

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 18 October 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I have something that I need to say at the start of the sitting concerning Tuesday's debate in the Chamber when some things were said that should not have been said. Members should know by now that I expect a certain standard of debate in the Chamber and that they are to treat other Members with dignity and courtesy. However, that certainly did not happen in the House on Tuesday evening.

I have reviewed Hansard, and I am sorry to say that, on both days last week, the remarks of a number of Members fell far short of the good standards of a parliamentary democracy anywhere. I defy any Member to tell me that the Members who made the remarks that I read in Hansard would get away with making them anywhere else — they certainly would not.

I am even more concerned to note that some very serious challenges were made to the authority of the Deputy Speakers. I am considering a number of remarks, and I assure the House that some Members will be hearing from me. I do not know how many times I have raised the issue of challenging the authority of the Chair. All Members know that whoever is in the Chair has a difficult enough job to do, but what makes it worse is Members telling the Chair what they think a point of order is. When Members approach the Table to ask the person in the Chair whether or not another Member's remarks were unparliamentary, it beggars belief. I have said this so many times in the House, but I am going to repeat it: I will not allow anybody to challenge the authority of the Chair; it will not happen. My job is to protect — totally and absolutely — the integrity of the House and that of its proceedings and work.

I keep repeating myself, but some of the remarks that I read in Hansard would not be allowed in a parliamentary democracy anywhere

else, and they will certainly not be allowed here. I have no intention of taking any points of order on the issue. I intend to deal with it in the strongest way that I can and with the authority that I have.

Members know exactly when they have said something in such a way that it hurts another Member. When Members rise to their feet, they know what they are saying and what they are going to say, and it is totally wrong if it is said in such a way as to hurt another Member. Robust debate can take place in the Chamber, and, on occasions, a debate can raise tensions in the House. As I have said from the Chair on a number of occasions, I am very happy with robust debate. In fact, on occasions, I enjoy a bit of banter across the Chamber. There is nothing wrong with that provided that it does not get out of control and that we do not say things to Members knowing that that will cause major problems. That is where I need to draw the line; after all, it is a debating Chamber. I will leave it at that.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Monday 11 October, during Question Time, I asked a supplementary question to the deputy First Minister. I made the specific reference that, in the areas where the deputy First Minister's party has the most electoral support, there is hardly a Protestant about the place. The deputy First Minister's reply was:

"I could not accept that for one minute." — [Official Report, Vol 56, No 34 ,p116, col 1]

Mr Speaker, I have written to you this morning, and I have copied that letter to each and every Sinn Féin MLA, with the incontrovertible evidence for what I asked the deputy First Minister about. Perhaps, in the future, Ministers could try to reply accurately to questions, rather than doing so inaccurately, which requires the action that I have had to take to rectify

the situation. Perhaps you can have a look at Hansard, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I have not received the letter yet. Let me look at the letter and come back to the Member directly.

Executive Committee Business

Justice Bill: First Stage

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): I beg to introduce the Justice Bill (NIA Bill 1/10), which is a Bill to make provision for an offender levy; to amend the law relating to measures for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses and live links; to make provision for policing and community safety partnerships; to make provision regulating certain sporting events; to amend the law relating to the treatment of offenders; to make provision for penalty notices and conditional cautions; to amend the law on legal aid; to amend the law on bail; to make other amendments relating to the administration of civil and criminal justice; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

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

Private Members' Business

Multiple Sclerosis Services

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Ross: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review and improve the facilities available to, and treatment for, people who are suffering from multiple sclerosis.

Last year, the Multiple Sclerosis Society held a series of events around the Province, one of which was held in my constituency in Larne and which I, my colleague David Hilditch and the Ulster Unionist Member for East Antrim Ken Robinson attended. We found that to be a very moving and powerful event, and the opportunity to listen to people who live with MS every day and to hear about the struggles that they go through and what could make their lives easier was good for us and certainly increased our knowledge of the illness. I am quite sure that Members who attended similar events in their constituencies will have had a similar experience, and, indeed, the number of Assembly questions that have been submitted to the Health Minister on the issue of MS since those meetings is testament to the impact that it has had on many Members.

Although I am no expert on MS, and most people are not, those events have raised my awareness of and interest in MS, and I have come to ask more questions about the sort of help that people currently get and the increased help that they could get.

For example, I was told a story about a young man in his late 20s, whose symptoms include wobbly legs and slurred speech. His young age and his symptoms mean that, when he goes out at night, people assume that he is drunk. That has led to him to want to stay in his house and to not go out, because he is afraid of the stigma that is attached to the matter. Hearing real-life examples of the social exclusion that can come with the illness is very powerful. Indeed, such

social exclusion can, in many cases, lead to mental illness.

MS has a huge, life-changing impact on not only those diagnosed with the illness but their partners, friends and wider families. It is a chronic debilitating neurological condition in which the body's immune system attacks the central nervous system, disrupting signals from the brain. It is the greatest cause of disability among young adults, particularly those between the ages of 20 and 40. We are also aware that women are three times more likely than men to be diagnosed with MS. However, MS is known somewhat as the forgotten illness, in the sense that many people are unaware of what it is, of what help there is and of what help there could be for those with the illness. In the Great Hall this morning, I spoke to some members of the MS Society. They are delighted that the Assembly is now debating the issue and that awareness about MS is being raised this afternoon.

MS has a number of different symptoms, and people can suffer from a relapsing, remitting form of it. However, it is always a progressive illness. Therefore, it is not something for which we can have a simple one-size-fits-all support programme for each and every individual. Rather, we have to have a range of services available to help those with MS, from those with the most aggressive type, who, as examples have shown, from the moment of diagnosis could be in a wheelchair or could even lose their lives in a short number of years, to those who do not have as severe a form of MS and could, perhaps, avail themselves of drugs and physiotherapy at timely interventions to help them.

The most startling fact that was raised at the recent meetings was that, compared with anywhere else in the world, Northern Ireland has a disproportionately high number of people suffering from MS. In my East Antrim constituency, that statistic is particularly acute. Perhaps, therefore, it is surprising that we do not put more resources into and emphasis on MS. Given that we have so many people suffering from it, it must be asked why Northern Ireland has not tried to become a centre of best practice for services for people with MS. Somewhere in the region of 4,000 people in Northern Ireland have MS, and they are asking why there is no clear strategy in the Health Service to deal with it. There is widespread concern in Northern Ireland that we have not

fully implemented the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines, which would ensure that those with MS are not failed by the system.

In the past number of years, two significant statements have come from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). In 2002, the Department carried out a review of neurology services, and, in 2009, Minister McGimpsey announced that there would be an additional review. However, no progress on that review has been reported to the MS Society, and it is unaware of the review's status. In April 2010, the Minister announced that a neurology network would be established. Again, however, no progress has been reported on that. We do not know whether any tangible results will flow from it, nor do we know whether the money that was earmarked for the network was one-off or recurring funding. That makes it very difficult to plan and to get the tangible results that I mentioned.

Although the cause of MS is unknown, and there is no cure for it, a number of measures can be taken to ease sufferers' pain. Certain treatments and specialists can help people to manage many of the symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, loss of mobility and feeling, depression and muscle spasms. Neurophysiotherapy provision and access to occupational therapists are the single biggest issues to come out of the meetings that were held in the various constituencies and those that I have held subsequently. That includes not only the provision of neurophysiotherapy when MS is first diagnosed but provision during timely interventions throughout key stages of the illness. Currently, there are no neurophysiotherapists in Northern Ireland working exclusively in the area of MS. When we are told that there are 90 physiotherapists with the relevant skills, we know that many of those individuals spend most of their time working in other areas. When asked how many physiotherapists have, at present, a specialised knowledge of MS, the Minister informed me that, in the Belfast Trust the whole-time equivalent is 7.27; in the Northern Trust it is two; in the South Eastern Trust it is 9.4; in the Southern Trust the figure is eight; and in the Western Trust it is 10.22. However, given that we know that many of those individuals do not deal with only MS sufferers, the proportion of experts available for the number of sufferers is very, very low.

We know through evidence that neurophysiotherapy can help to maintain mobility, and, depending on the intensity and delivery of the service, it can even help individuals to gain improvements. It is hugely beneficial and, importantly, can dramatically improve the quality of life of the individuals who receive it.

12.15 pm

A number of MS sufferers responded to a recent survey conducted by the MS Society. One individual said:

"Physio was very helpful and gave me ideas to make me more mobile in the house where I feel safer and less embarrassed".

However, interestingly, another respondent to the survey said:

"Physiotherapy is all very well when you are receiving it but when it stops you go back as far as you have come."

Therefore, it is important that physiotherapy is available to sufferers when the initial diagnosis is made and that follow-up treatment is provided. Indeed, many of the sufferers who I spoke to feel that they are forgotten or left on their own once the initial phase of support has gone.

In other research, the MS Society concluded that only 1% of those surveyed received physiotherapy more than once a week and that fewer than a quarter of individuals with MS could see a physio at least once a week. NICE guidelines stipulate that a neurophysiotherapist should be part of the MS team and, specifically, that those patients with muscle weakness or bowel and bladder problems should have regular physiotherapy. Therefore, when MS sufferers report difficulties in accessing neurophysiotherapists, difficulties in being referred and a general lack of appropriate provision, the whole House should be concerned.

There is also the need to tackle the perception that services are mainly focused in Belfast and that those who live in rural areas in the west of the Province do not have the same access. There are also reports of a shortage of appropriately trained physiotherapists for those with neurological conditions, particularly, MS.

A further concern is that there has been a 30% reduction in beds in the regional neurology inpatient unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital. That reduction means that patients who report

to hospital are placed in general wards, which perhaps do not have specialist expertise. As a result, those patients stay in hospital longer and place a further drain on resources.

Through the motion, we are not suggesting that those with MS should receive continuous physiotherapy but that it should be delivered in a required, time-appropriate way during the transitional stages of the illness. For example, when an individual is first diagnosed, it is important that a physiotherapist is appointed to help with mobility and to teach the sufferer exercises that he or she can do on their own. Again, information suggests that not all GPs are referring individuals immediately to get that early help. Another respondent to the recent MS Society survey said:

"I was never offered physiotherapy from hospital or outpatients. I think that MS patients should be offered this service at times."

There was a common theme among many of the responses to the survey.

Treatment does not have to take place in hospitals. In fact, in many cases, it is better if it does not take place there. Many individuals with MS find it difficult to get to hospital due to problems with getting lifts, using public transport or parking once they get to hospital. It is much better if that level of physiotherapy is delivered in local communities using council facilities, leisure centres and civic centres. Not only is it not delivered in the medicated environment of the hospital, there is a social aspect to it. That is something that we need to look at.

As I said, help is required most when someone is going through the transitional stages of the illness, perhaps when they use a stick for the first time, change their employment patterns or need to use a wheelchair full time. That time-appropriate intervention can make such an important difference to their lives.

I hope that we can have a good, mature debate on the issue today and listen to suggestions from, and the experiences of, Members from across the Province. I also hope that the Minister will give us some real answers to some of the questions that have been posed. I hope that he does not try to turn the debate into a party political slanging match about funding.

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

Mr Ross: We know that he receives half of the Budget, and we want to see those resources targeted in an appropriate fashion. I hope that the House will unite behind the motion, and I look forward to that.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, I speak in favour of the motion. I welcome the fact that we are debating this very important topic today, given, as the proposer said, that MS prevalence rates here are the highest in the world.

As the proposer also said, MS is a chronic debilitating neurological disease that is the greatest cause of disability among young adults, with onset typically occurring between 20 and 40 years of age. I want to commend the good work undertaken by the MS Society, which works tirelessly to lobby Members and to provide support and assistance to MS sufferers. A number of sufferers are in the Public Gallery today, and they are all very welcome.

The biggest issue that the MS Society identified in its recent survey was the dire situation as regards neurophysiotherapy provision. The survey made it clear that the role of physiotherapists and other allied health professionals (AHPs) in the treatment of those with MS and other long-term conditions is very under-developed.

The lack of recognition of the role of physiotherapists and other allied health professionals, and the value of the services that they provide for patients with long-term conditions, is, in part, a direct consequence of the absence of a strategy for allied health professionals.

In the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we have raised consistently over the past number of years the issue of the under-representation and capacity of allied health professionals at departmental level. I am aware that, sadly, the allied health professional representative at departmental level passed away earlier this year. That has obviously left a gap, but that gap has to be filled. The Department needs to move forward and deliver on its stated commitment to develop a strategy that fully recognises the fact that allied health professionals contribute significantly to improving the health and well-being of those

with long-term conditions. That, in turn, impacts on health and social care costs.

Allied health professionals play a clear role in supporting early discharge from hospital; working across the acute and community interface; delivering integrated services across health and social care; and supporting patients to manage their own conditions, thus preventing admissions to hospital. Allied health professionals provide equipment and adaptations to promote independence, which reduces visits and hospital admissions. They also play a role in assessing patients and, subsequently, in putting multidisciplinary treatment programmes in place. Those interventions enable patients to manage their own conditions and live as independently as possible, which minimises the demands on health and social care services. We all accept the clear advantages of helping people with MS to live the fullest lives possible.

It is accepted that a multidisciplinary approach to managing what is a debilitating disease is the most advantageous way of assisting MS sufferers to have a better quality of life. Sinn Féin fully supports the call for a more consistent strategy. Given that we were promised a review in April, we call on the Department to live up to its commitments. MS sufferers need to hear some positive news from the House today.

Mr Gardiner: The more that things change, the more that they stay the same. How true that translation of the French saying is of the DUP and its methods, as it sums up the DUP's apparent attitude to our Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The DUP demands reviews of spending on specific elements of the Department's delivery. That implies that there is something wrong with that delivery and, in the process, insults the dedicated professionals who work in the Health Service.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you.

At the same time, DUP members voted against the ring-fencing of the health budget in Committee. The DUP is perfectly aware of the financial constraints on our local Department, which has faced historical underfunding of £600 million.

Mr Easton: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Member mentioned a vote to ring-fence the

health budget. We did not vote against that; it was a different vote. The Member needs to report the facts accurately.

Mr Speaker: The Member has got his remarks on the record. I urge Mr Gardiner to return to the motion that is before the House.

Mr Gardiner: Ring-fencing concerns the Department's general funding rather than any individual or specific funding that comes under its remit.

There we have, perfectly described, the destructive, as opposed to the constructive, approach of the DUP. It would deprive the Minister of money and then criticise how he spends his money. Of course, the DUP cares little for the morale of the Health Service staff that it undermines. It plays politics with the Health Service in a totally cynical and self-serving way. The parties that voted to cut the health budget — namely, the DUP and Sinn Féin — need to reflect on the patients who suffer as a result of those cuts.

Mr Speaker: Order. As Members know, I have some patience. However, I must insist that the Member return to the motion.

Mr Gardiner: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister has been making steady progress on the multiple sclerosis front, as on so many other fronts, in his large and complex Department. In May, he announced a spend of £50,000 to enable the establishment of an MS network. The Minister has also increased investment in disease-modifying therapies. Physiotherapy is an important part of that and is most beneficial to MS sufferers, but disease-modifying therapy through drugs is another important aspect of the treatment.

In March, the Minister announced a short-term working group to examine the neurophysiotherapy service in Northern Ireland and to benchmark it against current NICE guidelines. He also announced that staffing levels would be assessed and that he would consider options for promoting neurophysiotherapy among physiotherapists. Therefore, the review that the DUP is calling for is, in large measure, already taking place.

The Minister has also revealed that all undergraduate physiotherapy students will study neurological conditions, including multiple sclerosis, in the second and third years of their courses, and that specialist development

programmes on neurological conditions, including multiple sclerosis, will be available after they get their qualifications. .

