
NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 2 February 2010

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Considering the nature of the business and the Bill this morning, it is important that Members of this House declare that they are members of local government. The onus is on Members to make those declarations.

I call on the Minister of the Environment to move the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Moved — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

Clause 1 (Functions to include power to enter contracts)

The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 1, line 19, leave out subsection (3) and insert

“(3) A provision of this Part does not apply to a contract which a district council enters into before the commencement of that provision.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 2, page 2, line 26, leave out from beginning to “case,” in line 28. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

No 6: In clause 16, page 10, line 23, at end insert

“() the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions)(Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (NI 3);” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

No 9: After clause 17 insert

“CHAPTER 5

POWER TO MODIFY LEGISLATION

Power to modify legislation in connection with local government re-organisation

—(1) The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary or expedient for the purpose of preparing for, or giving full effect to, the reorganisation of local government provided for by the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 (c. 7).

(2) In this section ‘local government legislation’ and ‘rating legislation’ have the meanings given by section 16(2).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

At the outset, I declare an interest. A number of the amendments arise from recommendations that were made by the Committee for the Environment during the Bill’s Committee Stage. I thank the Environment Committee for its very helpful recommendations and for its timely consideration of the Bill.

The first group of amendments is mainly technical in nature and tidies up loose ends. The amendments do not involve any change of policy. Amendment No 1 concerns the commencement of provisions in relation to contracts of councils. When the Bill was originally drafted, it was envisaged that local government waste management groups may have been in a position shortly thereafter to enter into significant waste infrastructure contracts. Therefore, clause 1(3) was drafted to enable any contract that was entered into by a district council or waste management group after the date on which the Bill was introduced to the Assembly, which was 22 June 2009, to be a certified contract under Part 1 of the Bill, provided that the certification requirements mentioned in clause 3 were satisfied within six weeks of the Bill coming into operation.

Those waste infrastructure contracts are not now expected to be entered into until later this year at the earliest. Therefore, the existing provision in clause 1(3) is no longer necessary. In Committee, the Environment Committee recommended that it be amended. I agree with that recommendation. The proposed amendment provides that the Part 1 provisions will apply only to contracts entered into after the provisions have commenced.

A knock-on effect of that amendment is that the provision in clause 2(5), which requires a six-week certification period for contracts entered into before the commencement of the Bill, is no longer needed. Therefore, I propose to amend clause 2(5) to provide that in relation to a council contract the certification period means a six-week period from the date that the council entered into the contract.

I move on to amendment No 6. Clause 16(1) provides that regulations made by my Department in relation to the constitution and functions of statutory transition committees may provide for any local government or rating legislation that applies to existing councils to apply, with or without modifications, to statutory transition committees or not to apply to existing councils.

Clause 16(2) defines local government legislation. The proposed amendment extends the definition to include the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2002, which enables my Department to pay general grants to councils. I propose to include that Order in the definition of local government legislation so that, if necessary, my Department may make payments of general grant to statutory transition committees before the new councils are formed.

I come to the final amendment in this group. The power currently provided for in clause 16 will permit my Department to amend rating legislation only in relation to existing councils and the statutory transition committees. However, a recent review of rating legislation, which was conducted jointly by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, highlighted the fact that, during the transitional reorganisation phase, it will be necessary to amend rating legislation in relation to the new councils as well as existing councils and the statutory transition committees. The amendment, which would insert a new clause after clause 17, will provide such a power and ensure a smooth transition of responsibility for the calculation and setting of district rates. Those are the group 1 amendments.

Mr Speaker: Before inviting the Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment to address group 1 amendments, I remind Members that there are three groups of amendments. We will debate each group in turn. The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2, 6 and 9, which deal with the commencement of certain provisions and powers to amend legislation. The second debate will be on amendment Nos 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8, which deal with the statutory transition committees and severance payments to councillors. The third debate will be on amendment Nos 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14, which deal mainly with giving councils additional waste management powers.

I remind Members who intend to speak during the debate that they should address all the amendments in each group on which they wish to comment. When the initial debate on each group is completed, any substantive amendments in that group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Question on clauses to stand part will be put at the appropriate points of the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mrs D Kelly): I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council and of the transition committee of which Craigavon is a part.

On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Consideration Stage of the Bill, which addresses several issues that need to be resolved in

order to bring about the RPA process in relation to local government. The Bill will clarify the powers of district councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector; enable councils to acquire land other than by agreement for waste management purposes; and make preliminary arrangements for the reorganisation of local government. It will also establish statutory transition committees for the purpose of preparing for and giving full effect to the reorganisation of local government, and it will enable the Department to make regulations to provide for severance payments to be made to councillors who resign during a specified period.

The Bill was referred to the Committee on 1 July 2009. Members were acutely aware of the need to progress the legislation quickly and to keep the Committee Stage as short as possible, while still conducting the necessary detailed scrutiny, making recommendations and prompting amendments where it was deemed necessary. The good working relationship that was established between the Committee and departmental officials helped the process and paid dividends when it came to agreeing recommendations on amendments.

However, there are two issues that I want to mention. First, the Committee, having been asked to report quickly on the Bill, did so in 33 days, so it is disappointing that more than three months elapsed until the Bill reached Consideration Stage. Secondly, although the Minister informed the Committee that he would take all its recommendations on board, in light of the time that it has taken for the Bill to reach Consideration Stage, it would have helped the Committee to have had copies of the amendments in order to consider them in detail, rather than getting them through normal Assembly channels, which left insufficient time.

Furthermore, before I talk specifically about the amendments, I wish to point out that, throughout its evidence sessions, the Committee heard local councils stress the importance of consultation on the secondary legislation that will flow from the Bill. The Committee wholeheartedly agrees, and it urges the Department to be mindful of that point when implementing the Bill.

I shall now comment on the first group of amendments, which are technical in nature. In its report on the Bill, the Committee recommended that the legislation would be improved by the exclusion of clause 1(3). Members felt that making Part 1 applicable on a date several months before the Bill will be enacted would be inappropriate, and I welcome amendment No 1, as outlined by the Minister, which will address that discrepancy.

In Committee, the Department advised the Committee of its intention to propose amendment No 2, which the Committee accepts.

Amendment No 9 proposes that, after clause 17, a new clause should be inserted that grants the “Power to modify legislation”, which the Committee welcomes.

On 9 December 2009, the Minister wrote to the Committee to advise members that the Minister of Finance and Personnel was seeking an amendment to the Bill with respect to rating. The Committee has been particularly concerned about the impact of some elements of the Bill on ratepayers, so it queried the exact nature of that amendment. The Committee was reassured by the Minister’s reply, which indicated that the amendment would provide for the smooth transition of responsibility for calculating and setting the district rate and that any legislation under that provision would be subject to affirmative resolution. However, I shall refer to the relevant amendment later.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an Bhille. I shall speak in favour of the Bill, and I echo the Chairperson’s commendation of the work of the Committee.

I welcome the opportunity to speak at Consideration Stage, which will form a central plank in determining how local government reforms impact on councils. The Committee’s aim throughout its scrutiny of the Bill was to ensure that it brought acceptable legislation to the Chamber so that local government will be equipped to deliver for local communities when reorganisation and the transfer of powers finally come about.

The amendments in group 1 and group 2 relate to technical issues, including powers to enable councils to enter into long-term service contracts with the private sector, thus ensuring that, in the future, councils will comply with relevant regulations and will discharge council functions that ultimately benefit ratepayers. Amendment Nos 6 and 9 will give powers to the Department to amend and modify regulations, particularly with regard to rating. Given the concerns that were raised in Committee about how such regulations might affect ratepayers, those powers must be welcomed. We believe that the amendments will be welcomed by all at council level, because they will afford local authorities that are involved in the transfer of local government powers an opportunity to plan ahead with certainty at an early stage and to deliver council functions efficiently and effectively.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the Bill’s progress to Consideration Stage. There are some important aspects of the Bill, particularly for waste management and for the ability of local authorities to enter into long-term contracts, which, ultimately, will benefit ratepayers. We have to keep our focus on that aspiration. In addition, the new transition committees will be given

powers to assist in as smooth a transfer under the RPA process as possible. Although the Ulster Unionist Party indicated its preference for a shadow model, that did not reflect the view of the Assembly. Therefore, we are trying to work constructively to see that there is a need for the transitionary process.

I declare an interest as a member of Carrickfergus Borough Council, and I wish to put on record that my dad is a member of Larne Borough Council. It is appropriate that I declare those interests.

10.45 am

I support amendment No 1, because there is no logic in having the date 22 June 2009 in the Bill. That date merely reflects the delays in the reorganisation process, and it has now been superseded by a considerable distance.

I support amendment No 2. In Committee, there was no argument about why the six-week period should be entered into for extending the certification period.

I support amendment No 6, which is a technical adjustment to ensure that the Bill is more complete.

Amendment No 9 is a significant new amendment. Like the Chairperson of the Committee, I would have preferred to have had more time to consider it in Committee. It contains some sweeping powers, with wording such as:

“The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary”.

Like the Committee Chairperson and other members of the Committee, I seek the Minister’s assurance that that power will be exercised using the affirmative resolution process, so that it can be clearly seen that balanced decisions are being made and so that there will be support in the Assembly for such changes before they are introduced. I understand that, when we go through such a sweeping reorganisation process, issues may arise that need to be dealt with, and I see that provision as being enabling legislation for that to happen. Therefore, I seek confirmation that the affirmative resolution method will be used.

It would also be helpful if the Minister could give us some examples of why the new clause is needed. Ultimately, I would be content with the amendment if there is an affirmative resolution process and the provision is exercised in appropriate circumstances.

Mr Ford: At the outset, I declare an interest as a serving member of Antrim Borough Council. I am not sure how many times I have declared that or whether it is a public secret, but I will at least get it on the record for this debate.

As a member of the Environment Committee, I think that it is rather unfortunate that, frequently, when

we debate legislation, the only Members who speak at Consideration Stage are those who have been members of the relevant Committee and will have had all kinds of discussions about it anyway. Nevertheless, as a member of the Committee, I welcome the willingness of the Minister's officials to engage with us on the detail of a number of matters.

As somebody who has been connected with other aspects of politics over the past week or so and has referred to the difficulties of actually getting any real business done in the Chamber, I acknowledge that we are doing real business this morning. We are carrying out our legislative responsibilities and following up on work that was done, as the Chairperson said, expeditiously but, nonetheless, effectively by the Committee some time ago. The Committee and the officials concerned should pat one another on the back for managing to achieve that much. The Speaker may tell me off for straying too far at this point, but that particularly applied to some of the issues that we will be considering in the next stage of the debate, given that there were extended discussions about items such as transition committees.

As the Chairperson said, it is a regret that we did not see the full wording of the Minister's amendments in time for the Committee to give proper consideration to them, especially given the time that expired between the Committee preparing its report and Consideration Stage. Nonetheless, we must deal with the amendments that are presented to the House today.

I believe that I highlighted in Committee and possibly at Second Stage that, as it stands, clause 1(3) facilitates an extremely dubious process by which it may or may not be possible to backdate retrospective approval to a particular date. It is entirely dubious to tell any public body — local council or otherwise — that a contract that is, at this point, *ultra vires* could become *intra vires* if the Bill in its current form were passed by the Assembly. I am not quite sure how legislative draftsmen got to that particular point. However, I welcome the fact that views that were expressed have been taken on board and that that provision is to be removed.

It is one thing to say, as amendment No 1 does, that a contract can be backdated to before the commencement of the provision after the Bill has become an Act; it is another thing entirely to pick a date — some date in history — and to suggest to councils that they might do something illegal but could get away with it if the law is changed as they had hoped. I welcome the fact that subsection (3) has been addressed.

Amendment Nos 2 and 6 are, relatively speaking, consequential, tidying-up matters that do not require particular discussion.

I agree entirely with Mr Beggs's point, and I will certainly seek the Minister's assurance that

amendment No 9, which introduces a new clause, conveys powers that are so significant that it would not be acceptable if they were approved by any means other than affirmative resolution in the House. Given the relatively sweeping nature of the proposed new clause to be inserted after clause 17, it must not simply be dealt with under the normal method for approving regulations, which go solely to the Committee for approval and not to the House. I trust that the Minister will give the House that assurance. I welcome the progress that we have made so far.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank Members for their comments thus far. The Committee Chairperson indicated that there is a degree of unhappiness that the Bill was not brought to the Assembly sooner, given the Committee's response time. I assure the Chairperson that that problem did not emanate from the Department of the Environment. I have pressed for all legislation that deals with local government to be brought to the House so that MLAs can hear it, consider it and have as great an opportunity as possible to test it rigorously and fully. At no point have I been responsible for any delay in bringing any of that legislation to the House.

I will continue to ensure that reform of local government remains high on the Executive's agenda. I trust that, when matters are resolved fully and properly, there will be a much smoother flow of business in the House. If there is not and the Assembly does not carry out more work, that will damage its credibility in the public eye. I for one do not want to be associated with an Executive and an Assembly that do not work as well as they should do.

Members raised a number of issues. The Department commenced consultation on proposed regulations on 2 November 2009. Comments were due to be received by 29 January 2010. Proposed regulations will, among other things, require a council, if entering into a certified contract, to issue a copy of the certificate to a local government auditor and to each person with whom the council has entered into the contract and to ensure that the certificate that is issued is signed by the council's chief finance officer. My Department will take on board the comments that it received in response to its consultation document. It will bring regulations into operation as soon as possible after Royal Assent.

The detail of severance arrangements for councillors will be set out in subordinate legislation. I intend to carry out full consultation on those arrangements. If statutory transition committees are to be able to carry out functions that are required of them, it will not be possible to consult on subordinate legislation for them because they need to be established as soon as possible.

In response to the issue that Mr Ford and Mr Beggs raised, I say that the power that is currently provided in

chapter 3 of the Bill permits the Department to make amendments only to rating legislation for existing councils and statutory transition committees. The review of the rating legislation, which was carried out by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel, highlighted the requirement to make amendments in relation to the new councils, existing councils and the statutory transition committees during the transitional reorganisation phase. The legislation made under that power can and will provide for a smooth transition of responsibility for the calculation and setting of the district rate. It is proposed that any legislation brought under that provision will be subject to draft affirmative procedure in the Assembly.

I trust that Members are content with how I dealt with that matter. They have full trust in the existing Minister of the Environment, but Ministers change from time to time. Members rightly sought the application of both belt and braces, in case the future brings a less benign Minister to the office.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 (Certified contracts to be intra vires)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 2 has been debated and is consequential to amendment No 1.

Amendment No 2 made: In page 2, line 26, leave out from beginning to “case,” in line 28. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 3 to 12 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 3, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 4, 5, 7 and 8. Those amendments deal with statutory transition committees and severance payments to councillors.

New Clause

The Minister of the Environment: I beg to move amendment No 3: After clause 12, insert the following new clause

“Referral to Department where consent refused or granted subject to conditions

— (1) This section applies where—

(a) the consent of a statutory transition committee is required in relation to a proposed disposal or contract of an existing council; and

(b) that consent is refused by the statutory transition committee or is given subject to conditions.

(2) The existing council may refer the decision of the statutory transition committee to the Department.

(3) Where the decision of a statutory transition committee is referred to the Department under this section, the Department may—

- (a) confirm that decision;
- (b) if consent has been given subject to conditions, amend or revoke any such condition;
- (c) if consent has been refused, grant consent unconditionally or subject to conditions.

(4) The decision of the Department under this section in relation to any consent or conditions—

(a) has effect for the purposes of this Chapter (except this section) as if made by the statutory transition committee; and

(b) is final.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4: In clause 14, page 9, line 11, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Those regulations shall ensure that—

(a) the statutory transition committee in relation to the new council for the district of Belfast consists of members of the predecessor council and members of Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council;

(b) the statutory transition committee in relation to any other new council consists of members of the predecessor councils.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 5: In clause 14, page 9, line 17, leave out ‘predecessor council’ and insert ‘council mentioned in subsection (4)’. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 7: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

“Guidance to statutory transition committees

—(1) The Department may issue guidance to statutory transition committees as to the exercise of their functions.

(2) It is the duty of a statutory transition committee to have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

No 8: In clause 17, page 11, line 5, at end insert

“(2A) Where the method of calculating the amount of severance payment depends on length of service, the regulations must provide that any period during which a councillor was a member of—

(a) the Assembly, or

(b) the House of Commons,

shall be disregarded.” — [*Mr Kinahan.*]

The Minister of the Environment: Clauses 10 to 13 will enable my Department to make directions to provide that an existing council will not dispose of any land or enter into any contracts above specified sums unless that council has the consent of a statutory transition committee. At Committee Stage, the Committee for the Environment recommended that an amendment be made to those provisions to provide that, where consent from a statutory transition committee is refused, the council concerned may refer the matter to my Department to consider and decide the outcome. I agree with that recommendation, and amendment No 3 will enable an existing council to refer to my

Department any matter to which its statutory transition committee did not give consent or gave consent subject to conditions. Where such referrals are made, the decision of my Department will be final.

Clause 14(4) provides that the regulations to be made by my Department to establish the statutory transition committees will ensure that the statutory transition committee for an existing council will consist of members of the predecessor council or councils. During Committee Stage, members of the Committee for the Environment pointed out that, as fairly significant areas in the existing local government districts of Castlereagh and Lisburn will transfer to the new government district of Belfast, it was important that the citizens of Castlereagh and Lisburn should have a say and be represented on the Belfast statutory transition committee. The Committee recommended that the Bill be amended to provide that the Belfast statutory transition committee should include members from Castlereagh and Lisburn councils. I agree with that recommendation, and I propose, therefore, to amend clause 14(4) to provide that my Department's regulations will ensure such representation on the Belfast statutory transition committee.

11.00 am

As a consequence of amendment No 4, I also propose to amend clause 14(5)(a). In making regulations to establish statutory transition committees and to provide for the appointment of the chairpersons and members, my Department may also legislate for the number of members to be appointed from each predecessor council and, in the case of the Belfast statutory transition committee, the number of members from Belfast City Council, Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council.

Amendment No 7 proposes to insert a new clause after clause 16, and clauses 14 to 16 will enable my Department to make regulations to establish statutory transition committees and to set out their constitution and functions. The regulations will provide for the functions of statutory transition committees by applying, with or without modifications, local government and rating legislation that applies to existing councils.

In addition to such functions, statutory transition committees will be required to carry out other duties to prepare for and give full effect to the reorganisation of local government. For example, they will be required to appoint senior staff designate for the new councils and to carry out preparatory work in community planning. There may be occasions when it will be necessary for my Department to issue guidance to statutory transition committees when carrying out such functions. Amendment No 7 will enable such guidance to be issued and will require statutory transition committees to have regard to that guidance.

Amendment No 8, tabled by Mr Kinahan and Mr McCallister, would provide that, where the calculation of a severance payment to a councillor depends on the length of his or her service, the regulations providing for severance payments to be made must provide that any period when the councillor was an Assembly Member or a member of the House of Commons will not be counted. I agree with that proposal, but I will wish to amend it to include any period when a councillor was a member of the European Parliament. I propose, therefore, to forward that amendment to be tabled at Further Consideration Stage. I will also require clarity from those Members as to whether the amendment includes the 1982 to 1986 Assembly or the bodies that sat from 1973 to 1975.

That concludes my explanation of the proposed amendments in group 2.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: As the Minister said, the second group of amendments relates to reorganisation and, more specifically, to statutory transition committees and severance payments.

Amendment No 3, which inserts a new clause after clause 12, is generally welcomed by the Committee. In its report, members agreed to recommend an amendment to the Bill to allow for an appeals mechanism through which councils could challenge decisions made by statutory transition committees where there was disagreement. The Department indicated that it would be willing to introduce an amendment to that effect. Therefore, it is good to see that that recommendation has been taken on board.

I referred earlier to the lack of communication on the detail of the amendments coming to the Committee in sufficient time to allow us to consider them. It would have been helpful and constructive for the Committee to have had an opportunity to debate amendment No 3, and I regret that the Department did not make that possible. I note the Minister's desire to have other legislation on the review of public administration before the House at an earlier opportunity than has been the case to date.

The Committee also welcomes amendment Nos 4 and 5. At Committee Stage, members expressed concern that although clause 14, as drafted, provides clear guidance on the membership of the statutory transition committees for most of the new councils, it is ambiguous on the statutory transition committee for the new greater Belfast council. As Members know, that statutory transition committee is not being created but is subsuming areas of two other existing councils, Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council. Consequently, members stressed the importance of ensuring that citizens from those areas are represented adequately on the Belfast statutory transition committee.

I note that the Committee also raised that concern about clause 9, but it recognised that the amendments to clause 14 address the issue adequately.

Mr Weir: I declare a range of interests. I am a member of North Down Borough Council, the North Down and Ards statutory transition committee, the policy development panel A under the Department of the Environment, which has been dealing with the governance arrangements of the statutory transition committees, and vice-president of NILGA.

Having declared all those interests, I am inclined to sit down, having made a fairly lengthy speech already and having, perhaps, said more than other Members.

I want to deal with several of the amendments, all of which are to be welcomed. As a member of the Committee for the Environment, I appreciate that the Committee would have liked to have had sight of the detail of the proposed amendments as early as possible, but we should not be churlish. The proposed amendments are very sensible and reflect some of the detail that was teased out by the Committee.

Amendment No 3 deals with the referral powers of the Department. The Bill provides that the transition committees must give their approval to the disposal of land or major capital projects, and that is very sensible. I am a member of a transition committee that has a natural fit — there is a degree of harmony between North Down and Ards. However, I am aware that that may not be the case in every other part of the country. There may be disagreements between councils, or situations may arise in which councillors from outgoing councils have “legacy ambitions” and seek to leverage large amounts of expenditure into their areas, so that a wider future council will be tied in to major capital projects. The Department’s thinking is that capital projects should not be stymied, but should be judged on their own merits, irrespective of RPA. Consequently, the restriction that the Bill puts in place to ensure that the transition committees will provide a degree of sanction is very wise.

However, the flip side of that argument — and the purpose of amendment No 3 — would occur if a transition committee unjustly tried to hold back the disposal of land or a capital project. One can envisage a scenario in which councils with different opinions could get into a tit-for-tat situation:

“we won’t approve your sale of this if you don’t approve our sale of the other.”

The mathematics of many of the transition committees means that there is a danger of gamesmanship, localism or parochialism, which goes against the spirit of trying to move forward with RPA. Consequently, having an independent appeals mechanism to the Department, with the Department deciding whether particular actions

can take place, is a sensible way forward. Therefore, I welcome amendment No 3.

Amendment No 4 deals with an issue that was identified by the Committee. It is an obvious, clear-cut problem that was always going to arise, and it was identified by the policy development panel quite a long time ago. Some special arrangements are needed to provide justice in the Belfast/Lisburn/Castlereagh situation. Compared with the other transition committees, that transition committee is in a unique position. All the other transitional committees are pure amalgamations of different councils. In my area, approximately 300 voters are transferring from North Down to Belfast, but the only area where significant numbers of people are affected is Belfast/Lisburn/Castlereagh. The population that will move from Lisburn City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council into the Belfast City Council area will account for one fifth or one sixth of the population of the new amalgamated area. Therefore, it would clearly not be equitable to have an equal number of representatives from each council on that transition committee, as is the case with the other committees. That would clearly be disproportionate.

However, similarly, it would be unacceptable simply to assume that Belfast should absorb territory, and leave a significant number of voters out on a limb. Consequently, the recognition that there is a need for specific regulations to address the situation in Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh shows a high degree of common sense.

Tough questions need to be asked about those regulations. For example, must councillors who will represent Lisburn and Castlereagh come from the areas affected, or can the council decide that they could be any representative of the new council? If, for example, people are selected from the area of Castlereagh that will be included in the Belfast council area, will that automatically exclude any councillor from that area who is from the Lisburn/Castlereagh end? Matters are not clear cut in that respect, but the broad principle that there needs to be clear representation for the people of Lisburn and Castlereagh in areas that will become part of Belfast is sensible. Regulations should be put in place, and will be welcomed by everyone across the Chamber.

