There had been some issues at the beginning, but those have been resolved successfully. The MMV Ostrea has a clean bill of health and, now that it is operational, it has carried out survey work and has returned useful information. I am confident that the vessel will be useful. It will greatly assist in the provision

of scientific management of the stocks in the Foyle and Carlingford in order to facilitate the development and sustainability of those sectors.

10.45 am

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister spoke of developing partnerships between the Loughs Agency, the NI Tourist Board and Louth County Council. Might there be scope for other such partnerships under the North/South Ministerial Council, whereby communities north and south of the border could connect to ensure that the maximum amenity of leisure provision and community regeneration is recognised? I am thinking particularly of the tremendous potential of Lough Macrory in County Tyrone. Perhaps a suitable partner from south of the border could be found through the NSMC when it next meets in this format.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I expected some latitude and creativity in Members' questions, but I did not expect it in the second one. However, I welcome the Member's question. It is unfortunate that Lough Macrory is outside the remit of the Loughs Agency, which is the Carlingford and Foyle catchment area, although I know that the Member is very aware of the geography of the area. However, his point is a serious one: communities could come together under the auspices of the Loughs Agency and create those linkages and partnerships. That can work, and we will certainly look into that.

Major projects using funds secured under the INTERREG programmes, for example, are set to take place at Gribben Quay, the Foyle Pontoon and at Meadowbank Quay. Those have been successful and important for the regeneration of the area. I do not see a problem if community organisations that do not fall under the auspices of the Foyle can create links in order to meet one another and find ways that they can tap into funding. However, that is technically outside the reach of the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for her statement. As usual, she has highlighted something that I am concerned about: the poaching of salmon. What is the Department doing to help encourage and promote angling activities across loughs and rivers in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member is aware that the

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is the key agency that deals with coarse and inland waterway fishing. The Loughs Agency is responsible for the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas and to that end has worked hard with our fishing stakeholders. A management system is now in place whereby, if fish counters are not recording adequate numbers of salmon, a temporary restriction can be placed on other types of fishing to ensure the retention of salmon in those rivers. It is important that the correct management tools are used; that the information is available to the Loughs Agency to make those decisions; and that there is sustainability of fishing in that area. However, there are other areas outside of the control of the Loughs Agency.

We hear about Atlantic survival and the rates of fish returning to an area. The research work that Loughs Agency staff have done has been hugely informative and interesting. It states that fish traditionally come back to the same river. There is a specific gene in the fish that can identify the River Faughan or the River Roe, which is fascinating. We are looking at ways in which we can ensure the safety and spawning ability of fish when they are in our rivers. The unknown factor in that is that we do not know when they will come back, so we have to monitor fish levels in our rivers carefully and ensure that they are not overfished. Concerns over the sustainability of coarse fishing have been raised with the Culture Minister, but again, that is outside the remit of the NSMC aquaculture sector.

Mr P J Bradley: I thank the Minister for her statement. She stated that the agency's new monitoring vessel, the MMV Ostrea, is now operational and has facilitated the surveying of the seed mussel areas in Carlingford Lough. In early summer, I wrote to the Minister with regard to the threat of disease to the mussel stock of Carlingford Lough. A fear was expressed to me that North/South co-operation was not all that it could have been. Was there any discussion on the very serious disease threat in Carlingford Lough?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I assure the Member that we are doing everything that we can to identify possible disease outbreaks in the Foyle and Carlingford catchments and disease at any level, whether animal, plant or fish. We take the threat of disease very seriously. I assure the Member that my Department has an excellent working

relationship with DAFF. Work is being done to ensure that we have proper controls to mitigate disease outbreaks. There is full co-operation. As the Member pointed out, if there was no North/South co-operation in Carlingford Lough, there would not be any kind of activity there, as it divides the two jurisdictions. Co-operation is absolutely necessary. I assure the Member that all is being done to contain every kind of disease, to ensure that proper scientific studies are done on those and to develop a sustainable fishery in the Carlingford area.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement, in which she said that the Council approved regulations that reduced the fee from some €400 to €166. That is certainly a hell of a reduction in the fee, and I have no doubt that the stakeholders will be pleased. Surely, however, that size of reduction must leave a gap somewhere else in the system? Will the Minister explain how she will fill that gap?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: When the regulation was set down, thought was given to how many licences would be issued. The number of licences has stabilised over the past number of years, and about twice as many licences as were expected have now been issued. To make it more affordable and yet to still cover our administrative costs in delivering the licences, it was decided that the fee would be reduced.

The agency has been very proactive. Rather than accepting a windfall, it identified the number of licences issued year on year and the amount of money that it expected to receive, and it decided that there was no need to charge stakeholders double the fee. There is not a gap as such; the agency has received the amount of money for which it hoped. More than that amount has been coming in over the past number of years, so it was decided to scale that back. If the number of licences remains on the current plateau, our fees will be covered, and we will not ask fishermen to dig deeper into their pockets than they need to.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is an important statement, particularly as regards the link between the two jurisdictions. Is there any indication of how beneficial salmon fishing has been to the tourism industry in the past year?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: There is a figure for the economic

benefit of every fish that is caught. I do not have that with me, but I am happy to provide that to the Member in writing.

Mr Dallat: I return briefly to the issue of partnerships. I envy the partnership between the North and County Louth. I am sure that the Minister and the House will agree that there is enormous potential in the Foyle and Bann areas of the north-west for partnerships with Inishowen, where the future of the ferry service is in some doubt because of financial difficulties. Will the Minister assure us that, in future meetings, there will be a focus on that area? As she said this morning, there has been high unemployment in Limavady, but there is enormous potential for tourism development, particularly marine tourism.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I welcome the Member's question, but I probably cannot give him the full assurances that he is looking for today because, although the NSMC meetings in aquaculture and marine sectoral format take place regularly, the Council discusses the areas for which it has responsibility. The ferry is outside the Loughs Agency's control and responsibility. Therefore, the matter has not been discussed at those meetings. The ferry remains under the auspices of the Department that has responsibility for it.

We recognise the importance of partnerships. As I said to Mr McElduff, we recognise the importance of working together. We have identified and shown that we work not just with tourism agencies but, as Members have witnessed, with bodies such as Louth County Council. We welcome any further partnership working that enhances the overall economic well-being of the areas under discussion. The chief executive of the Loughs Agency, Derick Anderson, and its chairperson, Tarlach O Crosain, are always proactive, but they are bound by their responsibilities.

Public Expenditure: September Monitoring 2010-11

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to update the Assembly on the outcome of the September monitoring process.

The starting point for this monitoring round was the outcome of the June monitoring round, which I reported on earlier this month. Members will be aware that June monitoring concluded with an effective overcommitment of £45.1 million in current expenditure and £10.6 million in capital investment. That overcommitment was a direct result of the £127.8 million reduction in funding that the UK Government imposed in the June Budget. Although the Executive have the option of deferring our share of the UK Government's public expenditure reduction until the next financial year, I am of the strong view that we need to deal with it now. The key issue is that, in the 2010 UK spending review, we will see a further tightening in the public expenditure environment, and we cannot allow that 2010-11 pressure to extend into the next financial year. In the September monitoring round, therefore, the Executive's focus has been on managing down the overcommitment, as opposed to meeting a substantial number of bids from Departments.

Before I go on to the outcome of September monitoring, I will highlight the level of reduced requirements surrendered and the bids that Departments submitted. Departments surrendered only £7.7 million of current expenditure and £18.1 million of capital investment in reduced requirements respectively. At this point in recent financial cycles, that is the lowest level of reduced requirements. Details of those reduced requirements are set out in the tables attached to the written version of my statement.

Three other issues that impacted on the resources available during this monitoring round also came to light. First, a recalculation of the interest requirement to service our reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing resulted in a further £2.8 million of current expenditure being made available. Secondly, the latest regional rate collection projection, which Land

and Property Services (LPS) conducted, showed a significant increase on the June position. That partly resulted from the extra money allocated to LPS in the June monitoring round. Given that latest assessment, a further £10.6 million has been made available. Finally, June monitoring identified a pressure related to a shortfall in our end-year flexibility (EYF) capital stock. However, after further negotiation with the Treasury, my officials have secured full access to our EYF claim for this financial year, and that frees up another £7.3 million of current expenditure and £900,000 of capital expenditure.

In addition to the reduced requirements, the Executive allow Departments to move resources across spending areas when such movement reflects a proactive management decision taken to enable the Department to better manage emerging pressures in its existing baselines.

That is to facilitate better financial management, and Departments that have made use of the mechanism should be commended for their efforts to deal with emerging pressures. It has also been necessary, due largely to technical issues, to reclassify some amounts between different categories of expenditure. Details of all those changes are provided in the tables attached to written copies of this statement.

11.00 am

The net result of those transactions, taking account of the June monitoring outcome, was to reduce the level of overcommitment in current expenditure to £16.7 million; similarly, the net position for capital expenditure resulted in £8.4 million being made available to the Executive for allocation. Against that net position, Departments submitted current expenditure bids of £77.9 million and capital investment bids of £83 million. Some of those bids reflected pressures that were identified but not met as part of the June monitoring round. Full details of departmental bids are also attached to written copies of this statement.

Based on the tight in-year position, the greatly reduced level of money surrendered and the need to address the £127.8 million reduction imposed by the UK Government this year, the Executive agreed not to meet any current expenditure bids. The only exception was a small allocation to the Northern Ireland Audit Office to cover a pressure in respect of depreciation costs. That bid was met because the Audit

Office's requests for resources are normally honoured automatically.

Members should also note that the equal pay issue is imposing additional uncertainty to the in-year financial position. Payments are being progressed, and, although my Department holds financial cover for the estimated liability, there is a risk that the outcome may exceed the current estimate. The Executive have agreed that allocations to Departments for equal pay will be processed in December, when the final position will be known. The approach, which was agreed by the Executive, resulted in a residual current expenditure overcommitment of £16.8 million, which will have to be managed in the two remaining monitoring rounds this year.

With respect to capital funding, £8.4 million was available for allocation, which allowed the Executive to agree allocations to six Departments. I shall draw attention to the two largest allocations: £3.2 million was allocated to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) to cover a shortfall in receipts associated with the planned sale of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) site at Balmoral; and £2.8 million was allocated to the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) for essential health and safety works in the further education estate in order to ensure compliance with health and safety regulations. In addition to those allocations, some relatively small amounts of capital money went to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), Department for Social Development (DSD), Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and Department of the Environment (DOE). Full details of those allocations are attached to written copies of this statement.

In total, capital investment resources were exhausted in this monitoring round, the outcome of which leaves the Executive with a zero capital overcommitment. In conclusion, the approach adopted by the Executive in the monitoring round has been, first and foremost, to address the residual pressure resulting from our share of the UK Government's £6 billion public expenditure reduction in this financial year.

I believe that, at this stage of the financial year, an overcommitment of £16.8 million in current expenditure is manageable. However, given the remaining financial uncertainties and the public expenditure outlook, it is necessary not to increase that level of overcommitment further.

The capital funding outcome left the Executive with no overcommitment, which we agreed was prudent, given the very low levels of money surrendered by Departments in the monitoring round. A less conservative approach would create a material risk that the Executive would have to impose further in-year reductions later in the financial year, when Departments would have little time to adjust. That is a risk that we were simply not prepared to take.

Nevertheless, the decision to adopt that approach was not taken lightly, since it left many Ministers disappointed. There are many areas in which we would have liked to have done more, and there are many ongoing financial pressures.

The upshot of that approach is that Ministers must now take urgent action to live within their existing budgets. They will have to identify where efficiencies and savings can be made and prioritise their spending plans to ensure that limited resources are put to the best possible use. That is true not only for this current year but for the upcoming Budget period. We are all aware of the tough times that lie ahead. It is imperative that the Executive work together to tackle the difficult financial decisions facing us. We must ensure that increasingly scarce resources are used in the best possible way to achieve the maximum benefit for the people of Northern Ireland. I commend the September monitoring round to the Assembly.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and apologise to him for missing the beginning of it.

The Minister said that, as a result of negotiations with the Treasury, an additional £7.3 million in current expenditure and £0.9 million in capital expenditure is now available. Can he clarify what the total level of existing current and capital end-year flexibility is? Can he now assure the House that the Executive have full access to current and capital stocks?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: At the moment, I cannot give the Chairperson the level of end-year flexibility that we have. I will put that figure in writing to her. We have been given the ability to draw down the money that was available to us in this Budget round. We will, of course, continue to negotiate with the Treasury to ensure that we have full access to that end-year flexibility. I am not too sure about the exact

figure, although I may be able to get it before the end of this item of business, and if I can, I will. If not, I will write to the Chairperson.

Mr Hamilton: Given the way in which monitoring rounds appear to be developing in this financial year and the concern that that will inevitably cause over public spending, what further discussions has the Minister had with the Treasury about the developing budgetary position for Northern Ireland in the years ahead? What devices or mechanisms might the Treasury introduce to stimulate the private sector in Northern Ireland, as the now Prime Minister and the Secretary of State promised before the recent general election?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I meet Treasury Ministers constantly, as do my officials with their Treasury counterparts, to discuss the current position in Northern Ireland and the pressures that we will face over the next number of years. I know that there have been suggestions that, somehow or other, we are simply rolling over and accepting the current position, but nothing could be further from the truth. However, we have to balance that against the reality, which is that we face a difficult position and therefore need to plan for it.

However, in discussions with the Treasury, we have, first, highlighted the unique position of Northern Ireland, its dependence on public sector spending, our position in the economic cycle and the particular difficulty that we have with the banking system in Northern Ireland. Those, I believe, present special circumstances. Other Ministers in other regions have done the same. Secondly, over the summer, we had discussions with the Secretary of State and the Treasury on the package to help to rebalance the economy.

Thirdly, there have been negotiations with the Treasury, which, I hope, will come to a successful conclusion, on the Barnett consequential that were imposed on Northern Ireland for the policing budget. The imposition of the Barnett consequential led to a reduction of £23 million in that budget. We believe that the consequential was not properly applied, and if that situation can be dealt with, not only will £23 million be available this year but the baseline for the policing budget will increase. Furthermore, there is the possibility of making a case to the Treasury for some access to the

money that is available for policing for national security.

We are continually talking to the Treasury about a range of issues and are fighting for every penny that we can get for Northern Ireland. That is the right thing to do while, at the same time, planning for what we know is inevitable.

Mr McNarry: I welcome the turnaround on rates collection. Perhaps the Minister will expand on how he will invest, in money terms, that significant increase in received revenue. Will he confirm whether he is content that all Departments have fully declared their reduced requirements at this time?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The picture on rates collection is improving. The Member has, quite rightly, been critical of Land and Property Services in the past, as I have, and that situation needed to be turned around. For a small investment of £5 million in the June monitoring round, we have been able to put additional resources into identifying properties, dealing with revaluations and some other backlogs. That has given us £10 million. I also point out to the Member that, although it does not have any financial consequence for us this year, the level of debt this year so far has been brought down from £157 million, which was far too high, to £121 million. That, of course, will have a revenue consequence in future because we will not have to set as much money aside for bad debt.

His second question was about the reduced requirements. At present, all that we can do is to listen to what Ministers say and consider the reduced requirements that they bring to the table. However, as he will expect, my officials talk to officials in other Departments, and the indications are that no massive reduced requirements are lurking in Departments at present that will suddenly come to the table in either December or February. We try to avoid that because, at the end of the year, it is much more difficult to spend the money. However, we are not aware of any huge reduced requirements. That represents a tightening of the fiscal situation and it is one reason why I was very keen to bring down the overcommitment as quickly as possible.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for his statement. In the previous monitoring round, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) identified an underspend

on swine flu that, if memory serves me right, totalled in excess of £15 million. The suggestion at that time was that that needed to be banked because of some financial rule. Has that money become available in this round? If so, is it factored into the figures?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The money that was not spent by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on swine flu was declared surplus to requirements at the end of the previous financial year in the February monitoring round. At that stage, all Departments — apart from, if my memory serves me right, the Department of Education — said that they could not spend the money. Therefore, it had to be returned to the Departments that made the contributions, and we indicated that we would bring it back in the June monitoring round. That has been done, and the money has been rightfully allocated to Departments. It was their money in the first place; they were top-sliced to make an allocation to deal with that incident. Once it was not spent, it had to go back to Departments.

Dr Farry: I welcome the timely statement although I suspect that it somewhat represents the calm before the storm. Will the Minister confirm whether he intends to clear the entire £128 million pressure during this financial year?

I come back to the point about reduced requirements. There seems to be a pattern that our flexibility is entirely based around Departments surrendering major capital schemes, and there is an issue with the timeliness of that. For example, both of the projects that are cited in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure figures are ones for which, as I understand it, the money could have been released some time ago. The Minister may wish to address that timeliness issue with Departments.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member asked about the timeliness of reduced requirements from Departments. That is emphasised to Departments regularly.

Indeed, I hope that it was a salutary lesson to Departments. If money is held deliberately until the end of the year, we may have to conduct the same exercise that we conducted with DHSSPS last year and say that the Department will not get to hold on to the money but will get hit at the start of the next financial year because we will require the money to be repaid. All Departments will benefit from reduced

requirements being identified early and returned to the pot so that the money can be used for the most pressing needs. That is a discipline that all Ministers need to abide by, because, collectively, it is in their interest to do so.

11.15 am

Although we can, it is my intention not to carry into next year the overcommitment from the budgetary cuts that were imposed in June. Given the tightness of next year's position, we do not want to add to that overcommitment any further. Thus far, we have done well to manage the overcommitment down to its current level, and I am hopeful that, by the end of the financial year, we can manage it down to zero both on current and capital expenditure.

Mr Frew: How does the Minister feel that the Executive are working together on the matter, and does he feel that Ministers realise that cuts will have to be made and that it is better to deal with most of the pressures now?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have emphasised time and time again that, in planning for next year's Budget, it is important that, first, we have a strategic picture of what we want to do. That includes consideration of issues such as where we want to direct expenditure, whether we want to raise revenue and, if so, how we wish to raise it.

In addition to those big strategic decisions, Ministers will look at their budgets and ask themselves whether they can find efficiencies. One does not find efficiencies at the last minute: some planning must be done. Ministers will have to consider whether they should give low priority to some areas of their budget and whether they should stop spending altogether on other areas because of the general direction in which we want to take the economy in Northern Ireland and because of the financial constraints that are on us.

A whole range of issues requires early sitting down and engagement among members of the Executive to get a broad picture of the direction in which we want to go, followed by discussion at departmental level so that we can allocate money to the important areas of departmental expenditure. As I have said before, we have not engaged properly as yet, but hopefully we will in the near future.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. As the Minister will be aware, the Committee for the Environment supported the Department of the Environment's September monitoring round bid and welcomes the small amount of capital funding that he has allocated the Environment Agency for equipment and for health and safety works. However, the Committee was most concerned that the Department had identified a need for additional funds to cover the costs of staff who have yet to be relocated from the Planning Service but who, owing to planning receipt shortfalls, can no longer be afforded. How will those costs be covered?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are two ways in which the costs can be covered. First, as I say to all Departments, they should deal with unmet bids by looking at their budgets to see how money might be reallocated and how changes might be made. As I pointed out in my statement, where there is proactive management of budgets, reclassifications of expenditure will be allowed, if the Minister makes a case for doing that.

The second way involves taking a bit of a chance, because we do not know what the picture will be. Departments will be capable of making bids in the December and February monitoring rounds. I understand that that leaves the bids until later in the year and that there is no guarantee that any money will be available, or, indeed, that bids that a particular Department makes will be given priority. The first and most important step should be to look at existing budgets and to decide whether, if something is considered to be a massive pressure, there are other areas from which money can be taken.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. In light of the commitment that Ministers and Departments must give to the Executive, what has been the level of buy-in from Departments on committing to the necessary cuts, based on the understanding that we must find £126 million or £127 million this year, never mind next year?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The good news is that we have found nearly all of the £127 million this year, and we are down to £16.8 million. I believe that we can and should manage it within the existing year. As far as next

year is concerned, I have made it clear that I am disappointed at the level of engagement so far. I do not think that we can continue without stepping up to the mark. However, that must be done collectively because, at the end of the day, the Budget has to be agreed collectively by the Executive. There is no point in an individual Minister's saying that we can progress with the Budget as much as we want but that he or she will vote against it. The issues are far too important.

People tell me that they want some certainty. They know that pain is coming, and they expect us to behave responsibly so that when we come to form the Budget, it will not be formed as some last-minute, thrown-together, cobbled compromise that wastes money. Rather, it should be constructed and presented in a way that shows some strategic thinking by the Executive.

Mr B McCrea: I want to follow up on the Minister's answer to a colleague, in which he talked about his communications with the Treasury. He was keen to emphasise that we were not rolling over and that we would fight our case. He talked about the particular banking requirements here. Will the Minister outline his assessment of the dangers posed by the situation that is about to develop at the Anglo Irish Bank, the potential failure of the Irish Government's bond markets and the possibility of their running to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)? The Minister said that, given the "remaining financial uncertainties" and the "public expenditure outlook", he had been meaning to examine those matters. Has the Minister considered them in detail? If so, has he shared those concerns with the Treasury?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member knows that banking is not a devolved issue. Therefore, the role that the Executive have to play in banking is more one of liaising with the Treasury in England or the Finance Minister in the Republic, and I have done both.

With regard to the Irish banks, I have met and will continue to meet and communicate regularly with the Minister responsible for finance in the Republic. As a result of those representations, there is now an advisory panel, which includes two members from Northern Ireland. The panel specifically examines the kind of issues that may arise as a result of the activities of NAMA, the Irish banks and the Northern Ireland economy.

We have two good representatives on the board, and they keep me informed. In addition, I continue to meet officials from NAMA, as I did over the summer, to discuss some of the concerns that the Member expressed about loans being taken on and the impact of the financial situation on the Irish banks.

The Member is right: the situation is extremely fragile. I also meet representatives from the individual banks. In the past two weeks, I met representatives of the First Trust Bank, which is a subsidiary of the Allied Irish Bank, to discuss banking issues. The Member knows that we do not have any powers to direct the banks. It is important, however, to highlight the problems, share the intelligence and try to find out what is being done to deal with the issues.

As far as the Treasury is concerned, that relates mostly to the activities of the Ulster Bank. The Department has access to Treasury officials and takes cases to the banking panel. The Department also receives regular updates on what is being done on bank lending, makes the case and tries to offer the local picture. Lack of lending by the banks is not unique to Northern Ireland. Indeed, I hear Members of the House of Commons complaining regularly about the activities of banks in England, Scotland and Wales and the lack of lending to businesses. At a Treasury level, there is some frustration, and the Department fills in the picture from a Northern Ireland perspective. Those are the types of things that it can do.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister raised the issue of banks. During a joint meeting of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Committee for Finance and Personnel last week, it was made clear that ordinary customers are not being well served by the banks. Many have been refused proper credit facilities, and, when they are granted, they are restrictive and sometimes punitive. Did the Minister raise those issues with the banks, and, if so, what was their reaction?

On his discussions with the Treasury, the Minister, although he may not have wanted to do so, gave the public and the Assembly the impression that he has accepted the proposed savage cuts with resignation —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister has not given a robust defence of the special circumstances in Northern Ireland.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member will be aware that I am not known for a lack of robust responses. Indeed, on occasions, I get into trouble in that area. Of course the case has been made; at the last meeting that we had with Danny Alexander in the Treasury, the case was also made by Jane Hutt, the Welsh Finance Minister, and John Swinney, the Scottish Finance Minister. We all emphasised the timing and depth of the cuts and the impact that they are likely to have on regions of the United Kingdom that have special features, or features that are not common to the southern part of England.

The Member must bear in mind that an acceptance of the position that we are in does not mean that we are resigned to it. We must accept the reality; we cannot bury our heads in the sand and hope that it will not happen. The extent may vary, but we know that huge financial cuts will be imposed on Northern Ireland and on other parts of the United Kingdom, and we must prepare for those. That is not resignation, rolling over or surrendering. That is doing the job that everyone expects me to do as Finance Minister. If I were not doing that, the Member would have more justification for criticising the position that I have adopted.