Local initiatives, such as rural lift transport, door-to-door transport and volunteer drivers are also available. The MS Society also provides transport to neurophysiotherapy services. GPs can arrange for ambulance transport, if appropriate; even travel by taxi may be authorised. In addition, for patients who are unable to travel, physiotherapists may be provided in the home or in a care setting.

The picture is one of continual renewal and improvement. That is achieved by hard-working healthcare staff under the equally hard-working Minister. The public know that, and they know exactly what to make of the destructive negativity of the DUP

As Ulster Unionists, we support the Health Minister in all that he is doing to assist people with MS, and we encourage everyone who can help out to do so. I know that the Health Minister will not shrink from his responsibilities to anybody under his Department who needs medical care.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion, and I thank the DUP Members who brought it to the Floor this morning. For the families of MS patients, and for the patients, the fact is that the MS service is the Cinderella service of the health sector. There are between 3,500 and 4,000 sufferers in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is a fact that the highest incidence of MS anywhere in the world is here in Northern Ireland.

I will give you an example of how the service is falling down. A patient was referred by their GP to a consultant, and the consultant recommended a course of drugs. However, the patient was told that they would have to wait for the drugs. Indeed, they had to wait for 12 months after being seen by the consultant before the drugs that the consultant recommended were available. I do not understand why that happened. In my view, there is no explanation for that. Therefore, the service is falling down very badly.

Members have pointed out that MS is the biggest cause of disability among young people and that we need a strategy.

That was suggested as far back as 2002, and again in 2009. Indeed, in 2010, the Minister

announced the establishment of a neurology network. However, people out there who deal with this difficult condition daily are not aware of any improvement. We need an update from the Minister on that important neurology network.

12.30 pm

Mr Dallat: Does the Member agree that, as a result of the debate, there must be a new urgency to deliver to MS sufferers those services that have, sadly, been neglected? Does he agree that the debate offers an excellent opportunity to do that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Gallagher: I thank my colleague for that contribution. Part of that service includes what has been referred to as a specialist area of physiotherapy, namely neuro-physiotherapy. There is a need for more trained personnel to support people throughout Northern Ireland, particularly in Fermanagh and Tyrone. Although it is welcome that transport is, sometimes, available, we must all remember that they have to travel furthest to Belfast. That presents them with great difficulties due to their mobility problems. It is a worry for their parents.

Of course, sadly, the majority of people who acquire multiple sclerosis are unable to continue to work because proper services are unavailable. They have to drop out of work and spend the rest of their days in their homes. If it were available, physiotherapy could keep some of those people in work, maybe for many more years.

I understand that the cross-border College of Occupational Therapists (COT) is looking at joint initiatives on neurology services. That is to be welcomed. As I have said, access to physiotherapy is a problem in border areas. I hope that the Minister will look again at the North/South feasibility study and, perhaps, reconsider his decision not to make its content available to the Assembly. In border areas, provision of physiotherapy or even, if that is unavailable, provision of exercise groups at community level can make a tremendous difference to easing problems for multiple sclerosis sufferers. Of course, we know that the mental health support that some of them require is not available. That is another instance of when people's names are put on a list and they are told that they will just have to wait until money becomes available.

Occupational therapy services have also been mentioned. There is a definite need for more personnel in that area. Therapists' voices are not being heard sufficiently by the health authorities, in the trusts or in the Department. I urge the Minister to look at that again to ensure that those professionals' voices are heard at the highest level in the Health Service.

I call on the Minister to update us on that network. I hope that the debate helps to give a voice to people who suffer from MS.

Mr McCarthy: As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I very much welcome and support the motion. Indeed, I thank the Members who put it on the Order Paper.

Reviewing and improving facilities and treatment for all MS sufferers is most certainly worthy of all Members' support. I have no doubt that all MS patients will support the Assembly's efforts to ensure that their needs are looked after. Every Assembly Member will have constituents who are plagued by the ravages of that disease. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us to pull out the stops to ensure that improvements are made as soon as possible.

Once again, I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Service for putting together a comprehensive analysis of MS and how it affects many people in the community. It is dreadful to think that Northern Ireland has one of the highest rates of MS in the world, as Mr Gallagher mentioned, and that the numbers are, in fact, rising. Upwards of 4,000 people in this small region suffer from MS. No one seems to know why that should be the case or how to help to reduce the number of patients with MS in Northern Ireland. Given those horrible statistics, it is the duty of our Health Service to provide help in every way possible to make the life of a patient as comfortable and rewarding as possible.

I have no doubt that the reason for bringing the motion to the House is to raise the profile of MS and the hopes of MS patients that things can only get better. I am glad that our Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey, is with us today to hear Members from different constituencies relate how MS sufferers want to see more and better provision to enable them to have a half-decent life.

I pay tribute to the volunteers and carers out in our community who work so hard through their

local branches of the Multiple Sclerosis Society to bring help and comfort to the patients. It is also worth recording the number of Members who have asked questions of the Minister on what provisions his Department is offering for MS patients. That indicates a growing concern about the plight of people suffering from MS across Northern Ireland.

I was horrified to hear recently that the Belfast Trust, in its wisdom or otherwise, decided to cut its inpatient neurology unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital by some 30%. I understand that that was done without consultation with any of the local consultants. Despite what managers say, that will have a detrimental effect, not only on MS patients but on sufferers of other neurological disorders.

The information to hand indicates that there are no designated MS physiotherapy services available in Northern Ireland, as has been said, and most of the evidence, through correspondence, suggests that MS patients regard physiotherapy as a number one priority. Surely that anomaly will show up in any review. Action must be taken to put that right as soon as possible. If we know that to be the case, let the Minister take action immediately for the benefit of all MS patients.

The Research and Library Service has provided us with a very detailed document entitled 'Multiple Sclerosis: National clinical guideline for diagnosis and management in primary and secondary care'. Contained in that document is a wide range of analysis of MS, its remedies and some 25 recommendations. The document had input from the Royal College of Physicians and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. Surely they are the experts, and their recommendations, along with the Department's national service framework for long-term conditions, should be the basis on which progress can be made at a local Northern Ireland level.

It is important that the Assembly acknowledges the plight in which MS patients find themselves, and we call on the Department and the Minister to help to ease the pain of the patients.

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

Mr McCartney: That can be done by providing the necessary drugs, rehabilitation and support at every level, and by working with the Multiple

Sclerosis Society to reduce the pain and suffering of all MS patients.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Easton: I support the motion, and I thank my colleagues for bringing it forward. Multiple sclerosis is a disease caused by inflammation around the brain and spinal cord. It affects the ability of nerve cells in the brain and spine to communicate with each other. Multiple sclerosis is most likely caused by a combination of genetic, environmental and infectious factors. However, its exact cause has not been identified. Relatives, usually siblings, of a person with the disease are more likely to contact it. It is difficult to diagnose, given that the symptoms can be similar to other medical problems. There is no known cure for MS. Management through treatment and therapy have proven useful and helpful. That may involve drugs and physiotherapy.

Mr Moutray: I thank my colleague for giving way. He referred to treatments and therapies. Does he agree that one beneficial treatment for users with multiple sclerosis has been found to be an oxygen chamber? Within the Southern Trust area, there is an oxygen chamber in Craigavon Area Hospital, but sufferers are denied the use of it. Does my colleague agree that that should be made available for sufferers?

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

Mr Easton: I thank my colleague for that intervention. An oxygen chamber has proven beneficial, and I am surprised to hear that the Southern Trust is not taking advantage of the chamber in Craigavon Area Hospital. I ask the Minister to take note of the lack of use of that chamber and perhaps to get in contact with the Southern Trust to see whether something can be done to alleviate the suffering of those with MS through the use of that chamber.

Treatment may also involve drugs and physiotherapy. Information about the patient's condition is also vital. Prognosis for a person with MS is very much dependent on the subtype of the disease, as well as the person's age, sex and initial symptoms. The disease advances and evolves over the decades of a person's life. Life expectancy is five to 10 years lower than the average for an unaffected person. Most sufferers lose the ability to walk when the disease is at an advanced stage. Sadly, suicide

represents a high risk among those with MS, as has been highlighted in much of the debate about euthanasia here.

MS is diagnosed in 3.5 to 6.6 people per 100,000 of the population in Northern Ireland each year. Prevalence is between 100 and 120 people per 100,000 of the population. Given that the disease is quite rare, problems in our Health Service relate to the availability of access to expert services. A published report by the National Collaborating Centre for Chronic Conditions argued that specialist neurological and neurological rehabilitation services should be made available to every person with MS when they need them.

Although we have services available for MS sufferers in Northern Ireland, problems have been highlighted with regard to access to physiotherapy and specialist neurological assistance. According to an MS Society report published in 2009, only 13% of those with MS have physiotherapy. Patients experience difficulty accessing a physiotherapist, difficulty being referred, and a lack of provision when they have received a referral to someone who understands their condition. There is, therefore, a need to specialise review services and the treatment available for MS sufferers, as the motion calls for.

The low availability of services is also restricting access to care and treatment for MS sufferers, especially with no dedicated team or unit to help people with MS. MS patients usually access treatment through the same channels as anyone else with a similar but different medical condition. However, on diagnosis, patients usually have access to a specialist MS nurse.

Northern Ireland has one of the highest and rising prevalence rates of MS in the world, with approximately 3,500 to 4,000 people with MS in Northern Ireland. That figure is staggering, given that we have a population of only 1.7 million. It is up to us to provide the best care and support for MS sufferers throughout their lives. I, therefore, support the motion and commend it to the House.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion, which is timely and welcome. We are debating a serious condition, and I do not think that MS sufferers or those from the MS Society came here today to listen to inter-party bickering about budgets that have not even been decided yet.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. Nobody will question the fact that there is no love lost between our two parties, but will the Member join me and express his disgust at the comments of Sammy Gardiner when he questioned the motivation behind the debate?

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I reiterate what I said; this is a serious subject, and it should not be used as some sort of political football.

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

Mr Brady: As has been stated, here in the North, we have some of the highest statistics of people suffering from MS in the world. In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, there is a very high incidence of MS. Approximately 25 years ago, the Mayo Clinic in America carried out an in-depth study on MS, which stated that we had among the highest rates of MS in the world. I have some personal experience of the effects of MS, as my brother suffered from the condition for a number of years until his death in 1998. Ironically enough, when he was first diagnosed, they thought that it was a brain tumour, and the diagnosis of MS came as almost a relief, with us obviously not knowing the full impact of the condition and how it was going to impact on him.

12.45 pm

MS is a condition that, obviously, affects the patient, but also has a widespread effect on the immediate family. It is a condition that can eventually lead to a very poor quality of life, with a person requiring a great deal of care and palliative treatment. In my experience and opinion, the services provided by the Health Department to MS sufferers are on an almost ad hoc basis. Treatment needs to be proactive, not reactive. Some of the most effective drugs, which can be very beneficial for some sufferers, are not always made readily available. Thought needs to be given to, and a proper strategy developed for, the continuing and most effective treatment of MS. There has to be a uniform approach to the services provided for MS and the alleviation of its attendant problems.

I attended a meeting at Newry arts centre in March this year that was facilitated by the Newry branch of the MS Society. I pay tribute to the MS Society in Newry, some of whose members are in the Public Gallery, which continues to

do such a valuable and fantastic job in dealing with, promoting awareness of, and helping with all the problems around MS. One issue raised at the meeting and which has been mentioned in the debate is how beneficial physiotherapy is in helping to alleviate some of the symptoms encountered by patients with MS.

However MS affects someone, it is clear that appropriate exercise can make a difference to managing and living with the condition. Physiotherapy can be very beneficial for people with milder symptoms and those more severely affected. It can help people to manage symptoms such as fatigue, muscle stiffness, balance difficulties, anxiety, depression, and bladder and bowel problems. Due to the difficulties of accessing physiotherapy, a lot of people who benefit initially from the service find that, as time goes on, it becomes less and less available because of longer waiting lists, etc. The Minister has to ensure that adequate services are provided for MS sufferers, particularly in areas such as physiotherapy, which can be of such benefit.

Each trust seems to do its own thing; surely there should be some liaison when determining the provision of such important services. Although MS is a progressive condition, it is clear that early intervention and the proper provision of drug regimes and services are essential to maintaining and improving the quality of life for MS sufferers. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr G Robinson: On 1 October 2010, the Belfast Trust closed one third of the neurology beds in the Royal Victoria Hospital. On 28 September 2010, I asked the Minister what action he intended to take to protect specialised neurological services. His reply was:

"The Health and Social Care Board is responsible for the commissioning of services to meet the needs of the population, including specialised neurological services. The Board will therefore consider any proposed changes to the provision of these services in that context."

The provision of adequate services should be your responsibility, Minister. I am in no way trying to politicise this very important medical debate, but we must all accept that we are, hopefully, trying to make life more tolerable for the sufferers of MS and their families.

The national service framework states that its aims include making services person-centred,

better co-ordinated, easier to use and provided by people with knowledge and experience of specific conditions. Not in the Northern Ireland Health Service, though: we will make you wait longer to access the treatment and care that you need because we have shut specialist neurology beds.

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

MS impacts on an entire family, not just the sufferer, and it is very important that treatment and access to professional help is a matter of urgency. The £50,000 made available to boost neurophysiotherapy earlier this year was welcome and, with the removal of bed space, will be all the more important. However, I am somewhat sceptical that that will be the reality. There is already a shortage of neurophysiotherapists. Now, when someone is diagnosed with MS, I fear that access to the treatment that is so vital to them and their family will be delayed due to a reduction in beds and a shortage of specialist services.

Although MS is a condition that may give sufferers better spells, we must always be aware that the most important thing is to ensure the best possible quality of life for the patient. The cuts and shortages that I have already outlined will not assist in achieving that. Budget cuts are a reality, but do we, as an Assembly, really believe that abandoning MS sufferers to longer waiting lists and delayed access to vital services, and, therefore, a poorer quality of life, is the way forward?

I pay tribute to all the wonderful and dedicated medical staff who look after MS sufferers. I support the motion.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I am grateful for the privilege of speaking in this important debate, and I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

MS is undoubtedly a distressing illness for those whom it affects and their families. When we lose sight of that and of the people who are suffering, we have lost the core of the debate.

For thousands of sufferers in the UK, including, as we have heard, an estimated 4,000 in Northern Ireland, MS has become a part of their everyday lives. Owing to its debilitating nature, the disease can have a detrimental impact not only on sufferers, but on their families, especially those with young children.

The nature of the disease and the manner in which it affects the body's central nervous system means that the effort of loved ones to assist in the alleviation of suffering is one that we must acknowledge. Until a cure is found, we should make the provision of adequate MS services a priority.

In the past century, the advances that have been made in the field of medical science have been truly remarkable. Yet, for all the success, the threat posed by multiple sclerosis is still very real. There is no cure, and even those who are diagnosed with mild, relapsing or remitting forms of the disease live with the threat of developing more progressive forms of it later in life.

It is important to recognise the efforts that have been made thus far by the Health Minister to address the four key areas of MS treatment: the causes, the cures, the symptoms and the services. Whether it is a £50,000 investment to form an MS network or the creation of an allied health strategy, the Minister remains committed to tackling the threat that MS poses.

No one in Northern Ireland has to wait longer than 13 weeks from the point of their referral to the time of their first round of treatment, a timescale that the Minister is seeking to reduce further. Those who live in rural communities without access to the larger hospitals are assisted with transport as well as with home help and physiotherapy, even though those support services are sometimes not entirely adequate. Last year, a new MS-specialised clinic opened in Craigavon Area Hospital.

The Minister is also committed to reducing waste and has targeted savings of £88 million through the use of generic drugs as opposed to brand names. However, more can always be done. I am particularly aware of the issues that surround neurophysiotherapy and the difficulties in accessing it in Northern Ireland.