Amendment No 5 is a consequential amendment, which technically flows from amendment No 4.

Amendment No 7 deals with the guidance. One of the concerns that we have had in the policy development panel is the extent to which some of the transition committees have almost run off on their own remit. Some transition committees seem very reluctant to move on anything, and have done very little, whereas some of the voluntary transition committees have started to move at pace, and to deal with issues that are rightly

the responsibility of statutory transition committees. Some voluntary transition committees have even considered issues that will actually be within the remit of successor councils. It is important that there be a degree of guidance.

At an earlier stage in the debate, Mr Dallat raised a concern about the need to ensure that there are minority protections — I thought that he would suddenly pay attention to what I am saying. That concern cuts both ways. Nationalists who will be living in council areas that are overwhelmingly unionist will want to ensure that there is protection for them, and the flip side is true: unionists who will be living in overwhelmingly nationalist areas will want to ensure that they are properly protected. There has been a considerable amount of work done on that issue, and there has been cross-party agreement in the policy development panels and the strategic leadership board to ensure a level of governance arrangements that will provide protections for everyone.

It seems to me that if there is a degree of uniform regulation and protection in relation to governance and a range of other issues in any new council system, to give a statutory transition committee *carte blanche* to do whatever it likes until that point does not make a great deal of sense. Consequently, the Department giving clear-cut guidance to the statutory transition committees on that range of issues, which will be relatively detailed, makes sense.

Finally, like the Minister, I welcome the proposals in amendment No 8, which represents a sensible compromise. When councils held discussions about severance, particularly how it affected MLAs, two quite divergent views emerged. One view — sometimes held by councillors who are not MLAs — is that the boys and girls up on the hill get enough, and that they should not be getting anything at all. That is a reasonable argument to make. Others have said that all councillors should be treated with equity, and that the severance package should be the same for everyone. There is merit in those arguments, but there are flaws in both. To say that an MLA, who receives a significant wage from the public purse, should simply be treated in the same way as other councillors, who are at times greatly undervalued, and have for many years worked for more or less a pittance, is wrong. On the flip side of the coin, a blanket exclusion mechanism would not take account of the fact that many Assembly Members served on councils for many years when it probably cost them money to do so. It would be fundamentally wrong if that service were to be ignored.

11.15 am

Unlike some Members, I can speak on the issue with no pecuniary interest. I was an Assembly Member before I became a councillor, so the effect of this

proposal would be to ensure that I would not receive a penny. I am sure that some Members might feel that that is merit enough for it to be passed. I genuinely think that it would be unfair and wrong to disregard Members who have given 20 or 30 years' service on a council, particularly in the cases of Members who have recently joined the House, so the amendment is a sensible way forward.

The Minister indicated that the proposal would also apply to MEPs, who are in a not dissimilar position. Only one MEP would be affected. There is a lack of clarity on that, and the proposer of the amendment may wish to clarify that. Judging by the consternation on his face when the issue was raised, the policy may have been drafted on the hoof. Everyone accepts that the amendment would cover the current Assembly, from 1998 onwards, but it is uncertain whether it would apply to the 1982-86 Assembly and other predecessor bodies of a similar nature. Consequently, I seek clarification from the proposer on that. It may be that the definition of "Assembly" needs to be tweaked at Further Consideration Stage.

On the whole, amendment No 8 is sensible, and the group of amendments enhances the Bill. I am happy to support all the amendments in the group.

Mr Boylan: We hope that the amendments will make the process for the important issue of reorganisation more open and transparent and remove the concerns that were raised in consultation with local councils. Councillors such as Peter Weir know exactly what is going on in local council chambers, and they bring that knowledge to this Chamber. Issues to do with the statutory transition committees exercised the Committee for the Environment for a while, and they will play an important role in moving the process forward. The statutory transition committees must be proportionate and representative if they are to serve the needs of whole communities, and they must make key decisions that will lead the way in delivering a model that will benefit all new council areas. That is encompassed by the amendments, which Sinn Féin supports.

We also support the amendment on severance payments. We were happy during the consultation period, and having listened to the Minister, I will seek clarification on time periods. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Kinahan: I declare an interest as a member of Antrim Borough Council, although I do not have as many other things to declare as Mr Weir.

I welcome the Bill, and as my colleague from South Antrim Mr Ford did, I welcome the fact that this Building is doing business and being seen to do so. I welcome the amendments, although, as other Members said, the Committee for the Environment would have liked to have seen them first. However, the Committee understands

why they have come out a bit later. I welcome amendment No 3, which provides for referral to the Department, and the tidying-up provisions for statutory transition committees that are proposed in amendment Nos 4, 5 and 7.

As regards amendment No 8, I declare that, as a member of Antrim Borough Council, I will not take any severance pay in whatever form it comes. I hope that that allows me to discuss the matter. I would be pleased if severance pay were chosen as the way to go forward, because many councillors have served for 20 or 30 years, and they have given much of their time for no pay. They might have received expenses, and, as my colleague said, payment of a few shillings. I also remember shillings.

The point of the amendment is that they were getting no pay and no pensions. Indeed, as one or two Members pointed out, it was probably costing them to be a councillor. We should congratulate all those councillors who have worked incredibly hard over time, with much of their private life being run by their life in council.

Amendment No 8 is aimed at addressing the matter of dual mandates, which the Ulster Unionist Party wishes to see ending. To clarify, I saw the provision as being applicable to any time that anyone was a Member of the Assembly or the House of Commons when they were receiving a pension or full-time pay. Often, when someone was working as a councillor only, they could have had another job with a pension at the same time. This provision is designed for times in the Assembly — the previous one and this one — when people are earning both pensions and proper pay. I hope that that clarifies matters. We may have to tweak the amendment a little, and I would accept the tweaking. The Minister wishes to include MEPs in the amendment, and I think that that is an extremely good idea. I had missed that. I am intrigued to know why our present MEP who said that she would stand down has not as yet, but I assume that that will be dealt with in time.

Another reason for the amendment is the expenses scandal that we read about in the newspapers and the way that the public looks at us. I thought that the amendment was a chance to show that we are not just here for extra money; we are here to do things fairly, and, as I have said before, councillors have earned the money. However, they should not be paid a severance amount for any period during which they were in this Chamber, the House of Commons or, as the Minister said, the European Parliament. It is a minimum that I am addressing, and I recommend amendment No 8.

Mr Ford: I join others in welcoming, in broad terms, the amendments in this group. I will comment briefly on each of them, while giving them all the same broad welcome that others have given them.

An issue raised at Committee Stage was what might happen if there was disagreement about capital projects, either new projects or disposals, and there was a dispute in a statutory transition committee as to how predecessor councils should operate. The process has been outlined to a considerable extent by Peter Weir, and I do not propose to repeat what was said. However, it is absolutely clear that although, at this stage, some transition committees are functioning quite well — I am happy to say that the transition committee of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Councils is one of them — others are functioning less well with less agreement. In particular, there is the prospect that one of the smaller councils in an amalgamation of three or four might well have difficulty getting agreement from members representing the other predecessor councils in a statutory transition committee for its capital plans for its remaining period.

Given that it is an entirely normal procedure that the Department has to give approval to certain matters, it is appropriate that there should be the appeal mechanism that is written into amendment No 3 to ensure that the Minister and Department are responsible for making determinations in cases in which there is a dispute in the transition committee. We should, of course, wish that that would be not the case, and we should seek the maximum possible consensus, but it would be irresponsible not to ensure that the legislation deals with the circumstances in which there is not agreement. I do not wish that we simply assume that the goodwill that Peter Weir says exists in North Down and Ards, or that I have seen in Antrim and Newtownabbey, will necessarily apply across all transition committees up to May 2011.

Therefore, amendment No 3 is to be welcomed in broad terms, and I repeat that it is unfortunate that we did not see it in full detail earlier. As it reads this morning, it appears to be a reasonable move forward, which could perhaps be addressed at Further Consideration Stage, if required.

Amendment No 4 and the consequential amendment No 5, which are designed to deal with the Belfast problem or the Lisburn/Castlereagh problem, depending on which way it is regarded, make sense in light of the discussion that the Committee had with officials. It was absolutely clear that Belfast City Council could not be regarded as other councils were. The definition in the Bill of the whole or the major part of councils merging with new councils simply did not deal with the issue of the southern and western suburbs of Belfast being included within the city for the first time.

Members highlighted some of the issues that have yet to be resolved: for example, how individual councillors may, or may not, be chosen to sit on one or other of the transition committees. To some extent, that problem is exacerbated by the fact that because of the difficulties

between the Minister, the Department, and the Executive in dealing with it, we have not yet seen the new boundaries Order in this place.

One district electoral area that is not affected by that particular boundary dispute is Castlereagh East. Two of its seven wards will move into Belfast, and the remaining five will become part of the new Lisburn and Castlereagh area. It is extremely difficult to determine how one should say, in statute, which councillors are entitled to sit on the Belfast transition committee and which on the Lisburn and Castlereagh transition committee. However, we can reasonably assume that the regulations will not allow members to serve on both transition committees and that members will, in effect, declare their future interest by putting their names forward for the committee on which they wish to sit. At least three, but potentially all four, Castlereagh DEAs may be affected by that, because the boundaries do not tie in with current wards, never mind with the current DEAs. It may, therefore, be somewhat difficult to provide statutory prescription through regulations on which members may serve on which committees. That might have to be left to the good sense that has been all pervasive in Lisburn and Castlereagh councils on recent occasions. We look forward to seeing how that is resolved.

As Peter Weir highlighted, the population of Belfast may increase by up to a fifth, and it would have been unacceptable for people from the greater Cregagh and greater Dunmurry areas not to have representation on that new transition committee. Similarly, as the Minister outlined, the ability to provide guidance to current and future councils must be replicated in amendment No 7, which deals with guidance to statutory transition committees.

I wish to refer to amendment No 8, which Danny Kinahan and John McCallister proposed. I repeat the declaration of interest that I made as a serving MLA to the Committee for the Environment. Were I to stand down from the council, I would not expect anything in the way of a severance payment. Thus unencumbered by the reservations that other Members may have, I feel entirely free to talk about the issue

Amendment No 8 refers to “the Assembly, or the House of Commons”. Clearly “the Assembly” applies to the bodies that have met in this Building at various stages and under various names since July 1998. However, the issue of severance is slightly different for those who were involved in the Assembly of 1973, the Constitutional Convention of 1975 and the Assembly of 1982. Although the Members of past mandates were remunerated, they were not paid the sort of salary that we receive, which is assessed by the independent SSRB, and they do not have the same pension arrangements as current MLAs.

Before Further Consideration Stage, the proposers of the amendment, the Minister and his officials should undertake a detailed examination of that issue. Common sense dictates that those who received a modest salary for public services in the 1970s and 1980s are in no different a position to those who received a salary from a private sector employer or an employer elsewhere in the public sector. I declare that I was a social worker during those periods.

Mr Speaker, I am sure that your officials ensured that “the Assembly” in the amendment refers specifically to the various bodies here since July 1998. If that is the case, the wording of the amendment is about right, because it distinguishes between those of us who currently receive a reasonable salary, severance and pension arrangements in this place and those who worked here in earlier decades and did not receive the same opportunities. On that basis, I am happy to support the amendment as it stands. I look forward to hearing whether others feel the need to amend it further at Further Consideration Stage.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for outlining his proposed amendments today. I am struck more by what is not included in the Bill than by what is.

Exclusivity has been the order of the day, particularly in regard to the transition committees for Lisburn City Council and Magherafelt District Council, and, for whatever reason, that has been directed principally at my party.

However, the RPA resulted in 100,000 voters being transferred from nationalist and non-single-majority councils to councils with a unionist majority and which are unionist dominated.

11.30 am

Throughout the Bill, there are no safeguards or protections against abuses or discriminatory practices for either the transition committees or the structures that should come later. Minority practices, safeguards and protections are paramount to what should be fair, open and equal local government for all who are represented in council chambers. I see no ring-fencing of equality —

Mr Weir: I appreciate the Member’s point on the wording of the legislation. However, is he somewhat reassured by the fact that, at the policy development panel and strategic board level, a range of safeguards was agreed by all five major parties and that those safeguards will form part of the governance arrangements that will protect all minorities? They will form part of the regulations, which are permitted by, and catered for in, the Bill. That was agreed by the DUP, the SDLP, Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party, and it was agreed that the regulations are the best place for those safeguards. The policy development

panel was specifically tasked with working out regulations on governance arrangements for the transition committees.

Although those specifics are not in the Bill, part of its provisions and part of amendment No 7 allow those governance arrangements, which have been agreed on entirely a cross-party basis in local government and with the involvement of the Department, to be put into regulations. I hope that that provides the Member with some comfort.

Mr McGlone: As always, I listened very carefully to what Mr Weir had to say, and I appreciate the information that he provided. However, he will appreciate that the proof of the pudding is always in the eating. I look forward to safeguards becoming manifest in legislation, so that all of us in this council chamber —

Mr Weir: Assembly Chamber.

Mr McGlone: Sorry. I look forward to safeguards becoming manifest in legislation, so that all of us in the Assembly Chamber can be assured that decision-making at local government level is done with equality for all citizens paramount. We cannot revert to the abuses of the past. The decision is too major for us to take today. I emphasise that the matter has already gone before the Equality Commission, and that, to date, the practice of some of the transition committees has not been good.

The Minister of the Environment: Following Mr Weir's initial speech in the debate, I feel that I do not need to say very much. Without any prompting, he elucidated the case very well. However, there are a number of issues to which I will respond.

Some Members complained, again, that, under the Committee structure, they have not had time to look at the amendments. I brought the Bill to the Executive two weeks ago, and I felt that bringing it to the House for debate, and moving it ahead, was important. I am criticised for moving the Bill forward, and I am criticised for not bringing it forward quickly enough. Members had their moan during the first round of amendments, which was fine. However, it begins to get boring by the second round.

It is proper and right that, following the changes to Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh councils, the 60,000 people who will transfer to Belfast will have representation. Mr Ford made a valid point about not legislating for the appointment of specific council members to that new council. It is better to operate by wit rather than writ and to leave room for councils to apply a degree of common sense in appointing members who reflect the views of the people from the areas that will be moved inside Belfast City Council's boundaries.

On spending, Mr Weir made the case particularly well that councils should not be inappropriately held back if they wish to carry out projects. However, it is

not appropriate for councils that wish to have some form of legacy project to pass the bill on to someone else.

There may be real difficulties among some of the councils that are represented on the transition committees. Let us be honest: not all of the transition committees are marriages made in heaven, and some of them may be more of a shotgun marriage. I have visited almost all of the transition committees, and most of them are operating fairly well. It is important that there be a fallback position and that the Department can step in, if appropriate, when the transition committees are not able to reach agreement.

Mr McGlone raised the issue of protections. I am very interested in his criticism of one particular council for using the d'Hondt mechanism. I welcome the fact that the soon-to-be deputy leader of the SDLP wishes to dissociate his party from the d'Hondt system. In the ongoing debate about policing and justice, the SDLP has been vocal in its support for the d'Hondt system, so its criticism of one council for using that system to appoint its members to a transition committee is welcome.

Mr McGlone: The SDLP was not the only organisation to raise the perception of inequity; the Equality Commission may have corroborated that perception.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member's comments on the Equality Commission's interference in the democratic process are noted. The d'Hondt mechanism was put in place, but the SDLP does not want it to be used when it does not suit its members. If that is the SDLP's new policy, we would all be interested to hear confirmation of that.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister comment on the situation at Limavady Borough Council, where the d'Hondt procedure was not used properly in the nominations to the Causeway Coast transition committee? The effect of that was a reduction in the level of unionist representation on the transition committee, even though any mathematical application of the d'Hondt system would show that to be incorrect. It seems somewhat strange that, in his decrying of representation on transition committees, the example in Limavady seemed to slip Mr McGlone's mind.

The Minister of the Environment: I thank the Member for drawing that to my attention. I am shocked, because I was always put under the impression that unionists were the people who discriminated and that nationalists were the paragons of equality. I am shocked to hear that, and I thank Mr Weir for drawing it to my attention.

In his reference to severance, Mr Ford said that only membership of the Assembly from 1998 onwards should be considered. On a number of occasions, I have been nobbled by a couple of former Members who sit on Lisburn City Council. One of those is Alderman Davis, who is most unhappy with the proposals from his

Ulster Unionist colleagues. The other is Alderman Close, who has clearly had a conversation with Mr Ford, because Mr Ford advocated a policy that will assist former Members.

Mr Ford: I wish to put on record that I have not discussed that issue with Alderman Seamus Close.

The Minister of the Environment: I am glad that the Member has confirmed that, but I can assure him that Mr Close will be very pleased with the comments made by his leader, assuming that Mr Ford is his leader.

Amendment No 3 agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 13 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 14 (Statutory transition committees: constitution)

Amendment No 4 made: In page 9, line 11, leave out subsection (4) and insert

“(4) Those regulations shall ensure that—

(a) the statutory transition committee in relation to the new council for the district of Belfast consists of members of the predecessor council and members of Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council;

(b) the statutory transition committee in relation to any other new council consists of members of the predecessor councils.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Amendment no 5 made: In page 9, line 17, leave out “predecessor council” and insert

“council mentioned in subsection (4)”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Clause 14, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 15 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 16 (Power to modify existing legislation)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 10, line 23, at end insert

“() the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 2002 (NI 3);”. — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

Clause 16, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 7 made: After clause 16, insert the following new clause

“Guidance to statutory transition committees

—(1) The Department may issue guidance to statutory transition committees as to the exercise of their functions.

(2) It is the duty of a statutory transition committee to have regard to any guidance issued by the Department.” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 17 (Severance payments to councillors)

Amendment No 8 made: In page 11, line 5, at end insert

“(2A) Where the method of calculating the amount of severance payment depends on length of service, the regulations must provide that any period during which a councillor was a member of—

(a) the Assembly, or

(b) the House of Commons,

shall be disregarded.” — *[Mr Kinahan.]*

Clause 17, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 9 made: After clause 17, insert the following new clause

“CHAPTER 5

POWER TO MODIFY LEGISLATION

Power to modify legislation in connection with local government re-organisation

—(1) The Department may by regulations make such modifications of local government or rating legislation as in the opinion of the Department are necessary or expedient for the purpose of preparing for, or giving full effect to, the reorganisation of local government provided for by the Local Government (Boundaries) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 (c. 7).

(2) In this section ‘local government legislation’ and ‘rating legislation’ have the meanings given by section 16(2).” — *[The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Mr Speaker: We now come to the third group of amendments. With amendment No 10, it will be convenient to debate amendments Nos 11, 12, 13 and 14, which deal mainly with new waste management powers that will be given to councils.

The Minister of the Environment: I beg to move amendment No 10: After clause 18, insert the following new clause

“Exercise of waste management functions of councils

Exercise of waste management functions of councils

—(1) For the purposes of this section—

‘joint committee’ means a committee appointed by two or more district councils under section 19 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 (c. 9) and ‘incorporated joint committee’ means a joint committee in relation to which an order under subsection (9) of that section is in force;

‘waste management functions’ are functions exercisable by a district council or incorporated joint committee—

(a) under Part 2 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (NI 19); or

(b) for the purposes of, or in connection with, the exercise of such functions;

‘waste management contract’ means a contract for the purposes of, or in connection with, the carrying out of waste management functions.

(2) A district council has power to enter into a waste management contract containing—

(a) terms under which the council guarantees, or provides warranties or indemnities in relation to, the performance by any other district council or any incorporated joint committee of its obligations under that or any other waste management contract;

(b) terms which impose joint or several liability on the council and any other district council or incorporated joint committee in respect of a breach of a term of that or any other waste management contract.

(3) Two or more district councils (‘the participating councils’) may enter into an agreement under which one of those councils (‘the lead council’) is to act on behalf, and in the name, of all the participating councils in relation to the exercise of such waste management functions of the participating councils as are specified in the agreement (‘the specified waste management functions’).

(4) Where such an agreement is in force—

(a) the lead council has all such powers as are necessary to give effect to the agreement including in particular—

(i) power to act on behalf, and in the name, of all the participating councils in relation to the exercise of the specified waste management functions;

(ii) power to exercise the specified waste management functions of other participating councils, including functions relating to acquiring and holding property, borrowing money and entering into waste management contracts;

(iii) power to receive and hold property on behalf of, and in the name of, participating councils;

(b) any other participant council has all such powers as are necessary to give effect to the agreement including in particular power—

(i) to borrow money for that purpose; and

(ii) to make payments to the lead council for that purpose.

(5) Nothing in this section is to be construed as derogating from any power of a council exercisable otherwise than by virtue of this section.”

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 11: In clause 19, page 11, line 28, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 12: In clause 19, page 11, line 35, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 13: In clause 20, page 12, line 5, after “3” insert “or 5”.
— [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

No 14: In the long title, after “councillors;” insert

“to make provision in relation to the exercise of waste management functions of district councils;”. — [The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).]

The Minister of the Environment: Consultation on my proposals for a waste Bill commenced on 6 April 2009 and concluded on 3 July 2009. There was significant support from consultees for additional measures to facilitate the waste infrastructure procurements. In particular, local government requested that the Bill include the power for councils to grant warranties, indemnities and guarantees and to accept joint and several liability. Moreover, consultees requested that those measures be moved from the waste Bill to the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

11.45 am

That matter was raised again by the representatives of local government groups during the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill’s Committee Stage. In its report on the Bill, the Committee for the Environment recommended that:

“in order to encourage and enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers when competing to provide waste infrastructure, the additional vires should be brought forward from the Waste Bill and included in this Bill.”

I fully accept that recommendation.

Amendment No 10 provides the additional waste vires requested by district councils and waste management groups as well as the Committee for the Environment. The amendment relates primarily to clarification on the granting of warranties, indemnities and guarantees, and the acceptance of joint and several liability. District councils do not currently have the express power to guarantee the obligations of other councils and incorporated joint committees. It is likely that in connection with any contract award relating to waste infrastructure management, the contractor and/or financiers will seek to have cross-guarantees with each of the councils for the obligations of the contracting party under the contract. That is because the individual councils are the bodies of substance in the arrangement. District councils will also be required to provide warranties, indemnities and cross-indemnities in their waste management contracts in order to provide reassurance to prospective contractors and financiers.

Those powers will need to be exercisable whether a council is acting simply in its own right or on behalf of other councils in a waste management group. Similarly, incorporated joint committees will require the power to provide such assurances. One example of such an obligation would be in a situation in which a council gives a warranty to deliver a specified tonnage of waste to a contractor for treatment. If a council defaults on the waste to be delivered, other councils need to be able to pick up on the default.

The district councils in a waste management group may have to become jointly and severally liable for any loan made to an incorporated joint committee or to a lead district council. If councils have joint liability,

they are each liable up to the full amount of the relevant obligation. That makes it easier for a contractor or a financier to recover damages in the event that a district council or a waste management group has breached the terms of a contract, and, consequently, more likely that a contract will be entered into.

The North West Region Waste Management Group is an unincorporated joint committee, and as such, is conducting its waste infrastructure procurement process through its lead council. Subsection (4) of the proposed new clause clarifies that in such cases, a council has clear powers to act on behalf of other councils, with their agreement, for waste management purposes, and that individual councils have powers to deliver their waste management functions through other councils. That includes power for a local council to enter into contracts, acquire property and borrow money for the purpose of exercising the waste management functions of participating councils in the waste management group.

SWaMP2008 and Arc21 have established incorporated joint committees under Orders made by my Department. Clause 19 amends the Orders constituting Arc21 and SWaMP2008 as bodies corporate, making it clear that Part 1 of the Bill, concerning contracts, and clause 18, concerning acquisition of land otherwise than by agreement, apply to both bodies in the same way as they apply to a district council. The amendments to clause 19 also make it clear that subsections (1) and (2), concerning the waste management functions of councils, apply to both bodies.

The proposed amendment to clause 20 simply reflects that any regulations made by my Department will be subject to draft affirmative procedures in the Assembly.