As far as the banks are concerned, the Member has rightly identified some of the issues that people have brought to my attention. Those include the arbitrary nature of the changes in the terms and conditions that the banks impose, the cost of finance and the unwillingness to finance certain ventures. The banks' response to me was that it now costs them more for raw materials and deposits, and, therefore, they are charging savers more. As far as the arbitrary changes are concerned, the banks tell me that they are obliged to give notice when they make changes in terms and conditions so that people have the opportunity to discuss those and to try to rejig them. However, stories have come back that that has not always been the case

They have also said that we are moving away from the days of businesses doing most of their financing through bank loans and, therefore, that businesses will have to look more at equity finance. That is the direction of travel that the monetary system is going in, and that will, of

course, be a big adjustment for many small businesses here in Northern Ireland.

The case has been put often. For example, the day before I saw them, the banks had met the Churches. A whole host of people are raising issues such as those which the Member raised with the banks.

11.30 am

Lord Morrow: I apologise to the Minister for not being here for the commencement of his statement. I was attending another meeting in the Building.

We need clarification on the cost of the PSNI hearing loss claims. I want to refer to a briefing paper that was presented to the Committee for Justice in August. Will the Minister outline the figures involved? A number of figures are being kicked about, and we need to ascertain exactly where all those figures come into place. We have been advised that there was a forecast for 2010-11 in which the cost of police hearing loss claims would be £29.8 million.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Lord Morrow: That is part of my question. Will the Minister outline what progress has been made between the Executive and the Treasury regarding the Treasury acquiring saleable assets to assist the Executive to meet the first £12 million of the cost of hearing loss claims? Will he confirm that the remaining £17.8 million has been provided for from the reserve fund? Will he tell us how much has been allocated or paid out to date?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are wandering well away from the September monitoring round. That is all I can say on the matter.

As the Department of Justice budget was ring-fenced for this year, there was not much engagement with that Department on the June monitoring round. Under the ring-fencing arrangement, the Department of Justice is allowed to keep and reallocate any reduced requirements it may have. All it has to do is simply notify us of that. As a result, I have had no detailed discussions about the spending that there has been on hearing loss claims this year. Therefore, I cannot confirm the figures that the Member raised. However, as he has raised the

issue, I will speak to the Justice Minister about that and write to the Member.

Mr McCallister: In his statement, the Minister spoke about banking. How likely does he think it is that the Irish Government will default as regards the Anglo Irish Bank and have to go to the IMF? If that happens, what would be the knock-on effect for us?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not going to speculate on what may happen to the finances of a foreign jurisdiction. However, from the conversations that I have had with the Finance Minister in the Republic, I know that every attempt had been made to safeguard against the kind of event that the Member described. Obviously, given the fact that a lot of banking in Northern Ireland rests on the activities of banks based not in the UK but in the Irish Republic — a point that we made to the Treasury in London — any disturbance in its banking system is bound to have a disproportionate impact on Northern Ireland.

Mr McGlone: The Minister mentioned the prioritisation of spending plans to ensure that limited resources are put to the best possible use and the need for strategic thinking. As the Minister knows, times are very tight, especially in constituencies where a high number of people are or were employed in the construction industry.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr McGlone: Sure. What measures are being taken across Departments to ensure that expenditure for capital schemes is made available quickly and efficiently to ensure that people are at least maintained in jobs with companies in the construction sector? I profess, at this stage, both a constituency sectional interest and a regional interest.

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

Mr McGlone: Will the Minister give me some detail about the police training college at Cookstown?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member has certainly got a press statement for the local paper. *[Laughter.]* I suppose that that is the main point of his question. You have indulged him, Mr Speaker.

The Executive will be responsible for £1.7 billion of capital spend this year. Not all of that, of course, will go to the construction industry. However, it is a very high level of capital spend and one that is unlikely to be replicated in future years. As for getting schemes on the ground quickly, we have tried to improve the whole procurement process by ensuring that it is streamlined and that contracts get out. My DOE colleague, Mr Poots, has, through the planning reform proposals, also sought to improve the planning process to ensure that there are no hold-ups.

Through improving the whole procurement process, we seek to ensure that schemes are not delayed by judicial reviews brought by people who did not win tenders. I have said the following before, and, indeed, I say it every time I meet employers and other people who are involved in the construction industry, but I need to emphasise it. It is one thing for us to change our processes here, and we should. We should look at our processes continually to ensure that they are not slow, cumbersome or causing delay. However, even when we do that, some people who did not get contracts enter into lengthy judicial reviews simply because they did not like the result of the procurement process. That, in turn, holds up projects. Both sides — the construction industry and us — have a responsibility to ensure that that does not happen.

The police training college is still part of the Department of Justice's capital proposals. However, there will be other demands on the capital budget, such as prisons. It is up to the Minister of Justice to decide which of those will be his priority in constrained capital circumstances.

Mr Speaker: That ends questions on the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement. I am sorry: Anno Lo is next. I apologise to the House.

Ms Lo: In many ways, Mr McGlone asked my question. I am disappointed that the Department for Social Development's bid for the social housing development programme did not get any money, as that would certainly have helped the construction industry. What plans does the Minister have to help that industry through providing public spending for schools maintenance, the Egan contracts and so on?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We can allocate money only if it is available for

allocation. As I pointed out in my statement, the amount of reduced requirements in the capital budget, which was approximately £18 million, meant that there was not a lot of money for reallocation. I must point out, however, that the social housing budget has been very well provided for by this Executive. Indeed, last year, we had a record social housing build of 1,800 units. I have no doubt that the former Minister for Social Development will take some credit for that. The fact that we have had a record build in recent years is an indication of the priority that has been given to the social housing programme.

There are other massive demands, but the Department for Social Development has not done too badly in the current monitoring rounds. In June, £10 million was allocated for urban regeneration projects, which will, of course, help the construction industry and help to kick-start economic development in lots of towns around Northern Ireland. Therefore, I think that the Minister for Social Development probably cannot complain. In fact, other Ministers have had more cause for complaint and have complained much more vociferously because they have not had any bids met in the two monitoring rounds so far.

Mr Speaker: That finally ends questions on the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement. Once again, I apologise to the Member.

Personal Statement

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has sought leave to make a personal statement. Before calling the Minister, I remind the House that a personal statement should be heard in silence. It is not a debate, and questions cannot be asked about it. I also advise the House, as I did this morning, that I will not be taking any points of order on any matter following the statement. I hope that is clear to all Members.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to make a personal statement to the House. I very much wanted to make the statement yesterday, but I was awaiting legal advice around some of the complex issues involved in this tragic case. On 21 September, I answered a question for urgent oral answer in relation to the McDermott brothers. In response to a supplementary question from Mrs Foster, I said:

“As I understand it, the doctor to whom Mrs Foster refers was not an employee of the trust.” — [Official Report, Vol 55, No 4, p182, col 2].

I subsequently learned that the doctor was employed by the trust. That error was a genuine mistake for which I take full responsibility, and I wish to apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House.

Private Members’ Business

Equality and Good Relations

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. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Ritchie: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges that there will be no good relations on this island without equality, and no equality without good relations; recognises that people who are socially disadvantaged suffer most from sectarian division; affirms the need for strong political leadership and independent voices to challenge government to progress lasting change; believes that government must tackle the origins and manifestations of sectarianism and racism through a robust Executive strategy; notes the publication of the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration; and believes that the consultation document fails to provide an adequate framework to enable progress towards a shared and reconciled society.

I thank my SDLP colleagues for tabling this motion, and, in particular, I thank Conall McDevitt, who leads our policy work stream in the area of building a shared future.

After three years of waiting for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to produce anything at all, I saw the first draft of the proposed cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, and I must say that I was deeply disappointed. The first draft, which was circulated some months ago, remains one of the worst documents that I have ever read. It did not mention a shared future or how we could progress towards one. It said little or nothing about the way in which we educate our children, the way in which we live in segregated communities and how evidence shows that, if you live in a single identity community, you are much more likely to be poor, unemployed, suffer ill health and early death. It did not even mention the only state agency that openly pursues a shared future agenda: the Community Relations Council. Instead, the OFMDFM paper

focused primarily on the need to correct bad behaviour, as if a shared future might somehow be achieved automatically if people desisted from certain behaviours. The paper's language and drafting were appalling. I am sure that it was not the handiwork of skilled civil servants; it resembled something from a George Orwell novel. It was as though the text had been produced by robots, devoid of empathy and intuition.

11.45 am

Although the next draft, which was pushed quickly through the Executive and is out for consultation, was slightly better, the central problem persists: it is a strategy for sharing that says nothing meaningful about sharing. The OFMDFM cohesion, sharing and integration strategy envisions a future in which there are still two separate communities. The height of its ambition is to have two communities that are still separate and unreconciled but are, generally, at peace and not attacking or abusing each other. That is what it means by "good relations". To my party, that represents poverty of ambition.

Although improved community relations are a prerequisite for building a shared society, they cannot be the end point. The Assembly must simply aim higher. It must set itself the goal of creating one reconciled, shared society that is completely comfortable with difference. Essentially, a normal society is one in which no one is in the least bit bothered which church their next-door neighbours attend or which party they vote for. Why can the Assembly not show that a normal society is its ambition? Why does the OFMDFM strategy fall short of that higher standard? Why is the CSI strategy so mealy-mouthed on reconciliation and sharing?

When one thinks about it, the answer is obvious, albeit disappointing. The truth is that the authors of the draft shared future strategy — the DUP and Sinn Féin — do not actually believe in sharing. They honestly do not want a shared future. They prefer the traditional division that affords them power in their single-identity communities: power and control before all else and carve-up before sharing. Therefore, the task that they set themselves was beyond what they are capable of achieving. That is why it took three years to produce the draft CSI document. That is why the current document is simply inadequate and unfit for purpose. Yet, it

is now being offered cynically to the public for comment.

Even as it stands, it is clear that OFMDFM Ministers have little confidence in what they have produced. They organised public consultation meetings, but they left it to their officials to meet the public. The two First Ministers and even the two junior Ministers were too busy to stand in front of people to answer questions and explain themselves. Incidentally, I have been told that there is a suggestion that the strategy has the support of all parties in the Executive. That is not true. I will examine the records of those meetings closely.

So far, polite society has been, well, quite polite about the new cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. People who have been engaged in the hard work of cross-community reconciliation and peace building have welcomed the fact that the paper has finally been produced. However, behind the scenes, I know that, in many cases, their blood is boiling. Their hopes and expectations have been dashed by what they know to be a cynical exercise by two cynical parties. They know that they are not being listened to. In the document, they see spurious detail about possible management structures and who would be in control of what. Alongside that, they see the document's utter absence of concrete proposals for building a better society.

Last year, when I held 14 public meetings to discuss how the Department for Social Development could advance the shared future agenda — 14 public meetings, which, incidentally, I fronted — I came across many people who longed for the normality of a genuinely shared society in this part of the world. There is no doubt in my mind that the public whom we serve believe overwhelmingly in a shared society, but they will not get that from this OFMDFM strategy. The absence of real intent to deliver on the part of the DUP and Sinn Féin serves only to conceal the real absence in all of this: the absence of leadership.

Although it is relatively easy for our joint First Ministers to grit their teeth and stand together to condemn negative events, such as dissident violence or racist attacks, where are the examples of positive leadership? Where is the reaching out across the divide? [Laughter.] Well may some of you laugh. When does it ever get past, "You get that for your side, and we will get that for our side"?

Last week, we saw the worst of that mentality when no one at OFMDFM picked up the invitation to participate in the papal visit to the United Kingdom. I said little at the time, because the Pope's visit was continuing, but I thought that it was disgraceful. Suffice it to say that it is a measure of the DUP and Sinn Féin's closed minds that we have one Minister who cannot risk being in the same room as the Pope, even at the invitation of the Queen, and another who is afraid of being in the same room as the Queen. Nor did they pass on the invitation so that our devolved Administration could be represented, for, in the carve-up world of OFMDFM, they alone are the Government.

We will not heal the deep divisions in this community if we do not get leadership from those who have the most power. Leadership starts by recognising that there is no credible alternative to a shared future. The maintenance of two better regulated but still deeply divided communities cannot be the answer. OFMDFM will have the opportunity to rewrite the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy after this phase of consultation. They know that it needs to be completely rewritten and to be supported by resources and a timetable for action. Despite the flawed process, the SDLP will submit a detailed and purposeful paper, which will help get the initiative back on track. This is an opportunity for all of us to move on and to lead and reach for the next horizon. I commend the motion to the House and pledge the best efforts of my party in this vital work.

Mr Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which the Assembly will hear from Mr Lyttle, I remind the House that it is the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

“; and calls on the Executive to ensure that a revised programme includes a clearly articulated vision of a cohesive, shared and integrated society and an action plan covering policies, resource allocations, targets, timetables and evaluation criteria.”

May I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr Speaker, and your colleagues for the warm welcome to the Assembly that I have been given and to put on record the honour and privilege that it is to be appointed to represent the people of East Belfast in the House? I am immensely proud of the constituency that I have lived in all my life. East Belfast is not only the

seat of our Assembly but is widely recognised for its rich industrial, cultural and sporting heritage. Names such as Harland and Wolff, C S Lewis, Van Morrison and George Best are world renowned, and, although some traditional industry in the area has declined, I believe that the enterprise, creativity and imagination of our people remain our most important resource in tackling social disadvantage and promoting economic development in this region.

I am aware that I follow in the line of distinguished parliamentarians who have represented the constituency with exceptional ability and, at times, no small measure of the feistiness and wit that are required to survive in this arena. I am sure that the House will agree that those qualities apply to no one more than my predecessor, Naomi Long, and will join me in paying tribute to the tremendous record of leadership that she had in the House. Naomi has been an outstanding Member of the Assembly and will continue to be a formidable representative for this region in her role as Member of Parliament for East Belfast. As deputy leader of the Alliance Party and as a former Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Naomi has been the strongest advocate of the need for a serious and overarching good relations policy to underpin the work of every Department and to drive forward the work of the Executive. It is leaders such as Naomi and people in organisations such as the Alliance Party, who prioritised tackling the deep division in our community and believe that there is more to unite us than divide us, who inspired me to take my own stand for a shared and better future on behalf of my community. It is pertinent, therefore, that my maiden contribution in the House is to move the amendment to the motion on equality and good relations.

The Alliance Party welcomes the historic opportunity represented by the publication of the draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration, and it welcomes the debate on that important matter today. Although my party will support the motion as tabled, I seek the support of the House for our sensible amendment.

I want to make it clear from the outset that the challenge of delivering equality and good relations in Northern Ireland must be much more important than any one party political agenda. That being the case, the Alliance Party

recognises the progress that has been made by local politicians in taking ownership of the draft strategy and the public consultation process associated with it. However, we must also recognise the fact that the current proposal is inadequate in some aspects and could be significantly improved. Our amendment sets out the nature of those inadequacies in broad terms and encourages OFMDFM and the wider Executive to address them in detail when the new programme is finalised.

The Alliance Party believes that the healing of deep divisions in this society is the greatest challenge for the Assembly. It has a vision of a cohesive, shared and integrated society, where people are safe and prosperous, have ample opportunities and are treated fairly and respectfully. We want to deliver a normal civic society underpinned by our shared values of equality, respect for diversity and interdependence. The critical measure for the programme must be what it will do for community relations in Northern Ireland.

We have spent approximately £1.5 billion on peace building in Northern Ireland, but that model is coming to an end. We need to take responsibility for the ongoing human and economic cost of getting this issue wrong. At a time of immense financial pressure, the fundamental link between a shared society and economic development should be a major driver of change. With approximately 70,000 spare school places and a crumbling schools estate, it is vital that robust education reform proposals are included in the policy. The establishment of a single integrated system that is shared by all children must be a priority. For good reasons, people in contested places are cautious about the education of their children. However, the delivery mechanisms that reflect historic interests cannot be the driver for our children's education in twenty-first-century Northern Ireland.

We must also not make the mistake of regarding community relations work solely as individually funded projects but see it rather as an ethos that runs throughout our system of government. However, I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the excellent strategic work of the Community Relations Council and to the many men, women and children who make their own significant contribution to improving community relations across our community, often in the most difficult conditions.

As I mentioned previously, past initiatives of that type occurred under direct rule, including, most recently, the shared future strategy in 2005. Although there was little wrong with that strategy, I am sure that the House will agree that it is much more desirable that local political institutions take ownership of the development and delivery of future strategies. The Alliance Party was, therefore, pleased to play a part in the agreement of a draft policy this year. However, it is worth recognising the fact that the current draft is an ongoing work and that significant concerns have been raised about its current content. The consultation exercise is, therefore, critical, and I was encouraged by the First Minister's remarks yesterday during Question Time, when he reflected on OFMDFM's record of responding positively to consultation recommendations. It is incumbent on OFMDFM and the Executive to take on board what is received and to amend the programme accordingly — indeed, to amend it radically.

12.00 noon

It is good to have a Government document that tackles issues such as shared space, shared education, shared housing, visible manifestations of racism, sectarianism, bonfires, flags, the cost of duplicated services and zero tolerance of hate crimes, and many of the key themes for actions are also in there. In that respect, the glass is half full. However, the vision of the document is weak and less developed. It is entitled cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI), but at no stage are any of those concepts well defined. Specifically, there is no affirmation of a shared society, and the underlying assumption of managing a divided society and separate communities remains. We are, therefore, in danger of having a shared-out future rather than the shared future that this region needs and deserves.

Cohesion, in particular, is the new standard in the field of community relations, and some very relevant work on it has been carried out in Great Britain. However, there is very little reference in the document to developing good practice beyond our shores. The Alliance Party is also wary of a hierarchy between equality and good relations. The document must recognise that there can be no sustainable equality in the region without a sense of solidarity, interdependence and sharing. Equality arguments should not be used to undermine good relations, and vice versa. We also regret

that there is not sufficient recognition of the economic and financial costs of continued divisions and of the opportunities that would come from a shared society. That is critical to understanding the full structural problems faced in the economy and to appreciating what will provide a real motivating force for devising a strong CSI strategy.

We need a clear vision of cohesion, sharing and integration and a detailed action plan against which to resource, target, timetable, monitor, evaluate and deliver that programme. The CSI programme must not be considered as just another document but a historic opportunity to make reconciliation, equality and good relations a reality for this and future generations of our community. Tremendous progress has occurred in the peace process over the past 15 years, including during this Assembly mandate. In order to realise our full potential, however, the political process must articulate a clear vision of a shared society and devise a robust action plan to address the ongoing human and financial cost of prejudice and segregation to our community.

Mr Spratt: Equality and good relations are a key component of any modern society; therefore I am pleased to speak in the debate.

For far too long, sectarianism and division have been a hallmark of life in Northern Ireland, and I welcome the First Minister and the deputy First Minister's considerable efforts to reduce and eradicate that cancer from our society. There has been much criticism of the cohesion, sharing and integration document: that it took too long to produce and that it lacks detail on timescales, actions and targets. However, this is a massive and important task, and it is critical to get it right. As Members are aware, the consultation process provided an opportunity to identify and address any issues that have not been included. The CSI document should be seen as the beginning of a very substantial process.

As I said before, Northern Ireland has been riven with sectarian divisions for far too long; it is a way of life for some people in the Province, and it will take a long time to change attitudes. That can be achieved only through a number of initiatives. However, I do not want to give the impression that work has not already been done to tackle those issues. Many organisations and, indeed, individuals have worked tirelessly over

the years to create a better future for everyone, and that must be commended. However, much of that work has been done at the coalface. The CSI strategy is a political agreement at a high strategic level, and it must be said that this is the first time that that has been achieved in the Assembly. That is clearly a major development, and it should be recognised as such.

As the deputy First Minister said, the clear intention is to set targets and actions to take forward the strategy and make a real difference. Those targets will be monitored and ensured by the ministerial panel, and they should be fully integrated with the Programme for Government and the public service agreements (PSAs). There is no doubt that the First Minister and deputy First Minister intend to follow through on their pledge to tackle the deep divisions in our society. The fact that there has been a consultation process and that there will be input from all Departments ensures that all interested parties have an opportunity to contribute to that vital and strategic policy document.

It is also important to note that the document does not simply focus on tackling sectarianism and racism but affirms that all forms of intolerance, including hate crimes, antisocial behaviour, harassment, discrimination, recreational rioting and interface issues are to be recognised as unacceptable in our society. That also includes attacks on people on any basis, such as age, disability, race, sexual orientation or gender. In respect of good relations, the First Minister stated:

"There can be no room for sectarianism, racism or any form of hate crime. Attacks or violence that are motivated by any of those are unacceptable and must be condemned. ... It is not only words of condemnation that are required but an identification of the causes of bad relations and actions to tackle the problem." — [Official Report, Vol 46, No 1, p23, col 2].

The concept of good relations has been in the mix for some time. OFMDFM has already provided major funding and worked with local councils and the Community Relations Council to achieve good relations. As I said, much has already been done to change attitudes. However, with the backing of the First and deputy First Ministers, we will have in place a high-level strategic plan that will have a long-term impact. If we are to develop the economy and attract investment from overseas, we must not allow the scenes of recreational rioting and interface

tensions that made the headlines in July this year. All crimes and violence that are motivated by hate and intolerance must be challenged.

I do not agree, however, with the motion's last statement:

"the consultation document fails to provide an adequate framework to enable progress towards a shared and reconciled society."

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

Mr Spratt: Therefore, we cannot support the motion that is before the House today.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. The motion and the amendment betray a lack of understanding of the equality provisions in section 75(1) of the 1998 Act. For that reason, we will reject the motion and the amendment.

The motion clearly suggests that equality and good relations are coequal sides of one coin; that they are both as important as each other. That is simply not the case, because good relations can be built only upon equality. Equality cannot and should not be built upon good relations. Shame on Margaret Ritchie, the leader of the SDLP, for driving such an agenda.

Let us take housing as an example. If we were to work on the basis of objective need, it might be shown, for instance, that more Catholics are on the waiting list and need allocated housing or that more Protestants are on the waiting list and need allocated housing. However, some people could object to having Catholics or Protestants living nearby because it would have a detrimental impact on good relations. The SDLP's motion promotes the idea of equal status for equality and good relations. Is the SDLP saying that, were that to be the case, housing for Catholics or for Protestants could be blocked on that basis? Where would that have left the Gildernews?

Mr McDevitt: If we are going to have a debate, it is important that we understand the difference between equality and equity. Ms Anderson seems to have forgotten the basic lesson of the schoolmistress who invites her children to take off a shoe and throw it into the middle of the room and then invites the children to blindfold themselves and pick up a shoe, and they do. They sit down, and the schoolmistress asks the children whether they are happy. They say, "No; not particularly. We are not happy." She

asks, "Oh, why are you not happy?" and they say, "Because we have all ended up with each other's shoes". The schoolmistress says, "But I did things equally. I treated you all equally. You all had the opportunity to pick up a shoe, and you now have a shoe".

The problem is, as with Ms Anderson's analysis — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McDevitt: As with Ms Anderson's analysis, that does not consider the fundamental issue, which is that you cannot decide equality until you understand need, and until you understand need, you do not get equality, and that is why good relations are so important.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is good practice that interventions should be short and to the point. *[Laughter.]* That is good practice not only in this House but elsewhere. The Member has a minute added to her time.

Ms M Anderson: I should have an extra two or three minutes. I appreciate that Conall McDevitt is a new MLA, and perhaps he does not understand section 75(1) and section 75(2) of the 1998 Act. The thinking and intention behind section 75(1) was that equality should always, absolutely always, take priority. Good relations — section 75(2) — will flow from that.

Equality is necessary; good relations are desirable. Equality is the primary duty, and I find it disappointing, but absolutely not surprising, that the SDLP do not seem to recognise that. What else would we expect from a party that opposed the MacBride principles? Perhaps the proposers of the motion, one of whom is the leader of the SDLP, are once again seeking to remove what their previous leader once referred to as the ugly scaffolding of the Good Friday Agreement — that same ugly scaffolding that exists to safeguard the rights and entitlements of nationalists.

Those protections were hard won. They were hard won — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms M Anderson: They were hard won.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms M Anderson: They were hard won, and nationalists and republicans can take heart that

Sinn Féin, and Sinn Féin representatives, have absolutely no intention of surrendering them.