However, addressing those difficulties requires resources in health; resources that have been cut by parties in this House on three occasions in the past 18 months. That is why it is even more important that health is not prioritised after the CSR.

In a debate, it is so easy to call for more funding for something without saying what will be cut to provide that funding. If the Minister made additional major investment in the facilities for and treatment of people with MS, he would,

first, have to withdraw funding from some other part of the Health Service. I wonder which area those who call for more support would suggest.

When dealing with services such as the treatment of MS, our co-operation with charitable organisations, such as the Multiple Sclerosis Society Northern Ireland and Action MS, continues to be invaluable. The role that those groups play in our society is crucial. It is also important to note the role that our universities play. The University of Ulster currently runs an important project to evaluate the effect of group exercise therapy.

The fight against multiple sclerosis will be long and arduous. However, with a firm commitment, the necessary economic assistance and co-operation at local, national and international levels, and in the Assembly, we can make a difference in alleviating the suffering of those living with the disease. I support the motion.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome the opportunity to outline the actions that my Department is taking to sustain and to improve services for people suffering multiple sclerosis and other complex neurological problems.

There is no doubt that multiple sclerosis, or MS as it is commonly known, can be a devastating disease. Some 3,500 people are living with MS in Northern Ireland, and, therefore, some 3,500 families are living with the impact of that disease. For some people, this can be a relatively mild disease that progresses slowly; others have rapidly advancing disease that affects their health, mobility, employment and family circumstances. Services for MS patients are provided within neurology services, along with other conditions such as Parkinson's, Huntington's and motor neuron diseases.

I am committed to the care of MS patients and to improving the nature of the services available to them. During my time as Health Minister, I have improved services for people with MS, invested in new treatments and ensured that in future we will maximise the effectiveness of their care. I have done all that in a financial climate that requires me to prioritise. Hospital expenditure on MS services falls within neurology. The spend on neurology, including expenditure on high-cost drugs, increased from £13.3 million in 2007-08 to £15.3 million last year.

I have also put in place a wide range of strategic measures that will improve services for those with MS and other complex neurological conditions. I have asked for the establishment of a neurological practitioners' network, which will meet formally before Christmas this year. It will help to ensure a uniform and co-ordinated approach to the supportive care, particularly physiotherapy, that is so essential for those suffering from MS and other neurological conditions. The detail of that network, its role and remit have been discussed with the Multiple Sclerosis Society and other key stakeholders. I recognise the fact that there are concerns about the number of neuro-physiotherapists in Northern Ireland. The network will help to improve access to neuro-physiotherapy and specialist nursing. It will do so by exploring different models of service delivery and improving arrangements. That will make a difference to those who use services.

My officials are working up standards for the management of long-term conditions including MS. They will help to achieve consistency in the treatment and care of patients and in the care of their families. They will also serve to promote good communication and collaborative working. I am pleased that the Long Term Condition Alliance Northern Ireland, which includes the Multiple Sclerosis Society, is closely engaged in the work, and I welcome its ongoing input and commitment.

The needs of those with a physical or sensory disability can be complex, and we must ensure that those needs are addressed. To that end, my Department is developing a strategy on physical and sensory disability. Allied health professionals (AHP), including physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists, play a key role in working with people with complex neurological disorders. That group is currently working with officials from my Department to produce a strategy for AHP services; that will help to ensure that they are developed in a manner that best meets patients' needs. A carers' strategy has also been published on this matter; in that, my Department worked in partnership with DSD colleagues to set out what needs to be done to support carers across Northern Ireland. Health and social care services provided for people with MS are tailored to individual needs.

If an individual develops symptoms, GPs are often the first point of contact. That will be

followed by a referral to a consultant neurologist for a specialist opinion, if appropriate. We have a very responsive neurology service that has 16 highly skilled and experienced consultants who are supported by nursing and allied health professional staff and other staff. Neurology clinics are held in 13 of our hospitals. That ensures that clinics are accessible across Northern Ireland.

1.00 pm

Neurology beds in the Royal Victoria Hospital were referred to. Neurology services are in the process of being modernised in the Belfast Trust. Although that will not affect beds in the Mater or City Hospitals, there will be a reduction of seven beds on the ward in the Royal Hospital. Those will be replaced by four ultra acute stroke beds. Therefore, that specialisation is happening in that trust area, and the Belfast Trust has assured me that it will improve, not reduce, service.

Waiting times for a neurology outpatient appointment have improved enormously in recent years. Currently, the vast majority of people are seen within nine weeks of a GP referral being made. As of June this year, the latest quarterly figures for waiting times showed that 2,385 patients out of a total of 3,047 were seen within the nine-week target. Those requiring an urgent opinion because of clinical priority can be seen more quickly.

The neurology service includes a regional component based at the Belfast Trust that provides quality care for MS sufferers and others with serious neurological conditions such as Parkinson's disease and motor neuron disease. It also provides acute stroke care. The input of specialised neurology care is critical and plays a major role in determining whether an individual is likely to benefit from specialist drug therapies.

We spend approximately £8.5 million a year on specialist drugs for MS. That approximates to between £6,000 and £10,000 for each patient a year. I must emphasise that people in Northern Ireland have excellent access to those medications. It was originally estimated that around 12% to 15% of people with MS would be eligible for treatment with disease-modifying therapies. At the end of August 2010, some 1,123 people were on treatment, which approximates to 27% of people with MS in Northern Ireland. It is important to note that not

everyone with MS will benefit from specialist drug therapy. The available drugs include beta interferon, and other new drugs are expected to be available in due course. Those are progressing through the European Medicines Agency's licensing process. In the UK, it is expected that the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence will consider the clinical and cost-effectiveness of those drugs.

I have put robust arrangements in place to minimise the time that people with MS need to wait before starting treatment. Currently, people should not wait longer than 13 weeks to start treatment. As of 31 August 2010, 37 people were waiting to start treatment, and none of them were waiting for longer than 13 weeks. Tommy Gallagher needs to write to me or speak to me about the instance that he cited of someone waiting for one year for treatment, because that example is certainly not representative of any sort of planned response.

My actions in improving timeliness and access to services are clear. My action to ensure that people with MS have rapid access to necessary drug treatments is clear, and my action in establishing a neurological practitioners' network to improve multidisciplinary working is clear. My plans to bring forward further work in neurology and AHP services, long-term conditions and physical and sensory disability are clear evidence of my commitment to the care of people with MS and other complex neurological conditions.

Members have asked that I review and improve facilities for people with MS. I think that I am demonstrating that I am doing so and that I am continuing to do so on a routine basis. The limitations that I face will depend on the outcome of the upcoming Budget. Mickey Brady says that the Budget has not been settled. I say to him that I am working on a current budget and that my budget has been cut three times in-year. It is simply impossible for me to improve and enhance health and social care across Northern Ireland unless I am provided with the necessary resources to do so.

Activity is in direct proportion to the funding that is available. If funding reduces, so does activity. As I have said over and over again, the health budget is too essential to cut. Without the right levels of funding, people will be left in pain and distress. The public have asked for the health budget to be protected. I continue to support

that call, and I ask that everyone in the House do the same. The Multiple Sclerosis Society, which is lobbying today, reinforces the need for the health budget to be protected.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister and all Members for their contributions. I am not sure that every contribution was valuable, but I will come to that later. The first part of what I intend to say will be in a personal capacity.

As elected representatives, we have many people come to our constituency offices to convey concerns about accessing healthcare. On occasion, the Minister gets letters from me on behalf of my constituents, and I thank him for his responses. We do not get success every time, but at least we get movement. I want to achieve the best access to healthcare for my constituents. I will certainly do what I can to deliver for them.

Northern Ireland has one of the highest and rising prevalence rates of multiple sclerosis in the world, which is a startling statistic for a population of only 1.7 million. A number of other Members referred to that figure. There are approximately 3,500 to 4,000 people with MS who live in Northern Ireland. MS is a debilitating neurological disease that is the greatest cause of disability, certainly among young adults, with the typical age of onset being between 20 and 40. Symptoms may vary among sufferers. They can be relapsing and remitting, but they are progressive. MS sufferers can live a full life, but given the fact that the disease is progressive, it affects their ability at times to do normal things. Therefore, MS sufferers need all the care and support that we can offer. At present, access to services for them is somewhat limited.

I again thank the Minister for responding to the debate. He set out the actions that he has taken, and that is to be welcomed. However, I refer to access to physiotherapists with specialist expertise and knowledge of the disease. An MS Society report that was published in 2009 stated that only 13% of those with MS in Northern Ireland were receiving physiotherapy. Patients report difficulties with accessing physiotherapy and being referred, as well as a lack of appropriate physio provision with those who are knowledgeable about multiple sclerosis.

As other Members indicated, there are currently no dedicated MS physiotherapists in Northern Ireland. Evidence has demonstrated that physiotherapy can help with balance, mobility,

bladder and bowel function, pain and fatigue, all of which are symptoms of MS. It has been indicated that physiotherapy helps patients to gain improvement for up to nine to 12 months, depending on the mode of delivery and the intensity of the programme. That is why MS sufferers must have access to dedicated services and to dedicated health professionals who specialise in MS.

I also draw Members' attention to the problems that MS sufferers have in accessing treatment and attending scheduled appointments. As Members will be aware, my constituency of Mid Ulster is very rural. It lacks transport networks, which limits the ability of MS sufferers, among others, to access care and treatment. Appointments for MS sufferers are generally in Belfast, which is some distance away, and that creates an obstacle. How can they get there when public transport links are so poor? On many occasions, they have to rely on a family member or a friend to take them to their appointment. The journey is long and can be uncomfortable, and, by the time they get home, whatever treatment they received in Belfast may prove to have been pointless. I suggest bringing treatment and care to MS sufferers. Why could local council buildings or, indeed, MS sufferers' homes not be used to deliver treatment? MS sufferers must be treated with care, enthusiasm and dedication. However, although that happens already, there is certainly room for improvement. I and every other Member believe that it is the patient who counts.

I shall now respond to Members' contributions. My colleague Alastair Ross opened the debate, and there was nothing in his remarks or in the motion that is in any way political or that attacks any Member or Minister. Michelle O'Neill referred to the fact that the Department has no MS strategy and that it needs to be more forward-thinking. The Minister has to take those comments on board. Sam Gardiner was next. To be honest, I was absolutely appalled by his comments. He should hang his head in shame, because he used the majority of his time to have a swipe at my party. As I said, there was nothing of a political nature in the motion. His attacks were uncalled for, and I have no doubt that that fact will not be lost on the wider community, who will share my disgust at the way in which he used his time in such an important debate.

Like other Members, Tommy Gallagher, who is no longer in his place, referred to those who

suffer from MS. He also stated that certain drugs are not available, the service is falling down, and there is a need for physiotherapy in homes. Kieran McCarthy referred to the same figures as other Members did, and he mentioned the fact that there are no designated physio services and that action must be taken as soon as possible to put that right. My colleague Alex Easton said that specialist services must be made available to MS sufferers. Mr Brady mentioned issues that affect patients, their family circle and the wider community. He said that treatment needs to be proactive and not reactive, and I share that view. In addition, he mentioned early intervention, which is an important aspect of treatment. George Robinson referred to the closure of beds at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The Minister responded to that point, so if the Member sees fit to do so, I will allow him to take the matter up with the Minister.

I welcome the majority of Dr Coulter's comments, which, as usual, were well made. I often take Dr Coulter's comments on board, because he has a wide range of knowledge on many issues. Although he recognised the Minister's efforts to do his bit, he suggested making the provision of care a priority. Few on these, or on other, Benches would question the commitment of any Minister, but that is not to say that they could not do more; there is plenty of room for improvement.

1.15 pm

Although I welcome many of the Minister's comments, he said in his closing remarks that he would take money out of his budget to do other things. That is an important issue, but —

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

Mr I McCrea: If the Health Minister wants to ring-fence money for health, from which Departments should funding be taken? I welcome everyone's commitment and the Minister's attendance and response. I hope that the House will not divide on the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to review and improve the facilities available to, and treatment for, people who are suffering from multiple sclerosis.

Vesting Land: Protecting Homeowners

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

Ms Ní Chuilín: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel to bring forward, within the lifetime of the current Assembly, proposals to ensure that homeowners living in areas that are due to be redeveloped by the Department for Social Development will be protected from negative equity and increased debt following the vesting of land.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to thank the Business Committee for selecting the motion and the Assembly Research and Library Service for providing information. In particular, however, I wish to thank the people of the Village, Carrick Hill, New Lodge and Parkside areas for their invaluable insight and their direct experience.

The motion calls for proposals to be brought forward in the lifetime of the Assembly. I am slightly disappointed by the SDLP amendment, which, in my view, weakens the motion. For example, it asks for:

"proposals which seek to address or mitigate against homeowners".

Our motion calls for:

"proposals to ensure that homeowners living in areas that are due to be redeveloped ... will be protected".

However, I appreciate the sentiment behind the amendment. If I read it correctly, its intent is to make sure that people, regardless of where they live, are not unduly disadvantaged as a result of any vesting procedure. If that is the sentiment and tone of the SDLP's contribution to the debate, I understand it, even though we cannot compare like with like. Nevertheless, it is the prerogative of a political party to table an amendment.

I will return to the motion. For well over a decade, residents of the Village area of south Belfast, and Carrick Hill, the upper long streets, Parkside and the Glen, to name but a few areas in north Belfast, have been campaigning for full redevelopment and urban regeneration schemes. My colleague Alex Maskey, who offers his apologies for not being here today because he is attending a funeral, has been one of the champions of full development of the Village area of south Belfast, which, as we all know, was vested in April this year. It is estimated that 52 people from the Village area face negative equity; more than a dozen residents of the upper long streets in the New Lodge are in the same situation. Unfortunately, I am confident that that figure will increase by the time vesting occurs.

I have no doubt that, over the months ahead, we will hear many legal — and quasi-legal — arguments using examples concerning different articles and sections of the law. We will hear a great deal about whether loss for homeowners is a direct consequence of vesting or simply bad luck because of the failure of market forces. Either way, I appeal to Members who are tempted to quote various articles and sections of the law to take a wee pause. I ask Members not to confuse the law with justice.

For decades, under the right-to-buy scheme, many tenants bought their homes from the Housing Executive or housing associations. They did so for different reasons: some wanted security for their families, while others felt that there was very little difference between the money that they were paying in rent and the money that they paid for a mortgage. That policy, regardless of its popularity, meant that the housing stock available for social housing decreased.

I ask the Department to investigate some proposals, and I have two examples from some research that we have done. The Minister made remarks as recently as last week on the golden share scheme. The scheme will mean that, if they wish to move back into an area following redevelopment, homeowners will be allowed to invest whatever money they made from the compulsory purchase order into one of the new homes, as long as they had previously been a resident for 12 months. The shortfall will not have to be paid back, because the housing association will hold on to that as a golden share. Therefore, the property will effectively be co-owned by the resident and the housing association. That is my understanding of the

scheme, but if I have got it wrong, I look forward to clarification from the Minister.

However, if that or something similar is the case, issues around maintenance and the percentage of share for the resident will need to be clarified. The scheme will also affect people who are on the housing waiting list because — I admit that I read the proposal very quickly — it will mean that those who avail themselves of the golden share will almost certainly have first pick of the social housing stock. That needs to be managed and explained.

I looked at schemes that have taken effect across the water, such as the one through the Seedley and Langworthy Trust in Salford in greater Manchester, as well as others in Scotland. The greater Manchester scheme seems to have been successful, having won an award in 2006 from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. That scheme was funded through a single regeneration budget.

The proposal for the golden share scheme seems to be fairly straightforward and does not require any new legislation. There will be additional legal arguments to be made, and the purpose of today's motion is to draw out ideas on top of the two examples that I cited.

