
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 10 February 2009

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Efficiency Savings in the Health Service

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

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

That this Assembly, while recognising that there is a need for efficiency savings within the Health Service, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in this 60th year of the Health Service, to ensure that these savings do not impact on front line services; and further calls for the budgets for the most vulnerable groups within our society, i.e. children, people with mental illness and older people, to be ring-fenced.

I am pleased to introduce the motion, which does not aim to score political points but aims to provide a voice for hard-pressed nurses across the Province and, more importantly, the most needy people in our society, namely the elderly, people with mental-health issues and special needs, and children.

The need to deliver the whole range of health, social-care and public-safety services more efficiently is not in dispute, and the Committee has always recognised that need. The requirement to deliver the cumulative 3% efficiency savings each year arises from the Executive Budget of 2008-2011, to which all parties signed up.

When the Committee considered the Executive draft Budget in 2007, we paid particular attention to the question of efficiencies. In particular, we recognised that if the Department was to continue to deliver vital services, it would be essential for the efficiency-savings targets to be achieved in full. The Committee also welcomed an explicit commitment from the

Minister that he would deliver those efficiencies and meet the target of £344 million.

A review of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, carried out by Professor John Appleby in 2005, concluded unequivocally that there was considerable scope for improvement in the way that services were delivered, and that action must be taken to address that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what he has done in response to Professor Appleby's comments.

Today's debate is not about whether there is a need for efficiency savings, but about how those efficiencies should be achieved. I understand that there was a division in the Committee on the wording of the motion. However, it is my understanding that there was general agreement on the principle that any savings measures must not impact on front line services. The difference arose in relation to the call for certain budgets to be ring-fenced. I leave it to others to explain their reasons for opposing the motion in full.

The Committee has been undertaking a detailed examination of how the savings are to be made, and the likely impact on services. As part of that, we met first the Minister, then trade union representatives. The Committee is now meeting each of the five health and social care trusts to examine the proposals that they have published for consultation. We have already met two trusts, and will meet the remaining trusts over the next couple of weeks, DV. When the consultation process is completed, the proposals by the trusts and the other health and social care bodies will go the Minister for his approval.

A paper provided to the Committee in October by the Minister indicated that there will be an estimated reduction of 2,475 jobs throughout the Health Service over the next three years. That takes account of both the efficiencies and any additional investments. The largest proportion of those jobs — some 925 — will be on the administrative side, mainly as a result of the new structures following the review of public administration (RPA). However, worryingly, it is estimated that there will be a reduction of 722 nurses and midwives — that must be a major concern. That number of nursing and midwifery posts cannot be removed without having a direct and detrimental effect on front line services. I believe that that will have most effect on the diminishing of time spent with patients and the quality of care available.

The Belfast Trust, in its evidence to the Committee, was keen to point out that it is not always a straightforward matter to define "front line staff". It argued, for example, that nurses can be employed in undertaking research work, that doctors can be employed in managerial posts, and that front line services cannot be provided without a whole range of support services

including, for example, clerical staff, engineers and laboratory staff. However, I believe that when any of us think of front line staff in the Health Service, we automatically think of nurses, doctors, social workers and other healthcare professionals — those who are providing hands-on care both day and night to patients in hospitals and in the community.

When we consider the 722 nursing and midwifery posts that will disappear over the next couple of years, even allowing for a small proportion that may not be working on the front line, it is difficult to understand how that will not have a serious impact on the care and treatment provided to patients.

I will also mention residential homes, as the proposals by all trusts include proposals to close or to rationalise residential homes in their areas. I spoke to a domiciliary nurse who works for a charitable trust, and who provides care in the community through one of the health trusts.

She said that she had to make life-and-death decisions over Christmas on which patients would get 15 minutes of care four times a day and which would not. She chose people who were living on their own and had no family backup, because those care periods provided the only opportunity for those people to have someone to talk to during the day. Rather than promote the idea that all resources should be directed towards community health services, we must also consider whether we have the competence and the staff numbers to fulfil our obligations to people who leave mental-health institutions and to elderly people in the community.

The health and social care trusts have been keen to point out to the Committee that, in surveys, people say that they want to remain in their own home rather than enter residential accommodation. No one can dispute that, because everyone has the right to decide what is best for him or her. However, when elderly people can no longer cope on their own and must move into a residential home, that becomes their home. The last thing that those people want or expect is to face the prospect of the home's closing down, meaning that they must move again. Unfortunately, that is exactly what a large number of elderly people throughout Northern Ireland is facing today. Children, and people with mental-health problems, are also particularly vulnerable. The Bamford Review highlighted the neglect of that aspect of healthcare over many years. No one in the Chamber will disagree that mental-health provision causes us all a great deal of concern.

The Bamford Review's recommendations need to be implemented urgently. Some additional funding has been identified in the Budget, but it would not make any sense, on the one hand, to provide additional resources while, on the other hand, to impose efficiency savings in those areas of healthcare that I have mentioned.

In proposing the motion, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety implores the Minister to ensure that although efficiencies must be made, they must not result in cuts in front line services. Yes, we must deliver services more efficiently and effectively, but we must also continue to meet the real health and social care needs of vulnerable people.

The Committee has identified the three most vulnerable groups in society: children; people with mental-health problems; and older people. The Committee calls for the budgets for those groups to be ring-fenced and protected. That is the only way in which we can protect the care and treatment that must be provided for those vulnerable people. I urge all Members to set aside political bias and support the motion. *[Laughter.]*

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like the proposer of the motion, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I commend the members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety for supporting my proposal. I made my proposal because of representations that were made to me by Members and others on their concerns about Health Service cuts, not because of party political interests.

In saying that, I did not realise that the motion would generate so much publicity. The subject of the motion has been aired all over the media this morning, so we may have hit a raw nerve with some of the issues that affect the health sector. In the sixtieth year of the Health Service, it is important to recognise and commend the good and positive work that is being done by people in the health sector and by staff on the front line, who are genuinely committed to patient care. Throughout the debate, and despite the row over efficiency savings, it is important to commend the core group of staff who have been working on the front line for a long time.

I welcome the Minister to the debate. I have no doubt that he will answer some of the questions that have come up. Our constituents elected us, so I, like all other Members, have a duty to raise issues, and I make no apologies for doing so.

The Chairperson of the Committee highlighted some relevant figures. I have only a couple of minutes in which to speak, so I will not go into them. However, it is important to recognise that less money is spent here on children's services compared with spending on similar services in England, Scotland and Wales. I recognise the Minister's commitment to funding services for children and young people, but it is crucial that front line services, which we know are historically underfunded, are not continuously hit by the impact of efficiency savings.

10.45 am

Protecting children and young people and ensuring that they are safe and that they get the support that they need to grow into healthy, independent adults is the primary purpose of the health and social care system. We must ensure that disabled young people have access to the kinds of services that give them the greatest opportunities to live their lives to the full. As I said earlier, front line services that focus mainly on our most vulnerable children and young people should not be the target for efficiency savings.

I know that the system is already under pressure. I remind the Minister, however, that several weeks ago, the Committee was informed that there are more than 1,000 unallocated cases in the social services sector. How can money be trimmed off that sector when there are more than 1,000 unallocated cases in the system? I cannot square that circle.

I am also concerned that some of the trusts are simply passing on the proposal of efficiency savings to the community and voluntary sector. They are telling the sector that it needs to save, but they are not naming the areas in which it should make those savings. Some trusts are simply saying that there must be blanket cuts.

As the Chairperson said, the Committee has already begun to hear evidence from each trust on how it proposes to make efficiency savings. We will continue to monitor, in detail, those proposals.

The Minister has said time and time again — and every Member in this Assembly recognises — that it is vital that efficiency savings are made. However, I do not think that efficiencies should be made at the cost of front line services.

One can examine the World Health Organization's definition of "health", and one can examine the Investing for Health framework, which says that health is determined mainly by a person's social, economic, physical and cultural environment. In response to a question for written answer, which was published on 6 February 2009, the Minister said:

"Health inequalities are the product of social, economic and health related issues."

Why, then, does it appear to communities as though cuts are being made to the services that were put in place to tackle such inequalities?

I listened to the reasons why some Committee members decided to oppose the motion and to talk about the issue of ring-fencing. The Minister, speaking on BBC Radio Ulster this morning, said that he has a ring-fenced budget. I simply do not know where that sits with other people's attitudes.

The unions informed the Committee of their concern about the efficiency savings and said that they view those savings as cuts. I have no difficulty in saying that

there is much wastage in the Health Service. However, I cannot see how that fits in with the proposed cuts to 925 administration posts, 722 nursing jobs, and 450 social service positions. The nursing unions featured heavily in the media this morning.

I am very conscious of the time. Time and time again, the Minister says that we should tell him if we have any suggestions. As a Committee member, I am trying to tease out some of those suggestions. What strikes me —

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

Ms S Ramsey: Certainly, I will. More than £1.5 million was spent on hospitality last year, and we should examine where that is going. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCallister: Although today's debate addresses an important issue, I fear that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has been again dragged before the Assembly unnecessarily and for unwarranted reasons. However, I thank the Minister for attending and for showing his usual desire to facilitate the Health Committee and to be open to scrutiny and examination.

My colleague Mr Gardiner and I did not vote in favour of tabling this motion. It serves little purpose beyond giving a platform to the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Chairperson of the Committee mentioned the Appleby Report in her remarks.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not want this debate to turn into a sham fight between the Ulster Unionists and the DUP. For the record, however, I suggested that the Committee should table the motion.

Mr McCallister: I am well aware of who suggested tabling the motion. My point, however, is that the Chairperson of the Committee used this motion to get herself onto 'The Stephen Nolan Show' and to try to convey an image that she is somehow championing the cause of health in Northern Ireland. Yet, everyone can remember that during the debate on the draft Budget, what she championed most was her husband's draft Budget, and she wanted us to stick with a much lower level of spending on health.

The Chairperson said that she called on the Minister to take account of the Appleby Report. When Professor Appleby was a witness at the Health Committee, he said that a key strand was to emphasise public health by engaging with people about their health. However, the DUP — in the Health Committee and in the House — voted against the establishment of a regional agency for public health and social well-being. The DUP's hypocrisy is breathtaking.

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that this is a wide-ranging debate, but the Member should return to the motion and the business that is on the Floor of the House.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The debate must be put in context. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has repeatedly stated that efficiency savings will be attained through a range of measures such as improved procurement, more efficient prescribing and dispensing of medicines, improved productivity and reduced administration. He has also repeatedly stated that efficiency savings will not result in any cuts to front line services. He has been categorical about that issue. In that respect, we know that the Minister agrees with part of the motion.

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that the DUP was not against a health promotion agency? The DUP wanted to keep such an agency within the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), so to say that the party did not want one in the first place is totally untrue. When nurses are lost because of natural wastage, they are replaced. However, under the proposals from the trusts, jobs will be cut and will not be replaced, which means that productivity will decrease and more agency staff will be employed. That will cost the Minister's Department even more money. Does the Member not agree that that is sheer madness?

Mr McCallister: Those comments highlight what I mentioned earlier. Yet again, Mr Easton got up and talked about a public health agency. Everyone in the House should read the debates on the Health and Social Care (Reform) Bill in the Hansard reports. He was against the proposal because he did not want a focus on public health. He disagrees with the UUP and the Minister.

The efficiency savings were never the Minister's idea. They are Executive savings that have been driven at every stage by the DUP and, most fervently, by the Robinsons — even to the stage at which the Chairperson of the Health Committee was removed from the House. It smacks of opportunism to claim that the Minister should be cautious in how he approaches this very difficult issue.

Front line services rely on those efficiency savings being made. In light of the fact that the budget that the Minister received did not adequately meet the heightening need in Northern Ireland, it is crucial that savings that are acquired from improved efficiencies are pumped back into the service.

All the new service developments that the Minister has been able to announce have to be funded by efficiency savings. There is a funding gap of over £600 million in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but that figure would have been larger if the

DUP had had its way. In April 2005, Iris Robinson claimed that an increase of 9% —

Mr Easton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: No; I am running out of time, and the Member has already had one bite at the cherry.

Iris Robinson claimed that an increase of 9% in the budget for the Department was grossly insufficient. However, a mere two years later, an increase of 3.8% was more than enough when Mr Peter Robinson — her husband — was in charge of the money. Political opportunism is regrettable in any area, but when politicians start to play games with people's health, the public — quite rightly — become very dismayed.

The Minister has been open with the Health Committee, the health trusts and the public. All proposals for efficiency benefits are just that — proposals. They will all go out for consultation, and people who wish to have their say about the proposals can do so.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Hanna: I support this important motion. We must achieve efficiency savings but not by using the blunt, crude instrument of 3% cuts across the board. With the tax base shrinking by the day, it is inevitable that there will be cuts. It was also inevitable that the previous budgeting assumptions, which were based on the Northern Ireland block grant, were thrown out the window.

The SDLP has been vindicated in voting against the flawed Budget. There is too much reliance on cutbacks to essential services that impact on the most vulnerable people in our society.

Members will be aware that there is a continuing gap in the health of people from the most affluent and most deprived areas in Northern Ireland. That is clearly reflected in life-expectancy rates, infant-mortality rates, cancer levels, obesity levels, teenage-pregnancy rates, hospital admissions for people with mental-health problems, and in the generally lower access to health care for people in the latter category. The statistics are well documented, and closing the gap must be the overarching aim of the Executive, the Assembly, the Health Minister and the Health Committee.

It has been predicted that more than 700 nursing jobs will go in the next three years. That reduction is dramatic, and the remaining staff will come under greater pressure than ever. As a registered nurse and midwife, I am deeply concerned about the impact that such cuts will have on service delivery. Nurses are the mainstay of the healthcare team. Of course, the Health Service must work smarter and more efficiently, and it must achieve a better skills mix. However, although there are jobs that could be done by people other than nurses, we should be upskilling rather than downgrading.

We need all the nurses we can get to fill the new posts that, I hope, will be created as a result of these awful efficiency savings. Even one nurse, providing support in the community, can make such a difference to patients, particularly those suffering from chronic illness and degenerative diseases, which are often a life sentence for them and their carers. Those patients are not at the sexy end of healthcare, but they require a lot more support, particularly nursing support. Residential homes are being closed and home-help services are being cut to the bone; there is not enough money to go around.

None of this is being seen by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), and I do not understand why the Minister of Finance and Personnel does not tackle Civil Service bureaucracy, especially at the higher levels. He should also be tackling the problem of Departments working in silos — he is the Minister of Personnel as well as the Minister of Finance. He is not required to account for raising taxes; his role is to distribute funds fairly and equitably, with help from his numerous advisers and civil servants. The Department of Finance and Personnel is not Whitehall, and Northern Ireland covers a small area that requires a more sensitive approach, using local knowledge, in order to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society are protected. That is what devolution is supposed to be about — local management.

Allocating sufficient resources for mental-health promotion and early intervention makes good economic sense. Mental ill-health imposes greater costs on society than any other health condition, including cancer and heart disease, and the case for tackling the problem is particularly strong in Northern Ireland, where the rate of mental ill-health is 25% higher than in the rest of the UK. Therefore, we must prioritise good mental health, because it impacts on so many areas of people's lives and, indeed, on many Departments, including the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department of Education (DE) and, through social housing, the Department for Social Development (DSD).

Although the Health Department has an alcohol and drugs strategy, the Executive and the Assembly should be more involved in working with parents, young people and the licensed trade, which has a vested interest. In addition, as Members heard in yesterday's debate on supported housing, there is an urgent housing need for the people who are moving out of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Some of those people have complex needs, so considerable resources are required.

I hope and trust that the Minister of Finance and Personnel acknowledges the impact that those challenges will have on many aspects of people's lives, and I hope that the Executive will be involved more proactively. The National Health Service belongs to no one but the public, and we must ensure that it serves

the interests of the public and, especially, the interests of the most vulnerable.

Dr Farry: The Alliance Party will support the motion, basing its judgement solely on the wording in the Order Paper, because it appreciates that there are major concerns about how efficiency savings are being delivered in the health sector. However, I express my utter shock and horror at the sheer nerve and gall of the Members who are behind the motion; the same people who signed up to the Budget that is at the heart of the problems facing the Health Service.

DUP and Sinn Féin Members should hold their heads in shame, because they are responsible for the flaws. It is a case of their shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted, and, furthermore, it is those parties that caused the horse to bolt in the first instance.

11.00 am

Mr Easton: Does the Member agree that his colleague in the United Community group Dr Kieran Deeny did not oppose the Budget or raise any issues concerning it in the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety? It appears, therefore, that there is a problem with that alliance over what it agrees on health issues.

Dr Farry: If the Member reads Hansard reports, he will see where the Alliance Party stands on the Budget. We have been consistent on the issue.

Northern Ireland's health budget is inadequate. The DUP can talk all its wants about the record levels of spending that have been made in healthcare in Northern Ireland. I accept that a high proportion of the overall Budget — 48% — and the majority of new spending has been invested in health. However, that does not take into account the fact that, compared with the UK average, investment in health in Northern Ireland is flatlining. There have been considerable levels of uplift in health spending elsewhere in the UK but not in Northern Ireland. We are falling behind, and that is a simple fact with which we must come to terms.

The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland estimates that we could be £200 million behind by 2011.

Ms S Ramsey: It is important that the comments about Kieran Deeny were made. I do not know whether the Member has read the motion, but, when the Health Service budget came before the Health Committee, we proposed that it be equality proofed, because we were aware that the Health Service was underfunded. In fact, we said so time and time again. The Committee subsequently agreed that it should be equality proofed. Although we recognise that efficiency savings need to be made, I urge the Minister not to attack the most vulnerable groups.

Dr Farry: Sinn Féin must face up to the fact that it signed up to a right-wing, Thatcherite Budget. The

party's credentials and what its members say on the streets of Belfast, and elsewhere in Northern Ireland, to their electorate, are inconsistent with their behaviour in the Assembly. I am amazed by that.

One must consider costs, which are rising across the system. People are living longer, and we have more expensive drugs and technologies. Health will always require a higher percentage of the Budget in Northern Ireland than it does in other jurisdictions because we are a devolved Assembly, and we have less of a range of responsibilities than others. We face other difficulties with our Budget; for example, the cost of division and the populist approach that the Executive have taken, thus far, to public spending.

When people trumpet about measures that they have implemented on rates and such issues, they must bear in mind that the people who suffer are those who require access to quality public services, which are underfunded. Therefore, the poorest and most vulnerable people in society have been let down by the Executive, who have paid more attention to the better-off in society than to the worse-off.

Efficiency savings should be about shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices into resources for the new. I accept that there is a problem with how that is happening in the Health Service. Too often, it results in cuts to front line services, and such cuts must be reduced.

We need to focus on prevention and on public health. That brings Mr Easton's comments into context. We require a stand-alone public-health agency that will drive forward efficiencies in our health system and reduce costs, but one that will do so without using half measures.

The motion proposes to ring-fence money for vulnerable groups, and that is laudable. However, why was that not done when the Budget was struck? The Budget is the proper vehicle for taking those types of decisions. The DUP and Sinn Féin missed a trick there. It is too late for them to come crying about the delivery of efficiency savings now, when their Members did not take the necessary action to protect core aspects of the Health Service when the Budget was being drafted. They could have done that if they had anticipated what was going to happen. Therefore, it is a bit late to raise those problems in the Assembly now.

A clear definition of front line services is required. There may be times when it will be beneficial to have efficiency savings impacting on front line services, because it will mean that things will be done better.

Mental-health promotion and prevention is underfunded in Northern Ireland, compared with the UK average. Some 9% of our overall health budget is spent on mental-health issues, as compared with the UK average of 12%.

We talk about moving people out of institutions and into the community. That is a change of policy and practice, and it is something that we should consider and welcome. The Bamford Review recommended such a move, but it must be backed up by proper staffing in the community that will provide people with the proper resources.

We will support the motion, judged upon how it is worded. However, those behind the motion have a lot of thinking to do because they have been massively inconsistent; the people of Northern Ireland will find them out very quickly.

Mr Easton: I have to confess that I have been looking forward to today's debate because I hope to get an understanding of the Minister's definition of efficiency savings and how they differ from cuts.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; not yet.

Unfortunately, today we will probably see — and are seeing — attacks by the Health Minister on the other parties and the Ulster Unionists blaming the issue of efficiencies on everyone and anyone. However, the Minister should be aware that the issues raised by Members today are real concerns that are felt by Health Service staff and members of the public.

In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which serves my constituency, there are 182 nursing posts under threat and proposals for three residential homes to close. How can we lose so many positions for nurses when we spend so much money on agency staff? The loss of nursing positions will lead to a decrease in productivity and will have the knock-on effect of causing waiting lists to rise and more work being pushed onto others — it is sheer madness.

The Minister gave a promise — and I will remind him of it time and time again, if necessary — that there will be no cuts to front line services. Will he reiterate that promise and not close residential homes such as Ravara House in Kilcooley, Bangor, where over 20 residents live in fear for their future? That is morally wrong, and the Minister has a chance to put a stop to this madness.

The Minister will try to blame the entire Executive for agreeing to the 3% efficiencies. However, what he has failed to say is that the 3% efficiency savings come as a directive that is part of the comprehensive spending review. It is a Westminster directive, from the Treasury, and the whole of the UK has to find the 3% savings. It is not exclusively a Northern Ireland Executive decision; no one in the Executive agreed to cutbacks.

Mr B McCrea: That is pathetic.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Easton: I think that the Member has a problem with the truth.

