



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

**COMMITTEE FOR
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Savills Report – Departmental Briefing

18 February 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mrs Mary Bradley
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Witnesses:

Mr Damien Carragher)
Ms Heather Cousins) Department for Social Development
Mr Michael Sands)

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Hilditch):

I welcome Heather Cousins, director of housing, Michael Sands, deputy director of housing, and Damien Carragher, head of housing finance. I advise members that the Committee papers include the Committee Clerk's cover note and a copy of the Savills report. A copy of the departmental briefing paper was e-mailed to members in advance of the meeting and can also be found in the tabled items folder.

I issue the usual warning that mobile phones must be turned off.

Heather, it is over to you to begin the briefing, which will be followed by some questions.

Ms Heather Cousins (Department for Social Development):

Thank you very much, Chairman, for the opportunity to address the Committee on the Savills stock condition survey. I have brought along my colleagues Michael Sands and Damien Carragher, as they were involved as part of the team that managed the project. They will be able to answer any detailed questions, which I am sure that you will have.

Members have already received a full copy of the report and the submission from the Minister on 16 February 2010, which sets out the background to the stock condition survey, the main recommendations and next steps. I do not propose to say too much in my opening statement, as I am sure that members will have many questions on the report. However, I will make a few key points.

I remind members that the survey is the first independent stock condition survey that has ever been carried out on Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock. The background to that is that it was essential, in the light of budget restrictions, for us to have an independent piece of work from a world-renowned firm that would set out for us the requirements for investment going into the future. That was the purpose of the survey.

Savills, which carried out the work, is a world-renowned land and property consultancy with vast experience in surveying, having carried out the work for most of the stock condition surveys for maintenance and stock transfer purposes throughout England, Scotland and Wales. The report that it has produced is very comprehensive.

I will draw out the report's main recommendations. The report sets out the total cost to maintain all 90,364 properties over the next 30 years as £5.1 billion, with a unit cost of approximately £56,491, averaging £1,883 a unit per annum. That equates to a total cost per annum of £134 million for major capital and revenue maintenance work. A key point to make is that that compares quite favourably with the levels of spend that have been entered into over the past number of years.

The profile of expenditure in the report is set out to meet the decent homes plus standard and statutory obligations. Expenditure starts off relatively low over the next five years before

gradually increasing to a peak in years 11 to 15, as would be expected.

Taking into account the results of the stock condition survey and a review of procurement, Savills recommends that the Housing Executive develops a maintenance strategy for the next five years to deliver the recommended stock investment programme and a modernised approach to procurement. We have had conversations with the Housing Executive and have agreed that a maintenance investment strategy will be developed for the next five years.

The report includes a 30-year cash flow business plan model that looks at the viability of the Housing Executive's landlord function. A number of recommendations are made in relation to that. The key recommendation is that a complete review of the rental system be carried out for the Housing Executive and housing associations, with the aim of producing a transparent and comprehensive methodology for future increases. We will be commencing that work in the next financial year. The report also recommends that a new service charge regime be adopted that will allow for the levying of charges that are reasonable, transparent and do not allow a profit to be made. That will be built into the review of rents.

That is all that I want to say, but we are very happy to take any questions that you may have on the report.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Thank you.

Will there be a reduction in the maintenance programme so that decent homes plus only will be delivered?

Ms Cousins:

The idea is that the maintenance programme will reflect the requirements set out in the Savills report. That could, effectively, lead to a reduction. I think that Damien has an estimated figure for what we will be spending on maintenance in the current financial year.

The Deputy Chairperson:

That would include the impact on the Egan contract.

Ms Cousins:

Yes.

Mr Damien Carragher (Department for Social Development):

In previous years, the Housing Executive has spent in excess of £200 million on maintaining its properties. In the current financial year, the figure has probably come down to just under £170 million. As the Savills report suggests, that figure should come down even more, perhaps to around £134 million or £135 million. The report suggests that it is more about focusing on areas that need to be maintained than carrying out multi-element improvement work, which, in the past, has been very expensive. The focus should be on doing elemental improvements on a more regular basis rather than going in and doing the whole thing. That is where some of the savings suggested in the Savills report will come from.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will there be a review of the strategy on disabled adaptations?

Ms Cousins:

That review has commenced, and Michael is leading that work.