There is concern about the golden share scheme among residents. I can speak only for the residents of the upper long streets, whom I met last week about the matter. There is talk among them that it is almost like giving away a piece of security that they had hoped to pass on to their families. I appreciate that much of this is governed by market value and is under the remit of Land and Property Services, which, in turn, is under the remit of the Department of Finance and Personnel. However, regardless of what proposals are introduced, our party is asking that what is considered are innovative approaches, precedents elsewhere, what schemes worked and what schemes did not work, with a view to introducing a scheme.

The Minister is well aware — I am sure that other Members are, too, particularly those who represent the constituency — of the issues in South Belfast. I will not get into those issues, because a tribunal is under way at the minute. However, I will give an example from North Belfast. The community in the New Lodge is situated beside that in Tigers Bay, where houses historically have received lower valuations than those in the New Lodge. For example, a house

in Tigers Bay that is similar to one in the New Lodge is currently valued at £40,000 less. That is setting the tone and is, as the Minister will appreciate, causing a great deal of concern.

One of the families that I was working with on Friday evening bought a house a couple of years ago — probably at the height of the market — for £154,000. The family has now been offered £70,000 for it. That is a massive drop. In fairness to that young couple, they do not anticipate the waving of a magic wand, but they are saying that the gap is far too big for them to bridge and will mean that they will not be able to move to somewhere of their choosing, if they can move at all. The onus is on elected representatives here, in conjunction with the two responsible Departments, to look at what is out there and try to introduce proposals.

The other example, and the other side of the coin, is that, when I spoke to some of the residents from the Village area a few weeks ago, they said that, at the height of the market, houses in the city centre and its outskirts were anticipated to be worth anything from £180,000 to £200,000. However, when it came to working-class Protestant areas, the value dropped. There is something wrong with the way that the market values of properties in both constituencies are calculated. By and large, both constituencies are made up of working-class, low-income families, who have worked and done their best to provide homes.

The Village urban renewal area (URA) scheme is more advanced than the URA schemes in my constituency. Nevertheless, if any lessons can be learnt from that, it is incumbent on us not to make mistakes that can be avoided on any pending URA scheme. It was with that in mind that Sinn Féin proposed the motion.

On a technical point and a small point of principle, I do not believe that the amendment is like for like. I accept that the SDLP's intentions in tabling the amendment were to ensure that people, regardless of where they live, are not disadvantaged as a result of any vesting procedures. To that end, Sinn Féin will accept the amendment. Although we disagree with it, we will certainly not divide the House on the matter. We ask the House to unite in support of people whose homes will be vested and who, on some occasions, will face huge negative equity. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr O'Loan: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "calls on" and insert

"the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to bring forward, within the lifetime of the current Assembly, proposals which seek to address or mitigate against homeowners, farm owners and land owners, living in areas that are due to be re-developed by the Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development or any other Department, being unduly affected by negative equity and increased debt following the vesting of land or property."

I appreciate the sentiments of the proposer of the motion and the manner in which she has spoken. I express myself in similar terms. I welcome the motion. It addresses an important issue that needs attention. Hopefully, a practical solution can be found to the problem. The SDLP's point in proposing the amendment is to indicate that the problem is situated more broadly and is not exclusive to the Department for Social Development (DSD). Also, any remedy is more likely to be found in the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), rather than exclusively in the Department for Social Development. I respect the fact that the motion refers to the Department of Finance and Personnel, but the SDLP's amendment is broader and more specific. I welcome the fact that the proposer of the motion said that she accepts the amendment.

I will start by referring to what the Department of Finance and Personnel says on the issue, as it is important to put that on the record. The introductory paragraphs of the Department's 'Compulsory Purchase and Compensation: A Guide to Compensation for Residential Owners and Occupiers' are very clear. With regard to market value, paragraph 2.10 states:

"The value is based upon what the land might be expected to realise if sold in the open market by a willing seller."

With regard to compensation, paragraph 2.19 states:

"When compensation is settled the outstanding loan from the mortgagee (usually a bank or a building society) is paid off and the mortgage is redeemed."

Paragraph 2.20 states:

"There may be circumstances where the outstanding loan on the mortgage exceeds the value of the property. This may arise, for example, where arrears have built up or where there is 'negative equity' as a result of falling values."

Paragraph 2.21 states:

"In these circumstances the value of the property being acquired is agreed between the acquiring authority, the lender and the borrower. If the value of the property is less than the outstanding debt on the mortgage there will be no compensation payable to the borrower."

Paragraph 2.22 states:

"The mortgagee will, firstly, receive payment of the principal sum outstanding including any arrears and interest due and, secondly, will retain the right to recover the outstanding sum and any interest due thereon from the borrower."

Those terms are very clear. Government have recognised the issue of negative equity: it is not an entirely new consideration as the result of today's motion. However, so far, DFP has not put forward a substantial remedy to address the matter.

The Department for Social Development has issued a consultation document entitled 'Policy to Support Owner Occupiers in Redevelopment Areas'.

The document refers at the outset to the existing measure that offers compensation over and above the ordinary market value: the home loss payment. A home loss payment equates to 10% of the market value of the existing property, with, as I understand it, a minimum of £4,500, and that is paid to owner-occupiers. I assume that the wording is deliberately chosen and that the payment is not, therefore, payable to landlords. However, it recognises the significant issue that arises in that situation. There is also a disturbance allowance, which I think is of the order of £1,500 or £1,600, but it relates solely to disturbance and probably should not be thought of in any sense as compensation for the issue that we are talking about today.

The consultation document recognises that, when compensation is paid, it can often fall short of allowing displaced owner-occupiers to buy into the new housing put back into their old community. The document puts forward some proposals to allow owner-occupiers to remain in the community. We should never forget that housing is about people and communities; we

do not want to rebuild at the cost of damaging existing communities.

Two measures are proposed in the consultation document, which was issued in July 2010, one of which is early buyout. It is already the case that owner-occupiers have the opportunity to be rehoused as social tenants. Under the ordinary rules, they have to wait five years before becoming eligible to buy their home. Under this proposal, they would be able to avail themselves of the house sale scheme immediately, with the same rights as other tenants. That seems like a very constructive proposition. Option two is a shared equity proposal that would give owner-occupiers the opportunity to purchase a new home in the community after regeneration, with any difference between the values of the old home and the new home held by the housing association that is putting back the new housing. Again, that is a very constructive step, and I am sure that parties here will respond to the consultation favourably.

I want to make some specific remarks about the Village area. I recognise that there are Members who know more about the detail of the area than I do, but I think that we would all be on common ground in saying that we very much support the scheme. It is a massive regeneration scheme, and a very necessary one. When Margaret Ritchie became Minister for Social Development, one of the first things that she did and was asked to do was visit the houses in that area, and she was shocked by what she saw. Margaret Ritchie was a Minister who acts, and, indeed, we now have a Minister who will also continue to act. Members will have seen that already and would, I think, give testimony to that effect.

The regeneration project is worth some £100 million. There are 500 old homes, many of which are unfit for further occupation, which will be demolished and replaced by 273 new homes built to the latest design and environmental standards. There will be massive improvements, and a number of other homes will be refurbished.

Talking in broad terms — I will come back to one or two more specific points about the Village area in a moment — I will address the reasons for the SDLP amendment. Other Departments are significantly affected by the issue of vesting of land, in particular, the Department for Regional Development (DRD). Members have asked questions in the Assembly, and there has

been significant press reportage, around the vesting of land for roads development — the A5, the A2 and, in my constituency, the A26, so it is not solely in relation to DSD that those matters arise. The issue can only really be dealt with and addressed by the Department of Finance and Personnel, because it sets the rules for purchasing and vesting, some of which I read out, and other Departments have to follow them.

Negative equity is not a new issue. Not everyone who suffers from negative equity can be compensated, but the particular issue in this case is that people are forced to sell their homes, which makes it a genuine issue for government. Even when people are affected by negative equity, most can ride out the market cycle, but that does not apply in this case. However, we should recognise that they are not the only people who are affected in that way. Sometimes something as simple as a change of job or a change in personal or family circumstances can mean that people are damaged by negative equity. Sometimes no rescue plan is available.

We do not think that is possible to fully protect people from negative equity, but there is an onus on government to look at the situation to see whether something can be done to mitigate its impact. We look to the Department of Finance and Personnel to consider what might be done. It is up to it what that might be, but interest-free loans or grants might come in to the equation.

Only a relatively small proportion of house owners in the Village area will be affected by negative equity. Many of them are long-established residents, and only people who bought at the height of the housing boom are hitting problems. Since 2007, market prices have dropped by 40%, so anyone who bought around then faces a significant problem. The vast majority of households are not in negative equity. Furthermore, a substantial proportion of the people who are in negative equity are not resident in the property but are investors. They are persons who bought to let. Anna Lo, in some of her questioning on the matter, referred specifically to the issue of landlords. Although we might also have some sympathy with investors, our particular sympathy is with owner-occupiers.

There is a genuine issue to address, and the Department for Social Development has

proposed significant initiatives to which I have referred and which I hope will come to fruition. The main potential for solving and addressing the issue rests with the Department of Finance and Personnel. When the outcome of the debate is brought before that Department, I hope that it will find a positive way of acting.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): I will juggle my time between commenting as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development and, latterly, as a DUP representative. The Committee has not spent a lot of time looking at the issue, so there is no Committee view to express. However, I will endeavour as far as I can to give an outline of what the Committee has done where it has delved into the issue and to report on the views that we have heard, if not taken, on the matter.

The motion appears to refer to the vesting of homes, whereas the amendment refers to the vesting of land and farms as well. I will talk about the latter first. The Committee has previously considered vesting by the Department for Social Development in relation to urban regeneration. The Department advises that, in the past 10 years, vesting has been used on 45 occasions for urban regeneration projects such as Victoria Square. On only 10% of those occasions was vesting opposed. On about half of those occasions, there were issues around establishing ownership, but, on just less than half of those occasions, the vesting was described by the Department as friendly.

Those statistics probably reflect a booming property market where land or premises owners received satisfactory compensatory payments. As we all know only too well, the position today is very different. Vesting payments associated with urban regeneration projects will probably no longer generate anything like the same level of compensatory payments. Consequently, I expect that that will lead to more contesting of property acquisitions. The Committee will recognise the problems of increased indebtedness and negative equity and will value the Minister's view on how that might be combated.

The Committee has noted the Department's proposals on the vesting of homes in redevelopment areas, which the previous Member who spoke mentioned. Those are set out in the consultation, which is entitled 'Policy to Support Owner Occupiers in Redevelopment

Areas'. The proposals, as the Committee understands them, would help owner-occupiers to remain in a development area by allowing them to become a tenant in a social home or to buy an equity share in a home that is purchased through the house scale scheme. Although we have not taken a view, I anticipate that the Committee will be generally supportive of the proposals, but it should be noted that the measures will not address negative equity issues. It seems that, even under those proposals, it may still be possible for a homeowner who has negative equity to be left with a large debt after vesting and then be unable to secure a mortgage to buy an equity share in a new home.

There will also probably be issues for landlords in redevelopment areas. In their case, it appears that the DSD proposals on support for owner-occupiers will provide no help. I hope that, in today's debate, the Minister will clarify the extent of support that his Department will be able to provide for owner-occupiers and other property owners whose houses in redevelopment areas have been vested.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will now give some views in a personal capacity and on behalf of the party.

Although the wording of the motion is far from perfect, I tried to understand where it is coming from. In some respects, it is understandable that its wording is far from perfect, as vesting is a difficult and complex issue that affects a lot of people. Indeed, Members who spoke previously cited the Village as an example. With that complexity comes a difficulty in drafting a perfect motion. However, the motion is imperfect in a couple of ways.

The focus in the motion on DFP, although understandable in some respects, is not entirely appropriate. The motion does not include all Departments and, indeed, does not include everyone who is affected. As Mr O'Loan mentioned, a significant number of people facing negative equity are not, as the motion says, "homeowners living in areas", but investors and landlords who are similarly affected.

The thorny issue is value for money. The amendment is much better than the motion, but it is also far from perfect, in that it does not touch on all relevant Departments either. It recognises that, even though everything that can be done to ameliorate negative equity should be done, we cannot eliminate it in all cases.

We cannot get around the fact that the public sector purchases and vests property at what is the appropriate or value-for-money price at a particular time. We cannot have two systems: one for good times and one for bad times when property prices are difficult.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development: Vesting is a difficult, complex issue, and the motion and the amendment are both imperfect. However, the amendment, at least, tries to better encapsulate the issues than the motion.

Mr Beggs: I thank the proposers of both the motion and the amendment for bringing the issue forward. It has been useful to have the debate. Very rarely do people who have spent their lives saving for their homes take it sympathetically when a government agency comes knocking on their door to tell them that it wants to buy the property and that, if they refuse to sell, it will forcibly buy out the property through the vesting system. I am sure that many Members know constituents whose gardens or properties have, in the past, been vested for such schemes as road improvements. The process is very painful for all concerned. However, what we are discussing today is even more important than losing farmland or part of a garden. Some citizens are losing their homes, often at tens of thousands of pounds less than they may have originally paid for them just a couple of years ago.

People are being left compulsorily in debt by the actions of government. We must recognise that the particular economic times that we are in today have not allowed those people to ride out the normal economic cycle whereby they could live in negative equity for a period until house prices recover. Our property prices followed the former boom and bust prices that were experienced in the Republic of Ireland. Those also increased to a much greater extent than prices in other parts of the United Kingdom, and, again to a much greater extent, they reduced in value. Therefore, no matter what type of property is being vested, it is very likely to go at a considerably reduced rate. Given the standard practice and policy of paying the current market value, many people are being left significantly less well off.

Over the past 12 months, vesting has continued as normal in Northern Ireland, despite the significant reduction in values. However, as Members mentioned, the circumstances around the vesting of hundreds of homes in the Village area of south Belfast are particularly troubling, given both the number of people that are involved and the timing, which falls in the middle of the economic process that I discussed. Potentially, a significant number of people — a figure of over 50 — will be left not only without a home but with thousands of pounds, perhaps tens of thousands of pounds, of debt, due largely, I would argue, to the exceptional market conditions that we have faced.

I thank the Assembly Research and Library Services for providing background information on today's debate. I note that, over the past year, property prices in England have increased by 9%, in Scotland by 3.7% and in Wales by 10%. In Northern Ireland, property prices have reduced by 17%. So, those individuals have faced vesting during perhaps the worst housing situation that there has ever been; certainly the worst that I can remember. Therefore, there are exceptional circumstances that ought to be looked at.

1.45 pm

We all recognise that there are many benefits from redevelopments and the upgrading of the housing stock, but there are particular difficulties for individual families in that situation. Given the significant reduction in house values, exceptional measures need to be looked at. For example, perhaps we should consider an exceptional hardship fund.

It would be helpful if the Minister for Social Development could make us aware of the number of homes that have been affected by negative equity. It is one thing for people to lose their homes and be rehoused in social housing by the Housing Executive, but it is another for them to lose their homes, be rehoused and be in tens of thousands of pounds of debt. They have to pay back that debt for the rest of their lives and yet have no home to live in. In light of those exceptional circumstances, that issue needs to be looked at.

I recognise that, as an Assembly, we face financial constraints and that other issues need to be taken into consideration. The response needs to be balanced; we need to protect the public against future property speculations.

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

Mr Beggs: It is worth seeing what can be done in this exceptional situation.

Ms Lo: I support the motion and the amendment. I welcome the debate; I want to talk specifically about my constituency. In the Village area, many homes were bought at the peak of the housing market, particularly by first-time buyers. However, at the time of vesting, those properties were worth far less than what was paid for them, leaving many owner-occupiers in severe levels of negative equity, even when home loss grants and disturbance payments are taken into account.