I welcome the fact that the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy document has been published for consultation, a consultation that provides us all with an opportunity to strengthen the strategy. The cohesion, sharing and integration strategy is a cross-cutting policy, and, as such, it needs to be driven at the highest level of leadership. As an indication of intent, the cohesion, sharing and integration document proposes a panel led by our First Minister and deputy First Minister that will work with a reinvigorated racial equality forum and other stakeholder groups, communities, and communities of interest.

The consultation document should be critically appraised. That is to be welcomed. The junior Minister in the Chamber yesterday talked about how he attended meetings, and there definitely were such critical appraisals. I welcome the fact that for the first time the dialogue to facilitate the development of cohesion, sharing and integration in this society is, if the SDLP will read it at paragraph 1.6 of the consultation document, framed in the context of:

“equality and the enforcement of rights.”

However, Sinn Féin has been clear from the day that the draft cohesion, sharing and integration strategy document was published that it was not the final article, and we heard the First Minister make such a reference yesterday.

We all have an opportunity to shape the final strategy —

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

Ms M Anderson: For all the reasons that I outlined, we will not be supporting the motion or the amendment.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate Chris Lyttle on his maiden speech. I thank the Members for tabling this motion. I have got myself in a muddle; bear with me. The Ulster Unionist Party will work constructively — bear with me just a second; I had shuffled my documents. Thank you for bearing with me.

12.15 pm

I thank the Members who tabled the motion for doing so. Northern Ireland's recent history has been turbulent and violent. That has left us with a legacy of segregation, mistrust and, in some cases, open hostility. The Belfast Agreement brought us peace and created political institutions that have largely served to regulate our differences.

However, we have not taken the necessary steps to move towards a society that is genuinely pluralist, genuinely integrationist and genuinely built on respect for our different traditions. That is evidenced by the fact that we have more peace lines today than we did in 1998. More people live in segregated communities, and there is growing violence from dissident republicans. That is despite us having probably the most stringent equality regime in Europe.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes in a genuinely pluralist Northern Ireland. We believe in a genuinely tolerant United Kingdom, and we believe in building genuine respect and integration between all groups in our society. So, it is clear that we have a job of work to do. However, we must be aware of what is at stake.

We cannot allow our children and young people to repeat a history of segregation and intolerance. The motion is also right to point out that in areas of social deprivation, segregation is at its most acute. If we fail to get this right, we will be dooming not only those communities but potentially our entire community. Would any international investors have been inspired to invest by the scenes in the Ardoyne in July? It is that reality that makes the document produced by Sinn Féin and the DUP so disappointing.

The delay in the production of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy appears to be due to differences between building good relations and equality. It has long been a position of Sinn Féin to diminish emphasis on good relations in favour of an ideological, divisive and exclusive focus on the equality agenda. The cohesion, sharing and integration document does not provide any solutions to that dilemma. Instead, it promotes the separate but equal agenda. That creates a danger of furthering a factory of grievances approach. The culmination of that approach in the document is the potential abolition of the Community Relations Council (CRC), if two of the four options available are chosen. Whatever the

CRC's flaws, it has provided an independent voice on an issue that some politicians have often sought to avoid.

The draft cohesion, sharing and integration strategy lacks goals beyond the general; it has no specific action plans and offers very little on young people, housing and education. Action in those areas is crucial if we are to avoid repeating ourselves. The document is more about sharing out than a shared future, and I am concerned that it will lead to a Balkanisation agenda being pursued without criticism and scrutiny. It also does not do enough to integrate other minorities in Northern Ireland.

Reflecting on that, some of the language in the SDLP's motion is unhelpful. The SDLP appears to be riding two horses at once. Of course we all want a more equal society, but we do not want a "one for you and one for me" mentality to pervade in the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. That is especially true as we enter a period of much-reduced funding. The logical conclusion of the opening sentence of the SDLP's motion is paralysis and a stand-off.

The Ulster Unionist Party will work constructively with and for any legitimate group in Northern Ireland, and we will pursue a shared future that is not based on gimmicks —

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

Mr Kinahan: We will do that because we want a better Northern Ireland and because we are —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No. We will do that because we are unapologetic unionists who want a strong and positive union, and we will do that because it is right.

Mr G Robinson: Equality and good relations must be one of the most difficult topics in Northern Ireland, but nobody should have any doubt that my party and I are committed to equality and good relations for all in Northern Ireland. On 3 September 2010, the First Minister said:

"We are at the beginning of a very important process and we want to hear the views of people throughout our society on how we can build a better future for everyone."

That is a clear indication of my party's thinking on the way forward. It is also a clear statement

of the support that this side of the House has for the principle of equality for everyone. Everyone will be treated equally in the Northern Ireland that is being built.

It is sadly true that those who suffer most from inequality are those who are at the greatest disadvantage for whatever reason — disability, unemployment or race. The Assembly must ensure that inequality is not common in society. I am also convinced that strong political leadership has been shown. The fact that the Assembly has not collapsed over the past three and a half years proves that strong leadership has been given, especially by the First Minister and his predecessor, Lord Bannside. That is reflected in the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration.

As elected representatives, we must all lead by example, particularly when making statements to the press and in public places, so that we do not inflame situations, such as occurred recently in Coleraine. If we are to build a society equal for all, we must choose our words very carefully. It is most regrettable that Members who signed the motion did not reflect on the early stage that the consultation process is at. The motion does little to promote cohesion, sharing or integration; it does the opposite.

Northern Ireland needs a peaceful future, and the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is an important milestone in achieving that. If the party that supports the motion wants that state of affairs, it should not put further divisive motions before the Assembly but work positively to achieve the equality that it says it wants.

Mr McKay: I oppose the motion and the amendment, as my party colleague outlined.

Fundamentally, equality cannot and should not be built on good relations. The CSI document highlights that equality is the foundation of good relations and that good relations can only be built on equality.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a duty on public authorities to treat people equally, regardless of race, age, marital status, religious belief, political opinion, or sexual orientation. By making the maintenance of good relations a duty equal to equality, many progressive policies to tackle inequality would be vetoed. That would be bad for good relations,

or so some politicians in our community would argue.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way and I promise not to mention shoes. *[Laughter.]*

I ask the Member to consider that the problem that Sinn Féin articulates with regard to the relationship between equality and good relations is actually a misunderstanding of the concept of good relations, which has been used and abused by certain politicians. If we talk about good relations in a context of sharing, it implies respect for diversity, which does not threaten equality; whereas, if someone objects to something and employs a “good relations” argument against it, it represents a warping of the notion of a shared society and the idea of good relations.

Mr Speaker: The Member may have an extra minute to speak.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention, but different parties have different interpretations of “good relations”.

For example, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community could apply to their local council for funding for a gay pride parade or a public event, and local councillors could employ the argument that funding or holding such an event in their community or in a particular area would be bad for good relations in that area. Councillors would be wrong to employ that argument, but some would. That could — would — happen, given the views of some political parties.

Dr Farry: That is exactly the point that I was trying to make; it is a clear example of a misunderstanding of the concept of good relations in a shared society; it is an abuse of the concept. That should not happen.

Mr McKay: Equality should be safeguarded at all times; it has to be the cornerstone of society and must be ahead of good relations. That is why in this case —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way again?

Mr McKay: No. Two interventions are enough, Basil.

We will not support that; we will not support the undermining of equality safeguards in society, and we will not support the dilution of

the equality legislation secured in the Good Friday Agreement. Equality is the bottom line as far as Sinn Féin is concerned. Sectarianism and intolerance are still rife in this society, and we must ensure that an effective strategy is in place, and that funding is used effectively to tackle those problems.

The concept of good relations taking priority over equality has led to the consolidation and ingraining of inequality in some cases and has been used by those opposed to the equality agenda to undermine hard-fought equality measures. Some of the aims and objectives outlined are to be welcomed, as the Member for East Belfast Chris Lyttle said earlier. Those include zero tolerance on crimes motivated by prejudice and all forms of hate crime; working to eliminate attacks on cultural, sports and other symbolic property and monuments, including GAA halls and Orange Halls in our community; maximising the impact of funding on the ground; and encouraging shared neighbourhoods and eliminating segregated services. That is worth working towards.

The CSI document could be better. One of the parties involved in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is progressive and the other is not. Sinn Féin not only wants to see the LGBT sector —

Mr A Maginness: Who is progressive and who is not?

Mr McKay: It does not take a genius, Alban.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: Sinn Féin not only wants to see the LGBT sector fully involved in this process, but wants to see their concerns dealt with effectively.

Mr McDevitt: Why do you not include them in —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McKay: The CSI strategy will not resolve sectarianism and the prejudicial attitudes that exist in this society. One hears a lot of comments from the SDLP about the document, and it is critical of what has been put together so far. However, that is only the first step in the process. It is worth remembering that the SDLP had ample opportunity to put together such a document when it was in the same office with the Ulster Unionist Party. It did not achieve anything. We got nothing from the SDLP. It is all

very well for the party to come here and try to criticise us for what has been brought forward, but it has not been able to do any of that work itself. Shame on the SDLP for bringing the motion forward, and shame on the SDLP for trying to undermine the equality legislation that was secured after decades of hard work. It does not understand the impact of what it is putting forward —

Mr A Maginness: After decades of violence —

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr McKay: The SDLP should go back to the —

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr McKay: They should try to understand the impact of what they are proposing. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately during the lunchtime suspension today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first Member to speak after lunchtime will be Mr Allan Bresland.

The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Bresland: I want a Northern Ireland that is free from sectarian and racial hatred, where all are equal under the law and where people live together in harmony. Sadly, despite the improved times in which we live, tensions still exist across society and are often just beneath the surface.

The programme for cohesion, sharing and integration is out for consultation. It is a genuine effort to bring about the sort of changes that we need. I regret that the SDLP has felt it necessary to throw a spanner in the works by proposing this divisive motion.

I believe in civil and religious liberty for all, and I try to be a good neighbour to all. However, I am not convinced that those who tabled the motion share my commitment to those principles. Indeed, the SDLP's track record points in the opposite direction. The SDLP is good at talking the talk, but it is not so good at walking the walk. It is the party that joined Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party and the Green Party last October to demand that an Executive Minister sacrifice his right to religious conscience. It is the party that supported 50:50 recruitment to the PSNI, thus denying equality of opportunity to many capable young Protestants. It is the party that attacked my colleague Lord Bannside for exercising his right to protest against the papal visit in Scotland. It is the party that wants to deny Protestants the right to exercise civil and religious liberty on the streets of our Province. It is the party that says that we must hold on to the Parades Commission, which is a body that has a dreadful track record of bias against my community. I will take no lectures from the SDLP on equality or good relations. Before it comes to the House with its fine-sounding words, it really needs to put its house in order.

Like many people in Northern Ireland, I am concerned about the growth of the equality industry. Surely no other region in Europe has the same amount of equality legislation and number of quangos that we have in Northern Ireland. That is hard to justify on the grounds of value for money. More importantly, we have to ask whether the equality industry is actually delivering. The people whom I represent do not feel that their rights are protected.

As I said, the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration offers an opportunity for the way forward. It offers a way to resolve some of the outstanding issues. Rather than attacking the CSI strategy, let us use it as a platform to build on. I oppose the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful to Danny Kennedy, who has allowed me to say a few words. I want to dispel any myths that are going around here. I am not used to speaking to such a small audience; however, I will do my best.

I wanted to address my comments to friends and colleagues and to esteemed Sinn Féin Assembly Members. I am looking for them, and, unless Barry McElduff is hiding round there, I cannot see any of them. That just shows how important this topic is to Sinn Féin. Nevertheless, I will address some of the comments that Ms Anderson in particular made — *[Interruption.]* Hold on a tick. Here we go — reinforcements have arrived. For one minute, I thought that I would have to talk to myself. It would not have been the first time that I have done that.

I would like to put forward some really important issues. I listened intently to the speeches in the debate. I find it strange when people say, as Sinn Féin tried to argue, that there must be equality above all else. Surely, need must come into it. Surely, if someone is in dire straits and has an absolutely obvious case for help, we should help them first, regardless of whether they are Catholic or Protestant, white or black, from these shores or not. Surely, the whole essence of civilization and having a responsible attitude is to look after those who are in most need. I am not saying that equality is not important: I am saying that it is just one of a collection of needs that we have to try to address.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for making a contribution to such a small audience. Does he agree that we focus on equality too much? We have some of the most robust equality legislation and measures in the European Union, probably, yet we also have one of the most divided societies in the European Union. We are not going to achieve everything by equality alone.

Mr B McCrea: The Member makes the useful point that we should be looking at outcomes. Can we find a way of doing more than issuing just nice words? I heard Mr Spratt speak

most eloquently on the subject. The issue is highlighted by looking at the official position, which concerns how we treat people, regardless of race, background, sexual orientation or any other circumstance. Mr Spratt repeatedly said that we have to address such issues, not just by word but by deed. We have to show our society that we are prepared to work together, that there is a real issue about leadership being shown by those of us in the Assembly and beyond.

I take this opportunity — I hope that I do not speak out of turn with my party colleagues — to say that there has been a lot of discussion of late in the press about various issues. Certainly, Tom Elliott and I have discussed such matters, and I want to put it on the record that Tom works extremely hard in his constituency to bring communities and people from all backgrounds together. He really works at that, and anybody who tries to make mischief out of such things completely misunderstands and misrepresents the reality on the ground.

The issue that I have with the motion and the reason why I stand before you is to say that I believe absolutely in a shared future because I think that it will make all of us stronger. In another place, I argued that, from my political perspective, the Union is stronger when it is a Union for everybody. We should seek to bring people together in our tent to tell them that their contribution is welcome.

Few people have a monopoly on the issue. It is not something about which one party can say that it is the party of equality, of equal opportunity or of this, that and the other. It is about collectivism, it is something that we must do together because that makes us all stronger. We all felt a little sympathy for Danny Kinahan during his speech because we have all experienced not quite getting our papers together. However, Members who listened to what he said heard a first-rate speech that all of us could support. Given the opportunity, I advocate continually that we need to see leadership from the Chamber — genuine leadership — and some form of generosity of spirit. It is a mistake for people to sometimes try to make a party political issue out of a matter that is all-embracing.

Way before my time to speak is up, I will conclude by saying that we will support the amendment and the motion, but we will do so on the basis of the good intent that has been

expressed by Members in the debate. Perhaps, all of us could use language a little better; however, collectively, we are the better for it.

Mrs D Kelly: Our party will support the Alliance Party amendment, which not only adds to the motion but serves to highlight the deficiencies in the CSI strategy.

It is most alarming that reconciliation is not mentioned once in the strategy. It is even more alarming to hear Martina Anderson's comments. I am glad that she has now joined us. Where in republicanism was apartheid ever mentioned? They are trying to create a North that, according to their ideal, is separate but equal. Perhaps that explains to some extent why there are more peace walls throughout the North. Perhaps we should simply build peace walls around all our towns and villages to segregate communities, because that appears to be Martina Anderson and Sinn Féin's vision.

Ms M Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Not just yet; I will give way later. I wish to address a few other points that Ms Anderson made. She challenged the SDLP about what it has done. We have done quite a lot. Where, in fact, were Martina and her comrades in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when the SDLP was arguing for a reconciled North of Ireland? Where were they when we said that the only way to build equality and good relations was through peaceful political dialogue and not through violence? We welcome the fact that, in parts, Sinn Féin is on the same page as the SDLP today. However, it has performed more U-turns than the Iron Lady. Sinn Féin has much to explain to the nationalist community.

Sinn Féin also has much to explain to the section 75 groups that are not mentioned in the strategy. Sinn Féin cannot have it both ways. Either, as Robin Newton said yesterday, it is a strategy to deal with sectarianism and racism, or it is not. When Sinn Féin and the DUP produced the document, they said that it related to all sections of society and would create a better, fairer and more inclusive Northern Ireland. Yet, outside of their contributions and proposals, young people are abysmally and appallingly dealt with in the document. Victims are not mentioned at all. People who live in marginalised areas and feel marginalised as members of society are not represented. There is no mention of people with disabilities. The document contains no response on gender

identity and nothing for the LGBT sector. Indeed, women are excluded entirely from the strategy. Therefore, it is rich of Sinn Féin to point to section 75, when it is clear that it has no understanding of what section 75 is about.

I listened to Daithí McKay, who comes from a constituency that includes Rasharkin, which is hardly a prime example of how people can live in a spirit of good relations and equality. It is win or lose, and, currently, all the people of Rasharkin are losers, because their problems are not being dealt with. We are not giving political leadership, and we are not building a shared and reconciled society.

The Good Friday Agreement was about reconciliation and finding a better way forward. On behalf of the SDLP, I say that the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy should have been about the solidarity that must exist among all people who live here. We must have interdependence among all people who live here, because, without going forward together, we will not go forward at all. Therefore, the strategy must include everyone. As I outlined, however, significant sections of our society are excluded entirely from the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. I remind Members that it is almost a year since Sinn Féin produced its own version of the strategy following its little spat with the DUP on the subject.

In tabling the motion, the SDLP is intent on building a reconciled future. Margaret Ritchie, in her campaign for party leader, made it one of her main commitments. She made it clear that it was one of the main pillars on which she would base her efforts to take our party and the community forward. No voices from the wider society are being heard, yet people who attended the consultation meetings are champions of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

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

Mrs D Kelly: Sinn Féin should have listened to us a few months ago when it was making a mess of the parades legislation. It should listen to us now and it would not have orange egg all over its face again today.

2.15 pm

The junior Minister (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) (Mr Newton): I

am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank the Members who tabled the motion because it has given the Assembly an opportunity to debate the content of the cohesion, sharing and integration consultation document rather than some of the more spurious aspects of the issue that have been thrown around the Chamber today.

I will begin by quoting the document's opening paragraph:

"We have entered a new and hopeful period in our history. Our vision for this new era is that, working together, we will build a shared and better future for us all. We want to build a society where everyone shares in and enjoys the benefits of a more peaceful society."

It is a positive statement, which stands in stark contrast to the extremely negative attitude that the SDLP has displayed. The aim of the document, which is our aim, is a shared future: not separate, but equal. The strategy makes clear our aim for shared spaces; shared celebration of cultural expression; and shared neighbourhoods, workplaces and educational opportunities. Executive agreement of the draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration should be seen as a significant moment in our ongoing effort to build a shared and better future for all. I welcome the opportunity to reiterate its importance and to call on the Assembly, as a whole, to give its full support to the draft programme.

Dolores Kelly mentioned what I said in the House yesterday. I must point out to the Member for Upper Bann that reconciliation is mentioned in the document. I advise her to go away and read the document before she comes to the Assembly to speak on it. I emphasise again what I said in the House yesterday: the SDLP and, indeed, the Ulster Unionists, I am afraid to say, failed to produce anything during their time in the posts of First Minister and deputy First Minister. They could not get agreement, even on a high-level policy, so it is striking to listen to the leader of the SDLP dismiss the Executive consultation document with such disdain. Since she became an MP, she has been taking lessons in how to be more insulting. That is the way in which she came across. She was very professional in her insulting contribution. That negative view exists only in the imagination of the SDLP and has no place in this discourse.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the junior Minister give way?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I am sorry, but I have only 15 minutes, and I have to get all my remarks made.

I said yesterday that I had attended several of the public consultation events. Not only did I attend them, but I spoke to at least one third of the audiences at each event before it began. I spoke to individuals, table to table, about their concerns about the consultation document. Therefore, I will not take any lessons on consultation from the SDLP.

It is important to realise that the draft programme is intended only to be a framework document for improved co-ordination of policy across government and the community and voluntary sector. That will ultimately ensure a more efficient, effective and focused response to the challenges of sectarianism and racism. The draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration sets out a vision for a new era in which all of us can work together to build a shared and better future, a future in which fairness, equality, rights, responsibilities and respect are acknowledged and accepted by all.

Mr A Maginness: Will the junior Minister give way?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I have only 15 minutes. I agree with the Member for East Belfast Mr Lyttle. It seems that, despite his little time in the Chamber, he has a more thorough grasp of the document than the much more seasoned and mature campaigners on the SDLP Benches, who should be able to analyse documents and put forward arguments, not arguments that are somewhere out of the ether but arguments that are focused on the document and the policy. That makes it even sadder that the Alliance Party has tabled an amendment to the SDLP motion.

The strategy represents a high-level strategic direction, and, once we get agreement on that framework and take into account what we hear during the consultation — I expect to hear lots during the consultation — we will seek final Executive agreement and start to work urgently to develop detailed and robust actions in all the specified areas. Likewise, we recognise all the valuable work and the critical role that is carried out in very difficult times by the Community Relations Council. I challenge Ms Ritchie's allegation that the Community Relations Council is absent from the strategy. In fact, the CRC

appears no fewer than 16 times throughout the document.

Mr Bell: She missed it.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): She missed it.

Mr Spratt: Rose-tinted glasses.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): Rose-tinted glasses. I welcome the recognition by my colleagues Mr Spratt and George Robinson that the publication of the strategy has been a significant and positive development in our efforts to tackle the scourges of sectarianism and racism in our community.

Ms Lo: Will the junior Minister give way?

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I have already —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has made it consistently clear that he does not wish to give way. Please respect that.

The junior Minister (Mr Newton): I speak to all Members of the House when I say that intolerance, prejudice, division, separation, hate and violence cannot be resolved by the publication of one document. This strategy represents a high-level commitment, but everyone in the Chamber and the Assembly needs to work together with the community groups and with each other to continue to bring about real and positive changes on the ground. Indeed, that is particularly true of the party leaders. Peter Robinson, DUP leader, made it clear yesterday during Question Time that this document offers leadership to the entire community. Taking the negative approach will do no one in the community any good. Indeed, that attitude will create further divisions in the community. I do not know what the SDLP's contribution will be to the consultative process, but I urge it to make a positive rather than a negative response. As Ms Anderson said, the draft programme acknowledges that good relations cannot be built on inequality and that the promotion of equality of opportunity is essential to build good relations.

I welcome Mr Kinahan's contribution, and, for that reason, I am disappointed to learn that the Ulster Unionists will support the SDLP motion. I welcomed Mr Kinahan's contribution, which was to say that the Ulster Unionist Party will work constructively to contribute to this process. It is difficult to see how that party can support a motion with such negative content given that,

when Mr Kinahan was on his feet, he spoke very positively about supporting the process. I agree with him: we must tackle the deprivation that contributes to bad community relations. However, I reiterate to Mr Kinahan that actions and targets must follow agreement on the overarching strategy. If we are not able to reach and implement a strategy, there is not much sense in having targets.

I will respond to Basil McCrea's comments. The process has been about trying to identify need and find the appropriate actions to address the need. There is a need to urgently address sectarianism throughout the community and to encourage greater sharing by tackling the barriers to that. That includes not only physical barriers but those that exist in the mindsets of people who would engage in hate crimes, sectarianism and racist activities.

The motion affirms the need for strong political leadership and for independent voices to challenge government to progress lasting change. The draft CSI programme aims to do precisely that. It is a draft document and is not cast in stone. The draft programme sets out plans for the establishment of a ministerial panel, which will be chaired by OFMDFM Ministers and will include all Ministers. Therefore the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party, Sinn Féin and the DUP will all sit round the table. I assume that they will make a positive contribution. There will be key decision-makers from other statutory agencies and representatives of the community and voluntary sector, and that mechanism will be driven by strong political leadership to progress the work on what are complex and difficult issues and to ensure that it remains at the top of everyone's agenda. Members will be aware that we have increased funding for work to promote good relations and good relations practice by one third for the period 2008 to 2011. Funding for youth and interface workers has also increased by one quarter.

CSI is a framework. Instead of criticising the draft programme as a whole, I ask Members to see it as a foundation on which we can build a new vision for a shared and better society here that is more cohesive and in which we can respect and tolerate each other's cultural identity in a context of fairness, equality, respect, rights and accepting our own responsibilities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, the House should take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mr Stephen Farry will make a winding-up speech on the amendment.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Affordable Housing: Strangford

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the availability of land for affordable housing in the Strangford constituency, particularly in the Comber area. (AQO 149/11)

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that there are a number of sites across the Strangford constituency, many of which the Member will be aware. There are 33 new homes on a site at Dunsy Way, which is being taken forward by the Fold Housing Association. A further site on the Newtownards Road is being taken forward by Connswater Homes, which expects to start work on 12 new homes later this year. There are a range of other sites in the constituency where housing associations have expressed an interest. The Housing Executive and the Department are working with the housing associations to try to put those new homes into future work programmes.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his helpful answer. He used the term “expressed an interest”. What access are housing associations being given to secure land for such projects, for example, land beside Upper Crescent in Comber, of which the Minister should be aware as it is directly beside a recently completed development?