Amendment No 14 inserts an additional phrase into the long title of the Bill. Due to the inclusion of additional measures in the Bill to clarify local government powers to enter into waste management contracts, it is also necessary to ensure that the long title of the Bill is amended to adequately reflect its revised scope. The amendment makes it clear that the Bill also contains provisions concerning the exercise of waste management functions of district councils.

That concludes my explanation of my proposed amendments in the third group.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: May I raise a matter under Standing Orders, Mr Speaker? It is my understanding that Members have to stand when addressing the House, and must not do so from a seated position. Is that not the case?

Mr Speaker: It is very much the convention that Members who speak in the Chamber must stand in their place to do so.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: Perhaps the Minister will bear that in mind when moving the subsequent amendments.

The Minister of the Environment: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have specific instructions to remain seated when moving the amendments. Perhaps the Speaker will provide clarification on that.

Mr Speaker: That has always been the convention and the practice for all Ministers. They are only moving an amendment; they are not speaking.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: I would be grateful for clarification on that point, because a number of Members were looking quite confused.

Mr Speaker: I assure the Member that I am not confused. I think that that is important.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment: Thank you indeed, Mr Speaker.

The amendments in group 3 focus on waste management. Local authorities and, indeed, waste management groups have made the Committee acutely aware over the past 18 months of the importance of the Bill in the functions of waste management.

The Committee greatly welcomes the new clause to be inserted after clause 18. NILGA and Arc21 advised the Committee that bringing forward powers that are proposed for inclusion in the draft waste Bill could enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers who are being encouraged to compete to provide waste infrastructure procurement. Although that may be welcome for the management of waste in general across the North, the Committee's primary concern was the impact that European waste management obligations would have on ratepayers.

The Department advised the Committee that although it was confident that the timing of the draft waste Bill would ensure that all contract provisions would be in place in good time, it was considering bringing in those additional powers earlier by incorporating them into the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to give greater confidence to bidders and financiers. The Committee agreed that it should recommend that to encourage and enhance the confidence of bidders and financiers, and thereby reduce cost to ratepayers when competing to provide waste infrastructure, the additional powers should be brought forward from the draft waste Bill and included in the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Department is to be commended for doing that.

The Committee recognises the need for amendment Nos 11 and No 12, which will accommodate the inclusion of the waste powers. The Committee also welcomes amendment No 14, which extends the long title to incorporate the additional waste powers. As I mentioned

when discussing amendment No 9, the Committee welcomed the Minister's proposal to require the additional chapter 5, which provides for the transition of the responsibility for calculating and setting the district rate to be laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly. The Committee accordingly welcomes amendment No 13.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am delighted that someone in the Chamber is not confused. I thank Mr Ford and Mr McGlone, who has left the Chamber, for livening up the debate.

Waste management will be a major concern in any new council realignment. It is incumbent on the Committee to ensure that the powers that are transferred to councils are relevant and effective. Sinn Féin supports the amendments in this group and sees the powers to acquire lands for the disposal and management of waste as a positive step in meeting local council responsibilities. They will ensure that councils meet EU targets and protect ratepayers from EU infractions.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, along with the draft waste Bill, will be key to the success of local authorities having the waste infrastructure to deliver for local communities. Perhaps the Minister will provide some clarification on the draft waste Bill. Sinn Féin welcomes the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill and hopes that the Assembly will welcome it as another step on the road to changing the face of local government for the benefit of everyone.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendments in group 3. I want to speak in particular about amendment No 10, which extends councils' warranties and indemnities to other councils. That amendment may seem strange on first reading or if it is read in isolation. However, it is, as the Minister said, an enabling measure for local councils, and it is they that must carefully read any subsequent contracts and make decisions accordingly.

I understand that future waste management contracts will require significant capital infrastructure. In turn, those who provide them will want to have guaranteed streams of material for processing to protect their investment. If that were to be agreed, it would provide the best value for the ratepayer in negotiating those contracts. However, it is important that local councils entering into such contracts do so carefully and with great consideration so that appropriate figures are bought into.

I support the fact that this enabling legislation passes the responsibility as an option to local councils. I hope that it will, in turn, result in savings to ratepayers if appropriate values are entered into in the contract. I support amend No 10 and the others in that group.

Mr Ford: I am not sure how to respond to being told by Mr Boylan that I make this place interesting,

because I was proposing to be extremely boring at this point.

There were doubts among some of those involved in waste management, whether from council groups or potential private tenderers, about the vires that would apply to either a lead council arrangement or a joint committee arrangement, whether incorporated or otherwise. In proposing amendment No 10, which is fairly extensive and contains a full new clause, the Minister has dealt with those issues and ensured that the necessary reassurance is given, bearing in mind the increasing size and scale of contracts for waste management. I welcome that, and the consequential amendments that flow from it. I also welcome his reassurance on affirmative resolution.

It is unfortunate that another Bill from the Department of the Environment requires the long title to be amended. Nonetheless, that is completely within the scope of the Bill as was originally suggested. We welcome the fact that it will now be a better Bill and that it will provide significant financial savings in the future to those who pay rates for the disposal of waste right across Northern Ireland, whichever format of organisation is adopted.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the Bill and the amendments. I am glad that the Minister is smiling, because I will refer to him. The Minister referred to the North West Waste Region Management Group, and I know that he is very familiar with what is going on there. I thank him for his direct intervention.

Waste management entails making provision for the disposal of waste. The situation that I am faced with, as are others, is the over-provision of waste. Given that there have been problems throughout Europe, has the Minister given any thought to what happens when one discovers that a cluster of landfill sites has been identified in planning applications? There is now an opportunity to deal with that. I hope that the Minister has given some thought to what form of protection can be given to communities finding themselves in that situation.

The European Council Directive 1999/31/EC on the landfill of waste clearly states that the aim of landfill is to protect the environment and that such protection must include the situations where up to four potential landfill sites are identified in one area. I know that the Minister has taken the matter seriously, and he wrote to me earlier in the week offering some degree of comfort.

During the process of the Bill, I hope that thought will be given to areas that may find their environment potentially destroyed as a result of the activities of new councils and how they oversee their waste management, particularly where private contractors are involved, as is the case in the north-west.

12.00 noon

The Minister of the Environment: The television programmes tonight will include major reports about an outbreak of peace in the Assembly and that harmony has prevailed, and, as we exit the Chamber, there will be a wall of flashing cameras and pressmen waiting to ask us all about it. It has all come about in the debate on the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, so it is great to be involved in that.

I will address some of the issues that Members raised in the discussion. Mr Boylan asked the question: where is the waste Bill? The intention is to introduce that Bill when it has been cleared by the Executive, and I want to clear it with the Executive this month. Therefore, we will have the opportunity to debate the Bill's legislative passage, which will include the Committee's detailed scrutiny of the legislation. Indeed, the draft Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have already been forwarded to the Committee for information purposes.

Most Members spoke very clearly in support of everything that we are doing here. Mr Dallat made a Freudian slip when he referred to the overprovision of waste: I assume that he meant to say the overprovision of waste-management sites.

Mr Dallat: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for pointing that out. It was a very serious mistake that could have unfolded the whole thing.

The Minister of the Environment: The point that I made is true, which is why I raised it: there is an overprovision of waste. I am getting into another debate, possibly, but we need to ensure that there is a significant reduction in the amount of waste produced in the first place. That will help to offset the problem to which Mr Dallat referred. We are picking up evidence that there is an overprovision of waste sites. At one stage, it seemed that quarries had struck gold because everyone wanted to put landfill in old quarries. However, the cost of landfill is coming down, and there is quite a bit of competition in that area now.

I want to make it absolutely clear that I see landfill as the last resort for waste. First, I want to see a reduction in waste. Secondly, I want to encourage recycling, and my Department has set a target of increasing recycling levels to 50% by 2020. I will look at that target, because I think that it could be even higher. Thirdly, I want to see energy recovery from waste.

Mr Ford: I hate to disagree with the Minister on a day of such unanimity but should it not be a matter of encouraging waste reduction and reuse before recycling?

The Minister of the Environment: That is a fair point. I want there to be less waste left at the point of recycling. Where there is waste left at that point, we

need to go for energy recovery. I am prepared to take on the challenge of energy recovery. It does not have to be through incineration, but that should not be excluded. There is a whole series of measures for dealing with waste, including incineration, anaerobic digestion, gasification and autoclaving.

Another point made, and it is a very valid point, is that councils and waste-management bodies need to be very careful about the contracts that they enter into. If a council enters into a contract with a company to provide an energy-recovery facility at huge cost, and the council does not have the materials to supply that facility, it will end up having to pay for materials that it does not need to get rid of. That will place an undue burden on ratepayers. We need to move forward very cautiously and ensure that we identify the appropriate amounts of waste that will go into energy-recovery facilities. That was a slight diversion perhaps, but it is relevant to the issue of waste. I think that I have covered most of the points that Members made.

Amendment No 10 agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 19 (Applications of certain provisions to certain joint committees constituted as bodies corporate)

Amendment No 11 made: In page 11, line 28, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Amendment No 12 made: In page 11, line 35, at end insert

“and

(c) section (Exercise of waste management functions of councils)(1) and (2) (contracts for waste management purposes).”
— [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Clause 19, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 20 (Regulations and orders)

Amendment No 13 made: In page 12, line 5, after “3” insert “or 5”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Clause 20, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 21 to 23 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long title

Amendment No 14 made: In the long title, after “councillors;” insert

“to make provision in relation to the exercise of waste management functions of district councils;”. — [*The Minister of the Environment (Mr Poots).*]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I ask the House to take its ease until the next item of business commences.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Cancer Treatment

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

Mrs O'Neill: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that people undergoing treatment for cancer can find themselves vulnerable to poverty because of their changed circumstances; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as part of his service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care, to provide access to quality, on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the cancer services framework published by the Department and want to put it on record that there has been positive feedback from the consultation, which is still open for responses.

In that context, I want to discuss the issue of financial support for cancer patients. For anyone who is diagnosed with cancer, it is a life-changing event. Life is often turned upside down and thrown into turmoil. One receives excellent information in relation to care pathways, methods of treatment, etc, but the costs of living with cancer are often forgotten. Many cancer patients and their families deal with a huge financial burden as a result of the illness. Some 91% of cancer households suffer loss of income and/or increased costs as a direct result of cancer. A 2005 Audit Office report found that 77% of cancer patients are not given financial support information.

Macmillan Cancer Support found that for many people who are affected by cancer, financial concerns are second only to physical pain as a cause of stress. Examples of how people's lives are affected by cancer poverty are included in the information pack that has been produced for Members by the Assembly's Research and Library Service. Members can read for themselves just how people's lives are affected adversely by a diagnosis of cancer.

There are situations that one would not even think of. When we think about someone having cancer, we do not often think about the costs; we often think just about the health aspects. We do not, for one minute, think that a person could be in danger of losing their home as they have not worked for six months and cannot afford their mortgage payments. We do not often think that a person may not eat a healthy diet as they cannot afford to buy fresh food. Unfortunately, however, those are inescapable realities of how cancer affects lives. We need to look at the barriers to getting

assistance. Many cancer patients are unaware that they may be entitled to claim statutory benefits. They are often unaware of how to access the benefits system and what services are offered by social security offices or independent advice providers.

Given the nature of cancer and its side effects, most patients are not well enough to attend their local social security offices for advice, even if they know to do so. Indeed, cancer patients are often advised not to be in a crowded environment in order to prevent infection. It is important that people be informed that they are entitled to financial support as early as possible because most applications for financial assistance through the benefits system cannot be backdated or can be backdated only for a limited period, and also because the decision-making process is often a lengthy one.

Over the years, Macmillan's benefits services, which are based at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, have shown that less than 10% of service users have never accessed the benefits system. My background is in providing welfare rights, and I am only too aware of the minefield that is the benefits system. It is a daunting task for anyone to navigate their way through it.

Welfare rights services are provided at Altnagelvin Area Hospital in partnership with the north-west independent advice service and in the Royal Group of Hospitals in partnership with the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux. Both those services are funded by Macmillan Cancer Support. The service at the Belfast City Hospital, which is open to people right across the North, is a partnership funded with Citizens Advice and lottery funding. However, demand is outstripping the service's capacity. It is experiencing a large number of clients from other trust areas, such as the Northern Trust, the South Eastern Trust and the Southern Trust, in which there is no such service. There are proposals to develop services in those areas. There is proof that there is a demand for that service, so we need to provide it.

Collective partnership working can deliver those services for those who require them. I encourage the Minister and the Department to work with those organisations and with the Department for Social Development (DSD) to ensure that key financial support is offered to assist those who are living with cancer when they need it most.

I call on the Minister to use today's debate to assist deliberations. It is unfortunate, to say the least, that he has not come to the Chamber today to listen to the debate. I ask the Minister to use today's debate to inform him when he considers the responses to the consultation document. It is important that he recognise the need to ensure that the framework contains a standard that ensures that all people who are affected by cancer are given information about what

financial help is available, how to access it, and their rights under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

That recommendation is in line with the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) supportive and palliative care guidelines. They recommend explicitly that systems be put in place to direct patients to expert advice on benefits, including support and completing application forms. I urge the Minister to introduce a strong standard under the cancer services framework to ensure that financial advice is provided consistently and effectively across the board. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Easton: Cancer is a terrible and often debilitating disease. Patients who undergo treatment are often unable to work for a considerable period; they may have to give up a good job and rely on state benefits. Most jobs offer sick leave on full pay for up to six months; others, however, do not, and that results in a considerable drop in income for the household concerned.

It has been found that 91% of cancer patient households suffer a loss of income at a time at which they may also experience an increase in costs that are associated with their cancer. The average drop in income for those households is 50%.

Cancer can result in patients experiencing physical or psychological illnesses for the rest of their lives and, as such, can have an impact on their ability to work.

12.15 pm

Mr Bell: Does Mr Easton share my concern over the case of one lady with whom I dealt? She found that cancer significantly disrupted her psychological, social and emotional circumstances. She had to travel some 20 miles in a state of exhaustion as a result of her medication and disruption to her personal circumstances in order to receive advice. To have to seek financial help in those critical circumstances is unacceptable. As the motion states, such help should be available on site.

Mr Speaker: The Member may speak for an extra minute.

Mr Easton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I totally agree with my colleague. It is unacceptable for a cancer sufferer to have to travel so far and to experience financial problems as a result of a debilitating illness. We must get to the bottom of that. We must also remember that a cancer diagnosis affects a sufferer's family, who may be required to care for their loved one.

People of working age diagnosed with cancer are six times more likely to report being unable to return to work because of their health than people with other illnesses. The loss of a job or an income can bring stress on anyone. However, in the case of people who are living with cancer, it should not be a burden, because

they have enough to deal with. Their main focus should be on recovery; financial stress should be avoided. Cancer can also result in a patient incurring additional costs for travel, drugs, special diets, heating bills and clothing. The state should protect such people here as much as it possibly can.

The decision to make prescription drugs free to all users of the Health Service has to be welcomed, because cancer patients who were not receiving benefits previously had to pay for their drugs on the NHS. Given their conditions, those cancer sufferers would have been taking a large number of drugs at considerable cost. That situation particularly affected middle-income families, in which the person diagnosed with cancer was unable to work while receiving treatment.

Travel costs are also a major factor. Over the years, more and more hospitals have charged patients and visitors for parking. Unfortunately, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has ignored an Assembly vote against charging for parking at our hospitals. Patients suffering from cancer make regular trips to hospitals or health centres; therefore, the costs add up.

At present, it is up to an individual to seek advice about benefits to which he or she may be entitled. However, people with cancer should be informed of their entitlements and assisted through every step of the way in securing them. I call on the Minister to work with his colleague the Minister for Social Development, Margaret Ritchie, who is responsible for the Social Security Agency, to seek to resolve the issues surrounding poverty and cancer. Those issues must be urgently addressed.

I fear that we are becoming increasingly more reliant on charities, which do some great work. However, it is clear that many charities and support groups have emerged because the Health Service has failed people in aspects of their care and treatment. Cancer treatment is a very serious issue. I commend the motion to the House and I, too, express my deep disappointment that there is to be no ministerial response to the debate.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I agree with other Members that being diagnosed with cancer must be an absolutely frightening, stressful and confusing experience. Figures from groups such as Macmillan Cancer Support show that 1.2 million people across the UK — approximately 31,000 in Northern Ireland — were diagnosed with cancer five or more years ago.

Financial support is the crux of some of the issues that we are debating. It must be borne in mind that 90% of people who are affected by cancer in the UK experience a drop in income and an increase in daily living expenses because of their cancer diagnosis.

Mr Easton mentioned sick pay, which goes to the core of our debate. Many people do not have a public sector job that may guarantee six months' full pay and six months' half pay. That level of support simply does not exist in the private sector.

Mr McCartney: I wonder whether the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety outlined to the Member, his party colleague, the reason why he would not be here. If he did so, perhaps the Member will share that information with the rest of the House?

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

Mr McCallister: I am happy to share that information with the rest of the House. I have just spoken to the Minister, and he said that the subject of the debate is a matter for the Department for Social Development. It is about financial help for cancer sufferers, and if Members read the motion, they will see that it is about:

“on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.”

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat. Does the Member agree that the motion is calling for access to on-site support and cancer treatment services in hospital grounds? We are asking for a standard within the framework to ensure that, after an appointment or treatment at a hospital, people are given appropriate support and financial advice at the same hospital site. That can be achieved cross-departmentally through DSD, the Health Service and the voluntary sector, but the Health Department must take the lead.

Mr McCallister: I thank Mrs O'Neill for her useful intervention. However, does she accept that the people who give such critical advice to cancer sufferers should be from the Social Security Agency, which falls under DSD's remit? I do not imagine that there would be any issue about giving such advice on-site in hospitals, as the Member rightly said.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for giving way, about which he has been very gracious. Does he accept that if that is the case, and if the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety holds that view strongly, he should have talked to the Minister for Social Development to arrange for at least one of them to be here to respond? They operate as part of the Executive, not simply in individual silos.

Mr McCallister: The Member makes a useful point. The House will want to see the motion acted upon and it will want the cross-departmental work about which Mrs O'Neill and Mrs Long spoke so that people receive appropriate financial assistance.

Last week, many Members took part in Macmillan Cancer Support's excellent event in the Long Gallery. It highlighted the very issue that the motion addresses,

whereby someone on an income of, say, £2,000 a month might see their income drop to practically nothing. Such a person may have no experience of the benefits system, so he or she would need the Department for Social Development's professional advice and guidance to navigate his or her way around the system. He or she would also have to work with the voluntary sector, which still has a huge impact in that area. Patients' access to financial advice and guidance is the key point of the debate, so I welcome moves to get that assistance to them.

I also encourage people to respond to the consultation on the service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care. Although the process finishes in the next few days, it is important that people respond and get their points across. On the ground, people already have to deal with hugely stressful circumstances due to illnesses over which they have no control, without having to face the added worries of being left in poverty and, consequently, being unable even to heat their homes. Such added stresses and worries can only exacerbate their illnesses. We should be debating and addressing benefit uptake for people who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr McDevitt, I remind Members that this is the first time that the Assembly will hear from him, and that it is the convention that a maiden speech should not be interrupted.

Mr McDevitt: Cancer robs this region of 4,000 lives every year, which is more than died in the 30 years of our dirty war. Its victims know no class. They are not counted by religion, nor are they remembered in our hallowed halls or state memorials. They are our sisters, our mothers, our friends and our foes. I should like to mention a few of their names today to place them on the record of the Assembly as a permanent memorial: people we loved and miss, such as my parents, Cathy and Rory McDevitt, or my late friend John Fee; people who gave us hope and made us smile, such as Nuala O'Faolain, whose lights went dim before her life expired, and Mo Mowlam, who has returned from beyond the grave to be in our lives this week.

The history of cancer has often been one of loss, yet, in Northern Ireland, since 1998, we have been fighting back, and many sufferers now have a new story to tell — a tale of survival and hope. It is the story of Carmel Hanna, who has given me the opportunity to stand here today. When faced with a diagnosis, she was able to fight back to serve us as a Minister and to champion peace and reconciliation in our land. The House will know that it will take all my best efforts and full health to live up to her record as a public representative, a legislator and a campaigner for the voiceless and the marginalised.

I hope never to sit in a consultant's office and be told that I have cancer. It must be a day that you never forget, when life flashes in front of you throwing everything into the air; a day when, at your weakest, you must dig deep inside and prepare for the fight ahead. It is the first day of fighting to live, of tests and chemo, of loss of income, of questions about who to tell and how to cope as your body fights itself and your treatment, of weeks of being better and sick, then better and sick again.

One would think that the state would rally around someone going through the trauma of diagnosis, yet often it does not. The majority of those who are faced with the grave diagnosis do not know that they are entitled to help and are not provided with the information that they need to access important benefits that could help them and their loved ones through the turmoil ahead. Many will face a new poverty foisted upon them by cancer. They will worry about little things, such as the cost of car parking and the multiple trips to hospital. That is why the issue was raised at the Health Committee by my colleague Dolores Kelly, and it is why the SDLP supports the motion. It is also why we have argued for palliative care support from the moment of diagnosis and for proper recognition for the silent and invisible army of carers who quietly nurse friends and family. It is not just doctors who fight cancer but the state as a whole, supported by many voluntary groups who provide expert support to those who must now put all their energies into simply getting better.

World-class medical treatment is very close at hand when people in south Belfast fall under the shadow of cancer. Professor Paddy Johnston and his team at the Northern Ireland Cancer Centre and colleagues at Belvoir Park Hospital are bringing the best possible treatment and research to the people of this region. However, quietly and behind the scenes, welfare rights groups, established by Macmillan Cancer Support, provide advice and other help to those in need. The team at Belfast City Hospital, which is in my constituency, was established in 2007. It is a partnership with the citizens advice bureau, and it has funding until next year. Patients from all over Northern Ireland have availed themselves of the service, which is now at breaking point because it is attracting users from areas where no support is available.

To represent South Belfast is to represent the new North; a diverse and vibrant part of our great city and a microcosm of where our region is headed. New accents echo through the red brick terraces and the rainbow of humanity finds home in our communities. However, their arrival has brought to the surface another pervasive disease that is endemic in this part of Ireland. In supporting the motion, I call on all Members to put the same effort into tackling the cancer of sectarianism

and racism in Northern Ireland. Let us lead by example in the Assembly. Let us declare war on division and on bigotry; let us build a region for everyone, a place where equality is more than just a slogan, where children have a right to make their own history, where government works, and where our people grow old in safety and in peace.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet 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 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the United Community, I support the important motion that is before the House. I thank the Members who brought it to the Floor.

As has already been said, utmost in the mind of someone who is diagnosed with cancer is how and when he or she can be cured. The person is certainly not thinking of financial matters at that point in his or her life. I want to put on record my party's thanks and sincere congratulations to all the organisations in Northern Ireland that have done and continue to do tremendous work, not only to help patients to survive the disease but to give assistance and direction on how to overcome the shortfall in family finance that they will undoubtedly face and, thereby, ensure that patients can concentrate on getting well again.

We expect the service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care to include facilities through which cancer patients can have easy access to financial aid and advice. Incidentally, at last night's meeting of the health committee of Ards Borough Council, of which I am a member, I received unanimous support for a response to that document in the positive way that we are discussing it today. I suggest that MLAs who are also council members consider the same option.

As recently as last week, along with other Members, I attended a meeting of Macmillan Cancer Support in Parliament Buildings. I pay tribute to the enormous efforts of that organisation to bring the important issue right up to Assembly level, where it matters. Hopefully, we will get the desired result. I note that, in its documentation, Macmillan Cancer Support acknowledges the good progress that has been made to date by the local Assembly and, indeed, by the Health Minister. That is what we are here for. We hope that more can and will be done.