Mr Michael Sands (Department for Social Development):

We have set up a group with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), user groups, health and social care trusts, etc, which had its first workshop a fortnight ago, with the aim of looking at the whole question of adaptations and aids. One of the difficulties that we are experiencing is that the Housing Executive has no record of where it has put extensions onto existing dwellings and, if an extension was provided for an individual, whether that individual is no longer living there, is deceased or whatever. When the need arises for an extension or for some sort of adaptation, the Housing Executive has to start from scratch again. We intend to establish a register of the properties that are available and to ensure that, where possible, some of those adaptations and aids are recycled as opposed to them being left in houses. That will enable us to deal more effectively with demands as they come to us.

Mr Craig:

I find some aspects of the report interesting but others concerning, particularly, the conclusions. What proportion of Housing Executive rent goes towards maintenance? The answer to that

question will be telling. Housing associations have to budget for maintenance in their system and, therefore, a proportion of their rent is put aside to maintain properties. Does the Housing Executive do the same or is it funding its maintenance in a completely different way that, quite frankly, does not add up?

Historically, the Housing Executive has not maintained its stock well. There is no getting away from that fact. I could take you to numerous examples in my constituency where it has failed to maintain its existing stock. Ultimately, it has had to send in the bulldozers, and building new housing to a higher standard has cost 10 times as much. Are we going to get ourselves into that loop yet again, where we fail to maintain the stock, even on a basic level, and, ultimately, we have to send in the bulldozers?

Ms Cousins:

The purpose of having a five-year maintenance investment strategy is to avoid that situation. We will be looking at a programme of works. Initially, the concentration needs to be on the 12,000 homes that do not meet the decent homes plus standard, as outlined in the Savills report. The reason that many of those homes are not meeting the decent homes plus standard is thermal inefficiency. Issues such as the heating system and the glazing in those properties need to be tackled first. The rest of the Housing Executive's stock that was surveyed by Savills was judged to exceed the decent homes plus standard, never mind the decent homes standard. It is a question of targeting where the maintenance spend is going.

At the start of his question, Mr Craig asked about funding. The Housing Executive's total costs are funded through government grant. A lot of the Housing Executive's costs relate to the strategic housing function, not just to the landlord function. Certainly, there are budgets within the budget for the landlord function that relate to maintenance on both the revenue and capital sides.

Mr Craig:

Is that funded through the rental system or through government grant?

Ms Cousins:

It is both rent and grant. The rent does not cover all the Housing Executive's costs, so there is a grant on top of that. However, the split between what is strategic and revenue is not fully

analysed. As much of the rental income as is possible goes towards maintenance and management, but there will be additional things that the Housing Executive does that are not related to looking after its stock.

Mr Craig:

My reason for asking is that it would give a good indicator. There are other reports on the table that include proposals to split off parts of the Housing Executive, the rental sector being one of those parts. I would be interested to see how it could stand on its own two feet. That said, areas have been highlighted that are in very poor condition, and, if you want, I could take you around some of them. They are absolutely atrocious. In some places, maintenance has not even been carried out with regard to health and safety, never mind meeting the decent homes standard. Will those areas be targeted effectively? My experience so far is that they will not; it seems that the funding to deal with health and safety issues cannot be found.

Ms Cousins:

We will have to look at those issues. The level of funding that is being provided for maintenance should be sufficient, given what is contained in the Savills report. If it is not being targeted, we will look at that separately. We are also exploring ways of developing localised pockets of housing stock that need major works in a partnership between the Housing Executive and housing associations so that private finance can be brought in to tackle those issues. We hope to take forward a pilot scheme, which we will then evaluate.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

Is the Department inclined to introduce an equality impact assessment of the revisions to the maintenance strategy? Jonathan made the point that there are areas in which health and safety standards are not even being met. Michael is aware of two areas in my constituency that are waiting to be given urban renewal status. One area, in particular, has not had any maintenance done for almost 20 years. I expect that there are quite a few areas that are caught in a loophole with no apparent evidence that homes there will get any maintenance at all because of the possibility of redevelopment.

The main fear that I am picking up on is that the reduction of the maintenance budget to possibly £134 million or £135 million smacks of maintenance by postcode. The Department will have to go a long way to assure elected representatives that that is not going to happen. I am one

of those people who argue that resources must go to those who are most in need, regardless of where they live or who they are. Those resources must be targeted on the basis of objective need towards estates that require maintenance more than others. I am not reassured at all by the report.