The Minister will also tell us that if we have any better ideas, we should make them known. Well, here are some ideas that many of the trusts are failing to consider as part of the 3% efficiencies. Doctor and nursing vacancies need to be processed quickly. Since the debate that we had months and months ago, we have seen no action taken to deal with the issue and the medical ward in Omagh having to close as a result of vacancies not being filled.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; I will not give way.

Another target should be to reduce the non-attendance at outpatient appointments, which stands at 196,000 across the Province. Dealing with that would increase productivity and reduce waiting lists.

Mr B McCrea: Tell us where the money is coming from.

Mr Easton: I am trying to explain where efficiencies might be made, but the Member will not listen. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Easton: The number of cancelled clinics, currently standing at nearly 14,000, should be reduced — that would reduce waiting lists and increase productivity. Medical negligence claims, currently costing nearly £14 million, should be reduced. The trusts should reduce the number of independent sector providers, which are costing almost £6 million across the Health Service. The cost of mail, standing at nearly a staggering £7 million, should be reduced, as should the cost of phone bills, which are costing the Health Service over £8 million.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No; I will not give way. The Member does not like to hear the truth; that is the problem.

Mr Cobain: Tell us how that can be done.

Mr Easton: I am giving the Minister some ideas about how to make the savings.

The Health Service energy bills, which cost nearly £29 million, should be reduced. We should be trying to make the trusts more energy efficient, and we are not doing that. The travel cost claims for the Health Service, which are costing £32 million, should be reduced. The Minister's own Department is spending nearly £400,000 on travel-cost claims — he must look into that.

The Minister should do away with bonus payments for senior officials, which have cost his own Department £180,000. Given the current economic climate, why are we paying bonuses? The Minister should reduce the

cost of art as capital, which is costing £700,000. If that were done away with, it could save two residential homes.

Management consultant fees, costing over £1 million, should be reduced. The Department should also, of course, try to reduce the cost of agency staff — £40 million across the health trusts. What is the Minister going to do about that issue? Sick leave, which cost the Minister's own Department over £1 million in 2007-08, must be reduced.

Today, the DUP has given the Minister some helpful ideas. He has the chance to change his mind and stop some of the cutbacks. Will he come to be known as the Minister for spin and cuts, like the Labour Party's Peter Mandelson, or as the Minister who delivers a first-class Health Service? I would not want to be known as the "Mandy" of the Ulster Unionist Party. Today, the Minister has a chance to put a stop to cuts in nursing and to the closure of residential homes.

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

Mr Easton: Will the Minister work with me and members of the Committee to come up with some realistic ideas?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As a member of Sinn Féin, I fully support the motion that is before the House. The Committee also supported the motion, although not unanimously. This morning, as I was sitting in traffic at Sandyknowes, I heard a nurse, or perhaps someone who was speaking on behalf of nurses, speaking on the radio.

A Member: Was it Carmel Hanna?

Mrs McGill: No, contrary to what I heard someone say from a sedentary position on my left-hand side, it was not Carmel Hanna. My understanding is that the individual was either a nurse or Mary Hinds of the RCN (Royal College of Nursing). Given the exchange that has just taken place between Members, it is important to note that she was glad that the matter was to be debated in the House today. I am prepared to listen to her because she works on the front line.

I am not someone who runs to the media, but I heard several contributions to the radio programme from Members, some of whom are present in the Chamber. I learned something from listening to people who work on the front line. In a powerful statement, the nurse said that no one is against change, but the problem is that after change has been introduced, no one evaluates the results. I identify with that statement.

I am going to quote an example — and I thank the Assembly Research and Library Services for this. This is from the Western Trust, which covers my area, and it is to do with domiciliary care and workers. I have a

particular interest in that because, as the Minister will know — and I welcome his presence — there is a situation in Strabane. There is a proposal to close Greenfield residential care home. As Sue Ramsey said, such proposals are of major concern to our constituents, and it would be remiss of me not to mention that.

The Western Trust's proposal is:

"Implement regional needs assessment criteria for domiciliary care, replacement of meal preparation and domestic chores by domiciliary workers with another model".

The inherent weakness of that proposal is that it gives no idea of how "another model" will work.

Based on what I heard on the radio this morning and on what people in my area have told me, I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee and people who work on the front line that the provision of home helps for 15 minutes here and there does not work. The Committee has been asked to make suggestions, and I have no difficulty with that. My suggestion is that we listen to what the people in the front line are saying. Go raibh maith agat.

11.15 am

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. The matter has, no doubt, provoked much controversy between the Department, the Minister, and members of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and it has raised concern among health professionals, especially the Royal Colleges.

I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber. The debate is important as it deals with efficiencies, and the difference between efficiencies and cuts in the Health Service. The motion has not been tabled by members of the Health Committee simply for the sake of having another debate on health in the Chamber; it has come from a collective, genuine concern to protect front line services and the most vulnerable in our communities. On several occasions, Mr McGimpsey said that he is ready and willing to listen. I hope that he not only listens but takes action on what he hears from Members today and from what has been presented to him. It appears that, in the past, the Minister has refused to listen and take on board the concerns of the members of the Health Committee regarding his definition of efficiency savings.

One of the first issues that the Minister must clarify is his definition of efficiency savings, which has been referred to by other Members. The Health Committee, and professionals at the cutting edge, have often heard that the Minister's definition of efficiency savings really means cuts to front line services. The Minister cannot use efficiency savings as a smokescreen to cut front line services, because Members will not buy into that.

I want to look at issues that will strengthen front line services rather than diminish them, because over the past 12 months we have seen the demise of front line

services. My colleague Alex Easton has raised several issues, and perhaps the Minister will take those on board.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buchanan: No, I will not give way. The first thing I want to look at is over-bureaucratic management —

Mr B McCrea: I just want to tease out —

Mr Speaker: Order, order. I remind Members that they should not persist when it is quite obvious that the Member has no intention of giving way.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Perhaps those folk will learn as time goes on; they are slow learners, but their time will come.

Although the Minister may well say in his remarks today that he has begun to streamline, and he may point out that the boards are reducing to one and the trusts to five, I still contend that there are far too many managers. Over the past 10 years, the number of managers and senior managers has doubled. The number of managers has risen from 504 in 1998 to 990 in 2007, and the number of senior managers has increased from 623 in 1998 to 1,153 in 2007 — a rise of 33% over the past 10 years. We are looking at efficiency savings; therefore, will the Minister tell me whether it is acceptable for that trend to continue while, at the same time, he is reducing the number of nurses who are delivering health services at the front line?

Service duplication must also be examined. Many clinics are being cancelled for no good reason, and theatre facilities are being underutilised. Operating theatres in the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, which is in the Western Health and Social Care Trust, have not been fully utilised simply because the networking — which has been talked about so much by the Department and the trusts — has never been put in place.

Another area in which efficiency savings could be made is in the use of agency staff. A few weeks ago when an agency consultant came to Altnagelvin Hospital —

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

Mr Buchanan: — her patients were not there. All those issues must be tackled.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Buchanan: Perhaps the Minister will listen today.

Mr Gardiner: I think that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety agrees with the sentiments of the motion, and I believe that he is already trying to do exactly what the motion proposes. In fact, I am sure that he would find it a lot easier to deliver on all health spending priorities if he had been given the budget that he asked for initially. However, he did not get it.

Of course, it was the honourable lady Iris Robinson's husband and fellow DUP member who, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, proposed a reduction in the health budget under the draft Budget. The DUP's then Finance Minister did that, despite the fact that, less than a year beforehand, the honourable lady had called on direct rule Ministers to increase spending on health. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Gardiner: It always struck me as inconsistent that when direct rule Ministers were running the show, more money was needed, but when her husband was running the show, less money was needed. *[Interruption.]*

It makes the honourable lady's every demand for prioritisation in the Health Service — the sentiments behind the motion — appear as though she is contradicting herself. She might dress up her position with the claim that new money can be found from efficiency savings. However, the scale of the cuts that the Finance Minister imposed on the Health Service will show that any efficiency savings will be small in comparison with the shortfall her husband has imposed on it. The Health Minister eventually accepted the budgetary settlement —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you. The Health Minister eventually accepted the budgetary settlement because the business of Government must continue. *[Interruption.]*

People simply have to get on with what they have been given — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Gardiner: — by an Executive that has many competing ministerial voices, all demanding money.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: No, thank you. I did not give way before, so I will carry on.

Perhaps the honourable lady will be able to shed light on that apparent inconsistency in her position when she is summing up.

The Minister has made clear his total commitment to the Health Service. His belief in the original 1948 vision for the Health Service — that it be free at the point of need — is beyond doubt. The Minister and the Health Committee are travelling on the same road and in the same direction, the difference being that the Minister has Executive responsibilities for the Health Service. He does not have the luxury of grandstanding on this demand or that demand — and such grandstanding is done largely for the public relations benefits it brings — because he is charged with ensuring that taxpayers' money is used efficiently.

The groups mentioned in the motion — children, people with mental illness and older people — are all priority groups for the Minister. He has always demonstrated that his commitment to helping them is real. However, ring-fencing money reduces flexibility. If all internal Health Service budgets were ring-fenced then no flexibility would be possible. Given the fact that the Health Minister has to live within the total budget determined by the Finance Minister, he cannot be flexible and ring-fence — the two positions are contradictory. The problem with a motion such as the one under discussion is that it implies that what is being demanded is not happening at all. However, everyone in the House and in the Health Service knows that that is just not true.

I commend the Health Minister on his work for the Health Service and the people of Northern Ireland to date. He is known as the people's Health Minister and as someone who delivers and who will look after the care and welfare of the sick and the dying.

Mr Gallagher: I support the motion, and I recognise, as most people now do, that there is broad support for tackling inefficiencies and eliminating waste in the Health Service. Like most people, I find it hard to see how, in the present climate, there can be any justification for continuing to pay large bonuses to senior managers in the service. The plans from all the trusts have now been published, and it is quite clear that, in order to achieve the comprehensive spending review (CSR) savings, they are targeting front line services.

The trusts made submissions to the Health Committee, and I am sure that Members, along with other elected representatives in their local areas, have held face-to-face meetings with them. The same themes arise in those meetings: the closure of residential homes; the removal of essential day-care services; and cuts in provision for the elderly and those with learning disabilities, such as home-help services, which have been severely hit. In the west, maternity services are in jeopardy and redundancy notices have been issued to nurses. Therefore, it is no wonder that there is such alarm and distress among patients and their families.

Many people do not understand the reasons behind those cuts, but they can be linked back to the Budget that the Assembly approved. Some Members need to be reminded that the Budget that they voted for included CSR cuts and efficiency savings, which were part of the package that has led to the current situation. That is why the SDLP, along with some other Members, voted against the Budget — it relied on market forces and placed far too much emphasis on economic competitiveness.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gallagher: No, I will not. I might finish early, so the Member might get an opportunity to comment if she asks the Speaker.

The Budget paid far too little attention to the needs of the weak and vulnerable in our society.

As I said, despite the increased demands on their services, trusts have made cutbacks in care for the elderly and care in the community — they are proposing sheltered accommodation and home-based care as alternatives to residential care. It will take many years for supported-housing initiatives to bear fruit. With little supported housing available and poor or non-existent home-help services, it is no wonder that there has been a public outcry and that so many people welcome the debate.

In cases in which home help cannot be found, trusts instruct families to use direct payments to recruit help. Families find that scheme far too complex to administer and cannot cope with it.

Given the Department's instruction for any reduction in the number of our nurses to be achieved through voluntary redundancy and natural wastage, the loss of well-qualified and full-time nursing staff is another worrying development. It is difficult to understand why full-time nurses in some trusts are not having their contracts renewed.

Mental-health services already account for 20% of the health burden, but receive only 10% of the health budget, so cuts to that service are very damaging — mental-health services require more investment, not less. The key services required for mental health, such as crisis-response services and vital outreach programmes, are very scarce and cannot be provided without additional resources. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion and commend those who tabled it. We live in difficult times, and we must all tighten our belts, at home and in our jobs. That applies to all executive bodies in the Northern Ireland Assembly, because our constituents look to us to ensure that money is spent wisely and that service provision is not affected by any cutbacks in spending.

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

It is our aim to spend more on meeting the needs of the people of the Province, not less. To do that, we must make cuts to non-essential spending and focus on what is necessary to help people through the difficult times that the economic crisis has brought. We know that more people are feeling the pressure — many families are out of work and are breaking down because of the pressure. It is more essential than ever that appropriate and efficient measures are implemented to provide the support networks that can make a difference to lives, sometimes the difference between life and death.

11.30 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: The point that I tried to make to Tommy is that the amounts of money invested in training staff in the Health Service — particularly healthcare professionals — are large. Such a big investment means that if those members of staff are displaced, that investment will have to be made a second time. That is not an efficient use of money, and, if I recall correctly, despite protestations by SDLP and UUP Members, Ministers from both parties voted for the Budget. I may be wrong about that.

Mr Shannon: I concur with the Member's comments. As yin o' tha members o' tha OFMDFM Cimmitee a' wus saddin'd tae reed about aw tha fowk whau haud pit in fer fundin, an wurny oany langer gaun tae receive it throo tha childern an yung fowks funn, as it is nae langer in ackshin, an is noo spread iver intae differe'n't Depertmunt whau hae goet extra funndin tae meet tha needs that ther er.

As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, it is with sadness that I read all the requests from people who can no longer receive funding through the children and young people's fund, because that fund is no longer in action. It has fallen to individual Departments, which have received extra funding, to step up and answer the needs that that fund previously addressed. That is the main reason that I support the motion. Now, more than ever, the Department must set aside moneys for programmes that are designed to give the necessary support.

In my constituency, the Link Group in Newtownards helps alcoholics, young people and those who are displaced, and there are other support organisations such as Life Start, Sure Start and Home-Start; those groups have been supported by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I wish to comment briefly on their work, because they have applied for funding and have received some money but not enough to continue their work.

Mr McNarry: Rubbish.

Mr Shannon: That is the truth, and there is no way that DUP Members will sit here and listen to snide remarks from the pom-pom girls in the corner.

On the Ards Peninsula, many young families and single-parent families find it difficult to cope. Home-Start is a community group that is made up of volunteers and paid co-ordinators; it supports families with young children throughout the Province. Over 650 visits are made each week by volunteers, and almost 3,000 children are supported in Northern Ireland. Volunteers make home visits to young mothers, mothers and fathers who are grieving, and homes with multiple births and illness. The criteria that are applied are simple: anyone with a child under five years of age can get help from a volunteer who will come and do a few

hours' work; for example, volunteers assist by planning menus, shopping or carrying out simple tasks; they also provide a caring, listening ear. Those examples illustrate some of Home-Start's important work.

I also wish to mention the work of Loch Cuan House — a residential home. The motion is clear: the last line states that money for older people should be ring-fenced. We are concerned about the future of that home and its residents, the majority of whom are between 80 and 95 years of age. We have written to the Minister about the issue and have asked for meetings and assurances. All the Members who represent the area are keen to ensure that the work of Loch Cuan House continues and that before anything should happen to the residents, individual risk assessments should be made for each resident.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way, and I congratulate him on his willingness to take interventions and to engage in debate — unlike some of his colleagues.

I have two questions for the Member. First, does the DUP suggest that the ring-fencing of Budget allocations should be applied to other areas of public spending? Secondly, with respect to bonuses in the Health Service, to which his party colleagues have referred, does the Member realise that bonuses are paid throughout the public sector? Does he believe that that is a problem that should be tackled in all Departments?

Mr Shannon: The debate is about the Health Service. I accept the Member's points; those problems must be addressed in other Departments. However, I am short of time.

I could point to many other examples in which the ring-fencing of money is imperative, in my constituency and right across the Province. The two examples that I have given — Home-Start and Loch Cuan House — illustrate why it is important to ring-fence money to ensure that it is available.

We need to make sure that efficiency savings are savings from non-essentials. The Minister must ensure that no service is lost —

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

Mr Shannon: Indeed, services must be enhanced and become more readily available. I support the motion.

Mr Poots: This debate did not come about by accident. It is easy for people to blame the DUP Minister of Finance and Personnel and everybody else for what is going on. The efficiency savings that are set by the Treasury apply to all Departments — not just the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Appleby Report concluded that major savings could be made in the Department of Health, Social

Services and Public Safety. I do not think that Appleby was talking about cutting the number of nurses or closing residential homes; he was talking about real efficiency savings. The Minister of Health should apply efficiencies to his Department, not to services but to costs. The Minister must make efficiencies, not cut services, take away nurses or close the residential homes that are required for our elderly.

We need to deliver services more efficiently. There is not enough money for the community care side of community care packages. For example, if one is seeking a place for someone who is in medical rehabilitation — usually an elderly person recovering from a stroke in hospital, which costs hundreds of pounds more each week than community care — one will be told that there is no money in the community care budget to allow that person to go to a residential home or to go to their own home and have a care package provided for them. Institution-based care will not give the money to the community care side, and, consequentially, the whole budget loses. The Minister needs to get his act together and sort out such issues.

Agency nurses have been mentioned in the House before. Why do we not have more permanent nursing staff and more nurses in the hospital bank rather than pay private agencies considerable sums of money over and above what ordinary nursing staff would be paid? I declare an interest in that my wife has been a nurse for many years, and I know something about the situation. The amount of money wasted in that way is an absolute scandal.

Instead of dealing with the issue, the Minister proposes to cut the number of nursing staff. What will happen when need arises? Those staff will be brought back in through a private agency. That will cost the Health Service even more money, and it will be done in the name of efficiency. That is nonsense.

The auditing process that nurses and doctors have to go through leaves far too great a paper trail, which deflects them from important and necessary work. Other people are then employed — administrators — to crawl over those paper trails. It is a box-ticking exercise, it does not improve the health of our nation, nor does it improve the service that is provided.

My colleague Simon Hamilton asked a question of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety last year. Over the past 10 years, there has been an increase of 100% in senior management and 33% in administration.

Mr D Bradley: I point out to the Member some of the changes that have been proposed in the Newry and Mourne area, where band-5 managers are being moved out of such services as care for the elderly and supported living, with the result that hands-on carers at the front line will now have to carry out the administrative tasks

previously done by those managers. Administrators close to the front line service are being moved around, not the fat cats at trust headquarters.

Mr Poots: The Member is absolutely right. The number of directors is not being reduced, and those senior managers are still in place. In looking at efficiency savings, it is obvious that if there has been a 100% increase in senior managers over the past 10 years and a 33% increase in administrators, one does not reduce the number of nursing staff. It is not a matter of closing residential homes; one should go to the administration side to see what is necessary and of benefit to services and what is superfluous.

Faced with this situation, any Minister seeking the betterment of healthcare for the general public would come to the same conclusion that I have: cuts should be made in administration. That is where Appleby would expect cuts to be made, not in front line services. I say to the Minister: lift the jackboot off the nurses, stop hammering the elderly, and make the cuts and efficiencies where they need to be made — in the delivery of administration. There must not be one drop more in administration than is absolutely necessary.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): I welcome today's debate, as it will help to put into context the delivery of efficiencies within the Health Service. All Northern Ireland Departments have been tasked with delivering £790 million of efficiencies per annum by March 2011. By 2010-11, my Department has to achieve an efficiency target of 3%, which is £344 million per annum and £700 million over three years. Those funds must be released if we are to ensure that vital life-saving and life-changing services are implemented over the next few years.

That is not an easy task; a huge sum of money has to be found within the already limited funds available to health and social care services. I remind Members, however, that that figure was agreed by the Executive, with no dispensation to my Department for the high priority that the people of Northern Ireland place on public health and social services.

I have listened with interest to the comments made today, and over recent weeks, and it appears that Members no longer defend the Budget that they so enthusiastically endorsed when it was passed in January 2008. It is encouraging to hear Members talk about the inadequate health budget and voice their concerns about what they believe to be cuts in front line health services. I only wish that they had spoken so passionately about that when the Budget was being debated; perhaps there would have been a very different sentiment. So outspoken on the subject was the Chairperson of the Health Committee that she was asked to leave the Chamber; it was notable that, as I

recall, not one of her colleagues stood up and applauded her as she was taken out.

This is the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the National Health Service, a service that we can justly be proud of for improving the health of the nation. Right now, however, we are facing huge challenges. Historically, there have been years of underfunding of health and social care, and Members have heard me highlight many times the £600 million funding gap between Northern Ireland and England. We need almost £300 million per annum to make our services match what is delivered in England, and another £300 million to match the investment that those services will receive this year and next.

There are many areas in which the gap between services here and in the rest of the UK is simply not acceptable. Expenditure per head on mental health, learning disability, and children's social needs is around 35% higher in England, despite higher levels of need here. If we had the same rate of heart disease as the rest of the UK, 300 fewer people would die each year. Death rates from bowel cancer are 16% higher than in GB. If we had the same adoption rates as in England, each year another 50 to 60 children in care would be adopted. That is unacceptable; it is not fair or right that people in Northern Ireland should be disadvantaged because of a lack of proper investment.

However, the situation could have been much worse. In August 2007, I was presented with the original draft Budget, which made absolutely no provision for service developments. It was only because I fought for extra funding that I was able to secure a significant increase in the resources available for those developments over the CSR period.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Without that extra funding there would not have been service developments, such as the introduction of bowel cancer screening, which will save up to 70 lives a year; an additional 700 heart operations and heart procedures each year; the introduction of the HPV vaccination against cervical cancer, which kills around 40 women each year; remote monitoring for up to 5,000 patients; an additional 200 units of respite and community-based care; improved family support services to help around 2,500 families each year; the extension of screening for breast cancer from age 65 to age 70, to name just a few.