My meeting with Macmillan staff last week was extremely informative. I was totally astonished by the amount of paperwork — forms etc — that cancer patients face at a time when they could certainly do without it. Surely, that must be revised and ways must be found by various Departments to provide a financial advice service to help patients at the earliest opportunity. Also of note is the fact, which has been mentioned in the debate, that cancer patients may not be aware that they are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Again, I pay tribute to Macmillan's work in providing a service in major hospitals. Indeed, it is hoped that the service will be operational in my own trust area and available in the Ulster Hospital, the Ards Community Hospital and the Bangor Community Hospital in the

near future. I understand that the service is to be fully funded by Macmillan for a two-year period.

Recently, I also had the pleasure of attending a presentation by the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) in the Building. Part-financed by Macmillan Cancer Support, NICaN is a managed clinical network within Northern Ireland's health and personal social services. All organisations' efforts are welcome. Indeed, they play a real and significant role in assisting cancer patients to receive health services and direction on how to avail themselves of the financial benefits to which they are fully entitled, so that they can provide for their family's requirements and use their energies to get back to health.

The Alliance Party fully supports the motion. I sincerely hope that the Department acknowledges the will of the House and includes a standard as agreed by the House.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. I am disappointed that the Minister is not present to listen to the debate and to respond. The issue is vital to people across Northern Ireland, and the Minister should be in the Chamber to hear the debate.

The motion deals with issues that are faced by many people from all walks of life and from various backgrounds. I am sure that most Members, if not all, can associate themselves with someone, perhaps a family member, who has faced the double blow of serious illness, such as cancer, and the severe financial difficulties that it can create.

It is often rightly said that wealth is health and that without our health we have nothing. How true it is that we should be thankful every day that we have our health and strength. Health is fragile, and so often, out of the blue, people lose their health. I am sure that all of us, at some time, have thought about how we might react if we were told that we were suffering from an illness that was potentially terminal. I have no doubt that the world of anyone who receives such news is immediately turned upside down.

We are greatly encouraged by the advances in modern medicine. No longer is cancer the sure and certain death sentence that it once was. Nowadays, we can be offered the hope of a cure or, at the very least, an assurance that the illness can be controlled. Despite that, cancer treatment is often a prolonged, distressful and depressing process, and many people find themselves out of work for long periods. That can lead to severe financial difficulties, which merely add to the feelings of distress and depression.

I pay tribute to the sterling work that is done by Macmillan Cancer Support. According to figures that it released recently, 31,000 people in Northern Ireland were diagnosed with cancer five or more years ago. In 2008, Macmillan also reported that three quarters of

cancer patients in Northern Ireland have financial concerns. That does not mean that three quarters of cancer patients are in poverty, but it highlights the extent of the problem. On the basis of those statistics, we can say that around 23,500 cancer sufferers in Northern Ireland face financial worries and pressures.

We should look at how those pressures come about. There is often a loss of direct income, because a person cannot work. A high percentage of the working population in Northern Ireland is employed by the public sector. I appreciate that the public sector shows concern for the welfare of its staff, but there will be financial repercussions, especially for those in low-grade jobs, if the illness is prolonged.

The problem is more serious in the private sector. For instance, if a self-employed person's business collapses as a result of his or her illness, it will have a knock-on effect if he or she has to pay off staff. Often, people who are employed in the private sector have fewer employment and welfare rights than those in other sectors. They are, therefore, vulnerable to financial pressures when serious illness strikes.

As well as the loss of direct income faced by people who are battling cancer, the overall cost of living can soar. Their heating costs increase; they incur costs for transport to and from hospital; their childcare arrangements can become a problem; their diet may need to change, and that can prove to be expensive; they may require new clothing; and many patients need more medicines and, therefore, more prescriptions.

In outlining the issues that confront us, I feel strongly that everything possible must be done to offer help and reassurance to those who find themselves sinking into poverty as a result of cancer. That is why access to quality on-site financial aid and advice services for people who are undergoing such treatment is essential. I know that steps have been and are being taken by the Executive. As chairperson of the Assembly all-party group on cancer, I welcome the draft service framework for cancer prevention and care.

In his absence, I urge the Health Minister to act swiftly to ensure that the implementation of some type of programme be carried through once the consultation ends on Friday.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome Members' contributions so far to the Sinn Féin motion on cancer treatment. It is obvious that the subject touches every family.

Last night, in advance of today's debate, I spoke to a cancer survivor in my constituency of West Tyrone. That young married man explained the difficulties that he and his wife faced with regard to the most simple things; for example, when he attempted to have a stair lift installed in his home to help him in his cancer journey and to allow him to have some dignity. However,

he said that the services provided by Macmillan Cancer Support at Altnagelvin Hospital were invaluable, and I gave him an undertaking to have that fact recorded today.

The motion calls on the Minister to provide information, access and advice about the services available to people with cancer and to those who have survived cancer. The Deputy Chairperson has already referred to having those services available on the hospital site.

Commenting on the briefing note from Macmillan, Kieran McCarthy said that Macmillan is keen that we celebrate the support that has come from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety so far, and I want to be associated with those comments. However, Macmillan goes on to say that it is disappointed that there is no standard in the consultation document that relates specifically to financial support. When I revisited the consultation document, I found that it contained 52 standards, but none referred to financial support.

The Research and Library Services information pack on the motion refers to 'Better Cancer Care, an Action Plan', a 2008 document from the Scottish Government, which states that cancer poverty is acknowledged in the actions that the Scottish Government have taken. There is a difference in emphasis between that document and the Department's consultation document, although that is not a criticism. The debate illustrates the point that there must be a standard relating to financial support, and Macmillan is calling for it. The fact that we are having such a positive response to the debate puts on record the fact that there is support for that standard in the consultation document, and the consultation closes on 5 February. I support the motion.

2.15 pm

Mr Hamilton: Although the motion is, in word if not literally, directed at the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I initially want to speak as the Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development. At this stage in the debate and particularly after Mr McDevitt's very emotional and thoughtful maiden speech, no one needs to elaborate on the debilitating and devastating effects that a cancer diagnosis can have on an individual and their family. Today's debate has shown us all that there is hardly a soul in the House, let alone in our society, who has not been directly or indirectly affected by cancer. That is why all parties have shown such passion and interest in the debate.

In that context, a very dry rundown of what the Committee for Social Development has done to address cancer poverty may in some ways seem unfitting or inappropriate. However, given the interest that the Committee has shown in that subject and given that there is a clear interface between benefits and health, it may be useful in the context of the debate to give such a rundown.

We must acknowledge that cancer treatment is getting better. Many cancer patients now live longer and enjoy more productive and complete lives than ever before. However, Macmillan Cancer Support has advised the Committee for Social Development that poverty is one of the less welcome consequences of the improvement in survival rates. Although modern treatments are effective, they can also be long and difficult and can involve extended periods of sickness. During such periods, a patient simply cannot work. Some cancer patients may have to remain at home for nearly 24 hours each day, and evidence suggests that they are consequently obliged to use a surprisingly large part of their reduced incomes or benefit payments to keep their home warm. The Committee for Social Development found that that is a real problem, and Macmillan Cancer Support advised that around two thirds of the grant aid that it distributes goes to meet cancer patients' fuel costs and that approximately 85% of the cancer patients that it has dealt with are living in fuel poverty.

State benefits and support are, of course, available to people who face that situation. However, the fluctuating and cyclical nature of the disease can make it difficult for patients to demonstrate on an application form that they satisfy the criteria for disability benefits. As a practical measure in response, the Committee for Social Development suggested extending winter fuel payments to every seriously ill cancer patient who is under 60 years of age. That group is easily identifiable, and extending that benefit would cost approximately £150,000 each year.

As all Members know, the social security system is intricate, complex and difficult to navigate. In addition to the practical measure that I outlined, the Committee for Social Development recognised that although Social Security Agency staff may have limited understanding of the issues that are associated with living with cancer — for example, diagnosis and prognosis — health and social care professionals can also lack knowledge of the benefits system. The consequences of that lack of a joined-up government approach may be that no sector, other than the voluntary sector, is able to provide accurate and appropriate information to cancer patients about the benefits to which they are entitled.

Mr McCallister: On that point, would the Member and perhaps the Committee for Social Development consider looking at how the Social Security Agency could, as Mrs O'Neill outlined earlier, be integrated into the hospital setting? That would enable the agency to get the information to those who need it when they need it.

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

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for his intervention. I would not be too precious about how precisely that service would be delivered.

Like others, I had the opportunity last week to meet Macmillan Cancer Support advisers, and I saw the very good work that they do. Those individuals are working on the front line and have been successful in recouping £5 million in benefits for cancer patients. They are saying clearly that the service that they provide must be mainstreamed. I would not be too precious about how the service is mainstreamed and who delivers it. However, had the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety been here, I would have impressed on him the need to take a collaborative approach with the Minister for Social Development to address the issue. However, we all agree that the service must be provided and that that must happen in a hospital setting. Who provides that service is a matter for discussion, but it is essential that it is given in a hospital setting.

I am sure that, when someone is diagnosed with cancer, the subject of benefits is the last thing on their mind as they deal with the consequences of that diagnosis. It would be extremely helpful and in the spirit of investing to save if there could be an integrated system within the hospital setting that directed people, as part of their treatment, to an on-site benefit advice service.

I have been told that the figure to integrate and mainstream such a system could amount to around £500,000, which may be difficult to secure, given the current tight health budget. However, if one considers the long-term benefits, the £5 million that Macmillan has already helped to recoup and the impact of reducing readmissions to hospital — as I said, people may be falling into fuel poverty because of the impact of their illness on their income — one can see that much more than that £500,000 could be saved. Clearly the benefit money would be recouped, but a fortune could also be saved in expenditure on readmissions to hospitals. With that in mind, I welcome the motion and support it wholeheartedly.

Mr Gardiner: I will begin by praising the excellent work done by Macmillan Cancer Support, which I have had the honour of supporting through the annual coffee mornings held in my constituency of Upper Bann. In particular and in the context of the motion, I praise Macmillan Cancer Support for the excellent booklet that it provides to cancer sufferers — the Northern Ireland edition of 'Help with the Cost of Cancer'. That booklet sets out the financial options for cancer sufferers of working age and for cancer sufferers who are pensioners or have children, as well as the help available for carers. It covers help with housing costs; help with health costs; the availability of loans

and grants; transport options; and a list of useful support organisations.

Cancer patients, particularly those in work, suffer seriously from a loss of earnings estimated to be as high as 50% for those aged under 55. Some 91% of cancer patients' households suffer a loss of income coupled with increased costs. In 2005, the National Audit Office found that 77% of all patients are not given any financial support information. In my view, cancer sufferers are entitled to high-quality financial advice under disability discrimination legislation. That should be supported by a national helpline, so that accessing information is both fast and easy for patients.

Special arrangements are in place for enhanced benefits for terminally ill patients. Some benefits also need to be fast-tracked for cancer sufferers. The Health Department already offers help through the NHS low-income scheme, which can help with prescription charges, dental treatment, sight tests, spectacles and travel. I would like to see that list extended. I would also like to see a special category of support introduced to the national benefits system for all seriously ill and terminally ill patients. Fast-track payments should be a part of that support. That is primarily a matter for the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in Whitehall, because changes of that order would need to be nationwide.

We must also realise that the delivery of all government services, including the Health Service, is a co-operative venture involving the Government and organisations like Macmillan Cancer Support. Macmillan is already fulfilling an excellent and important role in addition to its many other valuable roles. In offering a service that provides information on how to survive cancer financially, Macmillan works in close co-operation with other agencies for which I have the highest regard: citizens advice bureaux. They offer advice on applying for benefits; appealing benefits decisions; applying for tax credits; meeting health and travel costs; accessing disability parking badges; housing queues; debts; and a host of other problems.

There are 55,000 people in Northern Ireland living with or beyond a cancer diagnosis. That is a considerable section of society. It is 3% of the population, and 31,000 of those sufferers were diagnosed five or more years ago.

The Irish Republic's Finance Minister, Mr Brian Lenihan TD, has announced that he will continue to work during his treatment. Not all employers take as understanding a position as that which the Irish Government have taken on this occasion. It is essential that financial information be readily accessible and available for sufferers.

Many Members have spoken of the absence of the Health Minister from this debate. Only yesterday, the First Minister and deputy First Minister did not appear

for Question Time, and no reason was given other than that they had another engagement. People should get their priorities right before they start to criticise the Health Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Gardiner: It is the Minister for Social Development who should be taking this on, not the Health Minister.

Mrs D Kelly: It is quite clear from my reading of the motion that its point is about having on-site financial aid. No one has said that such financial advice and assistance does not exist; the critical question is about where it is delivered and how it is accessed. I am pleased to say that my proposal to have the Health Committee ask for the inclusion of this standard in the consultation on the framework services report was supported by all parties and by the Independent Member on the Committee.

Mr Hamilton was correct to say that the lives of few if any Members have not been affected by cancer. My mother died from cancer at the age of 54, and I remember well the trauma, grief and distress that it caused not only to her, my father and my brothers and sisters but to her mother, who died from cancer 18 months later. Many families have a history of people being bereaved and lives being touched by the ravages of cancer.

We have all worked with colleagues who have suffered from and come through cancer. Members have made the important point that many people have come through the other side, but that journey is fraught with anxiety about how to manage and cope. Anyone who has witnessed a person having chemotherapy or radiotherapy will know about the debilitating nature of the treatments for cancer. Those treatments have their own drastic consequences in causing ill health, and, for that reason, many people are no longer able to work.

Much medical evidence shows that stress and anxiety are contributory causes of cancer and are factors in exacerbating the condition as the disease progresses. In these straitened times, when many homes are worrying about finances for a number of reasons, we can only imagine the additional stress that is caused to a family worried about making ends meet when one of its main wage earners is unable to work because of cancer.

It is incumbent on society to help people through such difficult times, and we can all agree that the purpose of the Good Friday Agreement was to build a better society in which the people who are most marginalised and vulnerable would be protected. That is why the Assembly has a statutory obligation to tackle poverty and its causes and to promote social inclusion. I wish that those who were charged with implementing those policies would do so with a much more determined effort than has been demonstrated to date.

I associate myself with Mr Gardiner's praise for Macmillan Cancer Support, which does an excellent job not only in the provision of advice services but in supporting families the whole way through cancer treatment and sometimes, in the most unfortunate circumstances, in palliative care.

That work is often not acknowledged in the way in which it should be. People who work with and care for those who are ill are the real heroes of our society.

The SDLP supports the proposal fully. A lot of help exists for people who are undergoing treatment for cancer, but the point of the debate is that that help should be available and easily accessible. I readily lend my support to the motion.

2.30 pm

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the investment in cancer treatment that has been announced by the Health Minister, especially the cancer centre at Altnagelvin Area Hospital, which shows a financial commitment that has been long required and the will to put projects in place. The life-saving treatment that such centres provide cannot be underestimated in any way. I congratulate all those organisations that give so much help and support to that worthy cause. I wish to record my disappointment that the Minister is not in the House for the debate.

I ask the Minister, in conjunction with other Departments or voluntary bodies, to ensure that, as part of the treatment process, information regarding the financial assistance that is available to patients with cancer is made available in cancer treatment centres. Many people find themselves in financial difficulties due to their illness and the resulting loss of income, travel costs and other factors. It would be a great boost for them to have readily accessible information on financial assistance. I have known cases in which not only cancer but other illnesses have led to individuals and families being left in dire financial difficulties, as they have been unaware of any available assistance. Financial worries can be only an additional burden to people and families when their focus should be on recovering from illness.

As elected representatives, most Members are used to dealing with the benefits system, but many people have little or no experience of it. Those people are at the greatest risk of missing out on the benefits to which they are entitled. There is also a concern that families with young children or people who are retired are at the greatest risk of missing out. Therefore, I ask the Minister to examine closely an interdepartmental or inter-agency approach to providing a service that will ensure that everyone who needs financial assistance can get suitable advice. That can most easily be done at clinical appointments. I point the Minister to an example of practice at Causeway Hospital. When there is an eye clinic, members of the Royal National Institute

for the Blind (RNIB) are in attendance in the hospital's foyer to give advice. That is invaluable help to patients, and it is an excellent example of what can also be done for cancer patients. I stress that, for the patients' protection, the organisations that would be tasked to provide information would have to be recognised for their ability to do so reliably.

The adoption of an all-round approach to treating a serious illness is a practical and sensible way of ensuring that those who are going through the trying experience of serious illness can be reassured that they will be made aware of any financial assistance available. I support the motion.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. There is no doubt that everyone in the Chamber is aware of at least one person who has suffered from cancer. Many of us have knowledge of the issue that we are discussing today. One in every three people is affected by cancer in some way. I have experience of it in my family, and I am sure that other Members have it in theirs. As elected representatives, we deal with many people who have cancer. We see what it means when the dreaded "c word" is used, because people are scared. I am aware of some people who are very close to us in the Chamber who are facing bad times.

Thaire ir a clatter o' femmelies i the Province the noo wha ir fechtin cancer an' this motion heighlights the fecht at thaim at dinnae fecht no onie agin the cancer an' depression an' fear — they fecht agin practical hannlins an' hannlins adae wi' catter forebye.

There are an awful lot of families right now in the Province who are battling cancer, and the motion highlights the fact that they are fighting not only against cancer, depression and fear but against practical and financial difficulties. That is the issue that I want to concentrate on during the short time that I have in which to speak.

Those families do their best for their loved ones by buying them organic food, ensuring that they have the right diet and by keeping them warm, which is what they are told they should be doing. However, a number of people have told me that it has been particularly difficult to keep warm this winter. Those people's homes, which I visited, were like fridges. In fact, it was colder in their homes than it was outside, which is almost impossible to believe, given the weather that we have had this winter.

I wish to promote Macmillan Cancer Support's campaign to turn up the heat: it has been a real issue faced by many people this winter. A recent Macmillan survey found that one in five cancer patients turn the heating off because they are worried about rising fuel bills, even though they are cold. The fact that many cancer patients have probably experienced a 50% reduction in their income because of their illness alone

highlights the importance of the issue, and I think that Members are aware of that.

Consider the costs faced by the family of a cancer patient who visit the hospital: they must pay for all-day parking, which is not cheap, and take days off work, which is also costly. They also face the other problems that heap up.

I pay tribute to the Minister, who, unfortunately, is not here today, for his decision to remove prescription charges for cancer patients from April. That is good news and a step in the right direction. However, we are looking for a wee bit more. I hope that the Member who will be summing up shortly will focus on that issue.

There is no doubt that as well as affecting a family emotionally, cancer affects its financial stability. For families already on the breadline, it can be a step too far and can take them over the line. I commend Macmillan Cancer Support, Action Cancer and Marie Curie Cancer Care for the tremendous work that they do. I believe that the onus is on the strong to look after the weak, and I do not say that in a dismissive way; I mean it honestly, because I believe that it is true. It is important that we look after those cancer patients who do not automatically qualify for help with fuel or food payments. Those patients spend more time at home recovering than they do in hospital, and it is important that they are looked after at home. However, the issue of rising fuel bills must be addressed in order to facilitate that.

Macmillan Cancer Support is campaigning for more help for cancer patients who are struggling to cope with rising fuel bills, and I fully support that campaign. Ards Borough Council also supports the campaign; and the Assembly has an opportunity to do so today.

The winter fuel payment is not sufficient. People with cancer should be eligible for social tariffs and should be included in new mandatory price support, because that would give them a much needed discount on their fuel bills and would help with other factors. For that reason, I congratulate the Members who secured the debate in the Chamber today.

We have heard true stories about constituents who come with tears in their eyes to tell of their family circumstances, their children, etc. This is not like a housing issue or planning matter, where one can phone a Department or an officer and ask for support and help in addressing the issue.

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

Mr Shannon: The motion gives us an opportunity to address this problem. I ask Members to support the motion, and I believe they will. We should focus our energy on the people who need help.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to make the

winding-up speech in the debate. I thank the Members who took part in what has been a useful debate: they have all said that they will support the motion. Therefore, it is probably a good day for cancer services in the North, when all parties in the Assembly have said that they will support a motion that is trying to advance those services.

Normally, at this stage in a debate, I thank the Minister for attending; but he is not here today. I think that that is an issue: the Minister should be here, where possible. We need to live in the real world, and when the Minister told us months ago that he was dealing with the issue of swine flu, we accepted that. However, why is he not here today?

Mr Spratt: Will the Member accept that this is not the first time that the Minister has not appeared in the House to respond to important health debates and that he has shied away from such debates in the House on a number of occasions?

Ms S Ramsey: Absolutely. My colleague and I have asked Research and Library Services to give us a list of the debates that have taken place on swine flu and which of those the Minister has attended. It is important that the Health Minister, in common with all Ministers, takes the opportunity to come to the House to tell Members what he is going to do. I am not in the business of criticising for the sake of it, and I have commended the Minister when he needed to be commended. However, I am criticising him for not coming here today.

We do not know what is happening. A consultation exercise is going on. However, the Minister should have come to the House today to tell us what the issues are. John McCallister said that financial aid and advice services are not in the Health Minister's remit and that the Minister does not see that as his problem. Rather, he sees it as DSD's problem. If that is the case, I ask the Minister what he has done about that and whether he has talked to DSD. One minute we are told that the Minister is not here because he is dealing with swine flu, but the next we are told that he is not here because the issues that are under debate are DSD issues. It would be useful if the Minister were to get a copy of the Hansard report of the debate, because there are questions that he needs to answer.

In a letter to the Health Committee of 30 November 2009, the Minister said:

"Although as Minister with responsibility for health issues, my focus must always be on using the resources available to me to provide the means to treat disease and face the clinical challenges posed by cancer, I am aware that access to high quality, up to date information is critical to the wellbeing of patients, families and carers affected by cancer."

He went on to say:

"This includes effective signposting to benefits and financial advice but does not go as far as giving commitments on the specific provision of such advice as responsibility for this lies with other Departments, notably DSD."

At the end of the letter, the Minister said that he would ensure that the Committee's comments would be considered.

However, consultation closes this week, and we do not know whether the Minister has approached DSD or talked to the Minister for Social Development or to his Executive colleagues. The issue is not just about people's health and well-being; it is about investment for health. The Minister is being disingenuous by one minute saying that he is not here because of issues to do with swine flu, and the next, his party colleague is saying that he is not here because the matter under debate is not his issue.

I thank the research departments at Action Cancer and Macmillan Cancer Support for their briefing papers. Most, if not all, Members who spoke in the debate used statistics that those organisations provided. In its briefing paper, Macmillan said that it was very proud of the enormous steps that the Assembly and the Health Ministers have taken over the past decade to support cancer patients. Macmillan believes that that should be celebrated in the debate, and I think that that is absolutely right.

Some Members, including Jim Shannon, highlighted the issue of free prescriptions being available from April. Other Members talked about the steps forward on financial support for cancer treatment and research. Conall McDevitt talked about the good work that is being done by Paddy Johnston. Such work needs to be celebrated. As Jim said, 10 years ago, cancer was seen as "the big C", and, in my family, the word "cancer" was whispered. Now people are dealing with cancer and trying to move forward.

Action Cancer believes that the consultation and the framework are an impressive attempt to implement a structured system. Therefore, two of the biggest cancer charities are not overtly critical of what is happening. Instead, they are welcoming it. However, they are asking that that be tweaked and that another wee step be taken in the right direction so that we can take a holistic approach to dealing with issues that are associated with cancer.

Some Members rightly highlighted and commended the work of carers and people who work in that field. In common with Members who spoke previously, I, and my extended family, have been directly and indirectly affected by cancer. Carers and people working in the hospices and other institutions cannot be paid enough. At every opportunity, we should commend the work that those people do.

As I said, I hope that the Health Minister will get time to read the Hansard report. Therefore, I will read a recommendation that NICE makes in its supportive and palliative care guidance. That states:

“Systems should be in place to direct patients to expert advice on benefits, including support in completing application forms.”

One minute the Health Department representatives are saying that the NICE guidelines do not suit them, but the next minute they are saying that they do. At the Health Committee meeting last week, the Chief Medical Officer tried to use the NICE guidelines when he talked about drugs for arthritis and other such issues. If NICE says that something needs to be done, it needs to be done; people cannot cherry-pick what they think NICE wants them to do.