The Minister for Social Development: I am not aware of that particular site, and I will come back to the Member with the details. However, I can confirm that Connswater Homes has an interest in building eight new homes in Londonderry Avenue, and Trinity Housing plans to build 10 new homes on the Belfast Road. Obviously, that is subject to all the necessary approvals and appraisals being completed. All that complements the 50 new homes recently completed at Upper Crescent in Comber by Helm Housing. I think that is what the Member is getting at. The real issue is whether the

social housing budget will provide new homes to people in need and disadvantaged communities, and work for those in the construction industry who have no work. Will that budget line have a higher priority and protection in budget negotiations?

Mr Bell: Given that many in Strangford are facing the first elements of repossession, what advice would the Minister's Department give to people who are struggling with their mortgage arrears, particularly in relation to correspondence on a recent high court judgement? What support can be given to people so that they do not have to leave their homes and go into the social housing market?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his timely question. There are three pieces of advice. First, people who find themselves in mortgage difficulties should seek advice immediately. One of the great features of Northern Ireland society is the quality, range and expertise of those who give advice, especially in the independent and community advice sectors. Secondly, my Department, through a scheme run with the Housing Rights Service, gives advice to people in acute mortgage arrears, even at the door of the Chancery Court, in an effort to try to avoid repossession and to deal with the mortgage debt. Thirdly, on a number of occasions, I and my predecessor, Margaret Ritchie, proposed to run a scheme to try to help people in mortgage arrears. That issue was highlighted again yesterday by people in negative equity in the Village area. As far as we can, my Department, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and the Executive must try to scope out that issue to see whether there are any interventions that might help people in those circumstances.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister spoke about the Comber and Newtownards area. Will he comment on the villages on the peninsula? People in Ballyhalbert have been waiting for about 20 years for six houses, and those in Kircubbin have been waiting for about five years for seven houses. It is the small pockets where we have land —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McCarthy: When will we see houses on the ground in those villages?

The Minister for Social Development: I cannot answer specifically on one site or another at

this stage. On a general note, a large number of newbuilds will be built in the Strangford constituency in the coming year. The plan is to build 484 new social homes there, and, although I am unsure whether that will affect the sites that the Member named, that demonstrates that the housing need — it has always been about housing need — is being addressed through the Department's housing programme.

I do not deny that there will be pockets of need and general need in that constituency. Indeed, there are over 4,700 on the housing transfer list in Strangford, and, of those, 2,500 are in housing stress, with 156 in great need in Comber alone. What all of that demonstrates is that, whatever the top line may be from London during the negotiations for Budget 2011-15, the bottom line must be that those areas of need, be they villages in the Strangford constituency or elsewhere in the North, must be addressed through the budget for newbuild housing.

Warm Homes Scheme

2. **Mr T Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Development why his Department changed the criteria which allowed people in receipt of rates relief to benefit from the warm homes scheme. (AQO 150/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. He highlights a particular issue, and his question gives me an opportunity, either on behalf of the Department or the Housing Executive, to hold our hands up. There is an error, which is now being corrected, in the information that has been put out about the warm homes scheme.

In one way, the error was understandable, because it involved a complex and technical matter. Rates relief is given to people in the private sector who live in properties with excessive rates but who do not qualify for the warm homes scheme because of their income levels. Those who live in private properties and are entitled to make applications under the warm homes scheme qualify for rates rebate, which is different from rates relief. As a result of that difference and the misunderstanding and confusion that arose over it, there was, as I understand it, an error made in the information about access to the warm homes scheme. That error is now being corrected. However, a more important point is that the qualifying criteria that

were laid down in 2009 have not changed one iota over the past couple of years. Yes, I am currently reviewing the warm homes scheme, but the qualifying criteria have not changed. I apologise for the mistake that was made.

Mr T Clarke: Rates relief/benefit was one of the qualifying criteria for the warm homes scheme, and people in private homes who may be living in fuel poverty have been discriminated against because they cannot apply for the scheme.

The Minister for Social Development: As I said, rates relief is not a qualifying benefit or entitlement for accessing the warm homes scheme, the reason being that it is a consequence of high rates being paid by homeowners rather than them necessarily being on low incomes. There is a difference.

The warm homes scheme has been very successful, and I hope to be able to tweak and develop it over the next number of years. If money is to be spent on the scheme to deal with the up to 30% of people who are already in fuel poverty and the 40% plus who could be in it this year and next, it seems highly appropriate that that money should be targeted. The best group to target is those who live in low-income households, who are just beyond the threshold for housing benefit and who get rates relief. Targeting those moneys at those who are in the greatest need and on those levels of incomes seems to be a more judicious and proportionate use of resources.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I appreciate that the Minister has stated that he made a mistake, but he has not told us when that mistake will be rectified. That is an important point, because there are those, including elderly people in his own constituency, who are being pushed into fuel poverty. When will that issue be addressed? Will the Minister rectify the situation as soon as possible?

The Minister for Social Development: I did not concede that I had made a mistake: I accepted that a mistake was made between the Department and/or the Housing Executive. I am accountable, as Minister, and, therefore, I accept the responsibility. I may not have made the mistake personally, but it comes back to me in my collective capacity.

People are not being pushed into fuel poverty because of this matter. The qualifying criteria

for the warm homes scheme have not changed. Therefore, the mistake had no bearing on any individual application to the warm homes scheme. In that regard, the Member is in error. The real issue is that three factors give rise to fuel poverty; income, suitable home insulation and the cost of heating. Those are the three factors that drive people into fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is not a consequence of an error in a document. It is a consequence of those three factors.

If we are to have a Budget that is fit for purpose, and that lives up to the needs of those living in fuel poverty, disadvantage, stress, alienation and deprivation, the Executive have to make a value choice — every party and every Minister have to make a choice — that, when it comes to the warm homes scheme, we will not only protect the budget line but enhance it, so that, when we have a Budget, it is a Budget that protects those in need. That is the real issue. It is not a question of an error in one word; it is a question about a fundamental value choice. I hope that the Member, and all Members, will answer that question positively.

Mr Armstrong: Will the Minister update the House on the potential introduction of a boiler replacement scheme?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for that very important question. A boiler scrappage scheme was announced by the London Government. However, that scheme did not apply to Northern Ireland. During the consultation on taking the warm homes scheme forward, which finished last week, I put in a question explicitly about the boiler scrappage scheme. In my budget bid, I have said that I would like part of the warm homes scheme, which I referred to in my answer to Mr Maskey's question, to include a boiler scrappage scheme. However, any scheme that I recommend will not be based on the model used in England, which took a first come, first served approach. If there is going to be a boiler scrappage scheme here, it needs to be based on the broader criteria of those who are in most need and those who would enjoy most advantage. That is the sort of scheme that I intend to take forward, and I hope to make an announcement about that in the near future.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Minister give an assessment of how the warm homes scheme has contributed to the alleviation of fuel poverty?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for her answer. *[Interruption.]* Let me repeat that: I thank the Member for her question.

I can confirm that, in the previous financial year, because of the work of Margaret Ritchie, the Department, the Housing Executive and others, we exceeded our target and assisted more than 9,000 households with energy efficiency improvements. That is devolution working on behalf of those in need. At the time when people made their applications and were assessed for the warm homes scheme, they also got a benefit check. Therefore, as a consequence, there may have been a greater take-up of benefit entitlement by those in need.

In this financial year, £20.5 million has been committed to tackling fuel poverty. However, the issue is whether I will have £20.5 million, or more, next year, so that another 9,000 people, or more, can qualify under the scheme.

Egan Contracts

3. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Social Development whether expected budget restrictions will impact on the delivery of Egan contracts in the near future.
(AQO 151/11)

2.45 pm

The Minister for Social Development: We cannot anticipate whether there will be further changes to the in-year budgetary situation because there are still six months of the financial year to come, and there may be further budgetary pressures on the Northern Ireland Executive in that period. However, in the absence of further changes, and if we are able to roll out the Budget, and the Egan-style contracts in particular, as we anticipate at the beginning of the financial year, £30 million will be allocated to Egan-style contracts for a significant number of maintenance and repair works. Subject to that caveat, that is what I intend to do, and I anticipate that it will happen.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. I understand that the Minister met those involved in the Egan contracts recently. He is aware that any reduction in the money available to the Egan contracts would impact greatly not only on those whom they employ but on many small businesses that avail themselves of the moneys that come from his Department. I am glad that

he is not rolling over in the current climate of Tory cuts, and I hope that he will fight any reduction in his budget. I also hope that he has taken on board the fact that the Egan contracts play an important role in the housing sector.

The Minister for Social Development: I appreciate what the Member said. He will appreciate that, given that nearly 40,000 people are on the housing transfer list, of whom almost 20,000 are in housing need, my priority and that of Margaret Ritchie is the building of new social homes. I welcome the Member's indication that he supports me in protecting my budget lines; I hope that that sentiment will prevail over the next number of months and years.

I was pleased to meet the Egan contractors. I have ensured, and I make no apology for doing so, that the release of moneys for Egan-style contracts is conducted at a proportionate pace over the course of the year. There was the potential for far too much money to be released earlier in the year, which would have given rise to a situation in the latter months of the financial year in which there would be no money or new contracts. The release of money on a phased basis — £19 million of a £30 million budget had been released by the middle of September — seems to me to be a proportionate and reasonable release of moneys to provide the much-needed improvements to people's homes.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sé go dtí seo. Will the Minister detail the funding that has been available to the Egan contracts over the past two years?

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, the budget line is £30 million, of which £19 million was released in the first six months of this financial year. There is a balance of £11 million to be released. I expect that that will be released and that the full budget line will be discharged. That is on top of the £40 million that was released for Egan-style contracts last year. Given the situation on which Saville reported, namely that 0.2% of social housing in the Housing Executive sector was unfit, that is a measure of the Housing Executive's commitment to maintaining its housing stock and ensuring that people have homes of a decent standard.

Mr Ross: The Minister may be aware that people living in 40 or 50 homes in the Monkstown estate were under the impression that they would benefit from new schemes for replacement windows and kitchens this year. Those people have now been informed that they could be waiting for up to three years. I know that the Minister has agreed to visit Monkstown and meet some of those residents. Is he able to give any assurance that he may be able to bring some good news when he visits?

The Minister for Social Development: I went out of my way to ensure that I had the opportunity to visit Monkstown. I used to travel through the Monkstown and Rathcoole estates on my way to school years ago, so I am very familiar with the area. I am glad to accept Mr Ross's invitation to visit.

I will have to come back to the Member on the issues of replacement windows and the like, but my predecessor and I are not minded to go down the road of multi-element schemes for Housing Executive stock — the Housing Executive carrying out a large number of improvements to every property in a locality. We are trying to protect the budget lines that the Member talks about for new windows, improving home insulation, new boilers and new kitchens. Such budget lines are a proper use of the public purse rather than multi-element schemes, which upgraded all properties, regardless of whether they were in the same level of need.

Welfare Reform

4. **Mr P J Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the impact of UK welfare reform proposals in Northern Ireland, in the next three years.
(AQO 152/11)

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. It is timely, given that yesterday afternoon at 5.00 pm, I left my latest meeting with the Welfare Minister, Lord Freud, in London. The detail will be aired more fully in the debate that will follow Question Time, but there are two strategic issues and threats to welfare and to those who are on benefits in the North. In the longer term, it will be the outcome of Iain Duncan Smith's consultation on twenty-first century reform of the welfare benefits system. I anticipate that the fog will clear on 20 October, by which stage we will know where the balance of power will lie in the Department

for Work and Pensions and the Treasury on the future shape of welfare. I will reserve comment on that until the debate on the issue.

The second issue is the immediate period between now and the end of this financial year and the next two years before welfare benefit reform might be imposed in 2013. I raised a range of issues yesterday with Lord Freud, including cold weather payments, the change in mortgage interest rates for people on benefits, the extension of the 2009 mortgage relief scheme, which is due to end in January, and the migration of people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance (ESA) and how that could adversely affect people who are legitimately ill and on benefits. Northern Ireland is still in recession, and it will continue to be so until 2012. There may be fewer public sector jobs, and we face the possibility of a double dip in the neighbouring economy in the Republic of Ireland. Through no fault of their own, people are not in work; therefore how can they be penalised, given the adverse economic conditions in Northern Ireland? That conundrum, that inconsistency and that threat to people on benefits are at the heart of my negotiations with Lord Freud, Iain Duncan Smith and his colleagues.

Mr P J Bradley: I hope that the Minister does not ask me to repeat all that he told me. Will the expected cost associated with welfare reform be adequately reflected in the forthcoming Budget?

The Minister for Social Development: We do not know the anticipated costs for the roll-out of welfare reform, although we will know them in the near future. However, the question is appropriate because all the figures suggest that a big change to the welfare system would cost excessive amounts upfront. Therefore, if the London Treasury and Iain Duncan Smith get their way for a radical shake-up of the welfare benefits system, vast sums of money will have to be paid upfront to put it in place.

If something will cost that much money up front at a time when we have been told that there is less money generally, it seems that the inevitable and logical consequence will be more savings up front in headline benefit rates. That seems the natural conclusion of the conversation that appears to be taking place between the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions. Although the Treasury

says that it will fund a radical shake-up of the benefits system, it will penalise the Department in respect of benefits rates. The bottom line is that that will impact on a vast number of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister has already mentioned people on benefits who have problems paying their mortgages. A large number of people who get help with their mortgages and are in receipt of benefits have already been affected. Does the Minister accept that people's homes could be in danger? Will he explain to the House whether he intends to take action sooner rather than later? Obviously, we await the outcomes of various negotiations and talks about budgets, and so on. A large number of people are already in danger of losing their homes.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank the Member for his question. My reply has two elements. The first concerns policy, which I mentioned earlier. Yesterday, I argued with Lord Freud that the Labour Government's 2009 assistance scheme for people who became unemployed and had difficulty in paying their mortgages should be extended beyond January 2011, when it is due to finish. Furthermore, I argued that the reduction in the rate of mortgage interest that would be paid by people who are on benefits and still paying a mortgage — given that there will be a reduction of the interest rate payment to around 3.65% — would result in 7,000 people in Northern Ireland being penalised. I said that that was unjust, inequitable and would penalise people who are trying to keep their homes in a way that would put them under further financial pressure and result in the loss of their homes.

In respect of the second element, I refer to my previous answer. Dozens of people have been helped by money that we have put into housing rights to help those who, often, are at the doors of the court and face repossession. I believe that we have been able to help around 15% of people who have appeared before the chancery division to avoid repossession, but I will verify that figure. If it is correct, it suggests that that is a useful intervention. Let us build on that. Let us provide additional money for mortgage protection schemes, which the Executive have not funded to date, and for housing rights advice to enable people who get into debt to better manage their funds and to better negotiate

with their building society or bank to reduce the stress that they are in.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell me why much welfare reform attacks less-well-off people and, indeed, the National Health Service, which was the envy of Europe because it provided support from cradle to grave? It will now need to be paid for from conception to grave. That attack is aimed at less-well-off people in particular.

The Minister for Social Development: I broadly concur with that sentiment. Whatever spin the Treasury puts on the emergency Budget, the hard and cold fact is that a middle-of-the-road organisation, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, concluded that the emergency Budget in June had a disproportionate impact on the poor. Around four weeks ago, the BBC confirmed that research that it commissioned showed that areas of Northern Ireland and Britain that relied heavily on the public sector would suffer disproportionately when it comes to public service cuts. That is pretty self-evident.

The TUC's recent research confirmed that all indications, particularly reports that the Chancellor was trying to cut an extra £4 billion from the benefits system, would have a disproportionate impact on poor, needy and disadvantaged people. Therefore, I conclude that there is still a Tory wolf in the London Government, who masquerade as a coalition Government in grey suits.

If we do not measure up to the negotiation with London over the next number of weeks on minimising welfare impact on the North and maximising the budget, that situation might deepen.

3.00 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Development Programme

1. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the level of funding currently committed under axis 3 of the rural development programme. (AQO 164/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development (Ms Gildernew): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Resources to the value of some £12.5 million have been committed in letters of offer that have been issued under axis 3 of the rural development programme. That is across all six measures within the axis, including farm diversification, tourism, rural business and village renewal. In addition, a further £9.7 million of grants have been approved, and letters of offer are being prepared. Therefore, a total of £22.2 million has been committed, so far, in the axis. It is worth noting that in excess of £15.4 million of that £22.2 million has been committed in this financial year. Although that is good news, I am not complacent.

It is my strong belief that axis 3 spend needs to be increased significantly, and I am concerned about the slow progress of that axis compared with the rest of the rural development programme. The progress has been slow, despite the fact that we have made available a very large amount of financial resources for the administration of axis 3. Nevertheless, it appears that large numbers of applications are not moving to letter of offer stage quickly enough. Additionally, some applications are being withdrawn, and the local action groups do not always know why. All of that has led to a disappointing amount of funds going to rural communities by way of hard cash. That is not satisfactory. I have asked my officials to find out what and where the blockages are and to report back to me as a matter of urgency.

The Member will know that, when I set up the local action groups, I asked councils to look after the administration and finance. At that time, the review of public administration was imminent, and we were expecting that there would be a solid agreed cluster of councils, which would be in a position to look after the axis and to integrate it into a new and innovative local government structure. That has not happened. The clusters are a loose amalgam within the current 26-council structure. It is right, therefore, to assess the viability of continuing with such a system, and I intend to do so. My main concern, however, is to ensure that those funds get to the rural communities who need assistance, particularly in this difficult economic climate. I will look critically at the working of the axis. I have asked officials to produce the relevant facts and figures for me, and I will not shirk from the hard decisions that

will ensure that the funding gets to the people for whom it is meant as quickly as possible.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. She alluded to the disappointment in the rural community over how funding is getting to the people. What is the projected spend for the closure of the project in 2011? If all the moneys are not spent by the end of the project, will they be rolled over to a new scheme, or will they have to be returned to Europe?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I assure the Member and the House that I do not intend to hand money back to Europe. At this point, it is my absolute desire to see all the money identified for axis 3, which is £100 million, to be spent within that axis. Therefore, it is appropriate and timely to review progress to ensure that everything that can be done is being done or that we change things in time to get the spend out, if change is needed. I am also looking at the other challenges that exist in getting match funding from the banks, for instance, and at whether planning permission is a problem. I recognise that there are complex reasons why people do not progress to letter of offer stage, but I will look at those in great detail and do everything that I can to ensure that whatever decisions need to be made to get to that magic figure of £100 million will be made.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. How much of the money committed is for investment in farm diversification? How much has been spent?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am having difficulty finding the correct notes; that shows how organised I am. Gabh mo leithscéal, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise to the Member. Farm families have welcomed the opportunity to increase farm incomes through diversification projects, and the measure is becoming well subscribed.

To date, 172 letters of offer have been issued for diversification projects to a value of over £4 million. Projects are moving ahead, and almost £1 million has already been spent on them. That is where we see the benefits of axis 3, which include creating more work on farms and creating the possibility of further employment. Some of my best days out have been to farm diversification projects around all constituencies, where I have seen how

innovative and creative our rural communities can be in bringing forward ideas that benefit not only our tourism potential but the services that are available for local rural communities.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. She, quite rightly, identified slow progress. Will she explain how much of that slow progress was on the part of the Department? I remember from my time on the Committee that we had inordinate waits for the Department to make progress in getting money and investment out into the community so that we could see development and jobs being created. Can the Minister clarify whether the criteria were tweaked or changed by the Department during their evolution?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I have said many times in the House, I am determined to cut bureaucracy from my Department, and that includes in this scheme. However, money spent in axis 3 is public money, and the Member will know that it is money that comes not only from the Assembly but from Europe, and the Commission, as we heard yesterday, demands tight inspections and controls. I have given the House an undertaking that I will ensure that, if there are hiccups caused by my Department, I will find them, wherever they are, and — to use the word that the Member used — I will tweak the scheme to ensure that there are no difficulties at Department level.

Given the history of the scheme, the fact that the RPA was not as successful as we had hoped it would be has probably led to some difficulties. I know that there are very good people working on the scheme. As a European obligation, it is a bottom-up scheme. I accept that it has taken longer than I would have liked to get that scheme up and running properly, but I am hoping that the pace will take off now and that we will get more letters of offer out and get hard cash into the communities that need it most.

Mr Beggs: Given that axis 3 and axis 1 funding involves rural development and economic development in the countryside through tourism, community development, good relations etc and that, as the Minister has said, the RPA failed to go through, how is she ensuring that duplication — the structures do not match together — is avoided in local government and confusion is

avoided, so that we get value for money with this expenditure?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That is why I am looking at the progress that has been made to date. If there has been duplication, I want to know about it, and I will undertake a wide-ranging review to ensure that no unnecessary levels to go through are preventing spend on projects. I recognise that it took a while to get us where we want to be. If we do not see those schemes going ahead, I will be asking why. It is important that people who come forward with good ideas get the support that they need from the local action groups, the joint council committees and the Department to ensure that their ideas are progressed, they get the letters out and they spend the money to benefit not only the rural community, through making services available, but the rural economy.

The Deputy Speaker: The Member who tabled question 2 is not in his place.

DARD: Budget

3. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her plans for her departmental budget over the forthcoming comprehensive spending review period. (AQO 166/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the House is aware, the prospects for the public finances are very difficult, given that the British Government have made tackling the fiscal deficit their number-one priority. DFP has made a number of working assumptions about the level of cuts that might be needed to balance the books and fund cost pressures. I have been given the opportunity to submit bids for new proposals and pressures, and I have done so. At the Executive, we have already had discussions about the evolving Budget position. I expect that to continue into the autumn and beyond before the funding decisions can be made. We have begun to plan internally, but it is too early at this stage to say how we will deliver any savings that the Executive finally decide on.

Dr Farry: How much further into the future does the Department need to project to take into account the risk of a further EU disallowance in relation to single farm payments? Is that not a

major opportunity cost problem in the context of a tight public expenditure round?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The issue of disallowance was covered significantly yesterday, as was the fact that the impact of the disallowance will not be felt by DARD's budget. As the Member knows, we have bid for an amount, and the CSR period runs over four years. Many of us talked to the trade unions that were in the Building today about how we can fight cuts and try to work together. I know that the First Minister and deputy First Minister are in London today to speak to the Chancellor. It is important that we fight cuts as best we can. I assure the Member that internal planning is being undertaken, but it will be some weeks before we are ready to make those plans public. It would be imprudent of me to offer up savings that might have a knock-on effect that damages the rural economy when I might not have to offer up those savings at all.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail her Department's attitude to the possible relocation of its headquarters? I wish to flag up Omagh as a suitable location. I know that my colleague Martina Anderson has often flagged up Orchard House as a suitable location for any expansion project. However, Sperrin House and Omagh have a strong public sector tradition. Will the Minister outline her views on the matter?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Anybody who has ever been to our headquarters at Dundonald House will be aware that the building is coming to the end of its useful life. During the Budget period, I anticipate that new accommodation will need to be identified. That presents the Executive with an opportunity to address the recommendations in the Bain report on the relocation of public sector jobs and to consider the benefits of ensuring that quality public sector jobs are available in rural communities.

It would be symbolic and practical if the Executive addressed the recommendation that at least one departmental HQ should be considered for relocation, and the report identified DARD's headquarters as the most suitable option in that respect. However, I do not want to get involved in a fight between Ms Anderson and Mr McElduff about where the headquarters should be located. That is one decision that I hope that I do not have to make.

If relocation goes ahead during this CSR period, it would genuinely benefit rural communities.