My final point is about the review of rent for housing associations as well as the Housing Executive. If rent is to be standardised, the rights of housing association tenants must also be standardised. As bad as the Housing Executive is, it can get repairs done more quickly than a housing association can. That is a fact. Those issues must be at the front of any revised strategy. The likelihood of getting repairs done depends on the housing association and who it knows in the local community. It is so bad, sometimes, that I am reluctant — or at least sensitive and cautious — to lobby a housing association on behalf of tenants, because, if that housing association takes umbrage at me, I fear that it is taken out on the tenants who need repairs done to their homes. That is the perception, and it is not a good one. Any revision of the maintenance strategy must impose a robust responsibility on housing associations to their tenants and to the public purse.

Ms Cousins:

There are a number of issues that I would like to pick up on. The maintenance strategy will be a maintenance investment strategy for Housing Executive stock. Maintenance of housing association stock is a separate issue. However, the Department is the regulator of housing associations, and property maintenance is one of the areas that we look at as part of our inspections. If anyone has concerns about housing associations that, for example, are not in our programme of inspection, please pass those to us, and we will take them on board. It is in no one's interest to have different standards of maintenance, and we would want to look at any concerns. Therefore, please let us know.

The investment strategy will be submitted to the Department. We will look at it to try to ensure that it encompasses all of Northern Ireland but that it targets particular need. The figure of £135 million has been assessed by Savills as sufficient for capital and revenue maintenance needs. It will be a question of making sure that that money goes to the right places and the right schemes. That is what the investment strategy will be about.

I understand why some maintenance has not been done in those areas that are awaiting urban renewal status. We need to get through that process more quickly and get those places declared,

or not, as areas of urban renewal, so that things can move on, rather than there being years of uncertainty in which nothing happens and things deteriorate. I appreciate that that is a problem.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

It is a health and safety issue, particularly in Parkside and the Glen.

Ms Cousins:

If health and safety issues in public sector stock are not being dealt with, we need to know about it. Health and safety issues and day-to-day maintenance have been fully funded and, therefore, there should be no reason for that not to be happening. I am very concerned to hear that.

Ms Ní Chuilín:

It is housing association property rather than Housing Executive property.

Ms Cousins:

Please let us know of any issues, so that we can take that forward as the regulator.

Mr Carragher:

We are currently updating the 'Housing Association Guide' and developing a property management and maintenance section. Guidance in that area will very much reflect what the Housing Executive does, and it will set the standards that housing associations will have to follow. As Heather said, inspectors will assess properties against that. If properties are not meeting the standards in the maintenance guide, housing associations will be pulled over the coals.

Mr Sands:

We are, as Heather said, more than happy to approach a housing association if there is a diminution of standards in its approach to maintenance in comparison with the Housing Executive. We would find that out through the regulation and inspection process. However, we do not have to wait that long. If you have information, we are more than happy to tackle it upfront.

Mr F McCann:

Jonathan and Carál have raised some of the issues that I was going to cover.

I know that Savills may be a world-renowned organisation, but most of its work has been based elsewhere, and the report does not, in many ways, take into account the uniqueness of this place. We live in a low pay economy in which we pay more for everything. Savills indicates that rents, especially Housing Executive rents, need to be looked at as an upward spiral. Sometimes, that will have a direct impact. It needs to be taken into consideration that the Housing Executive is unique in that its rents are much lower than those of the private rented sector or housing associations. I thought that the purpose behind the Savills report, besides giving most Housing Executive properties a clean bill of health, was to deliver the desired result, which was to cut back on maintenance and increase rents. That seems to be running through much of what the report says.

We should be proud, in many ways, of the service that is being delivered and the standards of maintenance that exist in many houses. Any cutback in maintenance, even if the aim is to redirect that money more effectively, would be a backward step. If that happened, in five or 10 years, we may be getting somebody else in to tell us that 40% of properties have fallen below the decent homes standard. Dealing with the issue effectively is not always about bringing people in and getting a report from them.

My other concern is that the report seems to zero in on the 12,000 properties, perhaps more, that fall below the decent homes standard. If I read between the lines, it seems to suggest demolishing such properties because they are not cost effective. Is that the suggestion being made?