Many of my constituents have spoken to me about that issue. They are angry and upset. They did not want to sell their homes but were made to do so by government at a time of rock-bottom property values. They are being left with debts of between £20,000 and, in the case of one young landlord, £100,000, and must pay what is left of the mortgage with no property to show for it. As a consequence, they may also face increased financial strain, difficulties with further property purchases and bad credit scoring should the debt be unpaid. In light of the current financial climate and job market, those issues simply exacerbate what is an already difficult period for some.

Mr O'Loan suggested that there is less sympathy for buy-to-let landlords than for owner-occupiers. However, as a result of the vesting, they face an enormous financial burden and are not entitled to home loss or disturbance payments, which are only available to owner-occupiers. It is concerning that the Housing Executive can vest properties and get rental income from tenants while landlords retain responsibility for making mortgage payments. As a knock-on effect, landlords have refused to notify tenants that they are now Housing Executive tenants and are not returning rents or deposits. The Housing Executive is then asking those tenants for backdated rent arrears.

The greater Village area has been neglected for some time. The need to provide quality affordable social housing is evident, but should it be done at the cost of homeowners who have lived in the same home all their lives or saved to buy and spent significant time and money on improving their homes? It is only fair to say that DSD has created a gulf in equality between

social tenants and homeowners in the Village area. It is immoral for a statutory body to place such constraints on individuals, especially in a recession.

Consultation on the policy to support owner-occupiers in redevelopment areas has just ended, but neither option that it produced goes far enough. Neither option addresses the reality of negative equity that is faced by many people in the Village area. Neither option addresses the problem of where owner-occupiers will live between their homes being vested and demolished and a new home being ready, and the cost that they will incur in that time.

There is also no option for those who have invested in the area as landlords. Landlords often invest significant amounts of money in their properties to ensure that they are of an acceptable standard, and, therefore —

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that there is a difference between owner-occupiers and landlords? Landlords will have invested over the last number of years. Many have speculated and done very well from the properties that they invested in. With any investment, there is a risk. Does the Member not accept that landlords have taken a risk, that it should not always be one way and that we should concentrate on homeowners?

Ms Lo: I agree. However, landlords also have value in that they provide social housing and rented accommodation. Landlords often invest in their properties to ensure that they are of an acceptable standard and, therefore, increase the desirability of, and living standards in, the area. South Belfast is one such case; there is an area of rented accommodation available to all. However, many people in the Village find themselves in significant negative equity —

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

Ms Lo: — despite the amount of money that they invested in their homes and the area.

Mr Buchanan: I have no doubt that the motion was born of the difficulties faced by homeowners and landlords in the Village area of south Belfast, which, in May 2008, was declared an urban renewal area by the then Minister for Social Development, Ms Margaret Ritchie. At that time, the reason given for declaring it an urban renewal area was that a survey had found

that one in three homes there were unfit to live in; that one in five homes were vacant; and that there was a high level of disrepair. However, much of that was brought about by the Housing Executive itself.

Prior to the announcement, the Housing Executive moved into the area, purchased more than 100 homes from owner-occupiers and immediately bricked them up. It purchased those homes at an average of £150,000 and, at the same time, refused to purchase homes from landlords in the area. That added to the blight of the Village area, thus leaving it ripe to be announced as an area of urban renewal. When the announcement was made, the Minister, Ms Ritchie, declared that £110 million had been set aside for the vesting of properties in the scheme. However, unfortunately, that is not now coming to fruition as far as landlords and homeowners are concerned. Many face huge deficits in respect of what they are being offered for their properties compared to what they purchased them for. Some of those people purchased their properties only two or three years ago. However, they now receive only 50%, or perhaps less, of what they paid for those properties a short time ago.

Indeed, the entire situation is and has been poorly handled by the Housing Executive, Land and Property Services (LPS) and DSD. There has been a severe lack of consultation between the agencies and the Department and homeowners and landlords in the area.

The Housing Executive vested the houses from landlords in May. It took over the current tenancy of those houses and is now receiving rent for them, while the landlords have been left to pick up the mortgages and to continue to make repayments with no income at all from the rent of those houses. That is placing huge difficulties on landlords with their lenders, and that must be looked at urgently. Further to that, the Housing Executive is now offering less than 50% of the current valuation given by the Northern Ireland house price index for houses in that area. Therefore, I also ask the Minister to look into that matter. That is a far cry from the 'Guide to Compensation for Business Owners and Occupiers', which states:

"you should be no worse off in financial terms after the acquisition than you were before."

Another difficulty is that homeowners have received two or three different valuations, yet

they have not received a written valuation from LPS allowing them to take that forward to a tribunal if they wish to contest the value that has been placed on their homes. I call on the Minister for Social Development to take urgent action on the matter.

I received an e-mail from a homeowner, which gives some indication of how the issue is seriously affecting people's lives. He stated that there is a problem with negative equity, and tenants are now expected to pay rent to the NIHE while still having to pay mortgages on homes that they no longer own. Therefore, there is the huge issue of credit rating. He went on to say that he was at his wits' end and that it had got to the point where he now found it hard to concentrate on his job. He was snapping at his wife, found it hard to deal with his children and difficult to sleep at night. He constantly felt sick, and his credit rating will soon be destroyed, which will jeopardise his business, thus taking away his ability to support him and his family now and in the future.

As the previous Member who spoke, Ms Anna Lo, stated, people do not want to sell their homes at this time.

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

Mr Buchanan: However, their homes are being taken away from them, and they are being left to take up the huge financial burden. Again, I urgently call on the Minister to look at that issue. It is something that is focused on his Department, and I ask that he and his Department take the matter on board as a matter of urgency.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It deals with an aspect of vesting, which, while welcomed in the context of improving areas, should not have impacted so much on people whose homes or businesses have been vested to make way for redevelopment. The recent collapse of the property market impacted negatively on thousands of people who were encouraged to buy their houses or to tap into the booming property market. Many of those people believed that the bubble would never burst.

Very few people predicted that there would be a collapse in the property market. Lenders offered incredible deals, and people on certain types of benefits were encouraged to buy their homes.

Large amounts of money were on offer to people to become homeowners, and agents for lenders rapped on doors and convinced people to take out second mortgages, with no concerns that they may not be in a position to pay them back if anything went wrong. When the market fell apart, those people, and thousands more, faced ruin. Many people have already lost their homes, and many more face that same future. There have been recent draconian attacks on people who received help in the shape of housing benefit to pay the interest on their mortgages, and this is yet another nail in the coffin for many of those people who now also face losing their homes.

People who own several homes and rent them as part of the private rented sector and have had their homes vested are being impacted by the collapse of the housing market. All are facing financial ruin. None of those people saw it coming, but the vesting of redevelopment areas has had a huge negative impact on many homeowners.

2.00 pm

Sinn Féin fully supports the announcement of redevelopment, whether in the Village area of Belfast, the long streets of the New Lodge or wherever it takes place, to ensure the provision of better homes for local residents and a new beginning for those communities. However, an unforeseen consequence has been that people have been trapped in negative equity. Those people did not know what was lurking down the road. They had not foreseen that the former Minister would change her mind from her previous stance of refurbishment over redevelopment. Had those people known, some would have thought twice about buying their homes.

Sinn Féin members have dealt with a number of cases of residents of the Village area who bought their homes; homeowners who mortgaged themselves to the hilt. Those people would have been happy to live the rest of their lives in their homes. However, because the area was vested, they find themselves owing debts of £50,000 or £60,000. The property market has collapsed and the value of their homes with it. Sinn Féin has also spoken to a number of small landlords, owning between one and three houses, who invested all their savings. One woman who had been to university and got a degree bought a house at the top of the market and put it out to rent. Not only does she now

face financial ruin if she cannot pay, she faces bankruptcy and the loss of her career.

Some people who have been caught in negative equity have informed my party that a report existed in the Housing Executive at the time of vesting that spelled out the problems that many people would face when vesting became a reality. It was their understanding that the then Minister chose to ignore that report and advice. Looking back, had vesting been carried out in a more co-ordinated fashion, a mechanism may have been found to deal with the problem.

Much has been said about how people affected by the collapse of the Presbyterian Mutual Society lost thousands of pounds at the height of the financial crash and about the help and assistance that they have, rightly, been given to progress their case. People who are suffering as a result of being put into negative equity face ruin because they have been caught up in a ministerial decision to vest areas. Although Sinn Féin has no difficulty with the decision and has supported local residents in campaigns to rid themselves of poor housing, it has concern about the people who have suffered as a result of the vesting decision.

The Assembly must face up to that. My party asks Ministers to put their heads together to see what can be done to help those who have fallen foul of the vesting system. We need to know what can be done to help those people. We also need to know what, if any, advice was given to the former Minister for Social Development by the Housing Executive and whether a report existed that warned of difficulties. I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): I very much welcome the debate. There will be no argument from me that, whatever about the legal situation — some aspects of which I may touch upon — there is an issue of fairness. I and other Ministers with relevant responsibility — and, ultimately, the Executive — need to address that fairness issue. As Anna Lo said, people are being made to sell their houses at rock-bottom prices. She articulated fully all the other consequences for people's financial circumstances when they must sell their properties at lower prices.

I do not accept one or two comments that were made; for example, that DSD is responsible for creating a gulf in equality in the Village. Not one politician who represents South Belfast, either in

the Assembly or on the city council, differed from the decision to go ahead with the regeneration and redevelopment of the Village area.

Other Members have mentioned Margaret Ritchie's visit to the Village. She was struck politically, personally and emotionally by the state of housing there. The decision in principle to redevelop the Village was a right and healthy one. It demonstrated that the Government are committed to the needs of disadvantaged communities. That was acknowledged and appreciated by the people of the Village. Certainly, I visited there last Friday, along with Paula Bradshaw and other community representatives, and I did not get any sense from anyone that there was now a difference of opinion about the need to redevelop the Village and the principle of vesting. Yes, there are issues with its consequences. However, I did not pick up any serious difference of opinion about the fact that the decision to vest was appropriate and that the development of the Village was necessary. That is why I do not agree that DSD created a gulf in equality, or with certain other comments that were made, which I found a little bit ungracious.

It is important that we speak with one voice on the motion and the amendment, because, as the proposer confirmed, the issue of the Village cannot be separated from the issue of negative equity in the long streets. I met residents from the long streets only 10 days ago to begin to scope that out in more detail with them. The issue about the Village and the long streets cannot be divorced from the wider issues of negative equity, where they impact upon any community or Department.

I picked up from the comments from various Members who spoke that there is a need to be innovative. It seems to me that if the Government have been innovative and have stretched themselves in respect of the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the potential to more fully, if not completely, resolve that issue, and if other elements of the Government are thinking, as they see fit, of other innovative ways of dealing with issues of poverty and disadvantage, whatever I might think about that, we are obliged to get on our thinking caps and to deal with the matter across Departments and the Executive as fully as possible. I differentiate, in my head, to some extent, between traditional homeowners and mere investors, despite the fact that that is not legally feasible. The victims are living with the consequences of a good and healthy Government

decision in a way that impacts adversely and in an unanticipated way upon them.

I make that point, because Mr Beggs mentioned house prices in Northern Ireland. Britain has turned a corner in respect of house prices, but we have not, and we will not do so for the next number of years, potentially. The situation in Northern Ireland is unlike that in any other part of these islands, because it is still in recession, and, according to Ulster Bank advice, that will continue until at least the end of 2012. Our situation is such that there may be fewer public sector jobs, and the private sector may not be big enough or prosperous enough to pick up the shortfall. Therefore, the property market may not be in a process of recovery until the end of 2012 or, potentially, later. Alternatively, if it is in a process of recovery, it will be very slow and, in any situation, that will adversely impact upon the people in the Village and the other areas that I referred to. Therefore, there is an obligation to think innovatively in those circumstances and to see what we can do.

I am a Minister, and I think that all Ministers should not only look at the problem but identify a solution. In that regard, I have taken steps. They have not come to any fruition yet, but I think that they have been worth taking. First, I contacted the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and asked him to put his mind to the legal situation that has arisen from the Lands Tribunal decision of three months ago in relation to the obligations of the state as regards negative equity. It may be that the law does not allow flexibility, and that appears to have been the outcome of the Lands Tribunal decision. However, very often the Lands Tribunal meets and makes assessments that are based on market values; it does not necessarily delve into the full consequences of the law. There was legal argument at the Lands Tribunal hearing that I am talking about, but I wonder whether some further legal assessment could be made in order to determine whether there is any flexibility or latitude in the law, as it exists, to determine whether there is scope for dealing with the matter.

Secondly, as I indicated earlier, I have written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the matter, and he is not unsympathetic. He acknowledges and appreciates that there is an issue. An issue is different from a solution to the problem, but he acknowledges, nonetheless, that there is an issue. I suggest that the Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, the Minister of Finance and Personnel,

Sammy Wilson, and I should gather and have a conversation about the issue.

As Members indicated, in my Department, we have just finished a consultation, as of last Wednesday, in respect of a new owner-occupier policy. Responses to date have been very positive in respect of that scheme. I hope that that scheme, subject to its being agreed in the fullness of time, will have some impact on a number of families who may have to sell but will have the opportunity to go back into the neighbourhood from which they came with the golden share scheme, through the housing association. However, I accept that although that may create some certainty around their future accommodation, it does not create certainty around the issue of negative equity. Nonetheless, it suggests that the Government are trying to be innovative in dealing with a number of families who have a requirement to go back into the area from which they came, even if it does not fully resolve the issue of negative equity.

Mr Beggs asked about the numbers involved. I can confirm that the total number of affected properties in the Village area is 538. Of those, 149 have been sold voluntarily. Once Margaret Ritchie indicated her intention to regenerate the Village in 2008, there was an option for people to proceed in advance of vesting by way of voluntary sale. Those matters have progressed, but the valuation was based on the valuation back then, not the valuation based on vesting, which is what the Lands Tribunal has said should be the valuation for all the other properties.

Of the residue of the 538, 283 have made claims, and the Housing Executive and the Department have not yet made contact with the families living in 36 properties, despite some exhaustive efforts. Although I am subject to legal advice in respect of this matter, the homeowners of all those properties — the people who have traditionally lived in that area or have bought in that area more recently — are now suffering the effects of the property slump. I have particular sympathy in relation to all that.

Mr Hamilton, who has now gone to speak at a housing conference, made a very important point, which illustrates why the matter has to be scoped out around the Executive table and across Departments. Given that over the next period there will be intentions to vest in one Department or another, there could be some further consequences in Departments when it

comes to negative equity on the home or lands front. Therefore, given that the matter has now been highlighted, it is my understanding — subject to correction — that the land for the completion of the Aughnacloy to Derry road will potentially give rise to a heavy cost in relation to those landowners who are living in negative equity. Given all that, Simon Hamilton's point that there may be more cases coming down the road is important.

Thomas Buchanan made a number of interesting comments. I will not be able to answer them all, but I will come back to him in due course. I took note of the fact that guidance in relation to vesting and the value of properties states that a person should be no worse off after than before. Perhaps we could begin to scope that out in conversation with the Attorney General.

I do not accept the argument that there has been a severe lack of consultation or that the NI Housing Executive and DSD have done very poorly. At the time when the proposal for regeneration was announced, there was dancing in the streets in some parts of the Village. Since that time — as the figures that I have just outlined to Mr Beggs confirm — there have been quite exhaustive attempts to discuss with people their particular circumstances and to move the situation forward, to the point that there are now only 36 properties whose occupants have not made contact with the Department or the Housing Executive, despite some exhaustive efforts.

I will also deal with the valid point in respect of the fact that the Housing Executive now owns the properties and gets the rents, but the old landlords still pay the mortgages. Mr Buchanan made that point, and it has been made to me previously.

We are all subject to the law and cannot act outside it; otherwise we would be ultra vires. Somebody, somewhere, presumably in the Department of Finance and Personnel if nowhere else, or perhaps the Attorney General, would be on my case if I acted beyond the law and would warn me of the risks to the public purse and the good authority of Government.