Mr P J Bradley: As food production remains one of our key industries, what assurance will the Minister give that those involved in production and processing cycles will be given special protection by her Department in the forthcoming spending review?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I can give the Member absolutely no assurance about that, given the cuts that we are looking at and the savings that the Executive will have to make. It would be absolutely foolish of me to stand here and say that we intend to ring-fence a certain sector. We must look at everything. Nothing is not on the table, and difficult decisions must be made. It would not be right if I stood up here today and said that I was going to ring-fence a certain sector in my Department. However, what I can say to the House is that I am absolutely committed to protecting front line services for the benefit of farmers and rural communities.

Mr Kennedy: Given that it is anticipated that the Minister's Department will see a £10 million year-on-year reduction, will she detail precisely what savings she envisages her Department being able to make before any cutbacks impact on front line services?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As the Member is aware, delivering savings of that magnitude will be difficult for DARD, given that so much of what my Department does is either a statutory obligation or a direct service to our customers. The savings proposals that I will consult on must be realistic and sustainable, and it is important to get them right. I want the savings proposals to be as fully formed as possible before I consult stakeholders. I am aware that identifying options for savings could alarm customers and staff, and I do not want to cause concern by releasing material prematurely or by putting forward options that will not be needed. Rest assured that, when I am ready to release material, I will consult rural stakeholders and take account of their views.

3.15 pm

Single Farm Payments

4. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the

disallowances levied in relation to single farm payments.

(AQO 167/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The Member will be aware that I made a full statement on the issue of single farm payment disallowance yesterday, and I refer her to the detailed content in Hansard.

As I explained in my statement, we are working hard to resolve the disallowance issue in three main areas: challenge, compliance and enforcement. One important aspect of that challenge is an approach to the European Court of Justice to have the Commission's decision annulled. A critical area for compliance is the introduction as soon as possible of a revised mapping system, and the Department is also strengthening its inspection arrangements. On enforcement, I want farm businesses to know that it is vital that they ensure that their farm maps are correct and that they are claiming only eligible land. The Department can provide support and advice if the farmer approaches it, but, if the Department comes to the farmer to carry out an inspection, the penalties for negligent or intentional breaches are severe.

During the questions that followed my statement yesterday, I pointed out that farm businesses that have proactively notified changes to their farm maps will have the changes applied from this year only. Indeed, that is the situation at present. However, I want to add the caveat that the Department has an obligation to recover eventually any moneys due from previous years. It remains the case that any penalties that may result from such retrospective calculation are likely to be significantly less than would be the case following an inspection.

Overall, this is an important body of work, and we continue to work with farmers and their representatives to make the process better. I appreciate the support that my Assembly colleagues have given, and I will keep them updated on progress with the mapping project and the other disallowance issues as they arise.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her thorough reply. Does she accept that the underspend in her departmental budget that was redirected to cover disallowances could have been surrendered in monitoring rounds and reinvested in the education system and in health services?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Again, we covered that issue yesterday. It is not possible to identify some underspends early enough in the year, given that we are an outward-looking Department and some of the underspend was for, for example, animal disease. We had worked hard on trying to eradicate diseases such as TB and brucellosis. We had bid for compensation for a period in the future. It was later in the year when the work that we had done towards eradication proved to be successful, so we did not need as much compensation. Our Department is not the only one that had underspends, and we have been lucky that we have been able to use past underspend to deal with the situation. Over a number of years, all Departments have tightened up, and much less underspend is being announced at the end of the year now than was the case previously. Nobody wants to see underspends. We all want to see every penny spent. However, it can be difficult when we do not know what the implications of disease outbreak may be for the Department and its budget.

Mr Kinahan: I was concerned yesterday when I heard the Minister be rather indifferent to the potential of a fine of £100 million being imposed, as the money was coming from the Treasury rather than the Executive. Will the Minister detail what discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer or what discussions she is planning to have?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: My discussions on the matter have primarily been with colleagues in DEFRA. I say again that at no point did I feel that I was being indifferent to the House. This is a huge issue, and, on more than one occasion yesterday, I said that I regretted that, because of the way in which we have handled the situation, there is an impact on the Treasury's spending power. At no point was I indifferent. I know that that is not a view shared by my colleague from Fermanagh and South Tyrone Lord Morrow, but that is probably more of a constituency issue than a genuine reflection of what I said in the House yesterday. I refer the Member to Hansard to see what I said.

This is a serious issue. A huge amount of money is involved: £64 million in the past, and we have bid for £40 million as a prudency measure, although I am hoping that we will not use it. Therefore, the figure of £100 million is

not necessarily a fair one. However, I accept that even £64 million is an awful lot of money that is not available to the Treasury, and that is regrettable. I repeat what I said yesterday, and I assure the House that I have not been indifferent on the matter at all. I take the situation very seriously.

Fisheries Forum

5. **Mrs O'Neill** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the recommendations of the Fisheries Forum and how she will take these forward. (AQO 168/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The forum, which represents a wide spectrum of experience and expertise from the fishing industry and the marine environment, was set up to advise me on a long-term strategy to develop a sustainable and profitable future for the sector. I welcome the forum's report, and I fully support its vision of having a sustainable, profitable and self-reliant seafood and aquaculture industry.

The forum has presented a practical and realisable vision for the industry, and I am fully committed to helping it to achieve that vision. To that end, my Department has developed an implementation plan with a clear timetable to deliver most of the report's recommendations. Financial resources will also be made available through the EFF to ensure the effective delivery of the changes that are needed.

The report is not just about what government should do. Change can happen only through greater partnership between government and industry and between the sectors in that industry. That is reflected in the implementation plan, which contains actions for all stakeholders in taking forward the report's recommendations.

A key issue that the forum considered was the size of the fleet and the fishing opportunities available to it. There is evidence to suggest that the current balance is not right, and it has been recommended that my Department develop a decommissioning scheme to reduce the size of the fleet. I agree in principle that decommissioning should be examined further, and, as we enter the autumn negotiations on opportunities for 2011, I am very aware of the impact that further cuts in quota and fishing effort will have on our fleet. It is an emotive

issue, and many in the industry have concerns that such a scheme could have unintended consequences. I am particularly aware of the concerns of the fish processing sector and of the need to ensure that supplies of raw material are maintained. Therefore, I asked my Department to prepare a business case to examine critically the need for decommissioning, its value for money, the design of possible schemes and the impact that such schemes would have on all sectors of the industry.

I believe that the forum has provided a unique and valuable opportunity for the wide range of interests in the fishing industry to come together to tackle the challenges that it faces. I want it to continue to be involved in the implementation of the report's recommendations. I take this opportunity to thank the members of the Fisheries Forum for their very valuable work.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Minister for her detailed answer. What assistance is available for fishermen under the EFF?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The European Fisheries Fund is worth about £28 million and is available for the development of the fleet. Just under £4.7 million has been committed to projects so far. The fund's vessel modernisation measure is now open, and that will provide some £2.5 million of grant support. Under that measure, grants of up to 60% are available to improve fishing vessels that are less than 12 m long and use static gear. Larger vessels that use trawls and other mobile gear can receive grants of up to 40%.

A number of projects received 100% EFF support when they were undertaken by the industry rather than by individual fishermen. An excellent example of such collective action is the provision of £260,000 of grant support towards fitting the entire fleet with larger square mesh panels and cod ends to improve cod conservation.

The collective actions measure of the EFF remains open for applications, and the £700,000 small-scale coastal fishing measure will be opening on receipt of economists' approval of the business case. That approval is being sought.

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for the work that is being done to help the fishing industry, on which

my Strangford constituency is so dependent. What are the Minister's views on the quota system? Many in Strangford want to make their and their family's livelihood in fishing. Is the quota system fair, or could we be doing better for Northern Ireland? Secondly, if only £4.5 million of the £28 million is being used, is there any way to make the system less complex, so that we can get a better uptake?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: We are not dealing with the same timescales on EFF, and it has not been open for as long as the rural development programme, for example, which we heard about earlier. Therefore, the spend is getting out there relatively quickly, and I am content with that.

As the Member is aware, the quota system is not a scheme of our making, and it is difficult at times for us to fight our corner in Europe and insist that we need a quota that people there do not necessarily agree with. We work closely with scientists. They go out on fishing vessels, and they work closely with the industry to come up with a figure that is realisable, achievable and sustainable. We have to have that sustainability or we will not have any credibility in Europe. As I said, other Fisheries Ministers and I go out to Europe in November and December and argue our case, but that is a yearly process. Obviously, the main part of those talks happens at the end of the year, but we go out and put our case to the Commission.

The quota system has been difficult. As I said, the scheme was not of the Department's making, and it has been challenging for our fishing industry. However, we are committed to sustainable fishing communities, to the jobs that are onshore as well as offshore and to the benefit to coastal communities, particularly the three fishing villages. I will continue to work with the industry and scientists to fight our corner in Europe and try to minimise the impact of the quotas that are being applied to our fleet this year.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for her initial answer. First, what timescale does she envisage for the publishing of the business case on decommissioning? When will that report be coming back to her? Secondly, given the difficulties faced by fishermen and those in the fish processing sector in the three fishing villages in County Down, will she outline the discussions that she has had with the DEFRA Fisheries Minister and representatives of the

European Commission on the different method of calculation that will be used for quota allocations at this year's annual TAC debate in Brussels? Thirdly, what is her assessment of the availability of mackerel and its potential to our fishing industry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have a choice of questions.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I could be facetious and say "December", which would cover me. However, out of deference to my colleague, I will not do that.

It is hoped that the business plan will be completed by December. Discussions are ongoing, not just with the DEFRA Ministers but with those from the devolved regions and, obviously, the South. I have meetings scheduled with all those Ministers in the coming weeks and months. In a few weeks, I will host an event in Belfast at which all the Fisheries Ministers and the industry will get together to discuss this year's negotiations in November and December and the tack that we will take.

I did not hear the Member's third question, but I am sure that the House will want me to proceed.

DARD: Orchard House

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many permanent staff have been employed by her Department in Orchard House, in each of the last three years.
(AQO 169/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: DARD staff based in Orchard House comprise those in both the grants and subsidies payments and single farm payments business branches. Those branches are part of the rural payments division in the service delivery group in DARD.

Over the past three years, the following numbers of staff were employed in a permanent capacity by my Department at Orchard House: there were 145 in April 2010; 147 in April 2009; and 149 in April 2008. The figures have remained fairly consistent over the past three years.

Mrs M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. Has she agreed to any reduction in staff

numbers at Orchard House or to any relocation of her staff to other centres of employment?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I assure the Member that there are no immediate plans to reduce the number of staff as a consequence of the comprehensive spending review, nor are there immediate plans to move staff out of Orchard House. The Member can be assured that things will stay as they are.

Horse Mussels

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to protect horse mussels in Strangford Lough. (AQO 170/11)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Over the years, my Department has introduced various measures to offer protection to the Strangford Lough modiolus population, including the banning of dredging in parts of the lough in 1993 and a complete ban throughout the lough on fishing using mobile gear and dredges, which was imposed in 2003 and remains in place. Those measures already provide a significant degree of protection for modiolus against the most damaging forms of fishing activity.

My Department, along with DOE, has also developed a modiolus restoration plan, which has a number of short, medium and long-term objectives. Short-term objectives include a modiolus restoration project, which is being carried out under contract by Queen's — Queen's University that is; I knew that that would prick people's ears up — to identify and map modiolus in the lough, assess areas for restoration and to trial restoration methods. The modiolus restoration group is due to report its findings early in 2011.

That report will help inform the development of appropriate and feasible restoration measures to ultimately restore the modiolus biogenic reef to favourable conservation status.

3.30 pm

My Department and the Department of the Environment have also been working closely to finalise non-disturbance zones in Strangford Lough to give greater protection to areas containing the best remaining modiolus communities. The establishment of non-

disturbance zones is a requirement of the restoration plan agreed with the European Commission. The location of the zones has been complicated by the need to take account of the latest modiolus mapping data and by the need to try to reconcile opposing views from stakeholders about the measures needed. We have had draft legislation ready since last September to introduce sea-fishing exclusion zones, and the Bill will quickly be introduced as soon as the location of non-disturbance zones is finalised.

Once we have acted to introduce fishing exclusion zones — the Member will not have a chance to ask a supplementary question, so I am giving him my whole answer — it will be for other Departments to assess the impact of activities for which they are responsible and take action, or introduce appropriate measures if modiolus are affected. I have spoken to other Ministers about that.

My Department has also worked closely with the Strangford Lough Fishermen's Association. I will tell you what: I will give it up at that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have anticipated well, Minister. There is no time for the Member to ask a supplementary question. That concludes Question Time.

Private Members' Business

Equality and Good Relations

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges that there will be no good relations on this island without equality, and no equality without good relations; recognises that people who are socially disadvantaged suffer most from sectarian division; affirms the need for strong political leadership and independent voices to challenge government to progress lasting change; believes that government must tackle the origins and manifestations of sectarianism and racism through a robust Executive strategy; notes the publication of the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration; and believes that the consultation document fails to provide an adequate framework to enable progress towards a shared and reconciled society. — [Ms Ritchie.]

Which amendment was:

At end insert

“; and calls on the Executive to ensure that a revised programme includes a clearly articulated vision of a cohesive, shared and integrated society and an action plan covering policies, resource allocations, targets, timetables and evaluation criteria.” — [Mr Lyttle.]

Dr Farry: I am tempted to defend good relations for horse mussels.

I declare an interest as a member of the Community Relations Council (CRC). I also wish to set the record straight, in that the CRC is not a state body but is independent. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. Allow the Member to be heard.

Dr Farry: Independence for the CRC is not one of the options for the delivery mechanisms.

The Alliance Party supports the SDLP's motion and welcomes the comments that Margaret Ritchie and other Members made about moving beyond the concept of the two communities. We encourage the SDLP to follow through on that, particularly on matters such as Assembly designation and how we monitor ourselves as a society.

To be fair to the SDLP, concerning the attack from the Ulster Unionists as to the intent of the wording of the motion, I do not think that the motion was aimed at achieving a separate

but equal society. I am sure that the SDLP will reinforce that point when winding on the motion.

I welcome Chris Lyttle's maiden speech, which was very well received by the House. Of course, he has already made numerous interventions and asked many questions.

Let me be clear about the Alliance Party's position. We respect the progress that has been made on the issue. However, although we recognise that there are some very positive themes in the CSI document as it stands, it is flawed in many respects. Our amendment adds to the SDLP's motion by teasing out what those flaws are. They are primarily a weak vision and the lack of an action plan, including all the various elements that one might expect to find in such a plan. It is our hope that the consultation exercise will be treated seriously by the Office of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the rest of the Executive, and that the responses to the consultation will be reflected in a final document.

We are not rejecting the CSI programme — far from it. It is a floor on which to build, but there is a great deal of work to be done to make sure that we get the house right.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Far be it from me to discourage conversation between Members, but I need to hear the Member speak.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Dr Farry: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I note Jimmy Spratt's remark that this is the beginning of a process and that it is about achieving political agreement at the highest strategic level. However, we should not settle for something weak and based on that perspective. We acknowledge what has happened. All past initiatives on good relations occurred under direct rule — integrated education, the Community Relations Council and A Shared Future — but it is better that we have ownership of the development and delivery of policy through our own institutions.

There was nothing wrong with A Shared Future, but we accept that, when they assumed office as part of the restoration of devolution, the DUP and Sinn Féin wanted to shape their own document. That is democracy. The problem has been the three years of drift. It is not acceptable to have a strategic vacuum and to have

independent decisions taken by Ministers over funding and over what can be done. We need a proper, robust framework. We must push on.

We welcomed the agreement between the DUP and Sinn Féin in February, but what was agreed was a reconciliation of those parties' positions. The Executive as a whole released the document for consultation in July. It is important to make it clear that a number of parties had reservations about the content at that stage.

I welcome the comments made by Danny Kinahan and the Ulster Unionists, particularly those warning of the dangers of a Balkanised society. Again, there is a challenge for the UUP to follow through on that. I hope that, under the leadership of Tom Elliott, who I congratulate, they will do so.

I was concerned about some of the comments made by representatives of Sinn Féin. Martina Anderson said that equality could not be built on good relations. If that is true, it is a profoundly worrying statement of intent from Sinn Féin. I fear that the concept of good relations coming from that quarter has been misunderstood, and we were trying to tease that out. Sinn Féin seems to regard good relations as being something cited to stop people exercising their rights and culture in case it upsets someone. The same thing happened in Switzerland with the referendum that banned the building of minarets, because it was viewed as a threat to cohesion. That is wrong. Good relations are about a shared society; not a society of unequals. To the Alliance Party and many others, equality and good relations are completely interdependent. I dare say that the situation would be helped if OFMDFM would define what it means by "good relations", "cohesion", "sharing" and "integration".

The debate is an important one, and it is important that we take heed of the consultation and, as a government and an Assembly, reflect the views of the people. We must ensure that we follow the lead set by the people of Northern Ireland who want to live in a shared society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McDevitt: I thank all Members who participated in the debate, whatever their argument. The Assembly is meant to be built on the principles of partnership and reconciliation. This great House on a hill stands out to many of our younger generation as a beacon to a new

North and a new Ireland, yet, inside these halls, too many cannot seem to shake off the mistrust of generations. Despite hearing some very positive contributions today, we should all reflect on the fact that some people's contributions have been guided more by mistrust of the past than by a positive vision for tomorrow.

Sectarianism and the legacy of conflict linger, even here in this Chamber. Some days, the politics of division chokes our work. Sometimes, despite our diversity, it gets in the way of us being able to envisage a shared and better region.

I met some young men and women in the Great Hall just over an hour ago. They did not come here looking for a history lesson from one of the newer MLAs. They wanted to know what we were doing about education and jobs. They wanted to know what we were doing to protect their identity but celebrate what we share, and yet I had to admit that, all too often, what they hear coming from this Chamber is not talk of those things but of the past and, unfortunately, of a future built on the worst prejudice of that past. Many of us will have days when we wake up and think that we could do that generation a much better service than we achieve.

Minister Newton and Allan Bresland spoke about the need for leadership, but leadership must be about more than just being a gatekeeper to your community. Protectionism in any form feeds prejudice, blocks partnership and prevents leaders from envisaging a better future with a common goal of sharing with respect and an understanding that equality and good relations are both necessary conditions for trust and reconciliation.

That thinking is particularly evident in the proposed cohesion, sharing and integration strategy that we have been debating this afternoon. I agree with George Robinson, who said that he was committed to equality and good relations, but the problem with the document before us is that it ignores the basic reality that there can be no equality without good relations, and no good relations without equality.

Ms M Anderson: Shame on you.

Mr McDevitt: That is not a statement of shame but of proud confidence, because good relations, to me, mean solidarity. Good relations mean having the courage to understand that my rights come with some pretty big responsibilities

that I owe to fellow men and women. I must understand that there are people with whom I share any space — this space, this island, these islands — who have different needs from me. I must not simply look at them, decide that a “two for you, two for me” solution will meet my needs and theirs and try to convince myself that that is an act of solidarity. That is no act of solidarity; it is an act of selfishness. That is the issue at the heart of the debate, and it is the one issue that one party in the Chamber chooses to ignore.

Good relations are about solidarity, trust, inclusion and charity. I agree with Mr Farry that we should properly define “good relations” in the document. If we do, good relations will become the basis on which we can move forward. Paragraph 13 of the Good Friday Agreement states:

“The participants recognise and value the work being done by many organisations to develop reconciliation and mutual understanding and respect between and within communities and traditions, in Northern Ireland and between North and South, and they see such work as having a vital role in consolidating peace and political agreement. Accordingly, they pledge their continuing support to such organisations and will positively examine the case for enhanced financial assistance for the work of reconciliation. An essential aspect of the reconciliation process is the promotion of a culture of tolerance at every level of society, including initiatives to facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing.”

That is what we mean. That is not a statement of shame. Those are the words that the overwhelming majority of the people of this island endorsed. They are a reflection of modern Irish republicanism and the most positive expression of modern Ulster unionism. That is what the House should build on, not reject.

The strategy does not tackle the real issue. Instead, it proposes a bureaucratic maze to cover up the lack of strategy. At a time when we should be focused on tackling the cost of division, which is estimated at more than £1 billion a year, we are being offered a costly package of new panels, groups, action plans and funders' contracts. I will give Caitríona Ruane this: she offered up some savings this year. The only problem is that she offered them up from her community relations budget.

To ignore the link between equality and good relations is a denial of the real challenge that is posed by sectarianism and an abdication of the politics that sent us here. As Danny Kinahan pointed out so eloquently, it is equally dangerous to ignore the correlation between areas of social disadvantage and high levels of sectarian conflict. The First Minister and deputy First Minister's shelves creak under the weight of expensive research into the complex causes, impacts and outcomes of such multiple disadvantages. However, none of that thinking is evident in the strategy. It reminds us of Albert Einstein's definition of insanity as:

“doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Junior Minister Newton has been left alone. I hope that junior Minister Kelly has not been taken unwell. If he has, I am sure that the House will want to extend its best wishes to him. If he has not been taken unwell, he has chosen to absent himself from the debate. That is a true signal of what a shared future would look like under a DUP/Sinn Féin partnership Government. From coequal office, in which they are joint junior Ministers, only one has bothered to turn up. Mr Newton, left alone, will ask us to do the same thing again and again and to expect a different outcome.

We did not come here simply to oppose. We came here because we believe that, over the past decade, much good work has been done to try to understand better how to build a shared society. Such work recognises some of the following cross-cutting concepts and principles:

“the management of diversity by policy makers and politicians will be of the utmost importance in the immediate years ahead ... policy makers should work proactively, garnering societal diversity for the good of all society ... it is important that a ‘language’ of diversity is taken further, not just for semantic purposes, but rather to underpin policy and provide a public discourse that will aid achievement.”

The report in question also states that we should “no longer be consumed” by the two-community analysis of our problem.

Those are not my words. They were written by Dr Billy Leonard in his academic years, in 2001. I just wish that he could have a conversation —

3.45 pm

Mr Leonard: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: Yes, I will. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Leonard: This is —

Mr Storey: Orangeman.

Mr Leonard: Republican: that is the label. OK.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. All remarks must be made through the Chair; otherwise, some people may find that they will not be here for the vote.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Through the Chair, you got the label wrong: republican. Will Mr McDevitt accept that those written words do not automatically rubber-stamp the view that he is taking today?

Mr McDevitt: I will take my extra speaking time.

Mr Storey: You do not get extra time.

Mr Devitt: I do not get extra time? Unbelievable.

I never suggested that they did, but I know this: they are words that make some sense. If those words were reflected in the document that we are debating, it would be in my opinion, and, I hope, in Dr Leonard's too, a better document. Mr Deputy Speaker, in the brief time available to me —

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have, literally, eight seconds. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McDevitt: May I just thank Members for coming to the House today? I commend the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is now up.
[Interruption.]

Order, please. I am glad to see everyone smiling again.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 30; Noes 56.

AYES

Mr Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mrs M Bradley, Mr P J Bradley, Mr Durkan, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Gallagher, Mr Gardiner,

Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Chris Lyttle, Mr A Maginness, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGlone, Mr Neeson, Mr O'Loan, Mr P Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Mr K Robinson, Mr Savage, Mr B Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs D Kelly and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Mr Adams, Mr S Anderson, Ms Anderson, Lord Bannside, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Mr Brady, Mr Bresland, Lord Browne, Mr Buchanan, Mr Butler, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Simpson Gibson, Ms Gildernew, Mr Givan, Mr Hamilton, Mr W Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Leonard, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mrs McGill, Mr McHugh, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Molloy, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr S Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Bresland and Mr McKay.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived.

4.00 pm

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

Private Members' Business

Welfare Reform

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

Mr Hamilton: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges Northern Ireland's high dependency on social security benefits; supports reforms which are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Department for Work and Pensions, stressing the need for the special social and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland to be carefully considered and urging the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact on Northern Ireland.

This is one of those very rare motions that I am involved in during which I will not assail the Minister or attack anyone but will try to encourage him. I am going weak and soft; there is something wrong. I am sure that I will find some opportunity at a later stage to attack the Minister. However, on this occasion, I will try to be nice and encouraging to him in the very difficult job that he has ahead — *[Interruption.]* I am being called all sorts of names, Mr Deputy Speaker. You will have to rule some people out of order.