In addition, I secured a package of measures that is designed to provide my Department with greater scope and flexibility to manage its budget.

11.45 am

Once again, I thank colleagues in the Chamber, Health Service staff and the public, who supported me

in fighting to secure a better deal for health and social care. However, that simply is not enough, and I face extremely difficult choices every day. While I continue to argue for more resources, I must live within the budget that has been set, and that means delivering some £700 million of efficiency savings. I reassure the House that each and every penny that is released through greater efficiency will be reinvested in health. Delivering on efficiencies is the only way to make investment possible in service developments in the next three years. If efficiency savings are not achieved, plans, investments and new services cannot happen.

I have always heard Members say that there are better ways of meeting the efficiency target, because they see cutting out waste and inefficiency as all that is needed. However, the trusts' efficiency proposals already cover those basic housekeeping and productivity issues, and they factor in considerable reductions from administration. For example, £53 million per annum will be delivered through RPA reform, which will reduce Health Service administration costs by almost 25%. That is a reduction of 1,700 staff, and reducing 19 trusts to six and four boards to one. An even more dramatic reduction will take place in the number of senior executives, from about 137 —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Just a minute.

The number of senior executives will be reduced by 97 to 40, which is a reduction of three quarters.

Expanding the generic prescribing initiative and reducing drugs costs will produce a further £40 million of savings each year. Likewise, improving the day-case rates, decreasing the length of stay in hospitals, reducing sick absence, treating people in the community instead of in hospital, improved preventative measures and better procurement will deliver some £140 million each year.

Does anyone in the House believe that in an organisation of £4 billion, saving on postage, travel expenses or ground maintenance will deliver the £700 million that we are required to achieve? Does anyone believe that the trusts have not already considered the potential for such reductions? Members need to enter the real world. Yes, savings can be made in those areas, and I expect trusts to maximise them; however, penny-pinching postage costs will just not do it. We have to change what we do, not just how we do it.

The Health Service is better and stronger than it has been at any stage in its history, yet it still struggles to keep pace with rising expectations and with growing threats such as obesity and the ageing population. Bevan himself drew attention to the inevitability of such developments. In the week before the National Health Service was launched, he said:

“This service must always be changing, growing and improving, it must always appear inadequate.”

Change is never easy; there is always suspicion and scepticism of proposed new approaches. However, in the past 60 years, change has been the only constant in the Health Service. Our understanding of how disease develops and how to detect and treat illness has improved vastly since 1948. New technology has not only brought unimagined medical advances, but it has changed how we work, communicate and make choices. No one can argue with change if it means shifting resources from outmoded policies and practices and reinvesting them in better and more efficient ways of doing things. That makes perfect sense.

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Minister for giving way; I will be brief, because I am interested in what he is saying.

In their presentation to the Health Committee just before Christmas, the unions expressed deep concern about delegating responsibility to the trusts to develop their own plans for efficiency savings, because many of the services were regional and leaving it to the trusts was causing more problems.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, I am concerned about communication. I strongly believe that unions must be well informed about what is proposed — they should never be taken by surprise. Therefore, I share the concerns of unions that feel that they have not received the degree of communication that they expected from trusts. I have made my feelings known to the trusts. I hope, and I believe, that the situation has dramatically changed since unions informed the Member of their concerns in December.

Let me make it clear — efficiency savings are not cuts. That is why, when I became Minister, I considered, and threw out, what had been proposed under direct rule and asked trusts to think again. Those proposals included closing Belfast City Hospital's accident and emergency service; charging for the domiciliary care that most of our vulnerable people receive; and reducing our number of adult day centres by 50%. I made it plain to the trusts, and I will make it clear to Members, that I will not countenance cuts.

I have been asked many times how I can be certain that efficiency savings are not really cuts to front line services. My first priority is to help our health and social-care staff to deliver high-quality services to the public. Our focus must be on staff, not on buildings, particularly when so many of our facilities are no longer fit for purpose.

Many of the measures that the trusts propose are subject to formal consultation. I expect that process to be concluded by no later than March 2009. As Minister,

I will have the final say. If formal consultations do not produce a clear position, cuts will simply not get through.

I have heard Members argue for an exemption from efficiency savings for mental-health services, learning-disability services, and elderly people and children's services. I share and understand Members' concerns. However, to grant such an exemption would rule out efficiency plans of well over £1 billion of the Department's budget, which amounts to more than 50% of the trusts' spend. If those services are exempt, from where will the balance be sought? I reassure Members that funding for the particular services that I have mentioned is ring-fenced. That funding will deliver real improvements for those more vulnerable groups.

On the point that Sue Ramsey and Tommy Gallagher made earlier in the debate, my proposals over the CSR period will ensure that investment flows to the most vulnerable in our society. Indeed, I have ensured that services for those groups will benefit from significant funding increases over the next three years, including a 17% increase for mental-health provision; 16% more for learning-disability provision to drive forward the Bamford recommendations; a 13% increase for services for elderly people; a 16% increase for children's services; and a 14% rise in services for people with physical or sensory disabilities.

Change is right for our services. Waiting lists and waiting lengths for community services have reduced, and that has resulted in earlier discharges from hospital. Moreover, crucially, in order to meet the needs of local communities, trusts are consulting the public on a number of their proposals. Final decisions have yet to be made.

I assure Members that any change in services will be handled carefully and sensitively. I will fully consider the local circumstances of each and every resident. Viable alternatives that provide an equivalent or better standard of care must be put in place. That is only fair. I will ensure that that is done, and that is what I mean by efficiency savings. It is not about cuts but about creating a better and more responsive Health Service.

I could go through, one by one, all the points that Members made, but I am not sure that doing so would be helpful. However, I must say a couple of things. Tommy Gallagher talked about services for elderly people being cut. That is bogus; that is nonsense. They are actually being increased. Services for elderly people, after acute services, take the largest chunk of the health budget, and I am increasing spending in order to meet need.

Jim Shannon talked about Home-Start. In fact, Home-Start had been targeted for cuts, and I, as Minister, stepped in to secure funding for the charity. Indeed, I was at a reception for Home-Start in Hillsborough Castle last week, and I can assure Members that the

welcome that I received was not that for somebody who was cutting Home-Start.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As far as the Appleby Report is concerned, yes, Appleby said that the Health Service here could be more efficient. It has become dramatically more so. To understand that, one must merely consider waiting times at accident and emergency units, for diagnostics, for treatment and for care.

Appleby certainly looked at efficiency, but discount for need must also be considered. Our need is 10% greater. Personal social services' need is about 36% greater.

Taking that into account, the Department examines productivity in order to determine where efficiencies can be made. That is not about cutting funding, as some people seem to believe. The Appleby Report is about making money go further and being more productive. That is happening: the Department has driven down waiting lists; the length of hospital stays has been reduced; and bed utilisation has climbed. It will continue to work hard to make progress in precisely that direction.

As regards performance management, my Department has put in place structures and mechanisms to hold trusts responsible. It has set up the service delivery unit. As I benchmark —

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

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: As I said, I reassure Members that I will ensure that health and social care of excellent quality will be available to all people, in both urban and rural settings, in accessible, modern and fit-for-purpose accommodation. It is a time of immense change for the Health Service. That change must happen if the world-class Health Service that everyone in Northern Ireland deserves is to be delivered.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend my colleagues in the Health Committee who have brought the motion to the Floor of the House and all Members who took part in the debate, particularly those who are members of the Health Committee. I also want to put on record my thanks to the Minister for his attendance and attentiveness during the debate, despite his colleague John McCallister's remark that he has been dragged before the Assembly again for no good reason. Mr McCallister is not in the Chamber at present. I strongly disagree with his comment. The Committee has brought the debate to the House because of concerns that have been relayed to it. That is why we have

brought the matter before the House. We make no apology for asking the Minister to be here.

Ms S Ramsey: I am glad that Mr McCallister has just returned to the Chamber. Perhaps he could tell the House whether he will drag the Minister for Regional Development before the Assembly for no good reason in the next debate.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Several key issues have been raised, particularly about front line jobs. As Members are aware, the Committee's motion calls for front line services to be protected. There has been discussion about what constitutes a front line service. Members agree that services that are provided by doctors and, in particular, nurses are regarded as being at the front line. This morning, Mary Hinds from the Royal College of Nursing said on radio that you cannot get a much more front line service than nursing.

The Committee has been told that almost 2,500 jobs will be lost during a three-year period. Among those jobs, 722 will be nursing posts. I doubt that anyone would argue that the loss of so many nursing posts could not be achieved without major impact on services to patients, whether they are treated in hospital or in the community. The Royal College of Nursing has also said that that will impact on patient care and that patients will suffer. Members who listened to this morning's radio reports will have heard nurses who took time to phone in to radio stations to say that they are under severe pressure, which is the reason for high levels of sickness among nursing staff. That experience must be addressed. Claire McGill said that the Assembly must listen to front line staff. That is exactly why Members are present at today's debate.

Some Members mentioned the high cost of employing agency staff to fill nursing vacancies. The same applies to costs for locum doctors. Greater effort must be made to achieve efficiencies in those areas. The Department must reduce the use of agency staff and ensure that posts are filled by qualified and experienced staff.

Reference has also been made to residential homes. In her opening remarks, the Committee Chairperson mentioned the threat that hangs over residential homes throughout all trust areas. Many Members, including Tommy Gallagher, Alex Easton and Claire McGill, expressed serious concerns about proposed closure of homes in their areas and proposals that have caused widespread concern among local communities.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust, for example, told the Committee that it had received a petition of 4,000 signatures against the closure of just one residential home. Obviously, that number represents more people than simply the families of the home's

residents; the entire community is affected, which is why people took time to sign the petition.

In addition, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, in its evidence to the Committee, reported:

"The Minister has made it clear that unless suitable proposals are identified that are equal to or better than the care that is being provided, he will not support any recommendation that a trust might make about the closure of residential nursing homes."

I welcome the Minister's commitment, and his comments on the matter. However, I am certain that the Committee will want to follow up on what he said today and monitor the situation closely, because we do not want cuts to be made on the ground.

12.00 noon

A number of Members felt the need to raise the issue of home-help provision, which is another major area of concern. The home-help service is an easy target, and it always seems that it is the first service to be reduced when cuts are made. It must be realised that home help is a vital lifeline for people who want to remain in their own home. Reducing the length of time that a home help can spend in a house can, in many cases, render the service almost useless, and some home helps are able to visit for only 15 minutes a few times a day.

Home helps are often forced to provide a service over and above what they are paid for, and, indeed, it would cost the Health Service a great deal more money if home helps stuck to work-to-rule. As the elderly population increases, more and more older people depend on the home-help service to be able to remain in their own home. Therefore, it is vital that that front line service be protected.

Members have made a number of useful comments today, and I will highlight a few of them. Sue Ramsey commended the Health Service's good work. However, she also talked about the need to protect vulnerable young people and children, such as those with mental-health problems. She said that vulnerable people in society should not be targeted for efficiency savings. She also highlighted the concerns about efficiency savings that the unions expressed in Committee.

John McCallister made us aware that he did not vote for the motion in Committee. He referred to the Minister's statement that savings will not result in cuts in front line services. We await the outcome of the consultation exercise and hope that that will be the reality for the public. Carmel Hanna said that there should be smarter working in the Health Service and an emphasis put on upskilling. Her views need to be taken on board.

Claire McGill spoke about how nobody assesses the impact of change. She said that we must listen to the views of the nursing staff who rang the radio stations

this morning. Alex Easton also talked about the Minister's promise that there will be no cuts in front line services. He proposed a number of alternative ideas of how efficiency savings could be met. Thomas Buchanan spoke about the differences between efficiencies and cuts, and he said that there has been a 33% increase in the number of managers in the Health Service over the past 10 years. That concern needs to be assessed during the comprehensive spending review period.

Stephen Farry said that the motion may have come a bit late. I do not think that it is a bit late, because these are real concerns that must be dealt with. The cuts affect the most vulnerable in society. I welcome his statement that he will support the motion, even if his contribution to the debate was a little confusing.

Tommy Gallagher spoke about broad support for the tackling of inefficiencies; how there is no justification for senior managers being given large bonuses; and the concerns about cuts in the Health Service. Those are issues about which we are all genuinely concerned. Samuel Gardiner said that the vulnerable groups that have been mentioned are the Minister's priority. Once again, we await the outcome of the consultation process, as it will indicate the Minister's priorities.

The Minister put on record that meeting efficiency savings is not an easy task, and I agree with that. We all recognise the historical problem of lack of investment in the Health Service.

Dr Farry: That is a current problem.

Ms S Ramsey: We are going to be given an economics lesson now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): As I said, lack of investment is an historical problem, but it is something —

Dr Farry: Will the Deputy Chairperson give way?

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): Yes.

Dr Farry: Will the Member recognise that that is a current problem rather than an historical problem? A decision was taken that left the health budget short of money. Her party and the DUP voted for that last year.

Mrs O'Neill: I am not sure what world the Member lives in if he thinks that there is no historic problem of underinvestment in the Health Service here.

The Minister mentioned the Health Service's good work, and no one denies that we must commend those achievements. However, he was correct when he said that he must live within his budget at this time. The Committee wants to work with the Minister to determine areas of potential savings. However, we do not want

cuts to front line services, and today's motion addresses that issue.

The Minister questioned whether there are better ways to achieve savings. As some Members highlighted, there are several better ways to determine how to achieve efficiency savings. The Minister said that change is not easy. However, change masked as better services — which are, in reality, cuts — is even tougher to accept than change for good reason.

I welcome the Minister's reassurances that he will not make cuts and that services for vulnerable people will not be affected. However, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating. We recognise that all Departments must achieve efficiency savings, and we accept that as the Health Department has the largest budget share, it will be asked to contribute to the lion's share of the savings.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mrs O'Neill): We accept that savings will not be achieved without pain, but we must protect vulnerable people on the front line. We must support our workers on the front line and ensure that front line services for those who are most in need are not cut.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, while recognising that there is a need for efficiency savings within the Health Service, calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in this 60th year of the Health Service, to ensure that these savings do not impact on front line services; and further calls for the budgets for the most vulnerable groups within our society, i.e. children, people with mental illness and older people, to be ring-fenced.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Walking and Cycling to School Initiatives

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

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to invest further in walking and cycling to school initiatives to improve children's health and reduce traffic congestion.

I thank the Assembly's Research and Library Services and Sustrans, the UK's sustainable transport charity, for the useful background information that they have provided. Moreover, I commend Roads Service's Travelwise website, which is packed with useful information for anyone who is interested in sustainable transport issues. I urge teachers and parents who may be listening to or following the debate to take time to view the worthwhile ideas that are contained on the website.

The Safe Routes to Schools scheme of walking and cycling to school initiatives may be insignificant to some people. However, if I claimed to know how to improve children's health significantly, how to avoid significant future cost to the Health Service due to ill health, and how to reduce traffic congestion during peak times, improve journey times and improve the Northern Ireland economy, people might perk up their ears and listen. Safe Routes to Schools can deliver those things and can cause almost immediate improvements. Walking or cycling to and from school is an ideal way to get physical activity at no extra cost to children or families — given the credit crunch, it might even become a necessity for many.

I have introduced such initiatives to local schools in my constituency and am, therefore, aware that the programme is greatly valued and that the supporting documentation is of good quality. The integrated approach of road safety improvements — such as signage, crossing points and cycle lanes — classroom activity and parental involvement has proved a successful model.

Why do we need exercise? We are following American trends. Generally, we eat more than we need and are exercising less and less, the result of which is obesity.

The Department of Health's consultation document 'Fit Futures: Focus on Food Activity and Young People'

highlighted the growing problem of obesity, with significant increases among children. The effect of obesity on an individual's health and well-being, coupled with the reported increase in obesity, has resulted in its being described as a health time bomb.

Obesity is a health iceberg, with a range of underlying related illnesses. It can reduce life expectancy by approximately nine years; it contributes significantly to coronary heart disease, cancer, type-2 diabetes, stroke, and osteoarthritis; cardio-vascular diseases are being identified in young people for the first time, and type-2 diabetes is being diagnosed in significant numbers of children. Another positive effect of exercise is improved emotional and psychological well-being and self-esteem among young people.

Parents think that they are protecting their children by delivering them safely to and from school in a car, but by being wrapped in cotton wool, children are exposed to many deadly diseases because of ill health and lack of exercise. A quarter of young people aged between 11 and 16 in Northern Ireland are classed as obese. Obesity is the most serious — and growing — health concern for children.

Not everyone will be a sports star, but physical activities such as walking and cycling are the most common and versatile forms of exercise in which the vast majority of us can participate. A school located one mile from the home of a child is only a 10-minute brisk walk in the morning. Such a walk would burn about 100 calories, which is about as much as swimming for 10 minutes, playing football for 12 minutes, or doing aerobics for 16 minutes.

As many children, especially in towns and cities, live less than a mile from school, it is entirely reasonable to envisage, at some point, most children walking to school. As a P1 pupil many years ago, I had to walk a mile and a half to and from school. I did not realise it at the time, but I am sure that the fact that I exercised and followed up with sport has helped my health. There is a need to upgrade road crossings and to consider schemes such as walking buses to improve the road safety of children, as there is increased traffic on the roads.

Children are undoubtedly affected by their parents' approach to exercise. Research has shown that children with active parents are 70% more likely to walk to school than those with inactive parents who rely completely on the car. We parents have a responsibility in this area, and we must lead by example by going for walks, cycling, or taking other forms of sporting activity in our spare time.

Mr Ross: Does the Member acknowledge that if parents are worried about supervision and the safety of their child, they could walk along with the walking buses?

That would encourage children and their parents to get involved and would allow parents some supervision.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Member's intervention. If he has read the 'Safe Routes to Schools' document, he will be aware that that is a key feature that is promoted.

There are other benefits, such as traffic reduction. It is estimated that some 20% of cars at the peak morning traffic time of 8.50 am are taking children to school. When the roads are operating at their capacity, even a 10% reduction can result in a significant improvement to road users. That would lead to more efficient journey times for other commuters. Twenty-five per cent of car journeys are for fewer than 3 km, so encouraging one's children to walk or cycle where possible could reduce car usage. Of course, it would benefit their health at the same time. The perception that walking or cycling is unsafe has led many parents to rely on their cars to get their children to school; however, that completely overlooks the health risks associated with lack of exercise.

12.15 pm

The further development of Safe Routes to Schools and encouraging walking and cycling can result in environmental benefits. Whether the Minister of the Environment likes it or not, oil reserves are dwindling, CO2 levels are increasing and the associated climate change is occurring. We should be trying to conserve energy and to protect the planet. In these days of more stringent economic situations, we should also conserve funds and avoid spending additional money on cars.

Important environmental benefits can also be gained from a reduction in the use of cars for journeys to school. If more children walked or cycled to school, the roads would be clearer, which would create a safer and more pleasant atmosphere for pedestrians who already walk to school, and would encourage more people to walk. The congestion at school gates would be reduced, which would result in less exhaust pollution and thereby improve air quality. Children who are driven to school are not protected from car fumes; it has been found that in heavily congested areas, car passengers can be exposed to pollution levels that are two or three times higher than those experienced by pedestrians.

Sustrans recently undertook a project involving rural schools in Northern Ireland, in which it showed that it was possible to produce benefits for the pupils of those schools. Sustrans claims that the number of people in Northern Ireland who cycle to school has increased by 46% and the number of people who walk to school has increased by 61%, thereby saving some 250 tons of CO2. That equates to an additional 84,000 walking and cycling journeys in a year, showing that the benefits of cycling and walking can accumulate significantly.

Sustrans has calculated that if the same project was undertaken across Northern Ireland, it could lead to 26 million fewer car journeys a year. Significant differences could be made if such a project were to be undertaken. In his review of the project, Dr Michael McBride, the Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, lauded the programme and said that it:

"can contribute to the improvement of the health and well being of the people of Northern Ireland."

That is significant.

By the end of the project, 33% of pupils from the schools involved were walking to school, compared with 20% before; 49% of children were being driven to school, compared with 64% before the project began. Some 79% of headmasters of the schools involved in the project rated it as very good or excellent. It is clear that progress is being made.

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

Mr Beggs: I ask Members to support the motion. It requires cross-departmental activity and support from all Departments.

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

"and in the interim, given the current state of our roads, especially in rural areas, further calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school."

I thank Mr Beggs, Mr Cobain and Mr McCallister for tabling the motion. We wish to amend it in order to take account of the realities of an imperfect world, in which it is increasingly difficult to initiate the ideals that have just been expressed by Mr Beggs.

Over the years, the practice of children walking or cycling to school has diminished as the dangers have increased. Although that is true of urban and rural areas, children in rural areas often have to walk unreasonable distances in conditions that are simply unacceptable and in urgent need of revision. The assisted-transport scheme, as it is called these days, has changed little from its inception, and has taken no account of changing circumstances. Stubbornly, transport officers insist on sticking to their criteria for no other reason than consistency.

Members will know that children who live fewer than two miles from their local primary school cannot avail themselves of free transport. There are few Members who are not aware of families who fail the free transport test by a few metres. When it comes to secondary schools, the limit is raised to three miles, and many families who live 2.9 miles away from a school are put under enormous financial pressure to pay bus fares. Indeed, children who live in the same housing estate are treated differently because of the measurement rule. Those who live at the end of an

estate may qualify, while those who live nearest the entrance and the bus stop do not. That applies in Ballykelly, and is but one example.