2.15 pm

That the Housing Executive now gets the rents arose because landlords have yet to agree compensation based on the market value by Land and Property Services (LPS) for reasons

that were well aired in the debate. Ultimately, it is for landlords to agree the valuation with LPS or take the matter to the Lands Tribunal and, thereafter, if there is an argument in law, to the Court of Appeal.

I welcome the debate. I think that Ms Ní Chuilín would concur with me that its tone and character was very good. There is no lack of sympathy. However, the issue is whether we can provide more support, if not full support, for the families that are affected by negative equity, in particular traditional homeowners.

As I said, I tried to scope out the actions taken by the Department to date, but many more actions need to be taken by the Government to resolve the matter. However, although Government need to be vigilant not to over-commit on possible future costs, if we have been able to stretch ourselves on the Presbyterian Mutual Society and on other issues, is this not a matter — a good Government decision that results in bad consequences for a number of people — in which we try to scope out what more we can do to assist those in need, whatever the law may be?

Mr McDevitt: Like the Minister, I think that it was a testament to the House that the debate was conducted in such a positive spirit. Everyone has a sense of the crisis that exists in many households as a result of the financial crisis that has engulfed our islands and beyond. That crisis is all the more acute when it has been punctuated by the fact that the state wants to do something with the area or neighbourhood that your house may be in.

Like other Members, I draw a distinction between investors and those who have been caught up in negative equity as a result of finding their home due for redevelopment. As Mr Beggs suggested, there is a risk in investment that can either pay off or cost. However, we would be wrong to put people who have invested in the same category as those who genuinely bought to be their home a property that is now subject to a vesting order.

I thank all Members who spoke, particularly Ms Ní Chuilín for her generosity and willingness to accept the amendment. The principal reason for seeking to amend the motion was not in any way to detract from it but to contextualise it beyond the immediate issue of vesting for residential areas in Belfast in particular and to acknowledge that there are other types of vesting that the House will have to tackle in the months and years ahead, not least the

vesting required for some of our major road developments.

The other reason why we sought to influence the motion was because it called for individuals to be protected from negative equity. Although we would all love to be able to think that Government could protect people from negative equity, that is probably beyond the realms even of Government. Our ambition should be to mitigate the impacts of negative equity, particularly on homeowners.

Other colleagues who made a contribution included Declan O'Loan, who moved the amendment. It is worth noting, as he did, that the Village scheme is a very important and significant one. As an MLA for South Belfast whose office is not too far from the Village, I am reminded every day of the major benefits that the scheme will bring to that part of our city and the fact that, despite the market downturn and the downsides to some of the necessary steps that Government are having to take, it is being widely welcomed and positively received by people in the Village. It will give a very historic and important community in our city the opportunity to, quite literally, be born again.

Mr Hamilton rightly identified the complexity of the issues, and I welcome the support that he offered for the amendment.

Mr Beggs raised a number of issues, which the Minister sought to address, regarding the possibility of exceptional measures or special measures. We can all draw heart from the way that our colleagues have rallied round the savers in the Presbyterian Mutual Society and sought imaginative solutions. I look forward to a collection of Ministers being able to return to the House with imaginative solutions to the type of special circumstances that we have debated here today.

Ms Lo, Mr Buchanan and Mr Brady also made positive contributions. They all focused on the importance of protecting homes and highlighted the plight of those landlords who have found themselves on the wrong side of this particular decision.

For our part, we acknowledge the significant contribution that regeneration across our city, whether in south Belfast, north Belfast or other parts of Belfast, will play to the social well-being of our city. We note that the problem that we are debating goes beyond the doors of the Department for Social Development.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I repeat my party's appreciation of the support for the motion from other parties. I think that I am right in saying that the DUP supports the motion and the amendment, although I am not too sure. I am prepared to give way if Thomas Buchanan or William Humphrey wants to add clarification.

Mr Buchanan: The DUP will not be voting against either the motion or the amendment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that. I dare say that had Jimmy Spratt from South Belfast been here representing his constituents that would have been more explicit than implicit. I appreciate the fact that the DUP is not going to vote against the motion or the amendment, because the House not dividing will send a message to people who live in areas of regeneration and face negative equity that they have representatives in the Assembly who have had, for at least an hour, their concerns at heart.

Regeneration is vital. There is not an elected representative worth his or her salt who has not called for some sort of redevelopment or regeneration in his or her area, be that for roads, city centres or town centres. In our case, the regeneration is needed in south and north Belfast, which have been mentioned a lot today, and is primarily centred on the regeneration of old homes with new communities. Regeneration is not just about homes. I appreciate that it involves roads, lighting, infrastructure, shops and other amenities.

Declan O'Loan, Roy Beggs, Anna Lo, Mickey Brady, Conall McDevitt and the Minister spoke about the plight of residents who face negative equity. They said that, although they have sympathy for landlords, there is much more sympathy for homeowners, who are in a worse situation. Investors take risks. That is not to take away from the effects or impacts on investors that were outlined in the e-mail that Thomas Buchanan received. However, investors take risks, and those risks are calculated. Homeowners had no choice; their homes were vested and, as a result of a policy that we are implementing, they face a situation in which they are disadvantaged.

I also support the call for the Executive to take a common approach to this. I included the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the text of the motion, not simply to tag him on to it, but because he has responsibility for land and property. However, the motion largely concerns

urban regeneration, for which the Minister for Social Development has lead responsibility. If he and his Executive colleagues, including those whom he mentioned — namely, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel — were to sit down together and look at how we might take forward proposals, that would be very welcome and would count as a good day's work. We would be a day closer to finding innovative ways of lessening the impact on people who are facing extreme financial circumstances.

I want the Minister for Social Development to look specifically at the impact on the social housing stock. The golden share scheme, for example, would have an impact. I invite the Minister, if he has not already done so, to look at examples of schemes elsewhere, and I place at his disposal the research that I have undertaken.

I thank Members who have spoken in favour of the motion for their support. I fully accept the principle behind the amendment. Our intention is to ensure that people, regardless of who they are or where they live, are not disadvantaged as a result of any policy that originates in the Assembly. We should look at the differences that investment makes to communities, wherever they are. We should learn whatever lessons we can, and we certainly should not pass on negative equity to areas that are waiting to be vested. Go raibh maith agat.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to bring forward, within the lifetime of the current Assembly, proposals which seek to address or mitigate against homeowners, farm owners and land owners, living in areas that are due to be re-developed by the Department for Social Development, the Department for Regional Development or any other Department, being unduly affected by negative equity and increased debt following the vesting of land or property.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Dissident Republicans: Convictions

1. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Justice how many people have been convicted for violent criminal activity associated with dissident republicans in the Londonderry, Newry and Antrim areas, over the last 18 months. (AQO 311/11)

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): Law enforcement agencies north and south of the border are acutely aware of the threat posed by terrorists and continue to work together to take appropriate steps to address it. That has been evidenced through the success they have had in arrests and charges and in preventing and disrupting many attacks. So far this year, there have been 181 arrests and 64 charges for terrorist offences. That is in addition to the 106 arrests made and 17 charges brought last year.

I commend the PSNI and An Garda Síochána on their recent successful operations that resulted in a number of arrests as well as the seizure of a considerable quantity of firearms, ammunition and bomb-making parts. Those operations were undoubtedly significant in disrupting terrorist activity and further demonstrate the determination of the authorities on both sides of the border to ensure that those involved in terrorism will not be allowed to succeed.

Unfortunately, the detailed information requested is not available as court conviction data does not contain background information in relation to the offences committed or the group with which an offender is affiliated. As a result, it is not possible to determine the number of convictions relating to violent criminal activity associated with dissident republicans.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his general reply. I understand the reasons for the lack of clarity on individual areas. Such activities have recently been condemned rather

than condoned, which is welcome. However, will the Minister join me in calling for not just condemnation but information, so that people are brought before the courts, are convicted, and serve long prison sentences as a result of such actions?

The Minister of Justice: Mr Campbell is absolutely right: what is needed most as part of the operation of policing with the community is the fullest co-operation, which is being given to a great extent by many people. The fullest possible co-operation is needed to ensure that those who are guilty of those offences are brought to book by the police, treated appropriately by the Public Prosecution Service and the courts, and, where appropriate, given long prison sentences, as the Member said.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I too note the generality of the Ministers' comments and appreciate the reason why. However, given the repeated calls from Mr Gregory Campbell, who asked the question, for such information to be given to the PSNI when it is investigating such activity, can the Minister tell me, and I appreciate that he may have to come back to me as he may not be able to answer, if he knows whether the PSNI has received similar information about violent unionist activity in the north-west, specifically the murder of Kevin McDaid, in the area where the Member who asked the question is MP, and the brutal attack on Paul McCauley in the city of Derry —

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

Ms M Anderson: That happened when the Member was a member of Derry City Council.

The Minister of Justice: I hoped I had emphasised that the Police Service has informed me that it is getting better co-operation from all sections of the community in dealing with some of these dreadful crimes. The precise issue of how each individual case is handled is an operational issue for the police, and it would not be appropriate for me to go into the detail of any individual case.

Mr McNarry: I understand fully the Minister's being unable to address the specific areas identified by Mr Campbell. Perhaps I will try my luck. Will the Minister tell us what the dissident threat level assessed by convictions in the Newtownards and Ballynahinch areas is? Is he content that the Chief Constable has all the

necessary resources at his disposal to deal with the dissident threat, wherever it is?

The Minister of Justice: I am not in a position to give any detail on Newtownards and Ballynahinch any more than I was on Derry, Newry and Antrim. However, I have received requests from the Chief Constable to support his request for additional resources to deal with the additional threat that he faces, which is not the equivalent of that faced by any other police service in the United Kingdom.

In the context of the comprehensive spending review and the announcement that we expect on Wednesday of this week, it is vital that, in comparison with other services, the Police Service of Northern Ireland is resourced in a way that would allow it to deal with the additional responsibilities that it bears. I have been using every opportunity that I have to make that case at the highest level of government.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister's views on police resources. How many briefings has he had from the Security Service since he came into office?

The Minister of Justice: I simply cannot answer that question in the form that was requested. With respect, after six months and one week, it is very difficult for me to remember every meeting that I have had. I assure the Member that, when I have met the Secretary of State, his responsibilities have meant that there have been occasions when members of the Security Service were present. Given that the Secretary of State's responsibilities involve national security, Members will appreciate that the detail that I am given on such matters is significantly less than that which he receives.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

District Policing Partnerships

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the findings of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's district policing partnership survey 2010. (AQO 313/11)

The Minister of Justice: The cited survey is a very useful and interesting exercise that sets out what the public think of policing in their area and where they think that police attention should be focused. It makes a valuable

contribution to the work of the Policing Board and the PSNI in setting priorities for the police in local areas right across Northern Ireland.

The public's views are just one of the factors that inform the policing priorities that are set for the PSNI. The board and the Chief Constable also bear in mind the importance of addressing the serious harm that is caused by terrorism and violent crime, which is infrequent in practice and which consequently, does not often feature prominently in a survey of that sort.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his initial response. With the shockingly high figure of 40% of respondents citing antisocial behaviour as an identified issue, will the Minister undertake to investigate the work of the YMCA-led Bridge project, which is in my constituency, and review its excellent evaluation results? As funding through the CSPs runs out, will he also investigate the valuable work that they do, which could, perhaps, be sustainably funded?

The Minister of Justice: I assure the Member that I read with interest reports on a number of different initiatives that are undertaken by CSPs and voluntary organisations in different areas. If he is asking me to give a guarantee for the continuation of funding, I cannot do that. However, it is vital to ensure that we get the best possible results for the money that is expended. I am fully aware that, in many cases, that is done through voluntary organisations such as the YMCA.

Courts and Tribunals Service

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Justice what steps he is taking to ensure that there is accountability within the court service. (AQO 314/11)

The Minister of Justice: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is an agency of my Department. It is responsible for facilitating the conduct of the business of the courts and tribunals and for giving effect to civil court judgements. That work will be central to the annual report that, under section 68A of the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978, my Department is required to lay before the Assembly to describe how it has discharged its responsibilities for supporting the courts.

The day-to-day work of the service is the responsibility of the director and his senior management team. Governance is the

immediate responsibility of the agency board, which is chaired by the director. In addition to its executive members, the board is attended by four members of the judiciary, who are nominated by the Lord Chief Justice and whose role is to offer a judicial perspective on operational matters. The board also includes an independent non-executive member who was formerly the chief executive of the Courts Service of Ireland and who chairs the service's audit committee. The Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice also routinely carries out inspections into the service's work. Ultimately, the staff of the Courts and Tribunals Service are civil servants and are accountable to me. I meet regularly with the senior staff, and they understand that I expect them to maintain the highest possible standards of professionalism and service to the community.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Is he aware that there is a concern that, although the independence of the judiciary and the courts is important, it should not equate to a disjoint between the needs of the community and the work that the courts are doing and carrying out?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for her question. We are all aware of the issues associated with ensuring that the independence of the judiciary is respected fully and that the Courts and Tribunals Service is fully accountable for the duties that it carries out to me, as Minister, and ultimately, through the Committee, to the Assembly. To ensure public confidence, it is vital that that administrative oversight be seen to be carried through fully while recognising entirely the necessity of the independence of the judiciary.

Mr Bell: On the accountability of the Court Service, does the Minister agree that there is an appalling delay between young people being brought before the courts and their cases being heard, which does not serve youth justice and the needs of the victim well?

The Minister of Justice: I am sure that Mr Bell, among others, has heard me make the point about delays, particularly avoidable delays, in the justice system. However, despite his careful phrasing, he should not base his complaint entirely on the Courts and Tribunals Service. There is an issue with ensuring joined-up justice between the police, the Public Prosecution

Service and the Court Service. The only target that matters to the public is the one to shorten the time between an offence occurring and its final resolution in the courts. Throughout my six months in office, I have regarded that as a priority, and I will continue to do so.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that there is a distinction between elected representatives wanting to hold the Courts and Tribunals Service to account and Executive members' public criticism of the judiciary?

The Minister of Justice: I thought that I made it clear in my initial comment; however, we in the Chamber, as democratically elected and accountable politicians, need to be very careful about the independence of the judiciary. I am determined to ensure that the Courts and Tribunals Service is fully accountable to the House, and those of us who are tempted to comment directly on individual court cases need to be extremely careful.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give some indication of gender and community background in the Court Service? He spoke about building community confidence, but what measures will he take to redress the imbalances?

The Minister of Justice: Statistics relating to the gender and community background of staff in the Court Service are now the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, so any issue needs to be addressed by the Civil Service. Nevertheless, public confidence in the operation of the Courts and Tribunals Service depends on seeing the job done accurately, correctly and properly on all occasions rather than on what an individual's background happens to be.

Prisoners: Support Services

5. **Ms Purvis** asked the Minister of Justice what procedures his Department has put in place, in conjunction with other Departments, to ensure that prisoners have access to the resources and support services required whilst in custody. (AQO 315/11)

The Minister of Justice: The Department of Justice and, in particular, the Prison Service has an extensive range of support services and resources to address prisoners' needs, including: healthcare; addressing offending behaviour; learning and skills services; dealing with relationship problems; debt; seeking jobs,

accommodation and housing; and providing addiction services. I recognise the complex nature of the prison population, particularly the many prisoners who present with mental health problems and personality disorders. The Prison Service has a strong working partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust for the delivery of healthcare services. On 7 September, I met the Health Minister, and our Departments will continue to work closely together to improve service delivery.

The Prison Service leads a multi-agency steering group, which includes representatives from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the voluntary sector. The group looks at how best to address the needs of offenders with a learning disability and/or a learning and communication difficulty. In November, I expect to receive a report from the steering group that will include recommendations to improve identification, assessment, training and the joining up of services.