We are all very much aware of the very high level of dependency on social security in Northern Ireland. One analysis that I looked at when developing the motion was that of Graham Gudgin from Oxford Economics. He analysed one of the Varney reports — I think it was the second one — that showed how the number of benefit claimants here is 50% higher than in Great Britain and is higher in every benefit type. As we know, the economic inactivity rate in

Northern Ireland is in and around 28%, which is the highest of all the 12 UK regions.

Much of our dependency is generationally ingrained. About 40% of our unemployed are long-term unemployed, and over half of our income support claimants have been claiming that benefit for five years or more. We are also afflicted at another level because our average income poverty rates are higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That fact has been acknowledged by the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, in his foreword to a report entitled 'State of the Nation Report: Poverty, Worklessness and Welfare Dependency in the UK', which looks at poverty and worklessness across the United Kingdom.

Given that backdrop, it is entirely understandable that there is a lot of fear and trepidation and a severe sense of unease across Northern Ireland about what the latest round of welfare reforms might bring. I could be cynical and say that I have heard every Government at Westminster in my lifetime talk about how they will get stuck into welfare and slash welfare bills yet the graph has gone up. However, I think that the new Administration have a different intent.

We all know that the origin of the impending changes comes from the coalition Government, and, to give a bit of context, we can all recall how, in the election campaign, the new Prime Minister, David Cameron, singled out Northern Ireland and lambasted and bemoaned us for our high level of public spending. Subsequently, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, has talked about making crude £4 billion cuts to the overall welfare bill.

If we were to get our percentage of that, as I fear might happen, there would be a reduction of £100 million to Northern Ireland. That is a sizeable amount, equivalent to the budget of some of our Departments. Clearly, when the welfare reforms that Iain Duncan Smith proposes are viewed in the context of what the Prime Minister has done in singling out Northern Ireland as a special case and what the Chancellor has said about crude £4 billion cuts to the welfare bill, there is a great deal of unease and feeling of dread for many people.

Before discussing my specific concerns, I want to make two things perfectly clear. First, I do not fear reform. In fact, I welcome it. I welcome reform when it is targeted at getting those

who are able to work back into work, and I welcome reform when it seeks to break the benefits trap that has ensnared so many in our society. I welcome reform when it is targeted at simplifying a system that, for many, including many Members, can, at times, be impenetrable.

I do not welcome reform that, far from aiding the most vulnerable in society, can afflict them the most. I do not welcome Northern Ireland's being given its share of £4 billion of social security cuts in some sort of arbitrary and crude way regardless of the circumstances of Northern Ireland or the consequences that it might have for our people.

It is undeniably the case that Northern Ireland has more than its fair share of problems with generational unemployment, economic inactivity and a sense of hopelessness among many. I warmly welcome any reforms that are targeted at helping those who can work to break those shackles of despair that they have been bound in for, perhaps in some cases, generations. Employment can find a way out of poverty, and everybody will acknowledge that the best path out of poverty is a good, well-paying job.

Breaking the benefits trap should be the focus and first objective of any welfare reform, and, in many cases, that is as much about recognising the need to ease people back into work as it is about making the system much more simple and straightforward. In that respect, there are intriguing elements of the consultation document, '21st Century Welfare', which has been put out by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).

Welfare is not something that should be a lifestyle choice; the social security system ought to be a safety net, not a comfy sofa for someone to laze around on. It is there to help people who find themselves out of work, to help people get back into work and to help those who are on low incomes and those who are ill and chronically ill. It is not there as a lifestyle choice for someone to live on forever and a day. Therefore, anything that tackles generational underachievement or hopelessness and despair and which gets people back into work should be acknowledged and welcomed.

Secondly, in the context of all welfare reform, I place on the record my personal and my party's commitment to the maintenance of the parity principle when it comes to social security. Although there is scope for Northern Ireland's

special circumstances to be taken into account by DWP in ways that it has been in the past, I do not want to see any opting out or any derogations for Northern Ireland that would put parity and the comfort and security that comes with it broken or put at risk in any way. That is a no-no.

Bit by bit, we are gaining something of an insight into what DWP or, more pertinently, the Treasury might have in store for all of us. As I said, DWP has a consultation out, and it will take some time to see exactly what the conclusions of that will be. That is something for another day; I am more concerned about some of the immediate cuts that might happen, including the £4 billion that could quite crudely be applied to Northern Ireland and the other regions and the disproportionate effect that that might have on Northern Ireland. From listening to some of the Minister's media comments, I know that he is well aware of some of the rumours. Medical assessment for all claimants of disability living allowance (DLA) has been mentioned.

If we set aside the cost implications for the Northern Ireland Budget, have Northern Ireland's special circumstances, the legacy of the Troubles and the impact that that has had on mental and physical well-being been assessed or taken into consideration by the Treasury or by DWP? We hear about cuts to the winter fuel allowance. How on earth will that help us in Northern Ireland to fight fuel poverty and get people out of their desperate situations, given our chronic levels of fuel poverty? That is the more immediate concern on which we should focus.

The motion calls on the Assembly to empower the Minister for Social Development to resist, on the one hand, welfare reforms that would have a disproportionately negative effect on Northern Ireland by stressing our special social and economic circumstances, while, on the other hand, seeking the introduction of appropriate measures. I already made my point about breaking with parity, and I hold fast to that. However, surely there is scope, as there was in the past, for Northern Ireland's special circumstances. I am talking about our high level of dependency on social security, our reliance on the public sector and our position in the economic cycle as being the only region in the UK that is still in recession and for those to be given some weight when welfare reform is being implemented.

Consideration should also be given to how any reform system is administered in Northern Ireland. Consideration should be given to childcare concerns, for example, which are not the same as they are across the water; for the running of proper and appropriate pilot schemes in Northern Ireland to find out how some of the reforms would impact here; and for the pertinent situation in which we spend our Budget on the administration of all those reforms but the entire savings go back to Westminster. What amount, if any, can be kept and what incentive can be given for us to keep that money.

Our first argument must be to resist the changes that have a disproportionately negative effect on Northern Ireland. The impact of what the coalition Government may bring forward could be devastating for Northern Ireland if it is done in the crude, arbitrary way in which I fear that it might, where we get our fair share or our percentage cut of £4 billion of reductions in the overall welfare bill.

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

Mr Hamilton: With that in mind, we should empower our Minister to do what he has already done and will continue to do and give him the full backing of the Assembly to fight the case for Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion calls for support for reforms that are, apparently:

“aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Department for Work and Pensions, stressing the need for the special social and economic circumstances ... to be carefully considered and urging ... that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact”.

Those statements and sentiments are laudable, but the reality is that we are talking about parity legislation in relation to social security. The Minister assured us that he will attempt to stretch the flexibility of parity to its limit. However, we are not sure what that means and what it will entail. For example, Simon Hamilton said that pilot schemes would be run in Britain but not run here, which negates the idea of parity immediately. Is the Minister really capable of making a silk purse out of a sow's ear? I am sure that he will expand on that later.

The Welfare Reform Bill is the biggest change to the benefit system since its inception in 1948, and some might consider it to be a major step towards dismantling the welfare state. The legislation will have far-reaching consequences for many of those in receipt of social security benefits. Those most affected will be vulnerable groups such as lone parents, people suffering from mental illness, autism and those with learning difficulties, those caring for an ageing relative and someone suffering from a range of disabilities.

It is certainly praiseworthy that people should be encouraged back into employment. However, there is a presumption in the intent of the Welfare Reform Bill that those who are economically inactive and in receipt of benefit are quite content to remain unemployed, and it does not take into account the many and varied reasons why people find themselves in that situation. Rather than simplifying the system, the thrust of the Bill is sanction-led and has more to do with penalising those on benefits than developing a system that promotes and encourages people back into employment.

4.15 pm

I have been dealing with the social security system for over 30 years, and I have rarely, if ever, come across anyone who wanted to be on benefits or was content to be so. For many it is simply not a lifestyle choice. It should also be remembered that the legislation is being introduced at a time of severe economic restraint and recession when any kind of meaningful employment is almost impossible to find.

Lone parents are one group that will be most affected by the changes. The changes will also have an adverse effect on their children. The age range of dependent children, which determines whether a lone parent is expected to seek employment, will continue to decrease, and that will seriously impact on the level of care that a parent can give to his or her children. The level of childcare provision here in the North is also woefully inadequate, and, until proper provision is put in place, the children who are affected by the legislation will continue to have difficulty.

Unfortunately, parity legislation for social security continues to be the accepted norm. Sinn Féin attempted to introduce a number of reasonable amendments to the Welfare Reform

Bill, but those were not accepted. If we cannot change parity legislation, we should ensure that it is properly administered to ensure that those who need and require benefits receive them in a reasonable time from the date of claim and do not have to wait for a number of weeks. That is happening at the moment, and it is putting people, many of whom have worked for many years and who have not made the lifestyle choice to be on benefits, into penury and hardship.

We must continue to monitor carefully the legislation, which is becoming more complex rather than simpler. Almost all the leading voluntary organisations that gave evidence to the Social Development Committee on the Bill voiced some serious opposition. The motion must be considered in the overall context of the Welfare Reform Bill, which many, including myself, think is not beneficial.

Mrs M Bradley: I am under no illusions that there are serious difficulties ahead for us all in the near future, but particularly for those who are the most vulnerable and who totally rely on benefits. There is an air of foreboding when we speak of the forthcoming welfare reform, but I am confident that the Minister will fight Northern Ireland's case as an exceptional one. Our long troubled history, coupled with our poor economic recovery rate paints a dire picture.

The many contributors to the debate have robustly stated their concerns and will continue to do so. I have no intention of reiterating those issues, but it is worth overstating some points. I am sure that all Members could recount the ever-increasing numbers of people who come through their constituency offices with similar complaints about their housing benefit and the removal of DLA from genuine recipients. The lack of childcare adds to the problems for lone parents and the parents of younger children.

Given the proposed cuts to the welfare system, it would be foolhardy of any of us to presume that Northern Ireland will be insulated against the anticipated effect, and, ultimately, benefit allocations must be curbed. However, we must also be careful that we do not marginalise or punish the genuine cases who cannot survive without the state's help.

The Minister has voiced on record his concerns about how the fallout of the emergency Budget will affect Northern Ireland's welfare system. The Minister has voiced and will continue to

voice those concerns to Iain Duncan Smith and to Lord Freud.

Due to the economic situation and the resulting continuous fallout, we must be mindful of those who are classed as the working poor and who are struggling to make ends meet because they work. I represent an area in Foyle that is classed as one of the highest-ranking areas of deprivation in Northern Ireland and which, as a result, has one of the highest rankings for benefit dependency. I am also mindful of those who are perceived to be lucky enough to have a job, but who are teetering on the edge of financial ruin simply because they work. Those families are continuously overlooked in the British Government's plans and receive no financial help or assistance. Unlike the bankers, they cannot depend on generous bonuses to help them to pay their bills, and, unlike the bankers, they did not contribute to the situation that they find themselves in.

I also have grave concerns for those who, as a result of welfare reform, will be moved from income support to jobseekers allowance. Foyle has already haemorrhaged thousands of jobs and continues to do so, and I am unsure where those affected will find jobs. However, that question is for another Minister on another day.

I ask the Minister to continue with his endeavours to state the case for Northern Ireland. I have full confidence that he will do that and that he will deliver a fair and appropriate system of welfare reform that considers all our people and all our unique difficulties, which cannot be swept under the carpet. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I thank the Members who brought forward the motion. It is very timely, given that the Minister is having conversations with his counterpart in DWP. I assure the Minister that the Alliance Party supports his efforts to minimise the negative impact that welfare reform may have on Northern Ireland.

Although I support the principles of welfare reform, during the passage of the Welfare Reform Bill, I expressed a number of concerns that reform proposals may push those who are already marginalised further into the margins of society. Due to our specific social and economic circumstances, Northern Ireland has a high dependency on social security benefits. We are a post-conflict region that is still suffering from the legacy of a higher prevalence of mental and

physical health problems. The costs of division and segregation are estimated to be £1.5 billion a year. We have the lowest average income in the entire UK. The proportion of people in Northern Ireland who are not in paid work is higher than in the rest of the UK. During the recession, that proportion has risen further and faster than in any other region. Compared with the rest of the UK, our recovery from recession is expected to be slower. Around 20% of people in Northern Ireland live in low income households.

Simplifying the social security process is, of course, important, and it would make it easier for people to access their benefits and understand what they are entitled to. However, any change to the system must be properly planned and considered, and it must be implemented effectively. The employment and support allowance (ESA) system has not worked smoothly. I have a constituent who had repeated problems with original documents being lost and who had to wait four months before receiving any payment. That is just one example of many. Effective communications between the different agencies that deal with social security benefits is also essential, but we are not seeing that as a matter of course.

Although we acknowledge the serious consequences of breaching parity, there has to be flexibility in the system so that our particular needs can be recognised. Reform is necessary if we are to break the habit of welfare dependency and if we are to support those who can work to get back into the workplace. However, reforms must be backed up by strategies that support those who will be affected.

We still have no strategy on childcare or early years. One in five households in Northern Ireland is a single parent family, and lone parents cannot simply return to work. They need measures to address the lack of nursery provision and affordable childcare, the cost of which is one of the main issues preventing parents returning to work, especially as three in four single parent families in Northern Ireland live in poverty. It is important that we recognise that parents who make the choice to stay at home with their children are also making a contribution to society. Surely, therefore, they are entitled to benefits to enable them to do that.

As Mickey said, the majority of people want to work if they are able to get a decent job. It is important, therefore, that we help those people get enough qualifications to help them to get a decently paid job so that the pay makes it worth their while to go out to work rather than be dependent on social security.

Mr Easton: I thank my two colleagues for bringing the motion before the House. I am deeply concerned for many of my constituents in North Down who are in receipt of social welfare benefits. I deal, daily, with people who are unable to work for medical reasons; people who want to work but are unable to find jobs; single parents who struggle to make ends meet; and, especially, those who find it difficult to fill out benefits application forms, which, in my experience, are incredibly difficult and deliberately cumbersome.

We, in Northern Ireland, have a special case. The number of families with children in receipt of benefits totals 119,000. To put that into perspective, 68% of claimants have children and have been in receipt of benefits for the last two years; that is a worrying statistic. We must work with the Minister for Work and Pensions to protect the people of Northern Ireland who are reliant on benefits for good reasons. It is important that we see that the commitment of the coalition Government to simplify the benefits system comes to fruition. The system is complicated, even for those who have been in it for a long time. It changes constantly, and it becomes more complicated every time that it is changed.

As of November 2009, 21% of our working age population was claiming a key benefit. I have no doubt that that figure will rise as, in the recession, many people are laid off and those on unemployment benefit are unable to find work in the competitive job market. I and my constituents are very worried about the soundings from Westminster about cutting welfare benefits by £4 billion. When times are tight and our nation faces a huge deficit, which is what the coalition is trying to reduce, people become more reliant on benefits. People lose jobs and require help from the state during any recession. Any benefits cuts must bear that in mind. It has always been the philosophy of our nation to help those in most need. Jobs are hard to come by, and those who apply for positions face considerable competition, which reduces their chances of success.

The special circumstances of Northern Ireland have been highlighted by the Minister for Work and Pensions in the report that was commissioned by his party and published by the Centre for Social Justice. It identifies a range of deep social issues in Northern Ireland that have been made more difficult by the legacy of conflict. I know of many people on benefits who served in the security forces. They suffer from physical and mental illness as a result of having worked to defend democracy and secure peace. We must not forget those people now that we are in a period of peace; we must provide for them. Others who served our Province lost their lives, and we must remember the families that they left behind.

I am passionate about this issue. I entered politics to make people's lives better, and I want us, as an Assembly, to achieve that. I, therefore, support the motion wholeheartedly and urge other Members to do the same.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion, particularly its reference to the high dependency on social benefit. As some Members have outlined, there are undoubtedly elements of welfare reform that have potential. The removal of benefit complexity, for example, can only be a good thing for many of the people whom we represent. However, there are areas about which Sinn Féin representatives have consistently raised concern, particularly the use of sanctions such as the removal of benefits for the most trivial of reasons.

Many in the Chamber will be aware of people who, for a whole host of reasons, were not able to turn up for an interview and, as a result, had their benefits suspended for anything from one to eight weeks. During such suspensions, I know that a number of people have to rely on families and friends simply to survive. There is clearly something wrong with a system that allows people to be forced into such untenable situations.

The benefits system should not be about looking at ways of stopping the benefits of people who claim entitlements. It should be about ensuring that people who need help can avail themselves of it without being stigmatised or criminalised. Furthermore, the aim of welfare reform is clearly to have one universal benefit system. I have concerns about that; it could lead to more centralisation and a dilution of

front line services, and it will inevitably lead to job losses in social security agency offices, perhaps in places such as Derry.

Having said that, I welcome the Minister's comments earlier this month following a meeting with the British Tory Minister Iain Duncan Smith, when he insisted that welfare reform should not be used as a means to attack people on benefits and to load the burden of Tory Budget cuts on to the most vulnerable people in our society. Those are very welcome words indeed, but we need to see more action rather than relying on the goodwill of the Tory Minister in London. The Minister and, most importantly, the people whom we all represent would be much better served by working towards breaking parity with Britain. We would all do much better and would be much better served by taking control of our financial destiny and of our benefits system so that we can shape the kind of reform that is needed for the people whom we represent here in the North.

4.30 pm

The Minister rightly made the point that there are unique circumstances in the North of Ireland, such as the high level of deprivation and the legacy of the conflict. Mary Bradley spoke about the higher levels of deprivation in places such as north and west Belfast and Derry, and we all represent constituencies in those places. Therefore, it makes sense to have a benefits system that is designed to meet the needs of this region rather than one that is conceived for and largely administered from England.

We may be tied to parity, but we should not be in any rush to implement many elements of the legislation. Clearly, the benefits system here needs reforming. Without doubt, there are many problems that I am sure all representatives are dealing with in their constituency, sometimes on a daily basis. However, a read-across Bill from Britain that we have been asked to implement in the North is not the answer. We need our own Bill, and we need our own system — I am relating particularly to the text of the motion — which needs to be designed to meet the needs of the people whom we represent.

Although I welcome the sentiments of the motion and support it on that basis, it does not go far enough as far as Sinn Féin and I are concerned. I would like to see the Minister doing much more than simply continuing his dialogue with his British counterparts. I would like to see

him taking control of our destiny. The only cuts that he should be implementing are those that sever the apron strings from Britain.

Mr Craig: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. It is genuinely worrying to see how many people depend on social security benefits and, primarily, on jobseeker's allowance. In the past two years in my constituency in Lagan Valley, the figure has risen from 900 to more than 2,000, which is a clear indicator of how the economy in Northern Ireland is performing. It is also worrying that roughly 10% of the population are in receipt of disability living allowance. A large percentage of those people receive both care and mobility components. Eight per cent of our population are in receipt of housing benefit, and the majority of claimants live in the private rented sector and not in social housing.

That said, I see that the Tories are planning to introduce severe cuts to the whole welfare system. As someone who was looking for employment in the 1980s, I can say that I am not surprised by that. There was a period of deep recession then; in fact, if I were honest about it, it was almost deeper than the current recession in some respects. At that time, there was a Tory Government, and their response to the recession was not really a jobs creation Budget but rather a severe attack on the welfare system. Therefore, I stand here as someone who has learnt from that period of history, and I am not surprised that it is repeating itself with yet another Tory Government. It will have catastrophic effects for people who are in receipt of benefits and rely on them.

Whether we like it or not, Northern Ireland has a special case to make. I was interested to hear the Minister talk about his meeting with Iain Duncan Smith on the radio the other day. It is good that the Minister is at least making an effort to uphold that special status. Northern Ireland has endured a troubled period of more than 30 years. There has been conflict and violence. There is no point in sticking our heads in the sand and saying that it did not occur. It did occur. It had severe economic repercussions for all of Northern Ireland. It is only right that that be taken into account, as well as the effects of the UK Government's reduction of certain benefits and the implications that that would have for the entire social justice system in Northern Ireland.

I fully accept that there are issues and problems with the welfare system. I am not against welfare reform. In fact, if anything, I would say that certain aspects of the welfare system almost need to be scrapped and started over again. When I look at the 84-page document that needs to be filled in for DLA, I believe that not only have we created a welfare nightmare for the Government, but we have gone one step further and created a system to support applicants to the welfare system. Strangely enough, as taxpayers, we pay not only for the DLA system but for the support system that aids people to apply for that benefit in the first place. That is a ludicrous situation for any country to have got itself into. Unfortunately, that is where we are in the UK welfare system. Elements of that system need to be addressed. However, they need to be looked at in a sensible and sensitive manner by the Government. Will that happen? Have I any faith in a Tory Government to deliver sensible reforms to the welfare system? I stand here as someone who experienced the recession of the 1980s. I am sorry, but my experience tells me that that will not happen. It is up to the Assembly to voice its strong objection to the ludicrous suggestions that are coming forward, which will cost the block grant an absolute fortune. We can be sure that the only beneficiary will be the Treasury in London. I support the motion.

Mr Gallagher: At the outset, I want to thank the DUP Members who brought the motion on this important issue to the Assembly. I also want to commend the Minister for his initiative in going to London to try to persuade the UK Government of Northern Ireland's particular problems. Most of us understand that he has a difficult task in that regard, and we wish him well in it. Unlike Martina Anderson, those of us who live in the real world realise that there are limitations to what he can do. He certainly does not have a magic wand at his disposal.

The number of benefit claimants paints a good picture of the grim situation that exists throughout Northern Ireland. There is a big challenge in getting those people off benefits and back to work. The SDLP believes that there should be no cutting of benefits. That clearly would not work to change the situation for people who are caught in a cycle of poverty and unemployment. We can look at other ways to break that cycle, such as providing part-time work, and try to move to a situation in which people who try to take employment, even on

a part-time basis, are not caught up in a tax net that makes the entire exercise pointless. We also need to look at how we can arrive at a situation in which those people can do a bit of work but have their benefit entitlement protected.

We need to look at other areas that relate to work capability assessments. That is particularly important with DLA, but it is also essential with ESA. Mickey Brady highlighted the delays in the payment of benefits here. Indeed, many households here find themselves in the very worrying situation of having no bread on the table.

The capability assessment element of ESA needs to be looked at. In the area in which I live, I find that claimants send in their claim with certificates signed by their doctor stating that the claimant should be off work for three months and, in some cases, four months. However, within the same system, another assessor may say that the claimant is not entitled to the benefit in question. There is something badly wrong there, and we need to look at that.

A Member on the opposite Benches mentioned a problem relating to a childcare strategy. It is clear that we will not attract people back into work and encourage them to leave the benefits system unless they have affordable childcare. OFMDFM has a clear role in dealing with that problem through its strategy on childcare. However, we have not seen any action on that.

All those initiatives need to be backed up by the necessary funding. The Minister has been in London talking about the importance of making that funding available. However, there is also a responsibility on the Executive, through their arrangements, to be aware of the people who are on benefits. After all, those people are on benefits through no fault of their own. They are on benefits because of the actions of a small number of reckless, greedy and irresponsible people who brought about the financial crisis that we are in. We do not want the people who had nothing to do with that and who are suffering the most to be left without any support.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion, and I commend the DUP for tabling it. However, when Simon Hamilton mentioned Varney in his introduction, I had to shudder. He knows my party's view on Varney. It reminded me of a discussion that we once had in the

Health Committee about John Appleby, who is another economist and one who never appreciated the differences and distinctions in the North when it came to poverty, ill health, inequality and the legacy of the conflict that it has come through. There was a notion that something that operates in an area such as Bradford in England, which has similar issues, can be transported here and that it will work. It will not work. It has not worked in the past, and it will not work now.

Our party's views on welfare reform are on record. We tabled amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill, which was before the House in June. Our amendments were unsuccessful, but, at that time, the Minister acknowledged that they were not mischievous but could have a mischievous effect so far as parity is concerned.

Setting political differences aside, this is the first debate that we have had in a long time where practically everyone is saying the same thing. That is to be welcomed. People are arguing that there is a special case here when it comes to dealing with welfare reform. Like other Members who have spoken, I do not always think about cuts whenever I hear the word "reform". However, that is exactly what welfare reform from a Tory Government will mean. Is there room to make efficiencies? Is there room to do things better? There is, but it is up to us to decide what efficiencies need to be made and what room there is for doing things better. It has to be down to us and our local experience. That is where the whole system will be turning on its head.