Children from the same families, but who attend different schools in the same town, might be treated differently if one of those schools is situated beyond the qualifying distance and the other is not. That results in financial hardship for families on low incomes, particularly those who have two or more children at school.

The alternative, of course, is to walk to school, but no parents in their right mind would allow children to take Shanks's mare, considering the road conditions and the volume of traffic, which is increasing day and daily. Sadly, in a car-orientated world, there has been little planning for walkers or cyclists. In rural areas in particular, cycle lanes are mostly a pipe dream, and footpaths, where they exist, have been allowed to deteriorate over the years.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that cycle lanes, where they exist, are perhaps not used as much they could be?

Mr Dallat: I could not agree more, and more must be done to encourage their use.

We cannot, however, blame everything on the roads. Unfortunately, in too many cases, motorists have struck young pedestrians, killing or injuring them, because they lack the most basic respect for walkers or cyclists. It is sad that there is also the risk of evil people lurking about, waiting to endanger children. These days, that is a risk that parents simply will not take. In the short term, there is little likelihood that rural children will be able to focus on the benefits of a healthier lifestyle, a reduction in obesity and all the other benefits that come from walking or cycling to school, and that is regrettable.

The walk or cycle to school was one of the greatest joys of my school days many years ago. That was in the days when only a few people in my area owned a car, and yet they frequently stopped to offer a lift. However, when I did not get a lift, I had the time to stop and stare, to explore and discover the joys of nature, and to be inquisitive and fascinated by my surroundings. In contrast, today's rural children do not have that choice; it is simply too dangerous. The only alternative is for them to travel either by private car or public transport.

Unfortunately, the public school transport system has not adapted in the way that it should have. Cost appears to be the main reason why the old two-mile rule for primary schools and the three-mile rule for post-primary schools are stuck to rigidly. Those rules are at their daftest in a situation in which school buses with empty seats swish past the homes of children who happen to live marginally inside the two- or three-mile limit.

The current school transport policy is hopelessly out of date, unfit for purpose and in need of urgent review. It discriminates against poor families who cannot afford to pay bus fares, which runs contrary to the notion that all children must be treated equally in education. The children of families who simply cannot afford to pay school transport costs are exposed to the risk of death or serious injury — the statistics are there for all to see. Children, particularly younger ones, are highly vulnerable. The greatest risk to them occurs in the mornings and afternoons, which, unsurprisingly, happens to be when children are either arriving at or going home from school.

The risk arises —

Mr Shannon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: I have only a couple of minutes left, but OK.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for giving way, and I support his point. Does he agree that it is ludicrous that half-empty buses pass the homes of pupils who live two miles from a school? It seems logical to me, and probably to every Member in the Chamber, that buses should collect those children on their way past.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Member for his contribution. Of course, he is absolutely right — it is crazy that school buses with empty seats pass the homes of those children.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. Can the Member clarify whether he is encouraging children to walk and cycle to school or encouraging that more money be spent on more buses? Can he also clarify his point about the three-mile rule?

Mr Dallat: I am more than delighted to clarify that point. I fully support the motion. As a former teacher, I was very much engaged in road safety and encouraging children to cycle to school. As the Member is also from a rural constituency, I am more than surprised that he is not totally at ease with my amendment as it highlights the particular difficulties of children in rural areas who cannot walk or cycle to school because of the conditions that exist. Nevertheless, perhaps the Member's position will change as we proceed.

I am glad that the motion is being debated. I ask that all parties support our amendment, because it seeks to highlight the injustices in the free-transport scheme. That scheme needs to be challenged because it fails to recognise the special needs of rural children who are so disadvantaged in vital aspects of their education.

As this Assembly beds down, let us hope that there will be a recognition that much needs to be done to ensure that our schoolchildren have the right to walk or cycle to school in safety. It must be emphasised that a great deal could be done in our towns and villages to improve crossing points and the control of traffic. I am

glad that the Minister for Regional Development has attended the debate. A great deal has been done through traffic-calming measures, which is welcome. However, if we were to follow the examples of other European countries, there is a great deal more that we could do, and we could begin that work right now.

In conclusion, we fully support the motion. We are pleased that the Ulster Unionist Party has accepted the amendment, because it presents the overall reality of children who travel to school.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I commend the Members for their vivid memories of their primary school days.

Mr Wells: At the outset, I clarify that we will support the motion and the amendment. However, the issue that Mr Dallat has raised is of such importance that it would have warranted a separate motion in its own right. As constituency representatives, one of the biggest issues in our postbags last September was that of the cut-off points for the three-mile and two-mile rules. That issue causes a great deal of hurt and offence to rural dwellers. At a later stage, I urge Mr Dallat to propose that issue as a separate motion so that the Assembly can debate it in isolation, rather than tagging the issue onto another motion.

The Speaker has been very generous in allowing a somewhat tangential amendment to the main motion to be debated. The only common word between the motion and the amendment is “walking”, but well done to the Member. He managed to use the various tricks and trades — I am not sure whether of a Back-Bencher or Front-Bencher — to achieve his goal.

In Northern Ireland, 25% of all rush-hour traffic is generated by the school run. One only has to drive past any large school complex to see the utter chaos that the school run causes — not just in the immediate vicinity of the school, but the entire town centre or rural area, depending on where the school is. We seem to be in a state of mind in which Jonny is not safe unless he is driven from his front door to the very front door of the school in a Range Rover — at least — with airbags, safety belts and anti-lock brakes. It may have been before the Boer War when I went to school, but I walked to school. It was a long time ago, but there was never any thought of my brothers, my sister and I being driven to school, particularly to primary school. Nowadays, however, attitudes have changed.

We must reduce our global emissions. Let us talk about the reality of the situation — climate change is man-made. We, as a species, are destroying our planet through the production of carbon emissions and methane. We, as an Assembly, must do everything that we can to reduce those emissions. If the school run leads to 25% of the rush-hour emissions, we must try to reduce that dramatically.

In addition, we must instil in our children an appreciation that private transport is not always the best way to get to and from a facility that one might wish to use. Children must be encouraged to use public transport or, if possible, to cycle or walk.

12.30 pm

Many Members benefited from attending an interesting presentation by Sustrans in Parliament Buildings; it was educational to discover what that organisation is doing. Sustrans has demonstrated that cycling and walking can be encouraged and can benefit the community, pupils and the environment. Although its pilot scheme is being implemented in schools throughout Northern Ireland, the benefits that it will produce are small when compared to the overall problem. Nevertheless, I commend Sustrans's good work to Members, and I encourage them to read up on and investigate it.

Mr Shannon: As the Member rightly said, the Sustrans scheme is wonderful, and it has enabled children in my constituency to cycle to school. Nevertheless, given that a funding review of Sustrans is imminent — about which the Minister for Regional Development might wish to respond — does the Member agree that its funding should be renewed, so that its good work can continue?

Mr Wells: I hope that the motion will provide the Minister with a platform from which to announce continued funding for the Sustrans initiative. I noticed that he and I attended the same briefing, and a very pleasant young lady took him aside to give him an in-depth briefing about the work of Sustrans. Indeed, there was quite a lot of interest when he walked into the room, so I hope that he was persuaded by the young lady and that he will announce increased funding.

The Member for East Londonderry John Dallat managed to slip in the amendment, which the Democratic Unionist Party will support. In areas of traffic congestion and high carbon emissions, it is nonsense for half-empty buses to drive past bus stops, where children cannot get on because they are a few hundred yards on the wrong side of a boundary, particularly when the bus route that has been chosen, which might be the shortest way to a school, is the most difficult for pedestrians or cyclists to use. Therefore, there is much merit in the Member's suggestion.

It is particularly nonsensical that pupils are not even allowed to pay to use buses. Consequently, 10 children who are standing at a bus stop might be unable to pay to get on a 40-seat bus with only 10 children on it. That is nonsense. We need a joined-up approach to public transport to schools in Northern Ireland. However, as I said, Mr Dallat should consider tabling a full-blooded motion on this important subject, because I

believe that at least 20 or 30 MLAs would wish to contribute to such a debate.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. Sinn Féin does not have an issue with the amendment; it is attempting to encourage children to walk or cycle to school.

Many Members will remember routinely walking to school, and looking around the Chamber, I am sure that many of them did so in short trousers. Safety concerns and children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles have resulted in a dramatic decline in the number of children who walk or cycle to school, and the corresponding rise in the numbers of overweight and obese children and those who suffer from asthma is notable.

I wish to place on the record my thanks for the information supplied by the Assembly's Research and Library Services. As far back as 1969, reports indicated that approximately 50% of children walked to school. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case. Access to vehicles has significantly increased road traffic. Furthermore, the amount of equipment — including school bags, hurling and hockey sticks, files, PE gear, and even laptops — that post-primary pupils must now carry means that walking or riding a bike to school is inappropriate, so that matter must be considered.

Mr Ross — who has left the Chamber — spoke about parents walking to school with their children. That is OK; however, one must bear in mind that parents are under greater pressure nowadays; they must work longer hours, and many of them simply do not have the time to walk to school with their children. We must consider that also.

More policies on family-friendly working would be of benefit; after all, the health benefits of walking will be felt by adults and children. Whether at school or at home, children should be encouraged to walk or cycle, and, possibly, be rewarded for doing so.

It has been said that 20% of the early morning traffic in urban areas comprises vehicles that are transporting children to school. Early morning congestion around schools on rural roads can bring traffic to a standstill, and parent/vehicle behaviour is a significant contributor to the problem. In the mornings, one can see cars parked two or three abreast at schools, and the traffic is unable to get through. That may act as a speed deterrent, but it is not something that we would advocate, and it must be addressed.

The environmental impact of the school run should not be underestimated. The majority of those journeys are short, and cars with cold engines consume more fuel. Furthermore, cars produce higher levels of pollution at the start of their journeys because they have to travel up to five kilometres before catalytic converters become effective. Therefore, walking or cycling short distances

will reduce the amount of CO2 emissions significantly and will contribute to the Assembly's commitment to reduce CO2 emissions by 2050.

Some excellent work has been undertaken by Ministers in this area. For instance, the Department for Regional Development has linked with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the Rural Safe Routes to Schools initiative, which seeks to provide footpaths and cycle lanes close to schools. Such facilities are available at St Mary's Primary School at Derrytrasna, and at St Jarlath's Primary School in Blackwatertown — in my constituency of Newry and Armagh — the launch of which I had the privilege of attending a few months ago.

The Department of Education supports the Travelwise Safe Routes to Schools initiative. The Department of the Environment has also made a contribution through its road safety programme. Recently, Roads Service set out guidance for setting local speed limits in the North, which is at public consultation stage. That guidance contains proposals for reducing speed limits around schools at peak times. Those Departments are working collectively on programmes, and that is to be commended.

I urge that an assessment of routes at local level is carried out to identify measures that will allow more children to walk or cycle to school. Such measures will include lighting, signage, footpaths, cycle lanes and changes to road layouts. That will require significant capital investment in roads infrastructure to ensure that safe routes exist. For that, Roads Service will require additional funding, and I join other Members in urging the Executive to seek to provide that funding. I am keen to hear other Members' ideas on how that money will be found. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.37 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Lunn: I support the motion, which is appropriate and timely, given current circumstances. The Alliance Party will also be supporting the SDLP amendment, although I will talk a bit more about that shortly.

There is ample evidence of the increase in obesity in our children and the resultant health problems that they experience. No one would claim that simply being able to walk or cycle to school would solve those problems, but it would certainly be a good start. I imagine that, among parents, the main objection to walking or cycling initiatives would be based on road-safety issues.

Certainly, there are concerns over traffic density and speed, but those concerns should not deter the appropriate Departments from taking initiatives to encourage healthy exercise, as well as to reduce traffic congestion, particularly outside schools. As another Member said earlier, the area just outside a school is one of the most dangerous places to be. Parents who are setting down or picking up their children usually ignore no-parking areas, while their four-wheel-drive jeeps belch exhaust fumes.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People issued a briefing on the subject of road safety, which stated:

“Road safety education for children and young people must be an essential part of any initiative to increase walking and cycling to school.”

It also found that road safety is an issue of significant concern to children in Northern Ireland.

The Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland has been in existence for 45 years, and has a long and proud record of promoting various initiatives aimed at children, including general road-safety-awareness training, cycling proficiency testing and a recent initiative that involved walking groups of children to school under supervision. It has 18 local committees that all have a long track record of trying to educate young people on road-safety issues. It is a vital service; in fact, it is absolutely basic if we are to encourage children to walk and cycle to school.

I notice that the Minister of the Environment is now in the Chamber. The importance of the Road Safety Council makes his pending decision to withdraw its funding slightly surreal, if he does not mind my saying so. It is a decision that will undoubtedly result in the demise of several, if not all, of the local committees.

If children are to walk to school, properly positioned controlled crossings are essential. However, education boards are withdrawing manned crossing personnel, and requests for crossings, speed-limit zones or even signage outside schools are being refused regularly for

reasons that are only clear to the various Departments involved; that is, the Department of Education and the Department for Regional Development. Therefore, so far, I have criticised the Minister of the Environment, the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Education.

Mr S Wilson: I thank the Member for giving prior warning that he was going to lambaste me on the question of the Road Safety Council during the debate. Does the Member accept that the Department of the Environment values the work that the local committees do? Does he accept also that more money should be available for the delivery of services by the Road Safety Council at a local level and, I hope, by other bodies in areas where there are no Road Safety Council committees, so that the message of road safety can be conveyed, and so that we will see more children cycling and walking to school as a result?

Mr Lunn: I do not accept that from the Minister. His rationale for completely cutting out the Road Safety Council's core funding simply does not make sense. Fair enough, he is cutting the cost, but all that he is doing is transferring all the work on to unpaid volunteers at local level — that simply will not work. Furthermore, the central structure that the Road Safety Council provides will not be there, and it will be impossible, certainly in the short term, for local committees to liaise constructively to do some of the tasks that the Road Safety Council currently manages. However, I do not wish to devote my whole speech to the Road Safety Council.

The reason that I criticised all three Departments — I have not included the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for reasons of time — is to emphasise that the issue is cross-cutting. The motion is rightly directed at the Executive, and I hope that the Executive will take note of it and take action on the matter.

Members of the Alliance Party will support the SDLP amendment, although we, in common with other Members who have spoken, have reservations about how it relates to the motion. The amendment is, nonetheless, worthy; I, and many other Members, have received many complaints about the inconsistencies in the statutory walking distances to school. Therefore, I congratulate Mr Dallat and his colleagues on their initiative and ingenuity in having the amendment accepted.

As every other Member reminisced about their school days, I will do the same.

Mr S Wilson: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lunn: The Minister of the Environment mentioned 1963, and I remember it well. Every day, I cycled from Finaghy to Belfast Royal Academy. For those Members who are not familiar with Belfast, my

route included the main Lisburn Road, Sandy Row, the Boyne Bridge, Durham Street, Northumberland Street, Agnes Street, the lower Crumlin Road, the Oldpark Road, Manor Street and the Cliftonville Road. That would be some route nowadays, but it was safe then. I would love children to be able to cycle safely to school again; it would be therapeutic and beneficial exercise. The Alliance Party supports the motion and the amendment.

Mr Bresland: It is important to note that funding of the walking and cycling initiatives would be beneficial on two levels: it would start to combat the rise in childhood obesity, and it will benefit the environment. Obesity in the United Kingdom is approaching an unmanageable level, particularly among the younger generations. The best ways to combat the rise in obesity are by teaching sensible eating habits and ensuring that children exercise regularly.

Walking and cycling are both good methods of exercise, and, if the Executive were to fund initiatives through which children could take such exercise daily, it would be a major move towards combating obesity in children. By making it safe for children to walk and cycle to school, and creating a way in which they can regard it as fun, children and their parents will choose to travel that way. Many of them would be in favour of walking or cycling rather than taking a bus, but the facilities do not exist in some situations, and children, therefore, must travel to school in buses or private vehicles. The environment would also benefit from a reduction in the number of schoolchildren using buses or private vehicles. Inevitably, that would reduce the number of vehicles required for school runs, and, as a direct result, the number of pollutants produced would decrease because less fuel would be needed.

Northern Ireland produces more than its fair share of emissions, and a reduction is vital in securing a liveable environment for future generations. A reduction in the number and frequency of buses would also ease the morning traffic and lead to fewer instances of gridlock and the freer movement of traffic during peak travel times. A reduction in traffic congestion would, as well as lowering the amount of fuels used by buses and private vehicles, further reduce fuel emissions. There is no reason that children should not be allowed to walk or cycle to school safely. The benefits of the initiatives speak for themselves. I support the motion.

Mr W Clarke: A LeasCheann Comhairle, I support the motion and the amendment. As a number of Members said, the amendment deserves to be debated separately as a single-issue motion at a later date, and I am sure that the proposer of the amendment will agree to arrange that.

Encouraging children to walk or cycle to school brings huge benefits to children, parents, families and society. It is not only a question of improving physical health; it is also an opportunity to nourish a healthy mind and for families to build relationships.

Obviously, primary-school children would be supervised when walking to school. Given the high density of traffic in urban areas, and the lack of footpath provision and lighting in rural areas, it is essential that we provide adequate training and, where possible, adequate equipment such as high-visibility clothing.

It is widely recognised that rural areas in particular have inadequate road infrastructure with poor pedestrian provision. Existing schemes, promoted by various Departments, are in place, including the walking bus, which encourages more children to walk to school accompanied by adults and, in doing so, traffic congestion outside schools would be reduced. The Minister was involved in the promotion of that initiative.

Mr S Wilson: The Member has raised an important point about the difficulties that young people face in walking from school, or even from the bus to their homes, especially in rural areas. Does he accept the Western Education and Library Board's proposition that uniforms should incorporate visibility strips and that they should be manufactured with those strips, is a good idea, and that the Minister of Education should take that matter up with uniform manufacturers?

Mr W Clarke: Certainly, I agree with anything that promotes more safety for our young people.

Allowing children to make their own way to school would help to make them more confident and independent, which will be especially important in the transition from primary to secondary school. The school journey is an ideal opportunity for children to learn road-safety awareness and other life skills. For many children, cycling is simply more fun and is more sociable than going to school by car, and they love that feeling of freedom.

A more active lifestyle now, carried on into adulthood, will greatly improve a child's chance of living a long and healthy life. Physical inactivity is a far greater cause of heart disease than smoking, yet we take it much less seriously. Daily exercise has many immediate benefits, including improved bone strength, muscle tone and healthier joints.

The mode of travel chosen for a child's journey to school is widely recognised as having an impact not only on his or her safety, but on a child's health and personal development, and, of course, the environment. Schools must be empowered to develop school travel plans, and safer routes to school programmes are essential. Together, we can make a difference to the

journey that children make to and from school by making it safer, healthier, sustainable and more interesting.

Jim Wells stated earlier that Sustrans has been working with 18 schools in the North of Ireland as part of the new Safe Routes to Schools project, which aims to achieve a 10% reduction in car journeys in participating schools and to increase levels of walking and cycling. The project is worth £1.3 million, which was delivered mainly through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. It has been widely recognised as a success, and we need, as the motion outlines, Executive buy-in to such initiatives and to extend them.

The Rural Safe Routes to Schools initiative is part of the regional transportation strategy, which aims to provide a safe, modern and sustainable transportation network for the North of Ireland. We must tackle the problems created by the school run by raising awareness of congestion, road safety, health and the environment, and we can achieve that by all Departments working closely together, as the matter crosses all Departments. It is achievable. I thank the Minister for Regional Development for attending today. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Robinson: The health benefits of walking or cycling to school for rural children may well be underrated. Although some people may argue that the congestion experienced around schools in the mornings and afternoons may make some parents reluctant to allow their children to walk or cycle to school, if more children walked or cycled to school, the congestion problems could be eased. I appreciate that, although supporting the motion, it is worthwhile remembering that the younger children especially will need to be supervised. None of us would advocate young children travelling to school unaccompanied, especially in rural areas. That, of course, is where parents may decide to benefit from walking or cycling to school — weather permitting.

I am sure that every Member would agree that children would benefit from walking or cycling to school. That exercise would help to keep children fit and healthy, although such activity seems to be becoming more unusual nowadays.

2.15 pm

Surely it is good for the Assembly to take the lead in promoting the advantages of young people being healthier. In the long term, there may well be a reduction in the numbers of people with respiratory and heart problems. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety may even find some relief in his budget in the years to come. Moreover, walking and cycling to school will help to teach our children about the importance of road safety. Ultimately, that could lead to the motoring public becoming more safety conscious

in years to come, although I am in no way suggesting that that should be the sole approach to road safety.

There would also be environmental benefits because pollution levels would fall. If fewer cars take part in the school run, the air will be more pleasant to breathe. In addition, ever more children and parents would experience the benefits of walking or cycling. We cannot underestimate the importance of leading by example for older pupils and peer groups — although the bad examples are usually discussed more often than the positive ones.

Although I support the motion, as amended, I am also aware that there will be a cost attached to promoting those schemes. The value-for-money criteria must be applied to schemes supported by the Assembly to ensure maximum impact and results. I am therefore pleased to support the motion, as amended, and I hope that it will receive the support of all Members.

Mr McCallister: I am at an age when I can clearly remember my school days. It was much more hazardous for me to walk to school than it was for the likes of Mr Lunn, because the car had been invented by the time I was at school.

Serious points have been raised in a useful debate that focused not only on health and well-being, but on the polluting effects of the school run. During his opening remarks, my colleague Mr Beggs clearly demonstrated the impact that the school run has had on our roads network and our CO2 emissions targets — given that some 25% of journeys are less than 3 km, or 2 miles approximately. Those journeys have a serious impact on the roads network. Members will be aware of the difference between the journey to Stormont during the school term and the journey during the summer, when the schools are on holiday. The effects of the pollution are quite evident.