Ms Cousins:

No. Thermal efficiency, or rather inefficiency, is the problem. Some properties may have single glazing where double glazing is needed, or, perhaps, they use Economy 7. There are some properties for which it may be difficult, due to their nature, to do anything other than demolish. There is a range of different options.

The Savills report is written in the context of budget restrictions; that is the reality that we will face for the next number of years. The report says clearly that the stock is, by and large, in excellent condition and that the Housing Executive has done an extremely good job over many years. However, we now face a period of budget restrictions, and there is scope to pull back for

five years and to do what is required to meet the decent homes plus standard, rather than what we have been doing, which is exceeding the decent homes plus standard. While we are in a period of budget difficulty, it is difficult to justify exceeding that standard. We must ensure that there is consistency in achieving the decent homes plus standard right across the housing stock, so that it is not the case that some of the stock is excellent and some of it very poor.

Mr F McCann:

I have a difficulty with that point. I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. The council went through a number of years during which it cut back on many services and had a zero-rate option. It cost millions of pounds afterwards to bring everything back to a standard that people expect. I am concerned that, if the policy that you are suggesting is implemented, in many years' time, we will have to pick up the pieces and invest heavily once more in the quality of the housing stock.

Did Savills visit many of the interface areas? Did the people who produced the report take interface areas into account?

Ms Cousins:

Michael can give you the detail of what they did.

Mr Sands:

They took a representative sample of housing across Northern Ireland. I cannot say whether they visited specific interface areas, but, because there are so many of them, they would certainly have touched on some. They discovered that —

Mr F McCann:

The report does not mention those specific areas.

Mr Sands:

The housing stock is more than 90,000 homes. We have the details of the visits.

Mr F McCann:

As you said, there are so many interface areas — so many people in so many houses in so many areas are affected — that I would have thought that there would have been specific mention of

them in the report. That there is not skews some of the conclusions in the Savills report.

Mr Sands:

The survey was addressing the condition of the housing stock, not the location of the properties. The sample covered all of Northern Ireland, and it was specific in targeting houses of particular categories. We have the addresses of all the properties visited, but that was too much information to put in the report. The complete list is available should the member want to see it. For Savills, it was a question of addressing the housing stock situation.

I will respond to Mr McCann's point that standards will drop. I assure you that that will not be the case. Savills has looked at the cost and how it should be apportioned. Some £1,887 for each unit each year should be sufficient to allow a house to be maintained well above the decent homes standard. It is because the stock is in such good condition that that level of expenditure can continue for five years within the budgets suggested to maintain it. There is no suggestion whatsoever that we wish to delete or to drop any particular standards. The majority of the savings, as far as the report is concerned, relate to multi-element improvement (MEI) work. Traditionally, the Housing Executive works on a house from front door to back door and improves everything. However, it needs to be much more selective and to make elemental improvements, treating them as and when they are due for renewal. Savills went through that critically and apportioned a lifespan to all the individual elements in houses.

Mr F McCann:

Savills was asked to do a job, which it probably did to the best of its ability. In many ways, however, it bears no relation to what goes on in an area within an area. The fact of life is that the Housing Executive has cyclical maintenance strategies and MEI strategies, which deal with a lot of the maintenance. We are now talking about how to cut that back. We have seen the difficulties that have arisen over the past two years as a result of maintenance budget cutbacks. Most people are saying that those cutbacks and difficulties will have an impact on housing conditions and that it will cost more in the long run to rectify the situation.

Mr Sands:

If I may repeat myself, that will not be the case. Savills set the standard and addressed it, as it addressed the situation across the rest of the United Kingdom. It realises that a minimum standard needs to be maintained. The minimum standard is decent homes. We are going beyond

that to decent homes plus. Savills has budgeted and allowed for sufficient investment to be made to maintain those homes at decent homes plus standard. We are going over and above the decent homes standard even as it is.

Mr F McCann:

Does that make it wrong?

Mr Sands:

I am saying that what Savills is doing is right in the standards that it has set. We are not going for minimum standards; we are going above that, so we do not see that the housing stock will deteriorate. Savills was quite specific when briefing the Department that its recommendations will not lead to a requirement in 10 years' time to make huge investments in the housing stock because it has not been properly maintained. That will not be the case.