4.45 pm

The Minister said in June that he would try to stretch parity to its limits. I would like to see some proposals, if he can share them with us, because it is important to get cross-party support. I was encouraged by the responses to Iain Duncan Smith's vision of social justice; it is not the sort of social justice that we need. Jonathan Craig, Mickey Brady and others mentioned DLA, which has the lowest percentage of fraud of any benefit here. It is for people who are sick, needy, vulnerable and disabled, and that is what we are talking about cutting. Those are the people who will be directly affected by any change or cut in the welfare system.

Winter fuel payments were also mentioned. It is vital that we take a cross-party message to

the British Treasury that we cannot support the proposed welfare reforms; but what does it mean? I have no doubt that the Minister will say that he is hamstrung by parity, yet DLA forms were — still are — notoriously long, but we had the ability locally to administer the benefit and change the forms. Without sounding naive, I suggest that, if a certain percentage comes out of the block grant for people who are unemployed, sick or cannot work, it is up to us to administer that locally, but that absolutely does not mean administer cuts. If anything, because of the economic situation, people will be more reliant on the welfare system.

Tommy Gallagher mentioned the childcare strategy. That was the point that we made in our proposed amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill, which, unfortunately, his party failed to acknowledge. It is all very well politicking now, but that is a fact. His party also attempted to block the Financial Assistance Bill, now the Financial Assistance Act 2009, because of the very issue that we raised. We made the point about lone parents, welfare reform and people going back to work with no childcare. Whoever has responsibility — the First Minister and deputy First Minister or someone else — it needs to be sorted out because it prevents people from going to work. I want to put that on the record.

I support the motion and think that we have had a good debate, although it is not over yet. I will listen to the Minister, but we need to come back to the issue, and, if that means an all-party group or an all-party meeting on it, I am offering our support in taking those discussions forward.

Mr S Anderson: In supporting the motion, I commend my colleagues Simon Hamilton and Michelle McIlveen for tabling it. It was only a short while ago that the then leader of the opposition, now Prime Minister, David Cameron, singled Northern Ireland out as top of his hit list for cuts. Indeed, there are Members in the House who spoke in his defence at that time. They also actively campaigned in support of those cuts and sought election in May on the basis of being inextricably linked to him. Indeed, had they been elected they would have been at Westminster championing those cuts.

It is estimated that, when the cuts are implemented, they could be up to the tune of £2 billion. That being so, the motion is timely and raises important matters that deserve

close attention. The first thing that needs to be admitted on all sides is that Northern Ireland has a high dependency on benefits. Most people acknowledge that, but there are some factors that we need to keep in mind. We need to consider, for instance, the fact that no other part of the United Kingdom has such a high proportion of its population who will carry with them for the rest of their life the physical and mental scars inflicted on them over several decades of cruel terrorist attacks. That is just one factor, but it is a very important one.

As I said, most people acknowledge that there is a high dependency on benefits in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is only right that we consider ways to help people back to work. That should be our goal. However, it depends on the existence of jobs that people can apply for. Northern Ireland is at a different place in the economic cycle from the rest of the United Kingdom, and it will, therefore, take us longer to emerge from the recession. It needs to be remembered that the very cuts agenda advanced by David Cameron and, as I said, supported by some Members of this Chamber will, in all likelihood, mean that more jobs will be removed from the marketplace here than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, proportionally, because of Northern Ireland's high level of public sector employment. Those factors must be taken into account seriously. We cannot run away from them. However, as we take those factors into account, we should also seek to assist as many people as possible out of benefits and into work. Everyone deserves the right to have a job, and we should do everything that we can to help them to achieve that. I echo the motion in calling for the Minister, in his discussions with the Department for Work and Pensions, to continue to stress the particular economic circumstances that pertain to Northern Ireland, while seeking to reform the benefits system and help get people back into employment.

Mr G Robinson: I thank my two colleagues for bringing this motion to the Chamber. As the motion states, far too many residents in Northern Ireland, through no fault of their own, depend heavily on social security benefits. Although that is a sad fact of life, I have found that the complicated benefits system has been, at times, a barrier to people claiming the much-needed benefits to which they are entitled. The motion calls for a simplified system to be introduced. That would prevent people from

losing out on their entitlements and would ensure that they are given as much help as possible, including retraining to get them back into the workforce, which would be a positive step.

The Department for Work and Pensions must be made fully aware of the implications for Northern Ireland should it make changes that have a disproportionate impact here. Given that Northern Ireland has a large public sector and a higher number of benefit-dependent households, any changes made would have a greater impact here, if the end result is that the Minister cannot secure acknowledgement of Northern Ireland's special circumstances. There have been business closures and job losses in every constituency throughout Northern Ireland, and it will take time to build up employment again in the current economic downturn. To ensure that that happens, we need the DWP to take appropriate measures to ensure that all families are protected as much as possible from the forthcoming cuts.

We have a willing and hard-working workforce in Northern Ireland, and people are prepared to retrain or re-enter education to ensure that they get employment when the economy picks up. However, it is essential that the support that enables them to do so is maintained. That must be a central part of our plan for the future. I am happy to support this worthwhile motion and hope that all Members of the Assembly do the same given these dire economic times.

Mr Armstrong: The Ulster Unionist Party and Assembly Members at large acknowledge Northern Ireland's high dependency on social security benefits and support the reforms. However, I am somewhat concerned that the Members who tabled the motion are in two minds. In many ways, the motion appears to be a hokey-cokey approach to welfare reform.

In Northern Ireland, we have entrenched patterns of worklessness and child poverty that undermine prosperity and opportunity for too many people. There is nothing compassionate about a welfare system that removes the initiative to work. A recent Centre for Social Justice report highlighted the numerous problems that we face. For example, Northern Ireland has the highest economic inactivity in the United Kingdom. Over half of the people who claim income support have done so for more than five years, and long-term unemployment is estimated at 40% of total unemployment.

We now have a welfare system that is extremely complicated and discourages people from getting back to work. People, including parents, are often better off staying on benefits than finding a job. In such circumstances, it is understandable that they do not seek work. If we are to have a more socially mobile society and if we are to break long-term cycles of poverty, we must make work pay and the welfare system simpler. Those who advocate the status quo appear to be prepared to abandon too many citizens to welfare dependency and worklessness.

The Ulster Unionist Party is primarily a pragmatic party. Welfare reform must work in tandem with the revitalisation of the economy. It must work alongside early intervention, an improved education system and reformed childcare. That is why, as we face the inevitable spending cuts that are coming from the comprehensive spending review, we must be in a position to improve what we do locally, as well as ensuring that Westminster offers us proportionate protection. The UK coalition Government must bring forward proposals for economic reform in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. Giving people incentives to work will be successful only if jobs are available. We also need to ensure that people have the necessary skills to gain long-term employment.

The Ulster Unionist Party wants to ensure that Northern Ireland is not disproportionately affected by welfare reforms. However, there has to be an element of reality to this debate. The parity principle, which we support, dictates that the Minister for Social Development will implement the reforms introduced from Westminster or face potentially significant financial consequences.

Yesterday, I noticed that Sinn Féin called for the Social Development Minister to cut the apron strings from Westminster. Bearing in mind the amount of money that Westminster provides to the local welfare budget, I have to say that it is not the apron strings that we would be cutting but the benefit cheques. Westminster is the key to welfare and welfare reform. Therefore, I hope that the DUP, in particular, will be raising the issue in Westminster and that today is not merely a grandstanding operation.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the motion tabled by my colleagues. The motion is clear on one fact,

which is that Northern Ireland is highly reliant on social security benefits. Part of my role as an elected representative involves assisting in benefits issues and charting a course through the benefits process for my constituents.

There are many people out there who are disabled or unwell due to a number of conditions and are certainly unfit for work. In my opinion, it is important for the Minister to stress to that group that their rights to benefits will be protected. There is a lot of uncertainty among people who are on disability benefits, and I have spoken to a number who are worried that their benefits will be drastically cut or, worse still, removed. The Minister must reassure those people that DSD is not on a crusade to slash benefits and leave people who are genuinely unable to work without the means to have a reasonable standard of living.

Of course, in any society, there are those who are cheating the system and are in receipt of benefits where no benefit is deserved. Those people could be deemed to be eligible for some type of employment. In that light, therefore, our benefits system requires reform in order to ensure that the money is going to those who need it most.

With regard to my experiences with the Social Security Agency, I believe that there must also be a review of how certain benefits are administered, particularly employment and support allowance. I have had worrying cases where constituents were without any form of income due to issues with the processing of their particular benefit. On one occasion, the applicant sent important information by recorded delivery; yet, somehow, it was lost by the agency, and that added many weeks to the application process. I would like the Minister to explain how such important and confidential information is mislaid and to tell us whether he is concerned about such a loss.

I also have a problem with the length of time that the disability living allowance appeals process takes. Applicants may have to wait many weeks for an appeal hearing date. My constituents are particularly concerned about all those issues, against a backdrop of coalition cuts and a drive to reduce the number of people on benefits.

5.00 pm

I understand the economics of DWP's desire to reduce the social security bill. However, we must be very careful not to pile more disadvantages on those who, through illness, are already at a disadvantage in not being fit or able to work. Steps could be taken to encourage more people off benefits and into work. However, in tandem, we must realise that Northern Ireland has come through a rough and troublesome past whose legacy has affected a number of people and families to a higher degree than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

I wish the Minister well in his challenge in dealing with the Department for Work and Pensions and I hope that there will be recognition of our unique circumstances.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I did not expect to take part in the debate because of the long list of people who were due to speak before me. I agree with the motion, and it is good to see it coming from the DUP. It is good to see that we have moved on, and that the attacks by the Conservative Government on the weak and vulnerable are no longer supported by people in this Chamber.

The Minister has a big job in trying to challenge the cuts. However, the noises here are about working within the cuts, rather than challenging them. It is almost as if we have taken a 10- or 20-year leap from the conflict to where we are now. We have a special case here, and will for quite some time, in respect of our financial situation as a result of the legacy of the conflict. That legacy has many aspects, and it will take at least 30 years to overcome.

The benefit support system has become ingrained and entrenched in particular areas. Billy made conflicting arguments about that, and why people should be forced back to work, which the Conservatives pretend is their mantra. However, we cannot force people back to work if there are no jobs. There are no jobs in Ireland, north, south, east or west, for those who are well capable of doing them. There was pressure even on those who were unable to go to work to do some sort of job. There are no jobs for anyone at the moment, and that has to be taken into account.

We had a debate earlier about equality. That plays a part, because there is a legacy of inequality between the west and the east,

by which I mean Belfast. There was always inequality in where jobs were placed, and that still goes on. People from Fermanagh and South Tyrone, even recent graduates, still have to go in this direction or further afield if they want to take up employment in their chosen career — or they have to leave the country altogether. That has gone on for decades.

We talk about the financial situation here almost as if it was something that happened in the North. A lot of our difficulties with the British Government originated over there as a result of their financial dealings and failings. That has not been taken into account, and they have managed to escape that issue very well, including at the last election. Those who voted for them now face the cuts as well, so there is certainly something amiss with the people over there who voted them into power, knowing that this was coming down the pipe.

So-called progressive reform of the welfare system over the years has made things much worse for the weak and vulnerable, every time. Applying for their benefits was made more difficult and they were cut back more. I know from my own office staff, who do a professional job in filling in forms and dealing with people's difficulties every day, that it is very difficult to get disability living allowance or any other benefit. As someone mentioned, there has to be a cost to delivering that. So, we are paying for it from several directions.

People are very fearful; they fear for their pensions and for their futures, and they have to depend on welfare. In the South, a single person receives €200 a week in unemployment benefit; here, it is £60 or less. There is a great disparity there. At least the South is willing to recognise that people need a certain amount of money to live on. There are people who have to survive on £60 a week, which has to be taken into account.

To the Minister, I say that, although there is a conflict here about how to approach the financial situation, Sinn Féin is probably taking the right approach by challenging the cuts and trying to negotiate them. That is important because young people will increasingly get into drugs or violence or become dissidents — or whatever people want to call it — if deprivation in their areas is not addressed.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I thank everybody for their broad

and particular endorsements. One Member said that he would be nice and encouraging; another said that there would be welcome words; another said that she had full confidence in me; and someone else said practically the same. Although, in one way, that might cause us to suspend disbelief, in another way, I welcome it, because, since I came into post in May, I have had a very clear view of what is being proposed through welfare reform.

Whether that reform comes in the form of the proposals for 2013 and beyond that will emerge over the next short period of time or whether it comes in the form of the benefit cuts that have already been announced by the Chancellor — with possibly more to come — I have no doubt that it will be the most significant change to benefits for a generation or more. Mr Brady said that the reforms were steps towards dismantling of the welfare state, and there may be an element of truth in that. I spoke to a very senior Tory Minister within the past couple of days. He said that the Tory coalition's proposals would be its enduring legacy and would have the single biggest impact of any decision made by the coalition Government in the lifetime of this Westminster Parliament. That is the scale of what we are talking about. Therefore, I welcome all input, because it scopes out the scale of what we are talking about.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I will take the intervention shortly.

In dealing with the issue, I have been informed by four principles. The first, which is shared across all parties and all Members, is that, whatever welfare changes are proposed, our argument has to be about the top line when it comes to the block grant and the bottom line when it comes to how we spend the block grant and about protecting those in need, stress and disadvantage and those who may be experiencing alienation. That has to be a core value of government strategy and of the Budget negotiations in the Chamber over the next short space of time.

Secondly, the Northern Ireland conditions have to be taken fully into account. It is a fact that we have had to deal with intergenerational disadvantage and poverty, higher levels of emigration, women in their 40s bearing children, the legacy of long-term unemployment and families with nobody — grandparent, parent or

child — in work. All of that is compounded by the legacy of conflict.

Thirdly, as Simon Hamilton, Mr McHugh and others mentioned, in this part of these islands, we will be in recession at least until the end of 2012 and possibly longer. I met the representatives from the Construction Employers Federation two weeks ago, and one of its senior members believes that we will be in recession after the end of 2012.

Imposing welfare proposals or arguing for welfare changes in the absence of jobs is ludicrous. That is compounded by the fact that if there are public sector cuts but no new private sector jobs, the employment situation will deteriorate further.

The fourth element of my approach has been not just to argue against the immediate welfare benefit changes and against the potential changes over the next two or three years but to scope out all options for how Northern Ireland can be different in its approach to welfare reform.

Mr Brady said:

"If we cannot change parity legislation, we should ensure that it is properly administered"

I agree. If Members have issues with how social security is managed on a case-by-case basis, they should bring them to my attention and I will address them. I have made it clear, through the Social Security Agency, that where things are not managed properly and people are suffering delay in their benefit entitlement, we should address it, apologise for it and correct it.

However, I go further than Mr Brady in managing parity properly. My approach is to maximise flexibilities in and around parity and try to identify opportunities to move beyond it. I am not prepared to compromise the principle of parity per se, because, as I recall, a £3 billion subvention is paid to Northern Ireland annually in benefit payments. Therefore unless we work through very carefully what it means to change, abandon or move away from parity, we will only impose on those whom we are trying to protect greater doubt and greater burden.

As I say, I go further than Mr Brady. I want to find out where the operational flexibilities are, if possible develop pilots to see where we can go beyond parity and, at the same time, negotiate to move beyond parity in a way that does not

have an adverse or disproportionate impact on the people whom we are here to serve.

We can only judge the London Government by what they do as opposed to what they say. The effects of the emergency Budget, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, mean that those who are poor and disadvantaged will suffer disproportionately. The BBC's research confirmed that the areas with the highest level of public sector dependency will suffer most from the budget proposals. The TUC said that its scoping out of benefit proposals and London's policy suggests that the disadvantaged will suffer disproportionately.

Those are the hard facts and the brutal reality of what the London Government have already decided. Therefore, I decided that we should not enter into dialogue with Iain Duncan Smith and Lord Freud or the London officials when it comes to welfare and benefits, but that we go into hard and tough negotiations. Those negotiations are still at an early stage and are far from concluded. We have had only three meetings and there is much more work to do; however, I am determined that we will do it.

I approach that work from the following perspective: I agree with Simon Hamilton and Martina Anderson that there is a need for reform. Northern Ireland does reform well. What has been achieved collectively, despite resistance, on policing and politics, fair employment and housing, demonstrates that in our culture we have the capacity to look at the need for reform, and, whether we set about it with enthusiasm or reluctance, we set about it. There is further need for reform in Northern Ireland of prisons, the Public Prosecution Service and housing. I am not opposed to reform, but we have to make a judgement about what the reforms mean to the individuals, families and communities that we represent.

5.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín asked precisely what measures I am looking at. I will answer her question in part. I am not going to share all my thinking because those matters are, in some ways, works in progress and are still part of the conversation that I am having with Lord Freud. However, I will give some indicative examples of what I told him yesterday. I told Lord Freud that the proposal to cut housing benefit for people who had claimed jobseeker's allowance for over one year would penalise people generally as well as those who

would like to find work but cannot because of the condition of the job market in Northern Ireland. I told him that, due to the economic conditions that prevail in Northern Ireland, we will be in recession until at least the end of 2012, and so to penalise people still on JSA after one year by cutting their housing benefit by 10% was a punitive and unjustified punishment. I asked him to re-examine that.

I asked Lord Freud to extend the mortgage support scheme introduced by the Labour Party in January 2009 beyond its end date of January 2011. That is because it seems to me that homeowners with heavy mortgages who lost their jobs in communities throughout these islands through no fault of their own as a result of the world recession needed continued mortgage support. Therefore, the extension of that scheme beyond the two years is important.

There are proposals to change the regime around disability living allowance, which could potentially occur before the current scheduled date of 2013. Over 100,000 people in Northern Ireland are on disability living allowance. I asked Lord Freud to take on board the profile of DLA claimants in Northern Ireland, their number and the circumstances that they have lived in, not least because of the legacy of conflict. I told him that I wanted our officials, and right up to ministerial level, to work through how that change would work in Northern Ireland to ensure that the blind pursuit of cutting benefits and the blind ambition of getting people into work did not come back in the face of those tens of thousands of people who, because of their mental and physical condition, are not going to be fit for work now and in the future.

The social fund involves tens of millions of pounds a year in payments to people for community grants, white goods or funeral payments. I put it to Lord Freud that the proposals that have been outlined for England, Scotland and Wales make no sense in a Northern Ireland context. They involve giving responsibility for administering the payments to local authorities. However, our local authorities are of a different nature to those across the Irish Sea in Britain. We already have a localised system of payment of social funds through eight major offices and 26 satellite offices. Therefore, it seemed to me that that model of delivery of the social fund was fit for purpose here, regardless of what might be proposed in England.

In answering Ms Ní Chuilín's question, I am trying to scope out some of the scale of what we asked Lord Freud about yesterday. I am not even going to outline some of the harder issues and proposals that we put to him about some of the immediate benefit changes that the London Government are proposing.

I have two final comments. First, regardless of what happens with the immediate benefit regime changes, Iain Duncan Smith and Lord Freud clearly have an ambition to have more fundamental changes. It is my sense that that argument is currently being resolved in London between the Treasury and the Department that is responsible for welfare, and that it may be the case that we hear sooner rather than later what the scale, character and nature might be of what Iain Duncan Smith is proposing.

However, as I said during Question Time, if there is a proposal between now and 2013 for, as he sees it, a radical regime change when it comes to benefits, including the possibility of a universal benefit system, however that may be managed, the immediate impact of that will be heavy upfront costs. In a situation in which there is, apparently, less money, that must mean that there will be more benefit cuts in the short term. I put down a marker, to anybody in London who may be listening and to everybody in Northern Ireland, that some very severe and serious news is coming. We must guard against that and work against it.

During the top-line Budget negotiation with London, we need to be tough, robust, determined and relentless. We need to keep at it over the weeks and months. That is what I have been doing; I trust that other Ministers will follow that lead and are doing so at the moment. At the end of the day, the bottom line is decided by the Assembly and the Executive Ministers. If the bottom line Budget decisions are not informed by protecting those who are in need, stress, disadvantage or poverty, we will end up with a Government that is not fit for purpose and a Budget that is not fit for purpose.

Miss McIlveen: The rationale behind the motion was to stimulate debate on the current welfare system and its flaws and failings, and to give Members the opportunity to explore options for the future. The consultation paper, '21st Century Welfare', which was presented by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, has given us the basis for such a debate. The quality of that debate is for others

to judge, but I commend the tone of those who contributed.

Having said that, I was astonished by the comments of Mr Armstrong. I have always found him to be a very caring and compassionate man, so it was strange that he said this afternoon that Northern Ireland needs to cut benefit cheques. Perhaps those are not Mr Armstrong's views, but those of the author of the script. Whoever's view it is, I do not think that anyone else in the House agrees that cutting benefit payments is the answer to Northern Ireland's problems. Perhaps the Tory cat is well and truly out of the Ulster Unionist Party bag.

It is important, in this so-called age of austerity, to ensure that we, as a society, take all possible steps to continue to protect the vulnerable so that they do not bear the brunt of measures that are being implemented to address an economic crisis that was born out of greed and mismanagement. However, it is equally important that the social security system is looked at, reviewed and improved, which would be as true in better times as it is today. Social security is a devolved matter, and, therefore, the responsibility of the Assembly. However, as much as the Members opposite would like it not to be the case, it is an issue that is operated under the parity principle. Therefore, a single system of benefits and pensions operates throughout the United Kingdom.

It is well rehearsed and recognised that Northern Ireland has the highest levels of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom, with around 6.2% of our population not working. The Centre for Social Justice estimates that around 40% of the 56,000 people who are currently unemployed in Northern Ireland are long-term unemployed and that over half of those who claim income support have done so for over five years. Therefore, although the economic problems have added to the unemployment figure in recent years, there is a portion of society that, for whatever reason, is unwilling or unable to work and has been reliant on social security benefits for some considerable time. Indeed, 14% of children live in households in which no one works. Around 50,000 men and women in Northern Ireland do not work because of mental or behavioural problems. There are 42,000 people who claim disability living allowance and about 45,000 who claim incapacity benefit. Those are disproportionately high figures compared to the rest of the United

Kingdom, but one of many legacies of our recent troubled history.

Nearly one in 10 young people in Northern Ireland are not in education, employment or training. As a result, their prospects for future employment are greatly diminished. I commend the work of Bryson Charitable Group and Barnardo's in that regard. I am also aware that the Committee for Employment and Learning is currently undertaking an inquiry into that matter. I look forward to the report and the outworkings of the recommendations.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has published his Department's ideas on revolutionising the social security system across the UK.

As my colleague Simon Hamilton outlined, reforms which make the benefits system simpler and seek to increase economic activity are to be warmly welcomed. However, such reforms must be carefully implemented. The cold, hard reality is that Northern Ireland faces significant problems that will not be encountered by other parts of the United Kingdom.

The legacy of the Troubles is that we have a disproportionately high number of people who are unable to work because of physical or mental impairment, a point elaborated on by Mrs Bradley, Ms Lo, Mr Anderson and Mr Easton. Furthermore, the size of the public sector in Northern Ireland, compared to the private sector, means that the impact of impending cuts will be felt much more keenly here. That may result in an increase in the number of those relying on benefits and even fewer job opportunities for those already seeking work. Increased unemployment inevitably leads to increased numbers of vulnerable people, which, again, was referred to by Mr Easton and Ms Ní Chuilín.

Any radical overhaul is not without its problems, and often changes implemented by Government are the most problematic. It is, therefore, extremely important for the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Work and Pensions Secretary to ensure that Northern Ireland's needs are not only recognised but met, and I am encouraged by the Minister's words.

Many Members quoted statistics on the subject of high dependency on social security. Mr Hamilton stated the alarming analysis that the number of benefit claimants in Northern Ireland

is proportionately 50% higher than in the rest of GB. Mrs Bradley and Mr Easton spoke of the number of constituents with whom they deal in their offices, and the broad range of benefits that those constituents claim. Mr Armstrong recognised the high dependency on benefits, yet seemed to think that we have a “hokey-cokey” approach to reform.