I will focus on the impact that initiatives that promote walking and cycling to school have on people's health. Many health debates have been held in the Chamber, and we cannot overemphasise the contribution that such initiatives can make to people's health and well-being. It is alarming to look at the figures that show the rise in obesity and the state of people's health. It is particularly alarming to note that obesity affects children at an increasingly young age.

How do we address that problem, and what are the consequences if we do not? One obvious consequence is that people will develop conditions such as diabetes, which have a huge personal cost for the sufferer. Diabetes UK Northern Ireland says that people with diabetes are more likely to have heart attacks and strokes and to develop kidney failure, gangrene and foot ulcers, which can lead to amputation. The cost of addressing those problems amounts to 10% of the

health budget, or around £400 million a year. Thus, the cost to the individual and the economy is huge.

Some of my colleagues have spoken about the impact of the Safer Routes to School programme, and how it encourages people to get out of their cars and walk to schools. It encourages family involvement and promotes social inclusion by getting people to start walking. Once that activity is built into a family's routine, it becomes part of their exercise regime. The family does not have to set time aside for exercise — and, as we know, people often complain that they do not have time to exercise. Those are the types of policies that we should develop.

Although the Minister for Regional Development has responsibility for this matter, I accept that a cross-departmental strategy is needed, and a joined-up approach will be needed to deliver on it. Footpaths and lighting must be provided, and roads must be made safe for pedestrians. Parents must feel secure in the knowledge that their kids can get to school safely when they are old enough to walk to school unaccompanied.

It is important that such a strategy is implemented. In his opening remarks, Mr Beggs mentioned the commendable Sustrans scheme that was piloted in certain schools.

Footpaths and lighting are very important factors. As someone who drives and walks regularly, I believe that we must also do much more to promote high-visibility jackets. Although he was not speaking in his ministerial capacity, Mr Sammy Wilson made a valid point about making adjustments to school uniforms. High-visibility clothing is super, but not enough children and young people want to wear it. By their very nature, school uniforms tend to be dark in colour, which is the worst of all worlds for young people out walking at night. The suggestion to incorporate high-visibility clothing into school uniforms is sensible.

I appreciate the support that the motion has received from all sides of the House. I support the motion and the SDLP amendment.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Members who tabled the motion, which I support with the amendment.

There is a fundamental question of priority at the heart of this discussion — will we continue to develop as though the car is king, or will we put people and communities first? Standing at the roadside in the morning, it seems utter madness that eight out of every 10 cars contain only their driver. Although in many cases people have legitimate reasons for travelling like that, in many others the reasons are about comfort rather than necessity. Given the concerns about global warming, the long-term supply of fuel, congestion, pollution and road safety, using a ton of metal, powered by fossil fuels, to move one human being

from one point to another does not seem sensible. Better alternatives should be encouraged.

There is no doubt that cars can damage communities. Anyone who has walked children to school along a busy main road will know that the experience can be dangerous and unpleasant. Although 30 mph or 40 mph does not feel fast to someone in an air-conditioned car, it does to the parents of children who are just a couple of feet away on the footpath. Parents know that a loss of concentration for just a second is all that it takes for a child to fall or step off the kerb and for tragedy to occur.

As parents, what do we do to combat that? We put our children in our cars and drive them to school, because it is safer, more pleasant and more comfortable. Therefore, we become part of the problem. With the Executive, Members must take a number of actions to become part of the solution so that parents and children are allowed the reasonable, safe and healthy choice of walking or cycling to school.

We must ensure that routes to schools are safe. It is insane that footpaths are always built beside roads — why is that? Why are footpaths not routed away from the danger, noise and pollution of our roads? In many cities in Britain, networks of footpaths and cycle paths are built away from main roads. We should ensure that our towns and cities are developed in that way.

We must reduce speed, generally. From experience elsewhere, we know that a reduction in speed limits dramatically reduces the frequency and impact of accidents. That is why the SDLP has been asking the Minister for Regional Development to reduce speed limits in housing estates to 20 mph. The Minister will acknowledge that I have raised that issue with him on several occasions during Question Time. If residents in estates were asked for their opinion on speed limits, I am confident that a clear majority would support a reduction in speed limits. Scientific evidence could probably be used to show that such a reduction would not impact on journey times, because driving in residential areas is stop-start anyway. We know that traffic calming is cost effective compared to the cost of an accident.

People in residential areas have a right to expect discipline from drivers. I ask the Minister, as I have done before, to pilot reduced speed limits in estates across Northern Ireland. Estates that adopt a lower speed limit will take a great step towards making those areas better places in which children and families can live and play safely.

There is no practical reason why traffic should not be slowed at specific times outside school gates to allow children to arrive and leave safely. Such areas traditionally have high levels of congestion, and that is a chicken-and-egg situation: the greater the danger from traffic, the greater the number of people who will

drive their children to school because of that danger. If more people were able to walk or cycle to school with their children, the easier traffic would flow in the vicinity of schools.

We need to encourage the use of public transport generally in order to remove traffic from our roads. If we expect children to walk or cycle to school, why do we not expect the same of workers? That means that public transport, carpooling, and better access by foot and cycle must be made a higher priority. Public transport must be cheaper, faster and more comfortable than using a private car, otherwise people will continue to use their own cars. The encouragement of public transport, cycling and walking is not just an issue for schoolchildren; it should be an issue for us all. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr S Wilson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I appreciate that you have found a place in the debate for my contribution.

At this stage in the debate, there is danger of repetition because Members have raised a whole range of issues. However, I would like to dwell, for a moment or two, on some issues that have not been fully explored.

I agree with all the points that Members have made about the benefits that would accrue from greater numbers of children walking and cycling to school, including: greater road awareness; health benefits; a decrease in road congestion; a reduction in car traffic on roads at peak times; and a saving in transport expenditure — as a lot of new road-building would be rendered unnecessary.

Mr P Ramsey: Carbon emissions?

Mr S Wilson: The Member reminds me that a reduction in carbon emissions would also result. That is true, and I leave him to judge the impact of that.

The first factor that I want to consider is the impact on planning policy. Difficulty arises where there is an existing infrastructure and where changes to it can only be marginal or minimal. Sometimes, opportunities arise: the Sustrans Safe Routes to Schools concept has shown that changes can be made to road layouts on routes to school that will encourage people to walk and cycle.

Over the next few years, huge opportunities will arise as planning policies allow for new housing developments, the infrastructure within them and the schools that will be provided as a part of that. When we plan communities, we must try to integrate all those aspects.

Mr Ramsey mentioned moving footpaths away from the edges of roads. However, that brings pluses and minuses — there are no easy answers. Sometimes, because a footpath is beside a road, there is greater surveillance, and people consider it safer for

youngsters to walk along such a footpath than along a secluded one. Therefore, in planning, we must look carefully at the best ways of providing safe routes that people can use.

Another factor is that there will be a massive increase in the building of new schools. Members should point out to the Department of Education that, when formulating the handbook on school design, it should include automatic provision for the stacking and securing of bikes. Youngsters should also have lockers, so that they can change if they get wet while cycling to school, rather than stay in a wet school uniform for the rest of the day — an experience that can put youngsters off walking or cycling.

As we change school infrastructures and build new schools, there is an opportunity to include such provisions. Surprisingly, a lot of the new schools do not automatically have that provision — head teachers very often have to fight for that particular aspect.

2.30 pm

The second issue is the training of children. The Road Safety Council and its committees have been mentioned. One of the areas being pushed in schools is cycling proficiency, and the use of road safety officers to deliver that training. I would like to see far greater use of on-road training for cycling proficiency tests, although I accept that there is some parental opposition to that. Although one can train youngsters in the safety of a playground, making them face the hazards of a real road can help them to understand the dangers. I have observed many schemes in which children are trained to that standard, and it has a huge impact.

Ultimately, we have to change parental views. Increasingly, and especially with primary-school youngsters, there is a greater desire among parents to bring their children to school in cars. As a result, children do not have road awareness and do not get into the habit of being road aware. Perhaps we need to start with the young, and give parents the confidence to send their children to school on foot or by bike.

Ms Purvis: No doubt, as has been said, the debate has inspired some Members to reflect on their own childhood and to reminisce about walking barefoot 10 miles uphill to school and back in the snow. We may look back on our own youth with nostalgia — the meandering walks with friends to and from school and bike rides, for those who had bikes.

Walking and bike-riding seem to be natural things for children to do; so why do we need a Government initiative to promote them? Many Members have outlined the reasons why — in particular, because there are more cars on the road. That means more traffic, more congestion and more carbon emissions. For the benefit of the Minister of the Environment, those carbon emissions are coming from cars, not from the sun.

More cars also mean that children who go to school by bike and on foot face more dangerous situations.

Mr Ramsey mentioned the vicious cycle that is created when parents feel that their children are not safe when out walking and, therefore, take them to school in cars. Children from deprived areas are five times more likely to be killed, as pedestrians, than those from well-off areas, despite the fact that they are more likely to come from areas where there are low levels of car ownership. That suggests that they have fewer cars to deal with as they walk through their own neighbourhoods. However, they often walk greater distances to school, and through areas with poorer infrastructure and narrower footpaths, which may be blocked by parked cars, forcing the children to walk on narrow roads.

It is paramount, therefore, that the initiative is taken to support more children to walk and cycle to school and to create the infrastructure that will allow them to do so in as safe a manner as is possible.

As regards safe, healthy and sustainable travel, I encourage the Minister for Regional Development to maintain the Comber Greenway in its current form. It provides a tranquil and safe route for commuters of all ages. I support the motion and the amendment.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment for the opportunity to speak on the topic. I assure Mr McCallister that I have no issue about being dragged in front of the Assembly to answer on these matters, I consider it to be part of my responsibility.

The issue cuts across a number of Departments, but I will attempt to answer the points raised. I will ask officials to study the Hansard report of the debate and to respond in writing to Members who have raised specific points that I do not address.

The motion focuses attention on the link between walking and cycling to school, and the impact that those activities can have on children's health and on traffic congestion. The benefits of walking and cycling to school, as outlined by many Members, are widely acknowledged. They include improving health and fitness, and making a contribution to reducing traffic congestion and harmful CO₂ emissions. I agree with Mr Wells that the view on emissions is perhaps not shared by everyone on that side of the House. Nonetheless, it is an important factor in the debate.

Improving the independence of young people when travelling to and from school is another important factor. I assure the House that all those issues are of concern to the Executive and to me. As the Minister with responsibility for promoting sustainable travel, I

am keen to address the issues at a strategic and operational level.

In 2001, my Department's regional development strategy recognised the importance of the need to change travel culture and to contribute to healthier lifestyles. In particular, it recognised the need to revive the healthy habit, among people of all ages, of walking and cycling on short journeys. Since then, the regional transportation strategy, and the subsequent transport plans that support it, have included measures to support and promote walking and cycling. In addition, as mentioned by the Minister of the Environment and by Pat Ramsey, all planning policy introduced after the adoption of the regional development strategy makes walking and cycling an integral part of the planning process for new development.

In 2004, Roads Service launched the Travelwise initiative to raise public awareness of sustainable travel options and to demonstrate to businesses, commuters and schools that they can play a part in meeting the challenge of improving lifestyles. Since 2004, the Travelwise Safer Routes to School team has been tackling the issue of the school run through promoting more walking and cycling, greater use of public transport, and car sharing. My Department has already made a significant difference through the Safer Routes to School initiative and since its introduction, we have worked with 151 schools, involving more than 45,000 pupils and their parents, and have committed more than £2.3 million to that initiative. Last year, during walk-to-school week, 200 schools registered for events, and more than 41,000 pupils and their parents took part. In 2007-08, we carried out a survey to evaluate the Safer Routes to School scheme in 2007-08, and 50% of the schools that took part said that they had observed more children walking to and from school.

As many Members said, road safety is a priority for Roads Service, and the Department has always been conscious of the need to manage traffic speed in the vicinity of schools. Roads Service continues to roll out a programme of signs and road lining, and in certain cases, reduced speed limits have been provided at schools to make motorists aware of the presence of children. As part of that programme, Roads Service has initiated a trial of part-time speed limits at two schools near Coleraine and Ballymoney. The 20 mph speed limit is only in force at the start and finish of the school day, which are the periods of highest risk to children walking or cycling to and from school. Early indications are that those pilot schemes have been successful in reducing speed, and there has been a broad welcome from the schools and communities involved.

The concept of 20 mph speed limits at schools forms part of a wider consultation document on the setting of speed limits generally, which was launched by my Department in January. I hope that Members

will take the time to study that comprehensive document and to submit their comments in order to help formulate the final policy. Pat Ramsey mentioned communication that he has had with me on that issue, and this is an opportunity for him, and other interested parties, to submit their views.

As Members said, improving children's health and reducing traffic congestion is relevant to the work of several Departments; it is essential, therefore, that there is a coherent interdepartmental approach to those issues. To tackle obesity, the Department of Health established the fit futures task force, whose final report in 2006 contained more than 70 recommendations to help stem the rise of obesity in children and young people. Last year, Minister McGimpsey established the obesity prevention steering group to drive forward those recommendations and to work with other Departments, including my own, to produce an obesity strategic framework that aims to take the necessary action to redress the rise in obesity figures, and put in place a coherent plan of action that applies not only to children but to everyone.

Any initiative, such as walking and cycling, that can increase children's opportunity to take part in physical activity and which, in turn, encourages parents, guardians and teachers to participate, is to be welcomed.

Another key partner in promoting walking and cycling in schools is the Department of the Environment, which ensures that road safety education is given priority attention. The main focus of its road safety education programme for children and young people is to establish responsible attitudes and behaviour among road users from an early age and to instill the right attitudes and behaviours in tomorrow's drivers. The guidelines adopted by the Department of the Environment recommend that road safety is best taught by teachers on a regular and structured basis with resources, teacher training, advice and support provided by road-safety education officers. Those officers deliver specific road-safety initiatives and provide interactive sessions with pupils where appropriate.

As the Minister said in his contribution, specific road-safety initiatives delivered by the DOE in primary schools include the cycling proficiency scheme and practical child-pedestrian safety training.

The cycling proficiency scheme is well established and has been operating successfully for over 30 years. The number of schools that are involved in the scheme has been growing, and just under 600 primary schools participate annually. Around 8,500 children are trained each year.

Through the school travel advisory group, my officials work in partnership with the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of the Environment,

Translink and Sustrans to co-ordinate our approach and to optimise our efforts to promote sustainable school travel. The Department of Education's contribution to improve facilities in the schools estate has been mentioned in the debate and is much valued as part of the overall Safer Routes to School initiative.

That multi-agency approach was exemplified by the recent two-year rural Safer Routes to School project, which attracted EU funding through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and saw statutory bodies work in partnership with Sustrans to deliver a highly successful programme at 18 rural schools across the North. Preliminary results show that around 3,500 children took part in the project and that the proportion of those children who were driven to school dropped from 64% to 49% between the beginning and the end of the project.

When I attended the Sustrans briefing, I spoke to Steven Patterson, who, I reassure Jim Wells, is very pleasant but is neither young nor a lady. I did not have the experience that Mr Wells mentioned. The Department is considering a proposal to continue with that initiative and will discuss that with Sustrans and other Departments that have an interest.

The amendment calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school, which is a matter for the Minister of Education. Members will be aware that the statutory walking distances are used to determine whether the education boards or the parent should bear the cost of home-to-school transport. That is not necessarily related to the topic of the motion, and the ingenuity of the Members whose amendment was accepted has been praised. That is a matter for the Speaker's Office.

The Department of Education has advised that it is for parents to determine the method that they consider most appropriate for delivering their children to and from school. I understand that parents can apply to the education boards to request that a road safety assessment be conducted if they consider a particular road to represent a safety hazard. The Department of Education has no plans at present to change the current distance criteria, but I am advised that a review of school transport will take place once the way forward for transfer arrangements and area-based planning has been finalised. That said, it is clear that any reduction in the distance criteria would have a significant impact on the transport budget of the education boards.

I also noted the concerns that Members expressed about the condition of rural roads across the North. Maintaining the surfaces and underlying structures of the roads and footways is essential for the social and economic well-being of the North and is a high priority for my Department's Roads Service.

All my Department's programmes are under-resourced, and there is no painless solution. Within its allocation for maintenance, Roads Service has consistently —

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that some areas in Northern Ireland are more affected by lack of investment than others? I draw the Minister's attention to the dreadful, abysmal state of the roads on the Ards Peninsula in the Strangford constituency. I cannot find a word strong enough to describe the roads. This morning, people informed me by telephone that a number of roads were impassable because of flooding. That is simply because not enough people are available to get the water off the roads. I refer to roads that are beside Strangford Lough, so it is not as if the water has nowhere to go.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that interventions should be short and that the topic that is being debated is cycling to school.

The Minister for Regional Development: I trust, a LeasCheann Comhairle, that you will give me about an extra five minutes at the end of my speech.

I accept that there is not enough money in the roads budget; I have always said that that is a matter of fact. There are certainly roads that are in poor condition across the North, but I have been to Ards, and I do not accept that it is substantially worse than other areas; I assure the Member that I have been to some places that have bad roads.

It strikes me that the Alliance Party supported a motion for the Budget to be reset, but the only areas in which additional allocations were requested were social development, training and upskilling. The effect of providing that additional investment would be to remove money from my Department's spending on roads and from the Department of Education's school transport programme. It is all very well to argue that not enough resources are available, but some Members have supported proposals that would lead to resources being taken away. We must be consistent in our approach, and I would gladly accept more —

2.45 pm

Mr Paisley Jnr: Does the Minister accept that in the past 10 days, we have seen an indication of how wastefully resources are sometimes deployed? There was a lot of media hype about an imminent snowstorm, and how Roads Service was driven out —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that the motion relates to cycling to school.

Mr Paisley Jnr: That is absolutely what my intervention is about. Roads Service workers sprayed grit on our roads and prepared the country for a snow freeze that did not arrive until two days later. Yet, all those resources were used on roads that lead to schools

on which those resources cannot be spent. Was the Minister's Department pushed by the weather forecast and the media into taking that action?

The Minister for Regional Development: Preparation for the winter schedule is determined by Met Office weather forecasts, which cannot be ignored; it must be accepted that those people are experts in their field. The Met Office advises when severe weather is approaching, and services react accordingly.

There is, and has been, an issue over the past number of days in relation to the winter gritting schedule and its effectiveness, including how many roads were covered; in particular, in rural areas and around rural schools. There is an enormous pressure in that. However, it again relates to the last point that I was making to Mr McCarthy. It is entirely inconsistent for Members to argue for more resources for those areas at the same time as calling for more resources to go to other Departments. It requires more, not less, resources to meet people's demands for more to be spent on road maintenance, on rural roads, and on winter gritting in order to provide more widespread coverage.

On the issue of roads, the funding that my Department has been allocated for the Budget period — even with the in-year monitoring top-ups — falls about £125 million short of the level recommended in the structural maintenance funding plan across the Budget period up to 2011.

In distributing the limited resources available for roads maintenance, allocations are made to the four Roads Service divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity. Divisions use the indicators when apportioning costs across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds. Resurfacing work is generally undertaken on a priority basis that reflects both the structural condition of the relevant road and its traffic volumes.

It is always the case that the availability of more funding would enable more resurfacing work to be carried out. Members know that funding for structural maintenance has, historically, fallen well short of the levels recommended in the regional transportation strategy. However, it is important to see these things in the context of the correct management of the overall Budget, which involves assessing, and making decisions on, competing priorities from my own and other Departments.

Nevertheless, I reassure Members that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds as part of the in-year monitoring process. I also hope, given the views that have been expressed during the debate, that Members will support future bids by my Department for additional structural maintenance funds.

I am happy to have had the opportunity to address this motion, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I assure Members that the whole issue of walking and cycling to school, and of making the Safer Routes to School scheme available, is of keen interest to the Executive. In the past, it has received support from a range of Departments and from other agencies, including Sustrans, the good work of which was mentioned in the debate. My own Department is certainly very keen that those types of projects continue. We will do all that we can to ensure that walking and cycling to school are viable and safe options for children. We will also encourage, right across the age range, more sustainable travel modes for all our population. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off mobile phones. Someone is using one at the moment.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm achoimriú a dhéanamh ar an leasú.

The benefits — including health, economic and environmental — reaped from walking and cycling to school initiatives have been well ventilated during the debate. The increased volumes of traffic on our roads, and the pothole-pockmarked state of many rural roads, mean that the halcyon days of the past, when pupils walked many miles to school, are long gone. Many Members from rural areas will recall the days when it was not unusual for pupils to walk long distances through the countryside to school.

When he proposed the amendment, John Dallat pointed out that that has diminished in many rural areas. He also mentioned the assisted transport scheme, which he described as being totally inflexible and throwing up numerous anomalies; such as when, for example, some children from a particular housing estate get free transport while others from the same estate do not, albeit they all attend the same school. Mr Dallat also said that children from rural areas do not have the same opportunities as other children to walk and cycle to school because of the dangers involved, and that, therefore, they are disadvantaged in that respect. He wondered whether there had been any rural proofing of schemes to encourage walking and cycling to school.

Mr Dallat also said that given that half-empty buses are passing children on the roadside, the current school transport system and policy require revision. He described it as a waste of resources that would, ultimately, lead to more, rather than less, vehicular traffic.