2.45 pm

Alex Easton and his colleague Jonathan Bell highlighted the psychological impact of cancer and the impact of travel on cancer patients and their wider families. The motion calls for on-site financial aid to try to take that burden away.

I do not know whether it is in order to ask, but can we find out whether the Business Committee was formally told that the Health Minister would not be here for the debate? Samuel Gardiner criticised the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their absence from the Chamber yesterday, and that is his prerogative. However, at least they had the decency to write to the Speaker yesterday morning to apologise for their absence. As far as I am aware, the Health Minister did not write to the Speaker to tell him that he would not be here. The Health Minister found the time to take part in a private Member's motion yesterday, as a private Member. We are being told that he is not available on Monday and Tuesday to deal with health issues, so how was he able to free up time yesterday to take part in a private Member's motion? I do not want to be seen as critical of the Health Minister, but he is walking into criticism; he should have been here to answer some of the questions that have been asked.

Dolores Kelly and George Robinson highlighted the proactive work that is being done and commended the staff involved. I want to be associated with those comments.

We are all well aware that other Committees need to step up to the mark to address the issue raised in the motion. Simon Hamilton's contribution on behalf of the Social Development Committee was useful. He said 85% of the cancer patients that Macmillan Cancer Support deals with are living in fuel poverty and outlined what the DSD Committee is doing to address that. We should welcome the work of other Committees. However, if we are talking about a collective approach to health — Minister McGimpsey is well aware of, and is always talking about, a collective approach to health — he needs to come in here and let us work with him.

It might be useful for Simon Hamilton, as Chairperson of the Social Development Committee, to ensure that relevant information is forwarded to the Health

Committee. Other Committees are making small and important steps that have a positive impact on cancer patients and cancer charities. The statistics provided by Mr Hamilton were some of the most useful pieces of information to come out of the debate, particularly for me, because I am dealing with cancer patients who are living in fuel poverty.

All in all, the debate has been useful. Neither I nor my party colleagues are going to stop tabling motions on health issues just because the Minister will not come to the House for them. The Speaker and the Business Committee need to take on board that the Minister's time should be freed up when there are issues to discuss. If the Minister decides not to attend just for the sake of it, it should be made clear that the Chamber is where Ministers and MLAs are held to account, so he should be asked why he is refusing to attend important health debates in the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that people undergoing treatment for cancer can find themselves vulnerable to poverty because of their changed circumstances; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, as part of his service framework for cancer prevention, treatment and care, to provide access to quality, on-site financial aid and advice services for people undergoing such treatment.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Faith-based Organisations

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

Miss McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

None of us should underestimate the positive impact that faith communities have on wider society. Sadly, wider society does exactly that. I am sure that all Members in the Chamber have some contact with faith-based groups in their day-to-day constituency work. That contact may be through dealing with individuals who were referred to Members by those groups, hosting or speaking at events for them or even assisting with difficulties that they encounter individually. Beyond that, Churches and faith-based organisations are well established and have built up relationships of trust in local communities that enable them to carry out valuable work in areas where statutory services have been ineffective.

Although it is impossible to outline every area of action in which such organisations are now involved, it goes far beyond the simple stereotyping of the Sunday morning service, Sunday school and the Boys' Brigade. Those are mainstays of Christian faith-based organisations, and youth work is an important component of the services that they offer. For example, in Comber in my own constituency, a Youth for Christ drop-in centre called The Net was opened in February 1998. It sought to engage effectively with young people outside church congregations. That is known as detached youth work, and one of its key areas of work is addressing antisocial behaviour.

The 2005 research report into faith-based youth work in Northern Ireland, which was commissioned by a faith-based interest group called YouthNet, noted that 68% of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were faith- or church-based and involved around 90,000 young people. Amazingly, the volunteers in that area are sometimes overlooked when figures are discussed. According to the report, 22,109 people gave their time freely to help in youth work through faith-based organisations. That accounts for 74.4% of the total volunteers in youth work. Although I have referred to

the report, I should point out that it is limited in scope, and I suggest that any assessment should be significantly broader. However, it provides an indication of the numbers that are involved in such work.

As I said, youth work is only part of the work that faith-based communities undertake. They are now involved in a wide range of social matters and projects that seek to reduce drug abuse and assist victims of crime, including domestic violence. Important work is carried out on rehabilitation of ex-prisoners and paramilitary groups. In addition, such groups undertake schemes that cover such diverse areas as parent/toddler groups, lunch clubs and support networks. Moreover, we should not forget those who are involved in hospital visits, prisoner visits and employment training.

I will use another example from my own constituency. The Link Family and Community Centre was formed by a Presbyterian Church in Newtownards in January 1997. It offers a wide range of services, including support for people who are suffering as a result of long-term addiction to alcohol or drugs. It provides an educationally stimulating location for toddlers and offers a senior citizens' lunch club and community development projects. Project 23 provides support, facilities and activities for young people.

The Vine Centre was established in one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland in north Belfast in 1970. It offers an advice centre, after-school clubs, family education, a women's project, lunch clubs, senior citizens' meetings, adult education classes and a volunteer development programme.

The role and impact of volunteering is sometimes overlooked. However, it makes an important contribution to community life in general. Although volunteering has obvious benefits for a person who is taken out on social trips or kept company by a transport companion, it also acts as a means of building and maintaining skills for people who have been unemployed, and faith-based groups are a means through which that happens. Although we could list the fantastic services and praise their impact on wider society, we simply cannot categorically state what impact they have or detail with certainty all the services that are offered and the number of people who avail themselves of those services.

The motion refers to the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report. The rationale behind that was that there was little statistical evidence of the services that are provided by faith-based communities, as is the case in Northern Ireland. The report provides a breakdown of the faith communities in Wales along with their geographical location and shows how many of those communities are located in areas of high levels of deprivation.

The report provides evidence of the numbers of people who attend faith communities, the numbers of volunteers organised in those communities, the hours devoted to assisting others, and the services that are currently offered by faith communities, as well as those that they hope to offer in the future. The report also considers involvement in cultural and sporting activities and the use of various organisations' premises by the wider community.

Apart from those direct services, however, the report scrutinises the responsibility of faith-based communities for buildings of historical interest that can generate tourism in the areas in which they are situated. The report attempts to estimate the numbers of visitors to such sites. Furthermore, it makes economic estimates of the contribution that is made by faith-based communities, showing the value of the community work that is undertaken, the value of paid work, the value of the tourism that is generated, and the supply of premises. The report concludes by detailing the involvement of faith communities in government initiatives and highlights how such communities are mainly self-funding. The report shows that only 27% of such communities in Wales receive any funding from public sources.

There are evident benefits in carrying out similar exercises in Northern Ireland, where arguably there is an even greater proportion of people involved in such work. It is important that we be aware of the extent of the role that is played by such organisations. That can be achieved by gathering clear statistical data so that an assessment can be made of their contribution. Using that as a base, we can expand to create workable, two-way relationships between those communities and the Assembly.

We should appreciate that there are very few groups that have such a well-established structure in areas that public services have, traditionally, found hard to reach. There is capacity in those groups not only to gather and disseminate information to their communities, but to assist in delivering those services. It is only when we truly appreciate the work that is being undertaken by such communities and organisations that we can maximise the potential of any two-way relationship. To do that would require an audit similar to that outlined in the Welsh example.

One of the challenges faced by faith-based organisations that I and undoubtedly other Members have come across is the reluctance of such organisations to avail themselves of lottery funding to support what they do because that conflicts with their ethos. Having spoken to many of those groups in my Strangford constituency, I know that they do not even consider the option of applying for lottery funding. An audit that shows how those organisations are funded and outlines the difficulties that they experience may assist the

Assembly in considering alternative funding streams for those organisations that cannot access lottery funding on moral grounds.

I note that a member of the Minister for Social Development's party raised that concern in the House of Commons on 3 June 2009. During a supplementary question to the Minister of State, he recognised the valuable role that is played by Churches and faith-based groups to local communities and wider society in Northern Ireland. I hope, therefore, that I will have the support of the Minister and her party for the motion. Indeed, on 28 April 2008, the Minister said that:

"Faith based organisations have much to offer working in partnership with statutory and voluntary organisations to address the worst examples of social deprivation, prejudice and poverty."

I am sure that, with such recognition of what they can offer, she will agree that, in order to maximise any potential partnership, an assessment of the capacity and contribution of such organisations is essential. We can consider the £20 million Skainos urban regeneration project on the lower Newtownards Road in east Belfast, which developed out of the work of the East Belfast Mission. That shows the type of positive fruit that such partnerships can bear. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 3.00 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. When the debate resumes, I will call Mr Mickey Brady.

The debate stood suspended.

3.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

FINANCE AND PERSONNEL

Staffing

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his plan to redeploy 90 members of staff within his Department due to his reduced budget, how this can be reconciled with the large number of high-earning civil servants in his Department.

(AQO 693/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel (Mr S Wilson): My Department, in common with all other Departments, has had to make savings to enable it to live within the available funding for 2010-11. That will mean a reduction in the number of civil servants employed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). That reduction will be achieved by redeploying about 48 staff, or 2%, of the Department's workforce. The Department is also on course to reduce Senior Civil Service posts by 10% compared with the number at the start of this financial year. As the Member will know, 10% significantly exceeds the proportion of other staff who are being redeployed.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his answer. Over the years, we often heard that public sector salary levels were to be compared with the private sector. In light of the economic downturn and current financial climate, will the Minister carry out a review to appraise salaries at the most senior level throughout the public sector, given that the job losses are primarily at the coalface?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The last part of the Member's question demonstrates that she did not listen to my previous answer. The job losses will not be primarily at the coalface: the number of senior civil servants will reduce by 10%, and the number of staff in the rest of the Department will reduce by 2%.

However, the Member raised a good point. Although she does not like to give me too much credit for anything, I hope that she realises that of all the Finance Ministers across the United Kingdom, I have led the way in examining senior salaries. Indeed, even though the Senior Salaries Review Body recommended the payment of bonuses, Northern Ireland is the only place in which those bonuses have not been implemented. That was my decision, and I made it because it was important to examine the level of pay for senior posts.

There is now talk at Westminster of a salary freeze for senior civil servants next year. That will be fed through by the Senior Salaries Review Body, and we will be linked to that. I hope that the Member recognises that we have not ignored the issue.

Mr Weir: When does the Minister expect the redeployment exercise to be finalised and details of surplus staff to become available?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hope that it will be finalised by the end of next week. Initially, we will seek to redeploy staff rather than having to make people redundant. Given the high level of turnover in the Northern Ireland Civil Service — from memory, it amounts to about 900 posts a year, although if that figure is wrong, I will correct it — there is always hope that we will be able to redeploy people in various Departments.

Mr K Robinson: The House is always sorry to hear of any job losses, although we note that the generals as well as the infantry are taking their cut. However, will the Minister assure the House that the function and performance of his Department will not suffer as a result of those job losses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The job of all Ministers is to ensure that although economies must be made, any reductions are examined in light of service delivery. However the reductions are implemented, Ministers must ensure that their impact on service delivery is kept to an absolute minimum.

For that reason, to prevent maximum impact on service delivery, we are considering from where surplus staff in the Department can best be identified. We shall then seek to implement redeployments. All Ministers would seek to do that rather than opt for the first reduction that occurs to them regardless of impact.

Dr Farry: To what extent does the Minister recognise a failure in our local labour market? Our top talent is attracted to the public sector because it has the best terms and conditions and less risk. What efforts is the Minister making, in conjunction with other Ministers, to ensure that we have a more balanced labour market and that our top people are attracted not only to the public sector but to the private sector, in order to grow our economy?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: That is linked to an answer that I gave earlier. We recognise that there are some distortions. We want to attract the best people into the public service. There is no point in having the public service staffed by people who are second-rate. I believe that we attract very good staff to the upper echelons of the Civil Service. However, the Member makes an important point, which is that that cannot happen at the expense of distorting the labour market or of making the public sector the only attractive proposition for people with skills and ability.

I took a proposal to the Executive that we should examine bonuses and the bonus culture throughout the public sector, not just in the ranks of the Civil Service. Ministers are now obliged to apply to DFP when they wish to pay bonuses to staff. Some bonuses are contractual, so there is no way that we can get out of paying those, but, in other cases, my Department has refused to permit bonus payments to be made. That is at least a first step. The other structural issue that the Member raised must be dealt with by the wider review of public sector pay, into which we have an input but for which we do not have total responsibility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

INTERREG IV: Portrush

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel when EU INTERREG IV funding will be released for a technical study for the Portrush regeneration project. (AQO 695/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I hope that the funding for the project can be released fairly soon. The technical study for the Portrush regeneration project is part of the wider Sail West project, which has been allocated €7 million of INTERREG IVa funding. Donegal County Council is the lead partner for the project.

The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) issued a letter of offer to the Sail West project on 1 December 2009, but that has not yet been signed and returned. On 12 January 2010, Donegal County Council advised SEUPB of staffing changes and asked for the letter to be reissued. That was done on 27 January 2010, not provoked by the fact that this question had been tabled but because the Department has a quick and efficient turnaround. Money can begin to flow to the project when that letter has been signed and returned, together with a copy of the required partnership agreement among Donegal County Council, Coleraine Borough Council for the Portrush element, and the other Sail West partners. Those are matters for the project partners and not for my Department.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for that welcome announcement. This is quite a significant project in one of — if not the — premier tourism and leisure resorts in Northern Ireland. Given the good news that the Minister has been able to announce, and the fact that he is waiting for the response, will he tell us whether any of the individual economic appraisals have details outstanding? If there are, will he task his officials to assist in finding a speedy resolution in order to bring the project to fruition?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: Information is and will continue to be required for the 15 individual elements of the project.

Of course, SEUPB is always happy to help where there are difficulties in the applications process. It is not in our interests for funds to be delayed; we want to spend the money.

I know that a number of Members are concerned about this issue, but we are up to date with the spending of funds. There is no reason for us to delay spending at a time when we want to have as much investment in the economy as possible. However, there are elements that cannot be dealt with by the Department. In the cases of partnership arrangements, especially those with many elements, all the partners must come together to complete the applications so that money can start to flow.

Mr McClarty: Given the importance of Portrush and the Causeway Coast to Northern Ireland's overall tourism provision, does the Minister not accept that emergency financial action by the Executive is required beyond the Portrush regeneration scheme? The town was ranked fifty-sixth out of 59 in a recent UK-wide survey.

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: As the Member knows, my Department is responsible for the Peace III and INTERREG IVa elements of any spending. Other Ministers are responsible for any wider regeneration and spending issues, whether they relate to tourism, urban regeneration or whatever. The Member did not mention any specific projects, but having been in Portrush at the weekend, I can confirm his point.

There is a lot of dereliction in Portrush, especially in the main street. Therefore, a lot of work needs to be done in what is one of Northern Ireland's main tourist areas. That work will be done in conjunction with local authorities and a range of Departments. My Department wishes to move the Sail West project along. I hope that the issues that are still to be resolved, including those in relation to the partnership agreements, will be dealt with quickly so that the money can be released.

Mr Gallagher: Does the Minister agree that territorial cohesion is a central theme of EU policy? Will he tell the House whether that theme is reflected in his Department's thinking on all-Ireland infrastructure generally?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I cannot remember the exact percentage, but a lot of the INTERREG funding will be channelled through the five cross-border groups. I met some of the cross-border groups in November 2009, and they expressed concerns about the delay in funding. I undertook to see what could be done, and all the groups have now received offers for their administration costs. Some groups have received offers for particular projects, and a number of offers should be made to individual projects in the next five or six months. About €50 million should be allocated to individual projects as a result of the offers.

When we talk about cross-border co-operation, we are not just referring to co-operation between the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Increasingly, cross-border co-operation also refers to co-operation with councils in Scotland. That is important for the areas such as that which my friend from East Londonderry Mr McClarty talked about and, indeed, East Antrim. I have done my best to move that forward, as I promised I would when I met the groups, and we are beginning to see some results.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us how many projects, in his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, have been hindered due to the delays in the INTERREG IVa funding? How much money is involved in those projects?

3.15 pm

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There is not a massive delay. I have the figures: by the end of last year, the INTERREG IVa and PEACE III programmes had between them approved 139 projects worth €267 million. That means that we are up to date; we are not lagging behind in expenditure.

A number of Members from across the House have raised this with me, and I told them that I had no evidence that there were considerable delays. I spoke to the head of SEUPB, and we discussed it when we met on a North/South forum basis. I was assured that every effort was being made to ensure that the money was spent on time. The figures that we have available indicate that we are in place to spend the money. Of course, there are a number of major projects, some of which have been a bit slow. INTERREG IVa especially has been characterised by large projects that take much longer to evaluate and to get the information together on.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises: Finance

4. **Lord Browne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps he is taking to assist small and medium-sized enterprises to access capital.

(AQO 696/10)

5. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what success he has had in persuading banks to extend credit to small and medium-sized enterprises, and to increase liquidity within the economy.

(AQO 697/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 5 together.

As the chairperson of the Executive's cross-sector advisory forum banking group, I have convened a number of meetings of key stakeholders on this issue.

There is mounting evidence to suggest that local banks have adopted a conservative approach to lending to local businesses. That makes it increasingly difficult for them to maintain cash flow and investment requirements. I have, therefore, worked with the Institute of Directors and Invest Northern Ireland to develop a quick guide to accessing finance. That guide has now been circulated to local firms through the various business organisations, and that initiative will assist local firms in their engagements with banks.

I have also formally raised the matter of bank lending with the Treasury Ministers, and the issue is to be raised at the bank lending panel, which is chaired by the Chancellor. While strengthening their own balance sheets, local banks should also ensure that they give support to local businesses. Without strong local businesses, our economy will be weak.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate him on his efforts to help small businesses in this difficult economic climate. The business community appreciates the support provided by the enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Can the Minister give me any information on the uptake of that scheme? Is he satisfied that participating banks provide sufficient information to their small business customers?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I am not happy with the uptake of the scheme. Whether one considers the number of loans or the value of them, I can say only that Northern Ireland is performing abominably. Only 81 loans have been offered so far in Northern Ireland: that compares with the situation in Wales, where 384 have been offered; in Scotland, 515; the north-east of England, 253; and the south-east of England, over 1,000. Clearly, even though we are a smaller region, the uptake per 100 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has been low in Northern Ireland. Through the cross-sector advisory forum, I have taken this matter up with local banks to ask what they can do, and what they are doing, to promote the scheme with their customers. Equally important, for it is the other side of the equation, I have contacted the business organisations to encourage them to get their members to inquire of banks about the scheme's availability.

Mr B Wilson: I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously he has been active in this respect.

Last week, I spoke to a member of the Bangor Chamber of Commerce, who suggested that bank lending had not changed since the Minister had last spoken with the banks, and that some long-established businesses were in danger of going out of business because of cash flow problems. Is the Minister monitoring what the banks are doing? Has he any evidence of a change in bank lending since he spoke to the banks last?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The Member raised an important issue. There is no point in relating anecdotes. All the banks are represented on the banking subgroup of the cross-sector advisory forum. People had been relaying stories that they had heard about particular businesses, but all that information was highly anecdotal. Therefore, the Institute of Directors and other business organisations surveyed their members. To ensure that the banks could not wriggle out of the process, the institute spoke to them first to ascertain the kind of questions with which they would be happy. That collusion meant that the banks could not complain that the institute was asking the wrong questions.

The survey painted a fairly bleak picture: 44% of those who responded said that lending conditions had become worse. Importantly, however, we now have an evidence base, which is what the Member was getting at. As for what can be done, action can be taken at three levels. I do not want to over-egg the pudding: we cannot force banks to do something that they do not wish to do. First, however, we can, through the advisory forum, talk to the heads of the various banks. Secondly, I raised the issue with the Treasury Minister. Thirdly, during a quadrilateral meeting, I spoke to all the other Finance Ministers in the United Kingdom. The information that my officials send to the Treasury is now an item on the agenda of the lending panel, which is chaired by the Treasury Minister. In that way, at least we get access to those at the top, and we have the ear of people who may well have some influence on the banks.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister ensure that investment is made in organisations that lend to social economy businesses?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The social economy is represented on the banking subgroup of the cross-sector advisory forum. Its representatives have raised issues and highlighted the difficulties that they experience. Many of them made it clear that their businesses are sound and that they have a good market and strong base. They also pointed out that they benefit their local areas in many other ways through injecting their profits into socially worthwhile projects.

Although some of the issues facing the social economy are the same as those facing small businesses, others are peculiar to that sector. However, at least we have a means by which we can measure that sector's problems and relay its concerns to the banking industry. The sector has considered how credit unions may be able to help them. Often, social economy businesses share a common interest in their local areas with that particular source of finance.

Ms Lo: Does the Minister agree that the best way to grow the economy is to help SMEs to develop and export to other markets? In what way does the Minister envisage

his Department supporting the recommendations of the recent Barnett report?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: The implementation of the Barnett report's recommendations is a matter for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. My Department will listen to any of the Minister's proposals, particularly those that have financial implications. If a business case is presented, we will, of course, consider that, as we do any other application.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Shannon is not in his place to ask question 6.

Employment: Job Creation

7. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what action he is taking to protect public service jobs and to promote job creation within the construction sector, given that unemployment now stands at 54,500 and the number of people claiming jobseeker's allowance has increased by 50% in the past year. (AQO 699/10)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: There are two parts to the Member's question. As far as the Civil Service posts are concerned, I outlined in my response to an earlier question how we are considering what efficiencies must be made across Departments. We will, of course, examine how those efficiencies can be made without having a direct impact on service delivery.

At present, 30% of those who are registered as unemployed are from the construction industry. The Executive and I recognise the impact that the economic downturn, particularly in the housing market, has had on that industry.

That is one reason why we have spent more on capital investment this year than ever — up by about £1 million a day to overall spending that now amounts to £1.7 billion. When they hear uninformed, misinformed and, sometimes, malicious comments that the Assembly and the Executive are doing nothing for the unemployed, people should remember that 54% of people employed in the construction industry — it used to be 32% — are working on public sector projects, because the Executive moved quickly to bring forward spending to try to fill the gap.

We have not been able to fill it totally, and I do not think that anybody could reasonably expect us to do so. However, we have at least sought to address the problem, and, as a result of our action, far more people in the construction industry have been spared unemployment than would otherwise have been the case.

Mr Gardiner: I point out for the Minister's benefit that there has been considerable foot dragging by the Department of Education on two major projects in my

constituency, namely Lurgan College and Portadown College. That has had a big impact on construction work in my area. Will the Minister assure the Assembly that there is no unwritten policy of capital project delays, steered by his Department, which does not have Executive clearance?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I give the Member an absolute assurance that my Department has no policy of delaying capital projects. I often get letters, including from Members of every party in the House, accusing DFP of dragging its heels and taking ages to deal with business cases that have been presented to it. In most of the instances that I have investigated, the business cases never came to us.

I have made it clear to officials that business cases from Departments are to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Hopefully, they come with all the information that allows DFP to clear them. If they do not and there are further questions to be asked, I seek to make that turnaround as quick as possible. Do not forget that the preparation of the business case and answering queries about it is the responsibility of the parent Department. The only undertaking that I can give is that DFP will not drag its heels in dealing with business cases.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is there further scope in the Executive to bring forward public work schemes that provide opportunities for construction firms? How would the Minister respond to a call from a local company that has a proven track record in the construction field but which is not affiliated with or registered to Constructionline and which, therefore, does not qualify for public sector opportunities?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: I do not know the company. The Member may wish to write to me about the project, but his question is couched in such vague terms that he would not expect me to answer. Without knowing the details — even if he had given me the name of the construction company — I would not have hazarded a guess. However, I would be happy to look at the issue for him.

We have brought forward by years a great deal of capital spending in order to find opportunities and to bring forward capital projects. However, one must be prudent about not creating a spending hole for years to come, particularly when we know that there will be capital cuts after the next election, with the tightening of the Budget.

However, there are advantages in bringing capital projects forward at this time. Costs have been reduced so much — we sometimes get 20% discounts — that it makes more sense to spend the money now than to wait until there is an upturn and prices go up again. That judgement must be made.