Mr Carragher:

The figures in the report show that Savills looked at the cost of structural repairs and major capital improvements. On cyclical response maintenance, it took the figures that the Housing Executive used last year and rolled them forward. Savills took cognisance of the fact that, in Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive does things that are not done in any other part of the UK. Therefore, it kept the Housing Executive's budgeted figures for the maintenance of, for example, walls and fences. It kept those maintenance costs but did not provide for additional costs. It included the monies needed to maintain existing facilities but gave no provision to do more.

Ms Cousins:

Savills has modelled the requirements over 30 years, so we will not be facing accusations that we have not maintained this or that and have to demolish and start all over again. Savills has looked at a whole life investment strategy for different house types, and the figures are based on that.

Mr Easton:

The Savills report could be contentious further down the line. I am not content with it, and I wonder whether it ought to be discussed by the Executive.

Like other members, I have housing issues in my constituency. There are pensioners'

bungalows in Bloomfield, Bangor, that have not been touched for years. The pensioners are living with holes in their windows. Nothing has changed since I was elected in 2003. Those properties are not being maintained, and they need to be totally redone. It is the same story with bungalows in Rathgill estate. One lady with a small baby is living in damp, rot and all sorts.

We are not in a state to be reducing maintenance. Has the report been instigated to make savings and for that money to be used elsewhere? Is that what it is all about? I accept that you will argue that Bloomfield and Rathgill will be part of a scheme. However, improvement work has been cancelled for the past three or four years, so those properties cannot even get to a state whereby they can be maintained. I am suspicious about the whole exercise, and I think that it should go to the Executive for discussion, because we could be making a big mistake.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Can you allay Alex's suspicions?

Ms Cousins:

It is very difficult to do that. I am not a technical expert. We depended on Savills, an internationally renowned company, to do the work independently. It had no vested interest and no axe to grind. Its report tells us what the Housing Executive's stock requires over the next 30 years and what the figures for those requirements are. We all know that there are individual areas in which standards are less than satisfactory. However, we will have to tackle those individually on a scheme by scheme basis. The pilot that we are looking at in one area may be the model by which we take those schemes forward in the future. There has been a lot of uncertainty over budgets. The report, at least, gives us a basis on which to go forward; to plan, to carry out those plans properly, and to put in place a prioritised list based on the amount of funding available.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will the money that is not spent on maintenance go back to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP)?

Mr Carragher:

The budgets that are set for next year allow only for the amount of money that is included in the Savills report to be spent on maintenance, because it is close to the budget. Currently, around 70% of Housing Executive rents go towards paying for maintenance. With the public subsidy

that is going into the Housing Executive, it will not be able to afford to do very much more than that which is in the Savills report.

The Deputy Chairperson:

The Committee is probably quite surprised to be hearing about that this morning rather than at an earlier stage.

Mr F McCann:

I am quite surprised that we are being told that the Housing Executive's budget for next year has been set based on the Savills report, given that we have never discussed the report and it has never gone before the Assembly.

Mr Carragher:

Sorry, I did not mean to portray that. Budgets have been set on the basis of the overall budget allocated by DFP. The allocation that will go to maintenance is something similar to the figure in the Savills report. The figure for this year is also similar to that which has been allocated to maintenance. The budgets have not been set on the basis of the Savills report. They have been set on the basis of what is available.

Mr F McCann:

Equivalent to what is in the Savills report.

Ms Cousins:

The budget was set before the report, but it happens to be — *[Laughter.]* I do not mean that in the way in which you have taken it up.

The budgets were set three years ago, and that is the amount that was allocated for maintenance at that time. Fortunately, it is not less than the figure in the Savills report.

Ms Lo:

I thought that I had been forgotten about.

The Deputy Chairperson:

You are not the last. There are other members to come after you.

Ms Lo:

I commend the Housing Executive. The Savills report said that we have the best housing stock, in comparison with other parts of the UK, and that is something that we should be proud of. However, it is important that the proper amount of money is spent on maintaining that stock. We cannot be complacent.

I want to pick up on what Damien said. The Savills report did not exactly compare like with like when it looked at our housing stock and housing stock in England. For example, a lot of the housing stock in England uses gas, whereas properties in our stock are changing to oil-fired central heating. A lot more money is involved in that than in the gas system. Ground maintenance, such as fencing, is excluded from housing maintenance in England, where it is carried out by local authorities. Therefore, the general cost for maintenance here does not cover exactly the same thing that it does in England. If we were to split the maintenance, and give work to the councils, perhaps that would even it out.