Jim Wells, who along with the Environment Minister is the other DUP expert on climate change, underlined the importance of the amendment and expressed his wish for the Assembly to debate the assisted transport scheme in its own right. He

emphasised the reduction in vehicular traffic that would result in a change to the two- or three-mile rule. He described as nonsense the situation in which buses pass children who are standing in the rain and called for serious review of the school-transport issue. He supports the motion and, obviously, the amendment.

Cathal Boylan expressed his party's support for the motion and the amendment, even though, initially, he had difficulty with the amendment. Obviously, Mr Dallat's erudition helped Mr Boylan's understanding.

Trevor Lunn cited support for road-safety measures by the Children's Commissioner. He also mentioned the good work of the Road Safety Council. He said that he has a vague recollection of cycling from Finaghy to Belfast Royal Academy. He gave Members a virtual tour of his bike journey through Belfast, guided by his personal satnav.

Willie Clarke agreed with his South Down colleague Jim Wells that the amendment is worthy and deserves another dedicated airing in the Chamber.

Sammy Wilson made an intervention and pointed out that the Western Education and Library Board had incorporated a reflective element into school uniforms. He asked that the Minister of Education takes cognisance of that development.

John McCallister mentioned the importance of incorporating walking and cycling to school into families' daily routines. Pat Ramsey underlined the need for footpaths that are further away from roads. Sammy Wilson agreed that walking and cycling to school will lead to a reduction in carbon emissions. He said that new planning approaches will help to encourage walking and cycling to school.

In his contribution, the Minister acknowledged the benefits of walking and cycling to school. He also said that they had been integrated into planning policy through the regional development strategy. He explained the advantages of the Travelwise initiative and said that Safer Routes to School has certainly encouraged many more children to walk to school. He said that the pilot scheme for a 20 mph limit near schools has worked well and that he hoped that Members would contribute to consultation on the matter. He said that several Departments were involved and that there must be a cross-cutting approach.

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

Mr D Bradley: Obviously, I support the motion and the amendment. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I confess that at first sight of the UUP motion on the Order Paper, I wondered whether the Assembly should be debating this sort of matter, given the huge constitutional affairs, life-and-death concerns, and so forth, with which it must contend. I

am not sure whether other Members had the same thought, but the fact that people have that initial thought shows how much work needs to be done on the issue.

I am grateful to my colleague Mr Beggs for outlining some of the real issues that we must confront. We can all agree on the advantages of people doing more cycling and walking.

There was some mirth and merriment in the midst of Members' admirable and useful contributions, which is, perhaps, as it should be. I was delighted to hear Mr McCarthy saying that although there are very few roads in Strangford, the phones work; so, he is not totally out of communication. I was interested by Ian Paisley Jnr's reference to something called a "snow freeze", which the Minister was apparently expected to anticipate, even though we do not know what it is.

We have talked about the importance of walking, but I suspect that most of us park our cars as close to the door of the Building as possible. Perhaps we should lead by example and walk a little further. Indeed, that relates to why the motion is so important. People's expectations of political representatives are changing. It is no longer satisfactory for us to point and counterpoint across the Chamber. Rather, we have to lead by example on matters that are important to people.

It may come as a surprise to some folks that the real challenges facing our society are not constitutional issues. The real challenges are the three big killers in our society, namely alcohol — particularly underage drinking, allied with drugs — tobacco and obesity. Regardless of how many new hospitals are built, we will not be able to continue to look after people if obesity levels continue to rise. We must explain to people that cycling and walking can help to counter the problem of obesity.

I am disappointed that I missed Trevor Lunn's account of his cycling escapades. I remember the cycling shed at Belfast Royal Academy as the den of all iniquity.

Mrs M Bradley: Were you involved in that?

Mr B McCrea: I really wanted to find out what went on there, but I must confess that I was unlucky to be one of the people who was never invited down. Perhaps I would have been if I had had a bicycle — maybe that is the point.

Parental attitude is relevant to this discussion, just as it is relevant to so many of the issues that we try to address. Children are mollycoddled, and it is not always to their advantage. I am disappointed that Mr Sammy Wilson is not here, because he always adds lightness to a debate, but things said in jest can be wholly true. As my colleague Mr McCallister said, we must make parents understand that exercise taken together can create family bonds. It provides an

opportunity for discussion and learning. When I go cycling, I am always amazed by the fact that the pace of travel allows so much time for observation of the surroundings.

I concur with Pat Ramsey's comments about speed limits. Mr Ramsey also said that footpaths should be further away from roads. In some places in my constituency, people would be walking in the sheugh if the footpaths were any further away from the road. Seriously though, the network of footpaths must be got right if we are serious about this issue.

Dawn Purvis mentioned that people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to suffer an accident. I understand that that relates to accidents in the home, and so on, as well as to road accidents. We must address the financial costs to society, and the personal costs to individuals, that result from accidents.

The Minister pointed out that although he was the Minister responding to the debate, this is a cross-cutting issue. I have sympathy with his position, and the list of issues that could pertain to this topic is evidence of its cross-cutting nature.

For example, OFMDFM is responsible for children and young people's issues and the Programme for Government; the Department of Education is responsible for education and sustainable development and the Healthy Schools scheme; DHSSPS is responsible for the Fit Futures scheme; DSD is responsible for neighbourhood renewal; DCAL is responsible for the promotion of physical recreation; and DRD is responsible for the regional development strategy. Then again, there is the revised curriculum. That all demonstrates the need for us to provide leadership.

3.00 pm

Mr Wells mentioned the reduction in CO₂ emissions, and Cathal Boylan mentioned the impact of catalytic converters that do not kick in. There are fuel-efficiency issues, but the real issue is health and well-being and teaching our children to behave responsibly in the big wide world.

I know that the motion has all-party support, and, therefore, I do not intend to detain the House. I note the Department of Education's comments to the effect that parents should determine how their children get to school — but not, apparently, which school they go to. Therefore, parental choice is an issue. Parents are at the forefront of our thinking, and the Government should not take the role of parenting away. Our job is to encourage parents, families and future citizens to do what is right for them and what will, ultimately, be right for society.

I thank all Members. I am not sure whether I mentioned everyone who contributed to the debate. I am grateful to Members on my left — Mr Bresland

and Mr George Robinson — for not barracking me, as they sometimes do. That shows that there is a coming together on this issue. *[Interruption.]*

I must mention that I was available for interventions at any time.

I thank Members for their support. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment, and we want everyone to support the motion. We hope that this is not the end of the matter but an opportunity for us to start to show the people of Northern Ireland that, collectively, we can provide proper leadership for the good of everyone.

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 Executive to invest further in walking and cycling to school initiatives to improve children's health and reduce traffic congestion and in the interim, given the current state of our roads, especially in rural areas, further calls on the Executive to review the statutory walking distances from home to school.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Western Health and Social Care Trust

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

Mr Gallagher: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that as a result of the Review of Public Administration, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million; expresses concern about the impact of this debt on jobs and key services throughout the Trust area; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to deal with this matter.

A motion on health earlier today led to a detailed discussion, and I do not intend to spend time rehashing those issues. Indeed, as I entered the Chamber, Basil McCrea was highlighting health issues such as obesity and alcohol and drug addiction. For a minute, I thought that the earlier debate had continued in my absence.

This motion relates to the Western Health and Social Care Trust, and it is a unique issue that has not arisen in any other trusts. It did not arise at the time of amalgamation, and, as far as I am aware, it has not arisen since.

The motion that I ask Members to support calls for a resolution to an ongoing funding issue with the Western Health and Social Care Trust. That problem arose because of a £3.36 million deficit, which is a legacy of debt that was inherited in 2007. I appreciate the Minister and his staff taking time to be present for the debate.

The motion does not call for the money to meet that deficit to be taken from the budget of any other trusts — let us be clear on that. It calls on the Department of Health and the Executive to intervene in what are unique circumstances.

We are all aware of the pressures, and how they are further compounded across all the trusts because of the comprehensive spending review (CSR). There is considerable public annoyance over that, as we well know. That is reflected in the west in the number of public meetings that take place every week because of alarm and worry about ongoing issues, and indeed emerging issues. The same issues arise time after time. They have been mentioned this morning about the care issue and about job cuts, not only for professional workers in the Health Service, but in administration.

The Western Trust has an annual budget of approximately £430 million. It serves a population of close to 300,000. I think that it employs approximately 12,500 staff and, as Members will know, it covers a

vast area, from Derry through different council areas, including Limavady, Strabane, Omagh and Fermanagh. I mentioned the larger towns, but there are also dispersed rural populations, and some of the people there live in very isolated areas. The trust also has responsibility for a number of hospitals — I do not think that I will offend anyone by saying that the most important of those are Tyrone County Hospital, Altnagelvin Area Hospital and Erne Hospital, in no particular order.

The new trusts were formed in 2007, when their number was reduced by the amalgamations of smaller trusts. In the case of the Western Trust area, three trusts were amalgamated. One of those trusts had a legacy of debt. As I understand it, the Department of Health at that time directed that the debt had to be inherited by the new body. The trust was further directed that it had to carry that burden of debt, while, at the same time, staying within its budget for 2007-08 and 2008-09. The Department further gave the impression that, when that point was reached — that is, the end of the financial year 2008-09, which is now close — the position would be reviewed, and that the Department would consider waiving the requirement to recover approximately £3.5 million.

During the financial years 2007-09, the trust, as it was asked to do, did not overspend, neither did it underspend, because we all know from the debate this morning that trusts everywhere face more demands on their money than they can meet. It appears that the trust has managed its finances in a strong and robust fashion, and the review, which appeared to be confirmed by the Department in December 2007, is now weeks away.

The repayment of that inherited debt will have an impact on basic essential services such as cancer care or help for people who have suffered from strokes or mental illness, and on vulnerable people throughout the Western Trust area. That is why I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion, and thank Mr Gallagher for securing the debate. As he said, the Western Health and Social Care Trust inherited a deficit of £3.3 million when it superseded the old Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust, unlike the other four trusts, which came into operation with a clean sheet. Added to that are the 3% efficiency savings — amounting to just over £36 million — that the trust has to meet within the next three years. All trusts have to meet that target, and that matter was discussed earlier today in a separate debate.

For years, public representatives in the west of the Province have had to lobby extremely hard for job creation in the trust area, for the experts and the professionals that were required, and for the delivery

of equality of services to meet the needs of the people in our area. We did that simply to ensure that people had the same service provision as those who live in the rest of the Province — something which, in today's terms, is called equality.

As I consider the situation in the west of the Province, I begin to question the whole issue of equality. When the new trust took over last year, rather than starting off from a level playing field, it was immediately handicapped by the £3.3 million deficit that it had to clear in order to balance its books. The Western Trust, in an area that was deprived for years of proper Health Service provision, is now being further discriminated against by having to pick up another body's debt.

The irony of the matter is that after 12 months or more, the Minister and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety have failed to pick up that debt and leave the Western Trust on the same footing as all the other health and social care trusts. There is no doubt that if this matter is not addressed by the Minister and his Department, it will have a seriously detrimental effect on Health Service jobs and on key service provision in the Western Trust area in the future.

I can see the impact that that debt is now having on the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and on the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The sad reality is that it appears that no one from the Department is listening to the pleas of the people or to the Western Trust management, who have to try to meet the debt that was handed down to them. I know that the Minister will probably talk about the capital investment of £276 million in the new hospital in Enniskillen and £190 million in the new hospital in Omagh. We welcome and fully support his commitment to those investments. However, we are gravely concerned about the level of service provision that those new hospitals will be able to provide if the matter of the debt is not dealt with urgently.

We have already witnessed the removal of services from Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh and have read the proposals to close maternity beds in, and to remove other services from, the Erne Hospital in Enniskillen. The telemedicine provision in Tyrone County Hospital was not replaced when the consultant retired. All those issues are causing grave concern in the west of the Province. People are forced to travel long distances on rural roads in order to obtain access to proper healthcare provision. I plead with the Minister to take this matter on board and clear the deficit so that the Western Trust is put on a level playing field, is not disadvantaged and can have the same opportunities as the other trust areas, as it strives to provide proper, state-of-the-art healthcare for people in the south-west quarter of Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

Addressing the Western Health and Social Care Trust's debt is not too big a task to ask of the Minister. I plead with him to take the matter on board and deal with it immediately; it must not be allowed to drag on any longer. Any uncertainties must be taken out of the equation, so that the trust will be on a level playing field with the other trusts that commenced at the same time.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat. I apologise to Members for being late; I was appearing on 'Stormont Live'. I thank the Members who tabled the motion, and I greatly appreciate the opportunity to speak to it. The motion — in particular, its reference to the impact of the review of public administration (RPA) on the Western Health and Social Care Trust — is very timely. Today, PricewaterhouseCoopers released a new report, 'Job Creation in the Western Economic Corridor', which warns that the new RPA councils that will be formed by amalgamating Derry City Council with Strabane District Council and Fermanagh District Council with Omagh District Council will continue to suffer economically and socially unless there is a radical change in approach. On top of that, there is the comprehensive spending review, which is at the heart of the cuts that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Western Health and Social Care Trust will implement.

I recognise that the British Treasury has imposed the CSR on the Executive. The faceless men of Whitehall — unelected by the people of Ireland — are forcing those cuts on the people whom we represent. Once again, that exposes the folly of the parties in this Chamber —

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member not consider her speech to be somewhat inconsistent with the remarks that she made last week in the House. Ms Anderson said that she could not wait for the day when we are cut from Westminster, and yet, today, she is criticising Westminster for pouring money into the Health Service.

Ms Anderson: I am criticising Westminster for taking a policy decision that will introduce cuts. Of course, I would rather that we worked on an all-Ireland basis, particularly with regard to cancer facilities in the north-west. People in the north-west, and elsewhere, who are suffering because of the impact of partition, will agree with what I said. Obviously, Mr McCarthy does not agree.

Once again, that exposes the folly of the parties in this Chamber — and we have just heard from one of them — that refuse to support the transfer of fiscal sovereignty in the North. Until we take control of our own destiny, we will continue to be at the mercy of the British bureaucrats who could not care less about the plight of our people.

Ordinary people are suffering — people such as the residents of Foyleville Residential Home, in Derry,

which is earmarked for closure as part of the Western Trust's efficiency plans. From listening to Mr McCarthy comments, I am sure that he does not care too much about that.

I am aware that trust officials are due to meet the families of Foyleville residents on Thursday. Those families deserve to hear directly, and hopefully today, from the Minister about what the future holds for their loved ones. They are being told that care in the community packages will be put in place for their loved ones. However, at the same time, care in the community services are being cut. As a carer for my mother, I know only too well about the difficulties that people face when trying to access a suitable domiciliary-care package.

Some of the Foyleville residents are more than 93 years old and require a great deal of care, which is no less than they deserve. Therefore, I ask the Minister to state clearly what arrangements will be put in place to ensure that the residents of Foyleville Residential Home continue to get the best standards of care to which they are rightly entitled.

Unfortunately, the closure of that residential care home is only one example of the impact that those proposals will have. It is an impact that will be most devastatingly felt by the most vulnerable people in our society. In order to meet the efficiency savings targets of £36 million, the trust has developed 48 separate proposals. When one examines the areas in which some of the biggest cuts are planned, the impact becomes clear. Acute services face cuts of £8.7 million; services for adult mental health and learning disabilities face cuts of £3.1 million; older people's services face cuts of £6.9 million; and women's and children's services face cuts of £4.4 million.

Despite the very clear impact that those cuts are likely to have on some of the most vulnerable groups, only four of the 48 proposals have been deemed to require equality impact assessments. The adverse impact that those cuts will have on section 75 groups screams out from the pages of the proposals, so why have only four been subject to a full equality impact assessment? Are the trust and the Minister unaware of the legal duty to promote equality of opportunity? All programmes and policies should be tailored to ensure that they do good — it is not just about avoiding doing bad.

I am sure that all of us understand that the Health Department and the trust are under pressure to make efficiency savings. However, all Departments face the same pressures. The fat should be trimmed from the system and the fat cats, not from front line care. We live on a small island, but we run two separate and distinct health services that often duplicate services in cities and townlands that are sometimes just yards

apart. That is the very definition of ineffective and wasteful Government.

What is the Minister doing to increase North/South co-operation so that experiences, resources and services can be pooled in order to achieve efficiencies without impacting on care? Despite repeated protestations that front line services will not be affected, the evidence on the ground in places like Foyleville and elsewhere tells a different story. Therefore, I support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Gardiner: Every MLA has the right to speak up for their area, and that is completely understandable. However, I must admit that I was surprised that this motion did not take the form of an Adjournment debate. In many ways, the topic is more appropriate for an Adjournment debate because it involves the special interests of a defined geographical area of this Province.

Nevertheless, I will make a few points in relation to the motion. To be fair, the Minister of Health has been generous in his treatment of the west. As recently as 10 December 2008, he announced a £58 million funding boost for the Western Health and Social Care Trust. That funding represents only part of the total planned investment of £570 million for health and service care in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area over the next 10 years. That is no minor investment.

As well as the major hospital projects announced for Omagh and Enniskillen, Lisnaskea will receive a new healthcare centre. Further developments and improvements are planned at the Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry, including a new radiography unit. On 5 August last year, the Minister invested over £3 million in emergency services in Fermanagh and Tyrone. The Minister also announced that emergency services in the area will be improved to include additional ambulance cover in the Omagh and Enniskillen areas; 24/7 ambulance service cover for the Castlederg area; and a rolling out of paramedic-led thrombosis care, which could save the lives of people who suffer heart attacks.

On 16 April 2008, a new satellite radiotherapy centre was announced for Altnagelvin Hospital. That will provide the additional radiography capacity that is needed to meet the anticipated increase in cancer cases in Northern Ireland. All of that is in addition to the two new hospital facilities in Enniskillen and Omagh. People in the west cannot say that the Minister has neglected them — it is very much the opposite.

Mr Gallagher: Will the Member give way?

Mr Gardiner: I do not generally give way. It has been my tradition not to — even to my party colleagues.

I understand the concerns about the issue of funding, but the Health Minister has to make decisions that reflect balanced and publicly defensible views of the needs of the entire population.

The west of the Province suffers as a result of having a relatively small population, which is scattered over a large geographical area. The combined population of Fermanagh, Tyrone and Londonderry is 436,000, which accounts for 24% of Northern Ireland's total population. At the same time, those three western counties cover an area of 2,671 sq miles, which accounts for approximately 50% of Northern Ireland's geographic area.

That relatively low population density inevitably prevents efficiencies of scale, leading to higher costs, and the small population, combined with its scattered nature, makes the Minister's task difficult. Nevertheless, he has made a genuine attempt to take account of those problems, and he has treated the west fairly and generously. Moreover, I have every confidence that Minister McGimpsey will continue to do the same for that area as he would for any other part of Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I have listened to some depressing speeches from Members who represent constituencies that the Western Health and Social Care Trust covers. In fact, most of what has been said could be repeated in speeches about every trust area.

The £3.3 million debt that the Western Health and Social Care Trust must carry forward is an added burden. Of course, we all support making efficiencies in every sphere of administration, including the Health Service. However, I cannot support, and other Members should not accept, efficiencies when they result in cuts to front line services.

As the Alliance Party's health spokesperson, I totally repudiate staff reductions when it is obvious that front line services will be drastically curtailed. This morning, all hell broke loose on the radio at the mention of reducing nursing staff numbers by approximately 700, and rightly so. However, that is not new information. Everyone was aware of the situation when, at the start of this Administration's mandate, the Minister of Health was instructed to find 3% efficiency savings.

Consultations are ongoing in every trust area, and almost every sphere of front line services is under attack, with the possible closure of residential homes; a reduction in hospital admissions; stretched community care budgets; and other threats to front line service. All those proposed cuts leave people in our communities extremely worried that they will not be able to access health provision when they require it.

Earlier this afternoon, I had the pleasure of hosting a gathering in the Long Gallery of people who are concerned about the non-provision of services for patients with muscular dystrophy throughout Northern Ireland. Indeed, Muscular Dystrophy Campaign launched its Building on the Foundations campaign

there today. Many Members attended, for which the body is grateful. I hope that support will be forthcoming for a motion on that subject.

Among the many matters discussed in the Long Gallery was the lack of a paediatric consultant specialising in muscular dystrophy. Apparently, that position was filled some time ago, but, possibly as a result of so-called efficiency savings, the post is now vacant, and there does not appear to be any effort being made to fill it. I appeal to the Minister, who, I am glad to say, is present, to investigate that situation. It seems wrong that there should not be a specialist muscular-dystrophy consultant, who would cover all Northern Ireland trusts, including the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

The Alliance Party and the United Community group opposed the Budget on three grounds. First, it failed to take account of the divisions in our society; whereby massive savings could be made. Secondly, it left no room for the economic downturn, which, unfortunately, we are now witnessing. Thirdly, it demanded universal efficiency savings, without taking into account how efficient Departments already were.

All trusts — not only the Western Trust — are worried and concerned that the so-called 3% efficiency savings will mean that massive cuts will be made and that the provision of health services to all our communities will be reduced drastically. That must be avoided at all costs. I support the motion.

3.30 pm

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. However, I would like clarification on the debt that is mentioned in the motion. Does that still exist? I ask that because, on 8 December, Tommy Gallagher asked the Minister whether the Western Trust was the only one that had a legacy of debt. I am not sure whether the Minister said that it was. I would like to know for my own information.

I am also keen to know whether the figure of £3.3 million is correct. I looked through my papers for the relevant figures; the trust provided us with a range of figures up to £20 million, but that may be a different kind of debt. I would like clarity on that issue.

Mr Buchanan mentioned the need for a level playing field. Therefore, it is important that the Minister looks at the Western Trust's debt, if it remains, because it is unfair that one trust inherited a debt simply because two trusts were joined in a programme of rationalisation.

Mr Gardiner talked about how generous the Minister was in his treatment of the west. I will not comment on that, but I remember when the campaign to retain acute services at the Tyrone County Hospital was at its height. The hospital in Omagh was losing its

acute services, but I remember comments that were made by the late David Ervine in the context of a discussion about acute services and the golden six hospitals. He said that when he got up in the morning, he could see three acute hospitals. Mr Buchanan is correct: we do not see any in the west now.

The services that have been available, or not available, in the west previously are not down to Mr McGimpsey. However, there are inequalities, and the people in the west have suffered.

It is important to establish the situation with regard to the £3.3 million that is mentioned in the motion. I support the motion, and I want the Minister to examine the situation and see whether the £3.3 million — if that is the correct amount — can be wiped out. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Lord Morrow: I shall also begin by asking the Minister questions, and I hope that he will answer them in his response to the debate. Did the other trusts have any debt? What happened when the changeover occurred? The Western Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million, but I understand that other trusts had debts but were given a clean sheet. I hope that the Minister will answer my next question: if three trusts can be treated in that way, why should the Western Trust be treated any differently?

I was fascinated by what some Members had to say, particularly Mr Gardiner. I am sure that he did not mean his comments to sound as they did, but it seemed that he was saying that a rural dweller, or someone who lives in a sparsely populated area, may not be entitled to the same healthcare and health provision as someone who lives in a city or urban settlement.

For too long, people in the west have had difficulty keeping up and being treated as equals. Mr Gardiner rightly said that some good things are happening in places such as Lisnaskea, but he did not go on to say that, for instance, the South Tyrone Hospital has lost its acute services in recent years, and that we do not have that provision any more; nor did he say that the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh has lost its acute-services provision, yet those are significant factors when it comes to health care.

It should also be said that the west is a very sparse and rural area. The result is that, for example, an area such as Clogher Valley finds itself caught between the services provided by three different places; Enniskillen, Omagh and Craigavon. The Minister must look very closely at such areas and ask himself whether the distribution of finance and resources to rural communities is fair. People should not be penalised by virtue of their being rural dwellers.

The last Member who spoke for Sinn Féin did infinitely better than Ms Anderson, who sought to make a political point about it being time that we had

control in local hands. I must confess, I thought that Minister McGimpsey was a local Minister; I believe that he resides in the Belfast area. Therefore, I cannot for the life of me understand what she was talking about. Ms Anderson should get up to speed and realise that she has signed up to this.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Lord Morrow: Yes; I will give way in a moment or two.

In fairness to Ms Anderson's party colleague, Mrs McGill, she realised that fact and she tried to address the issues raised by the motion.

Mr A Maskey: I ask the Member to accept that Ms Anderson was not saying that the Minister for Health, Social Services or Public Safety — or any of the local Ministers — cannot do, or are not doing, very good work within their remits; her point was that we could do so much more if we had greater financial sovereignty.

Lord Morrow: Mr Maskey has made the point much better than his colleague did — I hear now what he is saying, but that is not how it came across when his colleague was speaking.

Those of us who live in the west intend to ensure that it gets its fair share. We feel that that has not happened at times and that, as a result, we are sometimes being penalised. I remind Members of the ten ministerial priority areas for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the period 2008-2011, which are all laudable and acceptable. Those priorities are: improving health and well-being; ensuring safer, better quality services; improving acute services; ensuring fully integrated care and support in the community; improving children's services; improving mental-health services; improving services for people with a disability; ensuring effective financial control and improved efficiency; improving productivity; and modernising the infrastructure.

Those priorities are very laudable, provided that we have a level playing field. However, as my colleague Mr Buchanan made quite clear, the one thing lacking in our healthcare provision is a level playing field. It is imperative that that is achieved and that those of us who come from the west — whether it is the far west or the near west — do not feel that we are at a distinct disadvantage because of our rurality.

I implore the Minister to take that point on board and ensure that there is equal treatment across Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing him deal with the point about the £3.3 million debt that was inherited by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and why that trust was treated differently from the other trusts — I ask the Minister to deal with that matter, please.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank Tommy and Mary for tabling the motion. It is regrettable that Sam Gardiner felt that such an important issue, which affects rural people and major areas of population, was more suitable for an Adjournment debate, and dismissed it as such. He should realise that the issue is much more fundamental than that, and I suggest that he recheck the population figures that he cited.

In relation to some of the other points about the regional investments that have been made by the Minister, those investments were made because the north-west needed them — it was a matter of equality.

I must remind a number of Members that the motion concerns a legacy of debt that was inherited from a previous trust and that no other trust has been asked to inherit a debt of that nature. The motion is not concerned with the comprehensive spending review or the 3% efficiency savings; if the trust does not receive assistance with the overspend, further efficiency savings will be required in the north-west.

Health Service managers have to strike a fine balance to provide the best possible service, to which people have a right. They must stay within budget but neither overspend nor underspend. To strike that balance, every trust must solve difficult problems. The Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Services Trust had a range of problems that were particular to that rural area and that were exacerbated by: ageing hospital buildings that were becoming increasingly unfit for purpose; the difficulty in recruiting key personnel; and the fact that locum cover was expensive.

However, resolving those problems was not just a matter for that trust; strategic departmental decision-making was required, including major investments in Delivering Better Services. That programme includes redesigning Health Service delivery pathways, two new hospitals and incorporating the changes that resulted from the review of public administration.

Given that the overspend occurred largely because the system and infrastructure were no longer fit for purpose and required departmental intervention for their rebuilding, it is hardly fair to expect people in the west to suffer the consequences of repaying £3.36 million. Claire McGill was right in saying that the Minister must be clear about whether any other trust has inherited such debt. Tommy Gallagher asked a question to that effect, to which the clear answer was that only one such case exists.

I understand that the Foyle Health and Social Services Trust wrote to the Department requesting that the debt, which had been incurred by a trust that no longer exists, be written off. The Department said that, if certain stringent budgetary conditions were met, it would look at the case sympathetically. Those conditions have been, and continue to be, met.

Therefore, I ask the Minister to commit to honouring the agreement that his Department made with the trust.

Given the other efficiency savings that are being made — and, as other Members said, those are often made in the face of opposition — the meeting of the conditions was no mean feat for the trust. My party colleagues and I have opposed some of the cuts that were introduced because they were unfair, and we continue to oppose them. To be fair to the trust, it has proposed, and continues to try to facilitate, alternative solutions where appropriate, and, in other cases, it has implemented the cuts as planned.

In partnership with elected representatives, user groups, staff and the community at large, the trust has done its bit. Given all that good work, the continued imposition of the repayment of the debt would go down very badly in the Western Trust area, because it would mean making further cuts. People there now expect the Executive and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to write off the debt.

I am sure that people in the area did not benefit from the overspend, and, if the trust is forced to pay back the debt, they will suffer. That would be grossly unfair on people who are measurably disadvantaged by the level of service they receive compared with people living in areas east of the Bann.

On behalf of the people in the Western Trust area, I ask the Minister and the Executive to make good on the implied commitment of the Department by writing off the debt.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (Mr McGimpsey): First, I will try to clarify the inherited position on the Western Trust. It was the only trust to acquire an original, underlying deficit. It inherited that deficit from its legacy trust, Sperrin Lakeland Trust, which incurred a deficit in 2006-07 and passed that on to the Western Trust. The reason for that deficit was that the Sperrin Lakeland Trust overspent. In fact, it spent £3.6 million more than it should have, and that is why the problem arose.

3.45 pm

I am totally committed to doing all in my power to ensure that the Western Trust operates on an even footing with the other trusts, and to the principle of ensuring fair and equal access to health and social care services and to developments. As far as I am concerned, all citizens, wherever they come from in Northern Ireland — be that Belfast or Belcoo — are equally deserving, and they should get the best health and social care provision within the resources available to me.

I will try to recount the detailed background to the debt of £3.3 million that the Western Trust faced when it was established in 2007. Sperrin Lakeland Trust was one of three former trusts, including the Foyle Trust

and the Altnagelvin Trust. Those trusts merged to form the Western Health and Social Care Trust in 2007 and, in April 2007, the Sperrin Lakeland Trust declared the deficit of £3.3 million. However, that deficit had not been forecast at any point prior to that.

As soon as the deficit came to light, the senior management team in the newly formed Western Trust moved quickly to appoint a former director of finance from an external trust to conduct an immediate review. That review urgently identified the weaknesses in financial management, financial controls and reporting. On foot of that, the Western Trust developed a plan to implement the review's recommendations, overseen by the audit committee, and it has since been following that through.

In the meantime, fortunately, my Department was able to manage the £3.3 million deficit within the overall Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety budget for 2006-07. As a result, my Department still lived within its budget in that year. I do not take the matter lightly. My Department's normal policy is that any trust's deficit must be addressed and losses paid back to the Department. That is a fundamental principle, as it ensures that all health and social care organisations contain their spending within their allocated resources. It also means that the population of one trust area does not suffer because of overspending in other trusts. I do not tolerate deficits.

However, in this case, I acknowledged the unusual circumstances in which the deficit occurred. I also recognised the unique circumstances and challenges of the formation of a new organisation. Therefore, in November 2007, I decided that if the Western Trust was able to demonstrate sound financial management by breaking even in both 2007-08 and 2008-09, my Department would not seek to recover the deficit. So far, so good.

To the credit of the trust, it broke even in 2006-07, and there is considerable optimism that it will do likewise this year, but that remains to be seen. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that the trust is making every effort. However, if the trust fails to break even in 2008-09, I remain determined that the £3.3 million will still have to be recovered. The trust still has some work to do, which is only fair, and the sum will be become available for reinvestment elsewhere in health and social care over the next few years. Should that be necessary, I make it absolutely clear that the trust will be required to achieve that without any adverse impact on patient services. In the event, I now have reasonable grounds to believe that that recovery of funds will not prove necessary.

During all that, there has been no adverse impact on staff jobs or on services provided to the population of the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust or the Western

Health and Social Care Trust area. My Department funded the deficit in 2006-07, and the Western Trust has not, so far, been required to reduce its spending by £3.3 million. Quite the contrary; the population of the former Sperrin Lakeland Trust area has benefited from increased spending on services amounting to £3.3 million in excess of the funds properly allocated to that trust. As I explained already, that will now need to be recovered only in the event of the trust failing to break even in the current year.

I remind Members of the substantial investment in new health and care facilities in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. During the next three years, over £58 million capital investment is committed for that trust.

That funding will assist in the delivery of two major hospital schemes in Enniskillen and Omagh. It will also address investment at Altnagelvin Area Hospital and be put towards a new health and care centre for Lisnaskea and a new residential respite unit in the Omagh area. That investment is part of a larger planned investment of £570 million in the Western Trust area over the next 10 years. All that will take place in the context of a very constrained capital expenditure environment. Over the 10-year period from 2008-09 to 2017-18, my Department has been allocated a total capital spend of almost £3.3 billion, against an identified need of some £7.8 billion.

In addition, I have invested £3 million in emergency services in Fermanagh and Tyrone, which includes additional ambulance cover in Omagh and Enniskillen, 24/7 ambulance service cover in the Castleterragh area and the roll-out of the paramedic-led thrombolysis, which can be life-saving for people suffering heart attacks.

Finally, I want to return briefly to the current efficiencies agenda, which was debated earlier today — as far as I could tell, Kieran McCarthy talked about nothing else. In case there is any doubt, the deficit under discussion is not about efficiency savings; rather, it is about the basic principle of living within one's budget. I know that all Members will agree on the importance of living within one's resources, and I expect and require all health bodies to do so. To spend more than one's budget only deprives others of their rightful due, and that cannot be tolerated. That is the simple principle that has guided my approach.

Given the unique circumstances in which the Western Trust found itself, I created a strong incentive for the trust to fix rapidly the problems that it inherited. I will reach a final view, based on the trust's financial performance, before the summer of 2009. I commend the trust on its success to date, which I expect it to sustain.

Mrs M Bradley: I welcome the Minister's comments. The pressure of debt should not be allowed

to inhibit health provision for people in the west. I hope that people there will get the same quality of healthcare as people elsewhere and that the debt that the trust has inherited does not stand in the way of that. I urge the Minister to continue to work to relieve the trust from the pressure that it is under as a result of the debt that it has had to take on.

In opening the debate, Tommy Gallagher called for a resolution to the problem as soon as possible. He said that he did not want the money that is needed to be taken from another budget, and he mentioned that there could be job cuts from Derry to Fermanagh. He said that it was totally unfair that the Western Trust had to carry a debt that was not of its own making.

Mr Buchanan said that, unlike other trusts, the Western Trust had to take on and clear debt, despite the fact that it operates in a deprived area. He said that the impact of the debt was already being felt, and he voiced his grave concerns for the future if it cannot be cleared. He pleaded with the Minister that the area be given the same opportunities as anywhere else.

Martina Anderson said that the motion was timely and that radical change was needed. She criticised the Westminster Government for making the cuts, although that comment is not really appropriate to the issue under discussion. She mentioned the closure of the Foyleville residential nursing home in Derry and asked the Minister what arrangements he would put in place for its residents. She said that there would be meetings with residents' families this week.

Mr Gardiner felt that the west has been given many services. That is correct, but we needed them, and we would not have been given them if we were not in real need. I thank the Minister for those services. However, I think that Mr Gardiner was on a bit of a different wavelength.

Mr McCarthy mentioned reductions in staff numbers and said that every trust area is having consultations on budgets, which I am sure is true. He mentioned muscular dystrophy and the extensive help that sufferers will need, and he urged the Minister to provide that help. He also said that he supported the motion.

Claire McGill rightly asked for clarification of the level of the trust's debt. She felt that it was important to deal with the remaining debt and that the west should not suffer as a result of it.

Lord Morrow asked whether any of the other trusts had inherited debt and, if so, how it was dealt with. He asked whether other trusts had started with a clean sheet. He said that the west is a rural area, and he asked the Minister to help rural areas. He added that those who live in the west often feel disadvantaged.

In response to Sam Gardiner's statement, Pat Ramsey said that the Minister's investments in the

north-west were made because that area needed them. He also said that the people of the west should not be expected to repay the debt, because the Department's conditions have been met. He said that the new trust has not gone over its budget and that the people of the west will suffer if the debt is not cleared.

I hope that the Minister acts as soon as possible to give the trust peace of mind so that it can work on the cuts that it already has to make, without having to think about what will happen in two years time. God knows what will happen to the people in the west if the debt is not cleared.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that as a result of the Review of Public Administration, the Western Health and Social Care Trust has inherited a debt of £3.3 million; expresses concern about the impact of this debt on jobs and key services throughout the Trust area; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Executive to deal with this matter.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Public-Sector Jobs in North Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer will have 15 minutes in which to speak, and all other Members who speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Thank you for the opportunity to raise an important issue for my constituency, which is also relevant to the priority setting of the Assembly and the Executive.

Growing the economy was the key priority of the Executive, and it remains so. In growing the economy, we must carefully balance and manage existing and new private enterprise with the public sector. The public sector remains one of our largest single employers and brings with it many opportunities. At a time of economic uncertainty due to the credit crunch, many people are delighted that there is such a strong public-sector economy in Northern Ireland, because it has created a sense of stability that is lacking in other parts of the country, other parts of the Kingdom and other parts of Europe.

Early last year, Sir George Bain was tasked with producing an independent review of policy on the location of public-sector jobs. He identified six parts of Northern Ireland that should be targeted for public-sector work. He did not make his proposals in an amateurish way by recommending that jobs be moved from Belfast, Bangor and Newtownards to Omagh, Londonderry and Ballymena. Instead, he made much more impressive suggestions and proposals, which took account of the entire public-sector workforce, the potential for growth in the public sector and the potential for new agencies. From that, he devised a scheme, which held that public-sector jobs be directed at new targeted areas.

One of those areas was in my North Antrim constituency — Ballymena and the surrounding area. The neighbouring constituency of East Londonderry, which you represent Mr Deputy Speaker, was also mentioned. That northern corner of Ulster was identified as a key area for employment opportunities. Bain stated that the key areas should benefit from:

“opportunities presented by the Review of Public Administration (i.e. the location of the new regional headquarter bodies);”

and that they should be located in key towns.

I remind Members that those key towns were Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine. Cookstown, Downpatrick and Enniskillen were identified as areas that should also be given consideration in the longer term.

Bain made other key recommendations that I shall touch on briefly. He stated:

“The following bodies should be candidates for relocation, providing a pool from which initial pilot projects should be identified”

and went on to outline 13 new opportunities; for example, the Commission for Victims and Survivors, with which a number of jobs will be associated; the Charity Commission; the Regional Health and Social Care Board; the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being; the Regional Business Services Organisation; and the Northern Ireland Civil Service shared services.

Furthermore, he identified a host of public and semi-public utility groups, such as the headquarters of Northern Ireland Water and the Environment Agency, which should be relocated. He identified, within those bodies, at least 3,000, and potentially 4,000, new employment opportunities that should be spread across those six key towns.

Bain also proposed:

“An Executive sub-committee should be established to lead the relocation initiative, and ministers and accounting officers should provide visible leadership and be held accountable for relocation activities within their departments.”

The Minister for Employment and Learning is present to answer on behalf of the Executive, and I welcome that. My party colleague, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, is unable to be here as he has another engagement, and I appreciate Sir Reg Empey’s stepping into the debate on the Executive’s behalf. It would be appropriate if Members could hear progress reports on some of the key issues that have been identified. If it is not possible today to bring the Assembly up to speed, the Executive should, in the weeks ahead, bring the country up to speed as to how those recommendations and the Executive subcommittee are progressing and taking forward these important and serious proposals.

Sir George Bain went on to recommend:

“Staff rights, terms and conditions, and interests should be given due consideration in the relocation decision making process, and there should be early and sustained engagement with the trade unions.”

Many people across Northern Ireland, and particularly in my constituency, would be delighted to hear what progress is made on that vital report. When a report like this, identifying a key area for employment opportunities, is published, a great deal of local interest is stirred up about how it will be taken forward and how the prospect that it offers will be turned into profit.

There are almost 250,000 public-sector workers in Northern Ireland, of which 6,400 are engaged in Ballymena, with a further 2,000 in the rest of the constituency. That makes about 8,000 people employed in the public sector in North Antrim — not a lot of jobs, when you consider that there are 222,000 available. That is why I think it important that we target some of the 4,000 new jobs that will come on-stream as a result of the changes in government, and have them established in my constituency. Like other Members, I want my constituency to be identified as a key area, and to get a fair share.

What provoked me to establish this debate was not the publication of Sir George Bain’s important report; that took place a few months ago, and the report has since been under consideration. Rather, it was the rush to take from my constituency a number of the existing public-sector jobs. It amazes me that, though we are promised more public-sector jobs, Government — both this devolved Administration and the national one at Westminster — appear hell-bent on taking public-sector jobs from us and making opportunities even harder to obtain.

That is done against the backdrop of Northern Ireland’s facing one of the worst economic crises in its history.

The ‘Financial Times’ has carried out an in-depth analysis of employment and unemployment in Northern Ireland, and reported in its edition of Wednesday 21 2009, that dole queues on the south coast of England and in Ulster have doubled in the past six months. When compared with some of the newspapers in our own country that claim to carry out investigative journalism, that is a piece of real investigative journalism. Our newspapers would never uncover issues such as that.

The ‘Financial Times’ has examined the issue in depth, and has identified that Ulster and the south coast of England are facing one of the worst economic downturns in their history. Ballymoney, in my constituency, is identified as having a 99.3% increase in claimant cases to the Social Security Agency as a result of redundancies.

A large section of my constituency is starting to endure the ravages of unemployment. That will be made worse, not by any change in the housing market but as a result of decisions that the Executive and the Westminster Administration — our own Government — take to remove certain public-sector workers from their jobs.

Three important areas will suffer as a result of relocation issues. The first is the Health Service, in which a number of changes has already been identified. I received this week a letter from a constituent of mine Mr Chambers, who told me that Northern Ireland’s health and social services board will, as Members are aware, cease to exist in April 2009. After the publication

of the Bain Report, my constituent felt sure that some commissioning and support services would remain at local level and that there would, therefore, be continued employment of staff at local level. He has now heard that that may not be the case, with services being centralised in Belfast. That is a worrying matter for my constituent, because to travel to Belfast is not feasible for him.

That is only the detail of one of around 300 similar letters that I received on the Health Service-reform element of the review of public administration alone. People are extremely worried. Some people travel from as far away as Ballycastle to the County Hall in Ballymena to work in that service. People who travel from Ballymoney and parts of rural Ballymena to get to the County Hall for work are being told that under the review, jobs will be moved to Belfast, so they will have to travel to there. In many instances, that would double people's travel time to work, thus making their retaining their jobs unfeasible. I know that it is impossible for some people who are currently employed at County Hall to fulfil that criterion. I will return to that point in a moment.

Another area in which jobs are under threat and attack is in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs' (HMRC) office in Ballymena. Our Westminster Government control those jobs. There are 84 people employed there at Kilpatrick House, all of whom have been told that because of a review into which they were brought very late in the day, that office will close. Those jobs will move to Ballymena, Newry and Londonderry, and employees will have to travel if they want to keep their jobs.