The publication on the website of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) delivery tracking system (DTS) portal gives firms good advance warning of what public projects are coming down the line so that those companies can prepare to make bids. We have tried to make the procurement process and the pre-qualification process, which can be time-consuming, as simple as possible. Once inputted, information does not need to be put in time and time again.

We have tried to cut down even those procurement costs for firms.

3.30 pm

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for the work that his Department has already done to assist the construction sector. As he knows, my constituency of Strangford has experienced major difficulties in that area. Given that apprenticeships and the local economy in Strangford are so dependent on the construction industry, will the Minister's Department and the Executive continue to prioritise construction work?

The Minister of Finance and Personnel: We are aware of the need for continuity, which is why we have framework directives whereby firms can secure long-term work. We also have a website on which upcoming projects are published so that firms can plan ahead for capital investment and employee training.

ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

Suggestion Boxes

1. **Ms J McCann** asked the Assembly Commission how many suggestions have been received, to date, via the suggestion boxes. (AQO 705/10)

Mr Neeson: On 8 October 2009, as part of the wider internal communications initiative, suggestion boxes were introduced in Parliament Buildings and Annexe C to provide an additional feedback method for secretariat staff. To date, 89 questions, suggestions and comments have been received through the boxes. That input has come not only from secretariat staff but from MLAs and party support staff. All entries are seen by the Clerk/Director General, and responses are issued to all individuals who supply a name. All responses are placed on AssISt, the Assembly's intranet facility.

Ms J McCann: Have any suggestions been made about introducing Irish language signage in Parliament Buildings and the Stormont estate, and will the Commission follow up on any such suggestions as part of its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages? The subject is significant

because many schoolchildren who visit Parliament Buildings are from Irish-medium schools.

Mr Neeson: I am pleased that the Member raised that issue because, on 21 January 2010, the Assembly Commission agreed a good relations action plan to address its statutory duty under section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The next stage in progressing the plan is for Directors to consider the impact of actions in the plan on their directorate and to further submit actions for completion at directorate level. Following that, the Commission will consult on the plan with a range of relevant section 75 groups. The plan includes actions that look at language and signage. For example, in May 2010, work will commence on developing a language policy, which will also address signage.

In addition, to ensure that a welcoming atmosphere is apparent in Parliament Buildings, the Assembly Commission is committed to conducting an internal good relations audit and framework, which will commence in February 2010, and a forum will be established to address issues arising from that internal audit. Furthermore, through an external good relations audit and consultation with relevant groups, the Commission will consider whether barriers exist or have been encountered when accessing services. I hope that that answers the Member's question.

Mr Kinahan: Has the Commission looked at any other ways to elicit suggestions, such as via electronic means?

Mr Neeson: Yes. We have been looking at other methods, particularly those that utilise electronic means. We keep the matter under continual review, because we want to ensure that Assembly facilities meet all the requirements not only of elected Members but of staff.

Ms Lo: Recently, I inquired about organising a wedding in Stormont, and I was told that only Christian weddings are allowed in this Building. Will the Commission consider extending that provision to make it more inclusive and to allow civil weddings to take place?

Mr Neeson: I welcome that issue being raised. If the Assembly is going to create real outreach, it must include all religions and nationalities. Therefore, I will raise the issue on behalf of the Member at the next meeting of the Assembly Commission.

Blue Flax Restaurant

2. **Mr Burns** asked the Assembly Commission what action Eurest has taken to address issues and complaints raised during the last customer survey about the Blue Flax restaurant. (AQO 706/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: The Commission has been advised that Eurest received no specific complaints in the customer survey that was carried out in January 2009. The survey data proved to be of assistance in the development of an action plan by Eurest to further improve the services provided. Its plan focused on the small percentage of comments that were marked as fair to poor. The survey was issued again in January 2010, and it is envisaged that the results will allow Eurest to carry out a comparative analysis on levels of customer satisfaction between 2009 and 2010.

Mr Burns: How many complaints have been received about the cost of items in the vending machines, and what measures have the Commission put in place to ensure that the prices of drinks and snacks in the vending machines are similar to the prices that are charged in shops?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I do not have those details to hand, but I will ensure that the Member receives an answer in writing.

Mr Gardiner: What provision has the Commission made for the ongoing review of food services in Parliament Buildings?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: We continually review Members' catering needs and look at how we can improve the service and carry it forward. We are looking forward to the results of the most recent questionnaire, and we will inform the House as soon as that information is available.

Ormiston House

3. **Mr McCallister** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on Ormiston House. (AQO 707/10)

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Ormiston House has been at the forefront of the Assembly's thinking for some time. The Assembly Commission has agreed to explore options for the disposal of Ormiston House to ensure best value for money for the public purse. Officials from the Northern Ireland Assembly met the Planning Service on 7 January 2010 to discuss revised development proposals for the Ormiston House site. A formal request to the Planning Service in respect of those proposals was made on 26 January 2010, and the Planning Service has committed to giving a definitive response by the end of February 2010. A soft market testing exercise has also been taking place, but, to date, no firm interest in purchasing the property has been registered.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Dr Coulter for his reply on behalf of the Commission. Have local residents been kept fully informed?

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I can give a positive response to that. As a member of the Commission who has been involved with the Ormiston House problem from the

beginning, I know that we agreed that residents would be kept fully informed. In fact, residents have been kept informed of progress at regular meetings with Assembly staff, the most recent of which took place in early January 2010 at Parliament Buildings. We intend to continue to keep residents fully informed of progress that is being made to develop the site.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Parliament Buildings: Recycling

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Assembly Commission what measures are in place to encourage recycling in the Assembly. (AQO 709/10)

Mr Neeson: I am aware that Daithí McKay has a keen interest in environmental issues in the Assembly. He has submitted quite a number of written questions to the Commission.

Measures to encourage recycling in the Assembly include the use of recycling points and awareness communications to staff. Recycling points are sited throughout Parliament Buildings and at Annexe C in kitchens and in most offices. Items to be recycled include office paper, newspapers, magazines, coffee cups, plastics, food and drinks cans and glass. The Assembly also recycles cardboard, electrical equipment, batteries, toner cartridges, printer consumables and cooking oil from kitchens.

Postmasters are issued periodically to encourage staff to recycle the waste that they generate. Additionally, e-mail messages and updates in team briefs are included to reinforce that message.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Neeson for his comprehensive answer. A number of MLAs also serve on councils and are aware of recycling targets that are set for councils. Has the Assembly Commission considered being more proactive in that field and setting targets for the Assembly?

Mr Neeson: The Member's question has two aspects. First, figures that are provided by waste contractors suggest that about 35% of waste generated in Parliament Buildings is recycled. Do we want to increase that percentage? The answer is yes. Measures are planned to improve recycling rates and signage at recycling points and to introduce additional recycling points and waste streams to be recycled. For example, it is hoped that food waste recycling will be introduced in March or April 2010.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In his answer, Mr Neeson mentioned many items to be recycled. Has the Commission any intention to recycle MLAs at all?

Mr Neeson: I am afraid that that responsibility is beyond the Commission's control. However, I shall raise the issue at the next Commission meeting.

Mr Cree: Has the Commission plans to recycle the cigarette butts and empty packets that are discarded outside the West Door?

Mr Neeson: The Member raises an issue that troubles me, as one who is concerned about smoking in public areas, such as outside the West Door. I know from a council perspective that smoking is allowed only in areas that are well away from the local facility. That should also be the case at Parliament Buildings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Michelle O'Neill is not in her place. That concludes Questions to the Assembly Commission and Question Time. We now return to the debate on faith-based organisations.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Faith-based Organisations

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. There is no doubt that Churches and faith-based organisations make a significant contribution to society in the North, and that should be acknowledged. There is evidence to suggest that faith-based organisations comprise a significant proportion of the charity sector. Many faith-based organisations provide benefits that are not always immediately recognised, instilling a sense of belonging, purpose, meaning and community identity and offering life skills and pastoral guidance and promoting good citizenship and healthy lifestyles.

3.45 pm

Faith-based organisations provide a real and important presence in communities and high levels of voluntary action. The organisations are historically linked to a social care and justice initiatives. They deal with a lot of contemporary social problems, such as alcohol and drug addiction, homelessness and domestic violence. Representatives from the organisations visit hospitals, hospices and prisons and provide support for Third World countries. Faith-based organisations are one of the largest sectors involving volunteers across a wide range of activities, such as youth and children's work, befriending, luncheon clubs and transport.

A consultation paper on the volunteering strategy that was published by DSD in July 2009 states that there is a need to enhance linkages between the faith-based sector and the volunteering infrastructure in order to provide better support and information in relation to the involvement of volunteers.

It is interesting to look at some of the statistics involved. In 2005, there were 1,405 registered faith-based and church-based groups here, with a total of 98,902 members, 16,457 volunteer leaders and 160 full-time youth workers. Some 68% of registered youth groups are faith- and church-based, and 57.8% of all members of registered youth groups are participants in faith-based youth groups.

There are some good models of faith-based youth work targeting social need, and there is potential for those groups to target social need in a more strategic way. There is also evidence of faith-based youth groups contributing to social capital in local communities

through, for instance, citizenship, community participation, volunteering trusts and social cohesion.

There is also evidence of faith-based youth work here in the North bridging social capital across the sectarian divide. I have met faith-based cross-community groups who have visited the Assembly, and I have been impressed by their motivation and enthusiasm for promoting a shared future. Those groups are actively promoting a peaceful and inclusive society that is based on equality, diversity and interdependence.

I worked in an advice centre in the voluntary sector for many years, and I had occasion to come into contact with many faith-based groups, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul. That group provides much-needed assistance and support for the most vulnerable in our society. In 1988, when the social fund was introduced to replace single payment grants, some people who were on very low incomes and who had little or no resources to provide essential household items did not qualify for community care grants. St Vincent de Paul stepped in, helped those people and made sure that they did not go without.

I am a member of the Social Development Committee, which was involved in the scrutiny of the Charities Bill. I was surprised and enlightened to discover the number of faith-based groups here in the North and the wide diversity of the work that they do. That work contributes to our society in an important and meaningful way, and I call on the Minister for Social Development to commission a study to quantify the contribution that is made by those organisations. Such a study would also be relevant in the development of a coherent and cohesive strategy on volunteering.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for proposing the motion and for giving the House an opportunity to formally acknowledge the beneficial work that so many of our Churches and faith-based groups do on a daily basis. I declare an interest as an officer in the First Raloo Boys' Brigade and as a committee member of Raloo Presbyterian Church. In fact, I hope to continue my community service to young people this evening when I assist at the Boys' Brigade.

Historically, the Protestant and Catholic Churches played a crucial role in the peace process. During the Troubles, however, I acknowledge that some individuals expressed distorted views, as is the case with the Taliban. In the midst of a terrorist campaign, when bombs and murder were a weekly or even daily occurrence, people often turned to their churches in the knowledge that they would usually provide a sanctuary from what was happening on the streets.

The proposer of the motion referred to the Welsh report and the impact that faith-based organisations in Wales have had on wider society. That report surprised many people when it was published. Few had expected

that the report would make such a big impression and illustrate how much the faith-based and church-based organisations mattered in Wales. There was a common perception that Welsh chapels were closing and that participation in the Church was declining.

The report showed that the faith community contributed £102 million to the Welsh economy each year and that, if a similar trend were to extend across the rest of the United Kingdom, the overall figure could be over £2 billion. I am confident that it would be a worthwhile exercise if the Department for Social Development were to put together a detailed report that stated the economic and social benefits of our faith-based organisations. I understand that the cost of doing so has been estimated at about £50,000, based on 2006 figures. Surely, that is a relatively small sum, given the significant contribution in volunteer hours given by faith-based organisations, which have made a wide contribution to community development, education heritage and social exclusion. As such, they would be a key area for the engagement of statutory services, and such a report could draw that out.

The 2006 research report commissioned by Youthnet, a faith-based group, revealed that there were 1,405 registered faith- or church-based groups, with just under 100,000 members. That demonstrates that those groups have a significant influence on Northern Ireland with its population of 1.7 million.

Many Members will recall going to Sunday school, Guides, Boys' and Girls' Brigade and Cubs in their younger days — I was a Cub once myself. Many will look back with fondness and gratitude for the skills that they developed from their involvement with those groups. My children have benefited from youth organisations, particularly through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, which opened up new horizons to them, including community service.

I am aware of the constructive role played by the YMCA in working with young people in Carrickfergus and Larne. The YMCA successfully established basic education courses at Sunnylands Youth Centre, which the local further education college failed to do. I pay tribute to Woodlands Presbyterian Church, which opened up its facilities to the local community on a number of occasions. Church members are involved with the Genesis project involving young people at Whitehead and the GRASP project in Greenisland, which has constructive engagement with young people.

Many Churches here have had a long tradition of encouraging their members to assist the local community; for example, Good Morning, Carrickfergus, which is in the Church of the Nazarene, and Good Morning, Larne, which helps isolated individuals in our community. The YMCA's Parents and Kids Together programme is funded with the help of several bodies, including local

Churches and their volunteers. The commitment displayed by our faith-based organisations is difficult to find in other walks of life.

Our religious organisations assist more than just our young people, and Members referred to the Salvation Army and the Society of St Vincent de Paul. It is vital that we do not let political correctness impede their work. Other Members referred to lottery funding, which can be a stumbling block to accessing funding. Equally, we must ensure that funding barriers do not impede the work of volunteers, and there is a need to review the funding of such groups.

Mr Burns: I welcome the motion and the opportunity to speak in the debate. Members will agree that it is good to see the contribution of faith-based organisations being recognised in the Assembly.

We are talking mostly about the Christian Churches in Northern Ireland, which are well established in every part of our community and represent all denominations, rich or poor, in urban and rural areas. In many cases, Churches have been serving their communities for hundreds of years.

Although the Churches are important, there are many other fine examples of charities, volunteer and non-profit making organisations that do a great job, such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. As Members said, those organisations make a valuable contribution in many different ways. Although most people can relate to what their local Church does, it is fair to say that, as the motion states, we have no hard statistical evidence to give us the big picture.

My local Church undertakes a great deal of work on the ground, and many other Churches do the same. In doing so, they provide a wide range of services to help their local communities, including many that the Government and the public sector are not willing to deliver.

In addition to the traditional services that are provided by Churches such as marriage or funeral preparation, most Churches allow people to use their facilities for community activities such as fitness, sports and exercise and cultural activities such as choirs. Many Churches are also heavily involved in providing educational services for young people in the form of kids, homework and youth clubs, and they also do a great job in getting volunteers together for a wide variety of community activities; there are just too many examples to mention.

All those activities bring great economic benefits. The 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report estimates that such activity creates a total economic value in Wales of £102 million each year. If that was to be widened to include the entire United Kingdom, we could be talking about £2 billion each year. Those organisations are self-financing and create massive

economic benefits. I support the call for a study to examine in detail the contribution that those organisations make here. Such a report would increase our understanding of the role that the Churches and faith-based groups play and would increase co-operation between the groups, the Government and other bodies that are working to improve the quality of life of all our people.

Regardless of whether that study is undertaken, the good work of those groups will continue. We should commend them for that work and be grateful for the contribution that they make to our community. I support the motion.

Ms Lo: I also support the motion. Many Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland benefit not only members of the faith communities but our wider society as they address social issues.

We are well known for our generosity in helping people in developing countries, and a number of our Churches and faith-based groups regularly raise funds for relief work overseas. At home, the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers (NICRAS) has told me that faith-based organisations have been the main source of support for the destitute in our community and that, without the generosity of those organisations, it would be facing a much more serious crisis than it is currently dealing with.

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

Those organisations have also been proactive in opening their doors to refugees and other migrant groups and in providing them with opportunities to meet others and seek advice. They have also made their premises available for groups to use. Indeed, the City Church in south Belfast and the interfaith organisation Embrace Northern Ireland were very active in helping the Roma families when they were targeted by racists in June 2009.

The 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report highlighted the contributions that were made by the faith-based sector in Wales, with some 42,000 volunteers generating a total economic value of more than £100 million. That research covered a range of faiths, including Baha'i, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish and Sikh, and, if we are to conduct a similar study here, it is important that we also include minority faiths and the interfaith groups, which promote a shared future.

Minister Ritchie and the voluntary community unit of DSD held a series of consultations with interfaith groups a couple of years ago, and papers from NICEM and the Northern Ireland Inter Faith Forum were presented at a DSD conference. However, as yet, nothing concrete has emerged from that exercise, and perhaps the Minister will update the House on that.

4.00 pm

Government lines of responsibility on faith issues are often unclear. DSD accepts responsibility when there is a social development component, but it refers issues of equality or good relations to OFMDFM. Sometimes DCAL also gets involved. If there is to be a study, all three Departments need to be actively involved, and some joined-up approach linking up with the good work of the sector of faith-based organisations and Churches is needed.

I understand that DSD is commissioning the Churches' Community Work Alliance (CCWA) to establish a faith forum. According to the Inter-Faith Forum, the proposed faith forum will include some members from minority faith communities, but people from minority faiths are barred from holding membership of the CCWA and have not been involved in discussing the proposals. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

Both the recent DSD consultation on volunteering and a Volunteer Development Agency report published in 2007 showed a significant decline in faith-based volunteering since 1995. However, it still remains a large sector, involving volunteers in activities for youth and children's work, befriending, luncheon clubs, transport, and so on. It is a very valuable sector. The consultation paper proposed that the sector needs to build volunteer management skills in order to increase volunteer recruitment and retention. I hope that the Volunteer Development Agency can help that sector to strengthen its volunteering infrastructure.

Although many faith-based organisations are self-financing, it is important that they are on a good financial footing. I hope that, through the study, a range of Departments and other bodies, such as DSD, OFMDFM, the Community Relations Council and local councils —

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

Ms Lo: — can jointly help to give them better financial assistance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that all electronic devices should be switched off.

Mr Storey: I obviously support the motion, given that I am one of the signatories to it. Over the long years of the terrorist campaign that we unfortunately endured in Northern Ireland, there was a very positive contribution that helped to keep our society intact and also helped to ensure that those terrorist organisations did not succeed in luring into their grasp those young people whom they saw as being useful in their very evil activities. I have no doubt that many of the faith organisations that have been referred to have made an invaluable contribution to ensuring that that was the case.

Sometimes when we debate an issue such as this, or other issues, in the House, we do not give the place to those organisations that have made an invaluable contribution to our communities. Other Members have made that point and have given specific references. I welcome the positive attitude that has been displayed by, for example, the Minister of Finance and Personnel to dormant bank accounts. He is considering ways in which that money might be made available to faith-based organisations.

On grounds of conscience, many faith-based organisations find themselves unable to apply for, for example, lottery funding. That is an entirely honourable and praiseworthy position, and Members who may feel that they would have no difficulty with that need to try to understand the challenges that that brings to some faith-based organisations. It, therefore, needs to be reflected on and seriously considered. It is unfortunate that so many good initiatives are stretched almost to breaking point because, to date, mechanisms have not been found to enable such groups and schemes to access funding and assistance.

I note Ms Lo's comments about the CCWA. Common among certain faith-based organisations is the feeling that they are often out of the loop of what are always deemed to be the four main religious denominations or large Churches in Northern Ireland. That issue must be addressed seriously. Therefore, I welcome the assistance that the Finance Minister could derive from dormant bank accounts, and most, if not all, Members will welcome that.

Although it is in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's remit to derive such funds, today's debate is for the Minister for Social Development to respond to. We wait to hear what she has to say about the issue. It will be particularly interesting to hear her comments on the proposals in the report 'Join In, Get Involved: Build a Better Future', which DSD commissioned recently. Proposal 26 of that report refers to faith-based organisations and the faith-based sector. It states:

"To ensure volunteering in this sector remains vibrant there is a need to enhance linkages between the faith based sector and the volunteering infrastructure in order to provide better support and information in relation to the involvement of volunteers."

My colleague Michelle McIlveen adequately described the report that was published in Wales, and she and other Members referred to the fact that an audit was carried out. An audit and an analysis are needed to identify clearly the organisations that come from a faith-based community but that feel that they are very much outside the loop at the moment. Indeed, another Member referred to the need for such analysis. We wait to hear what the Minister has to say, and I support the motion.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Tá mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún atá á chaibidil againn inniu.

I will use my speaking time to highlight and pay tribute to the work of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. I am not sure whether that body is defined exactly as a faith-based organisation, but I know that it was founded in 1833 by a group of Catholic students and that its aim is to put faith into action through direct contact with and assistance to the poor and needy. It has hundreds of active branches, or conferences, all over Ireland, over 180 of which are in the North alone. In 2008, St Vincent de Paul spent £3.4 million in the North alone in very practical ways on the needy and poor. That took the form of assistance with cash, food, clothing, fuel, debt relief and practical basic help, such as providing a cooker or a washing machine for a family or an individual in need.

I am aware of the work of St Vincent de Paul in the parish of Termonmaguirk, which includes Carrickmore, in my constituency of West Tyrone. I am also aware of an active conference in Omagh, where there is an excellent shop in Castle Street that takes and sells donations of clothing. This is quite a sensitive issue, but I am told that St Vincent de Paul in Omagh and other areas has presided over and paid for the repatriation of people from other countries who have come to live and work here and who have died here without a family network. St Vincent de Paul has noticed a gap in government provision in such cases, and it has often stepped into that breach.

That poses the question: is such a matter more properly within the remit of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, or is it an NIO or Health Department concern? Government should attempt to get to grips with the particular situation in which someone, who has come here from another country to live and work, dies without a family network and the body is to be sent back home. Perhaps the Government need to step in to assist organisations such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul to deal with that matter.

In my area, St Vincent de Paul works closely with organisations such as Omagh Independent Advice Services and statutory bodies not only to provide immediate help or relief but to try to empower people and to make them more self-sufficient, and I welcome that. It is my understanding that the society, like many other organisations, provides that type of help in a non-judgemental spirit of compassion based on the need of the family or the individual. Very often, the work of those organisations is preventing admissions to hospitals, and if that is the case, they are doing the work that Departments are statutorily obliged to carry out. That being the case, government can do a lot more to meet the likes of the Society of St Vincent de Paul half way.

Mr Newton: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for debate. I want to concentrate on the area of youth provision, which is a small part of the overall motion. I also want to take a bit of licence because the

motion describes organisations that are faith based, but there are those outside the faith-based aspect that I believe make a very positive contribution to the well-being of the youth of Northern Ireland in particular. I am thinking of organisations within the scouting movement, which may not be associated with any particular church, though many of them are. I ask that consideration be given to the fact that organisations of that type — the Boys' Brigade, the Girl Guides — are generally described as uniformed organisations rather than faith-based organisations.

I want to pay tribute to the many people who volunteer in the uniformed organisations from week to week, month to month, year to year and give generously of their time in developing the youth of this country. Where those organisations are active, they have contributed significantly to the character building of our young people, placing with them real values that will stand the test of time in society, assisting them with the development of skills and, indeed, in many ways, simply making them into very rounded young people who will often play leadership roles in society in their later lives.

In my constituency, I have seen the value of such groups, particularly in the inner city areas. My colleague Mr Storey referred to the time of bombings, murders, and so on, when terrorism was at its height, yet those organisations continued to meet, often in very difficult circumstances. Indeed, many would be regarded as the salt or preservative of the communities in which they were operating, regardless of whether that community was in the inner city or based in a large housing estate.

I was approached by a faith-based group, Mount-pottinger Baptist Church, and was privileged to sponsor the fiftieth anniversary of its Boys' Brigade movement, an event that took place in Parliament Buildings. On that anniversary, many people travelled across the globe to pay tribute to one man in particular and to the organisation through which they received their training. Many people at that meeting, some of whom are leading businessmen today, said that had it not been for Boys Brigade meetings on Tuesday or Thursday nights, they could quite easily have drifted into other organisations. That tells me of the real value of such groups and uniformed organisations.

4.15 pm

In my humble opinion, those organisations do not receive enough recognition from government. Indeed, I met with representatives of all those groups quite recently, and I understand that the amount of money that they receive centrally from government is minimal — it works out at less than 50p a head. Indeed, central organisations get minimal funding, and the groups themselves get between £100 and £200 a year from government or council sources.