The Probation Board is a key partner for the Prison Service in the delivery of offender management services. The work of the Inspire Women's Project centre is one example of how the Department, the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Probation Board work in partnership to meet the needs of offenders. The Prison Service also works in partnership with the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders to reinforce family links with offenders, and family liaison officers are in place in each establishment.

Tackling the needs and problems encountered by prisoners is a key element in reducing reoffending. The partnerships to deliver those interventions and support services to promote the rehabilitation of offenders are, ultimately, an investment in the security and stability of the community.

2.45 pm

Ms Purvis: I thank the Minister for his very detailed response. I am delighted, as are many other Members, to see that there is joined-up multi-agency work to address the issues. I am sure that the Minister will agree that prison should be as much about rehabilitation as loss of liberty. I am keen to hear from him what resources other Departments, including DEL and, perhaps, the Department for Social Development

(DSD), have committed to ensure that such multi-agency working delivers services.

The Minister of Justice: Ms Purvis makes an extremely valid point about the nature of joined-up working, and I am delighted that that element exists. At this stage, I cannot answer her question about the amount of resources that are being committed by other Departments. However, I will write to her.

Lord Morrow: I listened intently to the Minister's very lengthy response, in which he talked about ensuring that prisoners have access to all resources. There are some who believe that the same resources are not made available to victims. Does the Minister agree that it is important to assure the law-abiding world that victims also have a role in society and that they are not forgotten?

The Minister of Justice: Lord Morrow will know from his role as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice that the Justice Bill, which passed First Stage today, includes in large part measures to support services to victims. I am entirely aware of the point that he makes. However, I reiterate that ensuring the rehabilitation of offenders will provide a safer and more stable society for us all. The idea that, somehow, it is a question of either/or between victims and offenders is not an entirely accurate reflection of the position that we are in.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree that it is not a case of either/or. Society and the taxpayers have invested substantially in workshops for the rehabilitation of prisoners in Maghaberry prison to prevent reoffending. However, on the day that the Committee for Justice visited Maghaberry, those workshops were closed; therefore, they were of no benefit to the prisoners or to society.

Mr Speaker: The Member must ask his question.

Mr O'Dowd: I am led to understand that that was not the only occasion when those workshops were closed. Does the Minister agree that if we have invested in facilities in jails, they should be open and they should be used?

The Minister of Justice: I agree in principle that such facilities should be open and should be used. I suspect that what happened on the day of the visit, as happens on other days, was because of issues around having adequate staffing on duty in the prison to deal with all the

necessary duties that prison officers have to perform. Nevertheless, if the Member wishes to supply me with specific details, I will ensure that they are checked for him.

Police: Injury on Duty Pensions

6. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice if he can offer an assurance that recommendations on injury on duty pensions for former and serving policing officers, outlined in the review of police injury award arrangements, will be implemented as soon as possible.
(AQO 316/11)

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his question and thank him for his role in co-chairing the review panel. The co-operation demonstrated by the panel enabled a balanced and fair report to be produced in relatively short order and in line with the intended timescale. I published the final report of the review of police injury award arrangements on Thursday 7 October. The report contains 17 recommendations, some of which are for my Department to implement, while others are the responsibility of the Policing Board. I can offer an assurance that the recommendations that are under my control will be implemented as soon as possible; in fact, my officials have already started work on them. Progress on the recommendations will be reviewed by the panel in March 2011.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his remarks. The review was a tripartite process, involving the PSNI pensions branch, the Northern Ireland Policing Board and the Department of Justice. Against the background of the present economic climate, does the Minister agree that it would be worthwhile, given that progress on the review's recommendations will be monitored, to determine whether the administration costs incurred by all three organisations can be improved?

The Minister of Justice: I certainly agree that we need to be very sure of the costs of carrying out those processes. That is why, for example, there is a recommendation to examine the question of whether two medical practitioners should be involved in appeals.

There are benefits in having two practitioners, but there are also costs. We need to be careful to ensure the best treatment for the officers who are affected and, at the same time, ensure that costs do not run out of control.

Mr McCarthy: The Justice Minister referred to the fact that the review was co-chaired by a member of the Policing Board. Can the House take reassurance that that is evidence of an effective working relationship between the Department of Justice and the Policing Board?

The Minister of Justice: I certainly hope so. Members in all parts of the House, not just my own colleagues, will have heard me talk about partnership on a number of occasions. That relationship is a practical example of where a problem was highlighted in Northern Ireland — it has some crossover with issues in England, Wales and Scotland — and where the issues in this region were tackled by the Department of Justice and the Policing Board. I already highlighted Mr Spratt's role in co-chairing that. We have been able to resolve the issues for officers in the Police Service of Northern Ireland extremely rapidly. I hope that, by March, when the review is reconvened, there will have been solutions to some of the outstanding issues that are before the courts in England. That will enable further progress in those areas.

Justice Bill

7. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Justice what is the current position on the Justice Bill. (AQO 317/11)

The Minister of Justice: As I am sure that the Member is aware, I was pleased during Executive Committee business at noon today to introduce the Justice Bill to the Assembly. The Justice Bill is an important and specific commitment from the Hillsborough Castle Agreement and is designed to provide better services for victims and witnesses and to improve community safety, our business systems, efficiency and access to justice. The Bill is all about delivering a better and more effective service to everyone in Northern Ireland, including victims, communities and court users, in a more efficient and cost-conscious way. I am extremely pleased to be able to bring forward the first piece of devolved justice legislation to a Northern Ireland legislature for 40 years.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for his response and welcome the fact that the Justice Bill is moving forward. First, will the Minister give the House an assurance that the Bill will be fit for purpose for Northern Ireland issues and has not been plucked from other Bills in England, Scotland and Wales? Secondly, will he

outline the issues around the Attorney General and explain why his accountability to the Public Prosecution Service is not included in the Bill?

The Minister of Justice: I assure the Member that, as far as I can see, the Bill is fit for purpose and is tailored to the needs of Northern Ireland. Clearly, elements of the Bill are similar to legislation in other jurisdictions. However, it has been drawn up to meet the needs of this society, and I have no doubt that, if the Department has not already satisfied that point, Lord Morrow and his colleagues will ensure that that is the case as the Bill progresses — assuming that it is given Second Stage approval in a couple of weeks' time — through its Committee Stage.

Mr McCrea also asked about the relationship between the Attorney General and the Public Prosecution Service. The simple reality is that that relationship is a matter for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister not for the Department of Justice alone. Discussions on that are ongoing.

Mr O'Loan: Does the Minister have any further legislation to bring to the Assembly, particularly on the Prison Service?

The Minister of Justice: Given the size of the Bill that I introduced today and the short time that is available between now and the Assembly elections next year, it is, with the possibility of one or two minor exceptions to introduce specific small matters, most unlikely that there will be any further primary legislation from my Department. However, officials are already looking at the possible content of a justice Bill for the new Assembly. We have certainly not gone to sleep now that this Justice Bill has been agreed.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister reassure the House that full account will be taken of any equality issues that arise with the Justice Bill?

The Minister of Justice: Yes. The majority of matters in the Bill were considered at some previous stage, including through an equality impact assessment. Nonetheless, it was appropriate to review the Bill as a whole through an equality impact assessment, which was published on 12 August. The consultation closes on 4 November at almost exactly the same time as the Bill is due to go to the Committee, and I have no doubt that it will inform the Committee's deliberations during Committee Stage.

Crime: Reoffending

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice how many people convicted of violent crimes in the last five years have reoffended. (AQO 318/11)

The Minister of Justice: The most recent figures available relate to those who were released from a custodial sentence in 2007 or who received a community disposal in the calendar year 2007 following a violent offence: 30.6% of those who were released from a custodial sentence and 24.7% of those who received a community supervision sentence reoffended within a one-year period. Although it is not currently possible to provide directly comparable figures for Scotland or Ireland because of the different structure of offences, the rate of serious reoffending in Northern Ireland compares favourably with that in England and Wales.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he agree that it is important, not only for the individual offender but for society, that offenders are offered education and vocational training in jail in a bid to reduce reoffending?

The Minister of Justice: Yes, I agree with Mr Brady, as I agreed with Ms Purvis earlier. It is important for the good of society that offenders are rehabilitated while serving custodial sentences and not merely incarcerated. There is a real issue as to how we ensure that we make use of the time when prisoners are in jail to ensure that they come out with less chance of reoffending than would otherwise be the case. We should certainly not be complacent, even though our reoffending rates are somewhat better than those in England and Wales. There is still more work to be done in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: In light of the reoffending rate, does the Minister believe that the rehabilitation offered in the first place is not working, and that those individuals who continue to reoffend rather than be rehabilitated need to be punished so that they do not commit the crime again?

The Minister of Justice: I understood that if any individual were convicted of a serious offence, including whether they had previously served a prison sentence, they would be likely to be sent back to prison. I thought that that was the concept of punishment. However, we need to be clear that if people are sent to prison as punishment, they are not sent to prison for punishment. The duty of the prison is to

rehabilitate because that is what, ultimately, protects the community.

Mr Kennedy: In order to placate public concern on the matter, are there any specific measures that the Minister intends to bring forward to tackle the reoffending issue in Northern Ireland?

The Minister of Justice: I am aware that there is public concern. However, Members need to be careful in how that is presented. Northern Ireland's crime rate is low in comparison to other regions of these islands. Although we may always be concerned about individual offences, particularly the kind of offences that make headlines when they affect older members of the community, for example, we should not suggest that that is representative of this society. We should recognise that the minority of offences are a minority. We must ensure that we do the maximum possible to prevent such offences and to rehabilitate offenders to ensure that there is no reoffending. However, to suggest that we are in a worse place than others, or that that trend is in the wrong direction, is not an accurate reflection of our position at the moment.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister believe that someone convicted of a violent crime should always go to prison?

The Minister of Justice: I believe that those convicted should receive the appropriate sentence determined by the judiciary to ensure that there is full impartiality of the judiciary in carrying that through. I acknowledge that there are issues with regard to sentencing guidelines that have been raised in this House and elsewhere, which is why I have announced a consultation on sentencing guidelines mechanisms. We have seen significant work done by the Lord Chief Justice to inform the work of his colleagues. There is also the possibility of a more formal sentencing guidelines mechanism. I will await the outcome of that consultation with interest. Ultimately, any individual case must be left to the judge alone.

Drugs

9. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Justice if he has had any discussions, in the last three months, with senior police representatives or the Public Prosecution Service in relation to the illegal drugs trade. (AQO 319/11)

The Minister of Justice: As Justice Minister, I chair the Organised Crime Task Force

stakeholder group. I regularly receive quarterly briefings on the work streams of a number of expert subgroups, each of which deals with specific areas of organised crime, including illegal drugs.

At the most recent meeting of the stakeholder group, which was held on 15 September, I was advised that the key issues that the drugs expert group is examining include cannabis factories, legal highs and head shops. The stakeholder group's next meeting is due to take place on 8 December, at which time I will receive a further update on the work of each group.

I have not had any recent discussions on illegal drugs with the Public Prosecution Service. However, the drugs expert group has recently invited the PPS to nominate a representative to sit on it. I am pleased to say that the PPS has accepted the invitation, and a representative will attend the group's next meeting, which is scheduled to take place in early December.

Regional Development

DRD: Savings

1. **Mr Gibson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what savings have been identified within his Department and what plans he has to implement these savings. (AQO 325/11)

The Minister for Regional Development

(Mr Murphy): The Executive have not yet agreed savings targets for Departments. Therefore, at this stage, my Department is not in a position to provide details of savings or how they would be implemented. My officials are reviewing all Department for Regional Development (DRD) budgets over the next four years to assess the commitments that are already in place.

Mr Gibson: I thank the Minister for his response. As much as I appreciate the role of the Executive in the process, I wonder how it is the case that other Ministers have presented priorities and savings plans for their Departments. Why has the Minister not done likewise? Can he tell the House whether he is able to meet the timescales outlined by the Minister of Finance and Personnel?

The Minister for Regional Development: The Executive, to whom I answer as well as to the House, set a programme that included an

awayday. We had discussions about how we could collectively face and deal with all the issues that are to come before us and how we would prioritise them and look at possible revenue streams. The Department of Finance and Personnel has set off on its own course and is asking Departments to offer up cuts and to outline what impact they believe they would have and how they could deal with them. We have not yet been told what the cuts might be. I have done much work in the Department to plan for all the scenarios that we may face, but I would certainly prefer to follow the Executive route of challenging any cuts and of working together to decide our priorities and to look at the issues that affect us rather than follow a route of acquiescence and offering up a slash-and-burn policy in my Department in line with a Tory demand.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to the review that his Department is undertaking. I wonder whether he will share with us just what capital projects were reviewed. Can he also update us on the position of the funds — namely, the £400 million for the A5 project — that the Irish Government pledged to provide?

The Minister for Regional Development:

I have held a series of meetings with officials in my Department, and, as I said, we have reviewed all prospects for public finance, which includes everything on which the Department spends its money. We have completed all those exercises; indeed, we intend to revisit them after Wednesday. I do not consider it necessary to say to the public that we are willing to cut schemes a, b, c, d and e. We, in the Executive, have a collective view of how we should approach all this, and I am prepared and happy to stay within that collective view and to discuss how we can approach issues together rather than follow the DFP route, which is simply to offer ourselves up for whatever cuts the Tory Government might try to impose on us, without offering any resistance whatsoever.

As recently as the other week, at a meeting of the Dáil's Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement — I know that the Member's party does not have an opportunity to attend its meetings, but other parties do have that opportunity and should take it up — Micheál Martin, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, reaffirmed, for the umpteenth time, the Dublin Government's commitment to support financially both the A5 and the A8 schemes.

Mr McDevitt: Given the Minister's reluctance to give us any detail on cuts, I wonder why he has been able to confirm that there will be a particularly Tory-style cut to the cycling budget: a cut of 98%, from approximately £450,000 to £8,000. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what he thinks that that says about his commitment to sustainable transport?

The Minister for Regional Development: It is not surprising that the Member hitches his bicycle to any particular bandwagon that is rolling by — he is well renowned for it. In this case, he and some of those with him have taken a very narrow view of what is spent on cycling.

They have taken a narrow view not only in respect of the budget but geographically, because they have looked just at Belfast. I regret that the Friends of the Earth document focuses on cycling only in Belfast when there is also a broad interest in cycling in the rest of the Six Counties. They ignore the fact that cycle lanes have been provided for in all new road builds. They have taken a narrow view of one section of the budget. I have been proactive — *[Interruption.]*

There is a lot of chatter in the Chamber, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Minister for Regional Development: It is coming from the directors' club over there in the corner.

I have been very proactive in supporting cycling. My Department and I contributed to ensuring that Sustrans has a cycling officer to encourage school pupils to cycle.

The Member will know, as everyone else does, that we had to find savings this year, even before any cuts that are identified on Wednesday are delivered. He knows that all budgets are under pressure. His own party's response to that was to call on all the Departments, collectively, to give more money to build social housing. I am not sure where he would have fitted bicycles into the social housing plans, but, certainly, that approach would have cut money from all our budgets, including that for cycling. Therefore, I will not take lectures on that from him. He should go and examine what his party's approach has been to the financial difficulties that we all face. I have promoted and will continue to promote

cycling, not just in Belfast, where his interest lies, but across the Six Counties and the country in general.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I realise that the Minister's Department faces enormous pressures. Given those pressures on jobs and the budget, I ask the Minister to ensure that any job cuts are made equitably across regions rather than in more rural areas. Enterprises, such as the A5 would be of greatest importance —

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

Mr McHugh: — would be of the greatest importance for jobs, at a time like this and in the foreseeable few years.