I said I would return to a point: 45 people currently employed in Kilpatrick House are women, most of them part-time workers. Most of them have reasons for wanting to work locally in Ballymena, the principal one being because they are also raising a family and, therefore, need to be able to collect their children from school. That is the reason why those women wanted part-time jobs. If those part-time jobs go, they cannot travel to Belfast to take up jobs that are simply being relocated — jobs that should never have been reviewed and moved from Ballymena.

If one looks at the Deputy Speaker's constituency of East Londonderry, one sees that Coleraine has two offices for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Likewise, Newry has two offices, yet Ballymena's one, centralised office is to be closed. That is a scandal, and one to which the Government at Westminster ought not to have put their hands. I hope that progress can be made. I know that there is little that the Executive can do about it, other than to complain to Westminster. That should, nonetheless, be done, because that proposed relocation is an unfair act.

I sit on the Finance Committee, and we are regularly told that the most discriminated section of the Northern Ireland workforce is Protestant males between the ages of 16 and 25. Opportunities for Protestant males between those ages should be greatest in areas such as Ballymena and North Antrim, where they make up a large section of the population. Yet the jobs — the opportunities — in the public sector and the Civil Service are being removed from the constituency, and that is completely ironic.

Public-sector jobs are under attack following the Social Security Agency's strategic business review case. In my constituency, that agency employs 42 people in the Ballymena office, and 12 in the Ballymoney one. Staff in those offices have been told that a review is under way and that, under devolution, those jobs are going. Those jobs are not being lost, however, just centralised to Belfast, and, to me, that is incredible. Once again — against the backdrop of the Bain Report, which said that more public-sector jobs are required in North Antrim and in Ballymena — we are being told that the rug is to be pulled out from underneath our feet as regards public-sector jobs in that area.

We must get to grips with that. A message has to go out to Margaret Ritchie, the Minister with responsibility for social security, to the Health Minister, and from the Executive to Westminster, stating very clearly that those jobs must be retained, built on and sustained. At a time when the economy is in crisis, we must ensure that public-sector jobs can be depended upon; they cannot possibly be brought to an end in the way that has been identified by the proposals.

I, therefore, look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and I hope that he is able to give us some crumbs of comfort by way of a progress report on the Bain review. I hope that we very soon reach the point at which we start to see more public-sector opportunities develop as a result of the years of hard work that have brought us to this point.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for proposing this topic for debate. During the past three or four months — and I am sure that it is the same for other Members from the constituency — a day has hardly gone by in which I have not received letters concerning the loss of jobs in the public sector. The Member referred to a number of areas where that was the case, and it is not only the public sector in which jobs are at threat or being relocated to more urbanised areas outside our constituency. Obviously, a lot of jobs in the construction sector are at threat or have already been lost. Those statistics are reflected in the dole queues in Ballymoney.

Public-sector jobs are key to sustaining rural areas such as North Antrim. The Bain Report into public-sector jobs recognised that fact and concluded that at least 5,000 jobs should be moved away from Belfast, with North Antrim, and in particular Ballymena, getting its fair share. Ballymena already has many public-sector jobs in the health trust, the health and social services board, and the education and library board. Failure to retain or replace those public-sector jobs would be a disaster for the area. As the Member outlined, public-sector jobs are vital in times of economic difficulty.

The big losses that the area is facing include HMRC, where over 80 jobs are at risk; that would be a massive blow to the economy in the Ballymena area. The Northern Health and Social Services Board is one of the biggest employers in Ballymena, and workers there face great uncertainty. Last night, I met a constituent from Glenravel, who outlined the uncertainty that she and her family face. She works part time — she job-shares with a colleague — and it is unrealistic to expect her to travel to Belfast, day in, day out, for a job of that degree.

4.15 pm

The Social Security Agency's strategic business review is under way, but it no longer makes sense for jobs to be relocated out of North Antrim when jobs are being cut in Ballymena and Ballymoney. Dole queues have doubled in parts of the constituency; the Minister for Social Development must take cognisance of that and shelve those plans. This morning, I read in the 'Ballymena Guardian' that my colleague the Member for North Antrim Mr O'Loan is writing to the Social Security Agency about those proposals. He needs to speak to his party colleague who is a member of the Executive to ensure that those plans are shelved immediately, because they will cause massive stress in our constituency.

The onus is on the Executive to ensure that, especially in the present economic environment, the issue of public-sector jobs in North Antrim is dealt with delicately. There have been enough job losses in the area already. North Antrim is a large rural constituency, and it is unrealistic to expect someone from Waterfoot or Carry to travel to a part-time job in Belfast that has been relocated from Ballymena. The Executive must take into account the recommendations of the Bain Report and ensure that public-sector jobs are retained, built upon and not cut or relocated to Belfast and other areas. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I thank Mr Paisley Jnr for securing the Adjournment debate and for his excellent review of the situation. The Bain Report says that only one Northern Ireland Department's headquarters — the

Department of the Environment — should be relocated out of Belfast, and I understand that many other Members would want that to be located in their constituency. However, Ballymena has lost its hospital, which took away many jobs, and its military base, which took away much of the finance. Now it is to lose a lot of the other jobs in the immediate area.

The previous two Members who spoke in the debate have made it clear that it is not only people who live in Ballymena who will be affected, but people who live in the furthest ends of the constituency. Many people from places such as Moyle and Ballymoney come to work in Ballymena, and if those jobs are lost, where will those people go? Therefore, the economy of the area will be affected.

When an area loses public-sector jobs, it is only reasonable to expect that public-sector jobs should be relocated to that area at the earliest opportunity in order to undo any damage that has been done to the local economy. Members have already heard the statistics that show that there have been tremendous job losses in Ballymoney and Moyle. The knock-on effect for the shops and the area will be horrendous. If work is taken away from Ballymena, which is the core of where work is located in North Antrim, the knock-on effect will be devastating.

My other concern is that we have been told that the Government should consider the relocation of jobs out of Belfast because of the traffic situation. Those of us who have to travel through Sandyknowes every day know exactly the difficulties that will be faced. Will that situation be exacerbated by adding to the numbers of people who travel into that bottleneck and further down into Belfast? We need to be realistic and not add to the traffic congestion. Although it is the same distance, it is easier to travel from Belfast to Ballymena than it is to travel into Belfast from Ballymena.

I am sure that Mr Deputy Speaker — who is nodding his head — experiences that every day, as do I. We know the problems; will we add to them by taking jobs from Ballymena? I hope not.

People's concerns were mentioned in the debate, and people are concerned. I, like other Members, have had a tremendous number of requests by letter, phone and through individual contacts. Those people are concerned about their jobs, about young families, about the problem of the extra time involved in travelling to jobs in Belfast, and the lack of family time that will be available. In this day and generation, when we know that the family is so important, that is an issue that must be considered.

I have another concern about taking jobs out of Ballymena: Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, and their surrounding villages would become dormitories without a heart because there would be no places of

occupation. For that reason alone, we must take a very serious look at the entire public-sector jobs situation.

Mr O’Loan: I congratulate Mr Paisley Jnr for obtaining the Adjournment debate on a very important issue for our constituency. The contribution that public-sector jobs make to local economies, particularly in the more dispersed and rural parts of Northern Ireland, is very important, and the Government have a responsibility and a duty to behave equitably.

It may already have been quoted — I apologise for missing the start of the debate — that the Ballymena travel-to-work area has a low volume of public-sector jobs. Ballymena is an important regional hub; it is so defined in the regional development strategy and in the Bain Report, to which I will return later. Public-sector jobs are dispersed across North Antrim, but Ballymena is particularly important and will remain so.

Members know that the decision has been taken to close the HM Revenue and Customs office, with the loss of more than 70 jobs. Fears have been expressed about the effect of changes under the RPA to the Northern Health and Social Services Board, which employs 200; to the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which has a similar level of employment; and the latest concern is around the strategic business review of the Social Security Agency. Therefore, there are major fears that even standing still will prove difficult.

The Minister’s decisions on health last week leave significant questions unanswered. He said that most staff who do not obtain work in the new headquarters of the various organisations involved will remain in their current locations, and that Ballymena is one of those. However, we do not know exactly to what proportion of the current staff that will apply, or the logistics involved, which leaves considerable room for concern.

I note that the Regional Health and Social Care Board headquarters will be based in Belfast, as will the headquarters of the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being, and the Regional Business Services Organisation. I see that the Patient and Client Council headquarters will be in Antrim. I have nothing against Antrim, but, above all else, we must have a strategic view of that decision, and that strategic view was provided by Bain. Any deviation from the Bain recommendations should worry us greatly.

One of Bain’s key statements is that when opportunities are taken to set up new organisations or to disperse or restructure existing ones — which, in effect, creates new organisations — there should be a presumption against housing those bodies in Belfast.

Health decisions — and they are decisions, not proposals — state explicitly that Bain’s recommendations have not been taken into

consideration because no Bain proposals have been brought to the Executive. Those decisions are unfortunate; I will say more on them later. Much that is, at yet, unknown about the statement that a significant number of jobs will remain local must become known.

As Members are aware, education and library boards are to be subsumed into the new education and skills authority. That poses a major question mark over many jobs at the North Eastern Education and Library Board.

Mr McKay mentioned, quite rightly, the fact that I have made a submission to the Social Security Agency about its strategic business review. I have major concerns about the content of that review, including its lack of a place for Ballymena. To reduce the town to a mere footnote in a major strategic document, which raises a question mark over what will be there, is strange and quite unsatisfactory.

Part-time staff whose jobs might be relocated, many of whom have caring responsibilities, have been told that their new jobs could be 20 or 30 miles away; that is far from satisfactory. However, I am aware that the process is consultative and that the Minister has made it clear that no decisions have been taken. I have absolute confidence that the Minister in that case will be one who listens.

I want to comment further on the Bain Report, in which I have a great deal of interest; I am hugely supportive of what Sir George Bain has done. He was commissioned to write the report by the previous Finance Minister, Peter Robinson, who is now the First Minister, and I believe that Mr Robinson was highly committed to that project. Bain says that his proposals are modest, realistic and capable of achievement. He maintains that 3,500 jobs, which are only about 3% of the public-sector establishment, could be relocated during a five-year period. That should not be undoable.

I was surprised and shocked by the attitude of the present Finance Minister, Mr Dodds, during the Assembly debate on the Bain Report; he was distinctly cool about its outcome. He foresees that it will give rise to many financial and value-for-money problems rather than seeing it as an opportunity to achieve equity. Significant ongoing restructuring provides opportunities to take action that may not have existed in the past and perhaps not in the future.

An Executive subgroup and a secretariat to service it were to be established to drive that process. That has not happened. Indeed, as yet, no report on adopting or implementing the Bain Report has come to the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member’s time is almost up.

Mr O’Loan: I was disappointed that almost as soon as its creation had been announced, the Victims’

Commission was set up in Belfast — against the standard, which should apply, that there should be a presumption against the establishment of new bodies there.

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

Mr O'Loan: I will leave the matter there, Mr Deputy Speaker. If Members want to take decisive action, I urge them — and in particular, the Member who introduced the debate and his colleagues — to speak seriously to the Minister of Finance and Personnel about the thorough implementation of the Bain Report.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: The debate demonstrates that all parties in North Antrim are in unison, which, I suppose, should be celebrated. That, of course, is a matter of what flag one wants to fly.

Every Member here tonight wants to fly the one flag and say that, as far as possible, it is the responsibility of both the Executive and the British authorities to maintain people's jobs at this hour of crisis.

4.30 pm

It should be clearly underscored, as other Members have done, that the matter affects not only residents of Ballymena. We are dealing with people from as far away as the Moyle, Ballycastle, Ballymoney, the villages of that part of mid-Antrim, and those who travel from the other direction. However, most of the people whom I know who work in the affected offices come from the upper part of the county.

Those people are being told that they will have to travel as far as Belfast if they want to retain their jobs. I am sure that we can all imagine the effect that that would have on families. People already have an early enough start to get their children out to school and to their schoolhouse, and to get to their own place of employment in Ballymena.

Officials have suggested to me that the jobs are not being done away with and that they are all still there. They are not still there, because the workers concerned may as well have been told that they will not be able to maintain their job unless they can shift their home nearer to Belfast. Those jobs cannot be maintained by people who live in North Antrim. We must face up to that in defence.

I have talked to the highest authorities on the other side of the water — I will not name them — about an issue that I will also raise here today. When those matters came under consideration, one Department that has offices in Ballymena was told that its operation would not change. However, after a few days, and after discussions had taken place with other offices, my sources informed me that that Ballymena office was to be closed.

It had not been brought into the negotiations, and its voice had not been heard. Indeed, the voice that that office had listened to had provided reassurance that it was not on the list of proposed closures. That office has now been given the same message as the others. That is not right; everyone who has a stake in those jobs should have been treated equally. Why was everyone not treated equally? Why was each person not given the same opportunity to fight for the job that is his or her lifeblood?

Everyone in Northern Ireland is particularly interested in job security at this time, and many have never been unemployed before. Some people face a frightening horizon that is causing much heart-searching. God alone knows the pressures on families, who fear that they may have no employment and lose what they enjoyed before. We must face up to that terrible and serious threat.

I welcome the fact that all parties are united on the issue, and I trust that the Executive will hear and heed our representations. However, we must particularly put as much pressure as possible on the United Kingdom Government at Westminster, who know the consequences of the report that Mr O'Loan has mentioned. They know what was supposed to happen, but that matter was not taken care of, and it seems that the road that they intended to take is blocked and that substantial barriers have been put in the way of ever removing that blockage.

I trust that the authorities will heed the debate and that people employed in public-sector jobs in North Antrim will be able to contribute to the needs of the Province, as they have so ably done in the past.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I apologise on behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, who is unable to attend today. He has asked me to respond on behalf of his Department, and I am happy to do so.

I welcome this Adjournment debate. I thank the Member who tabled the debate and all Members who contributed. It is the second time in the past few months that the Assembly has had the opportunity to discuss public-sector jobs. I recall that a similar motion was debated on 21 October 2008, soon after Professor George Bain published his detailed report on the independent review of policy on the location of public-sector jobs.

Unsurprisingly, during both debates, Members discussed the complexity of the location of jobs. Those complexities are reinforced by the genuine interests of Members and their constituents. As an elected representative, I have the same responsibility as the Member for North Antrim Ian Paisley Jnr — to do the best for my constituents, the local economy and employment levels, particularly during these difficult

times. Similarly, given the difficult financial circumstances, we must be conscious of value for money when debating the size and location of the public sector.

Given the current economic climate, the importance of the retention of employment and the creation of jobs has probably never been more keenly felt in Northern Ireland. Professor Bain's report — which was published in early autumn — emphasised the need for better regional economic balance and recommended the establishment of public-sector jobs in six locations, including Ballymena and Coleraine. Therefore, Mr Paisley Jnr has the comfort of knowing that those areas might benefit in the event of any future movement of public-sector jobs or Civil Service jobs.

However, Professor Bain acknowledged the difficulties of relocation and recommended that, given the varying degrees of success and failure of other relocation projects and the absence of evidence in the rest of the UK or in the Republic of Ireland to prove the case, the concept should be piloted. He suggested the introduction of several pilot projects, the findings of which should determine long-term policy on location. Furthermore, he was keen to pursue the concept of flexible working in order to address issues such as efficiency, work/life balance and sustainability.

During the previous debate on public-sector jobs, it is fair to say that the House broadly accepted Professor Bain's principle of relocation. Moreover, his report was acknowledged as a useful framework to help the Executive reach decisions on location. Those decisions have still not been taken. However, the debate emphasised the divergence of views between those who want to pursue a policy of relocation proactively and those who prefer to progress more cautiously. Subsequently, a motion was passed that called upon the Finance Minister to report to the Executive and to the Assembly on how to address the matter of location, taking account of the various consequences, not least value for money and affordability.

As the Finance Minister said at the time; difficult times require difficult choices, and it does not get much more difficult than the financial and economic situation in which we currently find ourselves.

As I understand it, Minister Dodds is well advanced in preparing a paper for discussion by the Executive, having considered the views expressed by Members, other Ministers, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel. Representations have also been made by a number of local councils, including those in Ards, Armagh, Banbridge, Down, Dungannon, Limavady, Lisburn and North Down, all of which are keen to encourage employment in their areas and are concerned that they have been excluded by Professor

Bain. I look forward to seeing the Minister's proposals on how he intends to move the debate on.

I will now return to the specific issue of North Antrim; in particular, the Ballymena travel-to-work area. I understand that the number of public-sector jobs there is 14 per 100 people in the working-age population, a figure that is similar, interestingly, to the ratio in the Coleraine travel-to-work area, which covers part of the North Antrim constituency. That means that Ballymena and Coleraine are faring better than, for example, mid-Ulster, Newry, and Enniskillen, but are lagging behind Craigavon, Londonderry and Omagh, where there is a higher incidence per head of the working-age population.

Ballymena also hosts the main offices of a number of public-sector bodies, including health and education bodies; therefore, until final decisions are taken on the composition and location of, for example, review of public administration-related organisations, it is inevitable that public-sector staff there, as in other parts of Northern Ireland, will be concerned about their future. It is therefore important that those concerns are understood, and managed appropriately.

I will now deal with a number of the points that Members made during the debate. As stated by the proposer of the motion, Professor Bain did not recommend moving jobs from one area to another. He recommended that the headquarters of new public-sector bodies should be located in those areas. As I have said, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has a paper at an advanced stage of preparation, which he intends to bring to the Executive shortly.

A number of Members, including Mr O'Loan, made the point that, because there is no firm Executive policy, there is nothing for organisations to take into account when considering locations, other than their own particular reasoning and rationale. No Executive-wide policy on the issue has been determined. Until we receive that paper from the Finance Minister, have a debate in the Executive, and reach a conclusion, we are left with that situation. However, I assure Members that that is not far distant.

Mr O'Loan also described the Minister as being cool about the report. I think that that is unfair to him, because he is bringing forward a paper, and we will only be able to measure that when we see what is actually proposed, and what the downstream consequences are for each individual area.

Reverend Coulter made the point that when people talk about jobs in Ballymena, that does not mean that the jobs are filled by people from Ballymena. A number of Members, including Dr Paisley and others, made the point that North Antrim is a large constituency, geographically, and has a dispersed rural community. People travel significant distances,

perhaps from far north of Ballymena, to work there. Consequently, moving to other locations will have a significant impact.

A number of Members referred to the Social Security Agency's proposals. I will certainly bring this debate to the attention of the Minister for Social Development, because I know that the issue affects people throughout the community in a number of offices. I can say that the officials from my Department who operate in those offices will all be staying in their current locations. Sadly, we are actually experiencing a growth in those jobs, because of current circumstances. Things will not be changing with respect to the Department for Employment and Learning on that front.

4.45 pm

Rev Dr Robert Coulter also talked about the area becoming full of dormitory towns. That is a phenomenon of the developed world, in which the working heart of an area is suddenly transformed by housing estates from which people travel in and out. That takes the heart and soul out of an area, and we have seen that happen in towns in the Province.

On the health side, a commissioning group will remain in Ballymena. The headquartering of bodies is one thing, but there will not be an evacuation of health-related jobs from the Ballymena area. The precise details have still to be determined, but it is my understanding that a commissioning group will be retained and will operate in that area.

The proposer of the Adjournment topic mentioned several bodies, but until such times as an Executive-wide policy is in place, those bodies, if they are taking decisions on their location, will do so without a reference or compass to guide them in any particular area. People are expressing concern. We have had a flood of correspondence from other district councils claiming that they have been left out. Sir George Bain identified six areas that should be the recipients of 3,000 to 4,000 new jobs, although I suspect that there will be intense pressure to cap or stop public-sector growth in the coming months. However, Londonderry, Omagh, Craigavon, Newry, Ballymena and Coleraine were named as the areas that would benefit from such a policy if it were to be introduced. Therefore some areas will feel that they could lose out. However, the purpose of Sir George Bain's report is not simply to strip jobs out of one place and send them to another.

Some Members referred to the Revenue and Customs jobs in Ballymena. That situation is controlled by the Treasury at Westminster, but I have little doubt that the Department of Finance and Personnel will draw that matter and this debate to the Treasury's attention. The loss of 70 or 80 jobs is substantial, but not all those people will lose their jobs; some may be able to travel.

There is a limit to the economic viability of travelling to work; that applies to the Social Security Agency's proposals as well. Civil Service guidelines outline the terms and conditions under which people would be asked to move. It is ironic that even as we encourage green environmental policies, there are proposals to increase commuting. That is something of a contradiction.

As Dr Paisley said, there is no doubt that all parties are united and are reflecting their constituents' concerns on this matter. The Minister of Finance and Personnel will receive a full report on this debate so that he can take Members' views into account when completing the paper that he will bring to the Executive shortly.

We must direct our attention to obtaining a modest and phased process that will ensure balance. There will be no knee-jerk reactions; the attempts at significant movements that were made in the Irish Republic did not work terribly well and, indeed, have almost ground to a halt.

The Scottish Parliament have succeeded in moving approximately 2,500 jobs, but half of those jobs were moved from Edinburgh to Glasgow. Obviously, that is not the type of provision that Members had in mind.

We must be realistic; this will be a slow process. If I understand Members correctly, they want a fair share and some equity in all of this. We all know that policies develop over a long period of years; bodies start here and end there. Under the review of public administration, we face a major period of change, and there will be knock-on effects from that. Many decisions remain to be taken. It is a mistake to assume that they will necessarily be bad for North Antrim; I do not believe that that will be the case.

I thank Members for their participation, and I assure them that I will make the Minister of Finance and Personnel fully aware of their concerns. I wait, with interest, for the Minister's paper to be presented to the Executive and the discussions that we will have on that.

Adjourned at 4.52 pm.