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

Mr Newton: In supporting the motion, I ask that some attention be given to uniformed organisations so that a higher value is placed on them than has been in the past.

Mrs M Bradley: Our recognition today of faith-based organisations reminds of what my former party leader John Hume did when he was made Nobel Laureate. The first thing that he did when he came home with the money that he received was to make large contributions to the Society of St Vincent de Paul and, indeed, to the Salvation Army. John was recognising faith-based organisations then, and we are doing the same here today. I welcome the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it.

For many years, faith-based organisations have been making significant and valuable contributions to our society. Faith-based organisations are the second largest contributors to volunteering. I have worked with St Vincent de Paul, which is a well-known faith-based group, and I know that it targets people who need assistance and help with practical or financial matters. The organisation made a great difference to the many families that it helped, and even today, it still has a high profile. Given the current economic times, I am aware that it is busier than ever.

In my constituency, St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army are two of the most charitable faith-based organisations at the forefront of such work, and they both play an active role in our communities. I have a lasting memory of a family who approached the Salvation Army for help in searching for their brother, whom they had lost contact with after he had gone to England 30-odd years previously. The organisation enlisted the help of all its branches around England, and as a result, the family was reunited just in time, as the brother had recently received a diagnosis of a terminal illness. The financial implications of such a nationwide search would have been astronomical, and the family could never have afforded it. The value of reuniting them was, therefore, priceless.

The Welsh Assembly's 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report puts the economic contribution of faith-based volunteering at approximately £102 million. Indeed, my colleague Dr McDonnell raised the issue of the contribution of faith-based groups during Northern Ireland Question Time at Westminster on 3 June 2009, and Paul Goggins and our Finance Minister were in agreement about the major impact that such groups have on our many multi-denominational communities. Given that our communities are submerged in economic and political disarray, it is vital that that good work continues and that it is encouraged to develop.

I appreciate that the Department for Social Development is endeavouring to do just that, and I have every confidence that our Minister will do everything that she can to bring the volunteering ethos, particularly that delivered from faith-based organisations, to its optimum capacity.

I support the motion, and I thank Michelle McIlveen, Simon Hamilton, and — who else tabled the motion?

A Member: Mervyn.

Mrs M Bradley: How could I forget Mervyn? *[Laughter.]* I thank them for bringing the issue to the House. I hope that we all continue to support faith groups. I could have mentioned many more church groups, but they have been mentioned already.

Mr G Robinson: There are a vast number of unsung heroes in Northern Ireland who give up their time to help those in our society who need support of various types. Such people are rarely acknowledged. However, the practical contribution that they make to the lives of many is immense. I pay tribute to those people and to the work that they do.

Volunteers come from all faiths in society and raise the quality of life for many people. From practical experience, and from the 'Faith in Wales' report, I know that volunteers' contributions can include supporting a family during a time of illness or bereavement; visiting older people; organising social activities, which help to keep local communities together; and providing youth club services and facilities. Those are very important parts of community identity and help to reduce social exclusion.

How much of this work is being done in Northern Ireland? Are the skills and talents of the voluntary sector being fully used? Nobody knows. The only way that we can accurately assess the true situation is by following the example set by the Welsh Assembly and commissioning a study to find answers. When the situation in Northern Ireland is accurately known, the different Departments can use the skills that already exist in communities to help — and I stress "help" — to deliver some of their responsibilities at a fraction of the cost. That will mean that local people deal with their own communities, and that services are delivered to otherwise hard-to-reach areas. It will ensure that individuals and families are assured maximum support, whatever type of support they need.

I hope that all Members see the motion as a practical way of finding the talent available in Northern Ireland and ensuring that it is put to the best use for the people of Northern Ireland on the most local of levels. I support the motion.

Mr Bell: I support the motion, which was so well proposed by my colleague. I declare an interest as a youth worker at Newtownards Congregational Church.

I do not underestimate the task that the Minister has in trying to quantify the work that churches have contributed to. Across the Strangford constituency, many churches have placed the community at the heart of the work that they do.

A number of weeks ago, when I never thought that I would be standing here, it was my privilege to distribute Christmas gifts that had been provided to social services by St Vincent de Paul and the Salvation Army. Many homes to which we delivered presents had been wrecked by domestic violence, by unemployment or by mortgages that could not be paid. Some people had lost their homes and moved into Housing Executive accommodation, and had no support for Christmas. Along came the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul to provide those children with gifts. That was done quietly and unassumingly. The people who contribute to the Salvation Army and to St Vincent de Paul will never know the impact that those gifts have or the joy that they bring. I had the privilege to see parents — many of them single mothers — receive those gifts, knowing that they can provide their children with gifts in what are very difficult circumstances.

In my constituency of Strangford, people can go to the Kiltonga Store House to get a Christian response and food. That is given, free of charge, to people who are genuinely in need and who, in many cases through no fault of their own, find themselves in situations of deep distress.

Last night, Alderman Shannon and I saw the difficulties that there are in the Ards area due to alcohol abuse. The Central ward in Newtownards has the highest rate of referrals for alcohol abuse and addiction of any eastern area, with Portavogie coming in seventh among those wards. In response to that, a member of my constituency staff goes out on Friday nights, with a collective made up of the local Churches, and parks a caravan in the middle of the town square in Newtownards to offer support and advice to those in need, and, in particular, to those in need due to the effects of excess alcohol.

I note the work that Diane Holt has done with her team of volunteers at The Link project, which gets down to the very basics. I visited the project's facilities, which housed a basic shower for people who had lost much of their self-esteem, had no personal hygiene and could not afford basic toiletries. Those people could go to The Link project to get help, support and a shower.

In my own Newtownards Congregational Church, there is the Boys' Brigade, the Girls' Brigade, the holiday Bible club, the Child Evangelism Fellowship Good News club, the Saturday night youth club and the Cross Factor. Often, those programmes, which offer support to young people and elderly people, are provided by people who have already done a day's work. Those people have come home tired yet have

gone out to give of themselves in the service of others. Staggeringly, many of those people are retired and, in many cases, should have been putting on a fire and relaxing for the evening. Instead, they have decided to give of themselves in the service of others.

We need to support the work of the Churches and the work of individuals, for example, through volunteering. In many cases, very complex vetting systems are in place to guarantee child protection, and rightly so, and Church volunteers are helping by administering those systems.

It will be difficult to quantify the work that has been done, but quantify it we should. We should pay tribute to the people responsible, even though they do not want great glory for what they have done. They do what they do out of service to others. I thank all the people throughout Strangford who have followed the example of the Lord Jesus Christ and, quite literally, lived their lives in the service of others.

Mr Shannon: I support the motion. Many moons ago, I marched with my head held high, my feet six inches off the ground and my eyes staring forward, transfixed. I was not a young Orangeman at the time, although I am now an Orangeman, nor was I a member of the Territorial Army at the time, although I served in it for more than 14 years. I was a member of the Boys' Brigade (BB). I was one of those young boys who, at a very early stage, felt proud to be a member of that organisation. I was just one of thousands of children who benefited from that Christian group.

Launched in Glasgow in October 1883, the Boys' Brigade has been in operation for more than 125 years. To celebrate that achievement, Ards Borough Council organised an event last year, to which many people were invited to remember and reminisce about what the Boys' Brigade has done in our area.

As an organisation, the Boys' Brigade does not simply train a child in the Bible, although that is an honourable purpose in itself, but trains children to be active and helpful members of society through its badge schemes, which encourage work in the community. Members are rewarded for helping neighbours, visiting the elderly and minding children. All those may seem small things, but they are big things when it comes to building character, personality and compassion for others.

A phrase that I keep close to me is, "Compassion is your pain in my heart." Thinking about that focuses one's attention on others who need help. The activities that children do in the Boys' Brigade are small measures that encourage them to be part of the community and not simply observers. That is important, because today's children will be looking after the community in the future.

The Boys' Brigade also encourages hobbies and fosters talents through its regional and national competitions

in sports and academia. Being part of the Boys' Brigade is not all serious; it is fun as well. It builds character and personality. My three boys attended the Boys' Brigade at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Greyabbey and excelled. They built their personalities, built their characters and made lasting friendships. They achieved their badges, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the Queen's Badge, and they did so because they wanted to, not because their mum and dad pushed them. They do better at something if they want to do it, rather than if I tell them to do it, which would not be the right way in any case.

Boys, and girls through the Girls' Brigade, spend time with people who care about them and want to build a relationship with them while ensuring that God remains central. It is important to build character and personality and to focus attention on the things that matter, and the best lesson to teach our children is to put God and others first.

4.30 pm

Such organisations encourage fund-raising. On many occasions, my boys have returned home with details of fund-raising events that they are doing together with the rest of the organisation. They did not only ask their families for donations but went to other houses to ask people. I know that the BB in Greyabbey and further afield has been particularly involved with cancer charities.

The BB is not the only faith-based group that helps communities. Many churches, including my own Baptist Church, send a bus through housing estates in towns to collect children for events such as Sunday school. Most of us remember being children in Sunday school. Churches and youth clubs are safe places for children, where they can meet friends and feel like everyone is loved and important and that everyone matters. That can only be good for young people.

However, faith-based groups are not limited to dealing with youth. Many churches are involved in other aspects, such as senior citizens' clubs and so on. The Link in Newtownards works with elderly people, single parents, young people and those with addiction issues, as does the Salvation Army and the Society of St Vincent De Paul in Ards and Kircubbin. For the record, I have worked with St Vincent de Paul with people from different faiths. They do not necessarily need to be Roman Catholic; Protestants can get help as well.

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

Mr Shannon: The issue is very important. I urge everyone to support the motion, and I hope that the Minister makes some positive remarks about it.

The Minister for Social Development (Ms Ritchie): I welcome the opportunity to debate the contribution that faith-based organisations make to

society in Northern Ireland. I thank Michelle McIlveen, Simon Hamilton and Mervyn Storey for tabling this very important motion.

The motion seeks to recognise the range of services that are provided by church- and faith-based organisations. In that respect, I have no hesitation in confirming my belief that churches and faith-based groups play a significant and important role in meeting the needs of people in all our most needy and hard-to-reach communities.

Denominational, interdenominational and non-denominational faith groups have always been at the forefront of caring for local people in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that, in the past, before the foundation of our present health and social welfare systems in the 1940s, churches were the cornerstone of charitable work and caring for people, families and children. For example, Bryson House, which is one of our biggest local charities, owes its creation to men and women of the Christian faith who cared about the poor people in their midst.

Today, faith-based groups such as the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Salvation Army are possibly the best-known and highest-profile groups that provide services to the most in need. Year after year, their joint Christmas appeal is extremely successful in attracting support from many local companies and organisations and in collecting substantial donations of money and toys from kind-hearted people across the community. Jonathan Bell made reference to that. However, they do not do good work at Christmas alone; they make an all-year commitment to caring for people who are most in need.

Many other faith-based groups work in our midst; and there are too many to name during today's debate. Some are large and serve across all the North of Ireland while others are much smaller and focus, serve and engage with individuals and small groups of local people. All those faith groups draw volunteers from their own membership and are each making a valuable contribution to their local community in helping to serve those who are most in need. I cannot think of any area of need to which a faith-based group somewhere does not make a valued contribution.

Faith organisations serve those who are struggling with poverty, personal debt, homelessness, poor health — including addiction and drug and alcohol abuse — suicide and mental illness. They also help children and adults with learning difficulties, and deal with family breakdown, violence in the home and the neglect of children.

A research-based report commissioned by Youthnet in 2006 presented statistics that suggested that more than two thirds of all organised youth work in Northern Ireland was credited to churches and faith groups. In

recognising the extent and wide range of deprivation and social need that the faith-based organisations work to alleviate, I want to record my appreciation for the huge contribution to improving quality of life that churches and faith-based groups make in our society. Faith-based groups make a massive contribution in Northern Ireland, probably more so than anywhere else in Great Britain or in Ireland generally. I also believe that it is widely accepted across all our churches that faith-based groups can do more and wish to do even more.

A few years ago, an interdepartmental task force reported that, as part of its work of looking into hard-to-reach communities, the Churches had, in some cases, withdrawn from serving the needs of local communities as a result of inter- and intra-community tensions associated with our most troubled history. That situation was mentioned earlier by Mervyn Storey. Indeed, many of our Church leaders provided the evidence to support that view and led a call from within the Churches to look for new ways of engagement with those who needed help but were not actively involved in any particular church community.

Mr Shannon: Is the Minister aware that, sometimes, the Churches endeavour to address those issues collectively? For example, the church groups in Newtownards and Comber have, in an intergenerational way, tried to address issues and identify the help that is needed in those towns.

The Minister for Social Development: I thank Mr Shannon for his comment. He has given a good example of what happens not just in his constituency of Strangford but across Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to hear more and more reports of Church leaders encouraging their members to reach out with compassion and to speak a message of love — a model of practical service to those who are most in need — rather than sit comfortably in warm, well-maintained church buildings, looking after the needs of their own members.

As the drive for faith-based work in the community has gathered momentum, I have been pleased to provide financial support to the Churches Community Work Alliance (CCWA) Northern Ireland, which is a regional infrastructure body that is tasked with increasing the work of faith-based groups that seek to serve disadvantaged people. The CCWA funding contract sets challenging targets for expanding, developing and improving the effect that local faith groups can have on their community. I am satisfied that they are developing that work well in a growing number of churches across many denominational and independent groups. As an organisation, the CCWA is modelling the benefits and advantages of collaboration when independent and interdenominational groups come together to serve and to share resources and expertise, thus maximising their potential to make a difference.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister for Social Development: I must go on; I apologise, but I have little time.

Another example of DSD's work with local Churches is the "Don't miss out" campaign, which was launched by the Social Security Agency in November 2009. The campaign was designed to provide information on benefit uptake to those aged over 65. All four main denominational Churches in four council areas provided posters and leaflets to members and visitors attending church services and programmed activities for elderly people. As part of our efforts to increase benefit uptake among elderly people, the agency will review the success of that campaign and the contribution made by the Churches. Again, the willingness of the four main denominational Churches in assisting the agency in that campaign is further testimony to their desire to partner with statutory authorities to help the needy.

If I had more time, I could inform Members about the involvement of the Church of Ireland diocese of Derry and Raphoe in an interesting pilot project to increase the number of faith-based volunteers working with disadvantaged individuals in their local community. Similarly, I was pleased to secure funding to help to initiate a small pilot project at the City Church in Belfast. The project recruits volunteers from local faith communities to address problems associated with migrant worker families, as well as other community problems, in the area of south Belfast in which the City Church is based. Both projects are excellent examples of faith-led initiatives that demonstrate the caring heart of a faith community towards the poor and needy, the disadvantaged and the excluded.

The debate provides me with the opportunity to advise the House of another new initiative, which, after extensive negotiations and discussions, will soon be announced publicly. I am currently agreeing and finalising proposals to establish a two-year pilot faith forum for social development. The forum will draw its members from churches and faith groups across Northern Ireland that have demonstrated a sustained commitment to serving those in need in our community, regardless of their individual faith, religion or creed.

Officials in the Department's voluntary and community unit will meet with the forum quarterly to discuss relevant policy areas. At those meetings, the officials will also hear suggestions from faith-based organisations on how my Department can better partner with faith groups in harnessing and unlocking their potential to reach and help the people and communities in greatest need.

I expect that most Members recognise the biblical basis for the involvement of the Christian Church in social action through stories such as the Good Samaritan, which promotes the importance of being a good and caring neighbour, calls for widows and orphans to be

looked after and upholds the principle of feeding the hungry and caring for the poor. I wonder how many Members are aware that that principle of charitable giving and demonstrating consideration for others less fortunate is shared by all major world faiths. For that reason, it is important to ensure that a small number of places on the new pilot faith forum are allocated to members who are able to represent and advise on the contribution that can be made by our minority non-Christian faith communities.

Northern Ireland is a growing, multicultural society with an increasing size and range of faith communities. I am confident that Members will recognise the value of involving such representatives at the outset of the initiative. Although the creation of interfaith respect and mutual understanding will not be the primary objectives of such a faith forum, I am confident that those are highly likely to be most welcome spin-offs from its work.

The motion also calls on me to commission a study similar to the Welsh Assembly's report 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities'. In recognition of the comments that I and others have made during the wider debate and given the immeasurable contribution made by faith communities to society here in Northern Ireland, I remain unconvinced about the long-term benefits of spending scarce financial resources on such a report.

However, I do want to be helpful, and I am interested in consulting the future members of the faith forum on that matter. I propose to allocate a small annual budget to the pilot faith forum for the express purpose of carrying out research that will help the forum to be better placed to advise on and influence policy matters and project initiatives proposed by my Department.

Several possible research proposals are currently under consideration. I will welcome more detailed proposals from the faith forum once it has had a chance to find its feet and deliberate on its priorities for research projects.

4.45 pm

Many issues have been raised during the debate. I believe that members of all faith groups have demonstrated their commitment to the needy; not because they want recognition, but because it is a fundamental element of their personal faith. It is an expression of their beliefs and values, and that is something that is central and pivotal to each of us. It is appropriate for the Assembly and its Members to recognise the contribution and capacity of all those faith-based organisations and all who carry out such work in partnership with statutory authorities in order to make a difference in local communities across Northern Ireland.

I am pleased that the House has recognised the significant and valuable role that is played by faith-based organisations in our society. I assure Members that my intention is to continue to work with faith-based organisations to further unlock and increase their potential to work as partners with all statutory bodies and agencies for the good of all our people, especially those in most need.

I will respond to Members on individual matters if I have not addressed them in the body of my speech. I am happy to have further discussions with Members on this important topic.

Mr Hamilton: The debate has been valuable, and I welcome the constructive input from Members on all sides. I thank the Minister for her response to the motion, which was very positive.

It does not matter whether one is a person of faith or not; it would be difficult to listen to even part of the debate without acknowledging the positive impact that faith-based organisations make across Northern Ireland. That work is done by people who sometimes feel vilified because of their faith and who rarely have the good work that they selflessly carry out recognised at all.

I note the positive and constructive comments that the Minister made about the creation of a faith forum. That has great potential. I welcome the fact that she will provide a small amount of funding to that forum to try to get a sense of the impact that the sector has on society in Northern Ireland, so that, rather than simply existing, the forum can do useful work.

The main thrust of the motion is based on the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report. That report is an important recognition of the work that is done by faith-based communities. The faith-based sector has an immeasurable impact, as the Minister said, but the report tries to quantify the impact that those organisations have. The existence of the report in itself is an important recognition of that.

I was staggered to learn from the report that the economic impact, which is not something that one would necessarily associate with faith-based organisations, is around £102 million a year in Wales. Even on a crude, pro rata basis, that would translate to over £50 million in Northern Ireland. The figure would probably be much higher than that, given the propensity of faith-based organisations here. The monetary impact is huge.

Every Member who spoke mentioned the impact of faith-based organisations in their area. I am no different, and my constituency colleagues have saved me time by speaking about some of those organisations. We can all think of the work that is done in our respective areas with people such as pensioners and foreign nationals by churches, church groups and groups that, although not associated with churches now, owe their origins to churches. As Mr Shannon mentioned, our

constituency provides very good examples of churches working together to tackle problems. An inter-church forum works, for example, to help better integrate foreign nationals into our community.

Every Member could catalogue countless examples of such work in his or her constituency, and it is valuable that some have done that in today's debate. As Members explained the positive work that they had witnessed being done in their constituencies, I noted the sheer breadth of the services that faith-based organisations provide. I am a member of the Assembly all-party group on international development, and we regularly receive briefings from faith-based organisations that do fantastic work abroad and provide international aid to people in real poverty in developing countries all around the globe.

Members spoke of churches' and faith-based organisations' fantastic youth provision. Rather than just being organisations for the sake of it, those groups develop the skills of our young people. They help to encourage leisure, recreation, sport and outdoor activity and thereby tackle health problems. One of the best examples of that is Boys' Brigade football, which is a fantastic organisation that has spawned old boys' leagues in the Belfast area. Indeed, the talent of Northern Ireland captain, Aaron Hughes, was first spotted when he was playing BB football. Therefore, faith-based organisations can also help on the cultural and sporting side.

We heard about the accommodation that churches provide for their communities, often at a reduced rate. Indeed, they often provide accommodation to non-faith based organisations to give them a base from which to carry out good work in the community. We heard about the positive work that many churches and faith-based groups do in providing childcare, which, as the Minister knows, has an interface with social security work. A lot of churches and church groups provide childcare facilities on their premises; that childcare is much needed in Northern Ireland, especially in rural communities.

Other not-so-obvious examples of the positive contribution that faith-based organisations make include the preservation of listed buildings, which has a positive impact on tourism, and choirs that are based in churches. Indeed, you, Mr Deputy Speaker, are involved with a drama group that is associated with a church. That is not an obvious example of the work in which one might expect a church or faith-based organisation to be involved, but it enriches the cultural vibrancy of our society. There are many examples of the good work that is being done.

For me, the best and most important contribution of faith-based organisations is the work that they do with the vulnerable, whether they are older people, those with an alcohol or drug dependency or whoever.

Faith-based organisations often work with people whom the system has failed or cannot reach. A lot of Members cited organisations such as the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul. Indeed, I intend to visit the Salvation Army in the next number of weeks to see the work that it does with homeless people in Northern Ireland.

By and large, people do not speak or hear about that work, but, if it was not done, it would be up to Departments, such as that of the Minister and the Health Minister, to take up the slack and provide the services. It is important to quantify the impact of those organisations, because they do work on behalf of vulnerable people in society that the Government would otherwise be responsible for.

Social economy enterprises also do great work. Some of Northern Ireland's biggest social economy enterprises, such as the East Belfast Mission, which Michelle McIlveen mentioned, are huge entities in their local, and often very disadvantaged, communities. Those organisations provide jobs for people, often the long-term unemployed. As is the case with many other faith-based organisations, lottery grants, which are a huge source of funding, are denied to them because they make a conscious decision, based on conscience, not to apply for them.

That is why there is a lot of support for using money from the dormant accounts scheme to support faith-based organisations in that work. It was significant that the highest number of respondents to the consultation on dormant accounts came from faith-based organisations.

We must also recognise, as most Members have done, that a lot of the work performed by faith-based organisations is not paid but is done on a voluntary basis. In that respect, it dovetails with the development of the Minister's volunteering strategy. The consultation on a volunteering strategy for Northern Ireland recognised the work that the faith-based sector does. It noted that, as with many volunteering organisations, the number of those involved in faith-based organisations is diminishing. Any strategy that is developed must do what it can to identify the needs of the sector and ensure that there will be volunteers in future to deliver services.

Members will all want to pay tribute to those who give their time, energy and skills, free of charge and without a second thought, to help the vulnerable in society. We all acknowledge that. In my constituency work, I am always impressed — I know that other Members are similarly impressed — by the impact that the faith-based sector has on Northern Ireland society. As the Minister said, that work is carried out without seeking recognition. However, we would be failing in our duty if we did not take this occasion to recognise

the valuable, immeasurable contribution that Churches and faith-based organisations make to society. We value them greatly. We acknowledge their work and are grateful for it. We want to encourage them to continue that work and do what we can, as an Assembly and an Executive, to encourage and sustain it.

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

Mr Hamilton: Even though many in the faith-based sector are derided as marginal, we have learnt from this debate that they are very much mainstream. I welcome the Minister's comments, and we must maximise the impact that they have on society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the range of services provided by Churches and faith-based groups in Northern Ireland, particularly in traditionally hard-to-reach communities; notes the findings of the 'Faith in Wales: Counting for Communities' report; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to commission a similar study to quantify the contribution made by these organisations across Northern Ireland.

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Easibus Service: Bangor

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes; all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr Easton: I thank the Business Committee for allowing this Adjournment debate. I hope that Members will echo what I say today and send a clear message to the Minister for Regional Development that we are most unhappy with the decision to withdraw the Easibus service from Bangor.