Mr Craig said that the Government should be looking at starting from scratch. He highlighted the additional barrier that bureaucracy creates for applicants, which heightens the risk of error. He also spoke about its complex and confusing nature, as did other Members.

Ms Lo supported the principle of welfare reform but was concerned that those already marginalised would be further marginalised, and she gave an example of problems with ESA and so on that had been brought to her office. Mr Easton and others spoke of the cumbersome nature of the current system.

Mr Brady did not appear to support change, even though there is a clear need to encourage people back into work where jobs are available. He highlighted what he believed to be the failings of the Welfare Reform Bill and seemed to feel that it would penalise those on benefits. Although welcoming elements of welfare reform, Ms Anderson spoke of her concerns about certain aspects, for example, sanctions for trivial reasons. She was also concerned about the centralisation that reforms may bring, but she welcomed the Minister's statement and the negotiations that he has had. She attempted to make a case for breaking parity and wanted a Northern Ireland-specific benefit system without taking cognisance of the problems that might be caused by such a system and its outworkings.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that not only would there be great cost in funding any break with parity in terms of the payments, but that the Assembly would also have to fund, from the block grant, an entirely new computer and social security system to back it up, which would be prohibitive?

Miss McIlveen: Absolutely: I certainly agree with the Member's comments.

There is a clear need for Northern Ireland's special social and economic circumstances to be carefully considered. I note that the Minister has been putting Northern Ireland's case forward, and I welcome his efforts.

Other Members — Mrs Bradley, Mr Hamilton, Mr Gallagher and Miss Ní Chuilín — made their own case for Northern Ireland's special circumstances. Ms Ní Chuilín spoke specifically about the need for childcare reform and about the lack of it being a barrier for those getting back to work, particularly lone parents.

In conclusion, I welcome the commitment of the Minister and the work that he is doing, and also his response to the debate. It is fair to say that it is universally recognised in the Chamber that the vulnerable in Northern Ireland should not be made to suffer in the face of cuts and reforms imposed without any recognition of Northern Ireland's particular circumstances. It is important that those making such determinations are fully informed. However, the message must also be delivered that we do not fear reform. Reform is necessary to break the cycle of generational reliance on the welfare system. In that sense, I very much agree with Iain Duncan Smith, who said that we need to:

“end the poverty of aspiration that has trapped too many people for generations.”

Such reform must not come at any price, and it is the duty of any society to protect and support the vulnerable. Therefore, in participating in discussions on the ‘21st Century Welfare’ Command Paper, the interests of those who need our protection must be safeguarded.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges Northern Ireland's high dependency on social security benefits; supports reforms which are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his dialogue with the Department for Work and Pensions, stressing the need for the special social and economic circumstances of Northern Ireland to be carefully considered and urging the introduction of appropriate measures to ensure that the proposed welfare reforms do not have a disproportionately negative impact on Northern Ireland.

5.30 pm

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Social Security Office, Slieveban Drive, Andersonstown

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

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Business Committee for accepting the topic for debate. I also put on record my thanks to the Minister of Finance and Personnel — it is not often that I thank Sammy, but there you go — for his letter in response to e-mails that I sent to his private office on 1 or 3 and 6 September. Those related to ongoing security issues in the former social security office in Slieveban Drive, which is in the heart of Andersonstown.

I shall begin by giving a brief history of the place. On 21 May this year, DSD vacated the building to move to modern offices in the Kennedy Centre in west Belfast. Since then, the building has been empty. Initially, it was well secured. Indeed, I went around the site with a couple of residents and noted that the steel shuttering had been well installed and was secure. Unfortunately, adults — not children — removed some of the steel shutters, which required them to use angle grinders, as departmental officials pointed out to councillor Caoimhín Mac Giolla Mhíin and me when we met them on site. I suppose that the adults entered the premises out of greed to steal lead, copper and anything else that was worth money. I reiterate that it was adults and not children who began the process of causing antisocial behaviour in the area.

When we met the departmental officials, it was agreed that the shutters would be reinstalled, and they were. As a matter of urgency, I had asked the officials to remove any valuables that might be tempting to a thief, such as copper and lead, from the site. Perhaps that part of the

problem could have been resolved earlier, but we learn from our mistakes.

The shutters were removed again, allowing younger elements to get into the building and create havoc in the area. The building was set alight, and old furniture was removed to an adjacent playing field where it was set alight. Some young people got on to the roof of the building and threw objects into the surrounding streets, making the area unsafe and frightening many residents. On many occasions in recent months, members of the Fire and Rescue Service, the PSNI and representatives of the safer neighbourhood antisocial behaviour programme have dealt with fires and antisocial behaviour, all of which has put the community under a great deal of pressure that it should not have had to endure.

The current state of the building acts like a magnet for antisocial elements, some of whom come from other areas. Not only do they continue to damage the old offices, but there has been a dramatic surge in crime, including break-ins to homes and the theft of cars from the vicinity. On some weekends, there have been parties in the building, which, again, have acted like a magnet for antisocial behaviour.

I know that, through my correspondence with the Minister, there are now two security guards on the site every night from 5.00 pm to 7.00 am. That is a step in the right direction. I know that there had been issues with the security guard who was previously employed on the site. I am not sure of the details, but I know that some sort of threat had been made; perhaps the Minister knows more than I do. I was not aware of that situation; had I been, I would have challenged those who made any such threat. In his correspondence the Minister said that battery-operated CCTVs would be installed on the premises. CCTV cameras had already been installed there but had been damaged by antisocial elements. It would be of benefit to the residents nearby and the entire community if the security staff were kept in place until a future use for the site is found.

I delivered about 1,000 leaflets in that area last night, and I spoke to residents, as I have done over recent weeks and months, about the issue. The residents have been greatly affected by the situation. They said, however, that, since the security staff had been put in place, antisocial behaviour in the area had reduced. I

give credit where credit is due; however, I urge the Minister to retain the security staff on the site nightly from 5.00 pm to 7.00 am, because the measure seems to be working and it gives residents some peace of mind.

I want now to turn to the future use of the site. I am aware that the Housing Executive and Belfast City Council have expressed interest in it. I have spoken to many residents in the area, and my office has been contacted by others who are concerned about the future use of the site. That part of Andersonstown is a very settled area, and many of its residents have lived there for many years. Many pensioners live in the area, as do many schoolchildren. The people of the area deserve credit for the community spirit that they have built up over many years. The British Army vacated the land that they stole to build a military base right on the doorsteps of local people. The site was known locally as Silver City, but the military base is long gone, and the community has moved on.

Some of the residents expressed concern that there has been no creative thinking on the part of the Housing Executive. They say that, once the plot of land becomes available, the Housing Executive will simply claim it and cram as many houses as it can onto it. I am glad that the Minister for Social Development is here to hear my concerns and those of residents. My party colleagues and I deal day and daily with people who are on the housing waiting list for west Belfast. Andersonstown is one of the most sought-after locations in the west of the city. We need to have a serious debate about how we build extra houses. There is a desperate need to fill the gap and reduce the Housing Executive waiting list.

We cannot just build houses on every available space without considering the infrastructure in the community and in the larger area. There are schools in the vicinity of the site as well as GAA clubs and soccer teams, all of which have a shortage of playing facilities. I mention playing facilities and pitches because there is a Belfast City Council-run pitch and play-park adjacent to the site.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel

(Mr S Wilson): I want to respond later in the debate, but I am not quite clear what the Member is saying. Is he saying that he does not want housing on that site?

Mr P Maskey: I am saying that it could be a mixed-use site, Sammy. As I said, I was in the area last night delivering 1,000 leaflets. Again last night and over recent weeks and months, residents told me that they are concerned that cramming as many houses as possible onto the site would create a bottleneck in the area. There are nursery, primary and post-primary schools in the vicinity, and people are saying that, because it is a well-settled area, the site could be used as a multipurpose facility. The concern is that, if the site goes to the Housing Executive simply to build houses, the adjacent green field, which is used as a playing pitch, would go because there would be pressure to build houses on it as well.

It is important to have facilities around the area. As I said, there is a great housing shortage in west Belfast, and we lobby daily to get people placed in houses. However, we must use creative thinking when we consider that entire site. If Belfast City Council, other Departments and, possibly, the Housing Executive use creative thinking, we could create a facility that will enhance the local community instead of bottlenecking it with the additional traffic that will stem from the Housing Executive's cramming as many home units as possible onto it. Mixed use of the site, in my view, is the best option. As I said, Belfast City Council has already expressed an interest in it and could take full or part ownership and create a multipurpose building that will cater for sporting teams, schools and the community sector. Local residents are crying out for facilities that meet their needs.

The Upper Andersonstown Community Forum, which is known locally as Tullymore, is just up the street from the old offices on the broo or dole site. It has recently extended its premises, and thanks must be given to the Department for Social Development for giving money to that. The Minister and the MP, Gerry Adams, were at the opening a number of weeks ago; that is a very positive step. The Tullymore site is probably one of the most proactive and valuable resources in the area and one of the largest employers in Andersonstown. All its staff need to be commended, especially Tish Holland, who has driven the community sector in that area for many years.

Tullymore is maxed out already with the many initiatives that are in place, from childcare to pensioners' clubs, education facilities and after-school projects. There need to be further

developments in the vicinity to cater for the needs of the community, and I urge Minister Attwood to think seriously about that before he allows the Housing Executive to purchase the land simply to squeeze as many houses or apartments as possible onto it. In my view and that of many residents in that area, that will have a detrimental effect on that well-established part of the city. There is also the local library site in Slievegallion, which, unfortunately, closed its doors to the public in July this year. We are working proactively to get library services in the local community centre, and I hope that that will go some way to bridge the gap. That facility could be used by the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum.

Today's debate is important for the local community. There has been a blight of antisocial behaviour in recent months since the building closed. As I said, Silver City was in the heart of the Andersonstown area and on the doorsteps of many people's homes. That community has moved on in a positive manner, and it deserves better than to have a load more houses crammed onto the site.

We need creative thinking, and I urge Departments, councils and any other bodies to consult the local community in that area. That is an important step. However, tonight's Adjournment debate is the first step to addressing the problems. Any Executive Minister who deals with that area should know that I, as a local representative and local resident, will work my hardest to ensure that whatever is done is done right. I will assist any Minister, Department or council that takes on the issue. I support them all, but we must begin consultation as soon as possible. I know that our budgets are under tight constraints, but we must move in a positive direction.

5.45 pm

Mr Attwood: I thank Paul Maskey for bringing the issue to the attention of the Assembly. The debate touches on broader issues about land use, community participation, maximum return of available land and the right profile and balance to take land forward for development purposes. Over and above the Slieveban site, it raises broader themes and issues that can be usefully discussed.

The jobs and benefits office at Slieveban Drive is now closed, and a new facility is open at the Curley's site. I encourage the Minister to visit

jobs and benefits offices, which he will know about from his own experience. The jobs and benefits office at the Curley's site demonstrates that a new facility improves the working environment and customer service. It actually moderates behaviour. People going into a better-managed and new facility that is geared to the needs of individual claimants has resulted in the very few people who misbehave behaving better and generally moderating behaviour and improving the service. There is something that might be worthy of consideration in all of that in going forward with a capital budget.

I agree with Paul Maskey that, with respect to land use, we need to move forward not only with the consultation of local communities but with their participation. That is what DSD and the Housing Executive have been trying to do, for example, with the demolition of the flats at Ross Street, where individual, one-on-one consultation has taken place with tenants and the two homeowners. There is a standard around not only consulting communities but participation that is crucial.

Mr Adams: I do not wish to misrepresent what the Member said, but I found his comments about citizens behaving themselves better in the new benefits centre to be entirely patronising. It misrepresents what people who are subjected to unemployment have to go through sometimes in what is a very difficult process. It may not have been meant the way it sounded, but I think that the Member should reflect on what he said.

Mr Attwood: I note the intervention from Mr Adams. I think that Mr Adams should reflect and read Hansard. I made it clear that the people who misbehaved were the few who did so. That was the language that I used. If Mr Adams were to speak to our social security staff, who are the subject of the highest levels of work-related stress of any employees in the public service in Northern Ireland, I am sure that he would appreciate that the people who are on the front line in social security offices have to take abusive phone calls and comments at desks from the few abusive claimants. If Mr Adams were to do that, he would agree that my comments are very relevant and very accurate. Given my responsibility, in a different role, for social security staff, I do not take lightly any comments that suggest either on the customer side or on the staff side that I have anything other than appropriate respect for all that they have to go through and experience.

I turn back to the debate. There is no intention, as far as I am aware, by the Housing Executive, the DSD or the Planning Service to cram houses into sites. That is contrary to planning conditions and guidelines, and it is contrary to the core strategy of the DSD and the Housing Executive. Therefore, the development of land is not a matter of cramming properties onto sites; it is a proportionate and proper use of the site that is available.

My view as an MLA is that, if there is housing use at that site in the future, the use should be strictly for family homes, and there should not be any suggestion of apartments in what is already a very constrained site. In my own view, indicatively, if there were to be housing on all of that land, it would be up to and no more than 20 housing units, and those would be three-bedroom housing units. That would be an appropriate, proportionate and prudent use of land that is available and, as Members should remember, of land that is in government ownership. Therefore, given the principle of trying to build on land that is in government ownership, the site could be very amenable to all those outcomes.

As far as I am concerned and speaking in any capacity that I might have, I should say that there is no suggestion that there be cramming on any site. There have been examples of such cramming, and Mr Maskey and Mr Adams know full well of the apartment blight on the Andersonstown Road and the efforts that some developers have made to create a similar blight on the Glen Road and elsewhere. Given that experience and given the risk and the threat that arise occasionally as a result of Planning Service decisions, the site is not about cramming. It is about family homes. A moderate number of family homes would be involved, and there would not have to be a disproportionate impact on traffic use and pedestrian safety in the area.

I am concerned about ensuring that government works its maximum for people in west Belfast. Too often, I have seen Ministers go into government but not into power. There is a fundamental difference in culture and outcomes when it comes to the nature of government. That is why, once the land in question became available, the Housing Executive was right to move quickly to scope out whether it was suitable for housing use. It was also right to appoint a housing association to seek proposals

for design in the future. In my view, all that is an example of government moving quickly. However, government working quickly must be consistent with what I said at the beginning of my response about community involvement and participation. Going forward, regardless of whether the site will be exclusively for housing use or for mixed use, it should be done in consultation with the community to maximise the benefit to that community. That should include maximising the benefits to an area that is of high choice among social tenants and where there is already high need and high stress.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. This is probably one of the most unusual debates that this Assembly has had, in that we will receive information from a Minister whose constituency remit is in and around the site in question and who will be speaking as a local MLA. It will be useful to get some of that information, which will lead me to make a suggestion to Alex Attwood MLA, the Minister for Social Development, in my comments. I will never miss this opportunity, Alex, to comment on what you said.

I welcome the debate. It is important for the reasons that Paul Maskey and Alex Attwood gave, and I commend Paul for securing the debate. Paul said that antisocial behaviour from the young and, indeed, the not so young in and around the site is to be challenged and that it has been at every opportunity. Everyone in the Chamber is well aware, first and foremost, of the broken window syndrome, so I will not give a lesson on that. We need to ensure that we are not allowing the site to become a magnet or allowing it to continue to be a magnet for antisocial behaviour on a daily, if not a weekly, basis.

Paul highlighted some of the problems associated with the site. Indeed, in the times that we are in, those are problems that local residents, the local community and voluntary sectors do not need. The blue light services in particular do not need to be called out constantly to deal with antisocial behaviour, and that leads to the question of how much those additional call-outs are costing us.

I take this opportunity to praise those in the local area, including those who are involved in the safer neighbourhood project, without whose involvement we would probably be dealing, God forbid, with more serious issues on a regular

basis. I give credit where credit is due to the work that DFP has done to secure the site and to deal with some of the ongoing issues. However, consultation is the key theme in all the points that have been made. We now need the residents and the local community to be informed and kept up to date with the plans or the suggested plans for the site.

Paul voiced the concerns of some of the residents in the area, and those are genuine concerns. It is not a case of not in my back garden; there are genuine concerns about the whole issue of housing in the area. No one for one minute underestimates the need for additional housing in the West Belfast constituency, and no one is suggesting that more houses should not be built there, but we need proper infrastructure first, which is the point that Paul made.

In the letter that the Minister wrote to my colleague, he stated that he received a valuation of the property and would be meeting interested parties within a week. That letter was dated 17 September, and it would be useful if the Minister could indicate who those interested parties are.

Will the Minister also tell the House whether there are any proposals for him to meet with the community sector in the constituency, including, as Paul mentioned, the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum and the West Belfast Partnership Board? We should not lose sight of the fact that there is a vibrant community in West Belfast, which, to all intents and purpose, is up to speed and has a sound mind on some, if not all, of the issues that affect our community. Perhaps the Minister could meet the sector before the site is sold off. It is all right talking to the statutory agencies, but the Minister also needs to speak to the community and voluntary sector in the area.

Alex Attwood contributed to the debate as an MLA for West Belfast. I want to take the opportunity to sneak in a request for him, wearing his ministerial hat and in front of all the MLAs from West Belfast, to provide an update on what DSD's thinking is on the issue. That is not to say that the land will be sold to DSD, but it would be useful to understand the options that the Department has for the site. It would mean we all have the same information from the outset and that we can all be involved in the consultation.

Perhaps Minister Wilson could also tell us whether a request to take the site forward has been received from any other Departments. That is only a request for information so that we can ensure that we do not have to deal with a debacle like those we have dealt with in the past, with bits of information being received here and there. Everyone wants the site to be secured and to have no more antisocial behaviour on it. They also want the site to be used for the benefit of the community in and around that area and for the betterment of the community of the greater west Belfast area.

In conclusion, I want to commend the Minister. I am not sure whether I have a death wish. In fairness, he has a long history of working in local government and of working in partnership with local communities to try to get local solutions to local problems. It is all right saying that DFP will sell off the land, offset it to another Department and that the other Department will take it on. We are now in a collective Executive. We are talking about collective, joined-up government, and that is all about taking a partnership approach. There is no point in us imposing something on a community if it goes against its wishes and creates more difficulties and problems. We must utilise the local representatives and MLAs, because together we can ensure that everyone is happy with whatever is placed on the site.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am happy to respond to the debate at this late stage. It is like being kept in at school; I had to wait until 5.30 pm to respond.

I know from the correspondence that I received that the issue has caused the local community great difficulties. Indeed, Paul Maskey made that clear in the communications he sent to the Department. As always, I have tried to be as helpful as possible, and I am glad that he acknowledged that at least.

6.00 pm

In our roles as constituency representatives, all of us who are left in the Chamber — there are not too many of us — fully understand the difficulties caused by derelict buildings and the horror that the people who have to live, day in and day out, beside them can experience. Many people feel powerless because they have no control over what can be done with such buildings. Many people feel that public bodies do not move as quickly as they should and

that the people who make the decisions do not recognise what local people are going through, wondering, every night, whether they are going to have something thrown at their house or whether they are going to be disturbed.

I have asked departmental officials to try to move the process along as quickly as possible and, where there are problems, to try to address those. That is one reason why today's debate is useful. However, having listened to the debate, I am concerned that there are perhaps conflicting tensions. On the one hand, Members want something done about the problem quickly, and I can understand that. On the other hand, Members want to add in all the other things that people want done — I will come to that in a moment — which, by their very nature, would slow the process down and, therefore, leave us with the problem of the derelict building for longer. There are conflicting tensions.

Mr P Maskey: No matter what happens on the site — whether it is used for 20 houses, as the Minister said the Housing Executive could provide, or a multi-purpose facility — the concern that we all have is that it will take years to get planning permission and financing and for the demolition and building to be done. It is going to take a couple of years to get the site to that stage. If we start now, we could shorten that period and put something on the site that is much needed in that community.

The Minister will know from his days on Belfast City Council that there is a shortage of pitches across the city. With, as I said, a buy-in from Belfast City Council, the pitch beside the site could be utilised and turned into a 3G pitch. In Belfast, 50% of the shortage of pitches is in west Belfast. The site could be used as a sports facility for schools, the local GAA and local soccer teams.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I have noted what the Member said about the use of the land. A number of purposes have been suggested, from pitches to multi-purpose business facilities and from community use to housing or recreational land. The site is a not very well shaped 2·3 acres of land. We have to be realistic: it is not the Tardis. It is a fairly small piece of land and, given all the competing interests, we have to be realistic about what can go on the site.

I will outline for Members the factual position. When land is declared surplus to requirements

by a Department, there is an obligation to trawl for interest amongst public bodies and for a valuation to be done. The valuation of the land in this case is £1·1 million, which is significantly less than what it would have been valued at two or three years ago. However, that is what Land and Property Services has deemed the land to be worth on the public market. That puts certain constraints on the use of the land. For example, if we were to put 20 houses on a piece of land that is valued at £1·1 million, it would cost around £55,000 per unit for the land purposes alone. Members can see that, therefore, there would be financial constraints to that. The valuation has been done and a trawl has been carried out among the Departments. Under the rules for the disposal of land, if an interest is shown by other public sector bodies, that interest must be looked at first.

I do not want this to drag on, and I understand Members' points. I have said to officials to let us put the next step in place so that it does not drag on for ever. In conversation with the two bodies that expressed an interest, namely the Housing Executive and Belfast City Council, we now need to ascertain what they intend to put on the site and whether the money is available and do all the tests that will indicate whether it is likely to be a runner. If the two bids remain in place after that exploration, the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of the Environment will have to determine which bid is to be accepted and look at the associated business case. That is the rule.

Sue Ramsey raised the issue of the community sector. Under the current disposal rules, we cannot bring in the community sector until we have tested the interest from DSD and Belfast City Council. I have said to officials —

Ms S Ramsey: Is the Minister saying that it would be possible to bring in the community sector after he tests what DSD and Belfast City Council intend to do with the site?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is possible after the plans of Belfast City Council and DSD have been tested. One of the tests that will be applied immediately is whether the money is available at present. There is no point in DSD telling me that it would like to buy the site, that it does not have any money now but that it might have the money in four years' time. If that were the case, we would not regard that as a real expression of interest, and we would

move on. Those kinds of tests have to be done with the Departments to find out whether we proceed to the next step.

I do not want that process to go on for ever. Members of Belfast City Council will know well that if the matter went to the council's leisure services committee, or whatever it is called now, it could get kicked back five, six or seven times. Indeed, the council could be discussing it in a year's time. The important thing is to set a timetable.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I will after I finish this point. I do not know if it is a realistic timetable, but I have asked officials whether we can get the process completed in six weeks. That would give the sort of certainty that the Member asked for. I will give way now.

Mr F McCann: We could end up with what is probably everyone's worst nightmare: another leisure centre just across the road. The discussion about what will replace the building that is on the site at present is interesting. However, one of the difficulties is that that building is a magnet for those who want to destroy their community. Such buildings often lie there and are destroyed, having become hangouts for antisocial elements in the area. Would it not be better if those buildings were flattened and returned to grass? That would mean that there will be a clear site when it comes to building on it.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am getting worried, because I think that the Member may have read my mind. The next point that I was going to make concerned that nightmare that can be left by derelict buildings. I do not imagine that either of the two groups that have expressed an interest, Belfast City Council or the Housing Executive, will want the building to be left on the site, anyway. Those groups will be more interested in the piece of land.

I have said to officials to let us start the process of demolishing the building as quickly as possible. There are a number of steps in that process. Safety checks have to be carried out to ensure that all the services are turned off and that there is asbestos in the building. A tender then goes out, and the contractor comes in. We hope to complete all that and have the building demolished in about 10 weeks. I hope that that timescale gives some comfort to the

Members who raised the issue. That should also give some comfort to people that, come the dark nights, the building will not there as the kind of magnet for vandalism that Mr McCann described. As it is likely that any group that has an interest will have an interest only in the site rather than in the building, I do not think that we are taking any risks by demolishing the building. Therefore, that will be the next step.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to bring his remarks to a close.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel:

In conclusion, I hope that I have, at least, illustrated that we are taking the issue seriously. There are restrictions about how wide we can throw the net. At the end of the day, if the site goes for housing, it will be a battle between Sinn Féin representatives and the Minister for Social Development as to what goes on it.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.



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