If we take up the recommendations from the Savills report and reduce our maintenance costs, how will that impact on the Egan contracts and on the modernisation of the procurement strategy? Will we still have the Egan contracts, or will they be wiped out?

Ms Cousins:

We will still have Egan-type contracts, because Egan is just a type of contract. However, all those contracts will come up for renegotiation and re-tendering, and it is about making sure that best procurement practice is in place going into that process. Therefore, that type of contract will not disappear, but it would be hoped to get better value for money when re-letting the contract. That has been the experience with the warm homes contract; we achieved much better value for money through the re-tendering process. Things have moved on.

Savills did take into account those extra costs to which the member referred. They are included in its recommendations for the maintenance budget. Savills commented that it would not expect to see that elsewhere, but it included it in its figure work nevertheless.

We have been considering what other things we can do. We are looking at the possibility of having allotments on Housing Executive estates to help with ground maintenance issues. Home

adaptations are also a major issue, which is being looked at by another group. We are initiating reviews on issues raised by the report, but there are no conclusions yet. The work on rent, for example, will only start in the next financial year. Housing associations and the Housing Executive will be involved in that work, and it will go out for consultation, so we will take on board everyone's views. The Department has a completely open mind about the end result.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will Egan as we know it be wiped out?

Ms Cousins:

No, the Egan contract is a type. It is a framework that will remain, because it is still considered to be good procurement practice.

Mr Carragher:

The report is supportive of the Egan contracts and suggests that that type of contract should be expanded rather than cut back or curtailed.

Ms Cousins:

One problem is that the Egan contractors had an expectation that that level of work was an entitlement. It was an indicative figure, and it will always be an indicative figure.

Mr F McCann:

I have spoken to a number of Egan contractors and to the Housing Executive. Although the Egan contractors were not given guarantees when they were brought together, they were given commitments that the work would be done over a lengthy period. I understand that people will try to get more value for money, not only for maintenance. However, rather than always just going for the cheaper option, the Department needs to decide whether that is affecting quality and those employed by the industry.

Ms Cousins:

Quality is very important in those contracts. We never go for just the cheapest option.

Ms Lo:

I welcome setting rents. It is important to move away from the political decision of rent setting.

Will there be an independent rent setting body at a distance from the Housing Executive? How will that be set up?

Ms Cousins:

That will be examined in the reviews. All the review issues and the end report will go to the Minister, and it will then be for the Minister to decide how to take that forward. We are at the outset of the process, so no decisions have been made.

Ms Lo:

Has it been decided that there will be an independent body to set rents?

Ms Cousins:

I am sure that that will be one of the options in the report, about which decisions will be made. However, it will all be subject to consultation, so you would see the proposals at that stage and have the opportunity to comment on them before any decision was made.

Ms Lo:

There is no point in having such a body inside the Housing Executive or the Department for Social Development (DSD). It must be independent; a step away from the Housing Executive.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will the current Egan contractors see a reduction in work?

Ms Cousins:

The work that will be available will be based on what needs to be done. That is as far as we can go at this point.

Mr Brady:

Were we of a cynical disposition, which you realise that we are not, we might think that it was more than a coincidence that the budget and Savills recommendations equate. However, the witnesses have reassured the Committee that that is not the case.

My question for Mr Sands relates to disabled adaptations. He mentioned working with a group. What is the make-up of that group? Who is involved in consultations on behalf of that

group?

Mr Sands:

I chair it on behalf of this Department, which jointly chairs the group with DHSSPS. It is made up of representatives from the health and social care trusts, the Housing Executive and the user group. It also includes a disabled adaptations representative and front line occupational therapists. There is a very broad representation. We were very careful —

Mr Brady:

Is Disability Action represented?

Mr Sands:

Yes. We specifically ensured that all the major stakeholders were included. We even included a member from the user group to approve and to consider all the actions that we will be taking forward. The people involved will be split up into different groups. The core group, which I will chair, will meet monthly to ensure that the action is ongoing and that we are all working towards a timetable.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Members have no further questions. I thank the witnesses for their briefing.