I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue as it is of great concern to my constituents. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Translink have recently decided to withdraw the valued Easibus service in my constituency. Public reaction in the north Down area and particularly in Bangor, especially from the elderly and disabled, is one of confusion, anger, betrayal and loneliness. That community's confidence has been bashed as a result of the withdrawal of the service.

I am astonished that DRD and Translink have decided to abandon the most vulnerable in our society: the pensioners and disabled. The Department has made a huge error, and I hope the Minister will right the wrong that has been done to the elderly and disabled in the north Down area.

The Easibus service has been running since 2000. It provides transport for the elderly and disabled. The service is valuable in getting people from A to B, and it provides easy access; a specialist driver is trained to help passengers get on and off the bus. The buses are designed with the needs of elderly and disabled people in mind. The buses take many people from their homes, often from streets that are not accessible to normal buses, to their shopping destinations. Many people are extremely grateful for this service. The service has been successful since its introduction, but it is to be withdrawn completely during 2010.

5.00 pm

Mr Bell: I thank Mr Easton for giving way. Does he agree that the withdrawal of the Easibus service will effectively leave stranded those who are visually impaired and many out there who are single or widowed and may have lost a loved one who was the only driver in the house?

Mr Easton: I thank my colleague for that interjection. I have received many calls from the elderly, some of whom are blind and do not know how they will get out of their house to go to the shops with their guide dog. They feel extremely vulnerable and frightened. My colleague's comments echo the concerns of poor pensioners and disabled people.

As a result of the withdrawal of the service, I fear that many of my constituents will become housebound. In order to go about their business, they will be forced to hire taxis or use the door-to-door alternative, which cannot cope with an extra 23,000 passengers. The resources are not available to cope with that number of extra passengers. It is well known that it is important for older people to get out because it helps them with their mobility. It is also good for one's mental health.

Statistics provided by the Department for Regional Development show that, in the financial year 2008-09, the Easibus service was used by 23,000 passengers. I asked an Assembly question that confirms that. The Department and Translink, however, deem that inadequate and argue that the service is underused. More than 20% of people in my constituency are over 60. North Down has the oldest population of any constituency in Northern Ireland, and that figure is increasing. The Department and Translink are letting down those people. The service has been in existence for 10 years. If it has not been successful, why has it been in operation for so long?

Will the Minister tell us why there was no public consultation? Why were the people of Bangor, the council or we politicians not consulted about the service being withdrawn? We note the accessible transport strategy, the aim of which was to:

“have an accessible transport system that enables older people and people with disabilities to participate more fully in society, enjoy greater independence and experience a better quality of life.”

Will the Minister explain the apparent contradiction between the accessible transport strategy action plan for 2009-2012 and the withdrawal of the Easibus service? I do not understand it.

Perhaps the Minister will prevent the Easibus service from being withdrawn and look at alternatives. Some alternatives have been suggested to me by Translink drivers, such as taking out 16 slots of ordinary services that are operated elsewhere in North Down and filling them with the 16 journeys that are made each day by the Easibus service. That means that no one will suffer, and it would pay for the Easibus service to be retained. Perhaps we could look at meetings with the council. In co-operation with the Department for Regional Development and Translink, perhaps Bloomfield shopping centre will provide funding to keep the service going.

Will the Minister reassure us that he will take steps to try to reverse this absolutely disgraceful decision, which is not warranted, not needed and is a disaster for my constituency? The Minister's party is very much into preaching about equality and people having the right to do what they want in life without fear of persecution or having their rights taken away. If the Minister withdraws the Easibus service, he will do away with equality for pensioners and the disabled. I plead with the Minister to take strong action, show that he can take responsibility and give equality back to the pensioners and the disabled in North Down.

Mr Cree: I concur with my North Down colleague Mr Easton. The Easibus service has been a useful tool for people with disability in North Down. It was launched in 2000 amid a great fanfare of publicity. It was to be:

“customer friendly but infrequent, being primarily designed to encourage elderly people to get out more.”

DRD said that Easibus was:

“a flexible service often suited to those on a low income”,

and that it would promote social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Over the years since then, there have been other papers, to which I am sure the Minister will refer. The equality impact assessment on the ‘Transport Programme for People with Disabilities’, which was published in September 2004, reported that part of the Department's project would be to:

“continue to fund Translink's Easibus services in Bangor”.

The draft action plan of a more recent vintage — 2009 to 2012 — states that the Department's policy remains as it was in 2005:

“To have an accessible transport system that enables older people and people with disabilities to participate more fully in society, enjoy greater independence and experience a better quality of life.”

Commercial aspects of the service were not referred to anywhere in those documents, but I am afraid that that is what we now have.

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

In the year 2006-07, Easibus cost Translink £136,900, a cost that continued until 2009. The subsidy was £37,500 in 2006-07. In 2008-09, that subsidy was £38,400, so there was a significant subsidy that has now gone. I contend that we now have commercial decision-making and that, most regretably, the needs of disabled people have been ignored.

I urge the Minister to have a look at the issue. The numbers of people who use the service have been high: from 52,284 in 2006-07 to 42,800 in 2008-09, which is the last year for which we have figures. There is, therefore, a clearly identified need. A high proportion of North

Down's senior population deserves special recognition, particularly those with disabilities.

Dr Farry: I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the Adjournment debate, which reflects an issue of deep concern to the community in North Down. I stress that that community extends much further than those who directly use the service. It extends to their relatives and to those who care deeply for their neighbours and who want people to have the opportunities to enjoy life.

There is a very active local campaign against the withdrawal of Easibus services. I pay tribute to the sterling work and the deep commitment that is evidenced by the campaigners' attendance at the Assembly for a considerable time, which reflects their interest in ensuring that their voices are heard by policymakers at the highest level.

People's concerns are twofold. The first concern is the withdrawal of the service, which I will come to in a moment. The second concern is the nature of the consultation or, rather, the lack of consultation around the decision. It came very much out of the blue for people, who believe that Bangor was at the head of the queue for cuts that were not based on any real assessment of the community's need for the service. The Department's consultation on Translink's governance issues was effectively taken over by the community expressing its concerns, because that was the only forum that those people had to get their anti-withdrawal message across to policymakers.

Translink provides a public service, which, like any public service, is there because the market is not capable of providing it on a stand-alone basis. Society accepts that obligation and, consequently, invests money in such services. A subsidy is an inevitable part of the equation, and the issue is whether the subsidy can be justified. We believe that it can.

The issue is about giving older citizens and people with disabilities the freedom to enjoy life and to contribute to wider society. It is important that such people are able to go to the shops, access GP surgeries, pharmacies etc, participate in local community life and meet friends. They just want to get out of the house and to feel important, recognised and respected.

We talk a lot about accessibility, and I recognise that Translink has improved the level of service and the nature of the regular buses that are on offer. However, accessibility is about more than that, and the Easibus service is tailored to meet the needs of people with particular vulnerabilities. We must also recognise that accessibility is about how people get from where they live in order to access public transport. There is no point in someone having an accessible mainstream bus service if that person is unable to get to the bus stop from his or her house. To a considerable extent, Easibus

compensates for that service gap, and people welcome the fact that it is available.

It has been argued that the door-to-door service offers a viable alternative to Easibus. Since it was introduced in 2000, however, things have moved on. I welcome provision of the door-to-door service; a lot of people use and value it. However, we must recognise its limitations. First, the system works through bookings, and there is often a waiting list. Secondly, it involves pre-planning an outing. Sometimes, people's circumstances change, and they decide that they do not want to go out, or events come up at short notice to which they want to go but cannot access the door-to-door service.

There is also the cost issue. If the problems that are caused by the absence of Easibus are to be addressed by the door-to-door service, given the level of oversubscription to it, are we going to see a substantial investment in it to pick up the slack? The cost of running the door-to-door service is well in excess of that for running the Easibus service, so the proposal to remove it seems to be a false economy. The Easibus service is a much more cost-effective way of doing things, and it gives people a greater degree of freedom.

I want older citizens and persons with disabilities in my community and everywhere else to have the freedom to be spontaneous in life so that they can get up in the morning and decide that they want to go out without having to plan to do so well in advance. Services such as Easibus provide that freedom. Bearing in mind North Down's demography, the Easibus service is central to our community, and I am stunned that the axe is to fall first in Bangor. Therefore, I join colleagues in urging the Minister for Regional Development to reconsider the decision.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate. When the proposals to adopt a phased approach to removing the Easibus service — one bus was to be removed in January, which slipped to February, and another in June — were announced, the North Down community was unified in revulsion and anger, which was manifested by a number of groups that have campaigned against the decision. In particular, I commend the Omnibus Partnership and North Down Borough Council's disabilities working group. The council united across all divides to unanimously oppose the proposals. The feelings of ordinary people throughout North Down are illustrated by a relatively hastily arranged petition, which, in a matter of days, attracted a couple of thousand signatures. Indeed, before events overtook us last week, the council had intended to send a delegation, led by the mayor, to meet the Minister for Regional Development to discuss the matter further. In addition to the reasons that have been mentioned, people are particularly disgusted because they see the proposal as an attack on vulnerable people and on those who are least able to defend themselves.

There was concern over the way that the issue was handled and the lack of consultation. There was a feeling that North Down seems to have been front-loaded, because the Easibus service for one of the buses was due to end in January, but there was a slight postponement until February. Yet, in other parts of Northern Ireland, a review was going to take place in the summer. People are questioning what the implications are not just for North Down but for further afield.

5.15 pm

Miss McIlveen: I appreciate that this is very much a Bangor-focused debate, but it is a common theme across many constituencies. Indeed, I have been very vocal about the cutting back of the town service in Comber. I note the comments that have been made and the fact that there has been a general cutting back, and there is the feeling that the axe will fall for the rest of the service. I would like the Minister to take note that the same arguments apply across the Province, and I hope that we will not be revisiting the same debate for other towns across the Province.

Mr Weir: I concur that there is a threat beyond North Down. I agree with most of what has been said, but I take slight exception to one point. Leslie Cree mentioned that the withdrawal of the service was a commercial decision. I suspect that that was part of the thinking behind it, but, if it is a commercial decision, it is an extremely flawed one.

Members have posed questions, and the responses have been that the door-to-door service can be an adequate replacement and that Easibus was set up in the days before the door-to-door service. However, let us look at the figures. Over the past three years, Easibus has transported around 74,000 passengers, and the subsidy has been around £38,000 per year. In practice, that means that the subsidy from the Department is around £1.50 per journey. I agree with my colleague Dr Farry that the door-to-door service does an excellent service in the area in which it is focused, but its figures for North Down show that, from April to November 2009, there were about 11,000 passenger journeys, which is just under half of that of Easibus. It cost £232,000, which is approximately £20 per journey. That figure is not unique to North Down. Response to questions put to the Department show that, across Northern Ireland for a similar period, approximately 100,000 people used the door-to-door service at a cost of £2.23 million, which is about £22 per journey.

Mr Cree: I am sure that the Member is aware that DRD and Translink have already stated that the number of Easibus passengers is already extremely low and that it is not an efficient service.

Mr Weir: We are told that the numbers are extremely low, yet they are more than twice the level of the door-to-door service. The subsidy for Easibus is £1.50 as opposed

to £20. How does that make commercial or economic sense? Indeed, the bulk of people who use the Easibus service are elderly or disabled and would be switching to the door-to-door service, which may be unable to cope. To change from a situation whereby a journey is subsidised by £1.50 to one that is subsidised by £20 simply does not make economic sense. That is why I believe that the decision is fundamentally flawed.

We all appreciate that there are budgetary constraints, but, if something costs only £38,000 per year, it is not going to make a major impact on the overall budget situation and to take action will ultimately cost the public purse a good deal more. A lot of people are suspicious that the door-to-door service will be unable to cope and that we will be left every year with thousands of journeys that cannot be completed.

Those are the statistics, but behind those statistics is a host of very human stories of vulnerable people whose lifeline, which might be shopping in Bloomfield for instance, will suddenly be cut off. They will be isolated in their homes, and, for the sake of such a small amount of money, I urge the Minister to have a rethink and restore the Easibus service.

I urge the Minister to come riding to the rescue; to give hope to the vulnerable, disabled and elderly people of north Down, and to indicate that that funding will be made available. I urge him to reconsider his position.

Mr McFarland: I congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate. Back in 2000, the Bangor Easibus was a pioneering service. During the first Assembly mandate, I was Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development. The Committee supported the development of such services so that people with disabilities could travel more easily. Indeed, the Minister sat on that Committee with me.

Since that time, the Omnibus Partnership has been a leader. Members of that partnership are present in the Gallery for the debate. The partnership was at the forefront of the development of those services with Translink in north Down, and it continues to carry out training with Translink. I pay tribute to David McDonald and his committee and, indeed, to my party colleagues on North Down Borough Council, Marion Smyth and Ian Henry, who is chairperson of the council's disabilities committee.

I understand that finance is tight and that part of the reason why that has happened is the loss of financial support, which is no longer available. However, I do not understand why proper consultation was not carried out with service users or why the service has been withdrawn in advance of that consultation. Surely Translink and the Minister need to consult properly with service users and ensure that the proposed system is not introduced too quickly, before that consultation has been carried out. They must ensure that if they

introduce a new system, it does not just replace the current one but enhances it so that a better service is produced.

Surely, a door-to-door, individual service that takes people from A to B is to be welcomed. However, as Dr Farry has said, it reduces freedom because people have to book in advance. I suspect that if the service becomes more popular, people may have to book days in advance. Therefore, people's freedom to leave their houses, board a disability-friendly bus and go somewhere will be completely curtailed. My guess is that as the door-to-door service becomes more popular, it will end up overloaded, money will not be available for it, and it, too, will end up being cut back.

I call on the Minister, as have my colleagues, to keep the current service going and to consult properly so that a good and, indeed, improved service is available to users in north Down.

Mr B Wilson: I, too, congratulate Alex Easton on securing the debate and I support colleagues who have already called for the retention of the Easibus service in Bangor. The removal of the service has generated massive opposition throughout the community, as has been shown by a petition, which local people have been queuing up to sign during the past couple of weeks. The petition was organised by North Down Borough Council's disabilities committee and the Omnibus Partnership. The council is pleased by that level of support, which highlights the concern that exists in the community.

The decision to remove the Easibus service is widely regarded as unfair and discriminatory. The issue is that minimum savings will create maximum hardship. As Members have already mentioned, although savings of £38,000 are small in the overall Translink budget, the decision to remove the service will affect the most vulnerable, disabled and older people.

When DRD set up the system, it stated that its transport programme for people with disabilities aimed to target social need by improving accessibility of public transport to people with disabilities who cannot avail themselves of existing conventional services; and to complement the work of existing service providers that are involved in programmes that are designed to promote social inclusion for people with reduced mobility. The Bangor Easibus service, which was supposed to improve and complement existing services, is now being taken away.

I am also concerned that the Bangor Easibus service is being withdrawn, yet, as some Members mentioned, the Easibus services in Derry and Belfast have not been considered for withdrawal. Is that decision the tip of the iceberg, and will the Easibus services in Belfast and Derry also be reduced? People are asking why the service in Bangor is being withdrawn.

One might ask what is being lost by withdrawing the service. The buses used for the Easibus service have no steps, easy access and low floors, all of which are extremely important for many disabled people. The hail-and-ride aspect of the Easibus service must also be considered. People were permitted to hail the bus from various points on the main road without having to walk to bus stops. The buses used on the Easibus service are also wheelchair accessible, and they provide a service that delivers the user closer to his or her door. Although a growing number of people require such facilities, they are being taken away.

I do not accept the Department's argument that the service is underused. As other Members pointed out, the service has approximately 25,000 users annually. That is a significant number of people, many of whom have no alternative source of transport. The Department also argues that the town service bus covers the route, but it does not cover the entire route. In fact, there are parts of the route that the town service bus could not access. As a result, some people will not be able to access buses at all, and, unable to get into town, they will become isolated.

Many Members said that the Easibus service is supposed to be replaced by a door-to-door service. That is a good, valuable and popular service, but it could not meet the current demand on its own. How will it meet the increased demand? For that service to meet the demand would, as Dr Farry said, cost significantly more. On that basis, unless the door-to-door service was to receive massive investment, it could not replace the Easibus service. Furthermore, the door-to-door service does not have the same flexibility as the Easibus service.

Like others, I was annoyed that Translink did not carry out a consultation process, as it has a statutory duty to do. An equality impact assessment should also have been carried out. Equality issues should be considered as part of any decision to withdraw the Easibus service. The decision discriminates against those with disabilities and older people. Therefore, I join my colleagues in asking the Minister to reconsider. The decision could be reversed at minimum cost and doing so would benefit most of the vulnerable sectors of society.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who contributed to the debate, and I am happy to be able to offer some explanation in relation to the Easibus service in Bangor. I am aware of the value that users of the Easibus service in Bangor have attached to it and of their sense of disappointment that it is being withdrawn.

The debate is a useful opportunity for me to deal with a number of misconceptions. Some of the Members who contributed to the debate almost created an impression

that the service was being withdrawn leaving nothing in its place. Other Members, such as Brian Wilson, seemed to imply that the entire replacement for the Easibus service would be a door-to-door service, which is not the case.

Perhaps it would help to provide some additional context about the decision and the effect that it is likely to have on users of the service and the people of Bangor and north Down. In particular, it must be understood that considerable improvements have been made to transport provision in Bangor, and the withdrawal of the Easibus service must be considered in light of those improvements.

5.30 pm

Easibus is one of a number of services delivered by my Department under the transport programme for people with disabilities, which has been in existence since 1991. It has evolved considerably over the years and has developed a range of specialised transport services for disabled people involving a number of service operators.

In addition to Easibus services in Bangor, Belfast and Derry, the programme supports a number of different initiatives. Notably, it provides support to shopmobility schemes under its umbrella group, Shopmobility Northern Ireland. It provides door-to-door transport services in towns and cities throughout the North that have populations of more than 10,000 people, and it provides funding for the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee, which is the main source of independent advice to government and others on transport issues that affect the mobility of older and disabled people.

Easibus services in the North date back to 1994 when they commenced in Belfast to provide accessible local transport, and they were introduced in Bangor in 2000. Until last week, two buses in Bangor provided four Easibus services. One of those buses has been supported by my Department, which paid about 55% of its operating costs under the transport programme for people with disabilities. In recent years, the other bus has been supported by Translink out of its resources. Earlier, however, between 2001 and 2005, that bus received support from the tenants of Bloomfield Shopping Centre.

In the past financial year, the cost of providing the Easibus services in Bangor was about £137,000, to which my Department contributed £38,000. During that year, 42,000 passengers used the four services, which is a decline from the 52,000 passengers who used the services in 2006-07.

It is important to stress that Easibus services were introduced to Bangor in a different set of circumstances than those that currently exist. In recent years, Translink, which is funded by my Department, has made major

strides in the provision of new accessible buses for town services. In addition, the Ulsterbus strategic review of 2007 resulted in an extension of town bus services in Bangor. There are now seven bus services in Bangor, which deliver more than 685,000 passenger journeys on accessible buses. In addition, 330,000 passenger journeys are made to Bangor on services from Newtownards, Donaghadee, Ballywalter, the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald, and Belfast.

Another significant change has been the commencement of the door-to-door services, which were introduced in the Bangor operational area in February 2007. The door-to-door service was specifically designed to meet the needs of people who find it difficult or impossible to use conventional public transport, and it operates throughout the Bangor urban area. It provides transport and assistance from the member's home and is not restricted to fixed routes and timetables. The door-to-door service in Bangor has more than 900 members and makes, on average, 1,500 journeys a month.

With regard to the withdrawal of the Easibus service, the decision to withdraw funding was supported by my Department, and a decision to withdraw the other bus was taken in consultation with Translink and the Department. That decision was taken in light of the significant changes in the provision of public transport services in Bangor. Translink pointed out to the Department that passenger numbers were extremely low and that the services were largely duplicated by the more extensive Bangor town services. Not only are those town services more frequent than the Easibus services, but they start earlier in the day and end later. In those circumstances, Translink did not consider it to be an efficient use of its limited resources to continue to sustain those non-commercial services.

Some criticism of that decision seems to be based on a misunderstanding of the Easibus service as it currently operates. For example, it has been suggested that Easibus is a free service. That is not the case. In fact, there are no special concessions on Easibus. Instead, it is subject to exactly the same concessionary arrangements as apply on Translink's other scheduled services. A person who is carried free on Easibus will be carried free on Bangor town services.

It has also been suggested that Easibus is a flexible service that can deviate from its route to pick up passengers. In fact, Easibus is licensed as a stage carriage service and the conditions of that licence prevent it from operating on a demand-responsive basis. I am aware that passengers can hail and ride on sections of the Easibus route: in other words, be picked up and set down where there is no bus stop. That arrangement is not a feature of the town bus services, but I understand that, as a result of the Ulsterbus review, there has been an increase in the number of bus stops provided. Of course, Translink reviews the position of stops in response

to passenger needs. Translink has told me that more than 90% of the existing Easibus routes will also be serviced by town bus services after 30 June. There are, of course, some gaps, and Translink has been looking to see how those gaps can be plugged.

With regard to Groomsport, which does not have a town bus service, Translink intends to divert services from Ballywalter to Bangor and to provide links between Groomsport and Bloomfield Shopping Centre. I remind Members that where gaps remain or where disabled or older people find it otherwise difficult to access town bus services, there is the option of door-to-door services, which I have mentioned already.

I understand that there have been criticisms of the service, notably about its availability, and I believe that those criticisms are unfair. By its very nature, a door-to-door service requires a degree of flexibility and compromise on the part of the people who use it, and it is impossible to ensure that everyone will receive the precise journey time that they want. Nevertheless, the availability of the service has been good.

As availability of the service is an important aspect, it is monitored regularly. My Department collects statistics from the operator each month that show the number of trips taken and the number of trips refused due to the unavailability of transport. Those statistics show a refusal rate of approximately 3.4%, and that must be regarded as low for a service of that kind. My Department also monitors the attitudes of the users of door-to-door services, and following concerns about recent criticisms levelled at the service, my officials undertook a telephone survey of members in the Bangor area. The results of that survey show that 72% of those who had used the service were satisfied or very satisfied with its availability and that 84% were satisfied or very satisfied with the service overall.

I am aware that the Bangor door-to-door operational area does not cover all the areas that have been serviced by Easibus, and, in particular, the Groomsport area falls outside its parameters. However, I remind Members that people with mobility problems in Groomsport and other parts of north Down can avail themselves of similar support from my Department's rural transport fund. In particular, I wish to highlight the dial-a-lift service, which commenced on 1 December 2009 and which provides transport opportunities for individuals in rural areas and, in effect, is a door-to-door service. To qualify for that service, an individual must live in a rural area and have difficulties in accessing everyday local services due to a lack of transport. The service in the Groomsport area is provided by the local rural community transport partnership, which is Down District Accessible Transport.

I am aware that there have been several criticisms in relation to the decision to remove funding from the

Easibus service and how that removal was handled. I can assure Members that Bangor has not been singled out unfairly; Easibus services in Derry are also due to cease in June 2010. The decision to end those services followed a review that showed that the service was no longer being used wholly or mainly by people with disabilities, which is the criterion for Easibus. Although it would no longer be appropriate in this case to fund Easibus from the transport programme for people with disabilities, the service is clearly meeting a wider need, and Translink is reviewing local services to ensure that they will continue when Easibus services are withdrawn. Easibus services in Belfast are also due to be reviewed shortly.

I am aware of the criticism that Translink did not allow adequate time for consultation and, in particular, did not follow its own agreed processes. However, I am also aware that when that error was brought to Translink's attention, it extended the period before the withdrawal of the service by a further month to comply with the agreed process.

The current position in Bangor is that one Easibus has been withdrawn and the other will be withdrawn by the end of June. In the meantime, the Easibus that is funded by my Department will provide the four Easibus services on alternating days.

I am aware that Translink is making several adjustments to existing services to cushion the effects of the withdrawal of the Easibus service, and I am sure that it will continue to take a helpful approach to the design and provision of public transport services for Bangor. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm