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not anticipate and am not planning for any job cuts in rural or urban areas. As I said, our commitment, and that of the Dublin Government, to the A5 project has remained steadfast.

Aviation

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Minister for Regional Development if he has any plans to introduce a regional aviation strategy. (AQO 326/11)

The Minister for Regional Development: Although airports are in my remit, aviation is a reserved matter, and it is currently not in my Department's power to prepare an aviation strategy. Having said that, I note the concerns expressed to me by Members and others who believe that the Executive should be able to exercise greater control over the strategic direction of aviation here. I propose to engage with my Executive colleagues to determine the extent of their interest in seeking the devolution of some or all reserved aviation powers. I recognise that the negotiation of any transfer of functions is likely to take time. In the interim, I am prepared to consider what measures may be taken within my powers to assist the future development of this important sector. I will, of course, take into account airport master plans that have already been prepared by the two largest airports and have been agreed in the context of 'The Future of Air Transport' White Paper.

Mr Burns: Our situation is that we have three airports that are all chasing the same business, and it is essential that we have an aviation

strategy. Does the Minister agree that there should be an international airport, and, if there were, there would be no need for Belfast City Airport to seek an extension to its runway? I urge the Minister to show some leadership on this aviation strategy.

The Minister for Regional Development: I think that the Member misunderstands the point that he is trying to put to me. *[Laughter.]* Other than, that is, to bat for his constituency. That is probably about the extent of it.

Mr McElduff: It is up in the air.

The Minister for Regional Development: Yeah, it is up in the air. *[Laughter.]*

I made it clear that we do not have that responsibility at the moment. I am prepared to examine what we can do in the interim and the long term. However, aviation strategy is not about trying to promote one airport over the other. The Member needs to be clear that we are talking about having some sense of direction over our airports. With the exception of the City of Derry Airport, which belongs to the council, the airports are private businesses. It is not about promoting one over the other or about getting involved in planning applications for Belfast City Airport's runway. It is about a general approach to airports and ensuring that we recognise that, as an island and an island economy, airports are very important gateways for us. We should ensure that they continue to thrive and to do business. Access to them is important, and we should improve it as best we can.

Mr Campbell: Whether looking at an aviation strategy or at how best to promote airports throughout Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree, as has been raised with him before, that public transport links to the airports are fairly crucial? Can he not examine more closely public transport links to Belfast City Airport, Belfast International Airport and Londonderry airport?

The Minister for Regional Development: I agree that public transport links to the airports are crucial. The developing regional development strategy will recognise that. Particularly in the case of rail connections, and given the volume of passengers who go to Belfast International Airport, Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport, the question is how affordable those are in the current circumstances and whether such expenditure of the public purse would be justified. A general improvement in public

transport, road connections and access is important. The questions are how that can be justified based on the numbers of passengers and whether the Executive have the funds to provide the sorts of connections that the Member and others have advocated.

Mr Kinahan: Following on from the Minister's comments about putting funds towards access to airports, has he made the case to those in Dublin that perhaps some of the funding that we are getting for the key roads should really be for the key roads and railways that are and could be to the airports in the North?

The Minister for Regional Development: The commitment to the two road projects, the A5 and the A8, was made by Dublin as part of the St Andrews Agreement discussions, at which the Member's party was represented. At that stage, I was not in the office that I am in now. That commitment has been given and has been reaffirmed on many occasions since, but I recognise the importance of the transport links and public transport links to all our airports. We will continue to strive to improve those transport links. I have had discussions about those with all the airport operators and many representatives in all the areas affected, and we will continue to do what we can with the limited finances that are available to us.

Ambulance Service

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Regional Development if his Department is aware that the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service reform and modernisation programme is being applied to patient care services and for his assessment of the potential impact this may have on the transport needs of socially isolated people in rural areas and the services provided through rural community transport partnerships. (AQO 327/11)

The Minister for Regional Development: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has advised me that the reform and modernisation programme that is being undertaken by the Ambulance Service has focused primarily on improving its emergency response performance and has had a minimal effect on its non-emergency patient care services. However, I am aware of suggestions that the changes might put pressure on rural services that are funded by my Department

Rural community transport partnerships are funded to provide services in rural areas to people with reduced mobility. Since December 2009, the terms of the dial-a-lift scheme have allowed members of the partnerships to use the service when going to hospitals within a partnership's operational area. However, the dial-a-lift scheme is not resourced at a level that would allow journeys to be taken routinely outside of a partnership's operational area.

Mr Frew: Does the Minister agree that his Department should investigate the impact that that will have on the socially isolated rural population and not leave it to the local community transport partnerships, which could struggle to pick up the slack that is currently being picked up by the patient care services?

The Minister for Regional Development: We have been speaking to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and, as I said in my initial answer, it has advised that the reform and modernisation programme is focused primarily on emergency responses and will have a minimal effect on its non-emergency patient care services. Rural transport services have limited resources. If they pick up some of the services for hospitals in their area and, although not routinely, outside their area, we will work with them. We will also want to ensure that there is no fall down in the rural transport service that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety provides for people with mobility issues.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. If transport can be provided for journeys to a local hospital, why can it not be provided for people with appointments at regional or specialist hospitals?

The Minister for Regional Development: The amount of money that is available from the rural transport fund is limited, and it is important that all members of the partnerships have the opportunity to avail themselves of the services that are provided. Journeys outside the operational area not only incur more costs but they mean that a bus and a driver are not available for local journeys. Shortly after the introduction of the dial-a-lift scheme in December 2009, we changed the terms of the scheme to allow outpatients to be taken to local hospitals. That was a pragmatic change that could be coped with. A change to allow routine

journeys to areas outside an operational area would not be sustainable.

3.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Minister have any thoughts on whether all rural transport providers should have a fully integrated system? Does he have any plans to independently review rural transport providers' partnerships?

The Minister for Regional Development: We have been working quite closely with rural transport providers, and I recently attended their AGM in Downpatrick. We are having ongoing discussions and there have been some attempts to create mergers and greater partnerships to improve the services that are provided. We support the providers in trying to make a much more efficient rural public transport scheme.

Going forward, there are opportunities, which is why the reform of public transport is important. There are opportunities to look at areas in which we have transport provision for health and education and public transport provision, which come through my Department, to see where we can marry those services to get a more efficient and cost-effective provision that services the community, particularly the rural community, better.

Flooding: West Belfast

4. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any preparatory work which Roads Service and NI Water are undertaking to prevent a recurrence of last year's flooding in west Belfast. (AQO 328/11)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service is responsible for the maintenance of the storm water carriageway gulleys in the public roads network and aims to clean all gulleys in urban areas twice a year. The policy ensures that a reasonable level of maintenance is carried out to the roads drainage system, while taking account of the Department's finite funding and staff resource. At present, ongoing minor drainage issues are being addressed by Roads Service in areas such as Suffolk Crescent, Donegall Road at the Park Centre, Derrin Pass and Glenhill Park.

I am aware that there is a need for a joined-up approach with other agencies. To that end, Roads Service continues to liaise with officials in NIW (Northern Ireland Water) and

in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency to address flooding issues. However, it is important to remember that in periods of severe, heavy rain, our gulleys, drainage systems and water courses can simply be overwhelmed in a short time by the intensity of such rainfall.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Flooding is a very important issue. During the floods last year and the year before, many homes in my constituency of West Belfast were greatly affected. Will the Minister go into a bit of detail on what arrangements are in place to ensure that effective interagency co-operation is happening on the ground?

The Minister for Regional Development: Following the widespread flooding in 2007, it was recognised that, during more severe emergencies in which a multi-agency response is required, wider co-ordination is necessary. That co-ordination can best be achieved by councils, through local resilience, to ensure integration with regional structures and co-ordination with the local response. To that end, the Belfast Resilience Forum has been established. Roads Service and NIW participate in telephone conferences to help to co-ordinate an inter-agency response to flooding events. Those conferences normally take place at regular intervals and continue throughout the event. Roads Service and NIW are stakeholders in the Belfast Resilience Forum and have been involved in the development of risk assessments. They have participated in various working groups and in a number of tabletop exercises planned for Belfast to help to prepare effective responses to major incidents in the Belfast area. In addition, Roads Service has worked closely with the PSNI and Belfast City Council on the preparation of a joint protocol.

Mr Bell: Will the Minister undertake to bring back to the House a look at the stretch of the Portaferry Road between Londonderry Park and Greyabbey? Good work was done, if memory serves me, about seven or eight years ago, to do with flooding and the defence walls —

Mr Speaker: Order. The question was specifically about flooding in west Belfast. However, the Member did quite well.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister advise us what discussion he has had with the Minister of the Environment on urban intensification and how increased rates of water run-off are affecting

areas in Belfast that are already under stress? Has he discussed the particular need —

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is about west Belfast.

Mr Beggs: I did say "in Belfast".

Mr Speaker: West Belfast?

Mr Beggs: In west Belfast and other areas.

Has the Minister discussed the need for sustainable urban drainage to minimise the risk of such flooding?

The Minister for Regional Development: I think that the Member is making a bid for the return of Chris McGimpsey. There are inter-agency approaches. I have not had direct discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, because those matters are probably better dealt with by experts who know the issues involved. The agencies co-operate, not just in responding, which is very important, but in anticipation and prevention measures.

Taskforces have looked at the issues in west Belfast and east Belfast, both of which have suffered from flooding in the past number of years. In south Belfast, the lower Ormeau area was susceptible to flooding. Fortunately, however, with the construction of the sewer tunnel and the change in how flooding alleviation measures work and drain the floodwaters into the Lagan, we have had no reoccurrence of that recently.

That said, a substantial sudden downpour can overwhelm all the systems that we construct, and we must recognise that. It is incumbent not just on the Department for Regional Development and its agencies, but on all the other agencies involved, including the Department of the Environment, the Rivers Agency, the police and others, such as Belfast City Council, to work together to respond to incidents and to anticipate where flooding may occur.

Planning has a major role, as a greater concentration of housing and a reduction in green-field space creates a much greater run-off, which can create problems. We have seen that happen across the city of Belfast, and, as the hills around the edges become developed, there is a much greater run-off into central areas. Those are all issues that need to be taken into consideration, and all Departments and agencies are working together on them.

Mr Speaker: I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell, and I am sure that the Member will stick to west Belfast.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I am delighted with the Minister's answer and the approach that he took to solving flooding in west Belfast. The Minister mentioned the lower Ormeau area in his answer — *[Laughter.]* He will be aware that the lower Ravenhill area and about half a dozen different locations in south Belfast were also devastated by flooding. Will the same measures extend across the city to wherever flooding takes place?

The Minister for Regional Development: I thought that it was a mistake to mention the lower Ormeau; I opened another door. *[Laughter.]* Of course those measures will apply. As I said in my answer to the previous question, there have been incidents of flooding across Belfast, and, in each case, both the response to the incidents and their anticipation were looked at.

I have held many meetings with representatives from different parts of Belfast. There are very intricate and complex matters with drainage in the city. Many of the rivers are underground, and questions of who feeds into those drainage systems and who owns and is responsible for maintaining them must be dealt with by all the agencies. People want those issues fixed so that they do not live under the threat of flooding. Therefore, the agencies must co-operate as best as they can to respond to the incidents. They must also anticipate future flooding problems and take action to alleviate them.

Mr Speaker: It is important that Members' supplementary questions are, as far as possible, related to the original question. However, if the Minister decides to open it out, as far as I am concerned, it is open season. *[Laughter.]*

Travelwise

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many companies have engaged with Travelwise to construct a travel plan. (AQO 329/11)

The Minister for Regional Development: I consider myself suitably warned, Mr Speaker.

Through its Travelwise initiative, my Department has assisted 13 organisations to develop workplace travel plans. Those organisations

include the Quays Shopping Centre in Newry; both universities in the North; a number of Departments and agencies; local councils; and several health and social care trusts. My officials continue to assist those employers in the implementation and monitoring of their workplace travel plans. Officials are engaging with five further employers to help them to develop a workplace travel plan.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister is in a feisty mood this afternoon. Having talked earlier about the 95% cut in the budget for cycling, will the Minister explain why his Department has failed to meet every target for investment in sustainable transport over the past decade?

The Minister for Regional Development: I can only answer for the past three and a half years. It is right that we have ambitious targets and if we do not meet them, we strive to do better the following year. We have faced serious budget restrictions this year, and we may well face more depending on what the Member's former party colleagues decide for us in Westminster on Wednesday. We certainly strive to achieve that.

The workplace travel scheme is important. It is not simply about creating infrastructures for cycling, for example. It is about encouraging people to car-share or to walk to work. In many organisations, 10% or 20% of staff live within 1 km of their place of work yet still travel there by car. It is not simply a matter of spending money on other types of infrastructure. It is about working with organisations to see how they can approach things differently and how large employers, such as the universities, health trusts or councils, can spread a sense of co-operation among their own workforce to try to reduce dependency on the private car. It is about creating a climate in which people look to alternatives.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he elaborate a little on the Department for Regional Development's role in supporting the implementation of the workplace travel plan?

The Minister for Regional Development: I explained some of the things that we do in the last answer. We fund a programme of tailored, site-specific advice to employers who are willing to explore the benefits of a workplace travel plan. The specialist transportation planning consultants Atkins provided advice in conjunction with Travelwise staff. Travelwise's

budget for specific advice was £45,000 in 2009-2010, and it is approximately £80,000 in the current year. That is a good scheme. It has brought benefits in respect of reducing car usage and prompting more people to use public transport, walk or cycle, or to share cars when they are coming to large centres of employment. I encourage Members to encourage people in their constituencies to consult the Travelwise team to see whether there are opportunities for them to become involved in developing a Travelwise plan.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he provide us with detail on the number of people who have availed themselves of, and benefited from, the Travelwise scheme over the past four or five years?

The Minister for Regional Development: I do not have that detail to hand. It varies. As I said, we have been involved in 13 schemes, and another five are being developed. All those involve significant employers. The schemes beside me in the town of Newry, for instance, involve very significant employers. A 20% or 30% reduction in the number of cars being used by that workforce would have a very significant impact on the morning and evening traffic in the area. I will provide the Member with detail of how many people have taken up each of the 13 schemes. Monitoring is ongoing to ensure that people continue to follow through on the plan that has been developed, try to increase it, set targets for themselves, try to meet those targets and try to push on to meet even better targets.

Road Maintenance

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister for Regional Development how the impending Budget cuts will affect the budget for road repairs. (AQO 330/11)

The Minister for Regional Development: Roads Service is not yet in a position to make any judgement on the effect of the impending Budget cuts. The implications of the spending review for Departments here will not be known until sometime after the announcement of the outcome of the spending review on 20 October.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that the Minister agrees that there has been a long history of neglect of our roads down through the years, especially in times of crisis. Will the Minister give some

indication of how he intends to ring-fence the budget for the repair of roads? I ask in the interests of road safety.

The Minister for Regional Development: The Member is correct. He knows that the structural maintenance budget is not properly funded and has not been for some time; I have said that many times. It has relied on in-year monitoring rounds to provide more funding, usually at the tail end of the year. I suppose that one of the downsides of devolution is that, as Ministers are in their Departments full-time and spend their money much better, there is less money available to be used at the end of the year, particularly for Roads Service.

It is no secret. We produced a report that showed the level of underfunding in the structural maintenance budget. That underfunding has implications for roads right across the Six Counties, particularly rural roads. It is a priority of mine. Whatever the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, I will endeavour to ensure that we keep money there. As the Member said, road safety is a priority. That budget is needed to try to keep structural maintenance on roads at an acceptable level, but also to ensure that work is ongoing at that level right across the region and because of the economic impact that it has on small contractors. Whatever the outcome of the spending review, I will endeavour to ensure that as much funds as possible go into structural maintenance.

Adjourned at 3.30 pm.



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